

Book Review

Interpretation of Visual Arts Across

Societies and Political Culture: Emerging Research and Opportunities

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Interpretation of Visual Arts Across Societies and Political Culture: Emerging Research and Opportunities

Mika Markus Merviö

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The work *Interpretation of Visual Arts Across Societies and Political Culture: Emerging Research and Opportunities*, published by IGI Global, and written by Professor Mika Markus Merviö seeks to give an overview of contemporary arts within a globalised and highly image-based consumer culture. How does art, which has developed over time, coexist with new forms of image production and distribution of contemporary culture? This is one of the questions that the book strives to answer through its organisation into chapters dealing with varying aspects of art in the contemporary world, from its constitution or its political and symbolic role in crucial moments in the history of mankind, to the final part, in which the author invites us to reflect on the relevance of the thought of Walter Benjamin, and of Paul Valéry, who predicted a major change in the world of arts, both in terms of production and consumption, from the moment in which technology became part of everyone's everyday lives, through cameras and films, and subsequently, television and computers.

The major question running right through the work, to which the author attempts to give an answer in the final chapter, is if art can manage to survive, despite new mass reproduction/distribution technologies, despite the accelerated consumption of images and despite all the changes suffered within art itself – which is no longer easily recognisable or produced within given parameters, or techniques,

be they cultural or philosophical, and which can even be confused with mere entertainment. The author turns to the thinking of the philosopher Kant, to find a definition of art adaptable to new contagions, and transformations, suffered by the world of art in the last 100 years. But the “uselessness” of art, named by the philosopher as one of its essential features, has long since stopped making sense in a globalised world focused on trade, not only of consumer goods, but also of symbolic goods, a subject close to the heart of thinker Louis Althusser, who the author refers to when explaining the issues of ideology in the world of culture and the arts.

Mika Merviö is an expert in international relations, with works published in this field. He uses his knowledge primed from social sciences and he strives, with this book, to tackle the issue of art from a perspective designed to be hybrid and innovative. The strength of this book may also be its weakness, whereby it is clear that the author comes from another field, and not that of the arts, or art history. This doesn't stop him from demonstrating a vast knowledge on the most pressing issues of art in the contemporary context but, at the same time, he bypasses some fundamental authors that have already discussed this selfsame issue – which has been on the agenda since, at least, the 1960s – the works of Joseph Kosuth, artist and theoretician, who proposes, at a given moment, to use philosophers as operators of artistic thought, not only for the texts they produced on the issue of art, but also using philosophy itself as an artistic subject; further to his works, and reflections, there are also the inescapable texts of Arthur Danto on art in the contemporary world, which respond to the call of fear and of the growing process of *dehistoricization* of history itself, in addition to the work of Hal Foster on the state of art in the era of anything goes. Theoreticians, such as Nicolas Bourriaud, referred in chapter 5, and Georges Didi-Huberman, have also proposed a more thorough interpretation of the situation of art, and of artists, highlighting the special relationship that art develops with its viewers in the contemporary space. In this light, the work of Merviö's book is more introductory in nature, for readers unfamiliar with the more complex issues of art and of its interpretation in the contemporary world. As a fundamental text, it gives a clear, critical overview of the history and of the condition of art, in a comprehensible language, without disregarding the quality of the text, while also reflecting on its current situation, its role and its future.

Indeed, the question posed by the author is also a question with an answer that becomes more complex with each day that passes: what is art? There was a time in which things weren't so complicated: art and beauty walked hand in hand. Everything was specified in the works of philosophers and architects. No matter how great the artist, there was never any confusion between art and reality; the former was always seen as the imitation of the latter. There was also a moment in which reality stopped being the reference point and art began to gaze at its own navel: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. A painting of a pipe was always a painting, a representation; the artist understood that his role, as a demiurge, was to create another nature that couldn't be confused with reality itself. You could also recognise art through the materials used, through the exhibition venues, through the models appearing in books and through treatises on aesthetics, which gave a few pointers. There was always the chance that some works would be more appreciated than others, but there was never any doubt: it was always a work of art! Nowadays you can never be sure. Art has broken free from its previous confines and spread out into the street; beauty stopped being a prerequisite for any artistic creation long ago; and the shock factor in art no longer makes sense in an era in which audiovisuals, through the many screens we share our lives with, promote a continuous immersion in the absurd. And for this reason, and others, we go on asking ourselves: just what is art? What is it for?

Mika Merviö's book does not seek to give definitive answers, because he doesn't have any, and I doubt that anyone ever could. He does clarify a series of issues and places art in a central role within culture, recognising that without art, culture would cease to make sense and that we need not only to understand its processes, but also how to value it and understand the place it occupies, and has always occupied, in society. According to the author: “While there are more active artists in the world than ever before and while many art markets are still in their formative phase it will take a long time before we have a better idea of the lasting impact of the present generation of contemporary artists”.

If we are not able, as yet, to gauge the impact of the current generation of artists on the art market, we are able, according to Merviö, to see that the transformations, both technological and ideological have been unable to remove mankind's need for enjoying, consuming or interpreting art. And for this reason, this book is a guide for anyone looking for a better understanding of the continually-changing yet permanently stubborn art world.

Mirian Tavares is an Associate Professor at the Universidade do Algarve. With academic studies in Communication Sciences, Semiotics and Cultural Studies (PhD in Communication and Contemporary Culture, from the Federal University of Bahia), she has developed research work and theoretical production in fields related to Cinema, Arts, and Technology, as well as artistic and aesthetic film studies. As a Professor at the University of Algarve, she has participated in the development of the degree of "Visual Arts" of the Master's programmes in "Communication, Culture and Arts" and "Cultural Management" and of the PhD programmes in "Communication, Culture and Arts" and "Digital Media Arts." She is the current Coordinator of the CIAC (Arts and Communication Research Centre), funded by FCT. Prof. Tavares is also the Vice-coordinator of the PHD in Digital Media Arts, promoted by Universidade Aberta and Universidade do Algarve. She has been a member of the two main Portuguese Associations in Communication Studies: SOPCOM and CONFIBERCOM, and has participated in European as well as international projects and studies: as adviser to the British Film Institute – Project European Film Literacy; as a member of the Scientific Board of EUROMEDUC; as a member of the Scientific Board of ARTECH (International Conference in Digital Art).