How Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge can reveal the artist’s role today

The artist’s role in today’s society is a serious concern not only for artists, but for anyone who desires and believes in human progress. The artist’s role has traditionally been understood as one that tells “a story of continuous weaving and changing of traditions in which each work refers to the past and points to the future” (Gombrich 461). In the past, artists have played the role of historian, prophet and critic, presenting documentation, idealism and irony all with the necessary idea of moving humanity forward. Broadly speaking, the artist’s role has been to depict and even reveal truths about humanity’s relationship with itself and the reality it exists in (Kamhi). It is hard to say exactly what the artist’s role is today, but no matter how one understands the role it is hard to accept that it is a meaningless one. However, this is a possible interpretation of Foucault’s essay titled “What is an Author.”

To be fair, in the context of the essay mentioned, Foucault was primarily analyzing the relationship between art and its audience, not the relationship between the audience and artist. His argument was that when attempting to gain understanding from a work of art the author function is a limiting factor for concluding meaning. He wrote that “The Author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (“What Is an Author?” 927). This conclusion was the result of Foucault’s preconceived idea that power is knowledge and the Cartesian I is a construct. Foucault believed that the function of author operated as a set of parameters
established by the powers that be in which meaning is constructed, controlled and restricted. This is clearly evident in many art history classes and even in our everyday experience with works of art. Many of us have passed by a work of art to view the artist’s name prior to examining the work of art itself. It seems that a work of art must be proven worthy of examination by its proof of authorship prior to the actual experience of examining it. It also seems that many mediocre works of art are accepted as great works of art simply because they were created by an artist considered by history to be great. We have all experienced bad Picassos hanging in highly respected venues. I maintain that Foucault’s criticism of the role of authorship for the proliferation of meaning is evident and valid. However, applying his conclusion in an all-encompassing way has severe implications for the intentionality of artists and ultimately the role of artist as a whole. It can lead to the very statement Foucault makes at the end of his essay; “what difference does it make who is speaking” (“What Is an Author?” 928). If the intentions of the artist are of no value to his audience then it would follow that an artist does not need to have intentions at all. It could even lead on to question whether or not an artist is needed at all. This is the question that worries me and that I address in the following paragraphs.

Despite my immediate impulse to dismiss Foucault’s post-structural analysis because of its over-reaching scope and severe implications for the artist I can’t help but accept the accuracy of his description of the sometimes distorted relationship between art and audience. This aspect of his argument is the result of a method that he identified as archaeological. The archaeological method provided tools for analyzing cultural products in order to discover divergent patterns of production which correlate to paradigm shifts in the producers of the products. Keep in mind Foucault’s archaeological method is a tool for describing cultures, not for offering a prescription for future direction. Instead of looking for causes Foucault analyzed outcomes. This method is the result of the opinion that products reveal more than producers and empirical evidence is
much less problematic than looking for causal relationships. He wrote that “The archaeological
treatment of painting avoids these pitfalls, speaking not of style, genius, evolution, or
development, but the operations carried out by individual works of art upon the received
conventions of painting. Archaeology places a premium on seeing difference, heterogeneity, and
divergence” (Tanke 56-57). By analyzing the continuum of cultural products archeaologically he
was able to point to divergent patterns and therefore associate them with divergent paradigms.
Foucault used this method to analyze paintings throughout history and found that it revealed
three distinct divergences. His analysis of paintings is important for discovering the role of artists
because each painting reveals the role of the artist who painted it. By revealing the historical
roles as well as the present roles we are able to identify negatives and positives that can then be
used to prescribe a role for the future. The results of Foucault’s findings will be used to produce
a framework that can help determine the role of artists in today’s world.

As stated previously, Foucault discovered three distinct divergences and therefore was
able to recognize three distinct cultural phases. He labeled them as; “the Renaissance, the period
in Western history that spans the fifteenth to the start of the seventeenth century; the Classical
age, the seventeenth century through the end of the eighteenth; and the modern age, which for
Foucault, begins at the end of the eighteenth century and continues to our own day” (Tanke 23).
He did not recognize Postmodernity as a separate phase, but rather as a label describing the later
stage of Modernity. Foucault argued that each divergence was made evident in paintings that
demonstrated different ways of understanding and using the sign. Furthermore, each distinct use
of the sign directly related to a distinct way of ordering knowledge. Another way of stating this
might be to say that each phase obtained and accepted knowledge differently and therefore used
the sign differently as a result. For instance, during the Renaissance phase knowledge was gained
through a discovery of similarities and the sign follows this pattern. Objects were understood by
their relation of resemblance to other objects. This meant that at this time obtaining knowledge was the result of man’s task “to discover the similarities and weave them together into a ‘meaningful whole’ (Tanke 25). All of reality during this time was understood as being connected by an underlying network of similarities sometimes described as signatures. Foucault described this way of ordering knowledge as a network of resemblances. This was evident in the practice of iconography which understood icons as containing the essence of the saints they depicted through similarities. This is precisely why the worshipers of icons did not accept the claim by the iconoclasts that worshipping icons was idolatry. To the mind of the Renaissance artist the icon and the saint contained the same essence. This idea is also apparent in Raphael’s fresco titled Disputa (see fig. 1). This painting provides a visual for the Orthodox Christian idea that everything on earth resembles the heavens.

Foucault labeled the next stage the Classical phase. He recognized a divergent shift in a painting by Velazquez titled Las Meninas (see fig. 2). In this painting the objects do not resemble reality, but point to something distinct from the objects being represented. One example of this idea is revealed in how Velazquez himself could not be painting the family portrait from the viewpoint he depicts himself painting it from. Foucault argues that Velazquez’s painting is capable of representing every cultural phase, but this example recognizes the shift from resemblance to representation. It reveals that at this time the hidden connection of similarities which the Renaissance relied on for obtaining knowledge is beginning to lose its dominance. The objects depicted in the painting do not resemble reality in the way the Renaissance mind would have understood them to have. Foucault argued that Las Meninas (see fig. 2.) reveals that during the Classical phase knowledge was ordered through differences rather than similarities. Resemblance was replaced by representation which meant that man was “to see the world through a network of identities and differences, which intensify certain facets of experience by
excluding others” (Tanke 32). This was also made apparent in the interpretation of Descartes’ teachings which created a metaphysical separation between intangible and tangible that even today has not been resolved. During this time the possibility of knowing things in themselves is beginning to pass and is being replaced by knowing how to categorize the thing in relation to differences of other things. Context began to assert itself and opened the door for the next phase.

Foucault labeled the next and current stage we live in the Modern phase. This stage was discovered through an analysis of Manet’s *Luncheon of the Grass* (see fig. 3). In this painting Manet asserted the materiality of paintings by flattening the image and rejecting accepted Quattrocento conventions. Manet made painting a “game through which what is not present—which cannot be present because of the nature of the medium—is included in the representation introduces into the painting a discourse on the limitations of representation” (Tanke 75).

Foucault discovered in Manet’s painting that the idea of representation itself was being questioned. He argued that representation was put under the microscope because of the birth of man. The birth of man is the idea that man at some point became both subject and object of knowledge. This is the result of man’s assertion of subjectivity as an outcome of Kant’s redefinition of reason. His redefinition of reason confirmed that one can never know things in themselves. From this point knowledge is no longer grasped from external objects. Now man himself takes full responsibility for setting the parameters for what knowledge is and how it is obtained. Foucault also points to a painting by a Magritte titled The Treachery of Images (see fig. 4) to demonstrate the death of representation and the shift that brought about the modern phase. Magritte’s painting was “designed to overcome one of the implicit and guiding principles of representational painting, namely, that there is something external to painting, whose task it is to represent it” (Tanke 121). At this point in history knowledge, as something external, was a dying idea and the significance of the sign was following.
Postmodernity which Foucault considered late Modernity can best be understood in relation to the artist Andy Warhol. Warhol is the full realization of the idea that man’s task is no longer to pursue knowledge as something external, but rather something to be fabricated internally. The Modern order of knowledge is a process of self-aggrandizing. For Warhol, art and life were indistinguishable. He made no “distinction between people who make of their existence a work and those who make a work during their existence” (Tanke 194). This idea is also represented by the post structural idea that human understanding is a construct, not the result of a pursuit of an objective understanding. What I believe the results of Foucault’s archaeological analysis demonstrate is that without the pursuit of resemblance and representation today’s artist is becoming more and more trapped within himself. As a result of their loss, artists are no longer leaders of culture, but are just another product amongst many other indistinguishable products.

By applying archaeological methods to paintings Foucault discovered divergent shifts in how each phase ordered knowledge and consequentially understood the sign (Tanke 96). There are two ideas that can be concluded from his results which can help determine the role of artists today. The first idea is that there are different ways of ordering knowledge and art is a symptom of the artist’s accepted way. Foucault’s analysis provided several examples of how knowledge was ordered each with a common sense conclusion. The Renaissance phase ordered knowledge in a way that recognized and emphasized the inherent connections amongst things through resemblances. The Classical phase emphasized distinctions and differences valuing the individual over the whole. Ultimately the Modern phase does away with the idea of obtaining knowledge altogether as something external asserting subjectivity and self. The conclusion is that, throughout time, knowledge has been ordered differently and the next idea argues that each is still within the grasp of artists today.
The second idea is that artists are capable of creating art within a phase of culture that predominately holds one view of knowledge while having a completely different view themselves. Foucault’s phases recognize that a majority of people during each phase ordered knowledge a particular way, but not all people. Foucault believed that there were persistent paradigms held over from previous phases. In other words there were multiple ways of ordering knowledge during each phase that were the result of overlapping phases. Foucault argued this point by giving the example that the heroic status of artists during the classical phase was a direct result of the persistence of the Renaissance paradigm. He argued that this occurred because when knowledge became “ordered by differences, the poet and painter are the untimely ones who continue to view the world with the eyes of resemblance. To see and speak according to the bygone era of similitude is to inhabit shadowy realm at the borders of an era, discovering instances of the same against the grid of differences” (Tanke, 34). Artists during the Classical phase remained true to the Renaissance pursuit of looking for similitude amongst differences. This provided them with skills more like visionaries or prophets. They saw reality in a way that was not seen by the majority. This example demonstrates that artists have not always mirrored their culture in the way that Warhol did.

The example Foucault provided of the heroic artist as the result of a persistent paradigm provides an alternative for all artists no matter what the predominant way of ordering knowledge may be. Today, with the dominance of post structural thought, artists and people in general seem to accept the deterministic view that they are unable to think differently than the culture they exist within, yet Foucault himself provided an example that offers an alternative. People are more than a construct of their culture; they are capable of holding beliefs not forced on them by their culture. As another author stated artists and their art are “not the result of the forces—social, political, artistic or religious—of a given age, but on the contrary tells us, according to its
range and strength, what these forces truly are, by embodying them in symbolic entities that are apprehensible to all” (Chiari 13). Artists are capable of holding views in complete contradiction to the dominate view. Prior to Warhol, artists were advocates of this position. They offered the possibility of free thinking and understood that their role in culture was one of leadership not mimicry. The artist’s role was to reveal better ways of ordering knowledge and ultimately understanding the sign. Prior to this time the role of the artist was not seen “as a break with tradition, but as a recapturing of tradition, in circumstances for which the artistic legacy has made little or no provision. This history does not see the pastness of the present moment, but its present reality, as the place we have go to, and whose nature must be understood in terms of a continuum” (Scruton 171). We live in a time now when we accept our determined position and seek to embrace it rather than find ways to overcome it. For the Warholian artist, art is not in dialogue with the past, present, and future, but is restricted to the present, confined to a moment and separated metaphysically from others. Even though Foucault is considered a leader of the post-structural movement which promotes the constructed self, he held romantic notions of stepping beyond the forces that control. He argued that through the act of transgression “we can ignore all those implicit obligations which are not in the law but in the general way of behaving” (Tanke 52). My position is that by rejecting the constructed self and looking at the different ways knowledge has been ordered and signs understood, artists are presented with the possibility of discovering a role that is part of the continuum, one that builds on the past and adds something for the future.

The goal of this essay is to demonstrate how Foucault’s ideas can be used to determine the role of artists today. With that being said I am not convinced that the answer is a clear cut one. However, I think that there is a general direction discovered. The direction I prescribe is the result of many more years of pursuit than this essay can encompass, but I do think that
Foucault’s archaeological analysis has contributed to the base of knowledge I used to come to my conclusion. That conclusion is that if we accept the predominant paradigm of late Modernity or postmodernity, the role of the artist is dead or at least dying. With the current view of knowledge as something determined and or created by the subject there is nothing to pursue and no justification for making one thing over another. The result is one of circular mimicry and mirroring our culture is not a viable artistic role because it is not distinct from the role played by every other person. Maybe late Modernity is only leading to another productive shift, but it is also quite possible that it is leading to a negative shift, one in which there is no room for free thinking individuals that can still retain their universal connection to other things they exist with. What Foucault’s analysis reveals to me is that artists are moving closer and closer to becoming indistinguishable from culture itself and are trapped with a paradigm that has no viable explanation for how to connect and communicate with other individuals. I consider any shift in culture that leaves humans with the inability to relate to each other as a negative one and this is precisely what I think is happening as a result of how my culture orders knowledge and therefore makes art. Ultimately art is at minimal an act of communication and communication requires similarities nonexistent in a late Modern paradigm. Communication is important because it fosters empathy which recognizes differences and similarities. “We must never forget that the impulse to write and the reciprocal impulse to read are underwritten by a desire for communion with the other. Authors and books may indeed, be compromised by their times and conditions, their prejudices and aversions, their influences and agons; but we cannot escape the fact that—at times—the touch of their utterance upon us is profound to the point of ineffability. The point is that reading is an incredibly intimate act, when the ideas and words of another inhabit our own souls” (Martin 86).
This loss of communicative power is why I believe that artists today should seek to combine the ways of ordering knowledge that are represented by Resemblance and Representation. Communication and ultimately empathy are the result of a combination of the Renaissance and the Classical paradigms that Foucault described. I believe that for a brief time the Modern phase was doing this. However late Modernists like Warhol cut all ties from traditional ways. It is no wonder that the artist still looking for resemblance during the Classical phase was seen as a heroic character. He represented a combination of all that came before and also what was needed for his present time. I believe artists should combine the traditional ways of ordering knowledge into a unified and positive direction for humanity. To be clear this does not mean redefine them. Artists should act “with impeccable reverence to the past and at the same time exercise [their] originality to meet present needs” (Kemp 7).

Even though I have come to a conclusion in this essay about the role of artists today, I am not asserting that my role as an artist is completely resolved. I am asserting that artists today cannot forget that art is communicative. As one author put it “I am speaking not of a divine communion, but of a more humble one: that between human souls” (Martin 86). One could say that another role of the artist today is to figure out his role. Most importantly, I believe this essay offers a framework for other artists to do precisely that. All artists should have an understanding about how they order knowledge and understand the sign. With Foucault’s results artists can determine where they fit within his conclusions and also whether that is where they want to fit. I believe it is an inherent characteristic of humanity to want their similarities and differences acknowledged and this is accomplished through communication which fosters empathy. Art can be communicative and therefore can offer something positive for humanity. My response to Foucault when he states, “What difference does it make who is speaking?” is, if it is another human being, it makes a difference to me.


Soussloff, Catherine M. “Michel Foucault And The Point Of Painting.” *Art History* 32.4 (2009): 734-54.


Fig. 1. Raphael. *Disputa*. 1509-1510. Fresco. Apostolic Palace, Vatican City. 500 cm × 770 cm (200 in × 300 in)

Fig. 2. Velázquez, Diego. *Las Meninas*. 1656. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid. 318 cm × 276 cm (125.2 in × 108.7 in)
Fig. 3. Manet, Édouard. *The Luncheon on the Grass*. 1862-1863. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 208 cm × 265.5 cm (81.9 in × 104.5 in).

Fig. 4. Magritte, René. *The Treachery of Images*. 1928-1929. Oil on Canvas. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. 63.5 cm × 93.98 cm (25 in × 37 in)
Foucault’s Archaeology of Knowledge

How it can reveal the role of today’s artist

By Joshua Risner
Wayne Thiebaud
American, born 1920

Jawbreaker Machine, 1963
Oil on canvas

Wayne Thiebaud's Jawbreaker Machine is a frontal, iconic image. His distinctive still life paintings of pinball machines, toys and foodstuffs such as pies, cakes, pretzels and sandwiches, are inspired by childhood memories spent on the boardwalk in Long Beach, California. In Jawbreaker Machine the subject rests upon a stark white ground, inviting us to concentrate on the sumptuous handling of paint and the object's simplified form and intensified color. Here, even the shadows are colored and the contours of the candies are outlined in contrasting colors. Thiebaud charges this otherwise ordinary subject with dynamic visual energy.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Glenn through the Friends of Art, F65-46
“What difference does it make who is speaking?”

Michel Foucault
Renaissance
15th to the start of the 17th century

Classical
17th century through the end of the 18th century

Modern
End of the 18th century to the present
Renaissance

Knowledge is the result of discovering similarities amongst things and then linking them together by relations of resemblance. Resemblance Rules.
The hidden connection of things is broken. Knowledge is now the result of pointing out differences with the goal of ordering nature. Representation Rules.
The possibility of knowing things begins to pass through the sovereignty signs
Modern

Representation is questioned due to the birth of man which is the idea that he is both the subject and object of knowledge. Subjectivity Rules.
Ceci n'est pas une pipe.
The idea that man is both subject and object of knowledge is exhausted in that life and knowledge become one. “Subject is capable of attaining the truth by virtue of being a subject.” Foucault
Cultural descriptions recognize majorative paradigm shifts not exclusive ones. The persistence of resemblance through shifting cultures crowns the artist with a heroic/prophet status.
“The impulse to [make] and the reciprocal impulse to read are underwritten by a desire for communion with the other.”

Michael Martin
My intention has not been so much to paint pictures that charm the eye, as to suggest great thoughts that will appeal to the imagination and the heart, and kindle all that is best and noblest in humanity”

Odd Nerdrum
Who cares who is speaking?
If it is another person, I do.