Exploring the idea of difference in ‘Portrait of V I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock’ by Art and Language.

Assignment 4. VS1. Understanding Visual Culture

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Cover Image: Art and Language, (1980) 'Portrait of V I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock
Introduction

I am going to discuss the idea of difference in Art in Language ‘Portrait of V I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock’. I am going to explore how prior knowledge or ignorance of both Jackson Pollocks style of art, and the identity of V. I. Lenin, affect the viewers understanding, and I will also compare the two types of difference, the more common use of the word in comparing and contrasting, and also difference that subordinates’ identity. Finally, I am going to explore how Art and Languages work relates to the idea of differance in regards to thinkers like Derrida.

Art and Language\(^1\) were innovative fronrunners in the conceptual art world, pushing boundaries and exploring the social and psychological aspects of the world. Their group name, ‘Art and Language’ indicates their repertoire, since they did not just create paintings, but used indexes\(^2\), essays, performances and photography, merging it all together and producing an interdisciplinary collection of art.

[Caption: Art and Language (1972) Index 001.]

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\(^1\) Art and language are a group of artists founded in 1968 with members Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, Harold Hurrell and Terry Atkinson.

\(^2\) Index 01 was an installation piece created in 1972, consisting of multiple filing cabinets full of written texts and essays, sorted by index on card files by Art and Language throughout all members collective careers, exploring the relationships between each individual element.
Art and Language
There are four different categories of people experiencing Art and Language Portrait of V I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock, all of which will have completely different interpretations of this piece of art.

1. Those who do not have any knowledge of either Pollock or Lenin, for whom the painting is purely aesthetic.
2. Those who recognise the style of Jackson Pollock but not the portrait of V I Lenin, for whom the expressionistic style of the painting is most prominent.
3. Those who can see the portrait of V. I. Lenin but not Jackson Pollocks style, for whom the iconic image within the painting is prominent.
4. Those who can see and understand both Jackson Pollocks style and V I Lenin’s portrait, whom would be the ‘ideal’ or ‘most informed’ viewer.

To create this piece of art, Art & Language initially drew what was called a ‘flash portrait’ of V. I. Lenin. You can see an example in this flash portrait of George W Bush [7].

They then made this flash portrait into a set of stencils, and each individual stencil portrayed a different layer of tone. These, all layered together, create a full image of Lenin. They were individually laid down in stages whilst paint was dripped, splattered and poured over the top, in the style of Pollock.

Caption: Art and Language (1948) Map for Portrait of George. W. Bush in the style of Jacksons Pollock’s “Number 5”

3 See front page to view this painting
Jackson Pollock
The artist Jackson Pollock was an abstract impressionist\(^4\), who had an iconic style of art which involved paint being splashed and flung onto a large canvas on the floor, usually comprising of a restricted colour palette. His action paintings incorporated the use of his whole body, and was non-representational, mainly trying to show emotion rather than physical objects. Using a simulacrum of Pollocks artistic style in Art and Languages ‘Portrait…’ indicates the idea of creative risks. We can see Pollocks work in regards to the theory of signs, as most of us will recognise Pollocks iconic paint splatters in terms of his ‘signifier’, in that we associate his splatters with him.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin
Vladimir Lenin was a Russian political figure in the 20\(^{th}\) Century and the head of the USSR\(^5\). In 1917 he started working against the government, led what was known as the October Revolution, from which followed three years of civil war\(^6\). The use of Vladimir Lenin in this painting indicates a stereotype of political symbolism and indicated the idea of historical risk. Ultimately, we can look upon both Pollock and Lenin and realise that they both stand for opposing beliefs. Lenin stood for revolution, stirred up opposition to the government, and tried to take control and power in Russia.\(^7\) Pollock stood for creativity and self-expression\(^8\).

\(^4\) Pollock was born in 1912 and died in 1956.
\(^5\) The USSR is the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. This existed between 1922-1991, and was a socialist political organisation, generally concerned with the social issues associated with capitalism in Eurasia.
\(^7\) BBC Bitesize History. http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/mwh/russia/leninandbolshevikrevolutionrev1.shtml
\(^8\) An Interview with Jackson Pollock. (1950) http://homepages.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art201/201Read/201-Pollock.pdf
\(^9\) Image: ‘Vladimir Lenin in a Cap and Wig’ in order to evade capture.
Difference - comparing and contrasting.

The more commonly used idea of difference is the comparing and contrasting of two different things, where its identity as a painting comes first. We can use a table to demonstrate this, however it only portrays the simple, almost superficial kind of difference, and not the more intricate version of difference which I will explore further on in this essay.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artistic style of Art and Languages</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Artistic style of Jackson Pollock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portrait</td>
<td></td>
<td>Blocks of pure colour within the splattered paint, in blue and yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The yellows and reds are hints of splatters rather than blocks of colour. No blue.</td>
<td>Colour pallet – yellows, greys, black and white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional iconic image within the splatters – portrait of V I Lenin.</td>
<td>Style and method of creation – splattered, dripped and flung paint.</td>
<td>No intentional image or meaning within his work, purely aesthetic. Automatism – unplanned way of making art, using chance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much of the background is visible, high density of paint. Mostly light greys and whites make for a more blended overall image.</td>
<td>Abstract, no realism involved, gestural marks used to create a piece of art.</td>
<td>More background visible, less dense amount of paint splatters. Mostly strong blacks and yellows make for a more striking overall image.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iconic image of Lenin in Art and Languages Portrait</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Regular photograph of V I Lenin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract depiction, unrealistic, modernism</td>
<td>Iconic intonation, they are both portraits of V I Lenin</td>
<td>Very realistic and detailed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splattered paint roughly indicating tonal areas of Lenin’s face.</td>
<td>Areas of light and dark, variety of shaded tonal areas.</td>
<td>Clear and obvious portrait of Lenin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour palette, includes yellows and a hint of red</td>
<td>Interpretation of both images depends on prior knowledge. The image would be meaningless to someone who didn’t know who V I Lenin was.</td>
<td>Black and white, no colour at all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Difference that comes before its identity

The second definition involves the idea of difference coming before its identity, as opposed to the more common use of difference, where its identity comes first. A basic example of this would be going into a supermarket and understanding that a pear recognisable as a pear because it is different to an apple. In regards to Art and Language’s painting, this could involve the idea of being able to identify the difference between the image of V. I. Lenin and the stylistic expression of Pollock, and how the image differs with each interpretation. Art and Language’s art explores the idea of altered perception. When the need for realistic depictions in paintings became obsolete, particularly due to the invention of the camera, artists gained a newfound creative freedom and an ability to use art to depict scenarios that perhaps may be impossible in real life. For example, one type of altered perception is where there is confusion between the picture and what it depicts. In this first painting, [8], a boy from another time period climbs out of the frame as if it was three dimensional and he was about to jump down onto the gallery floor.

Another example of altered interpretation involves art which contain ambiguities or discrepancies within the painting itself. The Ambassadors, [9], at first glance appears to be relatively realistic, however from a certain angle you are able to perceive a skull in the lower third, symbolising the imminence of death. The life experience of each individual viewer changes its meaning and significance.

Derrida’s idea of Différance

Art and Language in particular have used this altered perception in ‘Portrait of V. I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock’, there is a discrepancy between the image and its interpretation. We can use Derrida’s ideas of *parergon* to further explain this, which in its most simple terms means something supplementary. We can expand on that, to imagine something like a parasite, something that leaches off another thing. Sometimes it is beneficial to both, sometimes it is fatal, and it relies on the concept of one thing needing the other for its existence, and so in terms of this painting, both the form of V I Lenin and Pollock’s signifier must coexist in a mutually dependent relationship. They do not exist independently of each other. These paintings are called ‘trompe l’oeil’, which means illusionistic, deceiving the eye. Derrida’s idea of ‘différance’ is spelt incorrectly, just like a trompe l’oeil, in order to trick the ear. We use this particular term to explore the idea of time, as *déférer* in French means ‘to defer’, and a way we can explore this is by looking at the space and time in this artwork, and how it will change over time. When we look at this painting, we see Pollock’s marks, and then we see Lenin. Both things exist, and we can relate it to the idea of ground and figure in art, in that the figure cannot exist without a ground to stand on, suggesting a special distance as well. We think of Derrida’s idea of différance as something constantly evolving over time, a piece of art is never truly finished, especially when supplements such as new essays or paintings constantly change its interpretation. If this painting was created before V. I. Lenin became a famous leader, this painting would have a completely different meaning. In the book *Derrida reframed*, K. Malcom Richards says:

‘Always marked by difference, Derrida thought suggests the ways that the process of constructing meaning neither ends, nor is a singular process in time and place’

We can analyse this to mean that we can constantly find new meaning in work, the process never ends, not just confined by a single time and place.
Conclusion

In this essay I analysed the many aspects of difference in Art and Languages painting ‘Portrait of V. I. Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock’. I showed how each person’s experience of this image will be unique based on prior experience.

I discussed the various uses of the word difference, the first being the more general use of the word as comparing and contrasting two things. I compared and contrasted ‘Portrait of V. I. Lenin’ against a stylistic painting by Jackson Pollock, giving examples such as how both images were created in a very similar manner, but there were differences, such as Pollocks work was completely abstract, whereas Art and Languages represented someone.

I discussed how the second use of the word difference involves identity being secondary to its identity, and how Art and Language explore the idea of altered perception, sometimes called a ‘trompe l’oeil. Both Jackson Pollocks style and the portrait of Lenin co-exist in a mutually dependent relationship. I discussed Derridas idea of différencé, and how interpretations of artwork will change over time. ‘Portrait of V. I Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock’ plays against the satire of combining both men, who clearly stood for opposing ideals.
References


