

A Debater's Art is All Wit and Witticism

Nina Zlateva Ilieva

*South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA
Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophical and Political Sciences*

Received: 30 May 2020 ▪ Accepted: 22 June 2020 ▪ Published Online: 10 July 2020

Abstract

The popular definition of the purpose of art is associated with the need to share feelings and ideas, which causes pleasure from the contact with the different art forms. A purpose of art, however, could be to provoke thought. Contemporary art reveals art forms which rely on the broadness and versatility of perception, and on spontaneous and surprising emotions. This paper is oriented towards provocative contemporary art forms, which most often focus on creative freedom and thus appear to protect civil liberties. Considered are emblematic in this respect art forms (installations, performance) and also provocative events from the world of show business.

Keywords: art, intentionality, provocation, message, civil society, creative freedom.

1. Introduction

The goals of art are most often associated with the need to share feelings and ideas, which evokes the pleasure of coming into contact with different art forms. The goal of art, however, can be and is to provoke and require reflection. Contemporary art finds its forms that rely on the breadth and versatility of what is read, on spontaneous and surprising emotions, engaging and even playing with those who perceive it.

The present study is oriented towards the contemporary provocative art forms, which most often emphasize creative freedom and thus appear in defense of the civil liberties. Emblematic in this respect art forms and provocative events from the world of show business will be considered. The presentation on the topic does not claim to analyze the reasons for the emergence of these forms, but aims to interpret and place them in the context of postmodern culture, as well as to emphasize their importance for activating civic position, expanding worldview in social development, which lacks the required level of citizenship.

2. Postmodernism: Art and culture

The American researcher of postmodernism Ihab Hassan traces the expanding scope of postmodern art and culture in *Toward a Concept of Postmodernism (From the Postmodern Turn, 1987)*. He points out the variety of representatives that shape our image of it: "Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard (philosophy), Michel Foucault, Hayden White (history), Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, R. D. Laing, Norman O. Brown (psychoanalysis), Herbert Marcuse, Jean Baudrillard, Jurgen Habermas (political philosophy), Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend (philosophy

of science), Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Wolfgang Iser, the “Yale Critics” (literary theory), Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais, Meredith Monk (dance), John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez (music), Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely, Joseph Beuys (art), Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, Brent Bolin (architecture), and various authors from Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jorge Luis Borges, Max Bense, and Vladimir Nabokov to Harold Pinter, B. S. Johnson, Rayner Heppenstall, Christine Brooke-Rose, Helmut Heissenbuttel, Jurgen Becker, Peter Handke, Thomas Bernhard, Ernest Jandl, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Alain RobbeGrillet, Michel Butor, Maurice Roche, Philippe Sollers, and, in America, John Barth, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Walter Abish, John Ashbery, David Antin, Sam Shepard, and Robert Wilson” (see Hassan 1987). All these names are too heterogeneous to form a school, a movement, but they express similar cultural tendencies (a set of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes), generally called postmodernism. It is emphasized that even with today's domination of postmodernism (if it really exists, be distinguished from modernism and named), it does not mean “that ideas or systems of the past have ceased to model the present. In fact, traditions are evolving and even species are evolving” (Hassan, 1987).

As history changes, theories are “reformulated” and this happens many times. The initial use of the term is to express the opposition to modernism, laid down in the early 20th century. I. Hassan also emphasizes the different content with which the concept is loaded by different authors. If for A. Toynbee postmodernism is a new historical cycle in Western civilization, characterized by “the disease of traditional concepts such as state and humanism,” then Irving Howe and Harry Levin see it as an alienation from the great modernist movement. If for Leslie Fiedler, he challenges the elitism of the high modernist tradition, then the author of *Toward a Concept of Postmodernism* sees it as a study of the impulse of self-destruction.

Like any terminology, this one reveals its will to power, the will of the “new” to rule over the “old”, accepted in different ways or simply rejected (acceptance or rejection of postmodernism depends on the psychopolitics of academic life – characterized by diverse grouping of people and power in universities, of critical fashions and personal models, of boundaries that are arbitrarily shifted to include or exclude something (Hassan, 1987).

Like any “new”, it entails the difficulties of establishing itself – classifying it as meaningless until it becomes obvious. The very name postmodernism is full of contradictions, because it contains what it wants to reject – modernism. None of the other periods contains in its name its enemy (romanticism, classicism, baroque), but this is perhaps the allusion to exhaustion or impossibility to be named in another way (Hassan, 1987).

The slippage in the age of postmodernism and modernism, and the threat of not distinguishing clearly, is also an expression of our time, of the age of “misreadings” and different points of view. The fact that there is no wall between them eloquently shows the openness of the culture to the past, present and future. The same author in his various creative periods can write both contemporary and postmodern books (Hassan's example is *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Vigil over Finegan* by D. Joyce).

As much as there is no consensus on the meaning of the term postmodernism (relative youth; semantic proximity to terms such as avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, modernism), the general understanding is that a new period is perceived on the one hand as rebellion but on the other as continuity. To move forward in time, he uses the inherited in some way, but also changes it, moves its boundaries to move forward. A significant moment in the postmodern rediscovery is associated with the “updating”, melting of genre traditions with a special affinity for “low genres” (Znepolski, 1993: 481), which, however, does not imply the abandonment of traditions.

This complementarity of unity and rupture has its structure, i.e. each period is diachronically and synchronously structured, requiring to be historically and theoretically determined. In determining it, its “predecessors” are constantly rediscovered. In other words, the

emerging model of postmodernism (which is a kind of typology of culture and imagination – IH), it seeks to rediscover his kinship with other periods and with different authors, as if re-creating his ancestors.

In support of this idea, the researcher gives an example by saying that some of the older writers such as Kafka, Beckett, Borges, Nabokov, may be postmodernists, while for others of the younger generation such as Updike, Capote, Doctorow – this is not necessarily. Postmodernism requires its own point of view, which, however, represents all aspects of complementarity, without imposing a single criterion for judgment.

The question is also important, what connects and divides the various aspects of this phenomenon – psychological, philosophical, economic, and political? Aren't they united by the characteristics of a society that is postmodern?

“For the most part, modernism is canonical, hypotactic and formalistic, postmodernism impresses with the opposite – playful, paratactic and destructive. In this way it revives the disrespectful spirit of the avant-garde and that is why he is sometimes called the neo-avant-garde.” (see Hassan, 1987).

However, postmodernism is cooler than the old avant-garde, and its distinguishing features of “hybridization, indeterminacy, “carnivalization”” (as Hassan defines it) define its attitude not as hostility to pop-electronic society and distance, but as a part of it. All this means that it is not a question of some fashion, but of expressing a cultural necessity, which, however, summarizes I. Hassan, is more like fear than hope.

This fear seems to necessitate a reconsideration of the already established relations - in society, in politics, in science, in human relations. The references to postmodernism as a worldview are to emphasize that the age of misunderstandings has spread to experimental artistic pursuits, and if nothing else, they awaken the “disrespectful spirit of the avant-garde” and have their provocative patterns.

The various movements of avant-garde and artistic experimentalism: “from futurism to cubism, from expressionism to surrealism, from Picasso to the great masters of informal art” (Eco, 2006: 415) they seek the beauty of provocation, not pose the problem of beauty.

For the neo-avant-garde, the beautiful does not even exist. “It anti means opposition to all the distinctive features of conventional art, including the beautiful as a moment in the aesthetic characteristics of this work” (Angelov, 2005: 269). Experimental art forms, in addition to creative imagination, are often influenced and provoked by socio-economic dynamism, but they themselves provoke, provoke reflection and discussion of pressing social and political issues that citizens for one reason or another turn their backs or their willingness to participate in such dialogue is scarce.

3. Several characters manifestations

On 24 June 1995, the ambitious project of the world-famous Bulgarian artist Hristo Yavashev-Christo and his wife Jean-Claude was completed. Behind the final creative result – the packaging of the Reichstag building in Berlin, are besides the creative decision, long negotiations, persuasions, collecting signatures for consent from all employees and last but not least the support of the President of the Bundestag – Rita Süsmuth. After lengthy discussions, the design for the historic building was finally approved on 25 February 1995, and the artists began their work. For its implementation, 100,000 square meters of refractory polypropylene fabric are used, which is secured with aluminum coating and nearly 15,000 meters of ropes. The packaging lasts for a week and the installation involves 90 professional climbers and many other assistants. The already packed Reichstag attracts the attention of more than 5 million visitors who line up in the coming days to see the work of Christo and his wife. The installation remains for visitors for 14 days. An

indicator of the effect of the project is the New York Times notes that it is “a monument to democracy, as if artists have bandaged the wounds of East and West.” For the ordinary citizen and connoisseur of art, the feeling remains that someone, not chanting at rallies or disguised in his own world, has said what he wanted to shout - every wound can be bandaged and healed.

Fourteen years later, in January 2009, the Czech conceptual sculptor David Černý's Entropa installation was unveiled in one of the European Union’s buildings in Brussels. It marks the beginning of the Czech presidency of the EU. Desislava Gavrilova examines the response and reactions against this creative provocative event “Until the opening day, it was thought that the authors were twenty-seven artists from each of the EU member states, but the media attention and political noise in Bulgaria forced the real – and only – author to reveal his joke on 13 January. It turned out to be the well-known conceptual artist from Czechoslovakia, David Černý. This event reminds the citizens of the political power of art before 1989 in Bulgaria.” (see Gavrilova, 2009). “The Entropa installation aims to provoke, through an artistic interpretation of various clichés about different European countries. Černý, taking responsibility for the Czech contribution to the imaginary collective, had to invent twenty-six other “European artists” from other countries – and he did it well to mislead the media and politicians, at least in my country, Bulgaria” (see Gavrilova, 2009). The idea of the installation - three-dimensional maps of the member states of the Union, is not in itself so original, but the challenge emanates from each of them through “playing with certain stereotypes about the country” (see Gavrilova, 2009). “Poland, for example, is represented by Catholic priests waving a flag in support of gay rights; the Netherlands is a flooded landscape over which only the minarets of mosques protrude; Romania is a Dracula theme park; France is a poster announcing a strike, while a detached Britain is an empty space. Bulgaria, meanwhile, was portrayed as a “Turkish toilet” - an image that major Bulgarian institutions and the media considered deeply offensive. And this is where the real action began”

The author follows the subsequent protest reactions of representatives of the Bulgarian institutions to emphasize their petty nature, which reveals “the minds of the Bulgarian institutions and the complexes of the local media: their latent nationalism, lack of humor – and deep ignorance of modern art. At the same time, the fierce Bulgarian denial had the opposite effect, making Černý's project one of the most successful conceptual works of art of recent years. To the extent that the main purpose of this type of art is to provoke debate, to attract attention, to make the viewer re-evaluate the obvious – in this case it succeeded completely, ensuring the victory of art and imagination over politics and pettiness” (see Gavrilova, 2009).

The excessive political, institutional and media reaction on the part of Bulgaria, compared to the response in other countries, raises many questions. Is our country European in spirit if it fails to surpass its own claim to be properly accepted by all others? Isn't the restriction of creative freedom and expression a threat to the restriction of citizens' freedom? If art aims to provoke, do we need boundaries within which it fits, when it is clear to everyone that boundaries divide rather than open common horizons? Doesn't the lack of self-irony reveal a narrow cultural cut, “deep political uncertainty” (*Ibid.*), and hence civil? Is contemporary art able to provoke debate?

The last question was answered with the help of Entropa, because this kind of contemporary art “does not” reflect “reality, but makes visible tensions, boundaries, stereotypes. It has more theater, sociology, civic action than painting. that the reaction of the audience is part of the work” (see Dichev, 2009).

This play not only with the stereotypes of the countries, but also with the audience itself, the penetration of genres into each other, the intertwining of stereotypes themselves and the “formation of absurd hybrids” (*Ibid.*) Relate to the culture of postmodernism defined by Ihab Hassan. for self-destruction, the puzzle of Entropa’s clichés breaks down. “According to Černý, if there is one thing that unites the continent, it is our mutual clichés. And our ability to laugh at them.

One mistake was made by the author: instead of the United Kingdom in the puzzle of Entropa, Bulgaria had to be absent” (see Dichev, 2009).

4. Provocative events from the world of show business

If we go back to the distant 60s of the 20th century, we will remember the “peaceful protests in bed” of the legendary John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono. The unconventional form of protest chosen by the couple aims to promote peace, and the year is 1969. Behind the famous message “Make love, not war” and the luxury of the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam, is the committed civic position of the famous musician, which he has also proved with the lyrics of most of his songs. Even today, his voice is still relevant from “Imagine” (see Lennon, 1971):

Imagine there's no heaven,
It's easy if you try
No hell below us,
above us only sky
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine no possessions – I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger,
a brotherhood of man.

Our time knows quite a few stage performances of world-famous performers, which, due to the desired effect of the performance or driven by beliefs, provoke and scandalize public opinion and institutions. Examples in this regard are Madonna and Sheena O'Connor, who rarely miss out on scandalous appearances. The video for Madonna's “Like a Prayer” contains many Catholic symbols, which is why it was denounced by the Vatican because of the “blasphemous” mixture of eroticism, Catholic symbolism and the hinted history of racism. In it, the singer dances in front of burning crosses, kisses a black saint in a church and receives the stigma. In one of her public appearances on television in the United States in the early 1990s, Sheena O'Connor tore a picture of Pope John Paul II, and later the famous Irish rebel drew the wrath of the entire Catholic community.

A musical performance from February 2012 – Punk prayer in the church “Christ the Savior” – received a response and protective manifestations not only from the art world, but also from citizens around the world who are not indifferent to the suppression and repression of dissent and freedom of the word. The three performers from “Pussy Paradise” Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, Maria Alyokhina, 24, and Ekaterina Samutsevich, 29, were sentenced to two years – to serve their sentences in a general prison. The three girls were arrested after raiding Moscow's Christ the Savior Orthodox Church on 21 February 2012, and performing a song against Vladimir Putin and the church-state symbiosis in Russia. Their arrest and subsequent trial sparked a lively controversy in Russia and around the world. One point of view defends freedom of speech, and the other condemns their scandalous behavior and the cynical text of the song, which are an act of vandalism and desecration of a Christian shrine. This division in the assessments of the punk prayer finds its supporters in our country as well, and on 17 August 2012, the monument to the Soviet Army dawned with hoods in support of the punk singers, and the message of their supporters is to release the three girls immediately and to respect fundamental human rights, such as freedom of

expression. A few days later, the Park-Monument of the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship in Varna was with covered head. The scandal with the group “Pussy Paradise” put on the agenda again the questions about the limits of provocation in art, whether they are necessary and who is threatened by free creative expression.

5. Conclusion

The selectively marked artistic and performing manifestations only remind that art is a force that can unite, incite citizenship, replace it where it is lacking, provoke controversy on issues relevant to globalizing humanity, require different readings. We recall John Lennon’s words again and realize that by the end of the 1980s we had not “imagined” that borders could collapse, but we still had hope. Today we are aware that a “human brotherhood” is an unattainable dream, but we do not stop dreaming. “You may say I’m a dreamer. But I’m not the only one. I hope some day you’ll join us. And the world will live as one” (John Lennon, “Imagine”, see Lennon, 1971).

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Angelov, V. (2005). *Art and aesthetics*. [Ангелов, В. *Изкуство & Естетика*. Издателска къща Агато, София. България.] Agato Publishing House. Sofia. Bulgaria.
- Dechev, I. (2009). *The art of scandal*. [Дичев, И. *Изкуството на скандала*. е-сп. Либерален преглед. № 2/01.2009.] E-journal Liberalen Pregled. No. 2/01.2009. http://www.librev.com/index.php/component/magazine/?func=show_edition&id=20.
- Eco, U. (2006). *History of beauty* [Еко, У. *История на красотата*. Издателска къща Кибее. София. България.] Cibeа Publishing House. Sofia. Bulgaria.
- Gavrailova, D. (2009). *Entropy: the art of politics, the heart of a country*. [Гавраилова, Д. *Ентропия: изкуството на политиката, сърцето на една страна*. – ел. сп.] Либерален преглед. № 2/01. 2009]. E-journal Liberalen Pregled. No. 2/01.2009. http://www.librev.com/index.php/component/magazine/?func=show_edition&id=20.
- Hassan, I. (1987). *Toward a concept of postmodernism* (From The Postmodern Turn, 1987). <http://www.slowdays.org/files/text/hassan.pdf>.
- Lennon, J. (1971). *Imagine*. <http://imaginejohnnyoko.com/the-films/>.
- Znepolski, I. (1991). The episteme of weak thought. In Bart, Roland. *The imagination of the sign*. {Знеполски, И. Епистемата на слабата мисъл. В: Барт, Ролан. *Въображението на знака*. Издателска къща Народна култура. София. България.} Folk Culture Publishing House. Sofia. Bulgaria.

