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## Visual Strategies of Contemporary Art: The Study of Banksy's Artworks

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### ABSTRACT

The development of contemporary art has introduced a new understanding and recognition of esthetics. This article aims to describe postesthetic phenomena as trends in the visual communication of contemporary art. The method used is a descriptive approach and analysis of Banksy's work. This study produces a discussion about 1). Postesthetic symptoms in Banksy's work, 2). Characteristics of Banksy's work, 3). Banksy's symbolic meaning, 3). Social implications arising from the postesthetic approach to Banksy's work.

Keywords: postesthetic; contemporary art; Banksy

### ABSTRAK

**Strategi Visual Seni Kontemporer: Studi Karya Seni Banksy.** Perkembangan seni kontemporer telah memperkenalkan pemahaman dan pengakuan baru terhadap estetika. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan gejala postestetik sebagai kecenderungan dalam komunikasi visual seni kontemporer. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan studi kasus terhadap Karya Banksy. Kajian ini menghasilkan pembahasan tentang: 1). Gejala postestetik dalam karya Banksy, 2). Karakteristik karya Banksy, 3). makna simbolik karya Banksy, 3). Implikasi Sosial yang ditimbulkan oleh pendekatan postestetik pada karya Banksy.

Kata kunci: postestetik; seni rupa kontemporer; Banksy

### Introduction

As time goes on and contemporary art discourse is taking place at this time, and the definition of esthetics has undergone a very radical deconstruction of meaning. Contemporary art, which is sometimes not fully understood, actually feels invading for some local art forms or traditions, which are still divided into genres and functions. Although there is no definition that precisely explains it, contemporary art is actually a dynamic, democratic, and heterogeneous art form, in which various kinds of artistic entities have fused into one. Therefore, the boundaries of the form, genre, medium and flow become blurred and even

disappear. In contemporary art, the emphasis is no longer on the issues of the dichotomy of low art (craft) and high art (fine art), but rather it is on the context of art forms that are processed with esthetic tastes through various approaches to art (Djatiprambudi, 2016).

The contemporary art movement has now dominated the art scene, both domestically and abroad. Contemporary works of art that tend to be free of expression can accommodate various forms of exploration both in the technical area as well as concepts and work discourse. Freedom of expression in contemporary art has given rise to many popular names that have now become icons of the world's contemporary art, and one of the most

phenomenal artist recently is Banksy. He has been known as an anonymous British street artist with a unique and controversial visual approach.

In the field of contemporary art in the world today, the name Banksy is perhaps the most influential figure and is a trendsetter for other artists. His works are very compatible with the spirit of the younger generation and contemporary art itself. Thanks to his contributions, Banksy's works have even been sold auctions at fantastic prices in comparison with the world's masterpieces of art. The stencil technique that he uses now may be one of the techniques in creating favorite paintings among young artists (Wicaksono, 2019).

Basically, there is nothing special about Banksy's work when viewed from a visual perspective; sometimes his works seem just for fun. Even technically, Banksy's works are not much better than the works of graffiti artists in general who seem more serious in executing the medium. But in line with the paradigm of contemporary art which is no longer monopolized by external beauty, Banksy's works are built with extraordinary powerful message. Therefore, beauty which was merely pragmatically understood in the beginning now through Banksy's artwork the status of beauty comes in more complex forms.

Banksy's visual approach has introduced outright new ways of understanding and acknowledging esthetics. Esthetics in the context of contemporary art can no longer only be understood as the value of ideal beauty, but beauty in a more abstract form (Ramadhani, 2017). Contemporary art is risking more meaning than form; therefore it is overriding the beauty and sensual pleasure. There is a kind of anti-esthetic form in contemporary art, and this implies that the art world has entered the postesthetic era.

The term postesthetics itself may feel problematic, but if viewed from a cultural perspective, this phenomenon is a new tendency in understanding or acknowledging what is called beauty. From the postesthetic point of view, everything that was originally considered ugly, unattractive, or worthless and terrible now is considered as a part of beauty, even the beauty itself (Piliang, 2006). This phenomenon is something that is very interesting to look at. How

can the status of beauty that has been believed for centuries as something essential now has actually collapsed on its own.

## Historical Study

The symptoms of postesthetics in the art world has existed since the era of modern art in the west. The signs of this trend at least begin to emerge from an artist named Marcel Duchamp who displayed a urinal to which he gave the title "Fountain" in a showroom in New York in 1917. Marcel Duchamp's actions instantly caused a commotion in the art community; the art world began to question the position of esthetics about whether true esthetics had restricted art democracy and freedom of thought. In fact, the provocative action of Marcel Duchamp had indeed become very famous and even became one of the icons in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Setjen, 2016). Marcel Duchamp's work was actually a form of resistance to injustice in the field of art at the time when the art world only recognized works that were perceived "beautiful" with all their special characteristics that had been recognized and created by the creators of the masterpieces. Duchamp with annoyance then made the work as a form of an insult to the esthetic monopoly. He independently voiced esthetic revision and freedom of thought in the world of art (Kusrini 2015: 117).

Marcel Duchamp's urinal work then marked the start of a debate about the dichotomy of high art and low art in the world of western fine arts. Forms of art that were originally recognized as high art were paintings and sculptures created by maestros. The maestros were believed to have the expertise of art that is able to represent ideas into the medium of canvas. Art forms other than the creation of the maestros are subsequently considered to be low art, as is the view of eastern art. After Duchamp's provocation, his views on esthetics, flow, style, language of expression, and the values in works of art that were once the subjects of relevance began to be questioned (Djatiprambudi, 2018).

The debate about the dichotomy of art was heightening when a new movement emerges in the world of contemporary Western art, namely Pop

Art, which has been famous through the works of Andy Warhol. Pop art in western fine art was originally a splinter of the flow of Dadaism and then shifted to a practical level at the time when Andy Warhol appeared and introduced Pop Art as a mass art. Andy is known as a Pop Art designer since he created works with mass printing techniques. Through his movement, he successfully represented his social criticism against the power of capitalism (Selvin, 2016). Among his mass-produced works of art was 32 Campbell's Soup Cans, in which he described himself (a symbol of popular culture) as a machine that constantly produces passively. With mass production through the printing technique, he produced the same drawings. Warhol actually also depicted the loss of originality, and this work indirectly likened appreciators to consumers who are shopping. Thanks to the popularity of Andy Warhol and his Pop Art, debates about the dichotomy of fine arts and esthetic views became increasingly complicated where the standards of masterpieces began to disappear and even their originality were questioned.

The discussion on contemporary art cannot stop at Andy Warhol. The next contemporary artist who also introduced a new style reappears in the Western art scene was Jean Michel Basquiat. Basquiat was originally a street graffiti artist who also studied Pop Art, but tended to have an independent and typical street art rebellion. Basquiat was a pioneer who opposed all forms of definitions and agreements in artistic practices. He tried to fight against the limits of fairness and standardization in the world of art and esthetics. These made his name one of the most influential figures in the art world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Buchhart, 2016).

### **Postesthetic Symptoms In Banksy's Works**

Banksy's works cannot be understood from the conventional esthetic point of view in general. This is because the esthetic approach used by Banksy is indeed different, as those different approaches used by other contemporary artists. The structure of beauty built in Banksy's works does not show visual beauty that calms the heart nor makes the

viewers feel comfortable. Instead, in general the art works presented by Banksy actually give unpleasant impressions. In essence Banksy through his work presents a contradiction, provocation, and horrors that force someone to think, to worry, and to get confused. Such is the beauty scheme offered by Banksy in his works.

Understanding Banksy's works must be based on a perspective of postesthetics also known as contemporary esthetics, in which things that are not of esthetic values are actually built to form interpretations of reality (Naukharinen, 2014). In the perspective of Banksy's version of contemporary esthetic, two important aspects can be seen, namely:

(1) The use of visual inclination towards postesthetics in Banksy's works is a form of resistance against the monopoly on the esthetics themselves. The esthetic nature that only recognizes pleasant things as beauty does not always match the reality, therefore, works that tend to focus on the level of visual beautification are considered to be dishonest in describing reality (Ramadhani, 2017). Things that are considered not beautiful basically have emotional closeness in the context of social reality such as violence or politics.

(2) The approach used by Banksy is basically a strategic effort to get a stronger impression on his works. Realities that are actually chaotic must be displayed in a chaotic manner to make it easier for the appreciator to interpret the work. Essentially, Banksy invites the public to be honest in seeing reality. In addition, contemporary paradigms have encouraged Banksy to use this strategy.



Figure 1. Banksy's parody on Napoleon's painting, a form of resistance against esthetic domination as well as strategic efforts to depict reality.

## Visual Characteristics of Banksy's Artworks

Visually, Banksy's works are more directed to street art similar to most of his works that are made in public places although in fact there are some of his works that are in the indoor format and exhibited conventionally. The approach through street art was chosen from the beginning as a form of resistance movement against existing social issues. This is because with street art anyone can see his works and not just the art community as it has been the case in exhibitions in the conventional galleries in general (Wicaksono, 2019).

Basically, Banksy always has a unique trick to make each of his works a subject of public discussion. He is good at placing moments, manipulating public perceptions, and attracting sympathies. Banksy also often does unthinkable actions such as destroying his own work, placing his work at locations that have never been thought of before, or making a tour in the location of his latest work. Based on these, a number of prominent characteristics in Banksy's visual approach can be identified, and they are as follow:

He uses stencil technique with monochrome color, rough but distinctive, original style, and different from most street art in general.

(2) Banksy often displays figures to emphasize certain meanings such as children, police, soldiers, iconic world figures, and images of animals such as rats or elephants.

(3) Banksy's visual works are sometimes very simple with one or two displayed figures; therefore, not too many symbols are displayed, which is different from most mainstream art works.



Figure 2. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple (left). A soldier and a child (right). The use of certain figures are intended to reinforce certain messages.

(4) His works are always displayed in strategic locations that have relationships or closeness to the meaning to the work displayed; therefore, the message of the work becomes stronger and more effective.

## Symbolic Meaning of Banksy's Artworks

Speaking of Banksy, he cannot always let go off symbols and signs in the context of strong semiotics. Banksy's works are almost entirely built on the strength of symbols. Symbols are signs whose meaning have been agreed or accepted socially (Supratno, 2010). Banksy combines various symbols to form new meanings and manipulate public perception. The result is a visual message that can be understood immediately. In this case, Banksy is probably one of the contemporary artists who is very aware of visual semiotics. There are several important points in the context of the symbolic meaning of Banksy's works, and they are as follow:

(1) The use of popular cultural icons are combined with certain symbols related to the



Figure 3. "Jesus Christ with shopping bags" showing the figure of Jesus Christ carrying shopping bags, illustrating the reality of consumerism in Christmas celebrations.

message carried, such as McDonald's mascot with a photograph of a child of the Vietnam War. Although both have different contexts, thanks to the visual semiotics these two icons can be united in one perception.

(2) He uses cultural symbols and even religious symbols which basically bring ethical problems that are not simple. His work once featured the figure of Jesus Christ carrying shopping bags. This art form is a criticism against consumerism culture during the celebration of Christmas.

(3) Symbols created by Banksy are not only present in his works, but he also constructs symbols through the moment or placement of his work. The location where he places his work often has a contextual closeness to the work he created.

(4) Banksy's works are mostly humorous but full of satiric elements; therefore, the humor displayed are sometimes presented as cruel and intimidating humors.

(5) Banksy's works are also packed with provocative and controversial images, especially on social humanitarian issues.

## Social Implications

Works with visual postesthetic approach inevitably generate debates that are vigorous, especially if they relate to ethical contexts. As it is known, these works often display something that is basically aimed at creating a discourse and a debate that is one of the strategies for creating

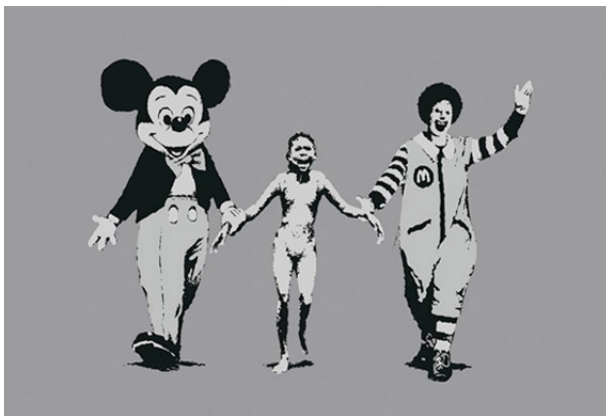


Figure 4. "Can't Beat the Feelin" featuring iconic figures. Mickey Mouse character (left), photo of a child of the Vietnam War (middle), McDonald's character (right). Symbols that initially had different contexts and meanings are combined to form new perceptions.

these works. In Banksy's case, he often presents controversial visuals, such as those showing Jesus or Napoleon. For some people, this can certainly bring strong reactions.

Ethical values cannot be completely ignored in life even in the world of art because, after, all the works of art are forms of human interpretation that are still bound by social norms. The ethical problems of these works indeed remain in the realm of space and time context, and in the reality in the life of Western society it might be considered normal (Naukkarinen, 2014). However, if the works incorporating such sensitive images are faced with the conservative or eastern societies, misunderstandings can occur, and they can even be considered blasphemous. Therefore, it is actually the public perception that is tested in this regard. In other words, it is the public maturity in reading the reality through visual language of the works in the context of social criticism.

Ethical values in their relevance to the symptoms of postesthetics sometimes seem to be ignored, but basically they are only at the visual level. The contents that needs to be conveyed are actually different from the visuals. In other words, the unethical visuals are basically tickling the appreciators to think and reflect. Therefore, when it is understood thoroughly, the ethical problem is actually nonexistent. It is the misinterpretation that might cause the ethical problem to arise. Therefore, at this point there is no such a premise that the contemporary esthetics, which is postesthetics, is entirely substandard; postesthetics actually encourages the public to exercise their critical and complex thinking.

## Conclusion

Postesthetics is basically a cultural phenomenon as a result of hyperreality in the postmodern era. Postesthetics itself if viewed from a cultural perspective, it is a new trend in understanding or acknowledging what is called beauty. In the postesthetic view, everything that was originally considered bad, unattractive, terrible, or worthless is now considered to be a part of beauty and even the beauty itself. Contemporary art is nothing but

the accumulation of postesthetic phenomena and its democratic and heterogeneous nature capable of accommodating new views, especially the postesthetic approach.

When viewed based on the time line since its emergence, which was pioneered by Marcel Duchamp and later by Banksy, postesthetics is actually a cultural and artistic approach that tries to be democratic and free to think. Banksy uses a contemporary esthetic approach to construct interpretations of reality in his works. The method he used is a form of resistance against the domination and esthetic monopoly as well as a strategic effort to make his works easier to interpret. Banksy has at least offered a new color in the world of contemporary art. The chaos of the discourse that he deliberately presents is an effort to encourage the public of art and the general public to be aware and more sensitive to the socio-cultural conditions.

Postesthetics in relation to the ethical issues is not necessarily in the wrong position because the context of the ethical problem is basically only related to the visual or external issues while the actual contents in the work contain different message. Visuals that look unethical actually encourage appreciators to think. It is misinterpretations that cause ethical problems to arise; therefore, there is no such a premise that the contemporary esthetics, postesthetics, is completely inferior.

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