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Reality in Picture Creation

The Change in Meaning of an Object in Art

DLA thesis

Synopsis

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Introduction

The choice of topic for my doctoral thesis was influenced by the problems arising in my creative activity. I had two experiences during my undergraduate years: first, in 1997 I learnt about the papermaking techniques in a camp in Lipótfá, second, on one occasion I did not find the appropriate canvas for a frame and I had to employ the wooden frame within the composition. In both cases I became interested in the relationship of a *real object* and the *quality that my painting or drawing created*. During my postgraduate studies I researched into this field.

This thesis has an indirect reference to my individual professional programme, it mostly deals with the basic problem of what the role an object can have within a work of art and how the meaning changes. The emphasis is laid on the importance of the context, especially in a visual sense. Though I am not an expert on them, I cannot avoid touching upon some related fields of science, this theme presses me to borrow some concepts from art history, aesthetics or even philosophy. I have my individual point of view about them, and I always try to avoid misunderstanding. There might be some paragraphs that seem superficial but it must be pointed out that I have written this thesis as a *creator*, using my own experiences, and they are more emphasised. Some examples of pictures and citations may seem arbitrary and there may be objections to the listed works in the bibliography, still, I hope I can give an overall picture of the problems I consider important.

My thesis is structured as follows: after the introduction I attempt to define the concept of reality, its meaning-conveying role and the relationship between reality and art. The notion of *context* is a central motif in this paper and is included in each chapter. The thesis is divided into four major parts: (1) *Object and its surroundings* (2) *Object transformation – object distortion* (3) *Building objects together* (4) *Completion of objects*. These parts are further divided into smaller chapters, depending on the logic of the text and the depth of analysis. In the next part I emphasise the interpretative role of completion and deal with the series called *Tunning* by Károly Elekes. Analysing these works of art I also discuss the importance of mimesis and illusion. In a separate chapter the influential role of text is also mentioned. I wish to follow a certain trail of thoughts that finally leads to the analysis of Tibor Gyenis' works. His series, in my opinion, deals with the central problems of my thesis and also visualises them. Finally, as a conclusion, I list my statements that provide the possibility of further interpretations.

My individual creative programme can be found in a separately bound attachment. This is a conscious choice as I did not want to put myself into the centre of my thesis, and it would not have been possible to bind them together. However, the themes I have mentioned above are closely connected with my professional programme, what is more, the latter influenced the first, and therefore I feel obliged to introduce it.

About reality

The concept of reality

In the title of the thesis the concept of *reality* is mentioned in association with picture creation. I could have written 'natural forms', as well, but later it will be seen that it would have been a restricted definition.¹ Although in my pictures I use almost exclusively natural materials and objects, and the photographic forms were mostly taken of nature, they embody a 'wider' reality outside me.²

The relationship of art and reality

In the preface of his book *Conversations with Picasso*, Brassai tells Gyula Illyés: 'As what you want to depict is impossible to mime, there is only the task to translate its core, its meaning into a sort of common tongue. It is exactly that makes us do some re-creation, we feel the urge to remain loyal to the core, we cannot betray it... This pursuit to find the *similarity* (...) takes us further away from the "free" areas of imagination and ingenuity' (Brassai 1968, X). We can find the same creative efforts in the works of Albert Camus, who, when contemplating upon the purposes of art, states that it is nothing but to give a form to reality conserving it, as [art] takes the emotional content from reality and art is nothing without reality (...) [without art] reality is not worth much' (Camus 1972, p. 352). As Tatarkiewicz said: 'If we accept the old definition of reality, something strange is brought to light: art cannot exist without reality, still, in some way art uses reality even if it is not able to reproduce it due to its versatile and flowing nature. The contemporary point of view is no

¹ 'Reality is a wider concept than nature as it includes the human creations, as well'. (Tatarkiewicz 2000, p. 212). At the same time we could say that humans are also part of nature, they are 'natural formations', such as the white ants, whose building as well as human creations are also part of the nature. However, we usually do not think this way, that is why the concept of nature is used in its everyday sense.

² The real or fictitious being of an objective reality outside the borders of subjectivity could be discussed philosophically in a separate chapter, but this is not my intention. There will be further references to it, however.

more the idea that art uses reality but rather that art *has no choice but* to use reality. Even Picasso said that art is not possible without reality' (Tatarkiewicz 2000, p. 210). (...)

Reality conveying meaning

It is my concept that the phenomena of reality have meaning. Within my research it is a minor question that Miklós Almási asks: '...due to being uttered did the differentiation between the signifier and the signified appear first, or did the natural forms force an attitude of search for meaning: from lightning to the flying of birds' (Almási 2003, p. 118). The trivial question of the precedence of the egg over the hen or vice versa does not change the fact that the human mind attributes meaning to everything that arouses its curiosity; a meaning that carries the promise of an explanation for existence, referring either to the phenomena in the world or the human itself. (...)

About the context

The importance of context reflected in meaning

In the previous chapter I have mentioned that the elements of reality have meaning to humans. This meaning can only exist in a mutual relationship, that is, the usual explanatory patterns require the meaning to have a relative character. The concept that *everything is related to everything* cannot be disregarded in the creative work either, what is more, the exciting research I am doing here can only be comprehensible in this respect.

(...)

In my thesis I deal with only one problem, namely, with the all-defining nature of the context.

(...)

Object and its surroundings

About the illustrations

In my thesis I use several illustrations of mine in order to demonstrate the findings about the topics.

The role of placing – the composition

Some people might say that placing a geometric figure on an empty sheet of paper is not a big deal – but they do not care much about the problems of visualization either. The size of a square and its placing (that I will discuss in details later on) has a determining role. ‘If one draws just a line on a sheet, or shapes the simplest form from a material, it is like a pebble thrown into a pool; stirring the tranquillity and activating space,’ says Rudolf Arnheim and he also adds, ‘Seeing is perceiving an action’ (Arnheim 1979, p. 27). What he is saying here is that seeing is an active process that requires the constant processing of perception; repeatedly monitored hypotheses must be put forward and finally the visual judgment is given. These are basic principles the knowing of which the artistic effect is based on. (That is why it is important for a creative individual to know the principles of the dynamic balance between the elements of a picture. It is closely associated with human visual perception.) (...)

The contrastive power of the surroundings

(...) We can see now that the way of placing an object is of great importance when the power relations, the attraction and repulsion within a picture are discussed. However, I must refer to the beginning of this chapter, because no phenomenon stands alone in the middle of nowhere; all phenomena together can create a world and are interrelated. The relationship of part and whole is even more important in our world and, within it, in the visual world. (...)

The conceptual meaning of visual forms

My trail of thoughts is illustrated with drawings that have an unambiguous conceptuality beside their visual meanings.³ Their illustrative feature can help us to understand the relationship of placing and meaning, and the importance of the context is more obvious. (...)

The role of context in a visual creation

³ It is obvious that the picture meaning can hardly exist without a conceptual meaning, as most of the visual phenomena can be named and defined. My statement aims at the idea that even a simple visual element, e. g. a dot can denote a hole, an eye, a nose or even a button on a garment.

Before starting to examine the influence of environment on the meaning of an object, we shall examine how this question is phrased in an exquisite work of art painted in a traditional style; Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' painting, *The Source* is analysed. (...)

The space in a museum

It is impossible to avoid the question of the influence of museum space on meaning, therefore it is discussed here. I will also mention Marcell Duchamp work of art, *The Source* and the achievements of Daniel Spoerri and Keith Haring.

Object and its placing

It is not only a museum space that can create the possibility to change and interpret the meaning of an object. If we return to Duchamp, even the most ordinary environment can produce odd situations, for instance the door that had double function in the flat on 11, Rue Larreyn (Cabanne 1967/1991). It was open and closed at the same time, that is, it closed the way to one of the rooms but allowed entrance to another space. (In fact, it was both a bedroom and a bathroom door.) (...) The discussion of this question is followed by introducing the works of Andreas Slominski, Robert Grober, Rebecca Horn and Dóra Maurer.

Object and the natural environment: the land-art activities of the Pécsi Műhely (Pécs Workshop)

The land-art activity of the Pécs Workshop is an excellent representation for the examination of the special role of the natural environment. The geometric compositions created in the studio were taken outside and the earlier findings were re-examined in an outdoor environment.

Object transformation – object distortion

The formal character conveying meaning

In this chapter I shall examine how the meaning of an object changes if not the environment or the placing is dominant but the changes made on the object. I mostly mention the artistic

use of distortion and enlargement but we cannot forget about the context of the environment and space.

Jan van Eyck: *Madonna in the Church*

In his study *Reality and Symbol in the Early Flemish Painting: Spiritual Objects in Bodily Metaphors*, Panofsky closely examines Jan van Eyck's work of art, *Madonna in the Church*. This accurate analysis is important here because, as its title shows, it discusses the symbolism of meaning.

Enlarging the size as an artistic device

An impressive and well-liked way of object transformation is enlarging it. There are well-known and spectacular examples in the works of Claes Oldenburg, or I could mention the giant boy of Ron Mueck or *Hymn* by Damien Hirst.

Other ways of object transformation

I shall introduce such famous examples here as the works of Damien Hirst, Meret Oppenheim, Robert Rauschenberg, César Baldaccini, Simon Starling, Damián Ortega, Gabriel Orozco, Charles Ray and Margot Quan Knight.

The connection between objects – merging objects, collage and assemblage

The logic of this argument demands that the possible modifications due to the interaction of objects must be included. Several creators used this technique, based on formal relationship or creating symbolic meaning or just simply reconstructing objects. The common thing is that during this process not only objects are placed next to each other but they form a close 'friendship' and overcome the repulsion. Objects merge and transform and completely new objects are born. (...) In this chapter I discuss the works of René Magritte, N. Lernes, John Heartfield, Pablo Picasso, David Mach, Marcell Duchamp, Meret Oppenheim and Rhona Byrne.

Completion as a factor modifying the meaning

This is the theme that mostly characterises my three-year-long creative programme, namely the possibilities of completing the (real) objects mostly in paintings or drawings. The examples are taken from the works of Steinberg, Marcell Duchamp, Man Ray, Imre Kocsis and Robin Rhode.

Károly Elekes: *Tunning*

His series, *Tunning* shows a characteristic and consistent use of completion. His latest creations are developed from the ‘Sunday painters’ oil paintings that he usually finds at flea markets or fairs. After buying them he restores the paintings and sometimes drastically, sometimes just slightly he gives them a completion and therefore a new quality.

Mimesis and illusion

The need for mimesis

It is probable that everyone who wishes to draw feels the need to reflect the objective world as it is. *Depicting* (I am aware of the choice of word, I do not want to use ‘*painting*’) is an intention to perfectly represent the surroundings on an even surface, and probably it was the driving force behind the works of those ‘Sunday painters’ that Elekes found. ...’Why does the difference cause such happiness, if the painted picture is only partly similar to the original object?’ asks Miklós Almási, and he gives an answer: ‘First, because that “original” something can be recognised, which is a discovery. Second, because what we recognise is never the same as the original and we can understand and discover it. However, this difference reveals something, something we had no idea about before.’ (...)

Possibilities of form and the logic of a work of art

How is a concrete idea born? What can that inspiration be that leads to creation? This chapter attempts to find the answer to these questions.

The role of selection

Upon the choice of a theme the spiritual way(s)⁴ are decided. There are two ways: either we start searching for the appropriate motif for an existing idea or a created idea; or an accidentally found phenomenon inspires us to create something new. These two ways are interrelated, and though in some cases only one of them is present, most of the time they are impossible to separate. As for the outcome, it is not important which way we choose, only the process is different. The artists mentioned in this paper all work or worked this way. (...)

Illusion as a device of fine arts

Helmoltz says that ‘every illusion has a very simple rule: we always think that we can perceive objects that – given that the eyesight is normal – would create the retinal picture that we are conscious of’ (Gregory 1982, p. 59). It refers to the recognition of the given object as well as its physical or other features such as size, colour, material etc. (...) ‘...we must respect the illusion and not only because it is a source of happiness for us, but for its inspiring force, for the new dimensions that it can open and for the answers that, paradoxical they might be, it can give to our questions about truth’ (Pensrose 1982, p. 288).

In the latter case the interpretative desire is significant. It is usually aimed at our surroundings, the objective world and the works of art within. In order to decode the meaning of the visually perceivable objects the linguistic messages can help, for example a written text (such as the title of the work). This is the way my argument follows here.

The influential role of text in a work of art

In the previous chapters I have touched upon numerous questions about the meaning of a work of art. One important factor of these artistic examples has not been discussed directly yet. It is important that most of the works of art have a title, at least a word, a number or a sentence that may help or confuse but definitely influence interpretation. My interpretative acts are directed by the understanding programme of the work: the work of art, in a good sense, manipulates the receiver’ (Almásí 2003, p. 25). In my opinion, the title does the same. It provides a context to the work, revealing its hidden meaning, explaining or just simply naming that. This latter function is often enough: an ordinary receiver expects that ‘the child should have a name.’ If the object is easily recognised and can be identified (it happens

⁴ I would include the practical steps of a creation that obviously are bred from the spiritual and mental background.

mostly in figurative arts) there is an impetus to ask the question: ‘What is the title?’ May it be a painting, a sculpture or any other work of art, it must have a name! Art-dealers, gallery owners and exhibition organisers have a dread of receiving a work of art ‘without title’. We *must* know what we see, hear, think and feel. That is the way we work. By giving a name to a thing we can tame it. Or conquer. Naming is magic. Titling is no different.

About the works of Tibor Gyenis

In the previous chapters I tried to introduce those problems that deal with the possible changes in meaning of an object in fine arts. The placing, transforming and distorting of an object, merging or completing it with other objects, the relationship of real and mimed qualities are aspects of this topic. The picture illustrations come from different artists, however, it happens that the seemingly various but theoretically homogeneous works can be connected with only one person. I think that Tibor Gyenis is such a person, and most of his creations represent the possible solutions listed in my thesis.

Summary

This doctoral thesis made an attempt to introduce that rich field of science from which I took a small piece and examined during the postgraduate years. I thoroughly analysed the different solutions how the objective reality can be used directly in works of art. In my own work I applied the process of completion and continuation to discover the possible relationship between real and painted or drawn elements. It was my desire to chart or at least partly reveal the devices of meaning and meaning modification. I mostly tried to introduce them with the help of special works of art, although the listed examples can only give a small insight into this rich field. However, my intention was to give, as much as it is possible, an overall picture of the problems here. Some important works of art may have escaped my attention or sometimes the size of the thesis did not make it possible to include them. It was my aim to discuss the questions arising in my professional programme without writing about my own works of art. (This is accomplished in the attached report.)

As a conclusion I can state the followings:

1. The (objective) *reality*, the starting point and raw material of the creative activity can provide space for an in-depth research overstepping the intention of simple reproduction and

reflection. The dominance of self-expression is counter-balanced but not excluded, and less obvious associations and laws can be charted. This, in the end, helps to improve self-knowledge and personality. (Conscious or not, this is the most important aspect, disregarding the fact whether it can be put into words or not.)

2. The phenomena should be examined *holistically*, because their interrelation and relationship with the whole can provide information about their general and peculiar qualities. It also refers to our world and life in general as well as to the numerous works of art that are parts of reality and model it often directly.

3. The question of the *context* is a determining factor: the inner structure of a work of art is influenced, and the function, the effect and the existence of that work of art cannot escape this influence either. The comprehensibility, the interpretation and the layers of meaning are also related to this question.⁵

4. Studying and analysing the works of other artists can improve our own creative activity as they help to gain important experiences and recognition, exposing the subconscious inner happenings, as well. These experiences might change our firm ideas and conceptions; however, in many cases the sameness of ideas may strengthen them. The open and careful attitude towards judgment does not mean unquestioning acceptance and agreement lacking any principle. A common sense critical attitude is vitally important to preserve our own self-development.

5. Although in my thesis some works of art were mentioned, the concept of art is not a central topic. I wished to invite the reader to a spiritual travel that touched upon the 'mystery' of spiritual meeting the material. The projection of this encounter – we may call it art – forces us to think about ourselves.

Finally, it is possible that these conclusions mean a giant leap compared to the more concrete character of my thesis, and my study is not specific enough. However, I wish to say that the interaction with the visible and material (objective) reality reflects our inner pursuit, and analysing reality also refers to this search. It is not obvious that the statements above are trivial, considering the multitude of contemporary works of art that do not go beyond the unhealthy and repulsive introduction of some troubled thoughts. These works of art give us an insight into the present state and values of art – and our own judgment reveals us. We must

⁵ A work of art can accommodate a lot of mental concepts, but they are always filtered through the visual culture within which that piece was created. (...) Joseph Kosuth (...) who took photographs of encyclopaedia entries, found a form to express his logical tautologies. This form can fully convey the artistic message providing that the receiver is also part of that culture in which Kosuth created.' (Perneczky 2006, p. 102)

say that Zrínyifalvi was right to say that ...'in the 20th century picture and art had numerous real and disguised functions but I entertain doubts about its intention to function as a conveyor of philosophical thoughts and abstract social ideas. I am of the opinion that it was fancied by critics showing off their philosophical knowledge, presumably unconsciously intending to prove their own superior mind and knowledge of art' (Zrínyifalvi 2006, pp. 45-46). This is one of the reasons why I tried to avoid explaining too much into a work of art and only interpreted ideas of others and mine as little as possible.

It was my intention to follow a logical trail of thoughts, which is the background of my professional programme, and I wished to find illustrations and that can give us good examples of my conclusions above.