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Language and art.

David Hockney reportedly said that his fame is partly due to the fact that people find it easy to write and talk about his work.

Such statement begs the question what is it in art that determines the capacity of language to interpret contemporary visual art. In answering I shall use the word ~~art~~ as referring to the set of concepts 'contemporary western fine art'. In the beginning I have made several basic assumptions: that looking at art is also an interpretation., that the dividing line between descriptions and interpretations is blurred., that art tolerates incompatible interpretations.

Although I think I understand why some debates on art happily use terms like " art as language ", " language of art " and "painting as a text " I do not consider the semiotic approach to be central to art. Characteristically art differs from spoken and written language by its presence, immediacy of appeal to the same sense organ and by its independence on the order in which we perceive its components.

In answering the question what is it in art that determines the interpretative capacity of language I consider ~~the~~ status, appearance, value and meaning of art.

My proposition is that if the works of art do not determine the four aspects solely in themselves they determine the need for a discourse.

Let us consider three examples :

Andre, Reef, 1966

Richter, 1024 colours, 1973

A slide taken in the street of Eindhoven in march 1981.

The two with the name of the artist are considered as art, the third one is not.

1. The artists arrived at propositions which were indubitable to them, but not at the propositions which were indubitable in principle. Viewed outside the art institutions and without the name of the artist attached, the two works of art cannot convincingly keep their status as art. Resulting diminished confidence of the works of art forges the uncertainty what is and what is not art. Whereas the "knowing that this is the case" is firmly established by the works of art, the "knowing how this is the case" is fruitfully attended to by discourse.

(The above distinction refers to G. Ryle)

2. Denis

2. Denis Donoghue in his 1982 Reith lectures stated:

"..the works of art no longer reveal in themselves the reason why they are the way they are .."

(The Listener, Dec 9 1982, pp. 11 - 14)

Let us take the following three examples :

Oldenburg, Colossal Ashtray, 1975

Oldenburg, Two way plug, 1971

Oldenburg, Saw, hard version, 1970/71

If the "why" question is not answered by the sculptural metaphor, it does not mean that that metaphor is not central to the interpretation of what is referred to as the "constellation of conditions".

(J.L.Mackie)

Although we should not expect an exhaustive account of the conditions necessary for interpretation of the production and appearance of these works of art we should expect an account of the conditions — that make the works the way they are — to be sufficient.

3. Lucy Lippard admitted to " a conviction that if something is new

.... and becomes relatively widespread, it is likely to be valid .."

(Changing, 1971, p. 28)

(Changing, 1971, p.28) even if she is aware that innovation may be either valid or corrupt or hidden.

Let us consider the following examples:

Johns, Painted bronze, 1960

Alistair Wilson, Still, 1983

Segal, Cinema, 1963

Hanson, Selfportrait with Model, 1979

John Davies, Man with a Ring, 1975

Rolfe, Performance (four slides), 1981

Havard, Flat Head River, 1976

Lembeck, Eagle Valley Music, 1978

Galagher Black Map, 1980

Whereas the awareness of whether the innovation of the work of art is valid, corrupt or hidden depends on the discriminating powers of the viewer and the kind of previous experience with art, the innovation itself renders the aesthetic experience inadequate.

The rapid changes in the art scene lead to a sense of incapacity whenever we pose the question of the value. Without analysis and teoretical generalization we cannot hope to arrive at what Karel Capek in 1915 called ' aesthetic understanding ' ^x. In turn these two constituent parts:

^x(Estetika, 1983, m. 1., pp. 45-47)

two constituent parts of it cannot do well without language.

I am not making a point that the value of a work of art is not accessible at all in the passive contemplation. I am making the point that the sense of incapacity as a result of aesthetic experience cannot be at the same time de-stabilized by it.

My last point concerns the meaning of the works of art. When Elliot said " No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone " (Selected Essays) he was thinking of the continuity of the new with the old. Yet he is hinting at some instability of meaning in the art. Recently the artists repeatedly issued explicit invitations to the viewer to complete the meaning that is locked in the work of art. If the work of art opens its constituent part to an arbitrary (more or less) completion, it may be thought of as being incomplete. But this view may be mistaking the call for interpretation of the meaning of the work of art for the admission of its incompleteness. If the work of art deliberately stimulates interpretative activity as a characteristic aspect of its own existence then it also determines the capacity of language to interpret.

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The capacity of language to interpret art is from the point of view of most linguistic theories the same as the capacity of language to express the needs of a child asking for a glass of milk or of a scientist expanding the theories of black holes. In theory language reflects all the needs of its users. Yet we have to bear in mind two specific aspects of language:

1. that it lags often behind thought
2. that the needs, the specific needs mentioned above, may be limited to a small number of users.

People throughout the history complained about language. Paul Valéry has compared words to light planks thrown over the abyss. Goethe has his Faust crying "Names are sound and smoke..." and Bergson accuses "this crude word" of crushing the "delicate and fleeting impressions" and of "interposing itself between the object and us" (Ullmann, Semantics, 1970)

The task to use something ordinary to interpret something extraordinary is daunting, but possible and necessary. Wohlheim reminds us that it is "beyond the bound of sense to maintain that a form of art could maintain itself outside a society of language users". By quoting him

quoting him I am distancing myself ^{from} the scepticism entertained by artists who prefer inner vision and passive contemplation all the time.

Wohlheim's thought that the continuum of "a form of art" depends on it being inside the society of language users, leads to another aspect, referred to as "linguistic imprisonment". Wittgenstein put it as "The limits of my language would then mean the limits of my world" (Philosophical Investigations, 1953)

If on one hand people complain that language is too crude to handle such things as art, others complain of the power of language forcing us to see things differently. Statements like Dickens's on "tyranny of words" or F. Bacon's on "language bearing rule over men's mind" are typical. (Ullmann, *op. cit.* p154 and 251)

Not less known to the language users is the treacherous permissiveness of words. Leon Steinberg quotes a charming example (even if lost when searched for in the translations accessible to me):

The words "painting merely" mean a failure when used by Vasari and similar words "simply painting" mean the highest praised when used by Malraux.

I conclude with a wish:

that the response in words to the call of art matches its strength so that those situations in art which may have strengthening or destructive effect on the way we live may not be perceived only dimly or not at all.

Pertinent to my wish is the Sapir - Whorf hypothesis which argues

" The linguistic system of each language is not merely a reproducing system for voicing ideas, but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock - in - trade .."

(Ullmann, op. cit., p. 251)