

## Conference Paper

# Translation from Artistic Language (the New Delimitation of Art)

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## Abstract

The aim of the article is to delimitate the art zone for our current era. The problematic relationship between the general public and contemporary art is well known and often discussed. The viewers often find it difficult to relate to contemporary artworks or even to understand why they are considered art. We are searching for the appropriate forms to support the viewers in the quest to improve perception of contemporary art by the public. Among the new approaches, we highlight the conception of contemporary art as based not only the category of beauty, but also the communicative act which can translate important social sense(s). This point of view we have found in conceptions of J. Dickey, A. Danto and E. Oryol. To help an ordinary art consumer discover the social sense, we suggest using facilitative discussion technique designed by American teachers A. Hausen and F. Yenawain, and the mediation technique practiced by the UIBSI (Yekaterinburg).

**Keywords:** contemporary art, communication, message, mediation, excursion, facilitative discussion

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## 1. Introduction

A variety of contemporary art forms (performances, actions, public art, art residencies, site-specific projects etc.) create an urgency of the question of the borders of art, on the one hand, and its purpose, on the other hand. In the situation of postmodernity, which, according to A. Giddens, is characterized by an increasing reflexivity and doubts [1] both aspects of the question are closely linked to the identity of the artist him/herself, to his/her role in artistic text production and in moulding its profound meanings, as well as to the mediators between the artist and its listeners, viewers, readers and ordinary consumers.

Today's cultural situation can be characterized as a progressing complexity first of all due to the overwhelming volume of diverse information that surrounds people and doesn't leave them a chance or time to grapple with it. Art is no exception.

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Postmodernism introduces into culture an absence of great meanings, clearly identified borders and rules for the existence of phenomena, destroying the modernist vision of the world and the human being [2, p.11, p.32–33, p.98–99]. A.F. Yeremeyev noted that “difficulty in defining the borders of art grows with the development of public mind, sophistication and intensification of interaction between its different forms and accumulation of cultural values” [3, p.36]. “An Art or not an Art” – that is the question a consumer is often puzzled with. However, from postmodern and meta-modern point of view this question is meaningless since there is no point in rigid borders for any phenomenon ever. Today’s consumer, brought up in educational establishments within the classical aesthetics and at the examples of classical art, faces a difficult situation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

What exactly qualifies an object as belonging or not belonging to the world of art and why is it so problematic? First of all, it is the evaluation of the artist’s status. The part that the creator plays is changing since “the production of art is no longer the artist’s doing”; “it is the doing of design, a technical occupation,” thinks Boris Groys [4, p. 308]. Modernity strips off the aura of inspiration from the creator of artworks because the creator of an art object can be easily replaced with any able-handed master or even an ordinary creative person without any professional skills and abilities. Production itself, as production of “some” object, is not difficult with the help of modern technologies and materials, templates, details and machines. The machine-produced works already occupy a place in the exhibition spaces of art galleries (for example, the work of art group *pt9 AF: CFFiLV* at the exhibition *After Us* in the gallery of NCCA/ROSIZO, July–November 2019). These artworks don’t lay claim to a special status, and the materials they are made of don’t qualify as a certain kind of art. “Information coming through different channels, instruments – new media – has become the main material for the artist,” concludes aesthetics theorist E. Oryol in her analysis of art criteria from the judicial perspective [5, p.153]. Now everybody can create by producing art objects in the information space, in everyday life and professional activities.

Today theorists and practitioners of art accentuate an artwork itself, instead of an artist, in their interpretation of artifacts. Such approach seems to be more meaningful, versatile and important often transcending the ideas generated by the artists themselves [6].

The fact that there is no more need for an artistically talented art-creator brings contemporary art closer to other everyday practices [5, p.155]. What do we see – an

ordinary hand-made object or a work of art? E. Oryol stresses that gallerists and curators “open the doors of art museums to those forms of art that used to be discriminated against in the past: for example, to handiwork which used to be labelled as and exclusively female art and was qualified as a craft worthy of being exhibited only in historical or ethnographic museums.” [5, p.155]

On the other hand, contemporary works – ready made, actions, performances, promenade shows, street art – get intertwined with the everyday reality and become a space for discussing the most pressing problems. Umberto Eco used a term “open work” for this kind of artworks. Where is a boundary between an event or a performance? “The works of contemporary artist represent an absolutely different open type of artwork,” asserts E. Oryol [5, p.156].

There is no demarcation line between art itself and consumer-oriented products (for example, advertisement). Ilya Kabakov points out that today an artist today is similar to “a person who is pretending to be a businessman” [4, p.320], because he needs to go negotiate his projects financially. Pragmatism is one of the most crucial criteria of the artwork’s success, rightness and value. Market price is determined not by the artwork’s authenticity or profundity, but rather by its popularity, promotion and lots of advertising.

If the same person creates an art object and an advertisement, she or he uses techniques from both fields in both cases. Art must be sold, and so marketing methods are required. Advertising uses artistic methods, because it has to stimulate emotional feedback. Any such products function as part of the mass culture and are consumed as entertainment. As for the public, it often sees no difference between advertising or artistic texts. Jean Baudrillard pinpoints the entertaining and festive nature of advertising, which appeals to artistic and mythological techniques needed to create its texts [8, pp.186–188]. Present-day advertising works shown at the festivals and competitions are so entertaining that the public consumes them as artistic products. For example, the *The Night of the AD Eaters*, which is a worldwide cinema show that includes many hours of video advertisements.

### 3. Discussion

An attempt can be made to find some points of reference that would enable the perception of the artwork as artistic. When explaining the duality of a sign within the literary texts, Yu.M.Lotman writes that “on the one hand, the text pretends to be a reality, to have a being independent of its author, a thing among the things of the real world”, while on the other hand “it is constantly reminding us that it is somebody’s creation and

it means something" [7, p. 69]. The existence of an artist, the creator of works, his or her guiding presence is one of such points of reference.

An artist's presence implies that we are receiving some kind of message, that the artist wishes to transmit some kind of code hidden inside the text. The viewers also contribute their own interpretations to the text, depending on their experience, as well as social and discursive practices common in the society as a response (what A.F. Yermeyev terms "the candle effect"). The distinctive feature of any work of art is its ability to excite, to stimulate emotional feedback, to produce sudden psychological response from the depth of unconscious memories.

In T. Barrett's opinion, the works of art can trigger numerous interpretations. The viewer can receive numerous messages and no single one of them can become the only one, or synthesizing, interpretation. Interpretations can be wrong, rational or convincing etc., and all of them have a right to exist especially when they empower the viewer to see something personal. Feelings and emotions often direct our understanding and interpretation [6]. In the meta-modern context, the message cannot be read completely, but the desire to reach the unreachable truth, also through communicative practices, including the group ones, is obvious. Here we list the techniques that enable to capture the messages.

Philosophers of aesthetics has again formulated the criteria for art. The ideas of American aesthetics philosopher George Dickie are presented in the book of T. Barrett *Why is That Art: Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art*. An artist is a person who willingly takes part in the creation of artwork. 2. The artwork is an artifact of its kind that was created to be presented to the public of the artworld. 3. Public is a group of people whose members are prepared to a certain extent to be able to understand an object presented to them. 4. The artworld is a totality of all systems of this world. 5. Systems of the world of art are a framework for presenting the artwork to the public by the artist." [6, p.4–5] The term "artworld" implies a relative system that provides an opportunity for communication between the artist and the public. The main criteria for the artist status, according to George Dickie, is not a natural talent or mastership but a conscious participation in the art process. In this sense, the artist that has produced a ready-made work of art, a urinal or a vase with a flower, is an artist because he consciously intended to make art. The foundations for this conscious choice lay in the necessity to communicate with the public, a wish to forward something "to a group of people which members are prepared to a certain extent". T. Barrett quotes an opinion of another American theorist of aesthetics A. Danto that doesn't contradict G. Dickie's position: "X is an artwork only and if 1) X has a subject; 2) X represents the point of

view of this subject; 3) often with the help of rhetorical and even metaphoric structure; 4) this structure requires participation of the audience in what had been left out, in other words it requires interpretation; 5) both of them – artwork and interpretation take place within artistic and historical context” [6, p. 5, 7]. The term “artworld” is practically equivalent the term “artistic and historical context”. The author-subject, the one that is interested in the audience capable of interpreting his rhetorical and mythological structure, is accentuated.

E. Oryol combines these two points of view which belong to G. Dickie and A. Danto by saying that they are both discussing the status of art as something that emerges and exists in the relationship of: 1) an artist, the audience and artistic and historical context – as is the case of A. Danto 2) and an artist, the audience, different art institutions and their agents: curators, gallerists, critics, historians of art etc. – as is the case of G. Dickie. At the same time, none of the theorists think that there is a connection between the classification status of “art and the quality of artwork or its relationship with other artistic hierarchies” [5, p.157].

In the situation of metaphorical complexity of art in general, and especially art not intended to produce aesthetical admiration, pleasure and non-involved pleasure, there is a need for mediators who can get the importance of a message across to the audience, direct it towards the meaning of the message and lead to the conceptual conclusion. The complexity and ambivalence of artistic texts in the second half of 20th century require special methods that enable not the artists but mediators, i.e. experts, to communicate with the audience interactively and stimulate it to make involved independent conclusions.

Today the classical iconological theory of Erwin Panofsky is used study art in depth moving from the superficial level of things to understanding the important meaning of the artwork that can be related to the personal experiences of the viewer. Erwin Panofsky identifies three types of content in art message: primary or natural subject matter – when we identify the visible forms with certain objects; secondary or conventional subject matter that includes information about meta-real world of customs and cultural tradition that are typical for a civilization; tertiary or intrinsic meaning – a verdict about the object’s essence [10]. Erwin Panofsky considers iconological analysis of art text to be the last and the most sophisticated and fundamental level in his system that requires the viewer to know the main trends in human philosophy, as well as synthetic intuition that is rooted in the viewer’s personal worldview and psychology [11, p. 57]. The viewer needs to have a rather high level of aesthetic development and sensitivity to perform an iconological analysis since the secondary or conventional strata according to E. Panofsky demands

not just the knowledge of the cultural context but also possession of “synthetic intuition” [11].

How can we determine the level of aesthetic development among the audience? Using the method of aesthetic interviewing of New York Museum of Contemporary Art visitors, A. Housen identified 5 stages of aesthetic development that became the foundations for the aesthetic development method, which was tested on the learners [12]: first stage – accountive stage (when a viewer can see only the obvious and specific things, the perception is very egocentric, the painting is evaluated as “I like it/I don’t like it”, feelings, memories and personal associations are used); second stage – constructive (when a viewer wants to see photographic exactness, realism, and if he doesn’t find it he can distance from the work of art, on this stage the viewer can rely on his own perception, his knowledge about the world of nature, social, cultural and moral values); third stage – classifying (the quality of the painting is defined by the name of the author or what movement and style in art this work belongs to, the viewer uses his own knowledge to rationalize the idea of the artwork by finding a place for it in the history of arts); fourth stage – interpretive (intuitive perception of the viewer, his subjective opinion to elicit symbols and meanings that can change with every new encounter with the artwork, these viewers observe the changes within themselves, as well as other alterations); fifth stage – re-creative (implies analysis of the painting from different perspectives, finding a variety of different meanings, the viewers blend together their personal interpretations with universal ones) [13]. If we use the five-stage scale developed by Abigail Housen to identify the level of aesthetical development, then the viewer that can ideally analyze the art text should be qualified as at least being on the fourth (interpretative) stage, when an experienced eye can capture not only the main plot but understand the symbolic language then the work of art can be viewed as representation of personal experience and it can appeal to the viewer’s inner experience. But what can a less sophisticated visitor do?

In this case there is a need not for a guide, but for a facilitated discussion leader to start with or a qualified mediator who can each use their methods to direct the viewer or give him/her gentle push in the right direction towards their own observations, feelings and associations. The method of facilitated discussion was developed by Abigail Housen in collaboration with Philip Yenawain in the course of teaching the perception of fine art (classical art) to school children. This method is presented on the personal website of the authors, VTS [14]. In Russia, this method is actively used in the Russian Museum by N.V. Iyevleva and M.V. Potapova [15].

An exhibition *After Us* opened during the 5th Ural Biennial of Industrial Art in Ekaterinburg in the gallery of NCCA/ROSIZO and presented the works of contemporary Russian artists. One of the works was a collage that consisted of enlarged screenshots (about twenty in total) of male shirt, the contents of a one-day trash bin which were emptied on the floor in front of collage, two video cameras and a life-size cardboard cat; the exposition is accompanied by music from the artist's playlist at Vkotakte social network. The author of this work, Igor Samolet, called it: "I'm not sure if you need to know but I'm taking a bath in pine concentrate". How can this work be approached? What is this set of subjects for? It is obvious that there is no need in mastering any art skills or having any art education for producing this work of art. Yet, it is an artwork. Why?

We can approach answering this question quite simply – the work is exhibited in an art gallery and that endows it with a status of an artwork. The guide can talk about it and call it an artwork. That will also confirm its status [9]. We can read an explication, which is also featured in the exhibition catalogue, here is a quote from it: "The artist is museumifying the documentary materials of our presence online and his work reminds assiduous work of an archeologist only instead of the remains of material culture Igor is studying the records of our online life". Information that we constantly receive from tens of various resources – social networks newsfeed, chats, telegram channels and news aggregators immerse us into the depths of media environment. We stop existing in the analogue linear system of time coordinates. The sequence of past-present-future is interrupted, and this present is stretched into the size of eternity but doesn't contain our private world writes V. Trakhtenberg [16]. The author of explication verbalizes the idea of Igor Samolet's message and attaches a status of a message to his work, because now we know what the author wanted to say. Next Trakhtenberg generalizes:

The name of this artwork is an ironic reference to the theme that attracted Samolet's attention long time ago – a conflict of private and public and transformations of one into another. <...> Igor goes even further in his ambition to blend together the private and the public: he creates a huge wall-altar made of screenshots, correspondence, posts, selfies, which approach us like informational tsunami of phenomenon and events that nobody can hide from. All information is equally significant and equally meaningless, Samolet doesn't draw the line between political news and private correspondence: the critical analysis of both requires time and distance, while both of them aren't available in the mode of constant media agenda updates. [16]

The viewers will understand that this collage has a profound meaning transcending the space of social networks and relating to the generalized purpose of life. They will see and believe.

It seems that the goal of attributing an art status has been solved. The specialists have already convinced the visitors of the exhibition of that. However, the effect of art emerges only when the viewers themselves can emotionally experience important states that engender meanings within [7, p.203–204].

What can a viewer see on his/her own? They can notice that the work of art undoubtedly has an author and the author's opinion. We can see the author's screenshots, his shirt, the contents of his trash bin, his red rose in the bottle, his symbolic cat finishes off and pacifies the composition being above the disturbing newsfeed. Next, the viewers can read the art text step by step and react to it emotionally or not. They can explore the objects by moving deeper from the subject level to ideographic (context interpretation of objects) and then finally to the ideo-social (the level of meaning in the whole text). In this case, the actions are organized in accordance with the E. Panofsky method [10, 11].

The method of facilitated discussion is based on activating the viewer through asking him a series of open questions: What can you see? Where is it happening? Who is the author? Which events are important for him? These questions allow the viewer to look more carefully into the details of the painting surpassing the words and evaluations of an expert.

Let us quote the fragments from a dialogue that took place between a group of visitors and the group leader Anna while they were observing the artwork by I. Samolet: "What do you think – does this phone belong to a man or a woman?". "It belongs to a man just as does the shirt and legs that we see in the bathroom are male too. The woman isn't going to make hairy male legs as her phone wallpaper", "these are male screenshots, they belong to the author. A person isn't going to demonstrate intimate pages from the other person's phone, nobody will show him these pages anyway", "This trash belongs to a man. Empty beer cans, a box from condoms, a woman isn't going to leave trash like that in front of the computer". Anna: "So, we have come to the conclusion that we saw screenshots from a man's phone and this phone belongs to the author". After the unnatural yellow color of water in a bath tub was noted down by the viewers Anna asks another question: "What do you see on the floor in front of the artwork?" The viewers carefully examine all tiniest details of the "trash". Voice: "There is a receipt from a *Molodaya Gvardia* bookshop here, for a book *The Final Circle of Paradise* by Strugatsky brothers. Those who had read the novel will immediately recall that it talks about some *sleg*, a new drug that when combined with anti-mosquito pills,



aromatic bath salts and a warm bath causes a person to experience pleasure, really bright sensations and feel like his wishes are coming true. Voice: “Wow, look, it is *s/eg!* The aromatic salt is dissolved in a bath and the author is catching a buzz!” Voice: “Look, why the rose?” There is a live rose in the bottle! It will fade away! Why? Other voice: “It’s really strange why a man has a rose?” The third voice: “And I remember these lines: Red rose growing in the meadow, you vaunt yourself bravely, bathed in crimson and carmine: a rich and fragrant show. But no: Being fair, you will be unhappy soon. It is an epigraph to Umberto Eco’s novel. It is about vanity, the finality of everything that we see because it’s perishable. Perhaps, Igor wanted to talk about that? Look, there is a screenshot about death and the ritual of throwing away the ashes”. Anna: “So, we have decided that we see the author’s screenshots, Igor Samolet’s screenshots and he is talking about himself.” The information noise is loud, but it constitutes life. The author is trying to derive more pleasure from life by using *s/eg*.

## 4. Conclusions

We can see that the collective intellect leads the viewers to a rather high generalizations, making it possible to notice symbols behind the heap of trash and a serious message left by the artist, and perhaps, even formulate those meanings he hadn’t thought of. If we use the mediation method, this dialogue can be added by stories about artist’s life and his ideas. A mediator, unlike a leader of a facilitated discussion, has an opportunity to guide the viewer, give him clues, share his own impressions. Mediator’s sincerity is a kind of openness that calls for a hearty response, a wish to see a sophisticated and important meaning of the artwork.

Art is understood through the dialogue, an opinion exchange, feelings. A group always has more opinions and emotions than the two people engaged in a dialogue. The exchange of opinions and emotions allows not just to read the contents of the work but also emotionally respond to it, get an insight and experience inner psychological reactions and strong emotions. Art has always been a part of modern life, and its new emerging forms are awaiting new interpretations, explanations, revelations to the audience which largely isn’t ready to accept it yet.

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