

# Searching the Traces of Dialogical Aesthetics in Digital Art

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## Özet

Digital Technology has dramatically changed the way human beings communicate. It has made distance communication possible and changed our world into a 'Global Village'. Besides, it has influenced art experiences in a dramatical way. Like other forms of information, art is also able to reach wider audiences in all parts of the world, thus creating effective cross-cultural communication.

Throughout its history, art has always been the basis for a dialogue. While dialogism in art is not exclusive only to digital art, the creation of digital media based art has given rise to the exchange and manipulation of images in real time, thus creating visual dialogues. The aim of this article is to analyze digital arts from a dialogical perspective. Focusing mainly on Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy, the article aims to present how the trajectories of digital art and dialogical aesthetics intersect. The article proposes that although interactive art and dialogical art share many characteristics in common, all interactive digital art is not dialogic; therefore, the focus of this article will be on digital arts which use telecommunication media as a means of dialogic meaning production. Using intersubjectivity, real-time remote interaction, co-production and negotiation of meaning as its assessment criteria, the article discusses the level of dialogic aesthetics in digital arts through two digital art processes.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Digital art, Dialogic art, Dialogic aesthetic, Bakhtin, Buber

## Diyalojik Estetik Kavramının Dijital Sanatlar Bağlamında İncelenmesi

### Abstract

*Dijital teknolojilerdeki gelişmeler, yaşamın her yönünü etkisi altına aldığı gibi, iletişim biçimlerini de önemli ölçüde etkilemişlerdir. Zaman, uzam kavramlarına getirdikleri değişimlerle, mesafeler yok olmuş, dünyamız adeta küresel bir köye dönüşmüştür. Kendisi de bir iletişim biçimi olan sanat, dijital teknolojiler aracılığıyla dünyanın her bölgesinde geniş izleyici kitleleri ile buluşma ve kültürlerarası bir iletişim sağlama olanağına kavuşmuştur.*

*Sanat, tarihi boyunca diyalogların temeli olma görevini üstlenmiştir. Diyalojik kuram yalnızca dijital sanatlara atfedilmese de, dijital medya teknolojileri kullanılarak oluşturulan sanat yapıtları imgelerin gerçek zamanda değişimini ve dönüşümünü olası kıldığından, görsel diyalog yaratma olanağı sunarlar. Bu bağlamda, görsel sanatları diyalojik kuramlarla inceleme çalışmalarına olanak sağlayan sanat biçimi dijital sanatlardır. Bu makalenin amacı, dijital sanatları diyalojik açıdan incelemektir. Makalede özellikle Martin Buber ve Mikhail Bakhtin'in diyalojik felsefelerine yoğunlaşarak, dijital sanat ve diyalojik sanatın yörüngelerinin hangi yönleriyle örtüştüğü tartışılacaktır. Etkileşimsel dijital sanat ve diyalojik sanat birçok ortak özelliğe sahip olsalar da, tüm etkileşimsel dijital sanatlar diyalojik olarak nitelendirilemez. Bu bağlamda, makale telekomünikasyon araçları aracılığıyla diyalojik anlam yaratan dijital sanat biçimlerine odaklanacaktır. Özneler arası, gerçek zamanlı etkileşim ve anlam yaratma olgularının kriter alınacağı araştırmada örnek sanat süreçlerinin diyalojik estetik dereceleri değerlendirilecektir.*

**Keywords:** Dijital sanat, Diyalojik sanat, Diyalojik estetik, Bakhtin, Buber

## Introduction

Dialogue can be defined as a complex process of meaning-making that weaves together and holds a tension between description and ideal definitions in the ongoing co-constructed understanding of meaning. (Maranhao,1990: 6) Dialogism is the creation of a relative meaning as a result of the simultaneous interaction of two or more bodies in different places. These bodies do not always have to be physical; they can be political, ideological or cultural as well. (Holquist, 2002: 20) Likewise, dialogic art may be defined as art brought into being through exchanges between people as they interact with information, objects and each other.

The terms 'Dialogic', 'Dialogism', 'Dialogical' are all derived from the word dialogue and simply they all mean 'related to or having the character of dialogue'. Dialogue has been a subject of interest for many scholars in the fields of communication, education, philosophy, politics, technology, public relations and other areas relating to dialogic principles. However, not much has been done about determining the dialogical aesthetics in the field of art.

In the first part of the article, the theory of dialogue will be discussed from Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin's point of view, since their theories of dialogue shed a light on dialogical digital art. In the second part of the article, digital art will be discussed from a dialogical perspective. The final part of the article will give place to two practices of dialogical art: Selçuk Artut's 'Swap Text for Image' and Paul Serman's 'Telematic Dreaming'. Using process analyses method, the dialogical level of these artworks will be discussed taking inter- subjectivity, real time remote interaction, co- production and negotiation of meaning as its assessment criteria.

## Dialogical Aesthetics: Theories of Buber and Bakhtin

When considering the dialogical aesthetics of digital art, two scholars who are considered as the fathers of dialogic principles are of great importance: Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin. In other words, among many scholars who have contributed to philosophy of dialogism, Buber and Bakhtin's theories are the ones which relate to the digital arts.

### Martin Buber's Theory of Dialogue

Martin Buber (1878- 1975) based his theory of dialogue on

two types of interactions among human beings; the instrumental 'I- it' and the relational or dialogic 'I- Thou' (Kent, 2017;14) In his famous book 'I and Thou', he focused on the way humans relate to their world and claimed that humans view both objects and people by their functions. According to Buber, this kind of 'I- it' relationship keeps people outside the moment of relationship. Buber notes that it is possible to place ourselves completely into a relationship, 'to be there' without any preconditions. The bond created enlarges each person, and each person responds trying to enhance the other person. (Clu Open University, 2018) For Buber, a dialogue is a process that requires commitment and concentration from both parties; a giving one's self over to the other. In other words, dialogue is interactive: 'The basic word I- You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say you.' (Buber, 2010: 62)

Buber maintains that it is possible to have an 'I- Thou' relationship with the world and the objects in it. I and Thou relate as subjects through reciprocity and mutuality. In other words, the context of the experience is reciprocal and one can take the initiative to interfere and alter the experience. In this sense, digital art is a medium Digital Art in which 'I- Thou' relationships can be developed and true dialogues can take place.

Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue sheds a light on a number of distinguishing characteristics of digital art. The main theme of Buber's philosophy is that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. This is also true for dialogic digital art: the meaning is created through the interactive relations of the participants. Immersion and embodiment are two features of digital art which distinguishes it from conventional art. For example, in virtual reality environments the boundaries between the real and the virtual world are blurred. The viewer goes through a sense of embodiment, which leads to shifts in mental awareness. (Packer, Jordan, 2001: 295) In other words, the participant fuses with the virtual environment, as in the I-Thou relationship put forward by Buber. He is 'there' and shares it without any preconditions.

### Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogical Aesthetics

As stated in the previous section, dialogic philosophy was elaborated by Martin Buber and developed by Mikhail Bakhtin within the limits of literature, especially the genre of the novel. As

a philosopher of language and literacy critic, Bakhtin argued that texts have meaning that can only be understood through an encounter with a text or holding a dialogue with it. (Kent, 2017: 26) According to Bakhtin, the novel preserves imagined interactions on paper. As a result, it can not create the dialogic and unpredictable nature of language as experienced in dialogue. (Kac, 2004: 199-216) Bakhtin contrasts the single-voiced speech of the monologue, where only one person is speaking, with the idea of dialogue, where two or more people engage with each other from different points of view. The monologue is associated with a single voice speaking the only truth that can exist, without any interplay. Dialogic speech, on the other hand, involves multiple speakers and a variety of perspectives; meaning develops along the way. In Bakhtin's own words, 'the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists cannot be reached through a monologic artistic approach: (Bakhtin, 1984: 270)

In his famous work, 'The Dialogic Imagination', Bakhtin's aesthetic approach reveals the possibility of artworks that give less importance to visuality but more importance to dialogical aesthetics. Bakhtin states,

'...Stylistics is concerned with abstract linguistic discourse in the service of an artist's individual creative powers. But these individual overtones of style, cut off from the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives, inevitably come across as flat and abstract...' (Bakhtin, 1981: 269)

As can be understood from the above quote, artworks which are created by solely an artist, which are only limited to visuality and isolated from the discourse of social reality are monologic. They are not interpersonal and relational, thus they are incapable of interactive meaning-making. To put it differently, they are not dialogic because they are not able to create interpersonal dialogues in which the meaning of artwork arises.

In the next section of the article, the major features of digital art will be discussed in the light of Bakhtin's dialogical aesthetics.

### **Dialogic Digital Art**

'All dialogic art is interactive but not all interactive art is dialogic'

Eduardo Kac

Art has always been a means of communication, reflecting the realities of the period in which it is created. We are living in the Digital Age and digital technology has revolutionized the way human beings communicate by enabling distance communication possible. In parallel with the advances in media and communication technologies, art has also undergone several significant changes. Since we are witnessing the digital era and since conventional art is not capable of reflecting the realities of the digital age, art has also been digitalized.

In his book 'Conversation Pieces: Communication in Modern Art (2004), Kester claims that 'the authentic work of art does not engage in a dialogue with other art forms or even with the viewer. It's meaning is given over to the viewer pure and fully formed through an immaculate perception, rather than constructed in the messy space between the viewer and the art work.' (Kester: 2004, 48) Kester defines dialogical art as art practices emphasizing a connected mode of knowing and meaning-making grounded in the collective interaction. (Kester, 2011: 30)

Considering the distinctive characteristics of digital art, it can be argued that most digital art, especially the ones using telecommunication technologies has features that can be labeled as dialogical. Digital art has changed the relationship between the artist-artwork and the audience. Digital artworks are not based on the concept of individual expression of the artist. In other words, artworks are not the creation of a sole artist anymore but are created as a result of intersubjectivity.

In the object-based artwork which is produced by the artist and offered to the viewer, the viewer's response has no effect on the production of the work. Furthermore, the physical artworks are static whereas dialogical projects gain extensive meaning through a process of performative interaction. (Kester, 2004: 9) In other words, in digital art, the meaning is created through an open process in which intersubjective dialogues take place. In this sense, a dialogue in art is defined as the 'interpersonal and relational, interactive meaning making' (Hammersley, 2015: 39)

Umberto Eco was the first to research the active role played by the viewer in the realization of the artwork. In 'The Open Work' published in 1962, he examined works of literatu-

re, music and the visual arts that gave the viewer a new position in the realization of the work. Eco defines open art works which 'are open to continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli'. Eco argues that the viewer becomes most involved in works that are not only open but also 'works in movement' characterized by the invitation of the audience to make the work together with the author'. He describes such works as 'works characteristically consisting of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units'. (Eco, 1989: 21) In these open art processes, dialogue becomes part of the work itself. They are 'active', generative processes that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse. (Kester, 2004: 8) Going back to Bakhtin's dialogical philosophy, open works of art are dialogical by nature since they offer a variety of different meanings, interpretations and, points of view. In other words, the work of art itself can be viewed as a kind of dialogue.

#### **Interactive Art Works vs. Dialogical Art Works**

Interactivity is the most prominent feature of digital arts which makes it different from contemporary art practices. Digital artworks that require the viewer to engage in some kind of activity that goes beyond purely mental reception are commonly designated as 'interactive art'. In 'Pioneers of Interactive Art' Soke Dinkla defines interactive art as, 'a category-specific designation for computer-supported works in which an interaction takes place between digital computer systems and users'. (Kwastek, 2013:4) A more comprehensive definition is given by the Turkish New Media artist Ozan Türkkan. He defines interactivity as, 'the viewer's participation in the art process, changing and even creating it. (as cited in Akin, 2015: 250) Türkkan states that interactive artworks appeal to six senses, the sixth being the consciousness and claims that these works take their form according to the nature of the viewer.

With the advent of digital interactive art, artworks have undergone radical changes. The art object has transformed into a process or a system. In other words, art is liberated from the boundaries of the object. The artist is not the sole creator of the art process. He informs the viewer with an information, feeling or a reality by providing the necessary data. It is the viewer who creates his own meaning through the art process. In this respect, digital interactive art is polysemic, having multiple meanings. Each viewer has his own unique experience

and the resulting artwork depends on the interaction of the viewer, thus being a unique work as well. The participant of the viewer has turned into an active co-author of the artwork. (Akin, 2015: 263)

The features of digital interactive art which have been mentioned above overlap with the characteristics of dialogical art practices. Dialogical art requires the use of bidirectional or multidirectional media to promote intersubjective experiences. Eduardo Kac asserts that, through telecommunication media and network protocols, artists can create what he calls 'multi-logic interaction'. Kac defines multi-logic interactions as, 'complex, real-time contexts in which the process or dialogue is extended to three or more persons in an ongoing exchange. (Kac, 2004: 7) As a result of this ongoing open exchange, what one says or does directly affects and is affected by what the others say or do. As can be inferred from Kac's definition, multi-logic interactions are dialogical.

Kac states that although all dialogic artworks are interactive, the opposite is not always true. Although some digital artworks seem to be interactive, they are not really so in reality: they are interpassive. Sometimes in interactive artworks, the artist writes the interaction of the viewer while he is producing the work. What the viewer has to do is only to choose from the pre-programmed options. In other words, it is the artist, not the viewer, who has control over the art system. The viewer chooses one option after the other from a pre-established system of choices. (Kac, 2004: 9) This kind of interpassive artworks are not dialogic because they are not intersubjective and it is still the artist who writes the work whereas a true dialogic work of art evolves in its own parameters.

#### **Method**

In the next part of this article, two artworks will be analyzed in detail in order to assess the level of their dialogic qualities. Taking content analyses as its milestone, the study develops a new model which is coined as 'process analyses'. Dialogic digital art is open to differentiated levels of indeterminacy and dialogic digital artworks do not exist as independent entities but depend directly on what the interactants bring into the experience. In other words, there is no concrete art object produced by an individual artist, but there is an ongoing process along which the meaning is produced through multidirectional, intersubjective interactions. Thus, what is going to be analyzed

is not an art object or a text but a process. After having a thorough literature review on Dialogic Aesthetics (Bakhtin, 1984; Buber, 2010; Baurriad, 1998), dialogism (Maranhao, 1990; Holquist, 2002) and digital art (Kaster, 2004; Kaster, 2011; Kac, 2004) (Hammersley, 2015) an assessment criteria has been established to evaluate to what extent digital artworks are dialogic.

As mentioned earlier in the article, dialogic art promotes new aesthetic values such as intersubjectivity, real time remote interaction, co- production and negotiation of meaning. To put it differently, real time remote interaction, inter subjectivity and negotiation of meaning are pre-requisites for art to be dialogic. That being the case, real time remote interaction, intersubjectivity and negotiation of meaning will be taken as assessment criteria in evaluating the dialogic level of the two sample cases which will be presented in the following section.

#### **Assessing the Dialogic Level of Two Digital Art Processes: Swap Text For Image, ‘Telematic Dreaming’**

‘Swap Text For Image’ (2005) is a multiparticipational, intersubjective, experimental short film Project produced by the Turkish artist and scholar Selçuk Artut. The Project was based on a research idea questioning interrelations between images and texts. (Artut, 2014: 19) In this project, while Artut questions the humiliation of word in a world dominated by images, he also criticises technology. As part of the project, writer Murat Uyrukulak was asked to develop a 27 sentence long short story. Every day, one single sentence of the story was announced to the public sequentially on the project’s website and the participants were asked to upload visuals related to that sentence, reflecting the participants’ feelings about the given sentence. In 27 days, with the participation of 500 volunteers, more than 2000 images were collected. 800 images were selected to create the intended film. After the sequencing of the images were completed, the sentences and the images were overlapped and put into a film structure. The names of the 500 volunteers were listed and projected on the screen when the film ended. In his book ‘A/B’, Artut explains his intention to start this project. In his own words: ‘We want to make a film, and we want for everyone who wants to act in this film to do so. The artistic production of ours should have not one owner, but a large number of shareholders, with each scene belonging to someone else. Like Martin Heidegger states in his article, ‘The Origin Of The Work of Art’, ‘a work of art produced today

cannot be considered the product solely of the artist who has produced it. Artistic production should not be perceived as an interpretation or reflection of reality, but as reflections of the community’s shared understanding. In this respect, this film is therefore our film- the film of a series of disjointed thoughts’. (Artut, 2010: 36)

‘Telematic Dreaming’ (1992) is an art work produced by the British artist and scholar Paul Sermon by using telecommunication media. Sermon defines his work as, ‘...user determined narrative between remote participants who are brought together within a shared telepresent environment.’ (Media Art Net, 2018) ‘Telematic Dreaming’ is a live telematic video installation, linking two remote sites via a telephone line. A video image of a single user/ performer who is lying on a bed in one location is projected to another bed in another location. In other words, they virtually share the bed and their responses are influenced by each other. Sermon creates a half-real, half virtual environment for the participant through immediate, real time interaction. By his work, Sermon wants to raise the cultural themes associated with communication in general. One of the themes he wants to point out through ‘Telematic Dreaming’ is the physical body’s relationship to virtual representations of the human body. (Popper, 2007: 363- 365)

The first prerequisite of a digital artwork to be considered as dialogic is it’s being intersubjective. Dialogical aesthetics is not concerned with sensory cognition or beauty, but with intersubjectivity. (Kac, 2004: 199- 216) In ‘Relational Aesthetics’ (1998), Baurriaud uses the term intersubjective to refer to inter- human encounters and exchanges which contribute to the construction of social phenomena. This inter- human inflection is a move towards a more social constructionist notion of self/ other relations and interpersonal encounters and exchanges that contribute to a co- productive process of meaning- making. In this sense, co- production refers to the collaborative construction of meaning. This brings us back to Martin Buber’s I/ Thou relationships which proposes that I and Thou relate as subjects through reciprocity and mutuality. By reciprocity, Buber means that the context of the experience is reciprocal. In other words, one can take the initiative to interfere and alter the experience. Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy coincides with the idea of intersubjectivity, as well. As stated earlier in the article, Bakhtin claims that dialogic speech which involves multiple speakers and a variety of perspectives develops me-



aning along the way.

Considering the two artworks, both works have intersubjective characteristics. In Artut's 'Swap Text For Image', each participant reflects his/ her own feelings which the given sentences arouse in them through the images of their own choices. These images go into a dialogue with each other and evolve into a whole containing a meaning. It is a collaboratory work which is based on 'dispersed authorship'. (Ascott, 1991:115) The focus of the aesthetics shifts from the observed object to the participating subject. It's a platform where different perceptions come together. It is an interpretation of society's common understanding.

In 'Telematic Dreaming' participants relate through reciprocity and mutuality. The participants are in a constant dialogue, affecting and changing each other's responses. Sermon does not have any control over the process; it is the participants at distant places brought together in a half virtual environment who are the creators of the artwork. Real time remote interaction is the second distinguishing character of dialogic digital artworks. Visual dialogues imply the exchange and manipulation of images in real time. In other words, the image is transformed as words are transformed in speech. Telecommunication media enables real time remote interaction among numerous participants at different locations. Sermon's 'Telematic Dreaming' is an example of telepresence which requires real time remote interaction. Jonathan Steuer defines telepresence as an experience of being there through a communication medium. (Steuer, 1992: 6) Telematic Dreaming involves a joint virtual presence of recipients who are actually located in different places (Kwastek, 2013: 35). A social interaction is built among the participants through telepresence. As in Buber's concept of reciprocity, the participants can interfere and influence the experience from a distant position, which makes it interactive and dialogic.

On the other hand, Artut's work does not display real time remote interaction. The images which are sent during a given period are brought together to create the art work. Participants interact, but not in real time.

As for negotiation of meaning, the meaning is produced along the way through the process in both works. Dialogical practices shift the focus of meaning making towards a process of encounter, rather than presenting the meaning of art as an

exercise in the distanced judgement of the viewer. (Baurriad, 2002: 14) The dialogical work of art is interpreted as the sum of relations that represent the proposal of living in a shared world. The proposal is that such constructive approaches transform the meaning of art from the sum of historical and aesthetic statements and judgments made by the artist in the process of production, to co-constructed and shared worlds meaning (Baurriad, 2002: 15). The meaning is realized through the reactions of the participants to the artist's doing or making. Kester defines dialogical encounter as 'interpersonal, collaborative practice in which all participants may have their existing conceptions challenged' (Kester, 2004: 49) Dialogical encounter represents the potential for the generation of new insights among collaborative participants. They may permit people to perceive relationships on ideas in new and fresh ways, challenging the embedded meaning.

Sermon's 'Telematic Dreaming' raises a few cultural themes associated with telecommunication in general. The participants experience the physical body's relationship to virtual representations of the human body. This reflects the condition of being connected to anonymous partners through communication technology. To state it differently, Sermon questions the intimacy of human interaction in the age of digital communication. (Popper, 2007: 365) However, each participant has his/ her own unique experience and each makes his own sense out of the dialogic encounter through the art process.

Artut's 'Swap Text For Image' questions the humiliation of word in a world surrounded by images. His work is also an observation of society's conceptions on word- image relationships. Each participant sends an image related to the given sentence. Artut states that some participants just chose a word, searched it on google and chose an image which interested them most from the visual context supplied to them. Others, however, made photos of the feelings the sentence arouse in them. (Akin, 2015: 233) In Artut's view, such behaviors of the participants reveal the extent the society is addicted to technology in expressing themselves. He also puts forward that digital technology excludes our brains, shaping our creativity with their own systems. (Artut, 2014: 20) In 'Swap Text For Image', as in 'Telematic Dreaming', the artist is the one who designs the system and the process. The meaning is created through the reactions of participants to the given sentences. Each participant develops his/ her unique textual- visual rela-

tionship. In other words, the observers are the creators of the work and the meaning is produced through the intersubjective dialogue. Referring back to Bakhtin's philosophy on dialogic speech, multiple speakers and a variety of perspectives meet through the medium of the internet and the meaning arises along the way.

### Conclusion

Art has always been a factor of sociability and has always been the basis for a dialogue. However, the type of dialogue it creates has evolved with dramatic changes in digital technologies. With the advent of digital arts, dialogic principles were introduced to the scene of visual arts. The main reason for this is digital art's using media that enables real dialogues.

Dialogic art promotes new aesthetic values such as intersubjectivity, co- production, real time remote interaction and negotiation of meaning. Based on Bakhtin and Buber's dialogic aesthetics, these prerequisite values of dialogic art have been analyzed through two interactive digital artworks. Considering intersubjectivity, both works analyzed show intersubjective characteristics, that coincide with Bakhtin and Buber's dialogic philosophy.

Taking real time remote interaction into account , Sermon's work which uses telecommunication media creates a joint virtual presence of recipients who are located at distant locations. This allows the participants to interfere and influence the experience, supporting Buber's concept of reciprocity. Artut's work, however, lacks real time remote interaction, which diminishes its level of dialogicality.

As for meaning making, in both processes meaning is created through dialogic encounters. In both works, there is no embedded meaning created by the artist. As Bakhtin has stated, dialogic speech, in our case dialogic art, which involves multiple participants and a variety of perspectives develops meaning along the way. To conclude, all digital artworks can not be labeled as dialogic. Interpassive works of art which use digital media do not have dialogic qualities. On the other hand, the level of dialogic relations differ in different forms of digital arts and digital artworks which enable real time interaction through communication media have the highest level of dialogicality. To finish the article with Nicolas Bourriaud's words; 'Contemporary art resembles a period of time that has

to be experienced, or the opening of a dialogue that never ends'. (Bourriaud, 1998: 16)

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