

# ART AT THE LIMITS OF THE VISIBLE

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*The article deals with the function of the non-visual, especially verbal elements, in the visual arts since the 1960s. It mentions the controversy between the modernist demand that art should be purely visual, and its conceptualist critics. It illustrates the possible use of texts in visual arts with the work of three artists, Jenny Holzer, Lewis Baltz and Jože Barši.*

Key words: visual culture / visual arts / textuality / Holzer, Jenny / Baltz, Lewis / Barši, Jože

*V klasičnem slikarstvu je slika mišljena kot beseda, dejansko pa je slika.*

*V novodobnem slikarstvu je slika mišljena kot slika, dejansko pa je beseda.*

I.G. Plamen, *Beseda in slika*

This is a quotation from a 1969 text called "Word and Image", by I. G. Plamen (Iztok Geister), poet, philosopher, ecologist, and former member of the avant-garde movement OHO in the 1960s. Plamen's texts often seem deceptively simple, yet they are highly complex, both in their language and their ideas (both aspects are, of course, very closely connected). Even the translation of the short passage quoted is not simple, due to the writer's love for ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings: "In classical painting, picture [or: image] is meant to be [or: is thought of as] word, but in fact it is picture [or: image]. / In the new-time [i.e., contemporary, modern] painting, picture is meant to be [or: is thought of as] picture [or: image], but in fact it is a word."<sup>1</sup>

It is no coincidence that this definition was formulated in the 1960s. This was perhaps a time when the complex relations between the visual

and non-visual elements in the visual arts became particularly clear, and these relations strongly determined the development of the arts in the following decades. "What you see is what you see", the famous sentence of Frank Stella from 1966, marks a final point in the development that essentially influenced the visual arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a process in which the visual arts were supposed to be rid of everything that does not essentially belong to them: illusion, narrative, the non-visual elements, etc. The history of so-called mainstream modernism has usually been understood as the progressive elimination from the work of art all elements that do not belong to its immediate visual presence, or better, to its basic visual means. Traditionally, works of art have not only represented recognizable objects (as in portraits, landscapes, still-lives, historical events, etc.), but they were also understood as having a sort of visual rhetoric, i.e. as visual representations of texts. The famous sentence by St. Gregory the Great, *Quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotibus pictura* (What is writing to those who can read, is image to those who cannot.), clearly defines images as an equivalent of writing. And indeed, in spite of the huge differences between the art of different periods, we could say that at least much of the visual arts in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism and later is quite deliberately "readable". That means that they (re)present (sometimes almost in the sense of a theatre performance) a certain textual background. Even such a seemingly simple genre as still-life can be (due to the conventional meanings of the objects represented and so-called hidden symbolism in them) heavily loaded with verbal (for example, moral or religious) meanings and messages, and this even more the case in historical, mythological or religious pictures.

An excellent example of these relations is David's *The Oath of the Horatii*. The paradox with this work is that – because it is so famous and because it introduced gestures and compositional devices that later became commonly used – most people think they "understand" it. I believe, however, that very few really do. To really understand it, one has to know a relatively obscure myth from republican Rome. One also has to have at least some very basic knowledge about the visual rhetoric David used (the meaning of the gestures and expressions, the implications of the setting and depicted objects). Without knowing what is actually happening in front of us, what has been set on stage by this painting, one simply misses some of its most essential aspects, especially its moral messages. Only by knowing the "represented" text can one judge the quality of the "performance" and appreciate its particular meanings and messages.

The leading theoreticians of mainstream modernism stressed the importance of the fact that art rids itself precisely of aspects such as representation or narration and eventually reduces the work only to what is essential in it – its medium. Now, the medium is no longer used as a vehicle for presenting something else, it presents only itself; it is, as Greenberg said somewhere, "imitation of imitating". From many different passages that illustrate such an understanding, we can quote one from Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" from 1961:

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity' meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.<sup>2</sup>

And, as Greeberg stressed in the same essay:

Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.<sup>3</sup>

Works that are reduced to their basic conditions, their medium, are therefore identical with the actual presence of flat painted surfaces. It is essential that these surfaces do not refer to or represent anything outside themselves. It is this very tendency that culminated with Stella's "What you see is what you see". A work of (visual) art is supposed to be completely tautological. In a sense, there is nothing what one could say about such works. Everything in the work is visible, and it is nothing but the visible.

Approximately at the time as Stella formulated his statement, there were – even in the circles that Stella himself belonged to – also other, very different ideas about the visual and verbal in art. In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967), Sol LeWitt spoke about art where the physical reality and the visual characteristics were only of secondary importance compared to the idea, the concept on which the work is based:

Three-dimensional art of any kind is a physical fact. This physicality is its most obvious and expressive content. Conceptual art is made to engage in the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions. The physicality of a three-dimensional object then becomes a contradiction to its non-emotive intent. Color, surface, texture, and shape only emphasize the physical aspects of the work. Anything that calls attention to and interests the viewer in this physicality is a deterrent to our understanding of the idea and is used as an expressive device. The conceptual artist would want to ameliorate this emphasis on materiality as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way. (To convert it into an idea.) This kind of art, then, should be stated with the most economy of means. Any idea that is better stated in two dimensions should not be in three dimensions. Ideas may also be stated by numbers, photographs, or words or any way the artist chooses, the form being unimportant.<sup>4</sup>

These references can also serve as a reminder that the construction of the tradition of "mainstream" modernism actually repressed different currents and approaches that did not emphasize any "pure" medium, mere presence, nor the purely visual nature of art. This is a line that can be followed back to the historical avant-gardes and, of course, the work of

Marcel Duchamp. Instead of reduction (as in modernism), this line stressed the idea of "extension". It was no coincidence that Joseph Beuys spoke about an "extended notion of art". Principles of collage, multi- and inter-mediality, site-specificity, ready-made objects and the gradual dematerialization of art (Lucy Lippard used this expression in describing processes in art in the 1960s) created works of art that are heterogeneous and in which visual and non-visual, material and conceptual elements remain in tension and, at the same time, in a complex and often multi-layered unity.

Since the 1960s, the tension between the visual and the non-visual in the arts has remained a central point in art. Conceptual artist criticized the very idea of a "pure" visuality, pointing at the non-visual structural elements and conditions of the visual. The tendency to research the conditions of seeing and visuality and therefore to "dematerialize" works of art have been crucial issues in the art of the last decade. Found and ready-made materials, works and actions that are available only through documentation, non-visual elements, such as sound or even smell, have all been means in these efforts. The use of text has been a particularly important and interesting method (and one that refers to a long tradition, since the relation of text and image has been essential throughout the history of art). It has always been an effective way to dematerialize the work and eventually develop it as a (self)-reflection of its own conditions. On the other hand, of course, the written texts have a material, visual aspect, and the mode and context of their presentation can affect their meaning.

We could mention an endless number of examples of such complex relations of visual and verbal elements in art, and specifically of works where text has the leading role or even replaces the material presence of the work. I will just mention three such examples. In 1968 Lawrence Weiner mounted an exhibition with Seth Siegelaub, a leading curator and promoter of conceptual art. The exhibition consisted of 28 phrases, printed one per page in a book called *Statements*. Such statements are, for example, "One standard dye marker thrown into the sea", or, "A field created by simul/taneous TNT explosions". Weiner did not exclude the material side of such works; not only does he evoke a mental image of actual materials and event, but such statements could be executed as material situations and processes, and even bought by collectors or museums. But such execution is not unavoidable; words alone can also be sufficient. The artist defined this in the following way: "1. The artist may construct the work. 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not to be built."<sup>5</sup> Croatian artist Josip Vaništa, founder of the Gorgona Group, had produced a painting that exists only as a description already in 1964. His *Painting* looks like this: "HORIZONTAL CANVAS FORMAT / WIDTH 180 CM, HEIGHT 140 CM, THE ENTIRE SURFACE WHITE, SILVER LINE RUNNING HORIZONTALLY / ACROSS THE MIDDLE OF THE CANVAS / (WIDTH 180 CM, HEIGHT 3 CM)".<sup>6</sup> A famous case in the history of conceptual art is the so-called Air Show by the group Art & Language. Histories of conceptual art sometimes claim that

the group exhibited an undefined column of air as their work. In fact, the case is even more complicated. The air column is just a virtual example in an essay written by the group. Art & Language are not interested so much in "producing" virtual objects (air column etc.), but in the process of critically describing the position and function of a work of art. Their art tends to be identical with such critical (self)-description.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the fact that such tendencies, in their dissent from the modernist orthodoxy revitalize a long artistic tradition of relations between texts and images, they often provoke doubts and criticisms. If a text takes on the leading role in a work and the material side is only marginal, if the work is radically dematerialized, can we still speak of works of (visual) art at all? Many people seem to think this is not so. I recently came upon a critical comment addressed to the work of Jenny Holzer, saying that a text cannot be a work of art. Here we should perhaps again turn to Sol LeWitt, to another text by him, "Statements on Conceptual Art" from 1969. In his 16<sup>th</sup> statement he says:

If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics.<sup>8</sup>

We could now return to Iztok Geister and his notes on the relations between words and images in art. The quoted passage points to the complex relation of the visual and the verbal in modern art, as well as in the Western pictorial tradition. As he rightfully stresses, traditional painting very often understood itself as a particular form of text, e.g. as "writing for the illiterate" in the middle ages, or as a way of performing a text in the French art of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. And yet this art can be understood as essentially visual, as a particular use of its "medium". On the other hand, however, Geister is explicitly critical of the ideas of "purely" visual and absolutely "autonomous" art. The "pure" visuality of modernist art is based on a particular narrative, on a critical discourse that determines its character and tradition. Only on the basis of such discourse is one able to perceive the "purely visual" nature of modernist paintings. Geister's position is rather different to that of modernist critics such as Greenberg. He points to the complexity and multiplicity of relations between the visual and non-visual (especially verbal) in works of (visual) art, both traditional and contemporary. Much recent art has been described, in a very general way, as conceptual or post-conceptual. I believe that it is this complexity of relations, rather than any direct reference to the actual practice of the conceptual artists of the 1960s, that influenced the nature of this art.

To illustrate the different possibilities of these complexities I will briefly present the work of three artists: Jenny Holzer, Lewis Baltz and Jože Barši.

## Jenny Holzer

The work of this artist is based on texts she herself writes. These texts range from short statements to long poems. The texts, however, are always presented in a particular way and in a particular context, and the work is only established through this presentation and localization. In the late 1970s, she produced a series of short, pointed, sometimes paradoxical or oxymoronic statements she called *Truisms*. The artist introduced these statements in different (predominantly urban) surroundings, using a number of different media – posters, electronic billboards, T-shirts etc. Although she has always been attentive to the formal aspects of such presentation, the main issue is the possibility of addressing people from different social contexts. The main space for *Truisms* has therefore been (urban) public space.

Later, Holzer's texts became longer, closer to poetry. Although they often remained directly critical and political (e.g., the *Inflammatory Essays* series), there has also been a more personal, intimate approach (e.g. the *Living Series*, *Under a Rock*, *Survival* and *Laments*). For these texts, too, the artists used similar presentation strategies (posters, T-shirts, displays, or metal plaques). Each of these media, of course, has its particular connotations, which, the artist always takes into account when she produces her pieces. Another essential aspect, of course, is the possibility of addressing people outside an artistic context, in a direct and unexpected way. Text, its formal design, the use of the media and the contextualization of the piece therefore produce the specific unity that could be described as the work of art.

It was an important step for her when she started to produce works for the museum context. Here, of course, she lost the quality of directness and unexpectedness that are characteristic of the works in public space, but she gained the possibility of a more concentrated and intimate relation that enabled more complex works. Her decision was perhaps partly connected with the wish to give even more accent to the traumatic aspects in her work, which the museum context enables. Nevertheless, the basic nature of her works remains the same. Texts gain specific, additional meanings when presented in a particular form and media and placed in a particular context. Her texts are to a certain extent independent of the actual presentation. She has used the same texts in different media and contexts; it is possible to read them in books or magazines. And yet one should say that the main subject of her work remain the relations between text, viewer, form and context.

## Lewis Baltz

In the work of the well-known contemporary photographer, Lewis Baltz, the project *Deaths in Newport* has a certain particularity. He was attracted to a case that took place in his hometown, Newport Beach, in 1947. A girl

and her boyfriend were accused of murdering her rich parents. Baltz research and collection of materials resulted in an exhibition project that presented a number of photographs and other documentary materials about the case (such as portraits of the main protagonists, pictures from the trial, and articles from the local press). Baltz sometimes includes found images or their fragments in his complex photo installations; in this case, however, found material replaced his own work entirely. But these materials were supplemented by a longer text that also appeared as a book.

The text has several layers. It is a narrative about the circumstances that brought the artist back to his hometown and initiated his interest in the case. It is also a report (40 years later) about an event that was important for its time and has remained unresolved. It refers – although in a less immediate way – to the artist's own childhood and family. (His father, the local mortician, had a relatively important role in the process as one of the witnesses.) It also refers to the artist's personal conditions whilst preparing the project and writing the text. All these layers are, however, basically memories, personal and social. Not only that – they touch upon a number of past and recent traumatic events, again both personal and social. As such they are, of course, subject to the processes of the unconscious. In this sense, the memories and narratives could be understood both as mechanisms of repression of the traumatic events and as a means of their return and (re)presentation.

A seemingly minor, but in fact a crucial aspect of the book, are four quotations that Baltz uses at the beginning and at the end. They refer in an ambiguous way to the ideas of home, (false) memories and crime. Two of the quotations are from Freud, one of them from his essay "Dostoyevski and the Parricide". Freud's explanations about the writer's identification with criminals throw additional light on the intricate intertwining of narratives and relations. Here, too, we have an almost obsessive concern with the criminals who (perhaps) killed the girl's parents. It has an additional dimension in the childhood memories and the role that the artist's father plays in the text.

It seems to me that Baltz has indeed come to the limits of the visual and visible in his project. We are confronted with a number of photographs that take for their subject existing documentation. The systematic approach in collecting and documenting this material suggests a certain obsessive drive in artist's activities, and this is both elucidated and further obscured by the text. Since the artist used found visual materials, the individual point of view (in a photographer's work normally represented by the view of the camera) was replaced by the text. Art, in this work, happens as multi-dimensional relations between these layers and elements. In such a way, the work develops a highly intriguing narrative on love and aggression, home and exile, memory and forgetting, repression and revelation, personal and social, etc.

## Jože Barši

We have to introduce the project *Walking* by Jože Barši with the circumstances in which it was made. Most things Jože Barši does are initially very simple and basic, and eventually turn out to be quite complex. The story of *Walking*, too, was initially a simple one. Barši was awarded a grant for a stay in the USA. He was supposed to produce an art project and present it at the end of his stay. Barši decided to walk every day in the empty gallery space. After his daily walking, he would usually send an email to himself, describing his experiences. Far from being any kind of "New Age" enthusiast, he has nevertheless been for a long time interested in Buddhist thought and meditation practices. ("These practices interest me and, well, here I am sort of conservative. I always go for those practices which are a thousand years old.") The walking meditation is such a technique, and Barši became acquainted with it during his stay in a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka.

Was his walking an art project? First, walking itself was certainly not art. Following the instructions published in a book on meditation techniques he had been using, Barši tried to concentrate as much as possible on the walking as such. He tried to exclude all other thoughts and concerns, and to intensify the experience of moving the legs, of advancing, slowly, step by step, through the space: left foot, right foot. It is, however, the context of his decision to start walking every day, and the fact that he presented it in the form of an art show, which make his actions art.

His decision was also connected to his thoughts about himself as a visual artist and about the role of sight and the other senses in his work. His idea is that the traditional division of perception regarding different senses is too mechanical and that "there is only one sense, mind, which connects all doors and windows of perception in the act of sensing".<sup>9</sup> Perception can be aimed outwards as well as inwards. "The important things are attention, perception and observation. Actions do not begin with thinking, but with very careful observation. [...] To see more, and more precisely, is a possibility of finding a way. This might sound a bit like some stupid esoterics, but the fact is that in the present-day surroundings which overwhelms us and constantly bombards us with sensations, it is hard to be an attentive observer. So, one does not need to work very hard to find an idea, it simply appears out of observation."

But the experience is not enough; it is completely personal, and Barši, being an artist, is interested in communication, in the "translation" of his experiences, too. He had to speak somehow about his decision and to point to his activity. Only by describing his experiences in the e-mail messages (a process which was a reflection, but also a "secondary revision", as Freud would have called it) and by presenting these messages in a show, could Barši re-connect his activity with art and thus make it meaningful to other people, too. "Of course, I am an artist probably because I want to show this to the audience. [...] I don't think that art is this piece of paper that I show to the visitor; art is the proposal



that he or she can do it himself or herself, since it is so stupidly simple and difficult at the same time. Try it!"

"Walking" is therefore a depiction of a solitary process and of artist's own experiences during this process. But what is more important is that it presents an artist's decision in a situation where he is asked to produce (meaningful) art. The *Walking* piece is both simple and meaningful in showing that there is always the possibility of stepping aside and concentrating on oneself; but also that there is always a path back to others, to the inter-subjective world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published without title in the anthology *Pericarežeracirep* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1969). It was reprinted as "Besede in slike" in: Iztok Geister Plamen, *Plavje in usedline* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 1996, 124).

<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", in: Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (Eds.), *Art in Modern Culture. An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London: Phaidon Press, 1992, 309).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, 836-837).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Weiner, "Statements", in: Harrison and Wood, *op. cit.*, 882.

<sup>6</sup> Branka Stipančić, *Riječi i slike / Words and Images* (Zagreb: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1995, 17).

<sup>7</sup> Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, "Air Show". First published in: *Frameworks – Air Conditioning* (Coventry: Art & Language Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art", in: Harrison and Wood, *op. cit.*, 838.

<sup>9</sup> This and the following quotations are from a letter in which Barši explained me his project.