

The Study of the Relation Between Interpretation and Existence: Understanding How Spaces Transform Into Places Through Experience and Perception

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Abstract

When experiencing a space, different appreciators can have different experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of meaning. Why is that so? What factors make space meaningful for certain people, and what factors influence the perception and experience of space so that space changes into a place? A case study is the space in installation art. There is a generally limited understanding that space is a physical space formed by space elements, such as four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. However, imaginary space, space sensation, and space formed by non-solid elements, such as installation art, have yet to be widely studied. Chiharu Shiota's installation art space is chosen as a case study because Shiota shapes human consciousness and non-physical experience to represent personal struggles and social and cultural identity through art. The analytical method used is a case study with existentialism theory. This research provides an understanding that the interpretation of space is a process of contextualization, recontextualization, and decontextualization of meaning conveyed by the artist, a process influenced by the existential nature of the reader's background.

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Introduction

Interpretation has always been abstract, especially when discussing art interpretation. When we talk about it, art has always belonged in a broader sense to the humanities. Regarding how humans act and the intellectual work of each of us, interpretation and comprehension have always been the aim of art. Subjectivity has always played a decisive role throughout one's life, in which it approaches more towards interpretative manners than explanatory manners, both in intellectual works and human actions. When talking about art criticism, artists' social reality issues are the personal tools for their visual queries to fill in the gap between the practice and the research in the field of art. By doing so, art interpretation has always been leaning more toward subjectivity than objectivity.

Chiharu Shiota is not the first artist to incorporate her social reality issues through her art; nevertheless, she is one of the well-known artists who created her art to impact the viewers and visitors of her art installation to receive the messages she wanted to deliver. As Chiharu Shiota explained in one of her interviews with Actar Publisher in 2014, she purposely chooses mundane, daily life items as they connote humans' existences, connections, memories, and life stories. Chiharu Shiota's art installations are not only representatives of her message, but she also creates new meanings to the items. By doing so, it also allows viewers and or visitors to interpret her artworks however they want to, yet it also directs them towards how she wanted her artworks' messages to be delivered. Chiharu Shiota selected the components in her art installation, focusing less on novelty than relatability in mind, thus making these components proven as the most cross-culturally powerful. She also mentioned that she purposely chooses these components in the hope that her work will be able to deliver the message and incite certain feelings or nostalgia regardless of the viewers' and or the visitors' background.

Arguably, many see that art interpretation has been leaning more toward subjectivity rather than objectivity. How is it possible for each viewer and/or visitor to appreciate artworks? As everyone has their subjectivity, how is it possible to deliver a message from art to an individual in a more objective way? One can understand the concept of art interpretation through its language. Feelings guide interpretation, and subject matter with the representation of a medium, form, and context create meanings.

This paper focuses on how art interpretation in art appreciation can elevate the significance of social realities in contemporary art. In this case, the work of Chiharu Shiota, 'The Soul Trembles' in Museum MACAN, with the art installation title 'In Silence,' will be analyzed through contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization. By analyzing the paper through this approach, one can find the relationship between the art components and see the art more objectively. Therefore, one can be more objective in making art interpretation rather than take it subjectively.

The exhibition occurred from 26th November 2022 until 30th April 2023, with Museum MACAN (Modern and Art Contemporary at Nusantara) as the curator. This museum is Indonesia's first modern and contemporary art museum, which opens public access to local and international contemporary art. The museum has an active program of exhibitions and events in a 7,100-square-foot facility, including educational and conservation spaces. As the first museum created and dedicated to housing modern and contemporary art, this building applies contemporary values.

Methods

This paper uses the hermeneutic approach to find deeper meanings between the lines within a text. In this case, the text mentioned is not only in words but also in the art installation itself and the dialogues between the artist, the viewer, or the visitor. The hermeneutic approach is considerably suitable for understanding the interview done with the artist and the dialog that the viewer and/or visitor has said in the art installation.

The knowledge that develops in individuals is integral to what they have learned. Context not only discusses each individual's knowledge but also includes its social and cultural aspects. The contextualization process highlights any lack of similarity between the viewer's and or visitor's understanding of the situation and the actual situation.

On the other hand, decontextualization is a process of thinking about one's thinking and learning, in which it is intentional thinking about how one could think and learn. Decontextualization can also mean removing or extracting the specific rules, contexts, and processes that lead to a particular situation. Decontextualization discusses a certain topic without the specific context of the situation. Extracting the principles and the knowledge can generalize the specific use of context. This way, one could focus on managing the objective meaning of a situation.

Last but not least, once the extraction of the objective meaning from the decontextualization occurs, it has to be contextualized again. Recontextualization considers new situations in which the acquired factors and the objectivity knowledge could be proven useful to connect what the artist wants to deliver (context) and what the viewer or visitor received (decontextualization). It links the action and its context, which will help appreciate artworks.

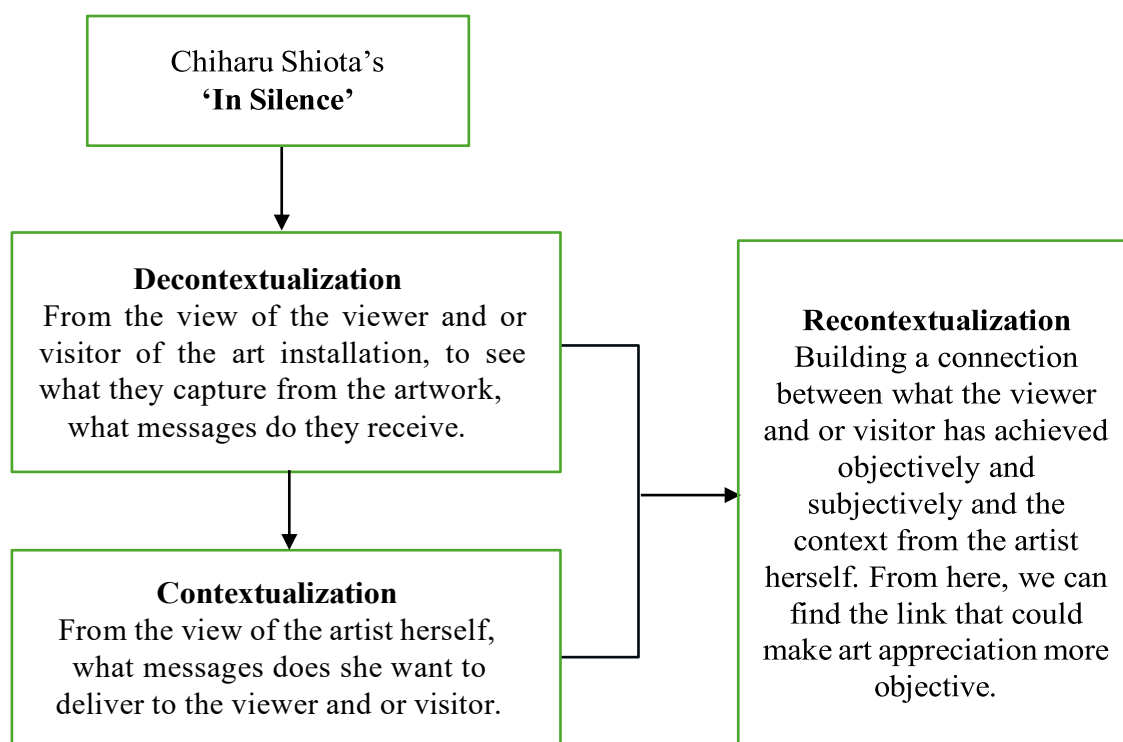


Figure 1: Analysis Method (Source: Carensia, 2023)

Decontextualisation

The decontextualization process talks about how the artwork speaks for the observer without having the artist herself be present with the observer to explain the meanings behind it. This process strips away all knowledge of the artwork from the artist and uses the interpretation based on the observer's knowledge alone.

During my visit to this exhibition, 'In Silence' caught my attention to observe the details closely. As an interior design student, I was captivated by how the objects were placed inside the space. The first thing I noticed when I first stepped into the installation space was the burnt piano in the middle, sitting there with no sound and thick black threads going upwards as if it was forming burning smoke. Then I realized that there were some burnt chairs across the piano, with similar treatment with the thread as if it was forming a burning smoke going upwards. All these threads go upwards and fill the entire space, from ceiling to walls.

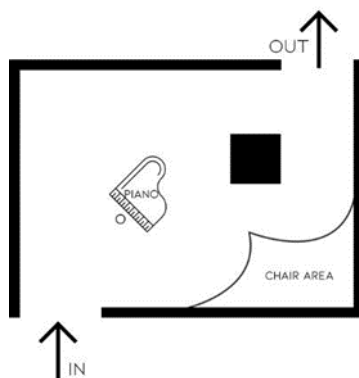


Figure 2: Visualization of 'In Silence' Floor Plan (Source: Carensia, 2023)



Figure 3: In Silence, Museum MACAN (Source: Carensia, 2023)




I then tried to understand the meaning of this burnt piano because it was located in the center of space; it seemed to be the 'centerpiece' of this art installation. As I used to play piano, I entirely understand when a piano is burnt to this stage, all the musical chords and keys have been burnt enough to the point it will not make any sound or even a single noise when the piano tuts are pressed, and not to mention the absence of the tuts on the piano. This piano is here, the object is here, I acknowledge the presence of the piano, but this piano has no value in being played by anyone as it has been 'silenced' by the burning smoke.



Figure 4: Burnt Piano (left), Burnt Chairs (right), Museum MACAN, 2022-2023
(Source: Carensia, 2023)

After I understood the piano, I started to look at the burnt chairs across it. It is as if there used to be audiences watching a piano performance, but now that the piano has no value in being played, there is also no audience left there anymore. Thus, it is symbolized by the burning chairs. A presence that used to be there, but now all the remains are just the object that shows that it used to be there, but now it is gone, and this burnt chair is the proof of a presence that used to be there.

Connecting the dots between the piano and the chairs as one, it becomes clear to me that the black thread surrounding the whole space, the jagged thick threads above the burnt piano and burnt chairs as if there are burning smoke; it wants to represent an incident of being caught in a fire and losing its voice during the process. Nevertheless, even if the voice is lost, the objects as remains stay there to be living proof of a presence that was once there. The way the threads are also slowly filling up the wall and the floor makes it look like a cloud of smoke is gradually filling up the room. The way the threads connect seems sharp, almost geometrical in an abstract way, and appears chaotic as each of the threads crosses one another multiple times. According to my observation of the art installation 'In Silence,' certain aspects of the art installation can be concluded in a table, as follows.

Components	Picture		Meanings
Burnt Piano			A lost voice, unable to function, silence
Burnt Chair			A presence, a proof that something used to be there
Black Threads			Smoke


Connected Threads' Shape		Chaotic
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Table 1: Components and Meanings Based on the Observer (Source: Carensia, 2023)

Contextualization

The contextualization process talks about how the artwork speaks for the artist without even having the artist herself present during the duration of the exhibition. By doing so, we must understand the message and context within the piece that the artist tries to deliver to the viewer and/or visitor. 'In Silence' has been one of Chiharu Shiota's most well-known art installations. It speaks up about her experience during her childhood when her neighbor's house burnt down.

In her interviews with the Detached Cultural Organization (2011), she told the story of the incident that happened when she was nine. She was awakened at midnight because of the sound of burning wood and ran to wake her parents up. She then saw the remains of the fire, including a burnt-out piano that stayed in silence in the middle of it. She saw the incident and ran home scared. After that, she tried to play the piano, but her parents stopped her. They saw it inappropriate to do so when their neighbor had just lost their home to the fire. Those feelings during that time linger with her. She felt as if her voice was also being burnt down, and that is why she kept playing the piano. A few days later, the wind blew the remaining ashes. Chiharu Shiota smelled the burnt ashes, and from there on, it kept reminding her of how her voice was also lost during the incident every time she smelled the burnt ashes. She stated, "This happened 20 years ago. I always carry this silence within me, deep in my heart. When I try to express it, I lack the necessary words. However, the silence lasts. The more I think about it, the stronger it gets. The piano loses its voice, the painter does not paint anymore, and the musician stops making music. They lose their function but not their beauty. They even become more beautiful".

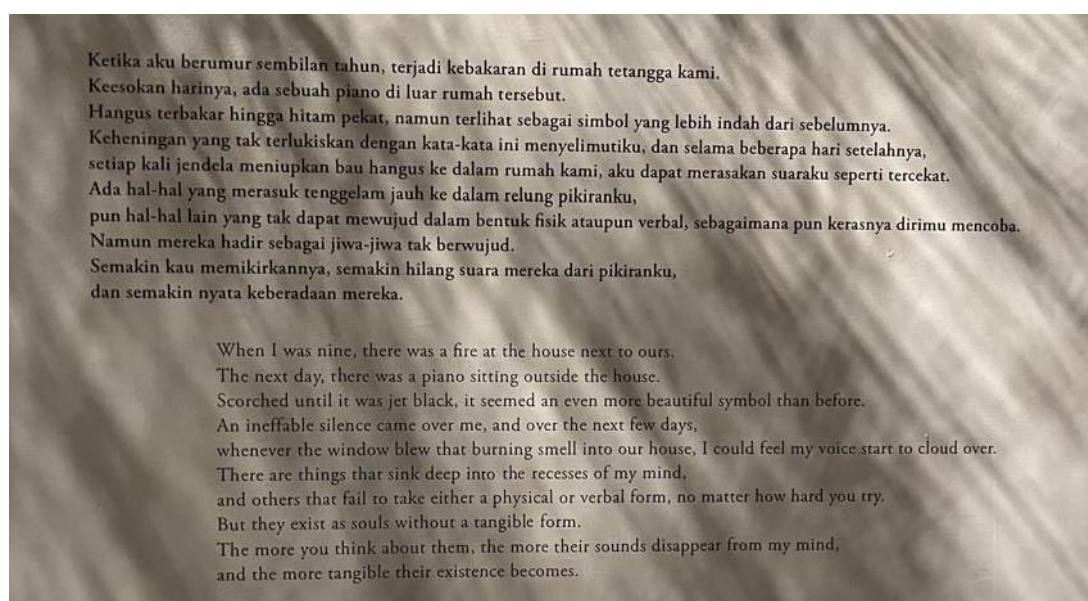


Figure 5: Text on the wall, Museum MACAN, 2022-2023 (Source: Carensia, 2023)

The art installation ‘In Silence’ comprises three main components: a burnt piano, burnt chairs, and black Alcantara thread. The piano is in the middle of the room, forcing every viewer and visitor to go through between the burnt chairs in the corner and the piano in the middle. All connected by many jagged black Alcantara threads. Unlike the other installation that uses the threads more softly, like a webbing of neurons, the jagged threads in this installation represent the chaos and the uninvited incident that happened. The message she tries to deliver to the viewer and/or visitor symbolizes a presence of nothingness. This is shown by the burnt piano that can no longer play music and the presence of burnt chairs with no audience. Meanwhile, the color black, according to the artist’s background as Japanese, represents the subconsciousness that brings the individual to a broader aspect. According to the artist’s perception of the art installation ‘In Silence’, certain aspects of the art installation can be concluded in a table, such as follows:

Components	Meanings
Burnt Piano	A lost voice, silence
Burnt Chair	A presence of nothingness
Black Threads	Subconsciousness
Connected Threads’ Shape	Chaos, uninvited incident (in negative ways)

Table 2: Components and Meanings based on the Artist’s Perception
(Source: Carensia, 2023)

Recontextualisation

Building the connection of the art installation ‘In Silence’ is based on what I had observed and the context from the artist herself. From here, we can find the link of the art installation ‘In Silence’ from the meanings of each component compared to each other (from my observation and the artist’s perception).

Components	Meanings (Observer)	Meanings (Artist)	Similarity	Difference
Burnt Piano	A lost voice, unable to function, silence	A lost voice, silence	A lost voice, silence	-
Burnt Chair	A presence of nothingness	A presence of nothingness	A presence of nothingness	-
Black Threads	Smoke	Subconsciousness	-	Smoke and Subconsciousness
Connected Threads’ Shape	Chaotic	Chaos, uninvited incident (in negative ways)	Chaos	-

Table 3: Comparison of Components and Meanings based on the Observer and the Artist’s Perception (Source: Carensia, 2023)

It is common knowledge that a piano is a musical instrument that plays music by pressing the hammers that will trigger the hammers inside the piano. These hammers will then strike the strings to vibrate so they can produce the piano’s sound. Without the hammers, a piano cannot produce

any sound as it is the main component where the fingers will press (first contact with humans) to pull the trigger for the hammer to strike. Without the hammer, nothing will happen even if anyone is pressing the tuts, as it is missing a component that strikes the strings to produce the sound of a piano. Without the strings, nothing comes about, as the strings' vibration is the one that makes the sound of a piano. When the whole piano is burnt to the point that the strings inside are snapped, it is for sure that it will not be able to produce any sound.

Furthermore, the absence of tuts on the piano makes it even more evident that the component where it first makes contact with humans is not there. This piano is unplayable. Therefore, this piano cannot produce any sound. The message in the art installation that the piano tries to convey is that because it cannot produce sound, there is only silence in the room. The piano is an item that is supposedly a musical instrument; it has lost its' voice to produce sound in the way it should.

On the other hand, the burnt chair is pretty straightforward. The purpose of a chair is to be a piece that people can sit on, especially with the arrangement of the chairs facing toward the piano. It is also universally known that a piano recital usually has spectators that sit on the audience chairs. With the chairs burnt to the point that humans cannot sit on them anymore, it gives out its purpose as a chair. What is left is just the presence of an object that humans cannot use anymore. The message these burnt chairs try to convey is a presence of nothingness, which can be seen through the presence of the object shown to be unusable, therefore having nothing on it. Although this message is addressed slightly differently by the observer from the artist, both have the same essence of interpretation as a presence of nothing, of something that is not there anymore.

In addition to the more universal components that many individuals could easily comprehend as they are objects many know, the way the threads are connected is more subconsciously interpreted. The book *Art and Visual Perception, Second Edition: A Psychology of The Creative Eye*, cites that 'Separations are as essential to composition as connections. When there are no segregated parts, there is nothing to connect, and the result is an amorphous mash'. This kind of composition could be visually seen in how the threads are connected in the art installation, where it is as if a bunch of threads are connected through random lines, creating an amorphous mash. Human brains are wired to seek patterns and structure in the environment. Therefore, when they encounter these kinds of arrangements that could be seen as random or irregular, the brains might interpret them as chaotic as they do not easily fit into recognizable patterns. The artist wants to convey that this thread symbolizes chaos, and it could be seen or even felt subconsciously by the observer. Even though the observer might not know how the psychology behind the subconscious works, it still could be felt from the visualization of these threads, and the message of how these threads are connected is delivered subconsciously.



Figure 6: The Black Alcantra Threads, Museum MACAN, 2022-2023
(Source: Carensia, 2023)

On the other hand, another more subconsciously interpreted message that does not quite deliver is the color black of the threads. With the artist's background as Japanese, the color black has meanings that the artist carries. Black is usually associated with mourning, unhappiness, fear, bad luck, or misfortune. This color fits the theme of the art installation as it talks about the misfortune incident that happened in the artist's past. The color's meaning, though, is primarily subconscious; consequently, the message the color black wants to deliver is the power of subconsciousness. The philosophy of the color black in Indonesian tradition usually represents authority, elegance, honor, strength, and even luxury with an elegant impression. Therefore, the observer and the artist have their own cultural background, which makes a difference in interpreting the color black in this art installation.

Certain aspects could be ruled as similarities and differences that become the base of recontextualization. In terms of similarities, it is pretty clear that the components with similarities mostly have the universal understanding aspect. In this case, a piano is universally known as an instrument, which makes it straightforward enough for observers to understand that it functions to produce music, a chair as a presence, and a visual representative of chaos by random jagged lines created by the threads. On the other hand, as color in different countries has different meanings, the differences in the cultural background of the artist and the observer play a huge part in understanding the meaning of the color. Unfortunately, as this art installation took place in Jakarta, Indonesia, the observer who has been living in Jakarta for most of the time does not have this kind of subconsciousness that is deeply attached to the knowledge of the color black the way the artist does.

Discussion

Art interpretation brings value to the artwork itself; be that as it may, what is the relation of art interpretation that could bring value to the artwork? Does the difference in the observer's perception and the artist play a massive role in appreciating and understanding artworks? This discussion brought up some assumptions that the purpose of the artwork is to deliver the message from the artist even without the artist being present to explain the artwork. In this sense, the artwork plays a role as a reflection and or communication media in delivering the artist's life value. While art is primarily interpreted subjectively by individuals as it is how they respond to a work of art differently, there is also objectivity in valuing artwork as one depersonalizes themselves to understand the art as the art itself. This approach relies on the observer's experiences, feelings, and emotions in subjective interpretation. This paper adequately conveys that the observer can get most similarities in understanding the meaning

through a personal connection. This approach emphasizes individual perspectives and how an artwork means to them personally. Therefore, in practice, most observers usually use a subjective approach.

On the other hand, art historians, critics, and even scholars use objective interpretation to provide a broader context and analysis of the artwork. Align with that, this paper shows that the artist's universal symbols can be valued objectively. Objective interpretation seeks to analyze and interpret art based on observable elements.

A room characteristic can be seen after we analyze the room's components. In this case, the overall analysis based on the subjective and objective views of the observer can create a character composed by the art installation. As the topic talks about uninvited events shown by burnt pieces of furniture, the chaotic feel from the threads and the contrasting black and white color scheme create a certain strong characteristic of this art installation space. A room or space that brings out a chaotic memory from the past becomes the characteristic of this room or space. At the same time, the meaning of this room is a chaotic room that reminisces the uninvited incident in the past. The art installation itself creates it as a component. Spatial design intentionally crafts human environments that connect to the world around them. The discipline combines interior design elements (such as furniture planning), art installation, and architecture (playing with the building's foundation). The meaning of this room can be seen through a thorough analysis of the recontextualization in the previous section of this paper.

Overall, art interpretation adds a lot of layering in terms of meaning and context to the artworks. These are what make artworks more valuable to both individuals and the society as a whole. It enhances the enjoyment, appreciation, and significance of art.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after analyzing and understanding the table of comparison (refer to Table 3), it could be seen that observers and artists both interpret in different ways, especially when it comes to meanings that underlie subconsciousness. It is pretty evident that the burnt piano both means a lost voice and a silence that erupts from a musical instrument; burnt chairs mean a presence of nothingness; how the threads intertwined with each other means chaos; and last but not least, the difference that can be found in the meaning of the color black for the thread that the artist tried to deliver as subconsciousness comes off as smoke to the observer.

It could be seen that objects that represent universal understanding, such as chairs, piano, and shapes, can be understood objectively in the sense of what the item means and purposes in general. In a way, one could say how the item is universally perceived. On the other hand, subjectivity comes in when understanding the components more personally. For example, the background of cultural beliefs will affect how one perceives specific art components, such as colors. A good balance of subjective and objective aspects will create a relationship between the components, thus making one perceive and understand the meaning and message of what the artist wants to deliver. By understanding this, one could appreciate artworks more and increase the value of art.

Last but not least, understanding the objective and subjective way of seeing artworks and how one affects the other will create a strain of connection and understanding the deeper

meaning of an artwork and art interpretation. Eventually, going through this, one will elevate the significance of social realities in contemporary arts.

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