

TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Teksts mūsdienu mākslā

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Abstract. *In the following pages we will take a brief look at how the use of text has developed and how it has found itself being used in today's contemporary art. The author will be drawing from the author's experience gained in an exhibition at the Liverpool Tate (UK) that the author has recently been to with the Sedici group, a private art group that the author belongs to. Here the author looks at some of these works seen at the exhibition dedicated to the use of text in art, and shares her thoughts on the subject.*

Keywords: *art, artist, contemporary art, Fiona Banner, Jenny Holzer, Lawrence Weiner, Liverpool Tate, Martin Creed, text.*

Introduction

How do we define text? If we look at the description of contemporary art it says that: this is an art movement of the 20th century to the early 21st century, both an outgrowth and a rejection of modern art movement. As the force and vigor of abstract expressionism diminished, new artistic movements and styles arose during the 1960s and 70s to challenge and displace modernism in painting, sculpture, and other media. (Contemporary Art definition taken from The Free Dictionary).

In today's world many artists use text in their work. Redefining 'the text', in my opinion, is written or printed words used on a daily basis for the purpose of communication, words can be verbal but only become text when written or printed. In the past text had many different roles in art but in today society it is constantly shifting and changing. So what does text represent to us in today's art? Let us think about this and look at some contemporary artists that use text in their work. Let me be clear here, the author is not interested in looking at the specific content of the text and how it reads, but rather the design of the text and how it is displayed. This would include its font, sizing, colour, and design. We will look at some of these properties later on and see how they contribute to the art work. How do contemporary artists use text and why? How does the text affect us psychologically?

We use text all the time, we send messages to each other on the phone, we read newspapers every day and when we go shopping we read signs on displays. Even when we come home in the evening we still go to the computer and see more and more text. It creeps upon us everywhere.

Well what about the text artists use in their work? We will be looking at contemporary art such as Martin Creed's work and the Tate Liverpool exhibition the author attended in March 2012. All of these artists use or have used text in their work. Let us investigate why and what for. Let us analyse closely what these people are trying to tell us, the viewers.



Figure 1. The use of text in Martin Creed's work "Small things" (Creed, 2006)

One of the artists who explores fully the use of text in his work is Martin Creed. He is a well known British contemporary artist who quite often has used text in his works. One example of this is his famous work called "Small things". For this work, Martin used modern technology, neon light in his work. The design of the text is a thin line which appears to the eyes very elegant and easy to read. The edges are quite sharp and not ornate, which suggests professionalism. The short message straight away tells us to 'get to the point' no dawdling! Furthermore, he is using capital letters to bring volume to the message or possibly screaming to get the viewers' attention. The background is black which is heavy and dark, and the colour of the text is cyan blue. Psychology tells us that this is a calming colour, recommended for use in bedrooms, for example, to create a resting environment.

Many artists have used the same materials and technology but in Creed's work it is about the meaning of the words rather than anything else, as he said "I search for absurdity and feeling... I want my work, so to speak, to be silly. I want to make things that are stupid and that contrast with that which is around it." (Duguid, 2008). He also refers to words as a sculpture and he talks about how big the words should be. In this particular work the word 'small' is actually the size of the whole wall itself. For Creed all words are associated with noise and movement, he also refers to it as like a soup. (Martin Creed on Mothers, 2011). The only way to deal with everything is by keeping it as simple as possible. Creed also uses music as a media of art using words as a way to express himself, going back to the idea that words are noise and movement.

The Tate Liverpool Exhibition Space

During February and March 2012 at the Tate Liverpool one exhibition featured a variety of art pieces. Here contemporary artists who use text in their work were arranged by the curators in one combined space creating an intimidating space where text would dominate the atmosphere. As you enter the space you see Jenny Holzer's piece entitled Truisms (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Truisms (Holzer, 1984).

This piece immediately associates with a train station notice board. Electronically operated text keeps appearing. The text sometimes runs fast and sometimes a bit slower. As well as going from left to right it also changes the direction from up to down. While reading the text there is a feeling of anticipation like you are waiting for something to happen, but nothing happens. The text keeps running. ‘... Plain can be a very positive thing... ’or ‘ ... People who do not work with their hands are parasites...’another catch line ‘... Push yourself to the limits as much as possible...’ and many more statements.



Figure 3. Don't Look Back (Banner, 1999).

Continuing in the exhibition we then have Fiona Banner's piece 'Don't Look Back' (Figure 3). Banner is one of the leading artists in today's contemporary art. She works in multimedia, sculpture and installations, but is mainly interested in text. Banner is well known for this iconic work (Figure 3) which is exhibiting at the Tate Liverpool at the moment. The author was very fortunate to visit this exhibition. This work has been described by the gallery as 'Narrative translated to the fine art...'.

As the author walked into the room she found herself looking at what a memorial wall looked like. Getting closer the author came to the conclusion that it was not at all what it first appeared to be. On inspecting the wall closer up, it became clear that it was script printed on paper just like normal wallpaper. The author believes that the reason for such a wrong conclusion was the fact that the print was black text on the metallic background. The type print appeared to look like Arial font with very straight edges, the entire text in capitals, no

new paragraphs and no separation to make it easy for the eye adjustment. It looked like a long list of names as we would find on a memorial plaque. There was nothing poetic about the way the text appeared.

The author read, “HE’S THERE IN FRONT OF THE ROAD, AND THE BEARDED GISBERG’S AT THE SIDE, HE’S HOLDING THE CARDS AND SKINNY LEGS TAPER DOWN TO HIS FEET, HIS HAIR’S LIKE NO OTHER..’ there in a puzzle, what can this possibly mean? What is the artist trying to say? Is there a message? Well, the description of the piece says that Banner was using the documentary film which was instrumental in helping to surround Bob Dylan as an artist performer. It is about the American singer Bob Dylan’s first British tour in 1965, and these are the lyrics of subterranean Homesick Blues. (Wallis, 2002). Banner turns her mental pictures of Dylan into a stream of words written in the present tense as if she were there with him at his concert.

Continuing on in the exhibition, the author saw Lawrence Weiner’s “Taken to as deep as the sea can be” (Figure 4). Straight away we see an opposite approach compared to that of Banners or Holzers as this text has a feeling of hand writing. Compared to the other two works, this text is typed but with a curl at the start that gives the feeling of free hand writing. The curl gives the impression that it is an unfinished letter or possibly an ornate prefix similar to what was often used in medieval times to decorate text.

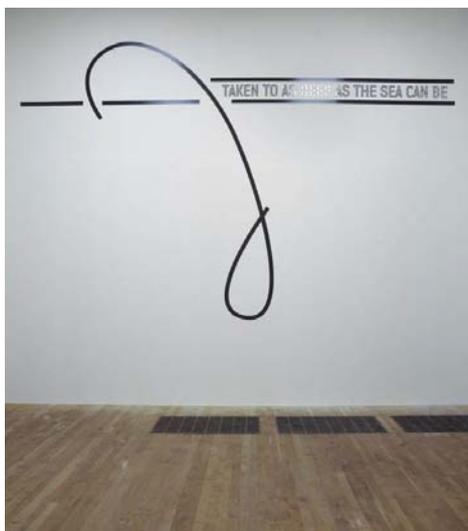


Figure 4. Taken to as deep as the sea can be (Weiner, 2005).

The text is silver with a black outline which brings the text forward making it stand out. The black and silver again takes us back to the idea of some kind of memorial text just like we saw in Banners ‘Don’t Look Back’. However, this impression does not last long, because as you read the text you immediately find yourself painting a picture of the deep sea, as the text reads ‘Taken to as deep as the sea can be’.

The meaning of this text, the sea and deepness, is something unexplored and is in many ways a bit alien to us as we do not live under the water. We cannot help but be curious and possibly a bit sceptical as we know that this environment is not habitable for us humans. The style of the text appears in the style similar to CASTELLAR with some differences. There are some gaps within the letters just like a stencils alphabet. This kind of alphabet is used in schools for teaching so there is this idea that you get told how to do things, you have got to follow a certain pattern to get it right rather than be creative, so the idea of limited freedom comes to mind here.

Conclusion

In this article we have seen how some contemporary artists use text in their work today. We have taken a closer look at Martin Creed's ideas about the use of words in his work as well as Jenny Holzer, Fiona Banner, and Lawrence Weiner.

Words are everywhere, we are surrounded by text and we see letters everywhere. My understanding of this is that they are messages for the readers, and the artists are the messengers.

We can successfully conclude that text will be constantly changing too and in turn so will the art work. With new innovations and technology as well as new ideas, it will all be changing. As we have seen in today's modern art, artists are applying this poetic idea of text becoming art. Banner tells us that literature walks hand in hand with his visual art and Creed says that words are music, words are sculptures, and words are movements. By reading texts we immediately draw pictures in our mind, we immediately think, we immediately associate as we did with Weiner's work. Typing texts is movement, it cannot appear on the computer screen without first being a thought, secondly being part of a program and thirdly without reading it other than to yourself or to the viewers. Text will be passed on to somebody, the message will be read by someone just as it is today in an SMS or in the art gallery.

The use of text for the contemporary artist comes across just like any other media artists used in the past such as drawing or sculpture. This is just a new language, a new way of communicating. The use of text is not a new idea at all, but what is new is the idea of accepting the use of text as a new art form, just as we have accepted graffiti art. We have seen how artists display work differently and how this can affect the viewer in terms of how they interpret the work. The display of the art is important as it can directly change the meaning of the context. The associations are crucial as they will dictate the connection to the art work.

Kopsavilkums. Raksts sniedz ieskatu, kā ir attīstījusies teksta izmantošana un kāda ir tā vieta mūsdienu mākslā. Secinājumi balstās uz autores pieredzi, kas gūta izstādē Liverpoolitā (Lielbritānijā), kuru autore nesen apmeklēja kopā ar Sediči grupu, kas ir privāta mākslinieku apvienība. Tur bija apskatāma izstāde, kas bija veltīta teksta izmantošanai mākslā, un šo darbu apskate ļauj autoram dalīties savās domās par šo jautājumu.

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