

# INTRODUCTION

## Lia Yoka

An early moment concretely linking art history to semiotics can be sought in the study of symbolic activity in culture at large as a foundation for the understanding of artworks: Partly forged by their association within the so-called Hamburg School of Art History, a thread of remarkable coherence and continuity connects the four volumes of Ernst Cassirer's 1923-1929 *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, where Cassirer suggests a conditional equivalence of symbols and signs, or rather of *Prägnanz* and symbolic activity, with Erwin Panofsky's 1939 *Studies in Iconology*, where "intrinsic" iconological meaning, the result of layered symbolic activity, emerges at the highest (and deepest, i.e. mythic) level of understanding an artwork, and with Aby Warburg's whole oeuvre on the cultural science of the image.

In his several studies on Romanesque and modern art, the pioneer art historian Meyer Schapiro began a parallel, one could say anti-"symbolist", tradition from within art history, incorporating semiotic thinking in a materialist understanding of style and form as embodiments of the social. His seminal *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (1973) rely heavily on a Saussurian conception of meaning as difference and are more about the functions of the symbol (understood as the meaning embedded in the formal and stylistic qualities of an artistic depiction): His famous chapter "Frontal and Profile as Symbolic Forms" distinguishes between understanding a symbol by convention and by connotation by way of its difference to other depictions.

The semioticians Yuriy Lotman, describing global culture in terms of spatialized, (intersecting or discontinuous) semiospheres, Umberto Eco, developing an interpretative and historical semiotics of texts as open fields of contested meaning, and Roland Barthes, famously deconstructing the mythical codes of advertisement, extended, in different ways, the study of symbolic activity within a general science of culture. These post-war theorists are more concerned with how broader cultural meaning is created and received rather than with seeking a way to read artistic images as signifying cultural objects.

Scholars with a primary interest in interpreting specific artworks, borrowed terminology and concepts from linguistics proper and from the philosophy of language, the cradle of semiology, and carried them across art historical and art critical studies in a series of works. To mention only a few that have been very widely-read (for reasons not unrelated to the art history education market): Using Piercean terminology, Stephen Bann has pointed to the internal relation between Courbet's landscapes as iconic of a specific place and as indexical of the material connection between plant-based paint and forest topography; elsewhere, he connected the novelty of cubist painting to a transition from representational image to analogical diagram (see his wonderful *Experimental Painting: Construction, abstraction, destruction, reduction*, 1970). Rosalind Krauss offered several semiotic readings of the pictorial language of Picasso in her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985) and of 1970s painting in her article "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" (*October*, [Part 1] vol. 3, Spring 1977, pp. 68-81 and [Part 2] vol. 4, Autumn 1977, pp. 58-67). Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, in their famous 1991 article in *The Art Bulletin* (Vol. 73, No. 2, June

1991, pp. 174-208) on “Semiotics and Art History”, admitting that “the semiotic perspective has long been present in art history”, claim that “the work of [Alois] Riegl and Panofksy can be shown to be congenial to the basic tenets of Peirce and Saussure” (“Semiotics and Art History” 174) and proceed to decipher the clues in several high art examples.

I found it interesting that the papers submitted to this volume on art and semiotics contains no references to these latter, somewhat external, uses of semiotic tools. This cannot be because all authors happen to consider them somehow unproductive – that they are definitely not. It seems however, that next to a current of semiotics drawing from descriptive semiotics and discovering the “visual” (often employing Jakobson’s *intersemiosis* to translate the *visual* into the repertoires of verbal-like languages), next to another market-oriented semiotics, liberally using artistic vocabulary to explain the function of commercial images, there is an increasing need for a return to semiotics as a holistically cultural yet media-specific approach. Ideally this approach can allow humanities and social science studies to not have to fight for their relevance, but to become indispensable for, and challenge, any “hard science” endeavor looking at e.g. neural networks or AI manufacturing processes. On the one hand, it tries to incorporate the understanding of pictures and picture-making into current communication studies (in their media-theoretical, bio-ecological and cultural-historical sense): In this direction, the analogies to speech act theory for the study of (non-artistic) pictures and the formulation of a predicative picture theory by Klaus Sachs-Hombach in this issue are fundamental. Irene Gerogianni’s discussion of ritual elements in the staged violence of performance art appreciates the broadening of the theory of speech acts, this time for the study of art.

On the other hand, this cultural and media-specific semiotics configures our thinking about art and art making within the historical study of the development, interconnections and separations of semiospheres of institutionalized power, like politics, religion, economy, law, medicine, and indeed art. Göran Sonesson’s evolutionary-phenomenological conception of an anthropology of art also traverses definitions of ritual. Art as an act of communication is about “making strange”, first through perfecting ‘appearances [close to] the perceptual world’ and then, i.e. since modernism, by ‘depicting other depictions’, yet still claiming their ‘specialness’, even while ‘[n]ewness becomes a frozen gesture’. Assimina Kaniari focuses on an instance, the proclamation of New Brutalism (1955) by Reyner Banham, where the definition of art as new *avant-garde* is expanded from within humanist historical discourses.

Surace examines the case of works by Kunizo Matsumoto, where ‘pre-semiotic psychopathological specifics’ of compulsive, ‘code-free’ graphomania seems to enter the realm of semiosis, since the resulting product is institutionally recognized as art.

In Bellentani and Panico’s treatment of monuments, aesthetic and symbolic perception (interpretive communities) conflates with the established material aspects (the ontology of the object) to establish the programmatically political aspects of memorialization, creating for monuments a conceptual space distinct from the artistic category, but also wholly dependent upon it.

Art reemerges as both a minor institutional subcategory of mass culture and the purest possible conception of a *semiotic urge*.