Definitions: Form, Content and Context

FORM

The form of a work of art or design refers to all of its visible elements and the particular way these come together as a whole. These include:

1. **the material or medium** used to construct the work, e.g. marble, bronze, found objects, oil paint, video, wood, steel, mixed media, photography etc;
2. **the colour** of the work and the way colour has been used in terms of tonal variation, contrast, harmony, coolness, warmth, opacity, translucence etc;
3. **the use of line** in the work and whether or not it is curved, angular, directional, repetitive, flowing, irregular etc;
4. **the texture or surface** of the work and whether it is rough, smooth, tactile, repellant, viscous, fluid etc;
5. **the composition** of the work i.e. the way the space is organized or how the elements are put together, e.g. one point perspective, close up, viewed from above, depth of field, chaotic, symmetrical, grid-like;
6. **the scale or dimensions** of a work and whether it is monumental, miniature, intimate, imposing etc;
7. **the duration of a work** and the length of time the viewer is expected to engage with it - particularly significant for timed-based work such as video and performance.

CONTENT

Content is the subject matter of a work of art or design. It is revealed through the formal properties of the work and may be evident on a number of levels. There is the immediate or obvious content of the work, e.g. it may be an historical scene, a landscape, a portrait, an interior, a functional object or an abstraction. Beyond this the content may become more complex. It is about what is happening in the works, what meaning you derive from them, and whether or not they create a particular mood or reaction. Sometimes content can be difficult to assess because it may be ambiguous or obscure. The formal elements of the work and its title can often help to read the content, as can recurring patterns, motifs or symbols that may have special significance.

CONTEXT

Context helps us to understand the meaning of a work of art. The context in which a work is made and displayed will impact on its formal resolution. So an artist will select particular materials and use them in a particular way depending on their social, cultural and personal background and the particular era they are working in. Context takes into account:

1. the social and historical milieu within which the works were produced;
2. the movement or period to which the artwork belongs;
3. sources referenced in the work such as the work of other artists, literature, ancient mythology and popular culture;
4. where and how the work is exhibited or performed, e.g. in a museum or gallery, indoors or outdoors, in public or private;
5. the cultural and personal background of the artist.