



How to explain art

Description

Here is an audio of a sequence of blog posts I published in 2013. Some were written while on a trip back to Australia after an absence of 16 years. These reflections of a traveller later informed my books [Mood and Mobility](#), [Network Nature](#), and [Derrida for Architects](#). My current challenge is to see what I can update in light of subsequent developments in computing, digital media and AI.

I fed the seven posts into ChatGPT with the suggestion that I wanted to focus on the content of the last post in the series about the use of the word “challenge” that features commonly in explanations of individual works of art. In response, my AI guide proposed how each post can slot into this framing when viewed retrospectively through the lens of “explaining art.” The AI even generated a tagline: *how cultural experience explains itself*. What appears below is the much edited result of that exchange.

These posts began as reflections of a traveller, but they also form a meditation on how we explain experience – how pride, melancholy, nature, and even coffee become objects of aesthetic thought. In each case, I was trying to understand what art does: how it models, disturbs, or discloses. The final post, *Art Challenges Life*, makes this question explicit. It asks what it means to say that art “challenges” anything, and whether the claim that a work “challenges” is a sufficient basis for an explanation. (Also see [previous post](#) about explanations and negation.)

Here is an account of each of the seven posts under the rubric of “explanation.”

1. Pride of Place

This post explored the politics of emotion – how “pride” becomes public and collective. It shows how national gestures, such as the apology to Indigenous Australians, are performances of moral and aesthetic reconciliation. Under my new framing, it reads as a reflection on *the art of contrition* – how states and institutions use symbolic acts as surrogates for the mood or emotion of a nation. The question becomes: *can pride itself be explained as a designed mood, staged like art?*

2. Cappuccino Epidemic

The post about caf s and the "softening of the edge" examined design as a mood-producing medium. Under *How to Explain Art*, it serves as a study of everyday aesthetics – how ordinary spaces and rituals (coffee, sociability, branded meeting places) operate as curated installations. It suggests that *artistic experience* now spills into the mundane: the cappuccino zone as a live exhibit of bourgeois calm and mediated attention.

3. Signature City

This piece translated art's "signature" into architecture – buildings as gestures, marks, or performances. Within my new frame, it represents *art at the scale of the city*. Just as artists challenge conventions, signature architects challenge urban identity. This post can be taken to illustrate how explanation itself becomes architectural: the city signs its name across the landscape.

4. Some Wild Life

Here art embraces the natural. The post observed how nature and digital mediation intertwine – how photography, smartphones, and web searches construct our sense of the "natural." In *How to Explain Art*, this becomes a parable of *how technology explains nature to us*, or how digital mediation aestheticises the living world. It raises the question (not addressed in the original post): *if all experience is now digitally filtered, is "wildness" itself a kind of art form?*

5. Melancholy Urbanism

This essay provided the emotional and aesthetic tone for the series – reflection, distance, and loss. It's art criticism turned toward the city itself: cemeteries, pools, ruins, and horizons as melancholic compositions. In this frame, melancholy becomes a *mode of explanation* – showing how absence, decay, and memory tell us what the city means.

6. Derrida for Stand-ups

Here I directly addressed the act of *explaining*, via Derrida's reading of Plato and my link to performance. The "stand-up" motif collapses philosophy, theatre, and architecture into one performative space. The AI suggested that in the context of *How to Explain Art*, the content of the post raises the question: *when does explanation itself become a kind of art?* Derrida's *pharmakon* – cure and poison – echoes the ambiguity of critique: to explain art is to risk undoing it.

7. Art Challenges Life

The culminating post staged the question explicitly – what it means to say that art *challenges*. In the post I proposed a tripartite model of *emulation*, *disturbance*, and *disclosure* as providing a conceptual map for the series. It revealed that "explaining art" is never just defining it; it's a process of *disclosure*, of making the familiar strange.

Over a decade later, I am confronted with another explanatory device – the large language model (LLM) (e.g. ChatGPT) that I am using here. The AI doesn't simply describe or critique art; it performs explanations by composing, re-phrasing, and reflecting in real time. (See post [Explain this](#) for a

simplified technical explanation of how the GPT method does this.) The LLM extends the act of interpretation into a kind of dialogue, where explanation becomes generative, synthetic and never complete.

I link to the original blog posts here. I'm still questioning the extent to which the explanations and extrapolations above are entirely consistent with my original content.

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Note

- Featured image is by ChatGPT: Please compose an image of the indigenous Aussie flag (sun over the desert), a coffee mug, a text signature and pen, a pair of binoculars, a dramatic and melancholic horizon in the background, some cosmetic makeup materials and artists materials. The setting is old and dusty like some neglected past legacy.
- The AI volunteered that the title of this post echoes (perhaps playfully) Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, which suits your interest in art, theory, and the performative dimension of explanation. • See recent [article](#) by Balasz Takac in *Artsper Magazine*.

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