

Beyond Words – Art Between the Verbal and the Visual

Christina Müller

Frankfurt a.M.

Abstract:

Philipp Horst's study examines the change in the use of language in the visual arts of the 20th and 21st century. The author observes three stages of this development which roughly correspond to the historical movements of modernism and conceptual art as well as contemporary computer art. Whereas modernist artists may be inspired by poetry (or poets by paintings), their works clearly favour the use of one medium, either the visual or the verbal. In the 1960s, however, conceptual artists attempt to merge visual and verbal elements in order to create an equal balance of the two media in their work. This development eventually leads to a third stage at the beginning of the 21st century, when computer artists create works which can neither be classified as visual nor verbal because these media are fused in order to invent a virtual quality which defies conventional descriptions of art.

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Philipp Horst's interdisciplinary analysis seeks to define and interpret a change in the use of language which can be detected in the visual arts of the 20th and 21st century. For this purpose, the author has chosen to study the works of several artists from three different movements: modernism, conceptual art, and contemporary computer art. Before proceeding to look at the art itself, Horst presents a few theoretical concepts relevant for his study. Horace's famous phrase "ut pictura poesis" is used to illustrate the fact that we are unable to perceive two media as one, and that our sensory impressions are thus dependent on maintaining the dialectic between the visual ('pictura') and the verbal ('poesis'). Roland Barthes' theory of signs defines a medium which in a certain context transmits a message as the 'core medium'. This core medium, however, is not always clearly identifiable in the context of postmodern art, which is why the term 'intermediality' and Jean Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum being a sign referring not to reality but rather to another sign are examined. Eventually, Horst presents Friedrich W. Block's concept of 'language art' as a useful definition for a genre of art which cannot clearly be attributed to either the visual or the verbal medium.

The author's hypothesis is based on a three-step argument. Firstly, Horst introduces modernist art using the examples of William Carlos Williams and Marcel Duchamp. He maintains that both Williams and Duchamp clearly favour one medium in order to produce art even though a second medium may influence their work. For example, Williams' poems on paintings by Brueghel clearly are poems made up of words even though they allude to colours and shapes which can then be imagined (visually) by the reader. Similarly, Duchamp's famous piece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915 - 1923) is a purely visual composition created from different materials, although Duchamp also produced a corresponding work, the *Green Box* (1934) containing numerous pieces of writing meant to explain its rather mysterious visual pendant. The verbal and the visual medium are, at this stage of art history, still clearly separated, even though they may inspire each other, meaning that the public cannot be in doubt as to whether it is confronted with poetry or a piece of visual art. This is true despite the fact that Duchamp, as Horst points out, though working at a time when modernism was the predominant movement, must be considered as a pioneer of conceptualism.

By the time of the 1960s, a clear distinction between visual and verbal art can no longer be held up. Conceptual artists such as Jenny Holzer create works like the Truisms, an extensive collection of phrases written by Holzer herself which are displayed at different places in cities all over the world. The surroundings and the style of the display cannot be separated from the meaning of the sentence itself – the visual and the verbal element comment on and complement each other. Thus there is no longer an explicit hierarchy of the media; the work of art is equally visual and verbal. Another example of this conceptualist use of media are the 'word sculptures' created by Susan Howe, a poet who is mainly concerned with how the words and phrases she has written are arranged on a white sheet of paper. Both Howe and Holzer also use their art as a means of commenting on political and social issues, such as gender roles and consumer habits.

The third part of Horst's analysis looks at contemporary computer art, an art form in which the medium is no longer identifiable – in Horst's words, it becomes a "lost medium". Computer artists such as Alan Sondheim or Jaromil create what might be called poems written in programming languages such as PERL: combinations of words which can also be read as texts or considered like a visual composition on a white background, but when typed into the correct programme, will plant a virus into a computer or turn themselves into a game. For Horst, this three-dimensional type of art, which has not only a visual and a verbal aspect, but also a virtual quality which cannot be attributed to either of the two media, seems to be the natural consequence of a development in art history which has been continually merging the visual and the verbal – until finally, in computer art, the visual and the verbal medium both vanish in order to create something new between them.

Philipp Horst's hypothesis is interesting, thoroughly explained, and plausible, even though the author does not sufficiently explain the connection between the artists' use of their art to transport political messages – a phenomenon he explicitly focuses on in the context of his study – with the change in the use of language in art. It certainly would have been worthwhile to examine the political potential of language as opposed to visual art more closely. Besides, the book contains quite a few spelling and typing errors which may from time to time distract the reader of this otherwise well-written and soundly reasoned study. However, the author sets out his ideas in a very clearly spoken and lucid manner, and it is a pleasure to follow the course of his argument throughout the different periods of art history.