

Questions about the Art itself in the modern artworks

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This article discusses one particular change in the development of Art in the twentieth century – the creation of Art as a reply to such questions as “Are there any substantial features of the work of art?”, “What is the difference between the works of art and nonartistic reality?”, “What does constitute the work of art as such?” Some contemporary artworks tell us merely about the nature of art. The attempt to conceive the works that belong to Biotechnological art, Social art, and Participatory art includes also a reflection on the question about the reasons which allow attributing these works to art. Creation includes consideration of what is possible in the art and notes on art history. The artworks combine the creation of artwork as such and questioning its content, meaning, form, and style. Art is perceived as an investigation of the status of the art object and the role of the artist himself.

Key words: Art, convention, rejection, theory, self-reflection, “Quay Arc”

INTRODUCTION

Classical philosophy took the main characteristic of Art to be a narrative about the main and highest aspects of reality. Some contemporary artworks tell us merely about the nature of art. This article will discuss one particular change in the development of Art in the twentieth century – the creation of Art as a reply to such questions as “Are there any substantial features of the work of art?”, “What is the difference between the works of art and nonartistic reality?”, “What does constitute the work of art as such?”

The greater part of art has become a phenomenon dealing with its own features and so what earlier used to be an object of the theory of art nowadays is included in its story. This aspect is referred to by artists themselves, considered by some philosophers and critics of art. It seems that some confluence of art and its theory was predicted even in the nineteenth century. In the “Lectures on Fine Art” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel writes that the impression made by new artworks “is of a more reflective kind and what they arouse in us needs a higher touchstone and a different test. Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art” (Hegel 1998: 10). Exploring changes of art at the stage of Romanticism Hegel notices that the masterly execution of an artwork becomes the very content of it when a Romantic painter or musician plays on the sound, colour and texture of his work. According to him: “artist’s subjective skill and his application of the means of artistic production are raised to the status of an objective matter in works of art” (Hegel 1998: 599).

CREATORS LIKE THEORISTS

Latter-day American art philosopher Allan Casebier discerns self-reflexivity as one of the peculiar features of the Modern art. The author points: "the conventions and devices used in constructing a work of art are shown rather than concealed in modern art, and the work bears the marks of its own inscription, exposes the presence of the artistic apparatus in the art object" (Casebier 2006: 30). The artists are like theorists who challenge means, modes and materials of artistic work. A lot of contemporary literature is about nothing much but the texts so that the story about the very process of the narration becomes the essence of such works.

A special type of the aesthetic preoccupation in artworks could be seen in the collage, which includes some element of externalising the mode of representation. The collage as such necessarily includes the element of the representation of representation. Each piece in the collage has a kind of double function; it breaks the linearity of the narrative and produces a possibility to understand it in relation to its original context and in relation to a new composition. The collage thus effects a play on what is seen and how it could be represented. Author of the article "In the Name of Picasso" Rosalind Krauss asserts that "capacity of 'speaking about' depends on the ability of each collage element to function as the material signifier for a signified that is its opposite: a presence whose referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence. As a system, the collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it" (Krauss 1981: 20). Hereby such artwork involves reference to the process of its creation as one of its messages. The works of art assembled using a principle of collage not only and not necessarily depict something outside the domain of art; their distinct feature is to represent the specific means of making the art and perceiving it.

The principle of the collage, which consists of the form of repetitions of already existing elements of art, is one of the peculiarities of Contemporary art. Creative and critical forms could be combined into new artworks. Previous artworks or classical styles could be involved in creation of new paintings or other forms of art. Maybe the earliest case of artworks that are visibly speaking of the features of previous art can be seen in the Dada movement. Italian art critic Loredana Parmesani perceptively states that "the Dadist works did have one common denominator: they were a criticism of the artistic product, even that of the avant-garde, which had up until then followed more or less traditional schemes" (Parmesani 2000: 37).

What is the reason of such tacit references to the history of previous art in the new artworks? Post-modern theorists are of the opinion that nowadays creation has been driven inside the mind of subject, it cannot look for the referent in the real world but must explore existing art forms or images. Maybe the best-known post-modernist theorist Fredric Jameson maintains: "in a wild in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is gang to be about art itself" (Jameson 1982: 4). Postmodernist author Susan Sontag emphasizes a similar aspect: "whatever the artist does is in (usually conscious) alignment with something else already done, producing a compulsion to be continually rechecking his situation, his own stance with those of his predecessors and contemporaries" (Sontag 1983: 190).

On the other hand, it is to be noted that a lot of Contemporary art might be apprehended as the search for new media of expression, techniques of production. Maybe it begins with the

appeal to conceive reality as a process of becoming and not as an absolute and unchanging system. Abstract artists assert their art as a pure beginning, as liberation from the extrinsic conventions, a need to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional requirements, a search for the truth about the essence of painting. But is it not a discourse about art itself, and its definition? It seems that Charles Jencks's concept of double coding could be extended to suit a description of the relations in a lot of contemporary artworks. The artworks acquire a double structure combining the creation of artwork as such and questioning its content, meaning, form and style. High Modern art as a whole can be conceived as the experimental disruption of given conventions, and this means some kind of questioning of the language and content of art itself, the creation as an addition to the concept of art. American artist and philosopher Joseph Kosuth claims that "the 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying 'what they added to the conception of art' or what wasn't there before they started" (Kosuth 1991: 18). Body art expresses a doubt on the existence of difference between the artist and its creative material. Self-destructive art questions the longevity of work of art or at least its persistent value. Ready-made and Found art tells us that creation might escape material handwork, it is enough to only pick up something, what precisely expresses the idea. Such consideration of what is possible in the art is characteristic of the works of other art movements as well. Minimal art pushes the art to its farthest limits by reducing it to its essentials. Such work does not seem just to be itself; it includes some message of rejection of earlier forms or images of art, of dealing just with most fundamental elements. So consciousness of art history forms part of the new work. The notable search for new ways of art is a peculiarity of Land art or Earthworks. Land art recalls the most primal forms of art, such as Paleolithic Earthworks, it deals with the relationship between the artwork and the basic natural phenomena, the artwork and the spectator, it questions the modes of perception of the artwork first and last.

We might encounter the specific style of art narratives in Vilnius as well. Some sculptures in Naujamiestis (New Town) on the banks of the Neris River are side by side and make influence on the perception of each other. Discussion about the sculptures on "Žaliasis Tiltas" (Green Bridge) that depict a Soviet soldier, farmer, worker and student¹ demonstrates us that now their main "message" is no longer the grandeur of those people, but the aesthetical principles of the monumental sculpture of Soviet realism. This new story of the old work of art encourages the spectator to understand the minimalistic "Krantinės Arka" (Arc on the Quay)², that resembles a simple bent metal conduit, as a comment on a possible variety of triumphal arcs. This work of art distinctly expresses the necessity to avoid the traditional style of triumphal arcs widespread in towns of Europe since it no longer suits the Post-soviet context.

At the same time this sculpture raised a question "What is art?" for a wide public. According to art historian and critic Giedrė Jankevičiūtė it "became unquestionably the most famous piece of visual art in the Independent Lithuania" (Jankevičiūtė 2009b: 162). Functionaries of culture and the greater part of society were inclined not to attribute a status "of work of art" to it. Even the opinions of philosophers have diverged. In an answer

¹ Authors of the sculptures: Juozas Mikėnas and Juozas Kėdainis, Bronius Pundzius, Bernardas Bučas and Petras Vaivada, Napoleonas Petrulis and Bronius Vyšniauskas.

² Created by Vladas Urbanavičius.

to the question of art researcher Jolita Jablonskienė, Arvydas Šliogeris told that “it is a deliberate discrediting of Vilnius” (Jablonskienė 2009: 166). Tomas Kačerauskas explained that traditionalists “are embarrassed because of the irony of “the pipeline” which fills with unrequested playfulness solemn representative narrative of the city” (Kačerauskas 2011: 91). Artisans and critics had a chance to exploit mass media for a presentation to the broad society of the nature of contemporary art. Many artisans stressed the fact that this work provokes people to think. Prominent art historian Irena Vaišvilaitė described this work as “deliberately provoking, stimulating thinking about our relation with the environment and culture, about our effect on it” (Vaišvilaitė 2009). Painter Mikalojus Viliūnas, perhaps acknowledging plastic aspects of the work of art and its relation with the surrounding space and the questions which lay there-in, explained this work invoking the metaphors of Heraclitean flux and Parmenidean stability (Viliūnas 2009). The author of “Quay Arc”, revealing the purpose of the employment of ready-made materials, stated that “obsolete things make us think” (Jankevičiūtė 2009a: 157).

SELF-REFLEXION

Describing the transition in Contemporary art, the well-known American philosopher Arthur Coleman Danto looks into dissolution of art as such. He investigates new artworks, that resemble mere real things outwardly to whatever required degree, and have moreover an identical content, but where one of them is a work of art and the other is not, and seeks to reveal the differences. The philosopher asserts that the difference consists in the fact that the artwork self-consciously presents its content in a way that shows something about the content presented. Consequently the content of such work includes a special message about the medium of its presentation. Danto asserts that artworks are complex, because “in addition to being about whatever they are about, they are about the way they are about that” (Danto 1981: 148–149). So works of art are always such through the fact that they are about art and hence about themselves, and require for their existence the concept of art. Moreover, Danto points to the new characteristic feature of artworks: “the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity so that virtually all there is at the end *is* theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness” (Danto 1986: 111). Such art seems but a name for a narrative on its own essence. The philosopher maintains that the definition of art has become part of the nature of artwork, and inasmuch as it has always been a philosophical preoccupation to define art there appears to be a congruence of the philosophy of art and art itself. We can hardly accept this radical conclusion, yet we should not neglect the fact of the existence of works of art which are merely the narratives about the art.

In the very direct sense the narratives about the works of art are works of Conceptual art. Conceptual art cannot even be an aesthetic phenomenon in the classical sense. Actually perceptual embodiment is not an essential component of such artwork, it may exist as a pure mental entity or a “message” what should be accomplished, what should be imagined, what should be thought out in order to make a work of art. The works of Conceptual art might talk about various issues outside the domain of art; however, they also declare that art no longer needs traditional constitutive qualities.

The target of Biotechnological art, Social art, and Participatory art is not a narrative about the art itself. Nevertheless, the attempt to conceive the works that belong to these forms of art includes also a reflection on the question about the reasons which allow attributing these works to art.

CONCLUSION

So we can make a conclusion that some contemporary artworks and especially that of real merit are perceived as an investigation of the status of the art object and the roles of the creator and his audience themselves. The artworks acquire a double structure combining the creation of artwork as such and questioning its content, meaning, form and style. Contemporary artwork does not seem just to be itself; it includes some message of rejection of earlier forms or images of art, of dealing just with the most fundamental elements, or a reflection on the question about the reasons which allow attributing this work to art. This way art and stories about art have fused in some artworks of the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

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Klausimai apie patį meną moderniuose meno kūrinuose

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas vienas iš XX a. meno raidos pokyčių – meno kūryba kaip klausimų: „ar egzistuoja esminės meno kūrinio ypatybės?“, „kuo meno kūrinys skiriasi nuo nemeninės tikrovės?“, „kas konstituoja meno kūrinį?“ svarstymas. Dalis šiuolaikinio meno kūrinių mums byloja tik apie meno prigimtį.

Stebint biotechnologinio, socialinio, dalyvavimo meno kryptims priklausančius kūrinius žiūrovui neišvengiamai kyla klausimas, kokios priežastys leidžia šiuos kūrinius laikyti menu.

Kūryba apima svarstymus, kas gali būti menas, ir pastabas apie meno istoriją. Kūriniai suderina patį meno kūrinio kūrimą ir meno turinio, prasmės, formos ir stiliaus kvestionavimą. Menas yra suvokiamas kaip paties meno kūrinio statuso ir paties menininko vaidmens tyrinėjimas.

Raktažodžiai: menas, konvencijos, atsisakymas, teorija, savirefleksija, „Krantinės arka“