

ARTICLES

QUALITIES OF DIEGESIS IN CONCEPTUAL CURATORIAL PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

Many phenomena of modern culture may be perceived as analogous to text, but curatorial projects are significant in this regard, as their conceptions are available for reception and interpretation in the context of narrative analysis. Diegetic aspects of an exhibition help to clarify its idea and meaning. It is remarkable that exhibitions of conceptualism, which are almost completely devoid of a coherent visual component (as demonstrated, for example, the exhibition *Voids: A Retrospective* [2009] at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, dedicated to interpretation of the category of *nothing* in contemporary art), could not avoid using text in form of comments, labels, catalogues, mediation services for the public. This article discusses the significant role of text in conceptual curatorial projects, and considers the relevant aspects of text: context, narrative, deconstruction, renaming, thesauration. The methodology process of the article is based on the comparative analysis of curatorial projects in the context of theory of culture, aesthetics, philosophy of art, and semantics. Diegetic features, which are distinctly present in the contemporary creative process, are undergoing metamorphosis, associated primarily with a change of attitude to the text from the 1960s: exaggeration of the text's role, logocentrism of contemporary art, the need for context in art, and, at the same time, the reduction of semantic, meaningful content of text in the era of triumph of media simulacra.

Keywords: Curatorial project; Contemporary art; Narrative; Diegesis; Context; Conceptual art; Deconstruction; Simulacrum.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aspect of imitation in contemporary art is only to a small extent connected to the category of classical mimesis. A much more significant role in relation to contemporary art plays the phenomena of simulacrum and simulation. Another important quality of imitation in contemporary art projects is close not to the category of mimesis, but to the category of diegesis, which, in the classical sense, is going back to the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, as responsible not for imitation of the external form of things, but for the story of a thing or a phenomenon. The image here is not visual, but textual or verbal. And we see a similar process in such art projects as exhibitions of conceptualism. A typical example of the diegetic process in the art of the second half of the 20th century is the *Bureau of Direct Democracy* by the conceptualist Joseph Beuys on *documenta 5* (1972): a project that appealed to the verbal and narrative essence of culture. In this project, Beuys talked to the public at the exhibition on various topics he proposed, from the employment of housewives to the anthropology of Rudolf Steiner (Figure 1). Conversations were the content of this project. It is obviously connected with such aspects of diegesis as context and narrative. Of course, many phenomena of modern culture can be perceived as analogous to text or narrative, but curatorial project is therefore the most accessible for reception and interpretation in this regard, since the analysis of the diegetic component of an exhibition helps to reveal a clear meaning and idea of the project.



Figure 1: Joseph Beuys, 1973. Photo: Rainer Rappmann, www.fiu-verlag.com. © Wikimedia Commons

It is remarkable that conceptual curatorial projects that almost completely abandon the distinct visual component of an exhibition – for example, *Voids: A Retrospective* (2009) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, curated by Gustav Metzger and Matthew Copeland, devoted to the interpretations of “nothing” in the exhibition practice –, are not able to abandon the textual aspect. At the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou there were completely

empty rooms, where ‘nothing’ was demonstrated, as, for example, in the remakes of Yves Klein’s 1958 project at the Iris Clert Gallery and the project *Air Conditioning* of the art group Art & Language. But there were stands with a full annotation of the artistic intentions.

It is no coincidence that the term *language* is used in relation to curatorial projects in the context of modern museology, exhibition practice, theory of curating, aesthetics. According to M. Schärer (2003, 115), no matter what the main topic of an exhibition is, it can be presented in several ways, which will focus on exhibition language, i. e. on the classification of exhibition artifacts. When discussing various approaches to exhibition presentation, the term *exhibition language* is sometimes used to refer to the fact that information is encoded into a *language* of things, or, of the material evidence of various cultural and natural phenomena. The base of an informative (curatorial) presentation is not just things (artworks) themselves but their explication, as well as other additional tools and exhibition strategies. All these elements constituting an integral unit can be perceived as a code; a *language* for their ability to describe effectively and to express selected realities, things, phenomena or abstract ideas. The term *exhibition language* is therefore important but it has its limit, or it even poses risks, especially when considering in the context of linguistic terminology. The basic difference between exhibition as text and language as text is that exhibitions are organized structurally, but language is linear. While language is a complex communication tool, an exhibition presentation is in fact more of a message.

Aristotle saw in diegesis (narrative) one of the components of poetic imitation, mimesis. Another part of it was an actor’s performance. Thus, Aristotle emphasized the classical distinction between narrative and dramatic poetry, as previously mentioned by Plato in *The Republic*, although Socrates in this text of Plato denies the qualities of imitation in narrative, demonstrating as its main feature the function of a personal story, which does not claim, as acting claims, the opportunity to reincarnate, to represent any other person (Kirby, 1991, p. 114).

Considering contemporary art projects, especially projects of conceptual art it should be noted that they often combine different qualities of diegesis, from performance on behalf of the author or dialogue (as it happened, for example, in the performance of Joseph Beuys’ *Bureau of Direct Democracy* on *documenta 5*), to expressive narrative and theatrical transformation, as in the project *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where American artist Andrea Fraser led a parody tour of the museum as a fictional art historian Jane Castleton.

A significant role in modern exhibition projects is played by the aspect of hidden text, when the visual presentation implies a hidden narrative, the meaning of which refers to the well-known cultural realities. For example, during the *Manifesta 10* (2014) at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Katarina Fritsch’s shell sculpture *The Woman with the Dog* (2008), exhibited in the rocaille boudoir of the Empress Maria Alexandrovna, obviously appealed to A.P. Chekhov’s short story *The Lady with the Dog*, first published in 1899. The hidden text here allowed

a viewer to pronounce this story to himself, facilitating the dialogue of the modern work with the interior in the style of the third Rococo of the second half of the 19th century, and hypothetically moving the art object of K. Fritsch to this époque. In the studies of mimetic and diegetic processes in contemporary art, the authors often demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach, the intersection of philosophy of culture, aesthetics and psychology of perception (Bensaude-Vincent and Newman, 2007; Benjamin, 2005; Ranta, 2000; Halliwell, 2002; Pier in Sebeok, 2009, p. 217). In the English-language scientific literature, the concept of diegesis is often translated as the concept of “narrative” (Genette, 1980).

In the analysis of a conceptual curatorial project, the poststructuralist approach, in particular, Jacques Derrida’s (2001) theory of text and context deconstruction, seems to be highly effective. The main aspects of deconstruction of the text in the conceptual projects are as follows: the destruction of integrity of the text, the discovery of hidden and imaginary meanings, profanation of meanings, identification of internal contradictions, leading to a new interpretation. This approach of an author (artist) does not aim at preserving the structure and integrity of both the text and its meanings. On the contrary, in the context of modern cultural paradigm, the final text can be absurd, profane, blurred. And its interpretation can change endlessly:

The openness of not only the text, but also of the context, inscribed in an infinite number of other, wider contexts, blurs the difference between text and context, language and metalanguage. This does not mean their transformation into a single homogeneous text: texts are immanently heterogeneous. The task of a researcher is to extract from them those metalinguistic keys that will manifest the deep issue of creativity with a new immersion in the context. (Mankovskaya, 2000, p. 27)

The *exhibition language* and *exhibition narrative* reflect interactions of text, context, interpretation, reception.

2. EXHIBITION AS TEXT: FEATURES OF DIEGESIS IN CURATORIAL PROJECTS

Among the most known exhibition projects demonstrating the qualities of diegesis is Harald Szeemann’s exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969). During the preparation of the exhibition Szeemann wrote a diary detailing visits to the workshops of the artists represented. The aspects of text, namely context, narrative, artistic myths played a significant role in the exhibition’s concept, as the visual demonstration of the artworks was not too impressive. The theoretical basis for subsequent projects of conceptualism was Joseph Kosuth’s program article *Art after Philosophy* (1969) in the English journal *Studio International* and the article *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* by Sol LeWitt in *Artforum* (1967) (Kosuth,

1991; LeWitt, 1969). The term “conceptual art” was first used by the Fluxus movement member Henry Flynt as a characterization of his performances in the essay published in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* in 1963. Conceptual projects show an increasing approximation to the idea as an artistic medium, at the expense of visual form. The tendency to demonstrate ideas instead of visual form is also evident in the titles of projects: for example, Joseph Kosuth’s series *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* in 1966-1967, or a group exhibition organized in 1969 by art dealer Seth Siegelaub in New York called *January 1-31: 0 Objects, 0 Painters, 0 Sculptors*.



Figure 2: Art & Language group project at documenta 5 (1972), Kassel. Photo: Art&language, © Wikimedia Commons.

The British-American art group *Art & Language*, founded in 1968, actively used the relationship of art and text in their projects, considering idea and concept as the main qualities of their work (Figure 2). For the members of the group, Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, David Bainbridge, Terry Atkinson, and others, an idea of the artwork preceded its execution, and the production of artifacts played a secondary role. The result of creativity was the documentation of the critical reception of art. Contemporary diegetic features were demonstrated in the project in the relevant aspects of text: context, narrative, deconstruction, renaming. The group published magazines *Art-Language* (1969-1985) and *The Fox* (1965-1976), the texts of which reflected relevant critical discussions. The exhibition *The Artist Out of Work: Art & Language 1972-1981* in 1999 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York presented the work of the group on a large scale.

The problem of text was further developed in the famous exhibition project *Information* curated by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. This exhibition is considered one of the first large-scale displays of Conceptual Art in a major museum. One hundred artists were represented, among them Hans Haacke, Vito Acconci, Robert Smithson, On Kawara, Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Walter de Maria and others. Hans Haacke demonstrated the installation *MoMA Poll* with two ballot boxes with the words “Yes” and “No”. The installation included the question to the public: “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina

policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?” In the left urn for the answer “Yes” were found twice as many ballots as in the right one, which reflected the negative attitude of the visitors to the USA’s covert bombing of Cambodia. As Nelson Rockefeller was also a trustee of MoMA, Haacke’s project had some traces of future institutional critique. With the help of the text, Haacke skillfully built the concept of his project, presenting to the public a clear message with political overtones. In general, both the title and the idea of the *Information* project were directly related to text, narrative, speech, language.

Damien Hirst’s work looks unsustainable in the context of the theory of classical mimesis, but as a product of diegesis it seems quite convincing. It is no coincidence that one of the theorists of modern auction business, Don Thompson, called his book *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (2008), referring to the famous work of Hirst *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), and dedicated a considerable part of the book to the history of this artwork (Figure 3). The narrative of the artist is organically integrated into the narrative of the critic about the purchase of a stuffed shark for several thousand dollars and the subsequent history of the auction record of this artifact, which, in its turn, had been incorporated into the structure of the artistic myth.

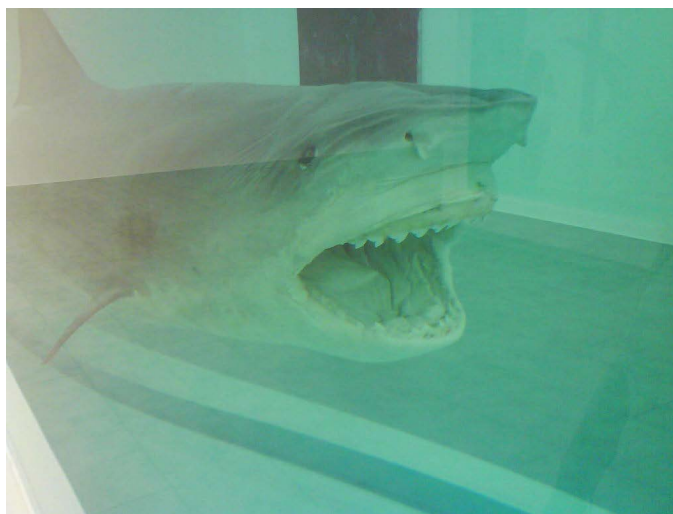


Figure 3: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, exhibition at the Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev. Photo: pinchukartcentre.org, © Wikimedia Commons.

In the late 1980s in the UK, starting with the exhibition *Freeze* (1988) in a warehouse in London, the movement of YBA, Young British Artists, was gaining strength. The exhibition was curated by the art group member Damien Hirst, but the real fame, although sometimes with a negative connotation, the group received after the exhibition *Sensation* (1997) at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, curated by Norman Rosenthal. The exhibition presented works from the collection of Charles Saatchi gallery, which in one way or another met the requirement of sensation, that is, were scandalous, shocking, aimed at revealing forbidden topics in society. For example, the already well-known to the public shark kept in formaldehyde which Hirst called *The Physical Impossibility of Death in*

the Mind of Someone Living (1991), as well as a sculptural self-portrait of Marc Quinn, made of his own frozen blood. The curatorial idea, in this case the idea of sensationalism, made it possible to vividly present in the exhibition space even those projects that a priori were unattractive to the public.

3. EXHIBITION LANGUAGE

Diegetic features of conceptual curatorial projects presume the necessity of choosing a specific *language* of an exhibition. But, while a usual language follows rather strict rules, the rules of exhibitions are significantly less rigid; in many cases, we simply cannot apply a term in correct or incorrect way. While labels and texts in exhibitions play rather a rational role, objects play often an emotional role. Poetically written texts are an exception (e.g., in literary or music museum exhibitions). Sometimes, objects and texts are involved in an undesirable competition, for example when labels explain a trivial reality which visitors a priori can see, and thereby they limit the overall message of the exhibition. An exhibition, just like language, can be divided into three basic levels: a system, norms, and language. Martin R. Schärer (2003) writes about four most important exhibition “languages”: aesthetic, didactic, drama, and associative “languages”. According to Schärer (2003), as interactivity is most likely present in all these “languages”, there is no need to create a special category for an “interactive exhibition language”. In fact, we rarely find these “languages” in their crystal-clear state but as a combination. (Schärer, 2003, p. 118) However, we believe that as a starting point we can use the following classification proposed by Schärer (2003, p. 121):

- 1 — Aesthetic exhibition language – focuses on the use of objects and makes pleasure from art easier to feel. The approach is very popular with gallery exhibitions.
- 2 — Didactic exhibition language – emphasizes the importance of objects and the transfer of knowledge. An exhibition may contain a large number of maps, illustrations, comprehensible commentaries, copies, etc. This language seems to be the most frequent in museum exhibition development.
- 3 — Drama (theatre) exhibition language – creates scenes as if from reality and supports emotional participation. Often used with dioramas; museum staff can be engaged in drama role playing.
- 4 — Associative exhibition language – combines objects with objectives of intended processes. Objects are staged in unusual positions or ways so that they trigger new processes of thought; these exhibitions have the biggest potential due to the creativity of their curators. A visitor is expected to be actively engaged in decoding the exhibition by identifying hidden connotations, as it often happens at conceptual art exhibitions.

While Schärer's classification is factually correct, the terminology employed deserves a deeper analysis. The above classification is rather a description of individual effects used to impress or inform a visitor rather than determine some special languages. In our opinion, there is only one exhibition language. Just as combining words in a sentence can lead to very different or even opposite results, the use of exhibition language can lead to differing findings and results. Combining its elements in various ways can help to create valuable but also worthless works. We use the term "exhibition language" as a well-established designation, even though it is rather a metaphor and the term should be used in quotation marks. Can we actually define what is a good "exhibition language"? It requires a certain optimal combination of knowledge on the given issue, curatorial and museum knowledge, and knowledge of receptive and cognitive abilities of visitors. When talking about metaphors, we can say that a final product of an exhibition language is not a prose but rather a disconnected staccato text, an essay or a piece of fragmented poetry. As any other text, an "exhibition text" contains paragraphs, and a "book" as a whole is divided into chapters – to enable a reader to understand it better (cf. Dolák, 2015; Dolák and Šobánková, 2018). In the field of museum and curatorial studies, the term "exhibition narrative" is used along with "exhibition language" (Biryukova, 2017; Falk and Dierking, 2000; Sitzia, 2016). They are different in the context of dialectics between artistic means to produce a story of an artwork and the idea or meaning of this work which might be understood conceptually or symbolically.

4. IDEA AS A PRINCIPLE OF CONTEMPORARY DIEGESIS

The main component of conceptual art is the idea. Contemporary art and, more specifically, conceptual art are widely discussed in the context of aesthetic opposition of form and idea. If an idea can be clearly explained orally (such as in an artist's lecture) or in writing (such as in an exhibition catalog or in an artistic manifesto), the form may remain obscure and aesthetically shabby. The account of "idea idea" by Peter Goldie and Elizabeth Schellekens (2009) can be considered as an attempt to establish a close contact between content and form, regardless of the artistic quality of the latter. In general, the "idea idea" concept means that "The medium of conceptual art is ideas, and any physical presence is merely the means by which the artist lets us gain access to his ideas." (Goldie and Schellekens, 2009, p. 60) The role of idea prevailing over artistic form is distinctly demonstrated in the concept of dematerialization of art discussed in the studies of Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (1968), Owen Duffy (2017), Nathalie Zonnenberg (2019). The ancestor of conceptual art and art form dematerialization process is Marcel Duchamp with his idea to exhibit a urinal under the guise of an art object in an art gallery.

Later, since the beginning of the 1960s, the time of progressive development of conceptualism, we can observe a number of not too large-scale art events or quasi-exhibition projects with a clear conceptual

idea, which did not always take place in the space of a museum or a gallery. These projects have qualities of diegesis, as they involve pronouncing their ideas, either in oral or textual form, as well as in the form of subconsciously pronounced hidden text, based on common cultural realities which the viewers shared with the author of the project. For example, in 1971, Hans Haacke proposed a project of the exhibition *Real Time Social System* to the Solomon Guggenheim Museum. The project was a description of real estate of a major New York landowner. The Guggenheim Museum refused to organize this exhibition, however, it remained in the history of exhibitions due to its conceptual component. Marcel Broodthaers, Douglas Huebler, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Barry, Michael Asher also contributed to the artistic processes related to the concepts of dematerialization of art and diegesis. Marcel Broodthaers worked as a poet until the age of forty, when he turned to conceptual art. His first exhibition demonstrated unsold copies of his poetry book covered in plaster. The language in this project took the material form of sculpture.

Often the content of conceptual exhibitions took form of a published text. And not in form of exhibition catalogues in the traditional sense, but in the form of fixation of a direct content of the projects, which in fact were texts themselves. In 1970, Douglas Huebler asked visitors at an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York to anonymously write their authentic secrets. Each entry was then replicated and shared with other survey participants as part of a continuous exchange. A few years later, the artist collected secrets that were actually not very original, in a book published in 1978. Yoko Ono did the same in 1964, publishing *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings*, a project presenting series of instructions for acquiring artistic experience.

The replacement of an artwork with a text or a message is a characteristic technique of conceptualism. In 1961, Robert Rauschenberg sent a telegram to the Iris Clert gallery in Paris with the words "This is a portrait of Iris Clert, if I say so." The artwork was intended for an exhibition of portraits at the gallery. A similar technique was used in 1962 by Piero Manzoni in the project *The Base of the World*: the artist declared the demonstration of the planet as his own work.

The aspects of terminology and thesaurus as essential aspects of text also did not escape being involved into the contemporary artistic process. In 1965, Joseph Kosuth presented the concept of *One and Three Chairs*. The concept of the artwork included a chair, its photograph and the definition of the word "chair" from a dictionary. There were four versions of the work with different definitions.

A powerful tool for influencing and attracting a reader or a viewer in the context of postmodernism is a method of text deconstruction. In John Latham's conceptual action *Still and Chew* (1966), the deconstruction of text became the deconstruction of reality. The destructive intentions of the artist and art were expressed in Latham's suggestion to art students to chew pages of Clement Greenberg's book *Art and Culture* (1966), which later had been placed in bottles and in this form returned to the library. The action ended with Latham's dismissal from the educational institution.

The aspect of renaming, which is directly related to the essence of simulacrum, when a certain object or a phenomenon receives a name or characteristic, previously completely unimaginable, also became an attribute of the exhibition activity: for example, in 1960, the artist Stanley Brown declared all the shoe stores of Amsterdam the exhibition of his works. Such simulacra projects include Tracey Emin's exhibition *My Bed* (1999) in form of an unmade bed, and Simon Starling's project *Shedboatshed* (2005), for which the artist received the Turner Prize: the artist converted a wooden barn into a boat and made a trip on it along the Rhine, and then turned the boat back into a barn. It is noteworthy that in the most of these projects, the artists themselves acted as curators, as the diegetic, verbal context was self-sufficient, and did not need additional curatorial interpretation.

5. CONCLUSION

The above examples of curatorial concepts illustrate the change of attitudes to text in the context of postmodernism and the relevant aspects of text: context, narrative, renaming, deconstruction. In conceptual curatorial projects, a number of modern modifications of the classical category of diegesis can be distinguished. Modern modifications should be understood as transformations of this category in the philosophical paradigm of the second half of the 20th century, in which positions of mimesis are often occupied by simulacrum and simulation, and the positions of diegesis are varieties of modern narratives, aspects of intertextuality and context. Diegetic qualities of curatorial projects are shown in the following aspects:

- a) the mythology of curators and the mythology of artists;
- b) personal narrative of a curator or an artist as a set of unique ideas;
- c) current cultural and philosophical ideas;
- d) connection with the language and literary tradition of the project's country;
- e) cultural symbols and myths in the curator's concept;
- f) context (narratives) of everyday life;
- g) the context of media: media stories and myths.

The definition of classical diegesis shows that the primary role in this process is played by narrative, a function of telling stories. In many conceptual projects, however, we observe an opposite trend: the interruption of the story, the violation of the structure of speech, the replacement of meanings. Narrative forms are sometimes impossible to identify, as speech takes an inarticulate form, such as the form of an obscure mumble in a well-known performance of Joseph Beuys in the Schmela gallery *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* in 1965. Diegesis as a mode of narration refers to the narrative component of culture, just as mimesis refers to the visual, imitative essence of it. But

if the category of mimesis has undergone significant changes in the context of the postmodern views on form and meanings, moving towards simulative aspects of culture, the features of diegesis, on the contrary, demonstrate obvious constancy. The modernist and the postmodern paradigms in art are unimaginable without texts, manifestos, extensive cultural and philosophical criticism, media stories, personal myths of artists. The interpenetration and interaction of these texts and narratives, of course, often leads not to understanding of artistic projects' ideas, but to a certain confusion of meanings, as well as to the confusion of the artists' intentions. And yet, the qualities of classical diegesis are preserved in many conceptual exhibitions, as well as in other curatorial projects with comprehensive conceptions.

It is necessary to determine the difference between *conceptual artworks*, *conceptual curatorial projects*, and *display of conceptual art* in creating exhibition narratives. *Conceptual artworks* are produced by an artist or a team of artists, while *conceptual curatorial projects* are products of a curator's reflection and ideas. At the same time, an artist can also take a role of a curator. In this case his/her artwork will take the form of a solo conceptual curatorial project, as it often happened in Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Beuys projects. A *display of conceptual art* has a meaning of demonstration of conceptual artworks without domination of a curator's idea. The diegetic features of *conceptual artworks* and *conceptual curatorial projects* are stipulated by the main actors of the projects, i. e. by artists or curators. We should also not forget the third important party in the exhibition narrative creation: the public.

The essential role of classical diegesis is its embeddedness in the myth-making process. The creation of a personal myth is certainly one of the main characteristics of modern artistic process. Any major exhibition project is accompanied by media myths about artists and artworks. One has only to recall projects of Joseph Beuys where he used fat and felt, and his legend about how during the Second world war Crimean Tatars saved the artist from frostbite with these home remedies.

The qualities of diegesis, which are distinctly present in the modern creative process, are undergoing metamorphosis, associated primarily with a change of attitude to text: exaggeration of its role in art projects, logocentrism of contemporary art, the need for context, and, at the same time, the reduction of semantic, meaningful content of text in the era of abundance of media simulacra.

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Article received on 30/07/2020 and accepted on 03/12/2020.

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