

Video Installation as a Language: An Interpretation of Mohd Fuad Arif's Artworks

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the role of language and music on Mohd Fuad Arif's artworks especially his installations. Language is a powerful tool that can be used as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. For Malaysian conceptual artist, Mohd Fuad Arif, language plays a significant role, particularly, in his installations. Indeed, for Mohd Fuad Arif language it can be seen as artwork. Also, the specific point which needed to be addressed was the relationship between artist or artist intent, artwork, and spectator. The purpose of this paper was to provide a deeper insight into Mohd Fuad Arif's artworks. This study attempted to decode some of his installations such as *Pembukaan* (The opening), *Ya Allah Selamatkan Bumi Singapura* (O Allah, Save Singapore). The different interpretation of the same subject has been one of the main characteristics of postmodern thinking. The author of this paper had his own interpretation of Mohd Fuad Arif's installations.

Keywords: Installation; Mohd Fuad Arif; Language; Postmodern Era; Conceptual Art

1. Introduction

The idea and interpretation have a direct connection to each other. In contemporary art, in particular, conceptual art, the idea of an artist is much more important than other elements (the final product and the process). According to Dan Karlholm, "the general idea of conceptual art is that the work of art is essentially an idea which may (or may not) generate a visible form". (Karlholm, 2010, p. 63). The idea of an artist does not have one particular meaning or interpretation. There could be different interpretations of an artist's idea. This is one of the key concepts in

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postmodernism and contemporary art. As stated by Arthur Asa Berger “The more interpretations we offer of something, the closer we come to finding out the truth of the matter”. (Berger, 2003, p. xv).

British historian Arnold Toynbee was the first person who used the Postmodernism term in the early 20th century. But it was in the late 1970s which Postmodernism became a centre of attraction. First Postmodernism was used in art especially architecture but then came to be applied more and more to a theoretical realm such as Jean François Lyotard’s book entitled *The Postmodern Condition*. Indeed, Postmodernism is a response to any sureness which tries to describe the reality. In postmodern thought, there is no description and explanation that is acceptable for all people and groups. According to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, “there are no facts or truths, only interpretations”. (Shusterman, 2000, p. 121). Due to this cause in postmodern thought, interpretation plays a vital role and the impossibility of objective truth is one of the most significant characteristics of the postmodern age. As a result, the relative truths of each and everyone are much more important than objective truths.

2. Relationship Between Artist, Art and Viewer

One of the main questions in postmodern thought regarding art is the relationship between artist, artwork, and viewer. In other words, does the artist have any power to control the meaning of an artwork? Or is it the viewer who gives the meaning to the work of art? According to Sheri Klein “In postmodern thinking about art, meaning lies with the viewer, not within the artwork. In this view, we are not guessing the intention of the artist. This is an institutional theory of art that has relevance for understanding postmodern art” (Klein, 2007, p. 29).

French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes in his important essay, *The Death of Author*, ask a very important question: who is the real author over text?

In Barthes’s view, the author is not at the center of all and the author or the artist exists alongside the artwork or the text. The *Death of Author* theory suggests an infinite interpretation for each text or artwork. As mentioned by Roland Barthes “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader”. (Barthes, 2017, p. 521). In this way, he challenges the authority of the author and he rejects that kind of criticism which believes that the author biography, political view, historical context and so forth so on are the keys to unlock the door of the meaning of the artwork. Indeed, for Barthes communication between text and reader is much more important than the author itself. Roland Barthes’s view can apply to other forms of art such as painting, cinema, installation, performance art and so forth so on. The author of this article will apply Roland Barthes’s *The Death of the Author* theory on Mohd Fuad Arif’s artworks.

3. Mohd Fuad Arif's Video Installation and its Interpretation

Mohd Fuad Arif is a Malaysian talented artist. In a pluralist culture in the postmodern age, Mohd Fuad Arif uses a different medium in the different genre without emphasizing on one specific medium. He employs language, video, music, and other elements. He had a video installation in the National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur 2013 which is called *Pembukaan* or *The opening*. In terms of formal elements, he just needed a dark room and a video projector, a speaker and a screen.

In Mohd Fuad Arif’s five minutes video installation or *Pembukaan* (*The opening*), the light, the word, and the music have played a very significant role. It seems he tries to express the majesty of

the universe and the greatness of God through this video installation. This video installation can be seen as the beginning of creation, but the question is how. The source of light is a video projector which is installed on the top and the words (Surah Al Fatihah) reflected on the screen. As Rudolf Steiner once said nowadays when people talk about the words, they generally speak about the weak human words which have so little importance in contrast with the words in holy books such as the Holy Quran and the Holy Bible. In this case, Mohd Fuad Arif used Surah Al Fatihah. Surah Al Fatihah is like a prayer which includes seven verses. Al Fatihah roughly means opening something, for instance, a book or a topic which we begin and the Holy Quran begins with Surah Al Fatihah. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “the Fatihah is often believed to be a synthesis of the Quran’s message and to be its most important Surah. Hence it has been given the title “Mother of the Book” a term also applied to other aspects of the Quran and to the celestial archetype of the Quran and in fact all sacred scripture” (Nasr, 2017, p. 69). That is shown how this Surah is important. Surah Al Fatihah can be seen as a prayer and if any person wants to benefit from the Holy Quran, he or she should offer this fantastic prayer to the lord of the universe or Allah. Indeed, Surah Al Fatihah is an opening statement or preface.

This is an insightful choice by Mohd Fuad Arif, the connection between the beginning of everything, in particular, the beginning of creation, and the word. Donald E. Battlein St. John’s Gospel has mentioned that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Battle, 2012, p. 49). The text and the music in Mohd Fuad Arif’s five minutes video installation are perfectly matched.

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the most spiritual music in the history of classical music. Bach is recognized as one of the greatest composers in history. Majority of his works are dedicated to God and the human spirit. As once Bach said: “Music’s only purpose should be for the glory of God and recreation of the human spirit.” (Kavanaugh, 1996, p. 19). He spent all his life in serving God through the Music. In Bach point of view, there is no distinction between sacred and secular works. According to Patrick Kavanaugh in some of his secular works, he wrote this dedication “to God alone the praise be given for what’s herein to man’s use written.” (Kavanaugh, 1996, p. 20). In this way, Mohd Fuad Arif succeeded to create a spiritual space through music and word. Mohd Fuad Arif’s five minutes video installation, and the space he has created, has invited people to the contemplation and meditation whether they are religious or not. The example of Mohd Fuad Arif’s work can be seen as follows:

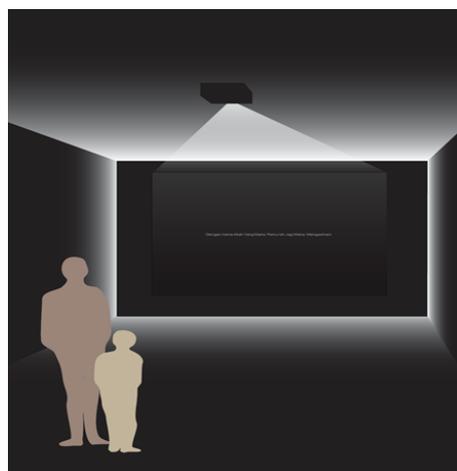


Fig 1 Pembukaan (The opening), 2013, a video installation

4. Art and Language

The relationship between language and art in contemporary era must not be overlooked. Is there any connection between art and language? For example, why in Mohd Fuad Arif's works of art word or language has been used? Can language be a form of art in his installations?

According to Michael Archer "Conceptual art proposed that images can be recognized as being language-like: artwork can be read. The reverse is equally true: words can work in a picture-like way." (Archer, 2012, p. 84). The role of language is really significant in Mohd Fuad Arif's artworks. For example, in his five minutes video installation or in his print installation like *Ya Allah Selamatkan Bumi Singapura* (O Allah, Save Singapore) which is inspired by Barbara Kruger's works this significance could be noticed. The example of his work is as follows:



Fig 2 *Ya Allah Selamatkan Bumi Singapura* (O Allah, Save Singapore), 2014, Print installation

The language is tied to the interpretation of the thing. Basically, the language has a key role in conceptual art. In fact, art and language reach their highest point of contribution to conceptual art. According to Joseph Kosuth "The art I call conceptual is based on the understanding of the linguistic nature of all art propositions" (Tymieniecka, 2002, p. 146).

Where is the art? Or where is the artwork? These are some of the most important questions that people usually ask about contemporary art, especially in relation to installation and conceptual art. For example, in Mohd Fuad Arif's video installation, is art in the words he shows us or is it in the music that we hear? People cannot really point out to an object and say that it is the artworks. Another example is Mohd Fuad Arif's print installation like *Ya Allah Selamatkan Bumi Singapura* (O Allah, Save Singapore). Is it possible to see the language as art especially in a social context? As stated by Eve Kalyva "Through their use of language, conceptual artworks contested the prioritization of the visual and of aesthetics apprehension and negotiated the space of representation across art and language as a social space." (Kalyva, 2016, p. 44). The spectator should notice that the language carries meaning and in Mohd Fuad Arif's works, the artworks are in the meaning not in the objects or the final products.

5. Conclusion

Based on the postmodern view on art, the main research question of this article was about the relationship between Mohd Fuad Arif as an artist, his installations as artworks and the author of this article as a viewer. In addition, the main theory of this research was based on the Death of Author theory by Roland Barthes. The main theory and the research question of this study are conceptually connected with each other. Both of them emphasize that the interpretation of Mohd Fuad Arif's installations lies outside his artworks and indeed lies with spectators (in this case the author of the article). The ideal or even comprehensive meaning does not exist. The interpretation of the same artwork by Mohd Fuad Arif can be completely different by different viewers.

In contemporary art, in particular, Mohd Fuad Arif's works, the audience should read his artworks not in terms of how they look like or how they appear, but how they are conceived. The concepts and the ideas which initiate the work of art are really important. Truly, in Mohd Fuad Arif's artworks, spectators should find the art in the meaningfulness of objects, not in the objects. He represents these objects for the sake of contemplation or philosophic contemplation not for the sake of aesthetics contemplation.

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