

Using works of art as epistemological devices

by Pekka Nikrus

A *system*, within the practice of systems thinking, can be understood as a mental model of some, perhaps any, functional detail of the world, like, but by no means restricted to, a clock, a corporation, or language. Mental models exist in our minds and are both very subjective and also hard to share as such. Therefore a *model* is needed. A model is the representation of a system: it works as a link to the world and can be shared with others and discussed. The model, as a source of information and understanding, is an epistemological device. It gives form not only to our thinking of the world but also our reasoning about thinking.

If one sees texts, such as poems, novels, or research reports, as representations of a writer's mental model, then texts can easily be understood as models, in a systemic sense. From here it is only a short step to imagery, visualisations, graphics, as well as works of art. What do pictures, when consciously produced, represent, if not mental models? Think of Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929). The painting is a representation of some detail of the world, as the artist understands it. Magritte shares his understanding through his work, which makes the artwork an epistemological device.

There are, as we all know, no rules governing how esoteric or introverted artworks may be. It is art, free expression without rules. In the context of using works of art as epistemological devices, though, I feel some considerations about expression are in order—especially in the context of research or education.

In my presentation, I discuss and show some results of my strive to follow the same rules for the works of art as I do for the writing in my doctoral dissertation. Creating the artistic component of the dissertation, photographs that work in conjunction with the text, diversify my overall phrasing on some topics. This way, art can be understood as the representation of the researcher's mind and is the result of skill-based thinking: the works of art reveal and bring forth conscious conceptual clarifications.

Resources

Checkland, Peter. 1988. *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*. Chichester: Wiley. 1981.

Meadows, Donella H. 2008. *Thinking In Systems: A Primer*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.

Varto, Juha. 2017. *Taiteellinen tutkimus. Mitä se on? Kuka sitä tekee? Miksi?* Helsinki: Aalto-yliopiston taiteiden ja suunnittelun korkeakoulu.