

Stefanie Albers

## Verbal Visuality

The Visual Arts in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction

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**The Visual Arts  
in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction**

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid hired a market research company to conduct a poll on aesthetic tastes in the United States, at this point the first one on artistic perception in the country. Making use of the extensive data compiled in the survey, the two artists then painted canvases representing what the participants in the poll most wanted in art as well as what they did not want. Fittingly enough, the paintings were referred to as *America's Most Wanted* (in no way related to the television show of the same title) and *America's Most Unwanted*. Naturally, Komar and Melamid also wondered what the ideal art<sup>1</sup> of other countries would look like. In the following years, they therefore extended their poll to thirteen additional countries via the internet: China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Kenya, Holland, Portugal, Russia, Turkey, and the Ukraine. Based on the results they received, they eventually completed a *Most Wanted* and a *Most Unwanted* painting for each of these countries.<sup>2</sup> The artists' answers to questions such as 'What kind of painting repels the Dutch?' or 'Which canvas is able to evoke something like an aesthetic epiphany in the Chinese, while it makes a French beholder's skin crawl?' are depicted in the thirty canvases that make up an exhibition entitled *The People's Choice*.<sup>3</sup> While the paintings Melamid and Komar produced are, for obvious reasons, frequently a conglomerate of incongruous elements, interestingly enough each element was considered to be an essential and – yes – beautiful element of the whole by the respondents to the poll.

Komar and Melamid's survey addresses a question that numerous scholars have tried to find an answer to in terms of art and taste, namely: Is there an underlying unity to aesthetic judgement? When considering the results of this poll, one is tempted to put forth the existence of a common denominator influencing and – in certain ways – unifying aesthetic judgements. However, this contention may very well be stated a little too readily. Despite Komar and Melamid's achievement, one only has to consider certain modern forms of art as well as so-called conceptual art. Such art forms are frequently not exactly pretty – and some can hardly be termed beautiful – and yet, a lot of people call them art while others merely shake their heads at such 'nonsense'. Therefore, aesthetic judgement is highly individual and the claim that art and beauty go hand

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<sup>1</sup> When used in the following, the term 'art' generally refers to the visual arts, i.e. to painting, sculpture, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrew Ross. "Poll Stars". In: *ArtForum* (January 1995). 72-77. 109.

<sup>3</sup> The paintings can be viewed online on Alexander Melamid and Vitali Komar's homepage at <http://www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html>

in hand needs to be questioned for obvious reasons, which is an issue that has sparked controversial debates. Indeed, the matter is also reflected in art itself, as art objects frequently negotiate and comment on the role of the arts as such, not least in literary form, so that art and, by extension, culture frequently adopt a high level of self-reflexivity.

Diverse as individuals' perceptions of aesthetic properties may be, one important issue to be broached when addressing both art and general aesthetics lies somewhere along the lines of what forms aesthetic experience may possibly adopt. This goes particularly for literary texts and the way art discourses are presented in fictional works. Following Lessing's famous contention, the medium of narrative is still frequently considered to be mainly temporal, while visual art is seen as predominantly spatial, which means that there is a difference in sign systems. This study is thus going to bring "the temporal field of the poet" as well as "the spatial realm of the painter"<sup>4</sup> together. It will explore the use of the visual arts in various contemporary novels and short stories of the Anglophone world, i.e. it will discuss how the visual arts and literature merge in the form of a fictional art discourse. The study is not directed at stressing the notion of a 'mutual illumination of the sister arts' but aims at going one step further, intending to point out the mutual interdependence of the verbal and the visual in contemporary art narratives.<sup>5</sup> This interdependence eventually leads to the creation of an iconotext or a hybrid text<sup>6</sup> that often significantly goes beyond the

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<sup>4</sup> G.E. Lessing. *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*. Ditzingen: Reclam, 1986; chapters 15-18, 119; my translation. The original reads "[...] daß die Zeitfolge das Gebiete des Dichters, so wie der Raum das Gebiete des Malers sei."

<sup>5</sup> 'Contemporary' here signifies works from the past ten to twenty years. Due to the necessity of choosing a representative selection of texts, the main art narratives discussed in the analytical section are the following: Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), John Banville's *Ghosts* (1998), Antonia S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories* (1996), Scott Campbell's *Aftermath* (2009), Tracy Chevalier's *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2006), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Nick Hornby's short story "Nipple Jesus" (2000), Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* (2005), Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1996), Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock's *Skyline* (2000), Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2006). Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) provides the material for a model reading. All of these narratives mainly work with ekphrases or general references to the visual arts. Narratives that make use of actual reproductions of paintings or photos are still comparatively rare and will here mainly serve as examples for certain intermediality issues addressed in the theoretical section of this study.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'iconotext' will be used according to Peter Wagner's definition in *Icons – Texts – Iconotexts*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996. Wagner here defines iconotexts as texts that implement actual pictures (i.e. reproductions of paintings, etc.). Taking it one step further, he eventually also classifies texts in which one medium is only implied under the same category. However, I will adopt his concept in its narrower sense and will regard texts that point to art through detailed descriptions or simple references as 'hybrid