A Study of the Importance of Semiotics (Implication) in Conceptual Photography
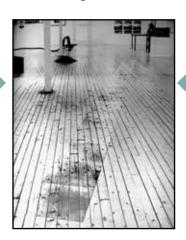
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Abstract

As one of the branches of new art being practiced independently, the conceptual art, or at times merely called 'conceptualism', is a type of art wherein ideas and concepts take precedence over the traditional aesthetic, technical, and material concerns involved for the creation of the artworks.

Taking into consideration the first examples of conceptual art, such as the 'One and Three Chairs' by Joseph Kosuth, photos play the main role in creating such works. This piece consists of a wooden folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of "chair". Here, the question put before the audience was which of the above presents the real or virtual nature of an object or phenomenon, here being 'the chair' In conceptual art, it's the artist's idea that matters, not the artwork's object or theme. In fact, the conceptual art endeavors to highlight the intellectual and mental aspect of an artwork that reflects the artist's intention. Nevertheless, such intention is not a clear, certain truth for the audience; on the contrary, any spectator can perceive a different meaning from the work of art or generalize its implicit concept. With the advent and development of diverse branches of new art between the 1960s and 1970s, photography was considered as one of the main mediums of the new art, particularly the conceptual one, due to its ease of availability, the possibility of recording the real time events and thus bearing witness to the reality.

Semiotics not only involves what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday life, but also anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs may appear as words, images, sounds, gestures and manners. Semiotics tell us that we live in a world of signs and so, understanding this world without identifying the existing signs and codes is impossible. Semiotics is the key to the cognition of a work. It is the solution to grasp the meaning (s) of artworks, helps comprehend the implications, clarifies how symbols are created and what rules over them. Moreover, since photos are hard copy or digital copies of a real life subject, they themselves are considered codes which sometimes function as symbols and at times as indices and thus, play an essential role in conveying the concept and meaning of an artwork. The photo reminds works that have proceeded before and now an image is enough for its objective visualization and presence and frees the viewer from need to its presence. Due to the fact that in the contemporary era, photos are taken as one of the main mediums of replication, they have always been associated with and connected to the reality and hence, are sometimes categorized in semiotics as iconic or indexical symbols. Yet, such classification should not take the photo context as a separate, single entity. It seems that photos always contain a track of visible/concealed symbols of time conveyed through the recording of the reality. Through a survey of the significance of semiotics in conceptual photographs, the paper at hand intends to investigate Pearce's theory regarding the importance of implications in conceptual works of art. The question here is: What role photography plays in conveying the implications in conceptual artworks? A review of the research studies conducted indicates that as photo is considered a reality oriented document, it is somehow a fixed company to conceptual art. The study of theories of new Semitists like Saussure and Pearce as well as the implication of reality in photos show that implicit and explicit implication play an essential role in conceptual art. Roland Barthes propounded such implications as a 'significant achievement in the semiotic study of photography'.

As a context, each photo can have a conceptual and implicit meaning besides a unique, explicit one. It's based on the recognition of these two implications, particularly the former one, that a photo should be examined. In other words, implicit implication of a photo or an image is totally dependent on the mental structure as well as the earlier individual, emotional experiences of the audience and is thus a personal, rather than collective, experience which is different from others. Implicit implications are manifold, while explicit ones are exclusive. Implicit implications depends on the personal background, earlier experiences and understandings of the audience (interpreter) against any given written or pictorial context such as

photo or painting. This research employs a descriptive – analytical method and in some cases field studies to examine the data collected from library sources and filed studies and comes to this conclusion that since photos are considered real documents, they somehow constitute the main part of conceptual art. Moreover, as photos are the most accurate replications of real subjects, they are considered symbolical or indexical signs. As a result, they play an essential role in conveying the concept and meaning of an artwork. A photo reminds of past events and actions for which, the respective image sufficiently serves the objective visualization and consequently, eliminates the necessity for the real presence of the subject matter before the spectator.

Due to the fact that a photo makes a silent, visual world for the audience, it does not impose its own perspectives on the spectator's mind. On the other hand, taking into account the fact all elements of photography are two-dimensional replications of daily, real life experiences, they are the best medium to employ symbols in conceptual art because in this type of art, the main emphasis is put on the artist's ideas.

Keywords: Photography, Conceptual Art, Implication, Semiotic.

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