

Conference Paper

The Work of Modern Art: In Search for the New Meanings

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Abstract

The article discusses the characteristics of contemporary art works and the specifics of its interaction with the audience. We demonstrate that contemporary art is not so much a way of reflecting on the world around us, but rather a way of learning about it, as well as a peculiar game (provocation) whose meanings are unknown and closed for discussion. Today it is impossible to provide unambiguous answers to the challenges faced by the art practice of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider topical issues, outline ways to study them, structure groups of facts, and determine methods for their research and description. The priority during this process is to identify the qualitative components of the works of contemporary visual art. To do this, it is necessary to determine the features that distinguish contemporary works from those created at the previous stages of art development. Further research is required for this problem. Here we use as case examples the works of Krasnoyarsk artists Anna Osipova and Alexander Surikov, who combine both classical and actual characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary art is represented by a vast variety of genres and style: from realism to performance and different kinds of techno (digital and laser technologies). Obviously, the function of reflecting the world that was typical for the classical art of the past has long exhausted itself. Contemporary art is not so much a way of reflecting about the world around us, as a way of learning about it, as well as a peculiar game-provocation with meanings that are unknown and closed for discussion.

2. Materials and Methods

The difference between art and science is in the absence of discoveries that is compensated with achievements, reaching the great heights, spiralling up, accumulating

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essential personal experience of spirituality. The complexity of the world inside and outside is learnt through the meaning that is encoded in the image of an artwork. On this journey of accumulating spiritual experience, any kind of art can become relevant depending on the point we occupy – Fayum mummy portraits, Mona Lisa, images created by Rembrandt or the works of present-day artists.

Contemporary art is anthropocentric, it is aimed at the study of human being as a unique subject; essentially, the centre of the universe. Artists tend to study the spiritual life of the human personality, also many of their artworks show great interest in the darker, less researched side of the human soul. Due to its deep immersion into tragic sense of life, contemporary art is often compared with medieval aesthetics of fear and destiny. Globalization is a theme that also finds its interpretations. Many works of art express the author's attitude to the process of worldwide economic, political, cultural and religious unification. At the same time, it is typical for the new art to combine different spatial and temporal aspects in one object.

The artist working today needs self-esteem, evaluation of professional art critic or art historian and the audience. Let us acknowledge the fact that artist has become a more public personality that encompasses different roles: an author, a viewer for other artists, a person belonging to a certain social group, curator, public figure etc. Depending on the circumstances, she or he plays different roles. Artists of the 21st century are characterized by their desire for viewer ratings and commercial success, they long for the attention of the audience and critics.

Contemporary art is a complex communication process, a search for oneself through reflection in the personality of the "Other". As there is a recipient, "the Other" on the author's side, so the author becomes "the Other" on the viewer's side. That is the reason why today social networks are full of pages dedicated to artistic process. Authors communicate with their audience a lot, answer to the comments left for their artworks. This virtual communication is quite interesting in social and art-historical way, and it awaits its researchers. The main strategy of the artist is to get a feedback to his own, subjective, absolutely personalized vision of the world that was presented in the artwork to try to be understood by the "Others" and to send his/her message, to let people hear his/her voice. A desire to get a feedback to his own vision, to understand the truthfulness of his own search for the foundations of the world through the response of "the Other". Art becomes the way of understanding life, a diary of personal emotions, a stage in the study of subjective reality. "The Other" represents the author's reflection that desires a response, interaction, communication with the viewer.

3. Discussion

There are numerous examples when the artist who wants to spark the interest to his works among the people, changes his usual self and becomes an exotic myth-maker, creating an aura of mysticism and extravagant legends around his or her art works. For some modern artists a definition by Oscar Wilde is appropriate: they are “sphinxes without a riddle”, since they, as a character from a short story *Lady Alroy*, create an aura of mystery around their lives.

For example, Anna Osipova, an artist based in Krasnoyarsk and working in ethnoarchaic style, publishes materials dedicated to the ancient history of Turkish civilization on her Facebook page and describes in mystical terms the circumstances that prompt her to create images for her artworks. The idea of an artwork *EneSai* (2017. 150x100. canvas, oils) appeared according to Anna when she

Walked into the bus and squeezed past the woman because I didn't want to push her. When the conductor came over, I noticed that there was nobody in the place where I tried to squeeze in, and nobody passed me by. What was that? – I thought going over the bridge above the Yenisey river. Maybe you are a woman? – I asked the river. Later I started working on the *EneSai* painting. When I was in Tuva, my assumptions were confirmed. In Tuva language *EneSai* means the matriarch or the foremother. [1]

In an attempt to capture and grasp the disappearing meanings, most works of contemporary artists have a serial nature and are developed as a project. Thus, the works of Osipova are combined in big and small cycles. We can name *Umai, It all happened..., Mongolia* among others. The works are contextual, they consist of a system of elements (symbols from different epochs and cultures, images of totem animals, human figures and natural motives) and are interconnected with the space (the far north, Gobi Desert, Baikal shore), time (the distant past and present) and the viewer.

Some present-day artists who were educated in the classical academic art institutions but have preserved their national vision of the world are interested in adopting the ethnoarchaic style that emerged by the middle of 1980s. Anna Osipova was born in the far north, in Yakut family. Her parents were professional artists educated in the traditions of Russian realism, who dedicated their life and works to the life of their people. The works of their daughter contain the images of archaic Yakut culture, although her technique also corresponds with the canons of professional art.

Before Anna starts working a new work, she studies research literature about history and culture of the indigenous people. The artist is in constant search for the new plastic language, because the strict canons of academic painting constrict her, preventing her from translating her ideas into art in the ways she wants to. In her artworks, Anna Osipova creates the world of ancient history of Turk people the way she imagines it. It may not conform to the vision of professional historians, but it does include some artistic truth nonetheless. The world of artworks created by Anna Osipova is built according to the laws of inner subjective reality of the author. This embodiment of the ancient history and its people find hearty and lively response among the audience. As an example, let us focus on works that depict the typical days and holidays of Yakut people. They are triptychs *Deer Racing* (2014) and *Ysyakh* (2015) or *The Departing Sun* (2015, 122x134 cm. canvas, oil).

Unlike Anna Osipova, who is cultivating the national identity in her art, Alexander Surikov, on the contrary, tries to erase all ethnic features in his art and, as most contemporary artists today, tries to become the citizen of the world. In his work *The New Year is Coming* (2007, 50x60, canvas, oils) the viewer can see a Pieter Brueghel style city of a generalized European appearance as if descending from classical Christmas postcards, while his painting *Black Coffee* (2006, 50x60, canvas, oils) features an emerging head of the “local inhabitant” from the African continent – a zebra. In *Taxi* (2006, 70x90, canvas, oils) he uses classical worldwide symbol of a yellow car for hire. These works demonstrate the artist’s wish to unify the images in his artworks.

This desire to embrace the entire global culture and the earth itself is a state of mind, a special mindset, a unique philosophy typical for the contemporary artists. This approach to the world citizenship can be expressed either in an aspiration for multiculturalism or in “itchy feet” syndrome. Krasnoyarsk-based artist really loves travelling and stays at home only for a couple months a year. For example, in April 2019 artist became a participant in International plein-air *The Way of the World* in Chechen Republic that was organized by the Irkutsk Dias Gallery.

There is also one more notable characteristic feature of the contemporary artist – the interest in new materials and new technologies. In search of original forms, we come across a lot of experiments, since many authors mix flat paintings and three-dimensional images, work simultaneously in different genres and kinds and movements of art, from paintings to installations, photography and video art. The art of Alexander Surikov presents interesting examples. The September 2018 exhibition *The non-triggered Show. A Pill* in Novosibirsk presented combination of painted works and author’s poetic texts written as calligraphic posters.

The negation of classical art values and a search for new ideas, both technical and graphic, is characteristic of Surikov's work. Quite often he uses nonsense, drivel, apple sauce and gibberish as the main idea for his artwork. The external simplicity and instantaneous impression present the question: "What is it? What is it for?" For instance, a series of artworks *Zhepa Miofibrilla* (120x40cm, canvas, sand, cement, acryl) present images of fragments of gable facade taken from modern panel high-rising residential buildings decorated with monotonous geometric pattern. Such rigid minimalism illustrates the artist's attitude to the beauty of urbanism. The first half of this series name is clear, but there is a desire to understand what is myofibril exactly? A more inquisitive viewer will be even more puzzled because, having checked the information in anatomic reference books, they will learn that this is just: "Organelle of cells from transversely striated muscles that provide their contraction". Why and for what reason this name was chosen for this series of artworks? Just to pose a question, even though without a meaningful answer.

A typical contemporary blend of the low and the high, the devilish and the divine and other opposites manifests itself in a series of artworks under the common title *NRZB* (2018). Alexander Surikov uses the images of the urban signs and hand-made adverts of different shops, car parks and salons providing various services. Covering, as if by accident, part of the words he creates double satirical meaning for the usual things, making it almost opposite of the original.

Present-day art process combines these provocative art practices with an aspiration to return to reality, because for many years art was dominated by voluntary quest for nonsense or abstraction. The fashion for random assemblages has almost passed. The artists are carefully monitoring the changes in the public taste, while many truly proficient artists intentionally stay away from mainstream and, by trying to be outside the main trend, they shape their own trend and implant it in the public consciousness.

A popular and truly contemporary work of art should have an emotional appeal, be living, in demand but not momentary. The artist used to be more distant from the exhibited artwork. Now the art is becoming more personal and subjective. The viewers come to the exhibition in search of feelings and emotions that the author should express in his work. At the same time, extreme shock value can push them away and cause negative response. The viewers values when the author respects them.

As for the most important components of contemporary work of art, we should stress such qualities as conceptualism and contextuality. Philosophers of art can follow in the footsteps of transforming the banality by demanding to see and think, attempt to grasp the author's concept. That said, there are no prohibited or tabooed themes and stories

in contemporary art. The present-day author is defined through a constant search for new decisions, surprising angles and fresh looks on the problem, a choice of marginal, sensitive and ambivalent themes bordering on taboo and challenging public morals. A present-day work of art is expected to pose a question and invite to the discussion.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, we can name the following among the fundamental characteristics of contemporary work of art: research and building-up the perception of the world around us, means to attract attention, social communication, search for the new meanings of existence.

All the same, despite these fundamental characteristics unusual for the mass audience, it should be noted that true art creates an unquestionably effective dialogue that is conducive to the development of spiritual foundations of human civilization and not to its destruction. The main criteria to help identify true art from the non-art have always been rooted in and will continue to be rooted in high morals and values of common human nature. Refusal to interpret humanity as a machine for consumption and pleasure is quite relevant at present. In this respect, we can view trend to commercialize art as a negative one, just as an intention to consider customer's demand to be a synonym of success and acknowledgement, popularity and as an assessment of art quality. The author's "object of art" becomes "the work of art" when it is shown to the public, so, unfortunately, anything can become a work of art, even a jar with human excrements that Italian artist Piero Manzoni [2] exchanged for a jar of gold of the same weight.

Nevertheless, contemporary art in all its heterogeneity provides those who are making art, as well as those who are consuming it, with an invaluable opportunity to learn about the world around by building a subjective model of objective reality in the space of an artwork.

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