Use of Text in Fluxus

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Abstract

Fluxus was ignored and neglected in art historical studies in the 1970s and 1980s, and has a wide influence on contemporary art practices today employing performance, happening, text, and ready-made. Fluxus was an interdisciplinary movement in which text has been used excessively. This thesis presents a chronological examination of the use of text from the Arts and Crafts Movement to the emergence of Fluxus in the 1960s. It seeks to answer how the text has been used before Fluxus and how Fluxus artists used text regarding i) form ii) content iii) language use and display. Five Fluxus artists' text-based works were analyzed with close reading and literary analysis techniques.

Keywords*: Anti-art; fluxus; fluxus and text use; language and art; text art.

INTRODUCTION

Wittgenstein resembles language to a game. "In most cases, the meaning of a word is its use", Wittgenstein claimed in *Philosophical Investigations*. (Cited from Wittgenstein by Rayner, 2014, para.5). It isn't what one says, it's the way that one says it, and the context in which one says it. Words are how we use them in a language game (Rayner, 2014).

The breakdown of Clement Greenberg's idea of medium-specific modernism and the rise of a new art critical position, which moved away from the idea of the passive spectator looking at an existing artwork toward the idea of an active spectator involved in some way in the physical and/or conceptual creation of the work, are linked to the transition from object to idea. Therefore, in the case of text works, what was offered—through typography and the distribution of printed matter—was a setting where the viewer may come into contact with the artwork by actively reading rather than by engaging in any specific kind of visual contemplation (Blacksell, 2013).

The widely acknowledged linguistic turn in philosophy and critical theory coincided with the use of linguistic models and materials in the visual arts. The majority of analyses of the 1960s poetry and visual arts intersection follow an earlier painter and poets model, following the New York School and Black Mountain poets' adoption of a painterly aesthetics of gestural expression and bodily enactment or tracing the numerous collaborations between poets and painters during this time (Kotz, 2007).

In this study, the use of text before Fluxus emerged in 1960s and how Fluxus artists used text is introduced. Five Fluxus artists; George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Robert Filliou, Mieko Shiomi, and Dick Higgins, and their text-based artworks are analyzed in detail. Due to the necessity of limiting the study I have chosen five Fluxus artist that used text frequently in their works. I have chosen two female and three male artists from Europe, America, and Japan to portray Fluxus' divergent nature. All of the artists I have chosen to analyse are among the most active members of Fluxus. Through close reading and literary analysis techniques, I analyzed text-based works from each artist regarding form, content, language use, and display employing

various literary analysis techniques to portray Fluxus's interdisciplinary nature and artists' critical concepts that they put forward.

Fluxus was ignored and neglected in art historical studies in the 1970s and 1980s, and has a wide influence on contemporary art practices today employing performance, happening, text, and ready-made (Arapoğlu, 2009). Fluxus was an interdisciplinary movement in which text has been used excessively. Dada, Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp's ready-made and John Cage's experimental musical events, visual art, and poetics which are the strongest precursors of Fluxus used text through deconstruction and abandoned the codes of communication. Fluxus artists utilized many artistic disciplines however the use of text in Fluxus artworks, mainly with Fluxus scores, had a major role in demonstrating Fluxus philosophy. Beginning with Art & Crafts Movement, artists used text in their visual works for individualistic purposes.

The text has been used on various occasions in visual culture and visual arts throughout history. Until modern art, the use of text in visual arts was limited to a few special purposes such as mythological, religious, and descriptive writing.

RESULTS

I conducted a detailed investigation of the form, content, and language use and display of three works by five Fluxus artists each while using literary analysis techniques. I found out that George Maciunas used text excessively with his manifestoes, art historical charts, name cards, scores, and Fluxkits and sometimes used text as a playscript for an event, sometimes as graphic design, sometimes as a map to construct a work, and sometimes to reference other Fluxus artists' scores using intertextuality. His use of language was mostly direct and concrete and always demonstrated Fluxus' core values and goals.

Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* book is a collection of Fluxus scores making ordinary reality special, which invites the reader to perform an event through the use of text, falling into the category of intermedia like many Fluxus works. Deep reflection is encouraged by Yoko Ono's scores, yet she does so with an intuitive understanding of lightness rather than analytical reasoning. The content of her text is poetic, utilizing intertextuality, and literary and poetic devices, and could be read in parallel with many theories such as deep ecology, the term flaneur, ecological art, performance art, intermedia, literature, Buddhism, and through the lens of linguistics.

Robert Filliou plays with binaries like life/death, bad/good, static/dynamic, made/not made, artist/viewer, and visual/textual. He used text in poetic forms, concrete forms, handwriting, and typewriting for two-dimensional artworks. He created communicative game cards and used text on ready-made. He brainstormed ideas for notions of the self, others, and communication as well as using text as an indicator for action and ontological thinking of creation itself. He combined photography, design, text, and canvases. He borrowed from Eastern philosophies in addition to poetry and literature to establish his unique theories regarding the significance of art through the use of puns, metaphors, and question forms. Since he dealt with binaries by disassembling them into their constituent parts and then reconstructing them into something new, his works is dealing with language, communication, art philosophy, and deconstruction.

Text was employed by Mieko Shiomi in her ready-made artworks as a map, a score, and a tool in a score. She occasionally used typewriters on other media, occasionally wrote the scores by hand, and occasionally allowed other artists to use her phrases to create a graphic design. She wrote global poems, action poems, and object poems using both explicit and figurative instructions. Distinct from other Fluxus scores, Shiomi's scores invited participants to use text while performing the event. Her entire body of work invites reading, contemplation, collaboration, and action.

Dick Higgins composed poetry, made charts, experimented with language and meaning, and incorporated text into his visual works in addition to founding Something Else Press, which has published numerous books and written works of art. Among his analyzed works are texts in a score format, with concrete language that invites experience and the creation of meaning. Higgins was inspired by everyday life, literature, Zen Buddhism, and John Cage. His use of text in his artworks was colorful, funny, poetic, and thought-provoking. Higgins also succeeded the purification of emotions and the destruction of the symbolic language of society solely by creating a one-word score: Scream!

DISCUSSION

In medieval art, texts and images were the complementary aspects that complemented each other. Thus, inscriptions were instruments of identification and expression (Yazıcı, 2019). Gombrich suggests, the majority of the Christian society was illiterate and the main aim of the

art was to demonstrate scenes from the bible to the believers (Cited from Gombrich by Şumnu, 2014).

Ancient and Classical periods the use of writing in visual arts mainly had religious aims. The artists used texts in their works in order to introduce the scenes from the Bible. Also, texts were used to remark on the identity or the social status of the sitter. Some artists preferred to write the titles of the paintings on the surfaces of them (Batu, 2014).

After the mid-nineteenth century, the text use in visual arts had to do with artists' individual standpoints, ideas, and chosen styles.

During the latter part of the 19th century Arts and Crafts Movement utilized text in a variety of fonts and presented it on papers, books, and textile crafts. For William Morris, art should be pleasant when being created, and not only when contemplated. He combined Medieval craftsmanship with socialist ideals (Fayos-Perez, 2013). Morris founded his own publishing house, the *Kelmscott Press* in 1891, and he wanted to reform the practice of book designing. Each book of the Kelmscott Press was designed with attention to detail, including typography, margins, the kind of paper, binding, or the kind of ink used and the materials were always from the best. He worked with specialists for the manufacture of each part of the book, trying to achieve "the ideal book" (Fayos-Perez, 2013) On the other hand, the contents of the texts were mostly epic poetry that typically referred to other literary works.

Later, in Europe and America, the Art Noveau movement gained popularity between 1895 and 1905. Lithography technique had an impact on Art Nouveau. Aloys Senefelder is credited with developing the technique that made it possible to create posters. In 1798, he invented the stone lithography technology. Prior to this invention, printing was pricy and time-consuming. The art of illustration was not well developed at first, and by the end of the 18th century, it was impossible to replicate the colors on the poster. The poster became the primary method of public communication in Europe and America due to its innovative ability to blend text and images in an affordable and visually appealing format (Petre, 2008). The text use in Art Nouveau was for informative purposes for poster designs and the form was playful as artists arranged the sizes of the letters differently from one another and used different fonts.

Cubism is credited as being the first art movement to use text as a ready-made on canvas. Due to collage's allure, many cubists chose to emphasize technique above subject in their works.

Picasso, Juan Gris, and Georges Braque were among the artists who experienced with the surface of the painting. The earliest instances of text being used as a ready-made on the canvas had seen in Cubism. Text placed to the painting's surface as commonplace, frequently meaningless symbols from daily life, such as a crumpled ticket or a newspaper article (Şumnu, 2014). They made it possible for the observer to understand the painting's tangible presence as an object by using linguistic clues. The deconstruction of meaning was made possible by the fragmentation of writings that were half-torn or indecipherable. Another significant contribution of Cubism, in addition to text fragmentation and text as ready-made, was the collage aesthetics that Dadaists used excessively.

Dadaist language experiments attacked the idea of absolute reality and revealed the arbitrary link between words and their meanings. Since the Ancient Greeks, objective and absolute truth has been seen as a distinguishing characteristic of Western civilization. Dada Manifestoes reveal that Dada wanted annihilate the heritage of the past along with linguistic and logical structures that are inherent in the society. Bruitist poems, meaningless words and sentences, simultaneous poems aimed at language itself (Horvath, 2016). Dadaists challenged this idea by illustrating the arbitrary nature of words and their meanings. Dada used anti-rational, haphazard, whimsical, arbitrary, and deconstructive textual forms that were taken from books, journals, posters, and newspapers, among other sources. Dadaists contributed a theatrical element and improvisation to visual arts by using handwritten poetry and reciting poems in unique ways. Alongside the Dadaist rejection of art, language was used in a destructive and post-structuralist manner.

Surrealists believed that the writing was an element that destructed the stability of the conscious. As Kahraman suggests, especially surrealist poetry attacks the seeing-oriented nature of Western art and disrupts the relationship between the image and the meaning. Poetry, too, was forced to transcend the symbolic features of language and created as iconic and even indexical (Cited from Kahraman by Şumnu, 2014). Rene Magritte agreed with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's enquiries about language. In particular, he adopted the view that there are many connections like consensual, cultural, historical and coincidental between the signifier (form, object) and the signified (meaning). In other words, the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. (Batu, 2014). The majority of the artwork produced by surrealists included handwritten poems, paintings, and experiments with automatism. Dadaist and Surrealist text users pursued different techniques and goals: some

employed text to make allusions to popular culture, others to generate wordplays, others to draw links between psychology, philosophy, and linguistics, and others to express political criticism. Consequently, the artworks began asking to be read. Reading the artworks required the audience to analyze the interpretations and meanings they offered. Another sign of the shift to conceptual art was the employment of texts of this kind and the integration of philosophy and linguistics into the visual arts.

Cynically, Marcel Duchamp questioned language in relation to his use of text. Duchamp asserts that language is one of humankind's illusions. Duchamp used words in his ready-mades for deconstructive purposes drawing parallels with his anti-art approach. He explained his use of words as:

"If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new."

Sometimes four or five different meanings come together through wordplays in which Duchamp finds source of inspiration (Lazzarato, 2017, p.43-5). Marcel Duchamp used text in his works in a variety of ways, including handwriting on items or already painted canvases and employing cardboard and advertising layout and typography. Duchamp employed wordplays, and literary devices including puns, abridgments, and metaphors with a sarcastic tone throughout the texts.

Following World War II, there was a golden age of popular culture consumption. Pop art created paintings and sculptures of mass culture objects and media stars, aiming to blur the boundaries between high art and low culture. Pop Art is fundamentally an art about signs and sign systems. The artworks use precoded content, which already exists as signs, such as comics, brand items, and photos (Alloway, 1926). While some artists used text in order to convey this purpose and some dealt with words as transparent signs. Language served as an issue of existence in a capitalist culture where people were pushed by consumerism and reality was becoming more and more superficial which in return mirrored by Pop Art.

In 1960s, Conceptual artists began using materials such as papers, newspapers, walls, gallery walls, scores, copies of previously published text, handwriting, typewriting, photographs, and objects as formats. On the other hand, the artists' ideas determined how their substance was presented. Prominent figures of the French Post-Structuralism Movement of the 1960s,

including Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault, drew inspiration from the semiotic theories and linguistic analyses of structuralist philosophers like Claude Levi-Strauss, Wittgenstein, Saussure, Lacan, and Roland Barthes. These thinkers also contributed concepts and thought systems that would influence the evolution of art theory. One of the key ideas of the time was deconstruction, which involves breaking up the strict rules of grammar and language in order to rebuild the hierarchical relationship between words and writing. The idea of deconstruction offered the visual and plastic arts the opportunity to act transdisciplinary, bringing art and many literary, philosophical, and social scientific disciplines together through intertextuality (Şumnu, 2014). "A work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as comment on art" claimed Kosuth (Cited from Kosuth by İz, 2011, p. 77). In the sense that they challenge the essence or purpose of art, conceptual artworks are definitions of art. Kosuth wanted to disprove the idea that factuality and aesthetics are related to art (İz, 2011). The text was employed as both an artistic medium and an isolated form of expression in conceptual artworks. The creation of Fluxus artworks, which are conceptual in character, began slightly earlier than conceptual artworks and corresponded with them for a while. Fluxus could thus be seen as a proto-conceptual movement.

One of the major contributors of intellectual precursors of Fluxus John Cage used text in an interdisciplinary manner by combining musical performance to reading and using fragmented words and letters within a ready-made object and with concrete poetry where not only the literary but the visual aspect of the poem is also important. John Cage contributed greatly to the foundation of Fluxus with his artistic ideas, his Experimental Music Classes, concrete poetry and its connection with graphics. Music, concrete poetry and graphics were schematized in presentation of Fluxus thought by George Maciunas. Also, the text score, widely used by Fluxus artist while visual artists and performers were turning to language in the 1960s (Kotz, 2007).

The use of text in the 20th century by Dadaism, Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, and John Cage's experimental artworks is significant to the powerful use of text in Fluxus. By dismantling words, these most influential Fluxus precursors gave up on communication codes. They broke away from the constraints of conventional language to express their ideas and artistic viewpoints, experiment, and create an experience.

The word "fluxus" has the meanings of "flow" and "change" in Latin and in English it means "flow" and "constant change". The concept of flux on the other hand appears in certain aspects of the history of thought such as Heraclitus' "pante rei" (everything flows), Hegel's statement

that everything is in a state of constant flow, Henri Bergson's statement that evolution is a process of constant flow and change, or the emphasis on the continuous flow in the passing moment in Zen Buddhism (Arapoğlu, 2009). A work of art is not a finished product but rather an ongoing process that is changing and evolving in a universe that is always changing. By highlighting creation and destruction and, more broadly, what is temporary, Fluxus relates to the flow of life (Sucuoğlu, 2014).

In 1959, Brecht created the Event score for John Cage's Experimental Composition class. The Event score was a straightforward white card with a few lines of text; it was intended to mediate a specific moment in the spectator's experience through language rather than an actual work of art. Brecht's Event model, with its ongoing investigation of language as an artistic intervention, is considered the forerunner of the numerous linguistic ideas that found their way into the art scene in the decade that followed (Robinson, 2009).

The concert in Düsseldorf was held at the city's Academy of Arts, organized by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and Maciunas, and the Fluxus Manifesto distributed. The Manifesto contains the meaning of the word "flux" and summarizes the purpose of Fluxus:

> Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, 'intellectual', professional, and commercialized culture. Purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, - purge the world of Europeanism. Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art. Promote living art, anti-art promote non art reality to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals. Fuse the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.

Together with festivals, street actions, and musical events, artists' editions played an essential role in Fluxus. It could be claimed that Fluxus initiated the significant change in 1960s visual arts toward language as a medium because its members deeply employed text, more than previous art movements. It has been seen that the majority of Fluxus scores and artworks employed language with ambiguous meanings, poetic forms, and occasionally even deconstructed language while still employing words in their most literal sense. Thus, Fluxus attempted to break the conventional links between "text" and "object". Fluxus also took the translation of visual language into verbal language in the context of art/life separation.

According to Arapoğlu, five major factors in almost all Fluxus artworks could be observed. These factors are utilizing tactility instead of visual in presentation, ordinary and extraordinary appearance of the image at the same time, rejection of high art, the use of chance factor and collectivity (Arapoğlu, 2009).

According to Roland Barthes creation is not to copy the universe but to make the universe comprehensible with realistic construction. A connection can be established between the idea that defines art as "what one adds to the object while reconstructing it" and the representation of text in plastic arts (Cited from Barthes by Oktay & Altınel, 2016, p.130). Accordingly, Fluxus not only add something new to visual artistic creation by using text but also took the translation of visual language into verbal language in the context of art/life dissociation and tried to erase the traditional ties between this "text" and "object" (Cited from Foster by Arapoğlu, 2009).

Furthermore, Wittgenstein not only resembles language to a game but also to life. For Wittgenstein the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (Wittgenstein, 2009). Fluxus artist wanted to merge art and life together resembling art to a form of life while using language in most of their artworks which are instructions to perform in real life in a playful manner and sometimes an event that involves having a meal with friends and chatting. Therefore, a connection between Wittgenstein's "language game" and Fluxus "scores" could be made.

Fluxus artworks falls the category of intermedia and artists were open about it from the beginning. For example, the printed announcement for the October 1962 Festival of Misfits reads:

> We make music which is not Music, poems that are not Poetry, paintings that are
> not Painting, but music that may fit poetry, poetry that may fit paintings, paintings
> that may fit … something, something which gives us the chance to enjoy a happy,
> non-specialized fantasy (Harren, 2015).

Although Fluxus artists did write poetry and employ written language, they did not classify their work under any particular discipline; rather, they attempted to find an unoccupied area that they referred to as "fantasy" or "intermedia" by searching the spaces between disciplines. They once more employed language to achieve and proclaim their point of view, but they did so without classifying their use of text. Thus, it may be said that Fluxus artists sometimes

employ text as a means of achieving artistic independence from classification and even from language itself.

Most Fluxus scores use straightforward language that gives instructions for an event, but some actions they suggest are highly abstract and impractical. As a result, the language is poetic, speaking to the audience's imagination, and is open to interpretations. Some scores are recognized as groundbreaking pieces of computational poetry that combine chance and technological advances such as Alison Knowles's *House of Dust* work dated 1967. Additionally, Joseph Beuy's "Everyone is an artist" saying is sloganized rather than written, like a political proverb preserved in collective memory.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the text has been used on various occasions in visual culture and visual arts throughout history. It is seen that until modern art, the use of text in visual arts was limited to a few special purposes such as mythological, religious, and descriptive writing. after the mid-nineteenth century, the text use in visual arts had to do with artists' individual standpoints, ideas, and chosen styles.

Ancient and Classical periods the use of writing in visual arts mainly had religious aims. The artists used texts in their works in order to introduce the scenes from the Bible.

After the mid-nineteenth century, the text use in visual arts had to do with artists' individual standpoints, ideas, and chosen styles.

During the latter part of the 19th century Arts and Crafts Movement utilized text in a variety of fonts and presented it on papers, books, and textile crafts.

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Pop Art on the other hand, is fundamentally an art about signs and sign systems. The artworks use precoded content, which already exists as signs, such as comics, brand items, and photos.

Conceptual artists began using materials such as papers, newspapers, walls, gallery walls, scores, copies of previously published text, handwriting, typewriting, photographs, and objects as formats. The text was employed as both an artistic medium and an isolated form of expression in conceptual artworks.

Fluxus John Cage used text in an interdisciplinary manner by combining musical performance to reading and using fragmented words and letters within a ready-made object and with concrete poetry where not only the literary but the visual aspect of the poem is also important.

The use of text in the 20th century by Dadaism, Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, and John Cage's experimental artworks is significant to the powerful use of text in Fluxus.

Performativity in Fluxus is typically attributed to text on event scores because of its refusal to fit into strict artistic categories and utilization of intermedia. In order to achieve the play,

spontaneity, and immediacy that was demonstrated during the event, text was an extremely successful instrument. Fluxus artists use language in various forms and deconstructively, and poetically, use it as instructions for the realization of performance, and use language as a tool to liberate from the logical and linear structure of language in order to be free from artistic categorizations. One of the goals of Fluxus was to expand the human experience with ontological knowledge and Fluxus artists used text in their works as instructions for the audience to realize an event to achieve this task. By allowing the performer's imagination to run free, Fluxus celebrates the diversity of thought and experience through the endless possibilities of language.

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