Filip Wróblewski

Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

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Abstract

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This article is based on an analysis of the social field of the art and cultural category designed to described human taste of aestheticism and need to art creativity. The main idea of this paper is attempt of amendment existing applied notions to the description and analyses of art. To this purpose author is using the analogy between the icono*clash* notion suggested by Bruno Latour, and proposed by oneself idea of the media*clash*. This phenomenon characterized by a clash of aesthetics and usage of formal means (especially digital technologies, which are the foundations of the very existence of new media). The second proposition is ar*thick* category, used like Clifford Geertz thick description. This concept show a procedure of interpretation that sets the meaning of particular actions within their proper context, which makes it possible to understand human creative actions and it's connections with social field.

Keywords: Clifford Geertz, thick description, art, media

The attempts to speak about art or (to be more specific) to speak of it, while taking on both the perspective of present time and the modern art (with all of its implications) as a point of reference, will always be burdened with the difficulty of statement. This results not only from the internal complexity of the issue itself, but also (or perhaps above all) from its contextual and dynamically changing implications. Especially if the afterthoughts concern the somewhat ephemeral new media art, that (quoting Ryszard Kluszczyński's words from *Interactive Art*) "we should look for among the phenomena, that don't belong with the classical, age-old means of expressing art", thus methods of "work that exploit technical resources and processes connected with them, as well as specific materials designed in the creative process not directly, but with the help of those technical resources in between" (Kluszczyński 2010: 15).

In other words, the emphasis is not being put on the representative goals of a work of art, or its being as an autonomous artifact. It's put on the features given to a medium, that allows the recipient to use it creatively and interact with it in the process. Of course, the standpoint presented above has to be treated as a derivative of a change in the recipient's status, that took place during the past century. The most important aspect of that change concerns the extension of the recipient's competence – we are now able to participate in a process of the social forming and separating possible meanings of a work of art, thanks to the act of usage (Kluszczyński 2010: 136–153). It's reflected in the ways of how art is conceptualized, which is a result of connecting the artistic attitude and the technical means of communication, that leads to perceiving creative activities as communication actions (Kluszczyński 2010: 16–17). This depiction, as a theoretical attempt to describe current changes in means of artistic expression, fits right in with the paradigmatic model of culture, introduced as a communication process (Winkin 2007: 27–76).

It's worth noticing, how that kind of attitude towards art results not only in the changing of a recipient's status, but also in the resignation from an explanatory attitude in favour of comparative analysis, while in the same time preserving the author's and theoretician's right to motivate creating the works or actions, which includes them in the art field. But even though those voices posses exegetical powers, they seem to misrepresent their former function. They mark a necessity of adding information about what the recipient is coping with, suggestions about how a work of art should be perceived, which conceptual code should be used and which would be inappropriate. This can be seen as a manifestation of a paradox, described by Clifford Geertz. The American anthropologist emphasizes the universal character of human's need to arrange, classify and explain artistic phenomenon, as well as the need to talk about it, which helps to fit it into a certain cultural system. On the other hand, Geertz stresses the futility of trying to understand art, which is caused by the historical and social diversity of art contexts (Geertz 2005: 102). As a result, "a collective ability to see forms" develops, together with an ability to interpret those forms (Geertz 2005: 113).

Considering the above – the radical change in the parameters of art, and most importantly a transformation in the qualitative character of its being, ways of using it and the narrowing of reference areas – it seems necessary to postulate a change in terminology. A similar action was conducted in year 2002 by Bruno Latour while searching for a title suitable for an exhibition devoted to iconoclasm. The French sociologist thought, that while the concept of *iconoclasm* was suitable for describing iconoclastic dealings, it wasn't wide enough to range all of the other actions, that were not motivated by religious reasons, and by that corresponding to actions treated today as vandalism. To introduce iconoclastic trends appropriate for different cultures and periods, motivated by religious or scientific reasons, as well as reasons deduced from modern art theories, Latour proposed the concept of **icono***clash* – a specific suspension of an armed hand, stopping it halfway through in an uncertainty about the conclusion of undertaken actions. He wrote:

we can define an icono*clash* as what happens when there is *uncertainty* about the exact role of the hand at mamer ready to expose, to denounce, to show up, to disappoint, to disenchant, to dispel one's illusion, to let the air out? Or is it, on the contrary, a cautious and careful hand, palm turned as if to catch, to elicit, to educate, to welcome, to generate, to entertain, to maintain, to collect truth and sanctity? (Latour 2002: 20).

The mechanism presented above should be considered useful not only in a practical sense, but also as a validation for searching further, resulting in a proposal of new concepts that could name phenomena or tendencies too elusive for old categories. Therefore it seems appropriate to introduce two concepts that suit the character of new media art.

The first one in line would be the concept that overrules previous ways of understanding art, especially when it's founded on new digital technologies and interactive media, that completely revalued the institution of an author. Perhaps the intuitively inappropriate concept of art (considering modern forms of artistic actions), that takes the form of an open cooperation, pulling the recipient in an endless process of giving meaning, should be called ar*thick*. All the more reason is, like Clifford Geertz said:

> man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some explication (Geertz 1973: 5).

Thus ar*thick* describes a procedure of interpretation that sets the meaning of particular actions within their proper context, which makes it possible to understand, just as it is in the case of thick description (Geertz 1973). Geertz took this category from the Gilbert Ryle's thought, who was a British philosopher. The main postulate of symbolic and interpretive anthropology is observation (in this particular case formulated based on experience of fieldwork in Morocco):

> as, in the study of culture, analysis penetrates into the very body of the object-that is, we begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those-the line between (Moroccan) culture as a natural fact and (Moroccan) culture as a theoretical entity tends to get blurred (Geertz 1973: 15).

The background of this theoretical proposal is observation that facts shown by researchers being supposed to explain determined reality or culture specified group, should be accepted with the carefulness. In this point is important to not distort or hide image witch slowly appointing view of world of human actions, value, belief and judgment, or way of living. Affairs connected with art have similarly. The full understanding of this matters depend on the care with which will grab and hold of individual artefacts and networks of meanings and practice wrapping them. However, in order accurately to recognize them, not only fitnesses permitting to build theory up, based on small premises and details, but above

all, an appropriate language is essential. Only it, along with the right theoretical foundation delivered conceptualization tools.

> The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics (Geertz 1973: 28).

The ar*thick* category should provide a contextually profound setting of a work of art, exposing further areas of meaning and connections, while putting on hold a judgment based on aesthetical categories. This way it could counterweight the specific withdrawal and weakness of interpretative tools, that has been described – Kluszczyński's description of interactive art is a fine example. Such action is all more important, that understanding connections for the wide context and relations let not only clarify chosen social facts with various prospects, but also deepen them. Letting simultaneously for more convenient describing cultural occurrences. Hence, development of scientific categories, accordingly to progress of cognition subordinate to the methodological discipline, for the possibly appropriate description and reality explaining, requires continuous checking the legitimacy of meanings and usefulness of notions developed within theory. This treatment – declared by Geertz – become a part of need for continuous unceasing testing, changing, as well as adapting categories of description applied in social sciences, depending on needs. That is direction of dynamically happening changes in world of the man. It is essential in order to

> the theoretical framework in terms of which such an interpretation is made must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view. Although we formulate our interpretation of an outburst of winking or an instance of sheep-raiding after its occurrence, sometimes long after, the theoretical framework terms of which such an interpretation is made must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view. Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going on-trying to find one's feet-one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; as I have said, they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. If they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop being used and are more or less abandoned. If they continue being useful, throwing up new understandings, they are further elaborated and go on being used (Geertz 1973: 26–27).

The second concept, parallel to Latour's suggestions, would be the concept of **media***clash*. It's an answer to the specific position of works of art, that qualify as interactive art but, in the same time, are deprived of a wide reference area. This limitation is present because of at least two reasons. First of all, the new media art is characterized by an increased instability, which leads to a temporality of message as well as meaning. Its essence is facetious, marked by the curse of uniqueness, which mocks the techniques of collective construction and preserving of meaning. This takes us to the second doubt, concerning that type of art – namely, that it is deprived of an area of transcendental references. It can be seen as an

effect of a twofold surrendering of the ambition to undertake a search like that (connected with the inability to see the human being and the human condition in a context that surpasses the materiality of media), and a reduction of the way to understand art sorely to a level of communication practices.

In the face of a common enthusiasm for new techniques of expression, that seem to guarantee nearly unlimited forms of artistic expression, it is important to devote some space to standpoints that motivate the anxiety evoked by the progressing impoverishment of values, functioning among public domain (which also found the art field). In the beginning of the 20th century, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset diagnosed the state of art. He claimed that it is a subject to a constant marginalization and a progressive subordination. That process was supposed to manifest itself through certain mechanisms: dehumanization, using forms that are not reflected in human life, the self-reference of a work of art, treating it only in terms of fun, the over-give of meaning to forms and the precision of execution (Ortega y Gasset 1996: 196, 218). All of the comments above seem to suit the work of "artists" like Nam June Paik, Bruce Naman or Stelarc. The spectacles they procure, as well as the artifacts connected with them, have more in common with a vague shamanism or a crippled version of Dadaism than with a constructive action, that would ask important questions about the human's way of existence in the world. Their interest in the form, technical possibilities, parameters – these are all parts of a blind appliance fetishism, a seclusion around the technologies of media, that lacks any cognitive horizons. A futile gesture of this orientation finds a way to validate itself in an institutional form – the museum. Two other French intellectuals spoke of it in a similar tone to Ortega y Gasset's. Jean Baudrillard points out the pretext character of modern art and says (in a somewhat exaggerated manner) that modern art is forced to use

> uncertainty, impossibility in forming any justified, aesthetical judgment, counting on the faults of those, who don't understand any of it, or those, who never realized, that there is nothing to understand here anymore (Baudrillard 2006: 82–83).

It's not about a complete denial of that type of activities – it's about a proper arrangement of emphasis, contrary to the developed system of techniques, that are supposed to certify artistic strategies with the use of statements about them, situated among the authorities, founded on an institutional base, such as museums, galleries, artistic circles or art critics' opinions. Jean Clair also doubts in that system, seeing the museum's crisis as a part of the secularity of art (that is nearly programmatic these days) and a compulsion of entertainment, which pleases the tastes of average people, who are badly formed as recipients of art or not formed at all. He also condemns the selfishness and a short-sighted egoism of the authors, that turns a potential work of art into "idiocy which expresses an infantile whim of an individual" (Clair 2009: 17–18; see: Clair 2007). The authors mentioned before can serve as an example of the postulated phenomenon called media*clash,* characterized by a clash of aesthetics and usage of formal means (especially digital technologies, which are the foundations of the very existence of new media), with

the implied futility of message connected with the understanding of art through the communication paradigm, which in the end reduces the meaning of art itself.

Baudrillard's and Clair's comments bring us to another dimension of how art functions, a problematic issue for the new media art. Namely, the usage of art requires from the recipient a certain level of experience and acquaintance with digital technologies, outside the context of art, but in daily life. This would suggest that to make the interfaces maintenance comprehensible, their tools and procedures need to be intuitive. In that, however, it's impossible to find a higher level of cultural abilities – there is no need for a recipient to meet any other requirements than the experiences motivated by pragmatic rules of behavior. The egalitarianism of new media art allows us to ignore any cultural nobility and indirectly also the effect of education (which was previously impossible to belittle), in other words – the symbolical capital equivalent to a valid culture and its formations. Therefore (taking into consideration Pierre Bourdieu's suggestion) we can say that until now certain mechanisms existed, which extorted the exclusivity of art norms – they were called aesthetical instructions, which should be understood as "ways of relating to objects socially designated as works of art", that is distinguished "classes of artistic objects", which differ from other objects made by people because of perceiving them "with a strictly aesthetic intention" (Bourdieu 2005: 41). But in the face of the subordination of old forms – made possible, thanks to the distinction of other concurrent forms, such as new media art – the previous order has been disturbed, at least partially. As a result, a new, discursive formation of art is developing, replacing the old ones. Together with a formalistic movement, it takes on a privileged position, mostly thanks to a democratic abolition of education as a requirement for its recipients. In the end, because of suspending the aesthetical competence, we face a situation where

> while confronting a work of valid art, people who lack the suitable competence the most, are prone to apply the same outlines of ethos, that influence their common perception of an ordinary existence and which […] defy the more or less transparent rules of [past] aesthetics. (Bourdieu 2005: 58).

In other words: the principle of art is being questioned.

Let us think about the categories, that could be used to describe the artistic actions of Bill Viola, which are known to be hermetic (also when it's about his choice of means) and very spare. The author can be safely contrasted with a whole bunch of pretentious workmen, who were mentioned earlier. Any attempt at interpreting his works, while using all of the technologies suitable for the new art media, are useless if they're detached from a vast knowledge of the history of art, the poetical means of expression or other possible references. Viola's work is not only competent, but also distinguishes itself thanks to a solid workshop and technical preparation[1]. It's artists like him that bring up the issue of rehabilitating art with a capital "A", also through postulating the use of transformed categories like **ar*thick***.

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[1] Compare other thesis by Donald Kuspit about New Old Masters in art (Kuspit 2004).

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