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The Reinterpretation of Portrait in Contemporary Art

Irina-Andreea STOLERIU[1]

Abstract: *The Reinterpretation of Portrait in Contemporary Art* accompanies the works of artists and theoreticians preoccupied by the meaning of the *portrait* and the *reinterpretation* and, especially, by putting them in practice through the works of arts. Being a large topic, the personal scientific endeavour that we materialize into the present study is centred on the contemporary period, not leaving aside the meaning of other artistic ages. The contemporary age reflects a particular time in the evolution of the history of art, it can be considered, on the one hand, the normal result of development of historical and artistic times up today, but, on the other hand, as an artistic-cultural independent period itself, that either breaks down connections with tradition or resumes them, finding new meaning and ways of approaching them. Thus, the idea of *reinterpreting* works of art comes to underline a specific feature of contemporary artistic times, making us the witnesses of a large history of reinventing the portrait.

Keywords: *Portrait, Reiterpretation, Contemorary Art.*

One of the tendencies of modern and postmodern art is the return to the creations of the past, this "paraphrasing" of works and consecrated values sometimes has a reverential character, sometimes a satirical one, directing irony towards the source of inspiration and the personality of the artist or the entire system of artistic and aesthetic manifestations which defined the art of previous periods. The motivation of this reinterpretation process is based on the reactualization of traditional values, modern and postmodern artists reconsidered the art of the past, historicized styles being often used as semantic elements in the construction of a work of art (Nae, 2010, p. 183). Therefore, this described process represents a real symbol of postmodernism, nowadays artists appeal to "quoting" the works of great artistic epochs, searching to underline the individual creative personality in the extended cultural contemporary context, and also to bring stylistic and technical modernization, through *reinterpreting* the already confirmed artistic models.

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Not at all accidentally, while choosing inspiration sources, contemporary artists often use representative works which have become symbols of the western culture. In this respect, the aims of the creators of reinterpretations are also reflected in the perception manner of the public and art critics, all these having in view the revival of some artistic periods and works which are considered "obsolete", through the interest manifested for well-known works. Regarding this aspect, the amateurs of art are in the position of comparing the source of inspiration with modern and postmodern reinterpretations, in this context, we have noticed the problem of the relationship among great artistic epochs, as far as the evolution of the representation of the envisaged topic is concerned.

Another problem of "paraphrasing" the works from the past is the one about originality. Thus, we ask the question, "to what extent can reinterpretations be considered original creations?". In this respect, we can mention two meanings of the concept of *originality*, connected to the entire process of reinterpretation, there is a strict meaning and another one which is more extended. The first meaning, at least from our point of view, excludes the possibility of originality for these creations, given the fact that in the definition of reinterpretation, a new approach of the original is suggested, the "paraphrasing" part can thus be considered a manner of epigonic representation, without knowing any innovative element. But, the second meaning is related to the originality of reinterpretations, they are not simple copies or fakes, but authentic creations in which one can remark the artist's involvement from a conceptual, thematic and technical point of view.

In this severe process of reactualization of the values of the past, one of the periods which is often referred to is the one of Renaissance whose art was defined by an inexhaustible heritage of creations which have become a real source of inspiration for the artists from the epochs that followed, including the contemporary one. Thus, the paintings of Renaissance masters have been the basis of some works of art of a certain value which have served, in turn, as the starting point of nowadays reinterpretations.

Argumenting the frequent return to Renaissance landmarks and by changing the status of the artist in society, seen up to that point as a simple craftsman, once the overwhelming personality of Leonardo da Vinci appeared, the creator of beauty has received a new position, a privileged one compared to the one from the past, that is the artist has become an intellectual (Maliţa, 2010, p.11). Regarding the creation part, this transformation of image has offered Renaissance and and Post-Renaissance

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masters an unseen freedom. This fact brings information which argument why the works of the Renaissance have become inspiration sources for modern and postmodern artists, this choice being supported by the emancipation of the masters from the 15th - 16th centuries and also by the original way of treating the composition and the human representations from those specific periods.

Moreover, another aspect that we want to underline in this study is connected to the finding of some possible answers to the question "Why the artists that appeal to reinterpretation choose, in general, (famous) works of reference from the history of art as inspiration sources?". A possible answer could be the fact that the already acquired status of the original can offer a sure starting point to the artist that reinterprets a work of art. In this respect, if one would appeal to a painter or work of art which is less known, the impact on the new public could be minor or even zero.

Continuing this theme, the frequent tendency of reinterpretation is explained by the transformations that took place while passing from Modernism to Postmodernism, through which the limits of art have been reached, the turning of conventions upside down has become a routine (Gablik, 2008, p.21). This is why, in previous eras, we have met copies after well-known works, in these two periods, modern and postmodern, the preferance of creators for interpreting or reinterpreting past works has generated a new vision compared to the original. Consequently, an important aspect of the contemporary phenomenon of reinterpretation consists in a more and more frequent approach of some creations which have become true landmarks for western culture, thus having a large amount of successive works which have the same reference (origin) image.

Famous cases of reinterpretations, sometimes maybe as well known as the originals, refer to an impressive number of artists which have the same sources of inspiration. What we have noticed is that a reinterpretation seems to inspire another one, thus creating a tradition or a contemporary tendency through which artists, being continuously in a competition of rediscussing traditional art, through diverse creative attitudes (from homage to satire), we propose a new formula of analysis of past art.

On the one hand, in the creations of some of the modern and postmodern artists, there are modern and postmodern cases of reinterpretations, materialized in a reduced number of works which have as landmark the art of the past. On the other hand, there is a frequent practice of reinterpretation, in this case, artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973),

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Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Fernando Botero (n. 1932), Yasumasa Morimura (n. 1951), Cindy Sherman (n. 1954) or John Currin (n. 1961) have created isolated series of works and they have built the entire career based on a process of artistic "paraphrasing".

Becoming for a period of time one of the most innovative personalities of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso was perceived towards the end of his career as a guardian (Walther, 2007, pp. 535-536) of tradition, without him having intended this thing. Regarding his reinterpretations, the art historian Ingo F. Walther claimed that the sterility (Walther, 2007, p.564) from Picasso's work could have been measured by "paraphrasing" great art personalities, this practice can be later found in the artist's creation of maturity. The English critic and historian John Golding offered a series of explanations for creating various works based on well-known paintings, asking himself questions about the motivation of the reinterpretative process and its explanation through the exhausted imagination of the artist (Golding, 1994, p. 113) who, under these circumstances, requires artificial stimuli (Golding, 1994, p. 113), which become real through "*going back in time in the history of art and by the skillful usage of rather traditional elements"* (Walther, 2007, p.82). Making themselves remarked through the originality of style, the series of reinterpretations of Picasso have started from studies in which the starting source of inspiration could be detected, in the end making some creations of remarkable originality.

Moreover, another piece of explanation of John Golding for the various and multiple "paraphrasings" from the work of Picasso referred to the reputation of the artist in decline (Golding, 1994, p.113) in the last period of life, and also to the metaphorical possession of personality and the value of the previous periods' masters whose creations were sources of inspiration (Golding, 1994, p.113). Picasso joined the great personalities of art history through his original creation and through the reinterpretation of some famous models from art history. Beyond his undeniable talent, the good fame of the artist was augmented by the organization of postume exhibitions, meant to reunite as many cubist creations of the artist as possible and also the works that have served as his source of inspiration, *Picasso et les maîtres* (Le Grand Palais, Paris, 2008) or *Picasso: Challenging the Past* (Londra, 2009) being two of the most representative events of the past years. These manifestations have suggested the symbolic meeting of the past with the preset, again certifying the value of the 20th century artist seen as the most valuable creator of the entire modern period.

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Unlike Picasso who has created numerous reinterpreted works having various sources of inspiration, Francis Bacon has created only a series of such works whose origin lies in the painting of Velásquez – *Pope Innocent X*. The motivation of these reinterpretations has suggestively marked the reinventing (Davies, 2001, p.12) of the pope's portrait made by Velásquez, and also the upgrading (Davies, 2001, p.12) of this painting in a manner which is specific to the 20th century.

Being impressed by the creation of the baroque artist, Bacon has been obsessed with him (the years 1950-1960) (Janson & Janson, 2004, p. 849), the British artist entered some sort of direct competition (Janson & Janson, 2004, p. 849) with his master from the 17th century. Thus, Bacon's various paintings have constituted an important moment for the evolution of reinterpretation of the pope's portrait, represented by Velásquez in the work *Pope Innocent X*, which marked the transition from classical images to avant-gardiste from the 20th and 21th centuries.

Fernando Botero is another artist preoccupied by reinterpreting, this practice being motivated in his case by the respect that this Columbian man had for the masters of the past, studying their works through reproductions and through his study travels in Europa. These creations have helped the artist to discover his own style, by learning details about composition, pictural technique and chromatics of great masters. Under these circumstances, Botero has oftn returned to the works of reference from the past, reinventing and adapting them to his own artistic vision, defined as a fantastic universe (Schurian, 2005, p. 80). Though the Columbian's artistic "paraphrasings" can not be placed in a singular series of works, like the works of Picasso or Bacon, still, this type of representation persists in his creative endeavour, bringing a specific tendency met all along his career.

In photographic reinterpretations, the names of two contemporary artists have made themselves remarked, Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman, whose creations have some common elements, both of them appealing to the sub-genre of selfportrait expressed artistically through photography. In this respect, Cindy Sherman created a series of reinterpretations called *History Portraits* (1988-90), using various artistic landmarks, such as the works of Fouquet, Rafael, Caravaggio, Rubens, Fragonard or Ingres. In his turn, Morimura has created an impressive series of photographs, suggestively called *Daugther of Art History* (1990-2001), starting from the most important and known works of art from western art. The reinterpretations of Yasumasa Morimura have a deep meaning, marking,

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on the one hand, the crisis of identity in art, on the other hand, underlining the ironic character regarding inspiration sources, materialized in a specific *commedia dell'arte* (Kuspit, 2003, p. 8). Moreover, another feature of the creations from the series *Daugther of Art History*envisages the creation of some anti-institutional works, this type of art becoming some sort of fetish after having been exhibited in a museum (Kuspit, 2003, p. 10). As a consequence of this belief, in his numerous selfportraits, Morimura interprets diverse roles–some of them inspired by well-known creations–the Japonese artist thus substitute the presence of the initial model with his own transformed image.

Together with Morimura, Sherman is considered one of the emblematic personalities of postmodern art which is remarkable through the selfportraits made by using photography. Regarding this technique, the artist has made an impressive number of reinterpretations inspired by famous works, creating a series called *History Portraits* (1988-90), having works close to caricature, sometimes being grotesque, because of the exaggerations involved in the sketching of physiognomies. The artist posed in situations of famous characters, inspired by the works of grand masters, recreating the compositional frame, the costumes and, up to a specific extent, the atmosphere of that time. Marking a new phase in the evolution of reinterpretation, "the unusual" selfportraits of Sherman have envisaged, through disguise and interpretation of different roles, a major transformation of the artist's physiognomy depending on the chosen situations.

Unlike Morimura, Sherman has never offered to the viewer clues regarding the inspiration source of his works through the titles of photographies, the difference being made by a number, preceded by the sign #. The images which have been created in this way have found their meaning and explanation in their semantic content, inviting the viewer to make a comparative analysis between the created work and the one which constituted, initially, the source of inspiration of reinterpretations.

In the study dedicated to Sherman's creations, the art criticRégis Durand was meditating on the meanings connected to these works, trying to bring arguments at a conceptual level for the photographic works from the series *History Portraits.* One of the major problems was the destruction of the rules specific to canvas painting by using satire in the case of some of the most valuable creations of the past, and also by making the parody of painting itself (Durand, 2006, p. 256). Régis Durand has tried to give an

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answer to these parodies through a remark that reflected itself over the entire contemporary art and society, respectively by confessing that, probably, all is left for us in the present is connected to parody, immitation and envy (Durand, 2006, p. 256). Joining the point of view of Régis Durand, Liviu Malița said that contemporary art has used *"the trivialization of the aesthetics of what's new and novelty through repetition, cliché, quotation, paraphrasing, parody, shortly (...)becoming a parasite of the old works"* (Maliţa, 2010, p. 334).

Passing from the creation of Sherman to the one of John Currin, he is considered one of the most controversed contemporary creators, underlining in his creations a world in which the physical aspect is dominant, creating a satire of society and beauty standards imposed by fashion magazines. In his paintings, the artist has underlined "*the bizarre and moralizing portrait of contemporary society"* (Grosenick, 2008, p. 62), this purpose not being reached through avant-gardiste techniques, but by appealing to the work style of previous masters. Thus, the paintings of Currin were based on portraits which remind us of the Renaissance and Mannerism paintings (Grosenick, 2002, p. 72), counting, on the one hand, on satirizing tradition, on the other hand, being endebted to works from the past (Marter, 2011, p. 585). Some of the paintings have been compared to the ones of Lucas Cranach the Old, the similarities consisting in the ideal of feminine beauty, the body that emanates light and the dark background, the elements also found in the works of the master from the 16th century. The ecclectic style of the paintings of Currin has been symbolically compared to vampirism (Gingeras, 2006, p. 44), the artist being inspired by the works of the past in order to create new ways of expression adapted to contemporary art and society.

In this article whose topic has been *the reinterpretation of portrait from a contemporary perspective,* we have referred to a method of remaking and successive interpreting of some of the consecrated creations of works of art. The reinterpretation of portrait in the context of nowadays brings forward both the original work which was the starting point and which constituted the inspiration source of future works and also the entire series of interpretations that appeared in time. We could state that this is one of the most representative features of the process of artistic reinterpretation, unveiled like "quoting" the initial message of the source work, having a new meaning, in most cases, even very different from the original.

Another aspect that we wanted to underline is the fact that not every artistic creation can constitute the object of reinterpretation. Though one

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may think that it is a perfectly normal thing to reinterpret a creation that belongs to any artistic genre, reinterpreting supposes something more, it consists in the artists' appeal to different periods in search for the source creation, sometimes they appeal to their interpretations done in time, underlining a permanently present temporal element of this procedure, consisting in the idea of continuity. Reinterpretation supposes a multiple analysis both of the work used as model and of its interpretations, every time searching for new meanings or not discovered yet. In the same context, we also notice the fact that imposes itself also like a condition of this process of reactualization: in most cases, only famous works of art "benefit" from the effects of this action of bringing them to present, the character of notoriety of the work taken as a model also becomes part of future interpretations.

On the whole, we can notice the fact that portraiture is among the major preoccupations of artists and theoreticians in contemporary times, just like the idea of reinterpretation of the portrait which tends to gain more and more space in the complex world of art. Thus presented, the topic of reinterpreting portrait catches one of the nowadays artistic tendencies prefered by a large number of creators and put in light by critics.

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