

# 850 hPa 01 MEZ

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary art lacks a uniform decoding system. On one hand, this lack leads to a formidable creative liberty for the artist; on the other hand, it leaves many viewers puzzled and suspended in search of sensible decoding. In my artwork, the artistic language is contrasted with other languages, particularly that of science, which possesses a precise, well-defined decoding system. Using a scientific object as starting point in my work, I create an artistic interpretation of the object. My interest lies less in the proposed alternative interpretation as such but in raising the viewers' awareness of their own decoding process.

## Keywords

Contemporary art, decoding.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemplating works of art is generally considered to be an intuitive and spontaneous act. However, enjoyment of contemporary artworks is strongly enhanced when one possesses background information on the artist and his concerns. Such supplementary information guides the viewer in his reception of the artwork and facilitates the communication between the viewer and the artist.

Generally, I think the reception and interpretation of an artwork consists of the viewer's projection of the artwork onto his personal decoding scheme. The viewer's decoding scheme depends on previously acquired experience and knowledge: his cultural, educational, and social background, but also the extent to which the viewer has information on the artwork as well as the artist and his works.

As an artist, one of my interests is the language for decoding contemporary art. In my artwork I oppose the language of contemporary art to other languages, particularly the language of science. The scientific language is precisely defined, its interpretation scheme is supposed to be objective and neutral. In contrast, the language of contemporary art is multi-dimensional, emotional and personal. The two languages are combined in my artistic creation through an interpretation of scientific schemes and objects as artistic subjects. My concern is not so much in proposing an alternative interpretation, but more in raising awareness of the viewers' own decoding system which is subject to their background knowledge, experience and personal

sensibilities.

In the following sections of this text, I will present two of my artworks, a drawing and an installation. The first one, "850 hPa 01 MEZ 5.1.1998" is an artistic interpretation of a scientific scheme, a weather chart. The second one, "LAIKA", is a painting showing the first dog in orbit. The painting is accompanied by two supplementary pieces of information concerning Laika, a text and a recording.

## 2. "850 hPa 01 MEZ 5.1.1998"

### 2.1 Materials

Figure 1 shows a picture of the drawing "850 hPa 01 MEZ 5.1.1998". The drawing is painted with asphalt on paper, its size is 175x150cm. The drawing is an interpretation of a weather chart on which pressure and wind distributions are shown. The specific pressure and wind distribution were taken on January 5<sup>th</sup> 1998 over continental Europe.

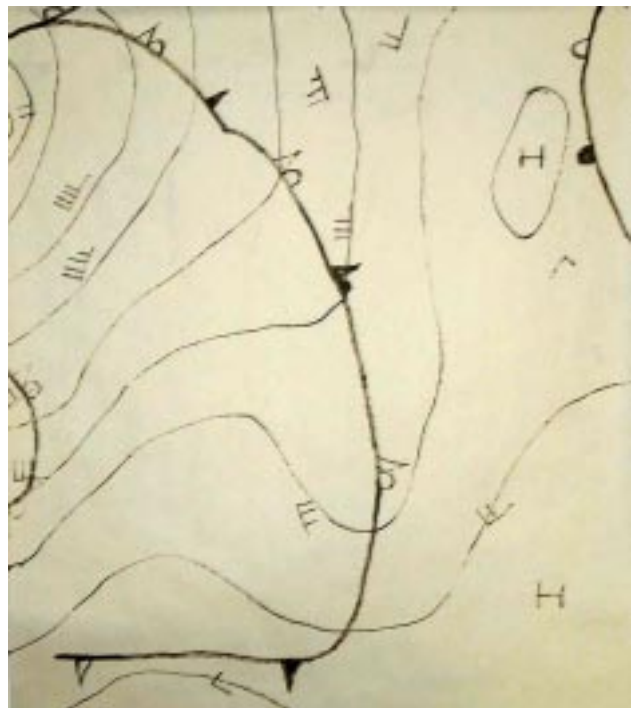


Figure 1. 850 hPa 01 MEZ 5.1.1998

## 2.2 Discussion

The main concern here is the impact of the viewer's level of scientific knowledge on the way he decodes the artwork. Viewers who know metrology will decode the drawing differently from those who have little or no relevant knowledge:

- a) A person not initiated to science will not recognize the representation of the weather chart. Such a viewer may read the drawing as an abstract painting of lines and forms.
- b) A person initiated to science (which is the typical viewer of contemporary art), recognizes the depiction of a weather chart. This viewer will be confronted by both, the artistic and the scientific aspects of the drawing.
- c) A specialist in meteorology will understand all the details of the weather chart (he probably would even find some subtle scientific impossibilities depicted on the drawing). He will imagine the interplay between wind and pressure seen on the drawing. For him the depicted storm might be boring; or he might get the shivers from the visualization of that terrible storm devastating Europe (the depicted storm was actually named "Desirée" by meteorologists).

## 3. "LAIKA"

### 3.1 Materials

The installation is shown in Figure 2. It consists of three parts: The main part is a painting made with high gloss paint on plastic. The second part is a text on photographic paper, imitating the font and allure of old, fluorescent computer screens. The third part is a headphone, made available to the viewer. Using a push button, the viewer can start and stop the recording.

The painting depicts the dog Laika lying in its capsule before being sent into orbit on 1957. Laika was the first dog in space; the mission was successful and represents a historical step in the human conquest of the moon.

The text below the painting reads: "On November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1957 Sputnik 2 was launched into orbit, 500km above the earth's surface. On board was the dog Laika, first animal in space. During her flight in the 105cm diameter capsule, her heartbeat was constantly recorded and sent back to earth. After a week in orbit the capsule overheated and the mongrel dog died.

Laika grew up in the streets of Moscow and was chosen for this mission because of her particularly calm character."

The headphones emit Laika's original heartbeat while she was orbiting around earth. During the mission, Laika's heartbeat was broadcasted live over the radio.



Figure 2. Installation for LAIKA

### 3.2 Discussion

A viewer approaching the installation first sees the painting on which he may recognize the dog's face. Some people actually do not recognize the dog's face at first glance. Then the viewer starts assimilating the supplementary information belonging to the installation: the painting's tag (title, material and the artist's name), the text below the painting and the recording. The various pieces of information are different in character. The text is written in descriptive language, void of emotion. By contrast, the recording is strongly emotional because it not only transmits the dog's heartbeat but also mentally "isolates" the viewer as he puts on the earphones. As the viewer explores the installation and assimilates the different pieces of information about Laika, his decoding of the painting undergoes constant changes.

Both of the presented artworks - the weather chart and Laika - are concerned with the effects of information on decoding. While the former points to the different decodings resulting from a viewer's level of information on a specific subject matter (i.e. metrology), the latter shows the changing decoding due to the viewer's gradual incorporation of new pieces of information.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Decoding of contemporary art is a complex, multidimensional and individual process. There is no unique decoding scheme for artworks, and this is certainly one of the attractions about art.

Many branches of contemporary art are done by artists with an interest in a specific topic. These artworks may not be fully decoded by viewers lacking knowledge about that specific topic.

New Media introduces a multitude of new technology and new references to contemporary art. With these novel dimensions introduced, New Media art comes to have a specific decoding system. Therefore, viewers not familiar with the technology and

references of New Media art are barred from fully enjoying certain artworks.

## **5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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