

# Message Transfer Theory (MTT): A Treatise on the Reversal of Meaning, the Displacement of Intent, and the Object as Conduit

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## I. The Opening Shift

In the age of Possession-Based Aesthetics, meaning was frozen in the object. The artwork was mistaken for the message. The artist, a vessel. The museum, a vault. To view art was to encounter permanence, a fixed declaration, entombed in matter.

Message Transfer Theory proposes a quiet reversal.

In this reframing, the object is no longer the message.

It is the *threshold* through which the message passes.

The artist remains the initiator. The viewer becomes the destination.

Meaning isn't stored. It is *transferred*.

The object isn't the voice. It is the *medium*.

Meaning isn't held. It is *activated* in motion.

This shift dethrones the sacredness of permanence. It resituates value not in what is kept, but in what is relayed, received, and transformed.

No longer is the sculpture the truth. It's the envelope.

No longer is the painting the final word. It's the threshold.

And if no one receives it, the transmission is incomplete.

## II. Message Transfer Theory

Current mainstream models, particularly postmodern or interpretive theories, do accept that viewers play a role in meaning-making. However, they often treat the *object* as a *stable site* of meaning, and the *viewer's interpretation* as *subjective ornamentation*.

layered on top. Even in participatory or conceptual art, the transmission itself isn't often foregrounded as the sacred act.

*Message Transfer Theory*, by contrast, **elevates the act of transmission itself** as the core event, not the object, not the artist, and not even the interpretation.

MTT asserts:

*The message is not stored. It's moved.*

*The object isn't a shrine of meaning; it's a vehicle that becomes sacred only in motion.*

### **Message Transfer Theory (MTT) rests on six primary assertions:**

**1. Meaning is Displaced:** The meaning of a work doesn't reside within the object. It's displaced into the space between sender and receiver. The artwork isn't a container, but a carrier. A possibility, not a pronouncement.

**2. Sequential Transmission:** Meaning is not embedded and discovered. It's transferred and activated. The artist imbues the object with a charge, not to preserve it, but to pass it. The object serves as a medium, not a container. The viewer, through presence, completes or even redirects the message. In this model, the message lives not in the object or the artist, but in the movement between them. The artwork becomes a living circuit: open, unstable, consecrated only in transmission.

**3. Activation Through Encounter:** The object alone is dormant. Meaning is activated only in the encounter. As Heidegger suggested, truth is not an essence, but an *event*: an *unconcealment* that occurs when the viewer stands before the work and allows it to appear.

**4. The Decay of Stored Meaning:** Like analog signals, meaning degrades when hoarded. Preservation without encounter leads not to continuity but to stasis. An artwork in a vault doesn't preserve its power. As Benjamin warned, mechanical reproduction dissolves aura. As Eco warned, interpretation must remain open.

**5. Completion Through Reception:** The work is complete not when it's made, but when it's received. The viewer isn't a passive observer, but the *final surface* the message touches. As Duchamp declared, "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone."

**6. Message is a Function of Transfer, Not Possession:** Meaning isn't something one *has*. It is something one *receives* and may then carry forward. *The message is relational. Its power is in motion.*

### III. The Philosophical Lineage

MTT stands in conscious dialogue with, and departure from, several pillars of philosophical aesthetics:

- **Plato** held that art mimics eternal forms. MTT argues that art doesn't mimic but *moves*: it initiates experiential change, not mimetic reflection.
- **Immanuel Kant** emphasized disinterested judgment. MTT proposes *interested encounter*: the viewer matters, their presence is constitutive.
- **Clement Greenberg** prized surface and medium specificity. MTT refocuses on transmission over form: the artwork is a wire, not a wall.
- **Roland Barthes**, in "The Death of the Author," emancipated the viewer from the author's intent. MTT extends this by emphasizing the *space between*, not dominance by either party.
- **Hans-Georg Gadamer** believed meaning arises in the fusion of horizons. MTT affirms this: message is not fixed; it is created in relation.
- **Umberto Eco** defined the "open work" as one that demands the reader's completion. MTT inherits this, but frames it not as a semantic exercise, but a metaphysical event.
- **Roman Jakobson** outlined the communication model: sender, channel, receiver. MTT applies this to art: the artwork is not the message, but the *channel*. Without reception, the message fails.

Thus, Message Transfer Theory occupies a unique position. It honors the legacy of these thinkers while carving its own terrain: a theory not of objects, but of relational meaning in motion.

### IV. Precedents in Practice

Several artists have, knowingly or not, embodied MTT principles. Their works exist not as declarations, but as **messages passed through**:

- **On Kawara**: His telegrams and date paintings were not about time, but about the act of sending time. Each viewer became a timestamped receiver.
- **Tehching Hsieh**: His durational performances, bound by time and discipline, demanded not just witnessing but endurance. The message was carried in lived hours.
- **Roni Horn**: Her river images capture flux. You do not “see” the Thames, you feel its refusal to be fixed. The message is in what escapes.
- **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha**: Her fractured book *Dictee* invites the viewer to reassemble language. The object is a relay of mourning, of colonial residue. Meaning passes through fragmentation.
- **David Hammons**: His snowball sale wasn’t about the object, but the transaction. It was a message in vanishing form. The point wasn’t what was sold, but what was revealed in the act.

These artists understood, or intuited, that permanence was never the point. Their works moved. And only those who received them can speak to what was carried.

## V. Implications for the Critic

In the MTT paradigm, the critic isn’t a summarizer of static meaning, but a *vessel*. Their duty is not to pin down, but to participate. They aren’t cartographers of truth, but *couriers* of the message.

Thus:

- The critic must *witness*, not just document.
- The critic must *preserve the movement*, not freeze it.
- The critic must *relay*, not claim.

To write about a work is to participate in its passage. Criticism becomes an act of *ethical transfer*: not to own the meaning, but to carry it onward, intact.

## VI. The Closing Frame

Message Transfer Theory reframes art as a motion event:

- Not object, but medium.
- Not possession, but passage.
- Not meaning held, but meaning moved.

The artist begins the message. The object transfers it. The viewer completes it. The critic carries it.

And in this trembling space between intention and inheritance, *art lives*.

Not in stasis. Not in summary.

But in *transfer*.

Art was never meant to be owned. It was meant to pass through us.

And what passes through us, changes us.

That is the revolution MTT proposes.

That is the altar on which it lays the object bare.

In motion.

In breath.

In witnessing.

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