

Conference Paper

Buddha's Image in Modern Art: Expert and Critical Approaches

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to formulate the main criteria for the analysis of contemporary art in general, with a specific focus on works including sacred image of Buddha, from an art-historical perspective. The development of an expert assessment approach in this area is a necessary step because most researchers of contemporary art containing various religious or sacred images describe them only from an artistic viewpoint or explore the general cultural context. The authors present several questions as assessment criteria, answers to which will be able to help the experts reach their conclusions. What is the purpose of creating an image? What role does the material chosen by an artist play in shaping the artistic image? Does the multidimensionality of meanings appear in the artistic image of the work? Does the work refer to a non-finite? While discussing these issues, we analyse the works of Pema Namdol Thae, Climent Brie, Nam Joon Paik, Yeshe Gombo and others.

Keywords: contemporary Buddhist art, Pema Namdol Thae, analysis and criticism of contemporary art, examination of contemporary art.

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Published: 25 August 2020

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Selection and Peer-review under
the responsibility of the
Questions of Expertise in
Culture, Arts and Design
Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Today the image of Buddha Shakyamuni is one of the most often reproduced images. It expanded far beyond the borders of Buddhist culture and is often utilized by the artists outside of its traditional context.

2. Materials and Methods

Establishing criteria for expert evaluation in this area is necessary, because most of the researchers approach works of contemporary art that include religious or sacral images either through the art-historical lens, or through cultural studies or culturological perspective. The scholars typically explore influences of Buddhist ideas (especially Zen Buddhism) on the contemporary actual art [1, 2]. However, Buddha's image is, first and

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foremost, a sacral image; this fact creates a range of discussion points on how to perform expert evaluation of such artworks. Analysis of a wide range of images allows us to propose several ideas for discussion that delineate such evaluation criteria.

3. Discussion

3.1. For what purpose an artwork is created?

This question can be asked both by the viewers and by the artist. Depending on the type of relationships between an artist and the world, as they have been established in art history, we find it important to highlight the following points. A work of art can be an original statement by an artist (his/her way of self-identification); it can be a work on a religious topic; or it can be a sacred object of worship. This corresponds with the purposes for which an artwork is created.

This typology is especially prominent in contemporary Buddhist art; it can serve as one of the important criteria of professional art assessment. Those masters whose goal lies outside of the Buddhist way, use Buddha's image to pinpoint certain meaningful and symbolic connotations indicating philosophical (often in an abstract-theoretical way) ruminations of the artist on the Buddhist concept of interdependency between Form and Void, on the all-permeating nature of Buddha, on the universal connectedness or the metaphysics of matter, etc. Already in 1974 the founder of video art Nam June Paik created one of the most famous installations – *TV Buddha* – whose material was not so much a classical iconographic sculpture (although it also formed a part of the installation), but rather an image of a certain philosophical concept referring to the Buddhist ideas of illusion, which the artist tried to “catch” through video projection. The simpler works, such as the collage by Tenzing Rigdola *Dissappearing Buddha*, also illustrate this idea. In this work the artist fills the silhouette of Buddha's chest-level image and his abhamandala (mandorla) with the fragments of geographical maps, advertisings, crossword puzzles and classic Tibetan fabrics, as if referring the viewers to the Buddhist teaching of dharma particles – or transmitting a simpler idea that Buddha's nature is in every material phenomenon, even in mass cultural ones.

Naive and literal interpretation of the Great Void (Sunyata) is present in the Sukha Barber's sculpture *Face of the Void*. It shows a figure sitting in a lotus position, whose forms are delineated by the strips of fabric between which we can see an empty space: an overall effect of “partially wrapped” human. This crude approach fails to reflect a meditative state which is present in the best works of the Buddhist sculpture through

the thinning and deconsolidation of material and through sensitivity to the light and shadow nuances of the surface – rather, it demonstrates a mummified body.

An illustrative quality of these works is obvious; we believe that it leads to the conceptualizing: in the postmodern fashion, the artists invite us to play with the discourse on the stereotypical “Buddhist truths”, rather than discover these truths through the process of co-experience, as happens in classical perception of artworks.

One of the purposes may be, as we have seen, the creation of Buddhist-themed paintings by Buddhist artists. Their goal is to visually express their personal experiences, meditative states, dreams etc. At the same time, these masters work within the frame of traditional Buddhist art as the successors of concrete schools of thangka painting or sculpture. These works are usually created by the artists born in 1970s–1980s in Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. Today these artists are fairly well known in the West. Such is an art of the master Pema Namdol Thaye, who combines organically traditional thangkas, 3D mandalas, modern Buddhist architectural projects and books on the principles of Buddhist art and architecture with the painted works. His images *Transformation* and *Transitory Experience*, shown in 2011 in the New York’s Tibet House, demonstrate, despite some reflectivity, a genuine meditative experience expressed through nuanced tonal gradations and emerging and dissolving images.

Among such Buddhist artists we can also name Russian artist Elena Bolsokhoyeva who works in a mixed batik technique. [3]

The third group comprises Buddhist cult images that can be made with the new materials and bear the signs of the 21st-century visual culture. For example, there are huge three-dimensional ritual images made in mixed technique by master Eshe Gombo who was born in Kazakhstan but now resides in San-Francisco. [4]

Therefore, when we use the purpose for which an artwork was created as one of the expert assessment criteria, we can determine through which angle or in which professional field we should approach this image: whether it is a Buddhist image, an image on a Buddhist topic, or whether it utilizes Buddha’s image to illustrate individual reflections.

3.2. What is the role of new artistic material in the creation of the artistic image?

Global art-historical process demonstrates that the changes in the relationships between artist, material and artistic image are happening in predictable ways. According to art history, usually exploration of new material happens in at least three stages: imitation

of a well-known material, exploration of its particular “special” characteristics (decorative, constructive, compositional etc.) and, finally, image creation – that is, transformation/transfiguration/spiritualization of a new material. A classic example of the latter is found in the analysis of European medieval stonework (from Romanesque style to the flamboyant Gothic) by van de Velde. He outlined a prevailing tendency to exhaust the material’s rough physical body, to refine it, to de-materialize it, i.e. to make it more spiritual. These three stages in mastering of material can be used in expert assessment of Buddha’s image in contemporary art.

As we know, early 20th century was a period of particularly keen exploration of new materials and new forms. Against the general mood of cultural exhaustion, a new passionarian cycle of art developed. Avant-garde “visionaries of the future” rejected figurative and realistic forms trying to achieve a new stage of awareness and new holistic understanding. Their engagement with abstract forms inevitably led them to experiment with materials. Material had to be transformed as much as a form, but this task was never completed: the materials remained the same despite some innovations, such as inlaying of paper, fabric or glass into the painted layer, and so on. Later, during the 20th century, progress in science and technology provided artists with entirely new materials, as well as helped them to transcend entirely the familiar qualities of three-dimensional physical reality. Today actual and contemporary art widely uses light, sound, tactile installations etc., as well as the discoveries of neuropsychology and quantum physics. Essentially, since mid-20s the notion of “material” stepped outside the limits set by traditional art history: the artists have been striving to explore the different levels of physical reality qualitatively. There were innovative attempts to utilize various states of matter (ice, water, steam) and to embrace the world-foundational elements: water–air–wind–fire–earth. It is vital to note that the artists explore such phenomena as light not as something that “illuminates”, “penetrates” or “shines” but as a material, out of which the work itself is created.

In part, visual meditations of the artists working with Buddha’s image follow the general development of global artistic process. This angle can be used to assess light installations by Clement Brie who projects sculptural images of Angkor Wat temple onto the tree leaves. His attempt to immerse the viewers into the world where Buddhas, Boddhisattvas, gandharvas, yakhas and yakshinis inhabit our everyday world may be interpreted as an exploration into the visual potential of the movements of the wind and the shifts of light and shadow in the tree leaves used as a new material. It is obvious that in this installation the images of semi-wrathful deities seem more convincing and natural. Their energy and life space, which are tied to the powers of the earth and

plants, are shown here more vividly, and the new materials facilitate the creation of visual image through the dynamic light-and-shadow modelling.

This is also a good perspective to use for the works of artists who create Buddhism-inspired works with water: for example, famous melting ice compositions *Ice Buddha* by the Korean artist Atta Kim repeatedly showed in New York, or an image of Buddha created from water drops by Tsering Nyandak. These works are united in the goal to recreate, in aesthetically attractive form, a vague foreshadowing of the unity between the “visible” and the “invisible”, the relations between the “manifest” and the “unmanifested” reality, even though this goal is attained by transforming ontological characteristics in a literally understood metaphor. In this case what could become a criterion for the “transformed” material? Probably a precise aesthetic form in which water is being melted or evaporated.

We believe that a presence or an absence of the transformed material (not only in Buddha images) can, in general, become one of the criteria for distinguishing between art and creative quests or art projects.

3.3. Does an image contain the ontological multi-dimensionality of meanings?

As previous criteria, this one can be applied not only to the contemporary Buddha images, but also to a wide range of contemporary artworks in general, since mutli-dimensionality of meanings is one of the key features of genuine art. This is the feature that allow us to re-think, re-experience, absorb and discover works made in the past. However, in images that contain religious and philosophical concepts, this ontological multi-dimensionality of meanings constitutes an apriori inherent feature subject to particularly obvious discovery and analysis.

Taken from the point of the process of art creation, this question can be formulated slightly differently: what is horizon of an event as it is interpreted by an artist. Does an artist interpret Buddha in a limited/one-dimensional way, as a historical figure, – or does he or she feels/experiences/touches the entire fullness of meanings contained in this image? Does an artist utilize everyday perspective, or can she reach towards the meditative, devotional awareness of Buddha? The mutlidimensionality of meanings open doors towards inexhaustible artistic content in its infinite-measurability: it is expressed through the system of associations, metaphors, semblances and analogies arising within cultural context; through the psycho-physical mutli-layeredness of artwork; through the fractal character of lines and shapes, rhythms of parts and the whole etc.

4. Conclusion. Is the "Non-finite" Present in the Artwork?

This gap, breathing space, a certain irregularity, a barely perceived incompleteness is one of the art's highest achievements. It shows the artist's spiritualized skill, as well as gives the viewers an opportunity to "enter inside the artwork". Through this gap, an artwork becomes an "open system", it comes alive, acquiring the fullness of artistic reality. This is, for example, a barely perceptible pause of dharma-chakra-pravartana-mudra of the Ming dynasty Buddha from Delhi museum, or the tiniest gap between the downcast right hand of the White Tara and its lotus pedestal in the statue by famous Mongolian master Zanabazar. This holistic figure created by the inter-object space and a tangible materiality is an indispensable criterion of the genuine artistic masterpieces, regardless of an era in which they were created. It may also appear in the contemporary images of Buddha.

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