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Migration of visual images in contemporary art experiences

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Abstract

The meaning mode of every era changes depending on social dynamics and ruling discourse of mentioned era. Meaning is also one of the basic problems of art. While modern art produces the meaning based on artwork, contemporary art makes it based on viewer and artwork. In this process, an infinite sign mechanism is established in between viewer and artwork by considering it within the problematic of meaning and comment. This mechanism takes artwork as a meaning-producing device, and the hyperactive meaning in the artwork turns to a game of meanings by degrading itself. Eroding migration of meaning has been made possible by migration and manipulation of reality. Artwork that lost its reality has obtained the system and image of display as a new area of power and hegemony by undressing the content of the artwork. Thus, the artwork is transformed to a pure visual show and sign position by demolishing the content that itself produced it.

Keywords: Contemporary art, migration of meaning, reality.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary art practices that dated 1960's and named as the end of modern art, has experienced important transformations since those dates. Indeed, major transformation lived in art practices in between 1960 and 1980 totally transformed representation character of art in its essence. Although there are many reasons for this transformation, it can be looked for through artists to be against formalism of modern art, its disconnection from daily life, its commercialisation, and its institutionalisation as parallel to social and economic infrastructure. Therefore, the art regime formed in between 1960 and 1980, has been focused on practices totally changing form language, aesthetics, material, subject, content and philosophy of modern art. On the other hand, the art practices since 1980 up to nowadays named as contemporary art that sprung as protest and avant-garde character in the 1960's has been transformed to a global and commercial structure under new liberal politics.

This transformation starting from the 1960's caused many discussions involving modern art come to the agenda. The important parts of these discussions are the problematics of representation forms of visual arts and meaning as output of these representations. While Tapies (2014, p. 88) explaining European Art of 1970's, he defines that art had no tie with life. Ranciere (2010, p. 65) defines that contemporary art samples such as interior photomontages and installations and this art mechanism don't do anything except turn around itself. Baudrillard (2010, p. 35) goes forward and characterises today's image production has nothing to say as discourse. It is required to turn back and look at all these critics getting denser on problematic of meaning and why contemporary art practices are not understandable in terms of its causalities, means and consequences.

2. Meaning migration of visual images

Radical tradition in visual representation until modern art was working on meaning similarity resulted by reality and fixation as reflection of outer reality. Although this understanding that called 'Mimesis' was not linear, it reduced problematics of meaning and representation in painting until modernism. Therefore, problematic of meaning starting with modern art exponentially proceeded in Postmodern art.

Modern art relatively aimed completeness of fixing its own meaning, made of fixer and structural elements. Modern art by its own scientific, pioneering and constructive direction based on interpretation of nature and reality provided readable and/or semi-readable representation. By Burger's (2014, p. 151) explanation, 'organic artworks are constructed by hermeneutic cycling. Recognition of the completeness of a work in advance both guides recognising the parts and correcting those recognitions. The most basic assumption of this type of reception is existence of compulsory harmony in between meanings of parts and completeness'. So, large part of modern art is constructed to create meaning. Parts even in most abstract samples, parts, stains and lines are in harmony and aesthetic completeness by pushing each other to integrate. The art developed after 1960's, runs to distract this readability. 'Avant-garde works make parts independent of completeness that they belong to. Parts are not compulsory elements of that completeness anymore. The work doesn't leave integrated impression to allow interpretation of the meaning, and it cannot be explained by referring individual parts. Because, those parts are not dependent on a purpose' (Burger, 2014, p. 151). In a point of view, some of these works are fixed on purpose to be against the meaning itself.

When turning back to see reasons of the character of sometimes ambivalent, slippery, migrating and sometimes totally disappearing meaning in contemporary artworks, it can be seen that historical obligations are primarily effective. Such that, post constructivism, postmodern theory, linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstructivism, etc., developed after 1960's have deeply affected artists and art practices. On the other hand, visual varieties developed after 1960-80 by science, technique, material and technologic availabilities, wars in global scale proposed by new liberal politics, migration, changing geographies, inclining religious, ethnical and sexual sub-identities, global annuities, disidentification, alienation and deteriorating ecologic balance, make this background. These dense

social dynamics lived in the 1960's made artists to quest by reaction against the structure of art that quite institutionalised in the society and disconnecting from the life. To distract old forms and structures means to distract their own meaning, too. New aesthetic paradigms come dressed with new meanings. Together with distracted structure, mimesis as continuity of tradition, and reflection function as conception that has no place anymore in daily life. Body, video and photograph replace functions of canvas, brush and paints. This transformation causes artwork to transform to a more complicated entity in terms of material, technique, aesthetic and content, and thus to be receipted more difficulty.

When looking at other factors besides historical obligations in contemporary art paradigms, it can be said that there is always covered, complicated but defined relation among artist, artwork and reader. The most important parameter of this relation that takes reader to the meaning is art knowledge. Although art knowledge is in itself discussion area, within the transforming and continuously relocating structure of art as dependent of social dynamics, today this knowledge is not only subject to form and plastics but also subject to social and political knowledge. Knowledge of art object is dependent on its ontological status, historical place, capacity to produce knowledge and meaning, on technique, material and plastics, on socio-political situation and further on a wide knowledge category and variables from the created subject (artist) to received subject (reader). Tapies (2014, p. 136) proposes that 'meaning of an artwork almost never takes place within itself, artwork is in relation with other artworks of the same artist or different artists, thus explaining an artwork is equivalent of writing a contemporary art history'.

3. Conceptions, linguistics, semiotics, science and theories before meaning

Years of 1960–70's are under the authority of conceptual art by its first protest behaviour against modern art and its institutionalisation together with background explained above. Covered meaning, existing in artworks from beginning, lost its validity in the works after the 1960's, it required to dominate knowledge of art, philosophy, language and science at conceptual level. By Atakan's (2008, p. 47) determination, when conceptual art and art take form of criticising exam and continuous dialog, discussions on art-related topics made possible to overlap practice with theory.

Most of the conceptual artists are interested in linguistic philosophy and semiotics newly started discussing after the 1960's. So many developing scientific and linguistic theories and discussions are focuses of conceptual artists.



Figure 1. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965.

Joseph Kosuth's installation named 'One and Three Chairs' is a typical sample of this theoretical background. 'Under the influence of philosophy, artist has seen art object as art proposal similar with linguistic proposal in his artwork and examined similarities in between language and art' (Atakan, 2008, p. 57). Taking place of chair itself, its painting and its photograph at the same time are a referring to semiotic theories. There is no doubt here that the requirement of a background to semiotics to receipt the artwork.



Figure 2. J. Beuys, Oil Chair, 1963.

On the other hand, Beuys (1963) 'made his artwork named Oil Chair to open a discussion on meaning of language, production and creation of human being, and their supplied scopes to the field of sculpture and culture. In this work, he attracts attention to making analogy in between human body and solid animal oil, and to the sexual, digestion, excretion regions where chemical processes take place. The reason of his using oil is the sensitivity of oil to heat change' (Atakan, 2008, p. 35). Understanding of these works is quite difficult without artist's explanation and manifestation. Here, meaning continuously runs with metaphor. The certain location of chair where oil is put marks that location. But it doesn't openly refer. From one side oil drops as it is heated. As in this example, reader mostly cannot find or gives up the internal interaction of the artwork.

Another issue that art dressed after 1960's is to exhibit performance by body. Especially feminist art performances developed after 1970's aim body's reconstruction and presentation as power field. Artists mostly tend to practices on violence applied to body, displaying sexuality and sexual identity by nudity and shocking extreme applications. Here, submitted message doesn't contain any meaning. Shock effect is fictional to create awareness and alienation. But, since spectator doesn't know psychoanalytic methods that artist fixed in the background and ruled the whole performance, it is possible to experience totally opposite reactions. Generally, the violence applied here examines naturally re-handling the body that civilised and apart from pain. Foster (2009, p. 185) emphasises the idea that the subject, which is the basic position at least psychoanalytic posture of feminist art, is ruled by symbolic regulation. It is very difficult for the spectator to understand this symbolic regulation under this violence.



Figure 3. Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 10, 1973.

As an example, Marina Abramovich uses alienation metaphor by offending her own body. In 1973, during her performance named Rhythm 10, by quickly and rhythmically stabbing a series of knives on her fingers and recording and listening her screams, she repeated this performance a few times. Artist has experienced non-western cultures by her trips, how native cultures enforce the limits of pain, dying and physical violence (Alp, 2014, p. 351).

4. Metaphor instead of mimesis

Mimesis is dealt as reflection of reality by its aspect defining art paradigms until modern art. Together with modern art, discussions began to argue the understanding that artwork cannot have a direct interest, in reality, nature is given reality but artwork is a structure of a fiction.

Fictional structure in contemporary artworks is totally disconnected from mimesis. Contemporary art fiction has a special power that can bend and twist the reality, can transform objective structure of reality by its own discourse. Methods forming fictions in contemporary artworks are generally metaphoric, allegoric, symbolic and semiotic expressions. 'Metaphor is a way basically to understand, to define the world and to be involved into it' (Dayi, 2013, p. 26). Mainly, metaphor is the way explaining and expressing a conception by another conception. Symbolisation and allegoric expression are indirect and intermediary media. In signification, metaphoric, symbolic, semiotic and allegoric expressions are widely used. The difficulty here is always these media imprison the meaning into the artwork or establishing continuous and endless relations with meaning connotations out of the artwork. Thus, meaning either cannot be caught or multi meaning, meaninglessness, connectionlessness are experienced. Metaphoric and symbolic expressions submit generally individual themes. In the other words, artist's own metaphors and symbols act. Therefore, metaphors used in vision production are quite complicated.

For example, Rosemarie Trockel densely uses ironic expression style in her works done by feminist philosophy. Her metaphors require enforced and carefully followed actual life.



Figure 4. Rosemarie Trockel, 1992, Titleless.

Trockel's installation named 'Titleless' in 1992 is just a seal hanged from its legs and a yellow wig attached to its head. Here, the metaphor between a woman and a seal, the irony fixed on femininity and sexy blonde is striking. But until now, this metaphor doesn't fix the real meaning of the artworks that we can culturally understand. The real meaning of the artwork is 'How Brigitte Bardot activated her fame as sex symbol for the purpose of protecting animals and opens secret curtain to be blonde under it' (Sonmez, 2006, p. 103).

Dubuffet nicely summarises this meaning slippage or unfortunately that we experience in front of contemporary artworks. 'Most of the times we are engaged to the thought that our glance unconsciously directed to an artwork, that glance can be universal and our judgement about that work can be generalised and to be a norm. This is a corruption of our glance. It happens just at the beginning of job. It culturalises our glance, therefore it distorts. When the meaning of an artwork is in its exceptionality, this distortion clearly appears' (Dubuffet, 2010, p. 70).



Figure 5. Felix Gonzales Torres, 1988, Nameless.

In another example, Kuban artist Felix Gonzales Torres' artworks named 'Nameless' made in 1988 for his darling died since AIDS hanged to billboards of the city. He investigated public area and private area discrimination as much as sexual preference discrimination in his artworks. In this work, he exhibited photographs of her dying hand and bed in public areas and highways. Here, it is possible to receipt the content of those billboards as advertisement of a bed by thousands of people who don't know this story. No doubt, some of the artworks are made of private stories of the artists.

5. Conclusion

Art experienced not only form wise change but also considerable migration of meaning defined by new paradigms 1960 parallel to transforming life. Conditions defining this migration of meaning are both historical and also contain sensitivities of artists to developing theories in science, linguistics, psychology and philosophy, issues like social rights, democracy, ecology and reactions against formalism and institutionalisation. On the other hand, it requires spectator to have accumulated knowledge not only in art but also in almost every field to read parameters forming meaning in contemporary art. Media used in contemporary art attract attention by their hard to read and multi-meaning structures such as metaphoric, semiotic, symbolic, ironic and allegoric.

From one side, attractive art object dressed mind with plural in material, slippery in meaning and transformed to puzzle, and from another side watching subject trying to read the unseeable, goes to struggle to capture the mind, knowledge and power by images. This struggle can end sometimes with reconciliation and sometimes with alienation.

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