

# Meaningless Shapes

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An interview with Touraj Saberi Vand on his book “Meaningless Shapes” Art is a language.

The issue of borders and geopolitical demarcation can be a great preoccupation for many politicians, but an artist doesn't find such issues that serious or meaningful. So far, a great number of artists, particularly in cinema, have challenged this bordering approach. They believe such demarcations not only will result in more wars and genocides, but also can be a great obstacle to human beings' communications and compatible relationships. Touraj Saberivand has challenged these borders in his latest book. Of course, it should be noted that the major idea of questioning borders goes back to a year before the book getting published. In September 2017, as a minimalist designer, SaberiVand was invited to Italy to receive A Design award. But for some difficulties in scheduling the embassy appointment and applying for visa, he gave up the idea of going to Italy. However, later on, he wrote a censorious letter to Italy cultural counselor to protest against what he described as “indecent behavior”. Nevertheless, as he saw such treatment several times, Saberivand chose art and culture as media to attract the attention of the embassy and the Iranian diplomats to this issue. So he published a book entitled “meaningless shapes”. Saberivand has referred to the geopolitical demarcations of the modern world simply by writing a sentence “not for those who have created a bordered world”. This book is full of black and white political maps each implying different political/cultural meanings. Among these meaningless shapes one can refer to the geopolitical maps the author has brought in the book. Regarding the publication of this book and also, its author's collaborations with non-Iranian designers, we have interviewed Saberivand to shed lights on his idea about meaninglessness of borders.

You have recently published a book with an uncommon form and content ; a book full of

unconventional shapes and non-geometrical forms which have different meanings in different parts of the world. Where did the like Marlboro, Mitsubishi, and even sometimes LG. Yellow and purple can stand idea come from to write such a book? Seemingly, the major distinction of your book is its title "meaningless shapes". I guess the ultimate goal of turning those pages and finding out that these are different countries of the world is to remind the reader of this title. Let's get started from the term meaningless. What shapes do you regard as meaningful? Why these shapes cannot be meaningful in isolation? What makes the readers' perception of your book meaningful?

- I don't think if we can find a meaningful shape at all. However, some shapes have names like the geometrical ones, and some don't. There are numerous nameless shapes which cannot be specified because of this anonymity. But, it doesn't mean that they don't exist. They exist anonymously. A diamond exist as a shape because it has either a name or a unified form. Hence, it can exist. However, we don't talk about the philosophical meaning of existence. Anyway, the shapes with or without names are meaningless. Also the alphabets are some weird shapes that don't have any meaning. But since they have names, they exist. Take letter چ in Persian alphabet. Although it has both a name and a shape, it is meaningless. However, we have agreed upon some shapes to imply some arbitrary meanings. The same is true about the shapes of the countries. In fact, what we call the shapes of the countries is actually the shapes of the borders. It's not the countries that we see on a world map. What we see is in fact their borders. And since the borders have nothing but names, they don't have any meaning.
- Of course, many believe these names are among the most significant names in human history. Different events like wars, genocides, natural disasters, ... have brought numerous changes to the present shapes of the countries. That is to say, if we believe in meaning creation, it could be said that one of the greatest meanings human being has created throughout the history is the concept of homeland. Also, if we believe in the meaning deciphering, homeland can be among the main meanings that is deciphered so far. However, this signification has contributed to a great number of historical events. Therefore, there might be some criticism against you. The critics might accuse you of reducing meaning merely to geometrical shapes, while in fact, these shapes are symbolic representations of history, identity and culture of human beings in past, present and future era. What would be your response to these criticisms?

Quite the contrary, I believe we can accuse these shapes of creating numerous wars and genocides all around the world. Actually, the names and features of shapes can be a good excuse to start a war. For instance, regard the man who decided to change his country's shape and add Khuzestan - in Iran- to its own homeland. Although we have been lucky enough to survive, different stages of our lives from childhood to probably our adulthood have been overshadowed by this decision.

Here is the thing. A purely meaningless idea that is fully processed to be meaningful, or let's say, to be holy enough that people think they might even get killed as a hero to save its name and shape. This is the very characteristic that all governments have in common. This is the very game of the politics: to show a holy face of a totally meaningless idea.

- Since both your book and your answers are focused on the concept of meaning, it seems necessary to first start with your idea about the concept of meaning. What is a meaningful concept? What items can help providing a phenomenon with meaning?

I am neither eager to try to define the concept of meaning nor it is a job I can handle it. But in case of countries meaninglessness, what I truly understand is that countries are signifiers with such volatile signifieds that we can hardly find out their meanings. The shape we name Iran, is the modern version of this country. In past, it wasn't like this. It had even another name. But, we, as Iranians, have two different attitudes toward our country. We are either proud Iranian citizens or ashamed of our national humiliation. Iran used to be a land with Persian, Turk, and Arab inhabitants. It used to be a well-known empire. Like other kings all over the world Iranian kings were murderers. However, their good deeds shouldn't be ignored. But since I was born in this country, I have to show a patriotic behavior when I hear my national song just the way an African citizen is proud of his national song. But why?

What kind of meaning, significance, dignity or authenticity can exist in these shapes, borders and names?

It's merely a fictional political meaning that can be a good start point for fascism. The end result would be nothing but a fake identity. Otherwise, what is the difference between an Afghan citizen with a citizen in Mashhad? What about the differences between a Mexican and a citizen in American frontier? How important it is to be in a specific spot in this world?

- You made two points in your response. First, let's talk about collective identity that we can't be sure about its truth or falsity. I mean how can we test the truth and falsity of a collective identity? Collective identity either exists or it doesn't. It starts from a set of shallow transitional issues and ends with very deep identities. For instance, the bus passengers going to Ghom, first define their shared identity as "we bus passengers" rather than deep and complicated identities such as "we Iranians". And about the meaningless shapes it could be said that when you regard some shapes as meaningless, in fact, you have an idea of a meaningful concept in your mind to compare meaningless shapes with them. I want to know if you believe in the concept of meaning at all or not? If yes, tell me about its nature. Tell me about the way other things lose meaning in front of it.

You are right about the falsity test. I guess, the collective identity of a country is not that different from the collective identity of the passengers in a bus. In some respects, the former is even shallower than the latter because no one has had the opportunity to decide whether he wanted to be a passenger in a country bus or not.

And about the meaningfulness of something I have to say, when I say I am a minimalist, I mean I believe something is good, while something else is bad. Being a minimalist artist is something meaningful. Minimalism is meaningful

too. That is to say, it has committed to some values that are the foundation of this art. When I say I am a moralist, I mean I believe in something I was free to not to. So, my admission about being a moralist is meaningful. In other words, a moral system has some values and ideals that must be flourished.

But when I say, I am from such and such a border, it's meaningless. The borders aren't created based upon values. They are in fact the result of some arbitrary division by some random people, just like school shifts which determined some students should come early in the day, and some, should come later in the day. It is totally coincidental and arbitrary. There is nothing valuable or significant about these divisions. However, it is dramatized as a theatrical scene to motivate the first shift students to start their school day with epic songs. As a result of this dramatization, I as an Iranian citizen feel the duty to get emotional while watching Damavand from Seyed Khandan Bridge, while I might have zero feeling about a Japanese mountain. Many people thought it was awful to use a mountain other than Damavand during the political debates. Are the mountains different from each other?

Damavand is a mountain just like other mountains in the world.

- But your examples do not provide us with a reasoning. Regarding minimalism or moralism as something meaningful without giving any logical reasoning is as acceptable as regarding a patriotic person's idea about patriotism meaningful. I mean how can a minimalist artist be meaningful while a patriotic cannot?

I wasn't reasoning. What I did was offering some examples of things that can be meaningful. So I named minimalism and moralism as examples. The borders are meaningless. This book is not about the significance or insignificance of the notion of patriotism. It is about the meaning of borders.

- Alright, it can be a good introduction to talk about your book. Don't you think that living inside these borders has led you to write this book? If you lived in another geographical location, wouldn't it affect your ideas?

Any response to this question would be hypothetical and non-testable. However, my answer is "No". If I lived in a place other than here, I would probably have different beliefs or ideas. I mean if I lived in downtown or uptown, or if I had a different teacher, or my house was different from my current house, or even if I was from North or South, my thoughts would be as different as a when I was in Balkh or Bukhara.

- To see how related your book and your ideas are that is directly related to our discussion, perhaps it is better to see to what category does this book belong? Is it a work of art? Is it a political treatise? What do you think?

Art is a language. And an artist is a person whose language is art. However, this language is not necessarily expressive or translatable. But as you know, a political treatise is either expressive or translatable to other languages. For sure I haven't thought about this issues when I was writing the book, but I think it can be a political content which its language is art.

- If we regard language as a tool to communicate with others, what do you think would be the relationship between art and language in this sense?

A person can communicate with others through laughter or lamentation. In fact, laughter and lamentation are some kinds of languages that are not translatable. Some people understand these languages better than some other who have no idea about the arbitrary rules of them. Music and images cannot be translated to each other because the nature of art is about form rather than a

definable content. However, I guess a French content that is translated to Arabic is a definable content. As a matter of fact, language is “a tool for communication”, but we have to specify the kind of communication we have in mind.

- You are a designer in its modern terms. It seems there is a shared language between the designers and a majority of their audiences. How can you define this condition? Can we regard design as the shared language of the modern human being?

It seems that design is a modern requirement. I think we can define a binary opposition of design/luxury. That is to say, the aim of design is to create functional products rather than useless luxury products. We have to create products that we need in our everyday life, things that make our lives easier. This approach would transform the relationship between design and the society. Previously, the designers used to design attractive products based upon the tastes of the capitalist producers. Then they had to use advertisements to persuade and excite people to buy them. But the modern version of design has disturbed this order. The modern designers prefer the society’s needs over the producers’ tastes. So they start

their task by monitoring people’s lives, issues and problems in order to offer a solution. By issues and problems, I don’t mean the metaphysical ones. I mean the very routine problems in the society. Design is there to resolve this simple problems. It doesn’t have big claims. It just focuses on its small tasks. For instance, it tries to create useful products in a sustainable and nature-friendly way. Obviously, capitalism is still yielding profits. I mean, when doesn’t it?

- What’s your idea about the effect of media and its power to make tastes for a world? Are the standards in design world created by media or academies?

Both media and academies are consumers of tastes themselves. I guess it’s impossible to understand the mechanisms of the highly complicated process of taste making throughout human history. If the notion of spirit of age is true, it could be suggested that the spirit of our age is minimalism. Both media and capitalism are harmonizing with this spirit. If this taste changes, media, academies and capitalism will change as well. The design colleges in many universities would train skillful people who do not necessarily produce science or tastes. The independent design institutions, design Councils, designers, studios, and even the design companies are

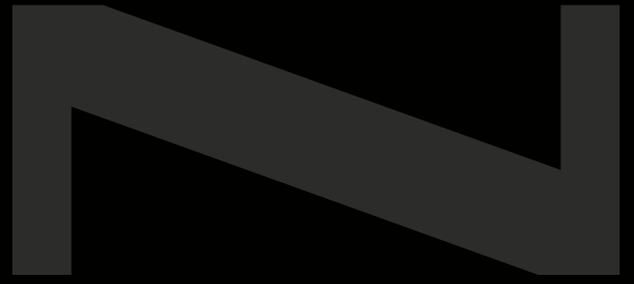
way more efficient than universities. I don't know any university that can compete with Bauhaus in terms of design.

Of course, Iranian universities are too weak to be able to even train skillful designers. • You are a minimalist designer as it is evident in this book. What do you think has made such a style in designing, art, ... in the modern world this popular? Can we consider it an antithesis to crowd, anarchy, and chaos of the modern mechanical world?

believe it is the functionalist approach of the contemporary human being that has caused this minimalist taste. I mean, the modern human being has thought about the use of all the extras and ornaments. So he decides to simply delete any extra thing. You can find this clearly in Adolf Loos's essay, "Ornament is crime". As Loos notes: "cultural evolution is directly related to the degree we avoid ornamenting products". He sarcastically regards this indifference toward ornaments as the grandeur of our age. Loos was an architect in 19th century. So we can find the roots of the present age's minimalist taste in that era. Obviously, the author lived in a society that wasn't empathetic with his ideas. But now we live in a world where everyone are either empathetic or starting to empathy with minimalism.

• You have challenged the idea of borders in your book by calling them meaningless. Regardless of the political implications of these borders, how have you experienced this meaninglessness in your profession? Have you and your foreign colleagues faced any conflicts in terms of culture or language?

The major problem that has caused disruption in my professional experiences, is time difference. For instance, we worked as a team whose members were from Iran (me), USA, Australia and Ireland. It's a pity if we take language and technology which have minimized the distance between human beings for granted. They cannot be easily ignored.



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