

# Understanding student's artworks according to the Scot Lash's post-modern Regime of signification

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## **Abstract:**

Something peculiar has happened at the 2005 semestrial students' exhibition at the department of Fine Art - Art Education program – at the University in Maribor. One of the artworks made by a group of students on the exhibition, which tried to refer to the late Asiatic tsunami disaster (The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake), was demolished by spontaneous art diversion performed by another group of students. Scandal emerged, demands for prosecutions followed. Some of the professors (a minority of us) tried to advocate the spontaneous students' artistic action.

This paper starts with a short introduction of both students' artworks involved, presents the students' statement on their art diversion as well as includes a DVD (4 minutes) of the action. What is more, the theoretical bases for support of the students' art diversion are developed. We make use of the event to establish some basic aspects of contemporary art education. The modern and postmodern approaches toward cultural objects are compared, referring to the Scott Lash' postmodern "Regime of signification" (1992). Then we refer to the bases of postmodern curriculum, to the ideas of Manfred Blohm (1995). The pedagogical necessity for stimulating spontaneous artistic responding among students is stressed.

The simple response to the spontaneous artistic action of the students – to what we, the professors at the department where the event happened were obliged – became a strong advocacy and branched out to a theoretically based lecture which helps students to understand the contemporary art and to become more sensible of their own artistic and educational work.

## **The key words:**

Art education, postmodernism, regime of signification, visual art didactics, contemporary art

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The scandal which is represented here emerged at the 2005 semestrial students' exhibition at the department of Fine Art - Art Education program – at the University in Maribor. One of the artworks on the exhibition, which tried to refer to the late Asiatic tsunami disaster, and was made by a group of students under their professor's mentorship, was demolished by spontaneous art diversion performed by another group of students.

## **2 STUDENTS' WORK 1: "WHY AND FOR WHOM?"**

"Why and for whom" is an installation made by students and their professor. Twenty sculptured portraits, made of clay, were exhibited on pedestals. The pedestals were not arranged all over the exhibition hall in a classical manner. The pedestals and the sculptures were crowded together in one corner of the hall instead of being arranged in a classical way. Some pedestals were overthrown and broken sculptures were lying on the floor. Instead of a classical exhibition of sculptured portraits, the idea of an installation was developed. It was developed by a group of students, yet under the strong influence of their professor. The idea of the Installation was to refer to the Tsunami disaster in Asia. It was not only an exhibition of students' artworks or what they had done during the studying process but also (or better primarily) a contemporary artistic response to the natural disaster. "We care" they wanted to say. "We installed our pedestals and portraits as they were ruined by the Tsunami. With our installation we sympathised with the victims of these natural disaster and their relatives".

## **3 STUDENTS' WORK 2 – THE REPLY: "THE ACTION"**

The Installation "Why and for whom?" was demolished. This happened on the evening before the opening day of the semestrial exhibition. All sculptures disappeared. Only the pedestals remained.

Nobody knew what had happened. Then a video was shown in one of the rooms where the students' exhibition took place. Thus everything was cleared. The Installation "Why and for whom?" was demolished by a spontaneous art diversion performed by another group of students. The duration of the Video was 5 minutes. The Video showed some

masked persons taking away all the sculptures. They were carrying them in hands and some of them were using a wheelbarrow. Outside the Faculty they threw the sculptures into a hole in the ground. The hole was filled up with earth.

Here it is to be stressed that the happenings on the film were only fiction. The students had not really ruined the sculptures of their colleagues. The artworks were safely hidden and returned to their place after the opening of the exhibition.

The Video was accompanied by a leaflet. It was a kind of manifest, where the anonymous group of students explained their diversion.

#### 4 SCOTT LASH AND HIS “REGIME OF SIGNIFICATION”

After the opening a big scandal emerged. Demands for prosecution of the students who had performed the diversion followed. Some of the professors tried to crucify them, some of us (we were in the minority) tried to advocate the spontaneous students' artistic action. My own advocacy has been included into my theoretical course for students at the subject Visual Art Pedagogy and Didactics 2 (last study semester).

The main theoretical base to advocate this “blaspheme” art diversion and to distinguish between both students' artworks as well as to establish “Why and for whom?” as a typical modernist cultural object and “The Action” as a typical postmodernist cultural object has been found in Scott Lash's *Sociology of Postmodernism*.

By describing postmodernism, Lash stresses that to him postmodernism is a strictly cultural phenomenon, a sort of cultural paradigm. He writes:

“More specifically, postmodernism and other cultural paradigms are what I want to call ‘*regimes of signification*’. The idea for this comes from the political economists of the ‘Regulation school’ and their notion of ‘regime of accumulation’/.../ In ‘regimes of signification’, however, only cultural objects are produced.” (Lash, 1992, pp. 4-5)

For Lash all regimes of signification comprise two main components, a specific ‘cultural economy’ and second, its specific mode of signification, by which he mean that its cultural objects depend on a particular relationship between signifier, signified and referent (Ibid. p. 5)

Lash explains the terminology: “Here the signifier is a sound, image, word, or statement; the signified is a concept or meaning; and the referent is an object in the real world to which signifier and signified connect.” (Ibid.) Then he stresses that: “Most important perhaps is the mode of representation itself. Modernism, as noted above, had clearly differentiated and autonomized the roles of signifier, signified, and referent.

Postmodernization on the contrary problematizes these distinctions, and especially the status and relationship of signifier and referent, or put another way, representation and reality.” (Ibid. p. 13).

By introducing the students with Lash’s theory, we also emphasised the next statement: “All this said, there is a specific distinction between modernism and postmodernism that seems to me to be more significant, somehow more basic, than the others. It is that *modernism conceives of representations as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematizes reality*. Let me explain this. According to the ideal type of ‘realism’, cultural forms are, unproblematical, signifiers which are supposed, again unproblematically, to represent reality. Thus realism takes neither representation nor reality as problematic. Modernist autonomization, as I mentioned above, is also the autonomization of cultural forms from the real, hence representations take on a certain opacity at the same time as they become self-legislating. What this does is draw the viewer’s attention to the ‘picture surface’, that is, to the representation itself.” (Lash, 1992, p. 13)

The course is concluded with the following. “To say that modernism *problematizes* the representation is to see cultural production in modernism as a sort of pursuit in ‘problem solving’ (or even as a learning process), in which the working out of the possibilities in the aesthetic material is the problem to be solved. Adorno spoke of modernism in terms of ‘aesthetic rationality’, a term whose meaning he has never very clear about. Perhaps to think of it as problem solving is one way toward inroads on what aesthetic rationality might be.

What postmodernism, in contraposition, sees as problematic is not the signifying process, not the picture’s surface – that is, not the representation, but reality itself.

Thus surrealism seems to be a departure from ‘high modernism’, to use a term whose ubiquity stems from Jameson, in the direction of realism. But the juxtaposition of two or more objects, clearly out of context with their ground – *problematizes reality*.” (Lash, 1992, p. 14)

The students’ artworks we are dealing with in our case are the most appropriate to illustrate the theoretical model of Regimes of signification.

Some aspects of the students’ artworks are also useful to represent some other topics. We can illustrate the thesis of contemporary art education developed by Manfred Blohm (1995, p.p. 9–15) where he stresses the need for similarity between artistic processes in contemporary art and didactic approaches in contemporary art education. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of questioning and interpretations of reality as well as unpredictable results in contemporary art education and so on.

## 5 A REGIMES OF SIGNIFICATION IN STUDENT'S WORKS OF ART.

A regime of signification (according to Scott Lash)	Signifier  (Image, action, statement, installation...)	Signified  (Concept, meaning, idea...)	Referent  (object, event in the real world, reality and so on ...)
Students artworks:			
“What for and for whom?”	installation	Absurdity of victims in Asian earthquake	Asian earthquake and tsunami
“Actionist’s art diversion”	Desecration of an artwork; art diversion	A protest against mass sale of suffering	Contemporary art production, hidden in “countless images, with which the mass media provide us daily”

Table 1: A regime of signification in students' works of art.

In table 1 the signifier, the signified and the referent for both student's artworks are defined and the distinctions between the students artworks according to the regimes of signification are shown. We will try to establish what defines these two artworks as problematic.

The first artwork “What for and for whom?” clearly differentiates the roles of the signifier, the signified and the referent. There is no problem within these relations. The signifier, which is the installation, most clearly illustrates the concept. The signified is represented by the sympathy for the victims of the natural accident. The signifier and the signified clearly refer to the referent, being the Asian earthquake. “What for and for whom?” is seen as a response to the natural disaster, a sorrow, a kind of homage. This work of art just states that natural disasters happen and there is nothing to be done. So “What for and for whom?” does not regard the referent in the real world as problematic.

The only problematic item here could be the signifier – the image, or in our case the installation – the representation itself. Why? The representation was unusual. The classic exhibition of the academic realistic clay portraits on pedestals was transformed into the illustration of the disaster. All of the clay portraits were covered up, all pedestals were heaped in one corner, some statues were purposely overthrown. Students (and their mentor) devoted full attention to the presentation, or with the words of Lash: “What this does is draw the viewer’s attention to the ‘picture surface’, that is, to the representation itself” (Lash, 1992, p. 13). So, we can establish that “What for and for whom?” exists as a typical modernist’s cultural object in which “the working out of the possibilities in the aesthetic material is the problem to be solved” (Lash, 1992, p. 14). The fact that a form of the Installation art – a typical contemporary visual art form – is used, does not help. “What for and for whom?” belongs to the past.

The second students’ artwork, the “Actionist’s art diversion” is something totally different. Analyzing the regime of signification, we revealed the postmodern nature of “Actionist’s art diversion”. At first we tried to determine the referent. To whom in real life this artwork is referring? Certainly this is not the Asian earthquake. No, the students try to refer to (as pointed out by themselves) “contemporary art production, hidden in one of the countless images, with which the mass media provide us daily”. The referent is the contemporary artwork made by their colleagues, which is of course problematic. Proof for the problematic nature of the installation “What for and for whom?” is quite simple and very logical. If the installation “What for and for whom?” had not been problematic for at least a part of the population, there would not have been any need for the spontaneous response, and the “Actionist’s art diversion” would not have taken place. So, the basic stimulus for the students’ art diversion was the problematic reality.

After having established the problematic referent in the “Actionists’ art diversion”, let us turn to the other modes. What kind of signifier did the students use? Artistic actions, performance art and so called ‘art diversions’ are common contemporary visual art practices with a wide range of artists who make use of them, starting with Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramovic or Alexander Brener, if we mention just some of them. Brener’s work is maybe the most suitable to be mentioned here, especially his art diversions. During the last eight years Alexander Brener attacked a painting of Kazimir Malevic in the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam. This happened in the name of art. What is more, he ruined the baroque glasses of the opera house in Ljubljana and broke into the artistic conference during the Manifesta 3 (Badovinac, p.p. 146–147).

In the “Actionists’ art diversion” the students did not develop or present as problematic different artistic forms of expressions. They just made use of one of them, which was the most convenient and appropriate for their purposes. Their postmodern approach is confirmed again by Lash’s statement that “what postmodernism, in contraposition, sees as problematic is not the signifying process, not the picture’s surface – that is, not the representation, but reality itself” (Lash, 1992, p. 14).

Another postmodern characteristic in the “Actionists’ art diversion” represent the status and relationship of the signifier and the referent, or put in another way, the representation and reality. If – according to Lash (1992, p. 12) – modernism clearly differentiated and automatized the roles of the signifier, the signified, and the referent, postmodernism on the contrary presents these distinctions as problematic, especially the relation between the signifier and the referent. In the “Actionists’ art diversion” the students - artists caught themselves in a trap. The referent, the reality they refer to, is – as we established in table 1 – contemporary art, which exploits the mass sale of disaster images. However, from a certain point of view, the actionists’ own signifier, their own artistic performance, their own “Actionists’ art diversion” is using the same strategy. The distinction between the signifier and the referent is not clearly differentiated and their roles are not as automatized as in modernist’s cultural objects. From a certain point of view, the referent, which exploits contemporary art, is the same as the signifier - the “Actionist’s art diversion”. The latter does the same in its own way. To summarize, the problematic referent and specific distinctions between the signifier and the referent determine the “Actionists’ art diversion” as a typical post-modern cultural object.

## 6 THE CONCLUSION

Analyzing both student’s artworks we did not want to evaluate them. By analyzing the regimes of signification of their artworks we wanted to offer them some theoretical bases to understand their spontaneous artistic intentions. As future/ potential art educators they have to be capable to understand a contemporary cultural object from different points of view.

Of course, as an individual and as their teacher I highly support spontaneous students’ artistic actions like the “Actionist’s art diversion”.

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