

Punctum.

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Special issue on
Art as Concept and
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of an Evolving Category

edited by
Lia Yoka

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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 Jacobson’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*.

Acting with pictures¹

Klaus Sachs-Hombach

Pictures are increasingly influential in all areas of society and even shape political discourse to a remarkable extent. In order to better understand why pictures are so powerful, the present article compares the affordances of using words and pictures for communicative purposes, thereby highlighting various similarities and differences between the two modes, and ultimately developing a pragmatic theory of picture use. The article's main thesis is that using pictures in a communicative context offers powerful affordances because understanding pictures involves a particularly intense engagement of our perceptual system. This can be formulated in terms of a predicative picture theory that describes pictures in analogy to predicators, as fulfilling a predicative function. At the same time, however, it seems that pictures are likely to be under-determined in various respects. And since their being under-determined allows that any change of context easily alters the effects pictures provoke, it becomes much more difficult to properly control the communicative effects of pictures.

KEYWORDS picture use, language, nomination, predication, illocution,
 pictorial act theory, perceptual realism, pictorial meaning

1. A short introduction: The power of pictures

Pictures are increasingly influential in all areas of society and meanwhile even shape politics to a remarkable extent. All of the controversial events during the last decades have been turned seemingly into a public debate only after the release of particular pictures that were able to win public attention by emotionally crystallizing the matter in question: remember for example the Abu Ghraib abuse photos or more recently the picture of a drowned Syrian boy on the shores of Greece.

Despite the intense research on visual communication during the last decades, there are still many questions to be answered in order to scientifically better understand how pictures function within communication. In the following, I would like to suggest and to discuss an approach that is oriented towards a pragmatic theory of communication similar to speech act theory but also different in some important respects. Using pictures, i.e., producing and presenting pictures, for communicative purposes is considered within such a framework as a special kind of action to make someone understand something or to motivate someone to behave in a certain way. There are, of course, various ways to do so, among them the use of spoken or written text as the most prominent way of communicating. But there are many other possibilities equally powerful, at least in some respect, like using gestures or pictures. Despite not employing words, those alternative communicative strategies have to follow similar rules on a more general communicative level. In order to communicate with pictures, we need to presuppose some of the communicative maxims speech act theory is presupposing for verbal communication. They of course must be complemented by some more specific rules that are able to account for the peculiarities of visual or pictorial communication.

The main thesis I put forward in this article is that using pictures in a communicative context offers a powerful option because understanding pictures involves a particularly intense engagement of our perceptual system. An upshot of that thesis is that it is much easier to arouse emotions with pictures, since emotions can at least partly be seen as some kind of evaluation of perceptual stimuli. The assumed higher impact of using pictures has some costs, though. There is always some trade-off when you are facing limited resources like attention, motivation or understanding. The negative effects in the case of using pictures are that the more directly you are able to win attention and to motivate for some action, the less complex the message normally has to be.² Therefore, pictures are effective communicative means only because they neglect some aspects thus emphasizing other aspects. A more cautious formulation might be: If pictures become effective (mass) communicative means, they are likely to be under-determined in various respects. Being effective makes it then also more difficult to properly control their use, since being under-determined allows that any change of context easily alters the effects pictures provoke. But let us start from the beginning and progress step by step.

2. A preliminary clarification: What is a picture?

According to my conception of a 'general image science' (cf. Sachs-Hombach 2003) I would like to suggest that we start our considerations with the area of external, i.e., material, pictures. I reserve the term "picture" for them and use the term "image" as a broader term including very different kinds of visual phenomena. More specifically, I am mainly interested in the field of representational pictures or depictions. Apart from pictures within art, this class of pictorial representations encompasses all kinds of pictures designed for practical use. An object then is a picture in this sense if it is (1) planar, artificial, and relatively durable, if it (2) serves as some kind of representation or illustration of real or fictional circumstances within a communicative act, and if it (3) is perceived in a way similar to the perception of the matters depicted. That definition describes what we usually regard as the core area of external pictures and what I address as "signs close to perception", e.g., portraits, holiday photographs, illustrations in magazines or press photographs.³

An increasingly broader conception of pictures emerges if more and more of the conditions under (1) and (2) are abandoned. Thus, for instance, an object is a picture in the broader sense if it does not fulfill one, several, or all of the conditions listed under (1) despite falling under condition (2). Accordingly, sculptures or cloud pictures can be regarded as pictures in a broader sense. The essential condition they must share with the phenomena of the core area is the special way we perceive them. This kind of perception, which can be denoted "pictorial perception", is determined as follows: An object is perceived pictorially (i.e., is a sign close to perception) if its interpretation uses the intrinsic structure of the object as starting point for the same perceptually driven process of categorization that is necessary in the case of directly perceiving the matters depicted (cf. Sachs-Hombach 2003, 88ff).

Why choose the area of materially realized pictures in general and depictions in particular? The suggestion of such a focus presupposes that no satisfactory theory exists up to now that covers the entire phenomenological area or even just a segment considerably larger than the core area suggested. Given this presupposition, there is only one reason against a preliminary limitation of the topic: the danger that important, possibly irreversible preliminary decisions are unconsciously made for the further course of theory development. It shall be assumed here that theories regarding different phenomena as paradigmatic also presuppose different basic assumptions. The choice of a starting point, accordingly, is closely related to the respective theoretical orientation. It could be pointed out, for instance, that traditional resemblance theories primarily refer to objective, perspectival pictures

in their analyses whereas conventionalist picture theories find support in the multitude of forms in abstract and non-objective art, while approaches oriented towards phenomenology tend to assign a paradigmatic function to mental images.

In my assessment, three advantages speak in favor of taking depicting as a core area: 1) Their existence is unproblematic, contrary to other pictorial phenomena. 2) We can draw on an already extensive research with these pictures. 3) They can be considered as very early evidence of human existence. 4) Early evidence reflecting the phenomena of pictures are addressed in particular depictions (cf. Sachs-Hombach & Schirra 2013). Additionally, other areas (such as the area of aesthetically valuable pictures) are less apt as core areas, as especially pictures of art enclose aspects that are not genuinely pictorial. Being artistic certainly heightens the complexity and efficiency of pictures, but does not necessarily contribute to the understanding of a fundamental picture competence. Due to their complexity, pictures of art rather complicate the analysis whereas it seems more promising from an epistemological point of view to start with simple phenomena, and to then introduce additional parameters for more complex analysis.

3. Picture and communication: General preliminary remarks on nomination, predication, proposition, and illocution

The picture theory I favor can be conceived of as a predicative picture theory. For a starting point it chooses the phenomenon that pictures are often provided with picture titles, captions or explanatory notes, i.e., they are actually used as part of text-picture-compounds (cf. Stöckl 2004). In the case of structural pictures (like maps or diagrams), such an embedding is even indispensable for realizing the respective communicative intentions. This suggests that pictures do not – at least not automatically – fulfill communicative functions in an independent fashion, but do require an additional element in many cases. In order to better understand the nature of the complement assumed and the connection between picture and verbal language, the relevant basic concepts of communication theory may now be recapitulated as a first step. The initial focus of attention is here on language use. Subsequently, the question arises which of those basic concepts may also be helpful for an understanding of picture uses. Having thus determined the features shared by verbal language use and picture use, we can consider in a second step the differences between language use and picture use. This will then motivate the introduction of a predicative picture theory.

Let us therefore start from the elementary case of singular declarative sentences, say: ‘The late medieval city of Magdeburg has a conspicuous dome from the early Gothic period.’ The structure of such a declarative sentence can be divided into two components. On the one hand, we use this sentence to point at a concrete object, for instance late medieval Magdeburg; on the other, we assign this object a property, namely the property of having a conspicuous dome. These two components roughly correspond with the entities designated in linguistics as subject and predicate. Strictly speaking, however, this is not so much a question of the syntactic categories but rather of the pragmatic functions performed by these components: Here, language philosophy uses the terms of nomination and predication with reference to the two partial activities of the overall sign activities, those of nominator and predicator respectively with reference to parts of the linguistic signs by means of which those activities are enacted. In the case of the singular declarative sentence, the nominator designates an individual, usually spatio-temporal object. In the case of general declarative sentences, the only difference is that sets of objects are now thematic.

According to general understanding, a nominator can appear in three different varieties: as a proper name, as a designation and as a deictic expression. ‘Magdeburg’, in our example, is a proper name and thus a singular terminus. Therefore, the respective declarative sentence is a singular sen-

tence. The specification 'late medieval' merely provides a temporal limitation which we can ignore for the moment. Were we to apply a designation, we could alternatively speak of 'the city at the Elbe with an imperial stronghold of Otto the Great'. The complexity of designations can be freely chosen. Sometimes they contain a proper name onto which the nomination is fixed, as is, in the example, the case of 'Otto the Great'. This is not necessary, however, as illustrated by the example 'the most famous living philosopher'. Concerning the deictic nominators, there are once more various possibilities of specification, for instance by anaphoric structures or demonstrative pronouns, the latter in particular combined with pointing gestures. Deictic designations, such as 'this conspicuous dome', are a combination of the latter two varieties of nomination.

In contrast to the nominator, the predicator necessarily contains an expression denoting the assigned property (or relation). A simple example would be 'is mortal'; somewhat more complicated is 'has a conspicuous dome from the early Gothic period'. Predicators, too, can acquire any level of complexity by subsuming several properties. It is important to see that an expression can assume one function or the other, according to the utterance in which it occurs. In particular, expressions that denote properties and that might be labeled as "predicates" can also be used within a nominator. Take, for instance, the following two examples: 'Aristotle is Plato's student' and 'Plato's student is a famous philosopher'. In the first sentence, the expression 'Plato's student' serves within the predicator 'is Plato's student' as a characterization relative to the object denoted by means of a proper name, whereas in the second sentence, the very same expression indicates the object to which a property is assigned.

This structure of singular as well as general declarative sentences, consisting of one or several nominators and one predicator, constitutes the proposition. The proposition contains the declarative content or the sentential meaning of the utterance and is usually expressed "as such" in a *that*-phrase: 'that Aristotle is a student of Plato's'. Since Frege's analyses, the proposition is regarded as the smallest unit of the highly developed human verbal language. Thus it follows that, as a rule, we would be unable to convey meaning if we uttered only nominators or only predicators. Taken by themselves, predicators are unsaturated functional expressions that are in need of nominatory addition within a communicative situation. Were someone to utter the phrase 'is arrogant', we would justifiably ask whom he was talking about.

Within the framework of speech act theory, a further differentiation has been made which, to me, seems fruitful from a picture-theoretical viewpoint as well – namely the differentiation between propositional structure and illocutionary role. Whereas the proposition contains the content of a sentence, its illocutionary role arises from the attitude the speaker takes towards the content. We can *claim*, accordingly, that Aristotle is a student of Plato's, but we can also just *assume* this or *hope* for it. We can furthermore *inform* about this fact, *question* it or *declare under oath* its validity. These different possibilities are denoted as the respective illocutionary role of an utterance. They do not derive from the proposition itself but from the communicative activities, as well as the respective communicative intentions into which the proposition is embedded.

In conclusion therefore, it follows for verbal communication that the utterances of the central form, as a rule, always display at least three aspects: respectively, a nominatory, a predicatory and an illocutionary aspect. The first two at least are necessary in order to convey something concerning circumstances within the world, that is, for declarative sentences. Hereby, one object is picked out and – by means of the predicator – assigned a property (or several objects between which a relation is meant to be established correspondingly). Together, nominators and predicator form a proposition that may find use in various illocutionary functions (cf. with regard to language-philosophical basics in general Tugendhat 1982).

4. Picture use as a communicative action

Let us suppose that pictures, too, serve the purpose of conveying something to a communication partner, e.g., in order to inform him about the outward appearance of a particular object, to mobilize protest against a political deficiency, or just for the sake of entertainment. In all those cases (as well as in many others), we assume a communicative core function analogous to language use. The question then arises whether and to what extent this assumption entitles us to describe the use of pictures as being analogous to the use of language.

There have already been some attempts to transfer linguistic terminology – and especially the speech act theoretical approach – to the area of pictures. In 1978, for instance, Kjörup talks of ‘pictorial speech acts’ (Kjörup 1978). Terminologically, it is of course quite problematic to denote the concrete applications of pictures as ‘speech acts’. Apart from the problem of adequate denotation, however, it seems correct to me to regard the use of pictures as a communicative action, as an act of painting or showing, intended to convey something to somebody by means of producing and presenting an object. This characterization of picture communication as an act of showing something to someone suggests at the same time similarities with and differences from verbal communication. The similarities refer to the communicative frame conditions, and thus to a very general model of communication, the differences to the respective way by which something is conveyed, in this case particularly to the specific aspect of showing in pictures, which is naturally connected to special mechanisms of understanding.

If the activity of picture presentation is described in analogy to speech acts, it is possible to ask first of all and in a very general way whether it makes sense to differentiate, as a further similarity, between the respective illocutionary role and propositional content in the case of pictures as well. When someone presents a picture in order to claim towards another person the particular visual character of an object not present in the presentation situation, the act of claiming must be considered as the illocutionary role of the communicative act, whereas that which is claimed (for instance, that an object has a certain outward appearance) corresponds to the propositional content.

The assumption that pictures have a propositional content, however, serves to point out some problems in our analogy. In contrast to the case of language, there seems to be no clearly defined proposition in the case of pictures. Furthermore, no grammatically supported assignment of single expressions to the corresponding functions is obvious. When it comes to pictures, the construction of complexes from single elements so characteristic of language is a lot less clearly defined. Thus, in analogy to which linguistic units are pictures to be understood? In analogy to which functions do we have to understand what sections of pictures? Here, a brief glimpse shows already that any unambiguous assignment remains problematic because pictures, depending on their respective application and context, can be defined in analogy to texts as well as to sentences or words.

Let us go through the analogy of picture and sentence in greater detail by means of an example, and let us limit our deliberations once more to representative pictures. We interpret the presentation of a picture, e.g., the presentation of a copperplate print of the medieval city of Magdeburg, as analogous to the utterance of a singular sentence. We may understand that presentation as the claim *that this particular city did have, at a particular time and viewed from a particular perspective, the respective visually characterized silhouette*. Leaving aside for now the illocutionary function, we are dealing here with a proposition (by analogy to a sentence) inasmuch as a particular object is assigned a particular property. Whether medieval Magdeburg did indeed possess this property (i.e. a particular outward appearance), and whether the picture can thus be regarded as true, is, for the time being, insignificant. It would even be a confirmation of our analogy between (the presentation of a) picture and (the utterance of a) sentence that the truth value of the picture can be doubted, for it is a principal and essential characteristic of propositions that they can be true or false. Let us therefore

determine that there certainly are many cases in which pictures can be understood to be analogous to single singular sentences.

Even in these cases, however, it remains unclear how pictures realize the supposed proposition. Taking seriously the analogy to sentences, we would have to assume that pictures can be divided into autonomous sub-units. At this point indeed, their basic differences from language begin to show, as pictures lack the division into nominators and predicators necessary for propositions in language. This is due to the fact that pictures can only be divided in a very limited way into autonomous sub-units that possibly allow for further division. A grammar of pictures, were there such a thing, is certainly no compositional grammar like, for instance, transformational-generative grammar. Moreover, there is no constant rule as to which functional role is assigned or should be assigned to a determined single picture element, whereas sentences normally indicate which part should be taken as nominator or predicator. Finally, with every functional division of a picture the question of internal syntactic structure arises, inasmuch as picture sections carrying meaning can be regarded as complete pictures in themselves.

The problem of separating the functional elements might possibly be evaded by presuming that the nominatory and predicatory functions are somehow blended. The identification of a particular object within a picture would then always bring into play as well the property that is to be assigned. In this case, we would not only use the picture to refer to a city but at the same time display the city's appearance visually, or, more precisely: we would refer to a particular city *by means of* putting on display certain visual properties. This idea exactly suggests a predicative picture theory, for the predicative function, the visual characterization of looking-so-and-so, prepares the basis for the nomination. Before I go on to explain this in more detail, we can state that the analogy of pictorial and verbal communication is appropriate insofar as overlapping aspects with regard to the functionality of both symbol systems can be pointed out; but the analogy no longer works once the manner comes into view by which these functions are realized. Hence, it is important for my approach to picture theory to describe the internal micro-functional structure of pictures in order to account for the peculiarities of the communicative use of pictures. This then provides at the same time an elaboration of predicative picture theory.

5. Predication as an elementary function of pictures

The central thesis of predicative picture theory is that pictures can be described in analogy to predicators, and accordingly do, in their elementary use, fulfill a predicative function. It is supposed here that such an elementary use of pictures – in analogy to elementary mathematical operations – can, firstly, not be reduced to other applications, and can, secondly, be proven to be constitutive for all other uses. The content of a picture is, by virtue of that thesis, a so-and-so-appearance (generated through the accentuation of particular visual properties of the picture vehicle). Accordingly, the production and/or the presentation of pictures in their elementary use is an act of visual characterization or illustration.

A predicative picture use of a more complex nature is already given when someone points out a photo of a wanted person accompanied by the words: 'The person we are looking for looks like *this*.' In this case, the expression '*this*' refers to the picture and thereby assumes a characterizing function within the communicative act. This function does not derive from the picture itself but from the contextual embedding. In contrast, the same photo of the wanted person would assume a nominatory function if it was connected to the following statement: 'This is the person unknown by name who is wanted for this and that offence'. In this second communicative context, the picture replaces the '*this*' and serves as the denotation of a particular person. The nominatory function that is performed

by means of the picture, however, nonetheless ensues via a visual characterization. The characterized properties are skillfully chosen in such a way that they are suitable for the denotation of an individual object in the respective context. The suitability of the characterization for the identification of a concrete object by no means changes the fact that the characterization itself appears in the sense of a denotation and may be understood as analogous to a predicate, in other words, to a general term.

The example of the mug shot is already a rather complex case, but still a special one. In order for the predicative picture theory to be plausible, it has to be made clear in what way it is supposed to be applicable to all cases of picture use. Initially, the central idea here is that no picture use can be found that dispenses with this predicative aspect. An additional theory would state that any picture use that is not primarily predicative necessarily depends on additional conditions external to the picture in question, usually through verbal additions or appropriate agreements or conventions.

To understand the predicative function as an elementary picture function therefore does not mean that picture communication only consists of illustration, but that more complex picture uses can also be derived from the predicative basic function. Here, four basic levels of complexity can be distinguished. On the elementary level – and thus, in analogy to a predicate – a picture merely illustrates properties. On this level, only the features of a concept that are deemed essential are brought into play: For instance, the concept of a parallelogram can be illustrated by means of four lines drawn accordingly. Thus, the elementary predicative picture function is basically reflexive of the concept: by means of illustration, the picture points us to specific aspects of the thematic concept. However, this happens in a very indirect manner, as merely the visual characterizations but not, at the same time, the thematic concepts are given. The latter have to be complemented cognitively. As elementary function, the predicative picture function is therefore an unsaturated form of utterance. Through it, we arrive at pictorial predicates only, but we are usually not consciously aware of this fact, as it involuntarily uses our cognitive system for classification and thus adds to it the relevant concept.

A more complexly layered case arises when visual properties are presented in such a way that the act of presentation serves as a visual pattern of certain classes of objects. This predicative application of pictures is made use of, for instance, in botanic classification books in which typical visual properties of a particular species of plant are illustrated in order to allow for a better detection and identification of concrete members of this species. Here, the nominatory partial aspect of the utterance is explicitly supplied, say, through a denotation such as “daffodil”. Thus, the predicative function of the picture is integrated into a complex act of utterance obtaining its nomination by the title of the picture.

On another, yet more complex level, a picture can also be employed to indicate that the illustration depicts a particular individual object that is meant to be made reference to or to be assigned particular properties. This can, like in the botanic classification book, ensue via an explicit nominator in the picture caption, or by means of choosing the visual properties displayed in the illustration in such a skillful way that the observer is involuntarily referred to an individual object. This second instance, which is principally prone to error (just think of two twins), not only illustrates particularly well the reason why I consider the nomination that comes into play here as a more complex process compared to the prior cases. It also demonstrates why visual predication should generally be regarded as more elementary than visual nomination: Nomination already presupposes, resp. entails, predication, since the reference to a concrete object arises here as a visual denotation and thus through the skillful combination of particular visual properties suitable, in this specific context, for the characterization of that individual object.

A final level of complexity is given when we exercise the various illocutionary functions by means of pictorial presentations. The presentation of a picture, for example, can be linked to an assertion or an appeal, i.e., it can generally convey an attitude towards an object. It must be assumed that the illocutionary role a picture should perform is not already determined by its picture-internal conditions,

even if suitable illocutionary markers suggest certain roles. Summarizing the central idea of predicative picture theory: since there is no equivalent to verbal proper names within the field of pictures, a nominatory function can only be realized by means of the predicative function as a visual equivalent of denotation. Accordingly, all complex picture applications depend on the predicative function and can be reconstructed in connection to the relevant picture-external conditions.

6. Semantic implications

My deliberations concerning predicative picture theory imply that the term 'picture meaning' may refer to some very different aspects: namely picture content, picture reference, symbolic meaning, and communicative meaning. In connection with these differentiations, which I shall only sketch out briefly, predicative picture theory allows for a description even of complex picture forms and picture uses.

The picture content is that which someone sees *within* the picture, not in the sense of a particular single object (which could be verbally identified by means of a nomination such as 'the Eiffel Tower'), but in the sense of a (possibly very complex) habitual distinction (which could be articulated by means of a predication, such as 'a great dark tower with four feet made from a dark material tapering upwards and...'). The picture content is processed via specific mechanisms of perception, especially those capabilities of differentiation that are activated in the process of perceiving the picture surface.

The picture content arises from the visual properties of the picture vehicle. However, it does not concur with the picture referent, nor does it presuppose such a thing, as fictional pictures demonstrate. The reference of a picture is principally unsure because different objects can, given certain perspectives, evoke the same perceptive impression. At most, the picture content conveys a necessary condition for the determination of the reference; by no means a sufficient one. Thus, picture reference is always a function determined contextually.

A third important phenomenon of meaning is symbolic meaning, which is assigned to a picture or a pictorial element by mediation of the content. The symbolic meaning is what a picture 'alludes' to or what it symbolizes. This kind of meaning, sometimes also referred to as 'connotation', is a frequent object of iconographic analysis. An understanding of the symbolic meaning (e.g., 'transiency') presupposes the determination of the picture content (e.g., 'being a bug'). Moreover, it demands considerable knowledge of the respective social and cultural context of production. Thus, the symbolic meaning by no means becomes apparent in a picture all by itself.

From the three phenomena of meaning named above – content, reference and symbolic meaning – the communicative meaning of a picture must be distinguished. The communicative meaning of a picture consists of the 'message' the picture is meant to convey, or, to put it differently, that which the use of the picture aims at. In speech act theory, the analogous linguistic phenomenon is referred to as 'utterance meaning'. Though the picture content does provide a necessary premise to make the communicative meaning of the presentation of a picture accessible, it is, as a rule, not sufficient in this case either. That fact derives from the predicative understanding of the picture inasmuch as the picture content provides a visual characterization, whereas the determination of the communicative meaning requires a complete propositional structure. In order to arrive at this structure, a contextual specification of the picture reference is necessary. Moreover, the illocutionary picture function referring to the propositional structure of the picture must first be determined.

The relation between the different aspects of meaning, tension-filled as it might be occasionally, is, in my assessment, responsible for the ambivalence of pictures. One may even speak of a semantic anomaly of pictures: compared to a verbal utterance, the meaning of a picture is at the same time more clearly determined and more indeterminate. It is more clearly determined inasmuch as we

can evoke by means of pictures the impression of a scene (the perceptively conveyed content) with great immediacy. It is, however, more indeterminate at the same time inasmuch as in picture use (1) the factual nature of a real scene is not guaranteed (only perceptual realism is given), and (2) the communicative meaning often remains vague. The ambivalence thus ensues from the different processing mechanisms for the picture content (determined syntactically / perceptually) and the picture message (determined pragmatically / contextually).

7. On the scientific status of verbal descriptions of pictures

In conclusion, I would like to address the relation between picture and language (on this topic, also cf. Schirra & Sachs-Hombach 2007 & Schirra & Sachs-Hombach 2013). What in scientific analysis is special about that relationship? In search of an answer, it is helpful to differentiate between the different levels of object, description, and theory. In the case of image science, single concrete pictures make up the object area. These objects of consideration must first of all be perceived. Precisely speaking, every picture is necessarily constituted in a respective situation of reception only. For scientific analysis, it is furthermore necessary to make the perceived pictures available in an intersubjectively conveyable manner. On the elementary level, this is achieved by means of a description that captures the relevant (especially visual) properties of the picture. Of course it is in principle impossible in this area already to capture all the properties, because every object possesses an infinite number of properties. This is a general problem concerning all sciences, which must necessarily limit themselves to a finite number of relevant properties: The descriptive quality of a theory decisively depends on the degree to which it can capture or has captured phenomenal properties causally relevant in the respective research context.

The numerous questions concerning the evaluation of scientific description have been intensely discussed in the history of scientific theory under the heading of 'protocol statements', leading to the widely acknowledged result that every description can be regarded as charged or led by theory. Thus, the inductionist *understanding* of science, which assumed that it has a secure foundation in observations and descriptions, lost its base: since every description presupposes concepts that are themselves connected again to theoretical contexts, description and theory depend on each other. Even the most neutral phenomenal description therefore is never without condition. Accordingly, descriptions are reliable only to a limited degree, they are not suitable for the concluding confirmation of our theories. As a result of this, among other things, all empirical-scientifically formulated laws were assigned the status of hypotheses. This loss of certainty, however, has rather promoted the 'progress' of science than hindered it, since it has forced an intense occupation with scientific processes and claims to validity.

As a rule, science consists of the attempt to not only describe the observed circumstances but to find regularities between them and to formulate these as precisely as possible. Just as every other science, image science conveys theory and description via the conceptual instruments that, on the one hand, delimit and structure the object area. On the other, however, those instruments are embedded in theoretical contexts, as the explanation of a basic concept is always understandable only relative to its theoretical embedding: The making explicit of a concept is essentially the explanation of the position and the function that this concept possesses within a theory.

The conceptual-theoretical area, as a rule, receives most attention, also from cross-disciplinary perspectives. It is connected to intense discussions, which – not uncommonly – are ideologically charged. The question which theory is adequate for a particular object area can, according to the above deliberations, surely be decided not only on the basis of mere descriptions, as descriptions always already contain theoretical assumptions and a respective justification thus becomes circular. An appropriate theory should of

course not contradict the descriptions and, moreover, contribute to a better understanding of them. As a rule, however, competing theories are able to achieve this in any case if they lean on their own respective (theory-guided) description basis. As long as it remains impossible to purposefully bring about a decision by means of experiments, the fruitfulness of a theory has then to be adduced as a criterion for evaluating the theories. Thus, competing theories cannot easily be proven wrong. Not uncommonly, competing theories do also capture single aspects of a phenomenon quite correctly, so that the essential task occasionally consists of appropriately delimiting the application areas of the theories in order to be able to relate them to each other in a rational way.

What meaning do these relatively general science-theoretical notes hold for the question of the relation between picture and language? As far as that question comes up in the light of picture-scientific research, it implies primarily that the verbal description of pictures by no means excludes their being captured *as pictures* appropriately. On the contrary, the ability to describe them in detail provides the prerequisite for the latter. Any accusation that we are not able to capture supposed essentials in “merely” describing a picture are irrelevant inasmuch as we principally do not possess any other possibility of scientifically accessing those essentials either. Verbally capturing, i.e. describing, pictures is thus an indispensable presupposition for scientifically understanding them. Moreover, I suspect that it is not in principle impossible to translate the various meanings of a picture into a verbal description, although this description would not, of course, have the same effects as the picture.

The relation of picture and language indeed becomes problematic, however, if we have incorrectly or insufficiently observed and/or described important properties. But what helps here is, as with all sciences, only the improvement of our observation process and our verbal means of articulation. The decisive question therefore should not be whether pictures can be translated appropriately into language, but rather what the criteria are exactly for an appropriate verbal description of phenomena. Since the criteria, however, are dependent again on the conceptual-theoretical condition, the evaluation of whether a description is adequate always ensues relative to the picture theory applied. Thus, our scientific engagement with pictures is in principal characterized by preliminaries. We therefore should not so much strive for the exclusion of competing theories but should rather look for sensible ways to connect them.

An appropriate description of the picture phenomenon must be distinguished from a complete description. It must further be distinguished whether a description is impossible in principle or impossible only at the moment due to currently insufficient verbal means. As far as we are considering the status of an *image science*, a complete verbal description is certainly neither possible nor required. Besides, it would be a misunderstanding to conclude from the possibility of verbal translation that the picture becomes replaceable or superfluous. Such a conclusion fails to recognize that the use of pictures is a very complex process, which is, for instance, also about specific atmospheric qualities linked to perception that are important especially for aesthetic phenomena. Although the atmospheric qualities can be characterized verbally as well, the respective descriptions of course no longer possess the emotionally enhanced immediacy of perceptive impressions. The scientific descriptions and the regularities formulated with their help are therefore not competing with the immediate experience of the phenomenon, but are meant to provide an explanation of them. A verbal description of pictures is in any case indispensable for scientific analysis. Without appropriate descriptions, there can be no image science. Descriptions, however, are always guided by a theory. Whenever there is an argument concerning the appropriateness of a certain description, an evaluation and a comparison of the underlying theories are under consideration as well.

NOTES

1. This article entails various ideas and whole passages already published in one of my earlier publications. See in particular Sachs-Hombach 2003, Sachs-Hombach 2011, Sachs-Hombach & Win-

ter 2013, Schirra & Sachs-Hombach 2007. I would in particular like to thank Jörg R. J. Schirra with whom I discussed most aspects of the article and partly developed them together.

2. Pictures of art are naturally a special and very complex case. In the following, I will not discuss the artistic features of pictures.
3. Thus, signs close to perception can be found in any mode of sense, not just the visual sense. Correspondingly, the expression 'picture' may be extended in that direction to include auditory pictures or olfactory pictures, though not in this article.

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About looking and looking away: Performance art, visuality and the vision of excess

Irene Gerogianni

Despite the centrality of looking to the experience of performance art, relatively little has been published on the visual as a condition of the production of meaning in this particular art form. Tracing the theoretical roots of performance art's vocabulary to linguistics, anthropology and theories of poststructuralism, it comes as no surprise that the concepts of 'theatricality' and 'performativity' have increasingly gained ground in the history of performance art. However, the act of looking, or looking away, should also be accounted for through an understanding of 'visuality', a third term that highlights the contingency of meaning making. For this, this essay affirms the anthropological paradigm, by focusing on situations of visual extremity in both ritual contexts and performance art, as a series of instances where the problems of vision are thrown into particular relief. However, it shall also strive to underline the differences between the two, just as Bataille has, especially on the ground of the creation and undermining of social orders.

KEYWORDS performance art theory, visuality, performativity

Still, one can doubt that even the most furious of those who have ever torn and mutilated themselves amid screams and to the beat of a drum have abused this marvelous freedom to the same extent as Vincent Van Gogh [...] The monstrous ear sent in its envelope, abruptly leaves the magic circle where the rites of liberation stupidly aborted.

Georges Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation and Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh'

1. Performance Art, Performativity and Theatricality

The term 'performativity' first appeared in the theory of *speech acts* by British linguist and professor at Oxford University John Austin. In 1955, through a series of lectures at Harvard University, Austin challenged the prevailing linguistic axiom of the time that meaning is exhausted in the descriptive ability of language and underlined the interpersonal and social role that language plays in communication. He argued that, alongside descriptive utterances, which describe a state of affairs, there are also performative utterances, through which the speaker is performing speech acts, such as promises, requests, orders, thanks, apologies. The category of performative utterances is often associated with a social contract, in which case the utterance is contractual in nature, as it requires specific conditions

for it to be valid (Austin 1975). Although Austin later abandoned his distinction between descriptive and performative utterances, the recognition of the latter was a breakthrough for contemporary philosophy of language, often significantly influencing disciplines outside of linguistics.

Just like performativity, theatricality can also be located in theoretical contexts aside from theater studies. Still, even when discussed at the periphery of the theatrical field, recognition of theatricality is based on the pursuit of recurring conventions and codes of theatrical communication, as well as their conscious reading by the viewer as such. For Josette Féral,

Theatricality can be seen as composed of two different parts: one highlights performance and is made up of the *realities of the imaginary*; and the other highlights the theatrical and is made up of *specific symbolic structures*. The former originates within the subject and allows his flows of desire to speak; the latter inscribes the subject in the law and in theatrical codes, which is to say, in the symbolic. Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities. (Féral 1982: 178)

Indeed, the two concepts seem to share some of their structural characteristics. Both performativity and theatricality are characterized by their capacity to question the illusion of a transparent or direct representation, through the pronouncement of every representation as theatrical by convention. After all, according to Janelle Reinelt, the distinction between the notions of 'performativity' and 'theatricality' is neither clear nor purely theoretical, but often simply geographical. As she writes, 'while recently Anglo-American theorists have embraced performance and performativity as central organizing concepts, European theorists have stressed theatricality, thus opening up a contemporary question concerning the variability of these terms' (Reinelt 2002: 207).

As becomes apparent, the performative turn in the visual arts –that is, the departure of art practices from the object-centered trends of modernist painting and sculpture and their direction towards a space-time oriented perception of the artwork as an event– as early as the 1950s and the 1960s, has been simultaneous and relative to the theoretical turn towards performativity and theatricality. These practices were characterized by their inclination towards the two concepts and led, by all means, to the formation of performance art as a medium. However, one of the major players in this evolution, apart from linguistics and any postdramatic developments in theater, was the new, performance-centered face of anthropology.

2. The anthropological roots of performance art's vocabulary

The emergence of performance art as a visual arts medium in the 1960s is not only concurrent, but also symptomatic, of the developments in the discipline of anthropology. Here, the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and his 'performative anthropological method' is seen as the one which most contributed to the establishment of a new model of understanding different cultures and marked the performative turn in cultural studies. According to Elizabeth Bell, Turner promoted a dramatic view of social relations, seeking 'to humanize the study of culture as performance by conceiving of humans as performers' (Bell 2008: 133). For Turner,

If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that man is a self-performing animal –his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. (Turner 1988: 81)

Other than the theoretical connections between Turner's theory and theater –which link the transformational effects of ceremonial performances with the study of performative art forms– there is also a direct one, when, in the early 1970s, Turner collaborated with Richard Schechner, professor of Performance Studies at New York University. Following Schechner's invitation to work with anthropology and theater students in a series of summer workshops, Turner and his team had the opportunity to use ideas and techniques of Western theatrical tradition in ritual representations of the Central African tribe of Ndembu. Their objective was to produce a dramatized version of the lived experience of the 'Other', by means of translating and understanding Ndembu's indigenous culture.

A notable fact is that the workshops were centered on Turner's ritual theory (Turner 1969). Indeed, ritual theory is an intersection between religion and anthropology. Ritual theories have made key contributions to the study of religions and of human cultures generally, as they call attention to behaviors rather than beliefs, and especially to repeated practices shaped by social custom and religious mandate. As a theory, it raises questions about how such practices should be interpreted, while it argues for the similarities between theater and religion (Turner 1982; Bell 1992).

However, the relationship between theater and anthropology, in terms of methodology, could not, in any case, be described as one-way. In seeking the root of the concept of 'theatricality' in a variety of academic disciplines, Marvin Carlson has underlined the cross-fertilization of the field of study with the social sciences and noted that: 'While traditionally theater theorists have most commonly looked to the work of literary theorists or philosophers for inspiration, concepts, and analytic strategies, today they are much more likely to look to such cultural analysts as anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists and sociologists' (Carlson 1996: 238). The same is true for art historians who seek a new vocabulary for performance art.

3. Shamans, Saints and Artists: Rituals and Performance Art

Thomas McEvilley has been one the most notable art historians to trace the roots of performance art in pre-modern societies. McEvilley locates the difference between conceptual and performance art in the chronological distance one has to cover to assign its beginnings: for the former, these can be associated with Duchamp's work and Dada, while for the latter, Paleolithic shamanism and Neolithic rituals (McEvilley 2005: 221). While McEvilley describes this performance art practice as 'neo-pro-Modernism' (McEvilley 2005: 218), he goes on to take a leap, in his associations, from the Neolithic to the Renaissance and the Baroque era –given his consideration of the Greco-Roman period as too secular. McEvilley also focuses on popular theatrical happenings of the latest periods, as well as on metaphysical spectacles what mimicked the natural elements, but also on performative works by the old masters, such as Leonardo and Bernini (McEvilley 2005: 218, 220-221). As far as performance art is concerned, McEvilley locates these 'neo-pro-Modernist' tendencies in the work of Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy and Herman Nitsch, among others (McEvilley 2005: 218, 219).

In his 1983 article 'Art in the Dark', McEvilley makes special reference to works that carry a most shocking element, the practice of self-injury and self-mutilation, as well as female imitation. As he sees it, this has been a standard feature of shamanic performances and primitive initiation rites around the world. McEvilley cites anthropological research on shamanism to present the cases of ritual practices, self-violence and ecstatic states brought about by drugs, drumming and dancing, while he associates these rituals with performance art works by the following artists: Chris Burden crawled through broken glass with his hands tied behind his back in *Through the Night, Softly*, 1973. Dennis Oppenheim did a performance in which rocks were dropped upon him from overhead for half an hour. The work was called *Rocked Circle/Fear*, 1971. Linda Montano inserted acupuncture needles around her eyes in *Mitchell's Death*, 1978. Gina Pane walked barefoot on fire in *Nourriture, actualités*

télévisée, feu, 1971. Stelarc has had himself suspended in various positions in the air by means of hooks embedded in his flesh. McEvelley sees these works as public performance of taboo acts, also present in ancient religious custom with roots in shamanism and primitive magic (McEvelley 2005).

Since McEvelley does not consider the Middle Ages as a source from which he can draw affinities between the treatment of the body in ritual and ceremonial practices and the body of the performance artist, it is to be expected that his religious examples do not include the sacrificial Christian body of the believer, the Martyr, or the Saint. As Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong state in their treatise on the body in the Middle Ages, 'the cult of the body in Antiquity gives its place to the annihilation of the body within the social life of the Middle Ages' (Le Goff and Truong [2003] 2009: 44). As they write, alongside the cultivation of the ascetic ideal that comes to dominate Christianity and becomes the foundation of a culture of monasticism, deprivation and contempt of worldly pleasures, the 12th century also sees the introduction of practices reminiscent of the passion of Christ. Notable, according to the authors, is the example of Louis IX, King of France, Saint Louis, who was known for his religious zeal and aimed to suffer as his God has suffered before him (Le Goff and Truong [2003] 2009: 45).

However, even though performance art has frequently been seen as a continuation of shamanistic rituals, it has only been associated with Christian sacrificial rituals in terms of its 'blasphemy' of them. A notable example is Orlan, the performance artist who has a lifelong project of transforming her face through plastic surgery, with her 'Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan' project carrying obvious religious connotations. Theologian Alyda Faber, in her 'Saint Orlan Ritual As Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism' essay, uses anthropological methods to interpret Orlan's self-designated saintliness through attention to the creation of religious meanings and the significance of the body for religious ritual and imaginative acts. As she argues, Orlan 'deliberately creates and embodies visual parodies of Christian martyrdom by assuming cruciform positions on the operating table' (Faber 2002: 86-87).

Nonetheless, one cannot deny the common ground between the two foundational practices, shamanism and Christianity, when it comes to performance art. As becomes apparent, sacrifice, ritual and bodily transgression can be seen as either cathartic or as a source of defiance, without changing the way violent performance art acts are read, i.e. as transgressive acts of symbolism, that aim to communicate a particular, often political, meaning.

4. Performance art theory, Violence and Meaning

For Antonin Artaud and his 'Theater of Cruelty', the image of a violent act portrayed in the theater was infinitely more powerful than an actual act of violence carried out elsewhere. As performance theorist John Freeman argues, the injection of reality in theater and art does not amount to the neutralization of the context. As he writes, 'it is precisely the framing aspect of art that makes the things we see so often difficult to bear', while he calls 1960s performance artists 'post-Artaudians' (Freeman 2007: 110).

Accordingly, one of the most prominent researchers of violent performance art of the 1960s and '70s, art historian Kathy O'Dell, does psychoanalytic readings of performances where the artist causes intentional self-harm. In her book *Contract with the Skin*, O'Dell records these 'masochistic' practices as a means of creating a social contract between the artist and the viewer. Underlining the economy of power that brings the desire to watch the suffering of the Other, O'Dell presents these performance works as sociopolitical commentary on the historical events of the time and especially the Vietnam War. For O'Dell, the imbalance brought to international relations by the Vietnam War, political turmoil and the resulting divisions both within and outside the United States, was the main point of reference of performance artists of the period. The 'masochistic' practices presented by

O'Dell aimed to bring the war home, next to the viewer and participant, with the body of the artist and his self-harming actions serving metaphorical roles (O'Dell 1998).

O'Dell's two main examples are the work of Chris Burden and Vito Acconci. In his performance piece *Shoot* of 1971, Burden was shot in the arm by a friend with a shotgun. The performance took place in a gallery in Santa Ana, California, in front of a handful of viewers. As O'Dell suggests, Burden's performance could not have taken place if at least one of the three parties did not honor its part of the –unwritten, but still there– agreement, the contract that determined the three-way relationship. Acconci's performance *Trademarks*, which took place in 1970, on the other hand, did not have an immediate audience; the whole process, however, was documented in photographs and traces of marks on the body of the artist. Naked, Acconci posed for the camera lens by turning his body and biting his hands, legs, and shoulders. Then his teeth marks were filled with ink and were used to seal painting surfaces. Even though the artist was not physically present at the viewing of the project, since his photos and fillings were presented in a two-page spread of *Avalanche* magazine in the fall of 1972, the evidence of pain spoke eloquently about his experience. As O'Dell points out, at a time when events were replaced by 'representational events' by the US government and the media that supported it, artists like Burden and Acconci used masochism as a metaphor and drew attention to the distance between truth and representation (O'Dell 1998).

Theorist Linda Kauffman similarly focuses on the political while using the stereotypical classifications of the gendered body in order to deconstruct them. In her book, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*, Kauffman examines both earlier and more recent performance art practices in which artists attempt to overturn the predefined roles of their gender (Kauffman 1998). Kauffman devotes part of the book to two artists who 'go inside their own bodies', Bob Flanagan and Orlan. Flanagan, a performance artist who suffered from cystic fibrosis, is known for his masochistic performances where 'the pathology of CF is juxtaposed with the "pathology" of masochism' and 'medicine is fused with sadomasochism to problematize the relationships between the social and the psychic, between disease and desire' (Kauffman 1998: 21, 31). In *Visiting Hours*, a site-specific installation exhibited at Santa Monica in 1992-1993, New York in 1994, and Boston in 1995, Flanagan displayed his 'sick' body in a constructed hospital-like environment, as both a patient and a male heterosexual submissive. Along the same medical lines, Kauffman discusses the work of Orlan within a context of radical body artists who expose the culture's deepest psychic investments in beauty and femininity. Orlan is anything but a passive patient, directing the filming of these operations, while performing her persona. For the theorist, Orlan is no less than a comedian who 'dissects male medical, scientific, and aesthetic ideologies with surgical precision' (Kauffman 1998: 2). As Kauffman suggests, just as Bob Flanagan dismantles masculinity, Orlan deconstructs femininity (Kauffman 1998: 61).

On the other hand, François Pluchart, in his 'Risk as the Practice of Thought' essay, claims that the body is one the most persistent taboos which is manipulated and mutilated by all ideologies, to the point that 'the staging of suffering and of death cannot be dissociated from the history of Western art'. Pluchart continues by saying that generally 'risk remains theoretical, a kind of by-product of the masochism inherent in every creative act', and it is peculiar that one had to wait for the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s 'to see the artists endanger their bodies and inflict on themselves a violent physical suffering in order to produce thought' (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 219). Pluchart gives various examples of performance artists that used risk as a statement, namely Dennis Oppenheim, Acconci, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane and Burden.

To demonstrate two European examples, Pluchart talks about Michel Journiac and Gina Pane's work. Pluchart writes about Journiac's *Messe pour un corps* of 1969, an event where the artist served a pudding made with his own blood and *Rituel pour un mort* of 1976, in which the artist inflicted cigarette burns on himself, as well as Pane's *Escalade non-anesthésiée* of 1971, a video-performance project where Pane climbs a ladder-like structure made of sharp objects. For Pluchart, Pane 'ill-treats

herself in order to make one feel that violence is a daily fact, a way of denying both man and life, just as it is proved by torture, war, deportation etc.' (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 221). Indeed, the blood and pain caused by her actions not only do not stop the artist from performing, but also seem to constitute the very center of the project. However, Pluchart's constant mention of archetypes, metaphysics and the cathartic in such art, shows the reader the way towards an interconnection between the ritual and political roles of violent performance art.

On the same note, art historian Tracy Warr describes Marina Abramovic's 1997 *Balkan Baroque* performance at the Venice Biennale as 'a gesture of mourning and healing for the civil wars in the Balkans', 'a metaphoric rite of passage in order to shed the pain of her internal conflicts of character and the more generalized tragedy of war' (Warr 2000: 112). During the performance, Abramovic sat on an enormous pile of beef bones, which she had the task of cleaning and scrubbing one by one, for six hours every day over five days. As she did so, she sang fragments of folksongs she could recall from her childhood. Behind her, three projections on the wall displayed the artist and her parents. The performance was, no doubt, a mixture of primitivist ritual, local folk and political commentary.

Conversely, art historian Amelia Jones sees the body in pain as an adequate demonstration of the personal being political. For Jones, 'violence and personal pain have been played out differently by artists who are not aligned with normative (straight, white, masculine) subjectivity' (Jones 2000: 33). Through the pairing of contrasting examples, Jones reads the work of Chris Burden as a reinforcement of his masculine subjectivity, while Gina Pane's pieces speak for the Other, as they 'seem to collapse the flesh of the self into the flesh of the world' (Jones 2000: 32). In her essay 'Dis/playing the phallus', Jones goes as far as to suggest that the 'masochism' of male artists, as described by O'Dell, is inextricably linked to the exhibitionist suffering associated with Christian martyrdom. Indeed, in his *Trans-fixed* of 1974, Burden had his palms nailed onto the roof of a Volkswagen, which was then pushed out of his garage in Venice, California. Jones cites Theodor Reik's psychoanalytical research on masochism to suggest that Christian masochism is the most extravagantly exhibitionist of all masochistic perversions (Reik in Jones 1994: 570). As she underlines, masochism requires a witness (Jones 1994: 570).

What follows is that the absence of a discussion on the visuality of the above described practices seems like a peculiar affair. Furthermore, this appears to be not an accidental but a deliberate strategy, initiated by Peggy Phelan and her book *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. As Phelan suggests, there is a fraught relation between political and representational visibility in contemporary art and culture. Her feminist psychoanalytic examination of performance rethinks and attacks visibility politics, with Phelan placing the (feminist) subject within the sphere of the non-representational to be studied through the ideology of the visible. For her, subjectivity is not –and can never be– visually representable. This does not mean, however, that feminism's objective should be to acquire greater visibility, since, according to Phelan, the relationship between representational visibility and political power is misunderstood, as it is based on the confusion between reality and representation. Following the path of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction, Phelan, despite being a feminist, condemns the idea of 'identity politics' as inadequate and underlines the limitations imposed by the quest for visual representation as a political objective (Phelan 1993).

As a result, performance art theory, and especially theory that analyses work that places the body of the artist in harm's way as an intention rather than a consequence, tends to focus on meaning, and not the meaning-making process. Despite theater theorist Dominic Johnson writing, in his book *Theatre & The Visual*, that 'images in the theatre do more than they mean' (Johnson 2012: 17), in the case of performance art theory, all effort appears to go into the recording of the latter.

5. Visuality as a meaning-making process

Violent performance art seems to be the privileged ground where one can negotiate a theoretical place for visibility. Indeed, as I intend to show, the act of looking in performance art must be accounted for through an understanding of both performativity and visibility, two concepts that highlight the contingency of making meaning. After all, all meaning produced relies on the contingency of vision, with our practices of seeing conditioned by various determinants. For Hal Foster, in his preface to *Vision and Visibility*, the difference between a theory of seeing and a theory of visibility suggests 'a difference within the visual –between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques' (Foster 1988: ix). Foster here abandons the idea of vision as a biological activity and investigates the historical construction of visibility as a politically invested act.

As Maaïke Bleeker, theater theorist and author of the only monograph on theater and the visual, suggests, the particularities of vision are complex, as they not only depend on one's position as a subject but are also culturally and historically specific. Her concern is with how visibility in the theater 'takes place', as well as allows for the inscription of modes of looking. For Bleeker, images are volatile and unstable phenomena, for the study of which one should employ tools from more visually oriented disciplines, such as art history, visual studies or the philosophical sub-discipline of aesthetics (Bleeker 2008).

It is interesting that Bleeker refers to the aesthetic side of vision, a quality that has been excluded from the discussion of violent performance art. Indeed, one rarely reads about visual pleasure offered by this kind of work. A notable exception is Patrick Campbell and Helen Spackman's analysis of Franko B.'s work, which is based on the bloody and ritualized violation of his own body. As they write, in their essay 'With/out An-Aesthetic: The Terrible Beauty of Franko B.', 'Franko B. resists interpretation, in fact the absence of program notes or of verbal texts is significant –words are denotative, they close down meaning; images remain open to multiple interpretations' (Campbell and Spackman 1998: 60). For the writers, Franko B.'s work does not make overt political statements, he opens his body as he closes his mouth. His images are described as stunning, the visual part of his work emphasized over physical pain, anguish and/or pleasure.

As becomes clear, the need to push spectatorship to reassess the conventions of visual pleasure, and to consider the necessarily painful or disturbing experiences of looking at –or looking away from– suffering bodies, forms a good example of how performance art has been used to expose and critique the objectifying tendencies of vision. Thus, also writing about Franko B., Johnson claims that performance art has the ability to highlight its own mediated condition, and hence invite us to reflect upon the experience of being the subject of vision, both in art and everyday life. For example, in *I Miss You*, which the artist performed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, Franko B. assumed the likeness of a catwalk show, with his body naked, monochromatic and bleeding. In this and other works by the artist, 'the scene of looking opens onto political possibilities that may not be available in the traditionally more tightly constrained theatrical setup' (Johnson 2012 : 41, 45).

Another instance where the artwork resisted the vehemence of hermeneutic aesthetics is found in Marina Abramovic's 1975 performance *Lips of Thomas*. During the performance, the artist, naked, ate and drank excessive amounts of honey and wine respectively, cut her abdomen in the shape of a five-pointed star with a razor blade, and flagellated her back with a whip, bleeding profoundly. She then lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice and stayed motionless, until some members of the audience removed her and carried her away, putting an end to the performance. For Erika Fischer-Lichte, Abramovic's performance exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle. As she writes, the work did not call for interpretation, as 'understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had carrying them out'. That is, 'the materiality of her actions dominated their semiotic attributes' (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 16, 18).

What follows is that the indeterminacy of meaning allows the reality of violence to emerge in the performance artwork, with the emergence of the reality of violence depending on the interruption rather than the stimulation of the construction of meaning. As has been shown, in addition to passing on information, communicating ideas and expressing opinions about violence, performance art also appeals to and enhances a different kind of knowledge, which comes into existence outside what Fischer-Lichte calls the order of representation. This way, the spectator encounters the violence before the mechanisms of naming, categorizing and making sense set in. After all, this is the only way the reality of violence in performance art is allowed to emerge, without meaning annihilating its aesthetic framework.

Consequently, attracted to the production of compelling and difficult images in their performance practice, artists often suggest that seeking pleasure or pain in the act of looking, or looking away, can open onto political possibilities for the work that do not necessarily rely on the quest for meaning. Hence, it is not in the act of finding meaning, but in the thinking about how performed images work –what they *do* rather than what they *mean*–, that as spectators we attend to the politics of pleasure, or of pain. It is through an analysis of visibility, even, or especially in the form of visual extremity, that we can start to look to the ways in which powerful images mark their viewers. As Johnson puts it, ‘the ways we look at performed images reminds us to ask questions about the meaning of images, but also the meaning of looking’ (Johnson 2012: 74).

6. Vincent van Gogh’s ear and social order

As is also true in the context of shamanistic and religious rituals of self-harm and bodily punishment, the performance artists that have been discussed here always run several risks, such as infection, poisoning of a bad wound, even death. As Pluchart writes, one might even question whether the game is worth it. However, for him, ‘a number of authors, like Georges Bataille in his search for the sacred, and Antonin Artaud in his desperate attempt to give back the theatre its primary cathartic function, show us the way’ (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 221).

Undoubtedly, the artist that has come closer to exploring Bataille’s writing in exquisite detail is Ron Athey. As Johnson acknowledges, in his essay ‘Ron Athey’s Vision of Excess: Performance After George Bataille’, *The Solar Anus*, first performed in 1998, was Athey’s first loving homage to Bataille. His performance begins with the extraction of a long string of pearls from the center of a black sun tattooed around the artist’s anus. Having removed the pearls, Athey inserted hooks into his face, hitching them with cords to a golden crown. The performance ends with the artist clasp sex horns to his stilettos, which he repeatedly forces into his rectum. Beyond his solo works, Athey has also organized various events that celebrate the legacies of Bataille’s writings. As Johnson reminds us, Bataille urged his readers to acknowledge the persistence of sacrificial elements at the centre of culture, to seek out and savor this force that threatens to consume. And he goes on to suggest that both Athey’s performances and curated events ‘are exemplary in their pursuit of such solicitations, and give body to Bataille’s mythic incitement, his call for a vertiginous fall into the depths of human possibility’ (Johnson 2010: 6-7).

Of course, Bataille himself did not have a chance to write about the performance artists presented above; he did, however, leave a roadmap for the treatment of their violent, self-harming work, which he seems to have anticipated, foreshadowed and projected onto the person of Vincent van Gogh. Be that as it may, strictly speaking, Vincent Van Gogh was not a performance artist. As a painter, he was involved in the making of pictures, intended to be experienced by subjects through the act of viewing. Indeed, the severing of his own ear, which was then presented to a prostitute, did not form part of his art practice. However, the materiality of his violence and his predetermination to

produce a visual end result appears to be the connecting thread between his late-nineteenth-century practice and performance art from the 1960s and 1970s to the present day.

On this ground, Bataille's discussion of Van Gogh's act of violence alongside religious or spiritual rituals of sacrifice brings to the surface a clarifying distinction between the two contexts, one that is also pronounced by anthropologist and art historian Nicholas Thomas, in his investigation on *Body Art*. As Thomas writes, in the contemporary art world, 'the careful staging of violence to the body has been a subversive gambit, or at least one that aspired to subversive effect. But through the world, and throughout human history, ritual violence has not undermined social orders but created them' (Thomas 2014: 95).

On the same note, by drawing a distinct division between the two, ritual and art, Bataille illustrates how, while the one who takes part in the sacrifice stages a theatrical rendering of freedom –as rejection– in a path to sanctity, Van Gogh produced a bodily spectacle that is contingent to a receiving end. For Bataille, the painter 'carried his severed ear to the place that most offends polite society' (Bataille 1986: 70) in order for it to be seen, as if the process of its mutilation was not complete until his loved one has looked at –or looked away from– its terrible sight. What Van Gogh had produced, setting the stage for violent performance art, was clearly a *vision of excess*.

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The meanings of monuments and memorials: toward a semiotic approach

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This paper aims at delineating the basic principles for a semiotic approach to monuments and memorials. Monuments are built forms erected to confer dominant meanings on space. They present an aesthetic value as well as a political function. Often, political elites erect monuments to promote selective historical narratives that focus on convenient events and individuals while obliterating what is discomfoting. While representing selective historical narratives, monuments can inculcate specific conceptions of the present and encourage future possibilities. As such, monuments become essential for the articulation of the national politics of memory and identity through which political elites set political agendas and legitimate political power. However, once erected, monuments become social properties and users can reinterpret them in ways that are different or contrary to the intentions of the designers.

Previous research has explored monuments as either aesthetic objects presenting historical and artistic values or as political tools in the hand of those in power. Hence, this research has wittingly or unwittingly created a gap between the material-symbolic and the political dimensions of monuments. Moreover, it has variously given more emphasis either to the intentions of the designers or to the interpretations of the users.

The semiotic approach to monuments can address these issues providing a holistic approach that overcomes the rigid distinctions predominant in previous research on monuments. Although useful analytical categories, the distinction between material-symbolic and political dimensions cannot be extended to the ontological state of monuments. Semiotics can be useful in investigating the meanings of monuments as actively created by the interplay of the material, the symbolic and the political dimensions. It provides a methodological basis to consider designers and users as equally contributing to the meaning-making of monuments.

KEYWORDS monuments and memorials, semiotics of culture, national identity, memory, meanings.

1. Introduction

Dictionaries of contemporary English define monuments and memorials emphasizing their commemorative functions: whatever their appearance or size, monuments are built forms explicitly erected to remind people of important events and individuals¹, but important for whom? Often contemporary states privilege dominant groups. As part of the state, urban planning can be used to serve the needs of political elites (Yiftachel 1998). And so is for monument design: political elites have more power and resources to establish monuments and memorials (Dwyer 2002: 32; Till 2003:

297). Political elites use monuments to represent their dominant worldviews in space. Consequently, monuments represent selective historical narratives focusing only on events and identities that are comfortable for political elites.

This is particularly evident in the post-socialist city (Tamm 2013). During transition, political elites in post-socialist countries established new monuments to celebrate the kinds of ideals they wanted citizens to strive toward. Often, this process was simultaneously supported by the reconstruction, relocation and removal of monuments erected during Communism (Kattago 2015: 180). These interventions on Communist built environment are still going on in some post-socialist countries: for example, in April 2015 the Ukrainian government approved laws to enable the removal of Communist monuments.

However, these interventions on Communist monumental remains were far from being widely accepted and often resulted in heated political discussion, social tension and conflict². The controversies around the meanings of monuments in post-socialist cities first show that monuments are not neutral urban decorations, but rather important sources of cultural identity and memory. Moreover, these controversies demonstrate that political elites cannot fully control how individuals and social communities interpret monuments. Once erected, monuments “can be used, reworked and reinterpreted in ways that are different from, or indeed contradictory to, the intentions of those who had them installed” (Hay et al. 2004: 204).

The study of monuments has so far remained rather marginal within the humanities and social sciences. One reason for this may have been that a multitude of disciplines have studied monuments from different points of view. As a consequence, the term monuments has become vaguely defined, ranging from purely aesthetic built forms to powerful tools to reproduce authority and control. Urban and art history have explored monuments as aesthetic objects, focusing on their immanent historical and artistic values. Human and cultural geography has analyzed monuments as political tools to legitimize the power of political elites. While urban and art history has largely underestimated the political dimension of monuments, human and cultural geographers have rarely explored how the material and symbolic aspects relate to the political dimension of monuments.

In this paper, we propose a holistic approach to describe how these various aspects overlap and reinforce each other in the meaning-making of monuments. The semiotic approach to monuments can provide adequate tools to investigate the material, the symbolic and the political dimensions of monuments as interdependent. In doing so, semiotics can revise the rigid distinctions that have characterized previous research on monuments, such as material/symbolic, visual/political, art/power, designer/user. Semiotic analysis accounts for the “dialogicity” of meanings circulating around monuments and specifically for the interplay between designers’ and users’ interpretations (Lindström et al. 2014: 126). Finally, semiotics can be useful to explore how different individuals and social communities differently interpret monuments.

In section 2, we review the main theoretical and analytical approaches to the meaning-making of monuments. In section 3, following proposals in semiotics of text, we propose a model that considers designers and users as equally contributing to the meaning-making of monuments. In section 4, we distinguish meanings in four autonomous but related functions: the cognitive, the axiological, the emotional and the pragmatic. In section 5, we describe two autonomous but related dimensions of monuments: the visual, divided in material and symbolic, and the political. The distinction between visual and political dimensions is a useful analytical tool, but it cannot be projected onto the ontological state of monuments: in practice, visual and political dimensions always function together and influence each other through continuous mediations. In section 6, we explain that cultural context and specifically the surrounding built environment largely affect the meaning-making of monuments.

2. How have monuments been studied?

The study of monuments has so far remained rather marginal within the humanities and social sciences. However, there have been a significant number of studies focusing on different aspects of monuments. Urban and art historians have considered monuments as physical and aesthetic objects presenting historical and artistic value. In this context, researchers have investigated the stylistic context in which monuments are erected with great emphasis on the visual dimension of monuments, describing in detail materials of construction, size and colors. Iconography has been broadly used to identify the conventional symbols represented in monuments. Other approaches have called for a more interpretative understanding of monuments using “iconology” to explore the “intrinsic meanings” that reveal “the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” (Panofsky 1955: 38).

Sociological and anthropological literature has mainly focused on the commemorative functions of monuments drawing attention to the practices of commemoration of the users. In this context, monuments have been considered as built forms erected to commemorate the events and the individuals that are significant for a group or for a community. Alois Riegl has explained that commemoration has been the traditional function of monuments since their origins:

A monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events [...] alive in the mind of future generations. (Riegl 1903: 117)

Riegl has also outlined the criteria that governments should consider when approaching the preservation of monuments. In his opinion, monuments should be preserved when they present a combination of artistic and historical values. Similarly, Roger W. Caves has shown that the preservation of monuments depends on both artistic values and commemorative functions. He has stated that a monument is:

A construction or an edifice filled with cultural, historical and artistic values. The conservation and maintenance of monuments is justified by those values. Historically, the idea of the monument is closely tied to commemoration (of a victory, a ruling, a new law). In the urban space, monuments have become parts of the city landscape, spatial points of reference or elements founding the identity of a place. Monuments can be enriched by educational and political functions [...] as well as artistic ones and those centered on commemoration. (Caves 2005: 318)

Geographers have used a different approach that considers the commemorative functions of monuments as essentially political. Since David Harvey (1979) analyzed the political controversy over the building of the Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Paris, broad and diverse research within human and cultural geography has considered monuments as tools in the hand of those in power to promote specific historical narratives and dominant worldviews (Hershkovitz 1993; Johnson 1995; Osborne 1998; Atkinson & Cosgrove 1998; Whelan 2002; Hay et al. 2004; Benton-Short 2006). This research has broadly investigated how monuments can create selective historical narratives. In doing so, some geographers have considered monuments as “sites of memory” (Nora 1996: XVII), i.e. material, symbolic and functional sites able to “frame and shape the content of what is remembered” (Kattago 2015: 7). Since memory is the basis for any identity building, geographers have highlighted the role of monuments in defining collective and national identity. In this context, they have investigated how political elites use monument to shape and reinforce sentiments of national distinctiveness and unity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983).

The aim of this geographical research has been to unveil the dominant discourses embodied in monuments: what history, ethnicity, gender and nationality have been represented in monuments and what have been obscured or obliterated? Is this oblivion deliberately planned so as to create a dominant “landscape of remembrance” (Johnson 1995: 56)?

The geographical study of monuments has broadly grounded itself on the rigid opposition between designers and users. Some geographers have considered the interpretations of users as spontaneous reactions to the more prominent meanings of political elites. Accordingly, they have assumed that “dominant cultures” had more power to convey their worldviews in space (Cosgrove 1989: 127).

Other geographers have considered monuments as potentially supporting every possible interpretation beyond designers’ intentions. In this case, “alternative cultures” (Cosgrove 1989: 131) interpret monuments in ways that are “different or even contrary to the uses to which their builders or ‘owners’ intended they be put” (Hershkovitz 1993: 397). Specifically, this approach has focused on contentious political circumstances in which oppositional and resistant movements “appropriate” monuments and “transform” them “into symbolic forms which take on new meanings and significance” (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987: 98-99).

Although the distinction between designer and user can be a useful analytical tool, we argue that designers and users equally contribute to the creation and development of the meaning of monuments. Following proposals in semiotics of text, the next section proposes to overcome the rigid division between designers and users.

3. The interpretation of monuments between designers and users

While reviewing contemporary theories of interpretation in the literary domain, Umberto Eco (1986) explains that research in textual interpretation has been polarized between those assuming that texts can be interpreted only according to the intentions of the authors and those considering text as supporting multiple interpretations. Later, Eco (1990a, 1992) suggests that interpretation lies in an intermediate position between these two poles, i.e. between the authors’ and readers’ intentions³.

This view overcomes the idea that “appropriate” interpretations occur only when texts are interpreted according to the intentions of the authors. Nevertheless, it takes into account that several strategies are available to the authors to control readers’ interpretations. Eco groups together these strategies under the terms “Model Reader” (Eco 1979: 7-11). According to this model, authors simultaneously presuppose and construct their readership making assumptions about its social background, education, cultural traits, tastes and needs. As a consequence, texts always refer to specific readerships, anticipating certain interpretations while resisting others (Eco 1979: 7-11; Lotman 1990: 63).

Although authors seek to control users’ interpretations, texts do not function as mere “communicative apparatuses” directly imprinting meanings to readers (Eco 1986: 25). Instead, texts are aesthetic productions always leaving something unexplained:

Every text, after all [...], is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand – it would never end. (Eco 1994: 3)

As aesthetic productions, texts become the “loci” where both authors and readers continuously negotiate their interpretations: on the one hand, authors seek to control readers’ interpretations; on the other hand, readers interpret texts according to their needs. Yet, certain constraints limit the range of interpretations that texts may elicit:

To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it “riverruns” merely for its own sake. To say that a text has potentially no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy end. (Eco 1990b: 143)

Hence, the issue on the limits of interpretations can be overcome exploring the complex interactions between authors, readers and texts themselves. As Yanow states:

[...] meaning resides not in any one of these – not exclusively in the author’s intent, in the text itself, or in the reader alone – but is, rather, created actively in interactions among all three, in the writing and in the reading. (Yanow 2000: 17)

Similarly, built environment as text anticipates a set of interpretations and uses while resisting others. Designers use several spatial strategies to create interpretative habits and pull users along a specific understanding of built environment. Paraphrasing Eco’s Model Reader, Marrone (2009, 2010, 2013) calls “Model Users” those users that conform to these interpretative habits and use built environment according to the designers’ intentions.

In an essay about architecture, Eco (1997) argues that, through specific design choices, designers can persuade users to interpret architecture the way they wish. Hence, architecture itself gives instructions on its “appropriate” use:

Architectural discourse is psychologically persuasive: with a gentle hand (even if one is not aware of this as a form of manipulation) one is prompted to follow the ‘instructions’ implicit in the architectural message; functions are not only signified but also promoted and induced. (Eco 1997: 196)

However, designers can never fully predetermine the interpretation of the built environment, as authors cannot control readers’ interpretations. In fact, only some users conform to the Model User and interpretations diverging from the designer’s intentions may arise. Consequently, a built environment can be used in ways the designers would never have thought of.

Eco (1972; see also Fabbri and Eco 1981: 7-12) terms “aberrant decoding” when the interpretations of a message differ from what the authors anticipated. According to Eco, divergent decoding of architecture is mostly unconscious. He considers the messages of functional architectures such as buildings as being rather coercive and indifferent:

Architectural discourse is experienced inattentively [...]. Buildings are always around and people percept them as a background. [...] Architectural messages can never be interpreted in an aberrant way, and without the addressee being aware of thereby perverting them. [...] Thus architecture fluctuates between being rather coercive, implying that you will live in such and such a way with it, and rather indifferent. (Eco 1997: 196)

This is not the case of monuments and memorials: users may deliberately interpret monuments in ways that are different or contrary to designers’ expectations. Furthermore, users can turn monuments into spaces for resistant political practices. As concrete manifestations of political power (Hershkovitz 1997: 397), monuments have often been desecrated through resistant performances: as an example, in April 2016 demonstrators smeared with colored dye many statues and monuments in Skopje in sign of protest against the Macedonian government.

The model describing the complex relations between authors-readers-texts and between designers-users-built environments can be applied to monuments. The meanings of monuments are hardly fixed and depend on the complex relations between designers, users and monuments them-

selves. Political elites use design strategies to generate interpretations that conform to their political purposes. Nevertheless, users may interpret monuments following their own opinions, beliefs, feelings and emotions. As a consequence, different and even contrasting interpretations often challenge the officially sanctioned meanings of monuments (see section 5.2). Lefebvre describes this capacity of monuments to generate multiple interpretations through the metaphor of “horizon of meanings”:

A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a ‘signified’ (or ‘signifieds’); rather, it has a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of – and for the sake of – a particular action. (Lefebvre 1974: 222)

The semiotic approach to monuments considers the meaning of monuments as always resulting from the interplay between designers’ and users’ interpretations. Moreover, the semiotic approach aims at exploring the meanings monuments come to have beyond individual interpretations – paraphrasing Eco, the “intentions” of monuments themselves.

4. The functions of the meanings of monuments

This section explores the meanings of monuments as divided in four interrelated functions: 1) the cognitive function refers to the kind of human knowledge monuments embody as well as the knowledge users have about the representations of monuments; 2) the axiological function considers whether users value this knowledge positively or negatively; 3) the emotional function investigates which emotions and feelings monuments elicit; and 4) the pragmatic function concerns the practices of users within the space of monuments. All these functions are only analytical: in practice, they are interdependent and act simultaneously in defining the meanings of monuments.

4.1 Cognitive function

From the mid-1980, cultural geographers began to investigate landscape⁴ as “communicative devices that encode and transmit information” (Duncan 1990: 4). Similarly, monuments have been considered as “high symbolic signifiers” that confer meanings on space (Whelan 2002: 508; Benton-Short 2006: 299).

The cognitive function of monuments regards the kind of human knowledge monuments embody as well as the knowledge users have about the representation of monuments. The knowledge embodied in monuments is inevitably biased. As every narrative selects some events while omitting others (Cobley 2001: 7), monuments necessarily focus on some histories while obliterating others. Since every “remembering, nevertheless, involves a forgetting” (Dovey 1999: 73), it is natural that monuments represent only specific events and individuals.

Yet political elites can deliberately plan to obliterate certain histories (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975: 46; Lorusso 2010: 92). They can articulate specific national politics of memory to educate citizens toward what to remember and what to forget of the past (Tamm 2013: 651). In doing so, political elites seek to promote dominant historical narratives to accommodate their political purposes and to encourage future possibilities (Massey 1995: 185; Dovey 1999: 12).

However, users may interpret the knowledge embodied in monuments according to their views and needs. Different interpretative communities have different ways of identifying and interpreting the representation of monuments (Yanow 2000). The cognitive function concerns also this local knowledge⁵ users have about the events and the individuals represented in monuments.

4.2 Axiological and emotional functions

The knowledge users have about monuments affect how they value the events, ideals and individuals represented in monuments. The axiological function concerns whether users positively or negatively value what monuments represent and specifically how they assess the modes through which monuments stage their scenes. This evaluation is based on the axiological structure euphoria/dysphoria (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 21). In less technical terms, euphoria relates to positive and attractive attitude toward monuments, while dysphoria is when monuments elicit negative or repulsive sentiments. As a consequence of these evaluations, monuments originate different emotional responses: which emotions and feelings do monuments elicit in users? Have users positive or negative attitudes toward what monuments represent?

In practice, each user has a different emotional response to monuments: in different users the same monument may elicit pleasant emotions or it may recall uncomfortable memories.

Greimas and Fontanille (1991) propose a semiotic model for the study of emotions and feelings at the narrative and discursive level.⁷ This model can be employed to study the fluctuation of emotional attitudes toward monuments and to explore how emotional attitudes affect the practices of users around monuments.

With reference to the axiological and the emotional functions, we distinguish between “hot” and “cold” monuments.⁶ In general terms, “hot” monuments can elicit in users uncomfortable or even traumatic emotions. They can stimulate fierce political debates that may result in forms of conflict and resistance at a social level. This situation occurs when there is a gap between the meanings promoted by political elites and how users differently interpret, contest and resist them. An example of a hot monument is the Red Army memorial of Tallinn: its presence in the heart of Tallinn recently became a touchy issue among Estonians. For this reason, in 2007, the Estonian government decided to relocate it outside the city. Some Tallinn citizens – especially those belonging to the large Russian minority living in Estonia – perceived this act as a provocation: for them, the memorial represented an important site of commemoration. As a result of this relocation, two nights of disorders broke out in Tallinn (for references about this case, see Note 2).



Figure 1.

Conversely, “cold” monuments convey meanings that have become widely shared by a large part of users. For this reasons, the representations of cold monuments elicit no intense emotional reactions. Cold monuments are peacefully integrated into the everyday practices of users that perceive them as ordinary built forms. This is the case with monuments that have turned into neutral landmark or mere meeting points.

The category hot/cold should be understood as a *continuum* between two terms defining distinct attitudes toward monuments. Originally, monuments are not erected as hot or cold: accepted monuments can turn into sites of resistance as well as controversial monuments can increasingly become accepted and mindlessly experienced during the routine of daily life. The evaluations and emotional responses of users toward monuments vary as social and political conceptions change over time (Kosellek 2002: 187; Kattago 2015: 185). For example, in post-socialist cities, monuments erected during the Communist era have increasingly become sites of oppositional and resistant practices as a consequence of the shift in political, social and ethnic relations since the fall of Communism.

4.3 Pragmatic function

How users act around monuments largely depends on what they know about what the monument represents (cognitive function), whether they value positively or negatively this knowledge (axiological function) and on the emotions monuments elicit in them (emotional function).

Cold monuments are experienced as ordinary built forms within the public space. They have lost their ideological weight and turned into neutral landmarks or meeting points. Elsewhere, they have become sites for unexpected practices: for example the War of Independence Victory Column in Tallinn, capital of Estonia, a memorial erected by the Estonian government as a sacred site to commemorate soldiers who served in a struggle against Soviet Russia⁸ has turned into a place where youngsters do tricks with skateboards and BMX. Nevertheless, the Estonian government still uses the area around this memorial for formal practices of commemoration and other national rituals. Around the same monument, oppositional political groups have from time to time organized demonstrations against the Estonian government.

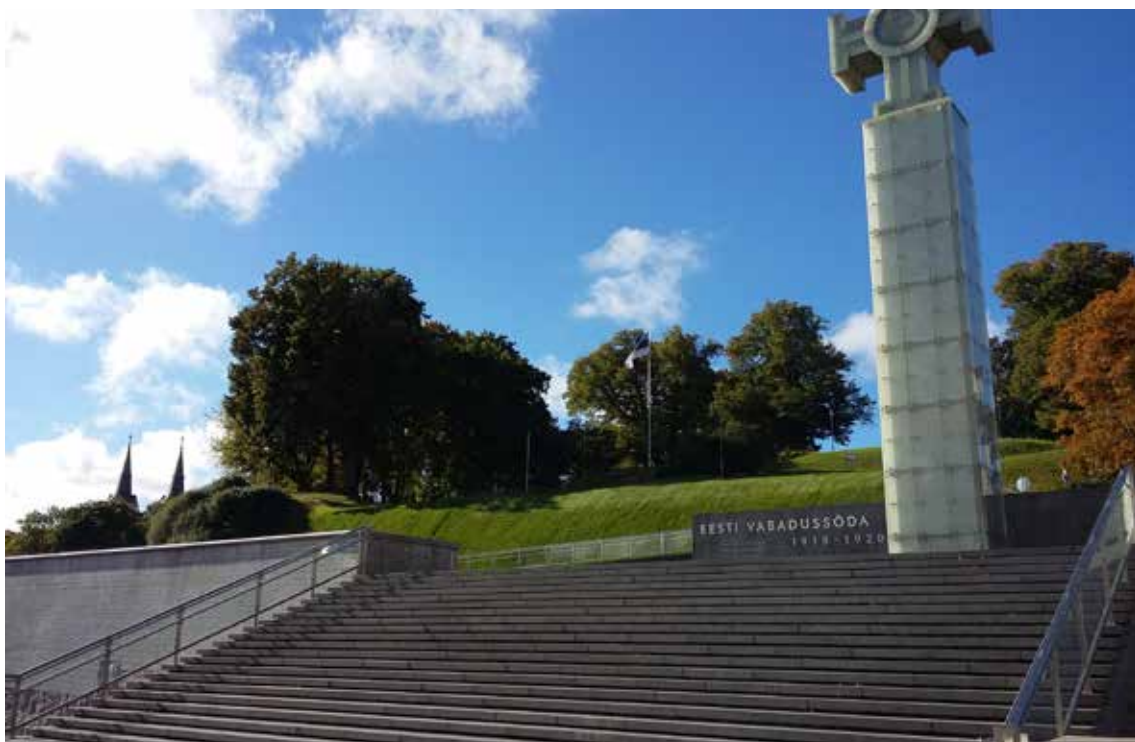


Figure 2.

The semiotic approach considers the formal, the unexpected as well as the resistant practices as equally contributing to the meaning-making of monuments.

5. The visual and the political dimensions of monuments

This section investigates the visual and political dimensions of monuments. Previous research on monuments has proposed excellent methodological approaches to explore each of these dimensions in turn. Visual and political dimensions always function together and influence each other through continuous mediations.

5.1 The visual dimension

The visual dimension of monuments refers to monuments as material built forms beyond their political implications. It examines both the material features and the representations of monuments. Following the proposal of visual semiotics, we divide the visual aspect into two autonomous but related levels: the plastic and the figurative (Greimas 1984), respectively describable as the material and symbolic levels.

The material level considers shapes, colors and topological distribution of monuments as independent from their visual representations. Abousnnouga and Machin (2013: 41-57) proposed a list of categories to describe the material dimension of monuments. They explain that several “material semiotic choices” are available to designers in order to establish specific relations between monuments and users (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 16).

The list below shows the categories that we consider pertinent for the analysis of the material level of monuments. The list includes some of the semiotic choices by Abousnnouga and Machin (2013: 41-57) and some topological, eidetic and chromatic categories from plastic semiotic (Greimas 1984).

1. Dimensions: large/small, wide/narrow, tall/short;
2. Location: degree of elevation, distance/proximity, angle of interaction;
3. Materials of construction: solidity/hollowness, texture of the surface;
4. Topological organization: form, shape;
5. Eidetic organization: regularity/irregularity, curvature;
6. Chromatic organization: colors, brightness/opacity, lighting.

The symbolic level regards the visual representation of monuments. Since monuments stage specific scenes, the symbolic analysis of monuments focuses on the represented objects, characters and actions. It looks at the iconographies and the symbols that monuments embody.

Traditional research in visual semiotics (for example, Thurlemann 1982: 108) has associated the material and symbolic levels with the expression/content distinction.⁹ This approach has conceptualized expressions as ontological entities regarding the physical and visually perceptible aspects of texts. As such, expressions have become meaningless substances to which intangible meanings correlate. For this reason, traditional semiotic analyses have assumed that meanings can be “extracted” directly from the materiality of visual texts without active interpretation processes (Chandler 1995).

The same assumption has characterized more recent semiotic research on the meaning of monuments. For example, Abousnnouga and Machin (2013: 57) have analyzed war memorials in United Kingdom implying that material design choices are able to directly communicate specific meanings. The authors have explained that a “repertoire of semiotic resources” is available to designers who combine them “to communicate specific meanings in context”. Moreover, they have argued that ma-

terial and symbolic choices can “have very different meaning potential” (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 131): for example, stone as a construction material conveys “longevity and ancientness”, but also “naturalness” and “softness” when carved in smooth and rounded shapes (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 134).

We argue that stone as a construction material cannot directly communicate specific meanings. Rather, stone signifies insofar as routinized patterns of interpretation are created, i.e. when semiotic resources has been repetitively used to convey certain meanings (Nanni and Bellentani, forthcoming). This is to say that, for example, a tall memorial cannot convey imposing meanings of power simply because of its stature or a glass sculpture cannot convey meanings of transparency only because of its material of construction. The semiotic analysis of monuments explores the strategies used by designers to create and control the interpretations of monuments: how does a tall memorial come to convey imposing meanings of power in a certain context? How does glass come to convey ideals of transparency?

Contemporary semiotic research has demonstrated that the material and the symbolic levels cannot be automatically associated to expression and content respectively (Paolucci 2010). This approach has defined a more complex relation between expression and content and consequently between material and symbolic: both expression/content and material/symbolic are in a mutual relation that defines, from context to context, something as expression/material and something else as content/symbolic.¹⁰ Following these proposals, the semiotic approach equally grants meaning potential to both the material and the symbolic levels of monuments.

5.2 The political dimension

Monuments and memorials are built forms deliberately erected to promote selective and dominant historical narratives.

Memorials and monuments are political constructions, recalling and representing histories selectively, drawing popular attention to specific events and people and obliterating or obscuring others. (Hay et al. 2004: 204)

Monuments contribute to fix in space dominant “discourses on the past” (Violi 2014: 11, our trans.). The discourses on the past are “ideological”, i.e. they have a “partial world vision” that selects specific interpretations of the “reality” while concealing others (Eco 1976: 289-290). Monuments embody discourses that inevitably express selective points of view on the past, focusing on convenient events while marginalizing what is discomforting for an elite.

For this reasons, monuments are essential for the articulation of the national politics of memory and identity.¹¹ Along with other legal, institutional and commemorative means, political elites use monuments to educate citizens toward “what is and what is not to be remembered of the past” (Tamm 2013: 651). Since memory is the basis of any identity building, monuments play an essential role in “shaping a given community’s basic values and principles of belonging” (Tamm 2013: 652). Hence, the establishment of selective monumental landscapes can help political elites to promote a single national identity and to reinforce sentiments of national distinctiveness.

While articulating selective historical narratives, political elites erect monuments to inculcate specific conceptions of the present and encourage future possibilities (Massey 1995: 185; Dovey 1999: 12). In doing so, political elites use monuments to set political agendas and to legitimate or reinforce the primacy of their political power. Therefore, monuments can be used as tools to establish the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Hershkovitz 1997; Hay et al. 2004).

Monuments are the most conspicuous concrete manifestations of political power and of

the command of resources and people by political and social elites. As such, they possess a powerful and usually self-conscious symbolic vocabulary or iconography that is understood by those who share a common culture and history. (Hershkovitz 1997: 397)

While political elites erect monuments seeking to convey dominant worldviews, the meanings of monuments are always “mutable and fluid” (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Once erected, monuments become “social property” (Hershkovits 1997: 397) and they “can be used, reworked and reinterpret in ways that are different from, or indeed contradictory to, the intentions of those who had them installed” (Hay et al. 2004: 204). The interpretations of monument can also dramatically change over time with the change of social relations, concepts of nation and opinions on past events.

[...] the original meaning is not really written in stone at all. Instead, it might be remembered completely differently later on or become the unexpected site of controversy. The memorial may even become invisible and unnoticed. (Kattago 2015: 185)

In transitional societies, the dominant meanings represented in monuments can suddenly become peripheral and variously resisted at a social level.¹² The tearing down of monuments erected by Communist authorities was the sign of regime change throughout post-socialist space. In less spectacular ways, monuments of a bygone era can turn into more neutral landmarks. For example, after the fall of Communism, the monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, capital of Bulgaria, has turned from a sacred memorial into a space of entertainment and leisure. Nowadays, the area of the monument is a popular meeting place for youngsters and attracts skaters and bikers that use it for their tricks.



Figure 3.

In some cases, monuments legitimizing the authority of political elites can turn into sites of oppositional and resistant political practices. Hershkovitz (1993) shows how Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the center of political power in China, has embodied traditions of protest and dissidence; Whelan

(2002) describes how monuments dedicated to British monarchs in Dublin became sites of contestation toward the political regime. Through an examination of the controversies over the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, Benton-Short proves that memorials wittingly or unwittingly generate debates on identity and memory:

Memorials and other forms of heritage are created in a social/political context where culture, location, class, power, religion, gender and even sexual orientation will influence what is considered to be worthy of preserving as heritage [...]. Because heritage, national identity, and memory are socially constructed, they are also inherently contested [...].
(Benton-Short 2006: 300)

In other cases, monuments considered sacred by their owners may become the object of scorn and ridicule. Atkinson & Cosgrove (1998) show how the Vittoriano, a huge monument commemorating the first king of united Italy in Rome, has been derided throughout its history.

These cases show that the meanings of monuments are never fixed once and for all and that that designers cannot fully control monument interpretations. Moreover, they show that unexpected and alternative uses continuously reinterpret the original meanings of monuments in ways the designers would never have thought of.

Therefore, monuments and memorials are “dynamic sites of meaning” (Osborne 1998: 453) disposed to elicit multiple interpretations and various emotional responses. The semiotic approach can be useful to analyze the multiple interpretations of monuments drawing attention to both the officially sanctioned meanings of monuments and the various ways they are interpreted or resisted at the social level.

6. The contextual and inter-textual relations of monuments

Monuments cannot be analyzed apart from their cultural context. Cultural context largely affects monument interpretations. Culture is the socially constructed signifying system that a group of people actively produces and maintains.¹³ It consists of the basic and shared meanings that guide behavior and channel interpretations of individuals and social communities. Due to its complexity, culture includes different interpretative communities (Yanow 2000). Each interpretative community has a particular way to frame social reality based on specific cultural traits such as language, race, ethnicity, class, religion, political views, socio-economic interests and needs (Yanow 2000; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

Eco calls these particular ways of interpreting social reality “encyclopedic competences” (Eco 1986: 2-3). In Eco’s term, the “encyclopedia” is a stock of shared signs that interpreters use during interpretative processes. The encyclopedia is subdivided in two levels to include both the cultural knowledge as a whole and the routinized ways to use that knowledge: at the global level, the encyclopedia contains all the potential interpretations circulating in the socio-cultural world; at local levels, it contains routinized sets of instructions to interpret specific portions of the socio-cultural space (Eco 1986: 68; Violi 1992: 103; Lorusso 2010: 108-109; Paolucci 2010: 357-358). In practice, different cultures select relevant local portions of knowledge to delimit specific areas of consensus that differentiate them from other cultures (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003: 27). Thus, different interpretative communities interpret monuments differently on the basis of their shared stock of knowledge: the same monument can be for one community a sacred site of commemoration, for another a source of traumatic memories.

As part of the broader cultural context, the spatial settings in which monuments are located

largely affect their interpretations. Often the location of monuments has “site specific connection to events and people commemorated” (Benton-Short 2007: 300).

In some cases, monuments are erected in locations they themselves contribute to symbolically and ideologically charge. Frequently spatial settings are reconstructed or redesigned to provide appropriate location for future monuments. In other cases, the manipulations of spatial surroundings can affect the meanings of already existing monuments. For example, the manipulation of spatial surrounding has been variously used in post-socialist cities to lessen the visibility and the “ideological weight” of monuments erected during the Communist era (Ehala 2009: 140).¹⁴ After the transition, monuments representing Communist leaders were marginalized or even removed from public space, while new political elites establish monuments in accordance with the current social and political system. For example, in Odessa, Ukraine, a statue of Lenin was turned into Darth Vader, the villain of the film series “Star Wars”. This replacement was made after the Ukrainian government approved laws to ban Communist symbols in April 2015. The Ukrainian government saw in the excision of Soviet material remains an opportunity to exorcize the traumatic experience of Soviet rule and to build a particular conception of the future.

In this latter case, as texts always reinterpret other texts,¹⁵ new monuments actively affected the meanings of the monumental space established during the Communist era. Once erected, monuments establish complex relations with the existing built environment. In linguistic and semiotic research, “intertextuality” defines the process through which texts establish relations with other texts circulating within the semiotic space (Manning 1987: 42). Post-structural geographic research has used literary intertextuality to describe the complex relations that built forms establish with other built forms and social practices (Duncan 1990: 22-23). Semiotic analysis takes into account both the cultural context in which monuments are erected and interpreted and the intertextual-like relations monuments establish with one another.

7. Toward a semiotic approach to monuments

Different disciplines have studied monuments and memorials using various theoretical and methodological approaches. No doubt this research would be a source of inspiration for future research on monuments and memorials. However, such studies wittingly or unwittingly created gaps between the material, the symbolic and the political dimensions of monuments. Moreover, they variously drew more attention either to the intentions of the designer or to the interpretations of the user. These rigid distinctions fall short of describing the complex interpretative processes around monuments and memorials.

We proposed a semiotic approach to overcome these rigid distinctions predominant in the previous research on monuments and memorials. The main advantages of a semiotic approach to monuments and memorials are the following:

(i) Semiotics provides a holistic approach overcoming distinctions such as visual/political, material/symbolic, designer/user, art/power and so on beforehand. These distinctions may be useful analytical tools in particular cases, but they cannot be projected onto the ontological state of monuments (Lindström et al. 2014: 125). These distinctions should be considered as “participative” rather than oppositional (Paolucci, 2010), defining a mutual process in which terms are directed and received to and by each other. Participative distinctions provide a methodological basis to investigate the meanings of monuments as actively resulting from (1) the interplay of the material, the symbolic and the political dimensions and (2) the interplay between designers’ and users’ interpretations.

(ii) Semiotics analyzes the meanings of monuments as the results of a “multi-party communication” (Lindström et al. 2014: 126) between different interpretative communities (Yanow 2000). The meanings one attaches to monuments depend on the interrelation between cognitive, axiological

and emotional functions. Moreover, the everyday practices of users are able to attach new meanings to monuments.

(iii) Semiotic analysis takes into account both the cultural context in which monuments are erected and interpreted and the intertextual relations monuments establish with one another. Specifically, it explores how the meanings of monuments originate from the dialogue between different interpretative communities within a cultural context.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Bronze Soldier in its current location - the Defence Forces Cemetery of Tallinn, Estonia. Picture taken by the authors in September 2015.

Figure 2. The War of Independence Victory Column in Freedom Square, Tallinn, Estonia. Picture taken by the authors in October 2015.

Figure 3. Skating and biking practices near the monument to the Soviet Army, Sofia, Bulgaria. Picture taken by the authors in June 2015.

NOTES

1. See for example “Monument” in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2009: 1130.
2. For example in Tallinn, capital of Estonia, the relocation in 2007 of a Red Army memorial caused two nights of disorders during which one person perished. This relocation had political consequences damaging the relations between Estonia and the Russian Federation. Moreover, it affects the everyday interactions between Estonian and Russian ethnic communities living in Estonia. For further research on this case, see Smith 2008; Pääbo 2008; Torsti 2008; Lehti et al. 2008; Wertsch 2009; Ehala 2009; Mälksoo 2009; Vihalemm and Kalmus 2009; Raun 2009; Kattago 2012; Tamm 2013.
3. Eco (1990b: 145) dubbed this intermediate way “intention of the text” or “*intention operis*, as opposed to – or interacting with – the *intention auctoris* and the *intention lectoris*”.
4. From the mid-1980s, the textual paradigm ignited a representational approach toward landscape within human geography. In this context, human geographers largely used the metaphor of landscape as text. Lagopoulos and Lagopoulou (2014: 456-457) registered two main approaches within the geographical research associating text to landscape: *landscape-in-text* assumes that researchers can reach appropriate understandings of landscape through the investigation of its textual representations. On the other hand, *landscape-as-text* analyzes actually existing landscapes focusing on the processes of landscape production and interpretation.
5. By “local knowledge” we mean the “web of beliefs” that characterize the interpretation processes of individual and social communities. Local knowledge is specific, concrete, practical and situated in context (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 75).
6. This category derives from the distinction between hot and cold societies by Levi-Strauss (1990): hot societies are disposed to social change and differentiation and focus on history; cold societies focus on myth and are more static and less differentiated.
7. Greimas and Fontanille (1991) provide a semiotic model to explore the emotional dimensions at the narrative and discursive level. They term “passions” the emotional states of the subjects during specific narrative programs. These emotional states depend on the junctive relation between the subject and the object, i.e. if subjects are joined up with or separated from the objects they value. Each passion differently affects the subject’s doing during narrative programs.

8. Officially called the “War of Independence Victory Column”, the Estonian government erected this memorial in 2009 to commemorate the soldiers who fought during the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920). According to Estonian historical narratives, this war is linked with ideals of freedom and sovereignty, since it culminated with the independence of the Republic of Estonia for the first time in history.
9. Elaborating the Saussurean notion of the sign as a twofold entity, Hjelmslev (1961: 30) defines expression and content “as designations of the functives that contract [...] the sign function”. He considers sign as “an entity generated by the connection between an expression and a content”.
10. As Paolucci explained (2010), Hjelmslev already conceptualized the mutual relation between expression and content in his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*: “The terms expression plane and content plane [...] are chosen in conformity with established notions and are quite arbitrary. Their functional definition provides no justification for calling one, and not the other, of these entities expression, or one, and not the other, content. They are defined only by their mutual solidarity, and neither of them can be identified otherwise. They are defined only oppositively and relatively, as mutually opposed functives of one and the same function” (Hjelmslev 1961/1943: 60).
11. Following Tamm (2013: 652), we use the terms “national politics of identity/memory” to distinguish the attempt by political elites to create a single collective memory from the other social communities variously calling for the recognition of their memories and identities.
12. Lotman (2005: 205; 1990: 123-204) used the spatial metaphors center and periphery to describe different levels of organization of cultures. At the center of the semiotic space, there were the “most developed and structurally organized languages, and in first place the natural language of that culture” (Lotman 1990: 127). Being more organized, cultures at the center attempted to prescribe conventional norms to the whole culture to generate behavioral norms and codified standards. Usually, the majority of social agents simply embodied these norms and perceived them as their own “reality”. However, divergent cultures placed at the periphery of the semiotic space could deviate from the central norms. Lotman considered center and periphery as a dynamic opposition: while organizing laws of self-regulation, central cultures became rigid and thus incapable to develop further (Lotman 1990: 134); on the other hand, being more flexible, peripheral cultures continuously influenced the more organized central cultures.
13. We consider culture as an essentially semiotic concept (Geertz 1973: 24; Othengrafen and Reimer 2012: 52). In order to conceptualize culture in a more critical way, most of the representatives of the so-called “cultural turn” in human geography and sociology investigated culture using semiotic concepts. For example, Raymond Williams (1982: 13) explained that culture is “the signifying system through which necessarily (through among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored”. Cosgrove and Jackson (1987: 99) considered culture “as the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomenon of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they gave meanings”. Peter Jackson (1989: 2) suggested seeing culture as made from “*maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible”.
14. For example, the Estonian government sought to reduce the visibility of the Red Army memorial in the city center of Tallinn to lessen its visibility and “ideological weight” (Ehala 2009: 140). Most of the presented plans suggested balancing the symbolic meanings of the Red Army memorial with Estonian national symbols. However, only minor manipulations were realized: diagonal footpaths replaced the direct access to the memorial, new trees were planted, the eternal flame was removed and the text on the commemorative plaque was modified (Ehala 2009: 140; Smith 2008).
15. Eco (1986: 68) called “unlimited semiosis” this recursive process through which a sign is always reinterpreted by other signs. This is the case also for texts as manifested sets of signs.

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Compulsive Scribblers. A Semiotic Challenge Based on the Works of Kunizo Matsumoto

Bruno Surace

The challenge faced in this paper is to attempt to formulate a semiotic analysis around the works of Kunizo Matsumoto, Japanese exponent of Art Brut affected by mental illness. Interfacing with the textualities produced by Matsumoto, thousands upon thousands of pages generated by a form of compulsive graphomania, means questioning some of the premises of general semiotics and of its approach to art: the concept of “autonomy of the text”, the issue of the author’s intentionality, the relationship between communication and signification, the conception of artistic discourse as a rhetorical form, the ambiguous existence of idiolect, the interpolation of the borders between symbolism and iconism. These issues will be subjected to examination in a dissertation which, before embarking on a specifically visual-plastic analysis, will try to delineate the relationship between mental pathology and artistic production in a semiotic regime which can in some way help extrapolate the domains of sense in the works of Matsumoto, providing a possible epistemological pattern to account for the manner in which irregular art is semiotized. In order to substantiate the questions raised above, at the centre of the paper there will, in fact, be a discussion of the possibilities of a signifier for its own sake, released from Saussure’s dual conception of sign, which will lead to a new definition of artistic discourse as a “breaking free from the code” based on the metabole of repetition, a rhetorical device able to describe “lateral” forms of art, such as those produced under an obsessive psychic regime, within a sort of fractal semiotics open to objective analysis. Starting from a hermeneutic declination of Davidson’s “principle of charity”, this may produce semiotic results with reference to the text beyond the psychopathological specifics – which are of fundamental relevance also in pre-semiotic areas – of the subject who elaborated it, freeing Matsumoto’s work from the yolk of an interpretation burdened by biological determinism.

KEYWORDS Kunizo Matsumoto, graphomania, Art Brut, mental illness, signifier

Therein lay hidden and threatening, although unknown to him, a future teeming with horrid professors of semiotics and brilliant avant-garde poets.

Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, *The Temple of Iconoclasts*, 1972

1. Compulsive graphomania

When visiting the *abcd* collection of Art Brut in Montreuil (France), one may happen to stumble across some rather strange manufactures which cannot be defined by a specific artistic criterion and

which therefore may often themselves be initiators of a new or separate 'canon'. One would not expect otherwise from a museum dedicated by its very name to the display of art that is unrefined, if not often manifestly "ugly" or unaesthetic, nevertheless one always remains somewhat perplexed on finding oneself in front of works like those of Kunizo Matsumoto, located in the remotest corner of the collection. Sheet upon sheet, exercise book pages or parts of calendars, literally overflowing with calligraphic *attempts* which are indecipherable even by the most cultured of Japanese, constantly reiterated in a sort of coherent – while enigmatic – variation on a theme, composed of crammed spaces and empty areas, in a plastic exercise that appears anything but random. It thus seems, in conclusion, that one has come up against an unknown language, endowed with its own grammar, if not even with its own alphabet for which no Rosetta Stone exists.

This suspicion, which for the semiotic scholar constitutes one of the biggest and most stimulating challenges conceivable, arises precisely from the repetitive nature – going well beyond obsession – of Matsumoto's work: such cast-iron reiteration must surely mean something. Secondly, but equally important, the search for meta-codes within the texts in question cannot but constitute a succulent enigma, starting perhaps from the *phemis* fragments referring to known symbolic configurations which may in some way aid decoding. This method may however seem rather difficult to those unversed in the Japanese system of ideograms and, anyway, is to be discarded to date on the grounds of the relevant literature which is unanimous in sustaining that as far as Matsumoto is concerned, references to the Japanese ideographic code stop at the imitation of the plastic formants; it may thus be necessary to resort to the age-old idiolectal hypothesis, postulating that the artist's calligraphic exercise consists in the execution of a language of his own. In the third and final analysis the situation is further complicated when it emerges that the artist suffers from a psychic disturbance. The dimension of mental unease therefore enters the equation and the semiotic challenge becomes even broader: whether or not to take into account the clinical peculiarities of his condition (crucial to his work, as can be seen in the rare film segments which portray Matsumoto in the act of writing), or entrust oneself slavishly to the principle of textual autonomy at the risk of overinterpretation. And even if one were to choose the second alternative, how does one proceed seeing that the compulsive nature of the works, one of the first stylemes the observer notes, is undeniably tied to its creator's psychopathological condition? That mysterious repetition is symptomatic of a burden rather than a gift, as those affected by obsessive-compulsive disorders well know. In this regard Freud, correlating the concept of *repetition compulsion* to instinctual drives, writes that:

A drive is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon, under the pressure of external disturbing forces; [...] it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life (Freud SE 18: 36).

Yet this condition would seem to give rise to a complete artistic discourse, not easily approachable by means of the customary interpretative heuristics. An interesting dilemma.

2. Breaking free from the code

It is by now pretty much the norm (Danto 1981, Bohem 2009, Simongini 2012), to regard artistic discourse, in an aesthetological context, as a rhetorical exercise on a par with other discursive regimes, as ascertained by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten:

Sense perception may lie at the centre of Baumgarten's aesthetics only as far as rhetoric allows it to be recognized as capable of an autonomous cognitive strategy of perfection. For

Baumgarten, the aesthetic argument takes place in the articulation of a connection of sense perceptions, and the rhetoric illustrates the structural rules whereby occurs the perfecting of sensual knowledge towards which all aesthetics aims (Tedesco 2008: 135).

In other words, art has its codes and, even though it may be executed precisely in an attempt to break free from them, in fact all it does is create new ones, generating rhetoric. It therefore appears that avoiding the code is almost impossible, seeing that not even artistic discourse – to which this task is usually delegated – is able to achieve it, yet Matsumoto's work seems to re-introduce this form of unexpected communicative motility. Indeed in this writer's texts the figure of repetition, which is a rhetorical styleme sedimented in centuries of practice, appears to be unhinged from any persuasive intention, and manifests itself rather as a sort of tic. To all effects the use of repetition by the artist in question would not seem to assume the value of an actual *metabola* (as the figures of repetition in the μ group are called), but rather to encapsulate metataxis, metasemes, metalogisms and metaplasms at the same time, displacing their individual specificity in favour of *repetitio* as such. This potentially infinite movement really represents the decline of any form of rhetoric in that it does not pursue any perlocutionary objective, but solely its own perpetuation. Having established this, reiteration for its own sake, not subjected to any teleological regime (not finalised), can scarcely be considered a semiotic process. Banally: what does it mean? One must be careful not to dismiss the issue as trivial, for if one were to settle the question by declaring that Matsumoto writes (or draws?) solely because driven to do so by his compulsion, then one would be eliminating the alternative domain from the analytical horizon, thereby impoverishing in a Saussurian sense the event of any trace of semiotic valence. Yet one could even deny the artist any form of planning or intention, while sustaining that his work nevertheless proves to be invested with sense since it is independent from its creator (the principle of textual autonomy), but once again one would risk losing one's sense of direction, debasing textualities which could (and perhaps, ethically, should) also be read as reflections precisely of whoever conceived them. The solution in this extremely delicate (but certainly not unique) case would appear to be that – generally suited to the hermeneutics of all forms of art – of remaining firmly anchored to the protasis, making the potential condition the interpretative horizon of reference, moreover according it the hermeneutic *principle of charity* which contemplates at the same time from the most 'pragmatic [dimension] of explicability to the epistemic [dimension] of truth' (Longato 1999: 150); in other words, if something can signify, then it does.

3. Insignificant signifiers

In order to proceed further without transcending the epistemologies of reference – that is, perhaps by sustaining – rather impressionistically – that it amounts to finally *pure* art, namely, art that has been *purified* of the burden of signification – it is here necessary to refer to the theoretical formulations of Jacques Lacan, first of all those associated with the so-called *primacy of the signifier* or, going back to Slavoj Žižek, the *Master-Signifier*. In fact, owing to the psychopathological conditions that cause it, the aesthetic valence of Matsumoto's work is to be sought above all in the *actio*, that is to say, in the act of the very production of the signifier. And here perhaps occurs the *brutalisation* (in a positive sense) of the artistic discourse, realised in 'a signifier available without its signified, or *before* it, so to speak, as in the case of the color blue announcing [...] the adduction in the order of the dynamics of the body itself' (Lyotard 2011: 80). The linear manifestation of the text (to put it in Eco's terms) is thus the very fulcrum of Matsumoto's aesthetics in that it is the execution *in praesentia* of a pre-narrative – if not altogether pre-semiotic – agency, which is actualized in the deturpation of the sheet of paper, brochure or calendar. Regarding the *writers*, in fact – but the concept may well be

applied here too – Dagostino states that ‘for the traditional graphomaniac deturpation has aesthetic valence’ (Dagostino 2006: 72) and, indeed, this resides in the externalization of one’s very being as a semiotic animal, in leaving a sign which is a sign of oneself. Partially similar is the operation which Marinetti was performing when arranging ideophones on his pages:

The blank page is no longer a neutral space, a support for writing, but *theatrum* and *lusus*, a synesthetic field of action, the possible vehicle for a visualization of the vital fluxes in which consciousness is immersed (Picciau 2007; 114).

The sign thus becomes a modality for contact between Matsumoto’s mind and the external world, as happens for every other individual, but acquires an artistic dimension when it becomes the expression of a semiotic diversity, precisely due to its serial nature which distinguishes it from the improvised doodle that everyone will produce during a moment of boredom. It does not therefore appear particularly useful to approach the issue in the positivist spirit which in 1903 was delivering sentences like: ‘The genesis of graphomania is to be sought in the very nature of delirium’ (*Giornale di psicopatologia e neuropsichiatria*, vol.31). In the charitable perspective cited above, it would rather seem necessary to look into the specifics of the plane of expression in Matsumoto’s work, carefully separating the content one might attribute it *ex-post* – perhaps playing at tracing the codes as John Nash used to do with United States periodicals – from the plastic peculiarities which are instead characteristic of the Japanese artist’s style (we can now so define it).

4. Fractal Semiotics

Matsumoto’s art therefore constitutes *art brut* (*rough art*, *raw art*, or, in the words of Roger Cardinal, *outsider art*) on account of its incessant, compulsive nature, as if it were a sort of tic. Nevertheless the exercise of replication is not lacking in variations, which once again fit in with the artist’s basic graphomania, concealing themselves in the thick web of signs woven from text to text. On a structural level the semiotics of Matsumoto’s work cannot but conform to this fractal geometry, that is, to the substantial absence of change in scale of the work which determines a figure ‘that is repeated infinitely with the same characteristics in all dimensions’ (Canonica e Rossi 2007, 598). Ultimately the author’s is a causal, controlled randomness, hence by examining different portions of different texts one can as a general result obtain roughly the same effect, given the substantial absence of content of the individual ideograms. Having said this, it does not follow that his work can be measured with formulae such as that proposed by mathematician George Birkhoff in 1930, according to which by dividing O (Order) and C (Complexity) one obtains M (Aesthetic beauty). Rather, one can appropriate the aesthetic dimension of the fractal concept understood as ‘geometry of chaos [and] transformation of a simple phenomenon into a marvellous design, based on the fraction which recurs in its segments’ (Intilla 2006: 128).

Nonetheless Matsumoto’s proto-ideograms are not exactly born *ex-novo*, like improvised scribbles, but are the fruit of a laborious, constant, maniacal search for sources which draw from disparate subjects, for the most part connected with Kabuki theatre (歌舞伎). It is not easy to trace the motivations underlying this preference, yet one must acknowledge that statistically the brochures picked up by the artist around Osaka principally refer to this theme. One will therefore notice in his work the copy, albeit subtle or difficult to decipher, of ideograms pertaining to this sphere yet, as previously stated, it would not seem particularly productive to use this contingency as a relevant principle for interpretation. Certainly, the more intrepid student of hermeneutics could sustain that the glyphs on the sheets of paper, with their graphematic references to the centuries-old Japanese dramatic arts, recall the *topoi* of the Kabuki in their spaces and movements, perhaps producing results that are as

fascinating as those which topicalize the Holy Scriptures in a UFOlogical key. However, if even the few biographies that exist of Matsumoto tell us that in his “School for the Disabled” he preferred to spend all his time reciting roles in “Japanese historical dramas”, the link between theatre and writing is not to be traced to some sort of common significance. He would seem rather to have developed a passion-obsession for Kabuki which leads him to collect whatever his mind can most tangibly connect to this ethereal semantic sphere, and that is the signs that refer to it. In this sense, his is truly meta-writing, in no way interested in describing or narrating a propensity but only in establishing it, continually pinning it down, substantiating it in a primigenial form (that of existing prior to signifying) which is completed in the act of sign production. What re-emerges therefore is the critical issue of the primacy of the signifier which signifies itself before anything else, assuming the nature of a paradoxical, oxymoric, solid but elusive meta-sign, which perhaps provides an explanation of Matsumoto’s ranting activity.

5. Glyphs, alphabets, and monoplane semiotics

Matsumoto’s work is therefore the fruit of a pre-semiotic semiotics, in that it does not apply itself to translating anything. It is not a question of translation, but rather of conlation, as the movement and perpetration of significant cells. This said, it is inevitable to consider how Japanese writing effected by means of *kanji* (漢字, sinograms in Japan) lends itself particularly well to this type of exercise since, ‘besides possessing an acoustic image, it is also equipped with a visual image, the ideogram’ (Marchianò 1992: 102). This alphabetic peculiarity probably lies at the base of the approach adopted by this artist who, according to the biography cited in footnote 1, has never learnt to read, despite manifesting from an early age a spasmodic interest in writing. This would corroborate the hypothesis whereby his fascination with ideograms is due to their decodification as iconic units, or perhaps more precisely as units characterised by semi-symbolism, as described by Greimas with regard to monoplane semiotics:

A type of “language” characterized not, as in the case of symbolism in the narrow sense (“interpretable monoplane semiotics”, formal languages), by the conformity of isolated elements, but by conformity between *categories* (according to Hjelmslev: paradigmatic classes of units which can be interchanged at a certain point in the syntagmatic chain) (Fabbri e Sbisà 2001: 242).

In fact, Matsumoto’s semiotics would appear to be of the monoplane variety on account of its totally metalinguistic character, which does nothing except try to substantiate itself as a kind of graphematic *ouroboros*. He takes the symbols or the images of the Japanese linguistic system and transfers them onto his supports, favouring some rather than others because they are visually or semantically connected to his past experiences, creating a work that appears motivated by a pantagruelic tautology: “I imprint because I imprint”. It seems difficult to think that he could do the same with the graphemes of the Latin alphabet, inasmuch as this last is composed of totally symbolic units which rarely convey autonomous meanings in their singularity, but rather accomplish meaning in the execution of combinatorial art. The key to Matsumoto’s signifier lies in the iconological contamination of the glyph *kanji*, in which he presumably recognizes a subject content which he systematically strips bare in favour of the celebration of the phemic categories which underlie it. For Matsumoto, the glyph is the code which enables him to break free from the code itself:

With the glyph, we are beyond semiotics, and beyond ontology. Once even perception (of an object or an event) can be articulated as socially dimensioned (along with feeling, emo-

tion, experience, etc.), it escapes categorization as either individual or social, ontological or semiotic (Martinot, 2006: 222).

Who does he do this for? Perhaps for himself, perhaps for no one, like Antonio Moresco in his *Lettere a nessuno* (*Letters to no one*) which he felt the need (or maybe the urge) to write despite not having anyone to write them to.

6. Physiology and alternative

Introducing compulsive urgency into the act of writing constitutes a not insignificant semiotic issue. If we are in fact dealing with an impelling drive to communicate, then this falls fully within the scope of phenomena which this discipline is able to analyze with its instruments, but if instead this need belongs to the sphere of physiology, the semiotic contingency is reduced to a collateral effect of an obligatory process, that is, there is no alternative. Indeed, a dictionary definition of graphomania reads:

the continuous – in some subjects manic – tendency to write on everything, in a pathological form. For some subjects, however, it may also be a “liberation”, an unconscious need, not pathological (Pigliacampo 2009: 162).

In other words, the movement from the domain of possibility to that of necessity (obvious right from the title of the exhibition organised by Yukiko Koide, *The Art of Necessity: Personal and Practical Creative Urgency*, which also includes Matsumoto's work) implies a derailment from *signedness* (*segnicITÀ*) to *fabrility* (*fabrilitÀ*), to use Cirese's categories for distinguishing between execution invested with sense and that merely aiming at existence (1984), or from sign to function, to recall a similar concept of Leroi-Gourhan's. It is thus necessary to differentiate between pathological compulsion and communicative emergency in order to avoid falling into the ‘temptation to tendential pansemioticism’ (Ponzio 1976: 160) when dealing with the issue, throwing into the same epistemological cauldron the outpourings on the walls of toilets in a service station – a rash operation, semi-rational, but soundly semiotic – and a sneeze – an operation which can at most signify in a semeiotic setting. This having been explicated, a huge problem arises as to the relationship between art and mental illness, tending precisely towards the definition of the confines between semiosis and physiology which, however, must also consider how:

(a) the very concept of *fabrility* turns out to be somewhat critical since “every transformation of space can be read as a significant” (Greimas 1991: 130);

(b) the images produced by the mentally ill may be read as “a collection of *pathognomic* details” (Tosatti 1997: 36) and therefore possess a semiotic substrate;

(c) the principle of charity previously cited may be regarded as a “reasonable act of faith” (Baruchello 2002:34) whereby it is worth conceding Matsumoto's work a hermeneutic “chance” rather than not doing so;

(d) inevitably sense can be traced in work which is the fruit of a psychopathology once this has been “given to the world”, that is, rendered to a community of readers who signify it in some way.

7. Plastic stylemes in Matsumoto

Having explained the caution needed, it is possible to approach Matsumoto's work trying to apply to it a general, plastic semiotic analysis which can ascertain the necessary presence of stylemes in order to be able to speak of an underlying grammar.



Fig. 1. Kunizo Matsumoto, untitled (1715-1716) © ART BRUT – collection abcd, Montreuil.



Fig. 2. Kunizo Matsumoto, untitled (1554) © ART BRUT – collection abcd, Montreuil.

From a topological perspective there is no doubt that the texts in question aim to saturate the writing surface, where full spaces prevail over empty spaces to an overwhelming extent, to signify a sort of irreversible branding of the support by the artist. Nevertheless one notices, in certain series, the expression of a kind of iconic “respect” towards the semiotized area. In the case of the calendars presenting decorative frills (see fig. 1), for example, these frills are never marked by the glyphs but are accurately avoided instead, as if to honour the intrinsic harmony of the support. On the contrary, as far as concerns the calendars without images (fig. 2) but showing the dates in cubital characters, the artist invades the space already occupied, writing over them, but interrupting his calligraphic outburst when he comes to the more visible paratextual ideograms situated at the top; nevertheless it should be highlighted that this occurs only in certain series of works, while in others the page is regarded as a “signable” surface in its entirety, as in fig. 3, where the only differences to be found in the support are the absence of the red design behind the central number and the utilization of a blue font. The page is therefore treated with a certain semiotic reverence out of respect for the signs which, in order of size but also of meaningfulness, already inhabit

it. Instead, the remaining copious flow of signs which pours forth from Matsumoto's hands floods every possible available area, almost as if – from the point of view proposed here – the artist were accepting a sort of invitation from the empty spaces asking, inasmuch as they reflect the full spaces, to be filled. This dynamic of rational and organized filling is typical of certain obsessive psychopathological states, as in the case of serial collectors of objects (who identify forms of *cosmos* in the *chaos* they construct), and is probably the psychological root at the base of this semiotic operation. One must add, moreover, that the inner spaces of the written surface also contain certain distinctive traits: in fig. 2 and fig. 3 it can clearly be seen how the bottom left-hand corner presents a form of dilation which seems to balance the overrunning of the top left- and right-hand corner, in favour of a kind of re-balancing of symmetry (that is, as appears evident with regard to obsessive-compulsive disorders, of harmony). A similar operation also appears in the ensemble in fig. 4, where the writing surface is no longer the page of a calendar but a white sheet with the drawing of a geisha at the bottom. In this case, too, we find very cramped writing on certain areas of the surface (typically the upper areas or those surrounding the printed graphics) juxtaposed with a dilation; furthermore here, too, a sort of respect seems to be shown towards the area previously signed, in this case by an icon.

This reverence towards the support can again be noted on a chromatic level. In the case of fig. 2 the black and white of the calendar page (with the exception of the red design at the centre which, perhaps because it is manifestly an “intruder” on the page, is not taken into consideration in terms of the global eurythmics) is maintained intact by the sole utilization of a black pen, just as instead the colours of the illustration in fig. 1 are unimaginatively reproduced in the polychromatic structure of the writing. One can even, with closer attention, venture the hypothesis of coherence in relation to the regimes of chromatic quantity: the blocks of ideograms in different colours are not in fact all the same size, and seem to copy the amount of colour present in the picture in the upper margin of the page. If this were so, one would find oneself before an extraordinary and refined example of intersemiotic translation within Matsumoto's work, whereby the image is translated into a form of writing which retains its semi-symbolic properties and isotopic-chromatic references, creating a not insignificant semiotic short-circuit.



Fig. 3. Kunizo Matsumoto, untitled (1557) © ART BRUT – collection abcd, Montreuil.

Finally, on an eidetic level the argument is more complex and potentially insoluble. If forms and lines are present in Matsumoto's work, these refer solely to the segments of graphemes and to the individuation of blocks composed of these. As far as the first possibility is concerned, it is somewhat complicated to infer, above all for those who (like the author of this paper) cannot read Japanese. Nevertheless, at a basic level of comparison it can be noted how the artist's writing is essentially square or rectangular, that is, devoid of that calligraphic gracefulness adopted instead by whoever wishes to impress upon the signs s/he produces a sort of visual musicality (or a “choreography of letters” as in the case of the Tunisian artist Nia Mahdaoui). This datum is rather relevant as, having ascertained that Matsumoto himself perceives the act of writing as a rhythmic, expressive exercise,

the absence of graphic “spangles” may be read as a kind of loyalty towards the sign as sign, or rather towards the signifier as such, the beauty of which lies in the structure which constitutes it more than in the trappings applied to it. Any type of adornment appears banned from Matsumoto’s approach – another indication of *rawness* as a form of authentic beauty – which manifests itself in its crudity. As far as concerns the lines which form the blocks of characters, these are defined instead solely by chromatic change in fig. 1, which does nothing except identify the rectangular portions within the rectangle that is the page, and are totally absent in fig. 2, in harmony with the monochromatic quality of the work *in toto*.

Now, given Matsumoto’s psychopathology, it is evident that many (if not all) the analytical considerations advanced above are the result of an enactment of unconscious cognitive and compulsive processes. Specifically, the correlation between Matsumoto’s psychopathology and his artwork can be traced in the following semio-stylistic dimensions:

A tendency to repetition and to the standardization of his work which goes beyond the established concept of series, given its endurance in time. If one looks at Claude Monet’s series, for example, the series composed of thirty paintings of the Cathedral in Rouen, one can identify a progression from the beginning to the end, where the seriality is significant in the measure in which it expresses a change. On the contrary, Matsumoto’s work is, even within its reiterated production of minimal differences, always the same in concept, and as such compulsive.

The manic urge to collect anything and everything related to the Kabuki theatre; this hoarding disorder (*disposophobia*) of Matsumoto’s spills over into his work, where the subject of Kabuki is in some measure rendered through a *proto-code*, which results in its transposition from an objectual to a graphematic dimension.

The continuation of the act of writing even once the chosen surface has been completely covered; Matsumoto, in fact, continues to write in the air, as it were, as if to create an imaginary dance.

The continuation of the act of writing late into the night (beyond the preset time for artistic production), on the calendar of the restaurant where he works during the day. His relatives are not permitted to touch these works, which is symptomatic of a mania for possession.

All the features hitherto mentioned may be examined in the context of diverse clinical frameworks (obsessive compulsive disorder first of all), but also in the light of approaches which outline their artistic and semiotic valence. This discussion has focused on the latter, with the aim of suggesting that Matsumoto’s work may justifiably be seen as anything but an exercise in senseless, simple or demented scribbling but, on the contrary, constitutes a form of communication – perhaps authentically idiolectal – which is extremely stimulating due to its essentially deconstructionist nature.



Fig. 4. Kunizo Matsumoto, ensemble untitled (1774) © ART BRUT – collection abcd, Montreuil.

7. Semiotics and interstice

To conclude this brief dissertation on compulsive graphomania as a form of art, on the possibility of a mutilated sign in which only the signifier exists and on the problems connected to the analysis of works produced by mentally ill subjects, one cannot but dwell on the liminal nature of the entire issue. We have in fact crossed the threshold into gray zones of semiotics, where the debate is necessarily uncertain, interfacing with the unknown. Nevertheless this is not stretching the discipline or its epistemic horizons, nor would it seem that the theoretical operations carried out have denatured the consolidated methodologies belonging to the subject. On the contrary, it is felt that if there must be a direction, this should be devoted to a constant, measured push towards the frontiers of semiotics, which coincide with the frontiers of sense in that interstitial space which exists between sense and *semiotic vacuum*. In this context, Matsumoto's work appears rather indicative in explicating the gap between mental image and its enactment by means of writing. It is precisely to this gap, that vacuum of communicability where the difference between the semiotic and the non-semiotic lies, that we have turned in the attempt to comprehend its morphology in conditions that are often not contemplated or relegated to the clinic, exactly like those of psychopathology. If, in fact, semiotics deals with alternatives, that is, with manifestations of diversity, then the products of a psychically disordered person or of a healthy person constitute terrains that are analyzable in the same measure, clearly starting from the premises that can or cannot be advanced case by case as regards the influences that the pathology may have had on the generation of the text.

NOTES

1. My thanks go to the abcd collection in Montreuil for their cooperation and the kindness shown me in granting me the possibility to reproduce certain works present in their collection.
2. We owe the concept of Art Brut to Jean Dubuffet, a twentieth-century French artist who postulated a form of art which "rather than ugly, was raw, rough and tough, dry and blunt, anti-artistic, anti-poetic and anti-cultural" (Spirito 2007: 159). It is therefore an expressive activity which, to a trans-Dadaist extent, aims at the destruction of the rule in favour of a conceptual discussion which calls the beautiful into question not by contrasting it with the ugly (cfr. Rosenkranz 1853) but by juxtaposing Art Brut as an absolute category which does not admit contradiction inasmuch as it is the manifestation of a kind of Truth-beyond-art.
3. Biography of Kunizo Matsumoto, drawn from his page on the website of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne (www.artbrut.ch): "Kunizo Matsumoto was born in Osaka, Japan. He worked as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant run by his relatives. At the same time, from 1985 to 1988 he attended a creative workshop for the mentally handicapped, where he started to become interested in calligraphy. Matsumoto was fascinated by the notes that the staff at the establishment wrote in little notebooks and attempted to reproduce them, even though he had never learnt to write. Subsequently, Kunizo Matsumoto developed his own personal written work, which he has continued since 1995 in an artistic workshop for the mentally handicapped. Using a brush, he obsessively copies ideograms from the numerous types of printed matter (calendars, tourist guides and catalogues of painting exhibitions) which he collects and piles up in his room. Very frequently he transforms them or invents new ideograms from them. His favourite subject is Kabuki. He gathers together all documents concerning this form of traditional Japanese dramatic art, as well as everything dealing with the tea ceremony. He then studies these texts in meticulous detail before launching himself into writing, feverishly covering entire pages of exercise books,

- calendars and other supports. He never goes out without taking a plastic bag, as well as his backpack and belt-bag, filled with printed documents on which he draws”.
4. “It is, rather, what is sometimes called “idiolect”. It is the set of rules that exist only in a given individual’s mind and that guide his/her linguistic performance. [...] Chomsky phrases this issue slightly differently in his more recent work. There he contrasts “I-language” and “E-language”. I-language or “internalized language” is idiolect” (Colm Hogan 2000: 287).
 5. In this regard we recommend the clip “Kunizo Matsumoto (ар-брют каллиграфия)”, which can be found at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC0bpSVe4Is> (last consulted 03/11/2015).
 6. Cf. McGinn and Sanderson 2005.
 7. Original quotation: “La percezione sensibile può stare al centro dell’estetica di Baumgarten solo in quanto la retorica permette di riconoscerla capace di un’autonoma strategia conoscitiva di perfezionamento. L’argomentazione estetica ha luogo per Baumgarten nell’articolazione di un nesso di percezioni sensibili, e la retorica illustra le regole strutturali per il cui tramite avviene il perfezionamento della conoscenza sensibile cui tutta intera l’estetica è finalizzata”. My translation in the text.
 8. As will be better explained further on, the issue concerns the debate between the possible and the necessary, and that is, between alternative and obligation. If the former in fact applies primarily to the discipline of semiotics, since it implies a range of differences from which sense can originate, the latter – being one-dimensional – cannot directly be situated within the discipline but rather interfaces with the horizons of the “hard” natural sciences. A sneeze, for example, contains little that is semiotic, as it is the unequivocal effect of a physiological or environmental trigger event which generally cannot be resisted. If instead the sneeze, in special circumstances, becomes the manifestation of an alternative (for example, a sneeze which forms part of an avant-garde musician’s artistic repertoire, or a vehemently loud sneeze produced in an attempt to distract a burglar who is trying to break into a house, and so on), then it can be connected to the subject of semiotics.
 9. “According to Davidson one can assume as evidence the speaker’s intention to assert a truth, that is, to affirm a belief which he truly professes. The possibility of such an assumption is based on the nature of language, that is, on the intention of speaker and listener to optimize comprehension. It is not a question of linguistic sharing or mutual affiliation to a jargon, but of the instance of comprehension which actuates the communication [...]. This communication develops around a variously defined but univocally mentioned postulate. It is the principle of charity [...]. In other words, thanks to the principle of interpretative charity we optimize others’ systems of belief in order to safeguard interpretation and hence comprehension between speakers “ (Boniolo and Vidali 2003: 28-29). My translation.
 10. Original quotation: “pragmatica dell’esplicabilità a quella epistemica della verità”. My translation in the text.
 11. Original quotation: “Per il tradizionale grafomane deturpare ha una valenza estetica”. My translation in the text.
 12. Original quotation: “La pagina bianca non è più uno spazio neutro, un supporto per la scrittura, ma theatrum e lusus, un campo d’azione sinestetica, il tramite possibile di una visualizzazione dei flussi vitali in cui è immersa la coscienza”. My translation in the text.
 13. Original quotation: “La genesi della grafomania è da ricercare nella natura stessa del delirio”. My translation in the text.
 14. Original quotation: “che si ripete all’infinito con le medesime caratteristiche ad ogni livello di grandezza”. My translation in the text.
 15. Cf. Sala and Cappellato 2004, about the relationship between art and fractals.

16. Original quotation: “[...] geometria del caos [e] trasformazione di un fenomeno semplice in un meraviglioso disegno, basato sulla frazione ricorrente dei suoi segmenti”. My translation in the text.
17. Original quotation: “[...] oltre a possedere un’immagine acustica, è dotata anche di un’immagine visiva, l’ideogramma”. My translation in the text.
18. But also to that in the catalogue of the exhibition devoted to Art Brut in Prague in 2006; cf. Decharme, Safarova and Zemankova 2006.
19. Original quotation: “un tipo di “linguaggio” caratterizzato non, come nel caso del simbolismo in senso stretto (le “semiotiche monoplane interpretabili”, i linguaggi formali) dalla conformità di elementi isolati, ma dalla conformità fra categorie (hjelmlevianamente: classi paradigmatiche d’unità fra loro sostituibili a un punto determinato della catena sintagmatica)”. My translation in the text.
20. Original quotation: “la tendenza continua, maniacale in alcuni soggetti, di scrivere su tutto, in forma patologica. Per alcuni soggetti, tuttavia, può anche trattarsi di una “liberazione”, di un bisogno inconscio, non patologico”. My translation in the text.
21. The correlation between fabrility and signedness concerns that between “technical-rational behaviour and ritual behaviour” (Gri 2001, 87) and was postulated by anthropologist Alberto Maria Cirese. If therefore by fabrility we mean the essentially a-semiotic – since totally functional – nature of the daily practices dedicated to survival, by signedness instead we mean that sort of “aura of sense” which imbues ritual practices, that is, those to which some segnic order is associated. This opposite category, which yet has the merit of inducing a reflection which in some ways calls into question a diffuse inclination to that which Augusto Ponzio called pansemioticism, and which certainly may emerge in a purely semiotic context, comes up against some problems since – apart from the most rigorous and physiological corporeality (but, in the end, not even that) – the appropriation of the world by means of fabrility is itself attributable to a semiotic domain.

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Brutalist image as humanist form: Reyner Banham, Erwin Panofsky and the turn to spatio-temporal structures in 1950s histories of (modern) art¹

Assimina Kaniari

*The term New brutalism often echoes an architecturally specific discourse, yet the introduction of the term in Britain in the 50s, looking at the example of Banham's writings from the Architectural Review, seems to take architecture as a starting point only to discuss a variety of art forms as the new location of avant garde art practices. Those included examples from the historical avant-garde to early precedents of British Pop, such the artists involved in the Independent Group. In this context, Banham defended and defined a particular understanding of the 'image' as an overarching category connected to the idea of 'form', which he then tied to a historiographic discourse on architectural theory, perspective and humanism. Despite the emphasis on form, Banham's notion of New Brutalism may be read, I argue in this paper, as a polemic against formalist art theory and as a critique on the notion of style as the privileged tool of historical explanation in this context. Drawing largely on his published doctoral thesis supervised by Pevsner as *Theory and Design in the first machine age*, I would like to suggest that Banham's 1950s discussions on art and painting as forms of a historical experience was conceived and expressed as a polemic against Pevsner's notion of style as the site of historical explanation, succession and change from the 19th to the 20th century, from his *Pioneers of Modern Design*. Unlike Pevsner's preference for style, Banham turns to 'brutalist form' which he conceives, along with its precedents in avant garde art and contemporary manifestations in a number of artists, not least those associated with the British Independent Group, as an event, a notion which echoes Panofsky's 1940s spatio-temporal structures. In the final part of this essay I explore this connection further drawing on Panofsky's famous essay 'Art History as a Humanistic Discipline'.*

KEYWORDS

Reyner Banham, Erwin Panofsky, new brutalism, art historiography

Introduction

In the opening page of his book *Theory and Design in the first machine age*, Reyner Banham extends the following dedication: "This book", he writes, "is dedicated to those who made it possible and necessary to write it" (Banham 1960: 2). Banham lists Nikolaus Pevsner, Giovanni Bernasconi, H.L.C. Jafeé, Marcel Duchamp and Alison and Peter Smithson, among others, his dedication attesting, on the one hand, to the broad range of influences and practices that appear to have informed his work, and on the other, to a contemporary difficulty to situate Banham's primary disciplinary allegiance. And while such a difficulty is often eased by the almost commonplace reading of his work as a landmark in architectural theory, such a reading undermines what I take to be a key objective in

his book, namely the historiographic revision of the modern, recast by Banham against the historical form of avant-garde art and of avant-garde painting, in particular.

Indeed, in Banham's book, painting and theoretical reflection on painting are closely tied to questions pertaining to the philosophy of history, historiographic issues and to the task of providing a definition for the modern as a historical fact. Unlike a highly abstract theoretical construct, Banham's modern is historicized and imbued by the same material qualities attributed to avant-garde art and painting in the book, *painting* itself being treated consistently as a context-dependent and historically specific category, acting, as I would like to suggest, as a material and visual strategy in the course of his argument. Banham's notion of Brutalist painting, in particular, I would like to argue, forms as a significant theoretical and material technology with which Banham constructs and appropriates his historiographic vision of the modern as a historical fact.

Painting and History: Banham's notion of a Brutalist image as a humanist form

Indeed, in the book, Banham uses examples of painting from the history of avant-garde art to revisit earlier constructions of the modern, in particular Pevsner's own in the context of his earlier writings in architectural history. Banham's dedication to his supervisor in the book and his pronouncing of his book project as a "necessity" are particularly telling in this light, while Banham's uses of examples from the history of avant-garde art and painting act as strategies crucial for the success of his own project. And if in his book *Pioneers of Modern Design*, in the chapter 'Eighteen-ninety in painting', the kind of historical explanation provided by Pevsner drew heavily on examples from 19th-century and early 20th-century art history to outline historical succession, Banham, in his own narrative, concentrates almost exclusively on examples from the avant-garde arts of the early 20th century; cubism and futurism, in particular. Moreover, while in Pevsner's history of the modern a linear succession of time was adopted, broken down into chronologically defined periods stylistically grasped, style itself being peculiar to the historical context of the 19th century in Pevsner's argument, in Banham's account of the modern, avant-garde painting of the 20th century and its particular characteristics chart a clear break with the 19th century, rupture rather than succession being the leading technology adopted by Banham in his narration. And while rupture becomes his privileged explanation for the historical phenomenon of the emergence of the modern, situated in the 20th century and distinguished by a clear break from the 19th century, Banham's rejection of Pevsner's foundations of the modern in the 19th century is also a direct critique of Pevsner's uses of style as a periodizing marker. Furthermore, since style was routinely used to re-present continuity across the arts from the 19th to the 20th century in the context of 20th century formalist theory, being one of its key theoretical tools, in challenging the validity of Pevsner's premise, Pevsner's notion of style as a foundation for the modern and as a 19th-century historical category, Banham might be seen to be implicitly critiquing formalist theory as well; in specific, formalist uses of style as evidence for continuity in history, Fry's early 20th-century historiographic and curatorial endeavors being a prominent example in this light. Indeed, in his well-known post-impressionist shows of 1914, Fry drew on the notion of style to legitimize the uses of formalist theory in explanations of historical continuity from the 19th century to the 20th century. Unlike the 'intransient' object of painting which the formalists envisioned in using style as a form of historical evidence and explanation, Banham's brutalist painting was context-dependent, temporally and spatially specific, grasped more as an 'event' and as a three-dimensional structure as opposed to a two-dimensional visual detail. In disconnecting form from a linear understanding of time flow, form being the event of the rupture, Banham's brutalist painting as an event, at one and the same time temporally and spatially specific, also critiqued a historiographic understanding of historical time

grasped as a succession of periods, chronologically and stylistically defined.

If time and in consequence history were to be experienced as temporally and spatially specific form, brutalist painting as evidence presupposed a different order and type of vision, characterized by temporal expansions and contractions grasped against spatially significant pictorial form, when compared to the formalist one; the latter privileging a vertical hierarchy of vision, dominated by the importance of the visual sense, “eye sight alone”, as advocated famously by Greenberg but shared among earlier British formalists such as Fry and Bell right up to later followers such as Fried. And yet, while Banham’s combination of spatiality with temporality in his thinking of evidence demanded both a visual sense and a notion of pictorial form as distributed against a three-dimensional grid of space and time, brutalist painting as a historical explanation sought to articulate similar historical phenomena with the formalists, including ‘abstraction’. The two explanations nevertheless departed from two clearly different visions of historical time which were also historically specific. Unlike the a-temporal neo-Kantian qualities which painting adopted as historical evidence in its formalist reading, Banham’s brutalist painting was both historically contingent and self-aware: cast, his own argument made clear, by way of a historical category, as avant-garde art, which formed, in turn, his starting point for the fashioning of the foundations of modern art. Importantly however, in addition to his attention to spatiality in relation to temporality, Banham’s emphasis on the present and one’s experience of the present, but also his effort to historicize it by way of incorporating it into his project of visual evidence, is particularly important as it is crucial in distinguishing his project from parallel historiographic endeavours of his time. Panofsky’s writings, almost contemporary to Banham, on art historiography and the emphasis on spatio-temporal structures as a ‘humanist form’, in specific, may be seen as a context from which Banham’s brutalist image as a humanist form is equally distinct. While in both cases the notions of form, space and time appear to merge with the category of art as visual and historical evidence, the two accounts present differences as to the kind of temporalities which they adopt in relation to the place of human experience in their explanations. For Banham, time, history and brutalist painting are not entities *independent* from human experience and most importantly from the present, brutalist painting being co-existent with the present and circumscribed by the boundaries of the present, being in effect an event and closer to a relativistic notion of evidence in this light.

Modern art, in particular, he writes, is the embodiment of such a fusion between experience, and one’s experience situated in the present, and the kinds and varieties of space which the 20th century brought about along with the various avant-garde forms of art. If his dedication to Bernasconi and Jaffeé are due, as he makes clear, on account of their “publications on Sant’ Elia and *de Stijl* that materially altered the direction of these studies” – the emphasis here via Sant’ Elia being also on Futurism – the present is literally active also in his historiographic notion of brutalist form as his acknowledgement of Peter and Alison Smithson and of his “own contemporaries” at the end of the book make clear. Banham credits them “for a constant view of the mainstream of modern architecture flowing on, and to the last named in particular for a proposition that, true or false, has been the lodestone of these studies” (Banham 1960: 2). A ‘sense of space’ and the ‘machine aesthetic’, in turn, are two sites of the present but also sites for the activation of the present in his conception and fashioning of brutalist pictorial evidence. “What distinguishes modern architecture”, he notes, “is surely a new sense of space *and* the machine aesthetic” (Banham 1960: 2). The latter defines a whole period which Banham situates in the 1950s, the period in which the book emerges, and which is characterized by new advents in technology and the adoption of new machines being part of what Banham describes as the ‘machine age’. In the Introduction entitled “The machine age”, Banham asserts, for example, that “this book was written in the late years of the Nineteen fifties, an epoch” called, as he writes, “the Jet Age”, the Detergent Decade, the Second Industrial Revolution” (Banham 1960: 9). And if Banham conceives of modern vision as a historically significant object and an event at the

same time, as an epoch and a fact, beginning with the classic avant-garde arts of the 20th century, he ends with mass culture.

Avant-garde and mass culture in Banham's notion of modern art

Thus, an “electric razor” seems to have the same effect in shaping our modern vision – bearing also historical significance as a site where such a vision becomes manifested and enacted across time – allowing however also the very possibility for historical reflection and revision for Banham, as cubist painting, with which he begins his narration. The element in common across the two categories of objects consists in the objects’ ability, but also agency, to construct breaks in ways of thinking, via one’s engagement with the objects, yet mainly while one is acting as a consumer. And such an ability extends from their capacity to break continuity in historical narration and in time as historical evidence into culture, the present cast anew as ‘living’. “The technical revolutions of our own time strike us with infinitely greater force because the small things of life have been visibly and audibly revolutionized as well”, Banham writes, “unlike”, in his view, “the cavalry, the growth of feudal organizations, the rise of the money economy “which left the objects of daily life, the hierarchy of the family and the structure of a sociable intercourse almost untouched” (Banham 1960: 9). “Small machines” in turn have contributed to what he describes as a “domestic revolution”, namely those of the hair-dryer, radio, mixers which “make their point of impact on us” (Banham 1960: 10). The latter seems to describe, in Banham’s own words, a process of Westernization understood as overconsumption. “Even a man who does not possess an electric razor is likely – in the Westernized World at least – to dispense some previously inconceivable product”, he writes for example, “such as an aerosol shaving cream, from an equally unprecedented pressurized container, and accept with equanimity the fact that he can afford to throw away regularly” (Banham 1960: 9). The latter, the advent of small machines and their impact on the domestic, is applauded, in turn, as a democratic effect on society; the latter because “it was in the hands of an élite, rather than the masses, that the symbolic machine of that First Machine Age was delivered, the automobile” (Banham 1960: 9-10). “The Man Multiplied by the Motor”, “to use Marinetti’s phrase,” Banham explains, “was a different kind of man to the horse-and-buggy men who ruled the world since the time of Alexander the Great.” (Banham 1960: 10). On the one hand, this reading of the motor, and the ways of domesticating access to power which it unleashed for the masses on the precondition of mass consumption and money exchange, also by way of comparisons with futurism, is important as it shows the proximity in Banham’s thinking between the category of the avant-garde and that of mass culture. Conditions of consumptions replace processes of production in his definition of the modern which in a way seems to be completely detached from 19th-century theory of political economy. The latter point may be seen both as a critique of Pevsner’s reliance on the 19th century to construct a foundation for the modern as well as again a critique of Greenberg’s distance from the equation between avant-garde and mass culture in his famous essay ‘Avant-garde and Kitch’, an essay and position which seem to have furnished much of the positions adopted by pop artists and their predecessors in the 1950s in the US, but also in Britain, with the example of the Independent Group being a most prominent one. On the other hand, Banham sees in the rise of mass culture, in what he defines and what defines as the modern, a democratic turn whereby consumption overcomes control of production means. “Under these changed circumstances”, he writes, “that barrier of incomprehension that had stood between thinking men and their mechanized environment all through the nineteenth century, in the mind of Marx as much as in the mind of Morris, began to crumble” (Banham 1960: 11). Mass culture, like avant-garde, form a clear break with the 19th century in this light, he concludes, his fashioning of the modern in these terms being proof of the inadequacies of Pevsner’s account. “The human chain of Pioneers of the Modern Movement that ex-

tends back from Gropius to William Morris, and beyond him to Ruskin, Pugin and William Blake, does not extend forward from Gropius,” he asserts, adding that, “the precious vessel of handicraft aesthetics that had been passed from hand to hand, was dropped and broken, and no one has bothered to pick the pieces” (Banham 1960: 12). And Banham is also eager to emphasize on another occasion the debt of his thought and by consequence the proximity of his notion of the modern to *the experience of the West and of its mass culture*.²

Banham’s discourse on painting

Why avant-garde painting? On the one hand it is easy to comprehend Banham’s turn to avant-garde painting as a means of critique addressed against Pevsner’s uses of style and 19th-century art as examples in his account.³ On the other hand, Banham’s antipathy for formalism expressed indirectly in his arguments and notion of brutalist form can also be justified in the context of the same antipathy for the 19th century as a foundation for the modern. His discussion on Futurism in chapter 8, entitled “The futurist manifesto”, might be seen as an example of Banham’s uses of avant-garde painting to attack formalist theory and Fry in particular. The “Technical Manifesto still gives no directives as to what a Futurist painting should look like in material fact”, he writes, adding that “its tabulated propositions formulate a frame of mind only” (Banham 1960: 108). He lists the points which in the manifesto proclaim a series of elements for futurist expression, but also those elements the futurists “combat”, the word itself taken from the manifesto. His comments on Fry are introduced on account of “negative proposition no. 3” (Banham 1960: 108), which Banham pronounces as “rather remarkable for its date” (Banham 1960: 109), “for the general tendency of European avant-garde aesthetics at the time was to continue the academicising tendencies of the Nineties, as can be seen from the writings of Roger Fry” (Banham 1960: 109). For these tendencies, he writes in a footnote discussion, “in Roger Fry see his ‘Essay on Aesthetics’ in *Vision and Design* (London, 1923)” (Banham 1960: 109). His next statement though gives us a sense of the reasons why Banham is against Fry’s formalist aesthetics, but also the aesthetics which developed around cubism equally taking formalism as a starting point. Having added “or the Cubist circle in Paris” next to his reference to Fry, in the same sentence he goes on to state that “the Futurists seem to have been almost alone in seeing that Platonic and Classicising aesthetics were out of tune with their mechanolatry, or indeed, any positive and *fruitful accommodation* to the new technology” (Banham 1960: 109). The word *accommodation* here seems to be at odds with idealization implied by Platonic aesthetics and expresses rather a pragmatist view with which Banham is happy – describing such an incident of *accommodation* as a ‘fruitful’ one.

From another, contemporary to Banham perspective, his uses of painting to construct a critique of the modern might be seen at odds with the actual place of painting in avant-garde art of the 1950s but also architectural practice and theory as well. In the example of the show *Parallels of Life and Art* organized by the Independent Group, only Pollock’s work appeared.⁴ Indeed, the show included a singular example of painting, Pollock’s abstract expressionism, the work’s presence in the conditions articulated by the ‘editors’ being concerned with the notions which the show addressed and which might also be seen as part of a critique of a contemporary formalist reading of such work. While the place of avant-garde alongside mass culture in Banham’s notion of the painting has an early opposite precedent in Greenberg’s seminal essay ‘Avant-garde art and Kitch’, in the context of the display logic as explained in the notes at the Tate Archive, the painting could hardly be seen to fit with the formalist normative paradigm of Greenberg’s explanation of modernism as the latter had taken shape in the 1950s and early 1960s in his writings championing Pollock.⁵ The nature of the historiographic project which Banham’s brutalist painting implied if compared with the way in which the painting was interpreted in the show seems at odds with Greenberg’s 1950s and 1960s formalism,

despite their shared point of departure: the question of the avant-garde's collapse into mass culture. And yet, 'abstraction' was a notion crucial for the articulation of the modern in Banham's project as well as in Greenberg's writings. At the same time, the notion of abstract art, fairly new in the 1950s, had a mirror image in the same period in the historiography of art, being an example where new historiographic accounts could be tested whether on modern art or indeed against earlier periods. Panofsky himself had drawn on the same notion as well as on technology to construct art history as a 'humanistic' discipline, while Banham's experiment in historiography shared Panofsky's respect for spatio-temporal structures, as well as discourses on modern physics as explanatory devices for the very historical phenomena of abstraction and form in art. Banham's reading of painting in the context of modern physics, very much like Panofsky, seems to depart from examples and writings which date from the early 20th century yet in which Banham quite clearly defends special relativity as a tool for the interpretation of avant-garde art. "Boccioni's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist sculpture* appeared in April 1912", he writes, adding that "it was entirely his own responsibility, and since the actual turn of phrase is not particularly Marinettian, probably entirely his own work" (Banham 1960: 112). According to Banham, the first section was a "routine rhetorical denunciation of the past and unoriginality" yet the second justified "the word technical far more fully" than did "the painting Manifesto", since after Paris Boccioni "knew what the result should look like" (Banham 1960: 112). According to Banham it was "in connection with Boccioni's sculptural activities of 1912 that the growing fusion between Parisian practice and Milanese theory" was most "clearly manifested" (Banham 1960: 111). His plate number 35 depicted a work by Braque, "one of the works by which cubism could be defined, with its highly fragmented simultaneous vision of scattered aspects of the visual scene" (Banham 1960: 113). On the following similarity across vision, Banham cited the following extract from Boccioni's manifesto on futurist sculpture:

We must begin with the central *nucleus* of an object as it strives for realization, in order to discover the new laws, that is, the new forms, that relate it invisibly but mathematically to the plastic infinity within, and visible plastic infinity without. The new plasticity will thus be the translation into plaster, bronze, glass, wood, or any other material, of the atmospheric planes that unite and intersect visible objects....Thus sculpture may bring objects to life by rendering apprehensible, plastic and systematic their prolongations into space, since it cannot be doubted any longer that one object finishes where another begins, and that there is not an object around us – bottle, automobile, tree, house or street – that does not cut and section us with some arabesque of curved or straight lines (Banham 1960: 112).

Banham's interpretation of the passage in *Theory and Design* is particularly telling. He writes:

The drawing discussed above is, of course, a more or less programmatic demonstration of this *field theory of aesthetic space*, a space which exists as a field of force or influence radiating from the geometrical center of the objects which give rise to it, and is a remarkable poetic achievement born, presumably of Bergson and Einstein (Banham 1960: 109).

His footnote discussion elucidates this point further: "Bergson", he writes, "was widely

discussed at the time: in the circle of the magazine *Poesia*, in the Apollinaire circle... and by Vorticists in England. The situation with Einstein is less clear: ideas marginal to the theories of relativity were certainly current in Cubist circles...it would appear that Giedion's proposition that resemblances between the painting of the period and Einsteinian ideas are 'simply a temporal coincidence' should be treated with some reserve – the possibility of consciously 'Relativistic' art cannot be ruled out (Banham 1960: 112).

And yet, following Martin Kemp's reading of Panofsky's perspective and science during the same period, Banham's and Panofsky's readings of painting in the context of their historiographic endeavours may be seen to part in one significant aspect concerned with the treatment of time.⁶ If for Banham the present was active, time having an impact on both human experience and the writing of the latter as a historiographic act, for Panofsky such an association was denounced. And in this light, Banham's object of modern art cast as a historiographic project afforded by a new reading of the abstracted, or fragmented painting, contained at least one precedence in the 1950s, or as already articulated by Panofsky as early as the 1940s, or indeed 1924, in which the re-claiming of pictorial space comprised a question crucial to the historiographic project. In the context of the latter, and unlike Banham's view of history as temporally and spatially experienced, Panofsky argued for the composition of pictorial space, perspective as a *symbolic form*. As outlined as early as 1924, such an understanding of pictorial space could deliver humanist values again in society and art history; provided art history turned its attention to history and its methods of analysis.

Banham and Panofsky

Unlike Banham's uncertainty for the legitimacy of his method and evidence of space, for Panofsky, perspective was the 'realist' site and the means by which a reliable description and explanation could be achieved, a site and method that safeguarded, by extension, art history from a relativistic leap, as Martin Kemp has argued in his wonderful 'Relativity not Relativism: some thoughts on the histories of science and art having reread Panofsky' (Kemp 1995). As Panofsky asserted in the 1940s in his famous essay 'History of Art as a humanistic discipline', "to grasp reality we have to detach ourselves from the present".⁷ In the same essay, he noted that "Philosophy and mathematics do this by building systems in a medium which is by definition not subject to time", adding that "Natural science and the humanities do it by creating these spatio-temporal structures which I have called the 'cosmos of nature' and the 'cosmos of culture'" (Panofsky 2007: 27-28). In the same essay Panofsky made a reference to abstract art comparing a machine to an abstract painting, the latter, in his view, being a more impressive expression of the idea of abstract form, while the first of the idea of functional content (Panofsky 2007: 18).⁸ Both, he asserts, may be seen to have minimal content (Panofsky 2007: 18). It seems that Panofsky at that point was considering questions which would become of interest to other historical projects including Banham's later notion of brutalist painting. As his 1955 essay 'The New Brutalism' published in *Architectural Review* shows, he adopted historiographic concepts similar to Panofsky's, such as the event and spatio-temporal structures, in order to narrate breaks and discontinuities in the history of 'modern art', yet drawing on a different use of time as pertaining to his notion of visual and historical evidence for the modern. Banham's notion of a brutalist image was different also in an additional aspect if compared to Panofsky's historiographic experiment, being politically and ideologically charged, an object of polemic as well as revision. Brutalism itself was conceived, as Banham argued in 1955, as a polemical concept, the term being suggestive of associations with a community of people sharing "a tendency to look toward Le Corbusier, and to be aware of something called *le beton brut*" (Banham 1955). At the level of affect, Banham's notion of new brutalism seemed to express an antipathy for "a quasihistorical concept, oriented, however spuriously, toward that mid-nineteenth century epoch which was marxism's Golden Age, when you could recognize a capitalist when you met him", which he associated with the term "the New Humanism" (Banham 1955). In the same 1955 essay he defined the latter as a form of architectural experiment in revival carried out in the Soviet East, Morris here too having an equally de-based or defunct, as he put it, position in Banham's discourse as in his 1950s and 1960s historiographic experiment in the history of modern art.

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was presented to the Association of Art Historians' Annual Meeting of April 2013 at the Royal College of Arts, London, under the title 'Brutalist image as humanist form: expanding the architectural medium in Banham's 1950s criticism'.
2. For the remaking of avant-garde art into a site of practice and historiography in the 1950s-1970s see Hal Foster, 1996. *The return of the real. The avant-garde at the end of the century*, Cambridge MA, London: MIT Press.
3. See for example Pevsner's chapter 3 'Eighteen-ninety on painting' illustrated by Renoir's *The Judgement of Paris*, 1908 and Cezanne's *Bathers*, 1895-1905. (Pevsner 1964, 68-69).
4. For a reconstruction of the exhibition see the accompanying publication Victoria Walsh, 2001. *Nigel Henderson Parallel of Life and Art*, Foreword and Afterword by Peter Smithson, London: Thames and Hudson. See also the follow-up in the 2015 exhibition at Tate Britain *New Brutalist Image 1949-55*
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/bp-spotlight-new-brutalist-image-1949-55>
 For a discussion of the Independent Group and Hamilton see Assimina Kaniari, 2013. 'D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* and the Concept of Dynamic Form in Postwar Avant-Garde Art Theory', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 38, 1, March, 64-75. For the correspondence between member of the IG in the context of the *Parallels* exhibition see Assimina Kaniari, 'Uma genealogia da nano-art através da escala: práticas fotográficas de Nigel Henderson no arquivo da Tate Gallery' ['A genealogy of nano-art across scale: Nigel Henderson's avantgarde photographic practices in the Tate Archive' In Portuguese], *Nada*, 2009, 13, 40-51.
5. For Greenberg's formalism, Caroline Jones 2006, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Nikos Daskalothanassis, 2007, *Clement Greenberg, Art and Culture*. [In Greek Clement Greenberg, Τέχνη και Πολιτισμός] Athens: Nefeli.
6. See Martin Kemp, 1995. "Relativity not Relativism: Some thoughts on the Histories of Science and Art having Reread Panofsky". In *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1829-1968)* Edited by Irvin Lavin. Princeton: Institute of Advanced Study, 224-236.
7. I cite here from the Greek translation of the essay. Erwin Panofsky, 2007. «Η ιστορία της τέχνης ως ανθρωπιστική επιστήμη», translated by Παύλος Καλλιγιάς, in *Δευκαλίων* 25/1 June 5-29, 18.
8. For the place of abstraction in 1950s art-historical thinking see Assimina Kaniari, 2013. 'Material Objects as impossible things: Panofsky, Kubler and Abstraction', in G. Ulrich Großmann/Petra Krutisch (eds.) *The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts*, Nuremberg, T. 1-3, T. 1, 46-49.

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1. Art under the Regime of Modernism

Modernism as a cultural phenomenon, and the possibility of its having been succeeded by something else, often called Postmodernity, is rarely discussed in semiotics. The whole issue is usually given over to so-called Postmodernist (or, originally, Poststructuralist) theory, which, in spite of its name, has a very tenuous theoretical content. In several earlier papers, I have suggested that this phenomenon is better understood from the point of view of semiotics, and that we are already in possession of at least part of the necessary theoretical equipment required (see Sonesson 1993; 1999a; 2011). Semiotics, I have argued, as it has evolved from Russian Formalism, through Prague structuralism, and to the Tartu School, is not only theoretically capable of handling Modernism: it has in fact been, as the French say, its *companion de route*. It will not part company with Postmodernism, for the simple reason that the latter, in spite of its self-understanding, is only a new phase of Modernism. While Russian Formalism and Prague structuralism were made in theoretical heaven to account for Modernism, including Postmodernism, a quite different question, on which we will embark in the second part of this essay, is whether this tradition still has something to say about art, before the time of Aristotle and Kant, that it, at the outset of the human adventure.

1.1 Formalism as a Historical Model

Bringing together the historical experience of art during the first part of the 20th century, and the philosophical criticism of the notion of art, the institutional theory of art, first suggested by Arthur Danto (1981) and George Dickie (1974) determined that everything is art once it has been designated as such by the proper actors, which is to say by artists, critics, conservators, and so on. While Dickie, in particular, presented this rather like a manifesto for a new way of doing art, Howard Becker (1982) later suggested this could be a sociological description of how the Art world works in present day society. Still, even as a sociological vision, this conception only makes the actors internal to the Art world into participants, leaving out the audience and, in fact, the rest of society. Paradoxically, the conception of the so-called Russian Formalists, later developed by the Prague School, is more inclusive in its sociological aspect, and more geared to the biologically founded capacity for perception of human beings. The paradox, of course, consists in these scholars calling themselves Formalists, in the sense of abstraction from sociological and psychological parameters, and retaining this reputation in the succeeding history of criticism.

The formula for what characterizes art, as given by the Russian Formalists, is that of making strange, or, as they also said, of desautomatization or defamiliarization (Shklovsky 1988[1917]). This mechanism itself works in two ways: first, since the Formalists mainly thought of literature, they argued that artistic works aimed to disappoint the expectations produced by everyday language; second, they argued that each new tradition within art has the goal of disappointing the expectations created by some earlier artistic tradition (See Erlich 1969; Steiner 1984). According to the common way of writing the history of semiotics, history as such lies outside the purview of Russian Formalism, and it is supposed that it was only at its latest stage, at the point of transition to Czech structuralism, that a theory of history was supplied, by the collaborate effort of Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov (1971 [1928]). Yet, a theory of history – of the *history of perception*, to be more specific – is clearly *implied*, already by one of the central theses of Formalism (as formulated by Viktor Shklovsky and, perhaps earlier, by Leo Jakubinskij), according to which the habits of perception, which are acquired in our ongoing everyday experience of standard language and other standardized media (as, in the case of pictorial art, 'non-artistic' pictures), and are thus 'automatized', are disrupted by artistic creation, and thereby 'made strange', or 'actualized', for us; and which, when they have hardened into standardized artistic forms, are again transgressed by the invention of new ways for the making of

art. Indeed, in spite of his formalism, Shklovsky (1988 [1917]) talks about 'the laws of perception' and the 'habituation' to which it gives rise from the very beginning. Nor is *society* really absent: it is in relation to an audience, a public, that art appears as something 'strange', and it a public which is familiar with earlier artistic traditions that discover the new way of making art as incarnating 'the shock of the new'.

In this respect, as in many others, Formalism may well have formulated, not a theory of art outside history, but of *the art of its time*: emerging Modernism, created by friends of the Formalists, such as Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Chlebnikov, Brik, Majakovskij, Meyerhold, etc.; and even by the Formalists themselves in another incarnation, as in the case of Sergej Eisenstein and the early Roman Jakobson (cf. Steiner 1984). The Prague structuralists, who took over, specified, revised, and extended the theories of Russian Formalism, certainly entertained similar connivances with the contemporary Czech avant-garde, Karel Teige and 'Poetism' (see Deluy, ed. 1972). Thus, the Formalist model, as well as its later Prague School version, is implicitly, if not overtly, historical, not only because it supposes a sequence of changing perceptual habits, but more fundamentally, it is historically dated, because of its reproducing the conception of art presupposed, and even explicitly formulated, by the exponents of Modernism. If the dialectics of art described by Formalism is really identical to the Mechanism of Modernism, there must have been a time when it was not yet a correct description of art; and we may thus be justified in asking whether, as the prophets of Postmodernity submit, it could also cease to be such a description.

It stands to reason, then, that Modernism, and thus the applicability of the Formalist model, has a beginning, not, perhaps, as far as the divorce from the standard medium is concerned, but as to the ever-repeated dialectics of 'struggle and reformation' (in the terms of the Prague theses) applied to established artistic forms. It is not only that 'the character, direction and scale of this re-formation vary greatly', as Jakobson and Tynjanov (1971 [1928]): say, but, although re-formations must have taken place before the advent of Modernism, they were not the order of the day: the breaking of the norms did not constitute the *meta-norm* of all artistic work. In the case of painting, for instance, there may have been a guiding idea, a common endeavour, since the Italian Renaissance, aspiring to render ever more perfectly the appearances of the visual world; 'progress in art', in Suzy Gablik's (1976) terms, was thus conceivable. But it is wrong to think that there could be a similar progress in abstraction: rather, following the dialectics formulated by the Formalists, each new generation of Modernists found themselves, in Michael Fried's terms (as quoted by Singerman 1989: 158), under the obligation to work through the problems 'thrown up by the art of the recent past', thereby creating new problems for the future generation to work on.

Once the machine of Modernism has got going, however, there is no escape from it, and there can be no Postmodernism, if not as a (misnamed) phase of Modernism. This is not only because a lot of properties usually ascribed to Postmodernism are already present in Modernism. There are at least two, more fundamental, reasons for rejecting the claims of Postmodernism, one of which is simply semantic, the other properly semiotic. The semantic, that is, purely linguistic reason, has to do with the fact that the word 'modern' is an instance of the category of *shifters* (as defined by Jakobson 1963 quoting Jespersen): a word, the meaning of which refers to the act (for instance the time and place) of its own enunciation. Thus, the time span included in the domain of reference of the word 'modern' must comprehend the moment at which the word is pronounced. Modernity is always on the point of running ahead of us, unavoidably lagging behind by an inch. Some modernisms, of course, become objectified in history: that of the new philosophy of the Middle Ages, or that of Perrault's *moderns* struggling against *les anciens*, no longer seem particularly modern to us. But they continue to encapsulate the time of enunciation when they were truly modern.

The second, purely semiotic reason, because of which there can be no end to Modernism, is that its mechanism, as described by the Formalists, can never cease functioning, once it has started to

work: trying the break out of the 'tradition of the new', the art work *confirms to the very mechanism of that tradition*, which consists precisely in transgressing the norms set up by the art-forms preceding it. Even if Postmodernity consisted in returning to the ways in which art was created before Modernism was invented (which is only true, and only to some extent, of Postmodernist architecture), this could only be understood, after Modernism, as a break with the earlier, temporary, Modernist norm, and thus as a new phase of Modernism – that is, it could only be so interpreted, as long as Modernism was remembered, and not lost too far back in the past. If, however, as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) often suggested (also see Appignanesi, ed., 1989), Postmodernism originates before, or at the same time as, Modernism (which does make sense in terms of the properties often ascribed to it), it is simply a misnomer (see further section 1.3).

1.2 Modernism – an Unending Story

Let us now recapitulate, in order to add some details, while applying and adapting the models referred to. What I have termed the Mechanism of Modernism may be conceived as a particular application of what Edmund Husserl (1966: 331) has termed *Time consciousness*, in which, at each moment of time, some earlier moment is retained, while another is expected to occur, or as Husserl terms it, is protained. This model has been used, and revised, by Jan Mukařovský (1974) and Jiří Veltruský (1977), in their studies of literature and drama; and by myself, when endeavouring to render the working of perceptual hypothesis-filling when supplying the details lacking in everyday experience (Sonesson 1978). I have lately used it even more generally, as a substitute for the much too limited notion of isotopy, to render the idea of an interpretational scheme, present in the work of Schütz, Piaget, Bartlett, and contemporary cognitive psychology (cf. Sonesson 1988; 1996, in press and Fig.1.).

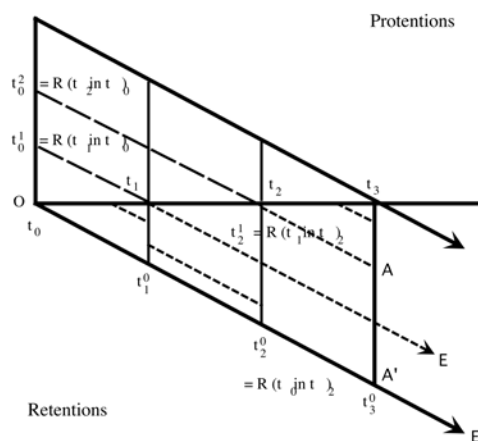


Fig. 1. A schematic description of time consciousness, inspired by Husserl 1966, but adapted in Sonesson 2015a along the lines suggested by Husserl's text.

According to the critique of the notion of *isotopy*, which I have set out in detail elsewhere (Sonesson 1988; 1996; in press), this concept, introduced by Greimas presupposes the return, at time t_2 , of an event expected at time t_1 , which, at some level of abstraction, is identical to the event occurring at time t_1 . There is a break of norms, according to this conception, if instead, another event, categorically different from the event at t_1 , occurs at time t_2 . To my mind, rhetoric, as the art of transgressions, should be much broader: it should also include the occurrence, at time t_2 , of an event which is identical to the one occurring at time t_1 , when a different event is expected. The rhetoric of Modernism is really of the latter kind: it makes us expect, at time 1, that the work of art created at time 2 will be different from that existing at time t_1 . Of course, even the expectancy of something different occurs inside a framework of familiarity and things-taken-for-granted: we expect, among other things, that

the new work of art, however different, will be of the kind to which Modernism has accustomed us. Thus, the real surprise would be the occurrence, at time t_2 , of an altarpiece of the style painted during the Middle Ages, or even of a painting like those which won awards at the French *salons* during the last century, when, at time t_1 , a Modernist work of art is expected to appear.

What the Formalist model says, then, is, in sum, that every new event at time t_1 will tend to become the norm in vigour at t_2 , which is applied and obeyed, only to be transgressed at t_3 , when a new event occurs, which is then made the norm at t_4 , and subsequently contested by yet another norm at t_5 , and so on indefinitely. Clearly, this mechanism has a beginning, but no conceivable end. What happens in the end, however, is that newness itself becomes something well-known and familiar: in terms of isotopy theory, *non-iterability is iterated*, the non-expected is expected. That which, on a lower level of generality, is for ever new, is, higher up on the ladder of abstraction, always the same. Thus, at last, that particularly modern sentiment, diagnosed by Marshall Berman (1982), and before him, of course, by Marx, that ‘all that is solid melts into air’, tends to disappear. Newness becomes a frozen gesture. The habits of perception are never really upset. Postmodernism, on this count, is Dadaism in scare quotes: Dadaism as theatre. We will see the importance of this possibility later.

The Prague School model of artistic communication, as it was first suggested by Mukařovský, may be seen as a direct application of Husserl’s model of time consciousness to the communication of art, though it was more directly inspired by some ideas of another follower of Husserl, Roman Ingarden (1965). The most important idea to retain from this model is that communication (in the sense of conveying information) is not necessarily about transportation or encoding, but it does involve the presentation of an artefact by somebody to somebody else, giving rise to the task of making sense of this artefact (See Sonesson 1999b; 2014). An artefact is produced by somebody, and it has to be transformed by another person into a work of art going through a process of concretisation. The term concretisation is used to describe this process to emphasize the active, but still regulated, contribution of the receiver/audience to the work, which, moreover, takes place in a social context. Since, to Mukařovský (1974), this is a social act, the process of creating the artefact, as well as that of perceiving it, is determined by a set of norms, which may be aesthetic (and in works of art they would be predominantly so), but they can also be social, psychological, and so on.

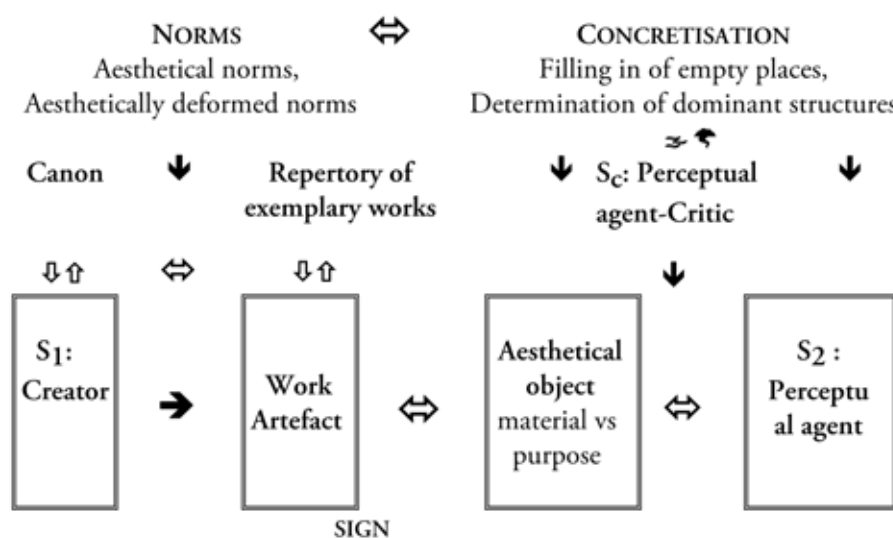


Fig. 2. Schematic rendering of the Prague School model (as reconstructed in Sonesson 1999b). Filled arrows indicate direct influence; outline arrows stand for more complex interactions)

The work of art is that which transgresses these rules. Mukařovský points out, however, that these norms may be of any kind, going from simple regularities to written laws. All interpretation also takes place in accordance with a pool of knowledge, more or less shared between the sender and the re-

ceiver, which has two main incarnations: the set of exemplary works of arts and the canon, in the sense of the rules for how art works are to be made. As Mukařovský also observes, though it would be given special importance by his student Felix Vodčika (1976), the critic also has an important part to play. But this takes us back to a conception closer to that of the institutional theory of art (See section 1.1.).

This is of course a very general model, which may be generalized to communication will beyond art (see Sonesson 2014). Even when we add the temporal dimension, this model may be sufficiently general to account for art in general, or at least for Occidental art since antiquity, as long as the guiding value is some specific content, such as the Renaissance striving to render the appearances of the perceptual world ever more perfectly, which, no doubt together with other values, has been a regulatory idea of most Occidental art, up to, and in a way including, Impressionism. When the rhetoric of Modernism gets going, however, it is newness itself which becomes the guiding norm (See Sonesson 1999a). In time this modernist norm came to require the abandonment of pictorial representation mimicking the appearances of the visual world, and thus, by implication, the central role of the human figure, thus denying another norm in vigour (in the Occidental world, but not, for instance, in the Islamic one) ever since the end of prehistoric cave paintings and petroglyphs. As Frank Stella has testified (cf. Tomkins 1988:141ff), at the time of his art studies, it was simply unimaginable to make a painting which was not abstract. Indeed, when de Kooning started painting female figures, however caricatured, Georges Mathieu demanded his expulsion from the Artist's Club in New York for having betrayed the abstract cause, that is, broken the norm of American Modernism (cf. Tomkins 1988:137ff). That fact that he apparently was not excluded illustrates Mukařovský's point that not all norms acquire the force of law.

As Mukařovský (quoted by Galan 1986:36) notes, every work of art contains an affirmation of some (aspects of) earlier works of art, together with a negation of others. This observation is also verified by later Modernist movements: Frank Stella's abstraction is even more studied than that of Rauschenberg and Johns; as for the more confirmed Minimalists who followed him, such as Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Sol LeVitt, their work may even be considered to retain the simple geometrical forms found in early European abstraction (notably that of Malevich, Arp, etc.), yet without the claim to convey a higher symbolism which was essential to the latter. At least at the level of intentions, there is a curious contrast between, for instance, the esoteric conceptions of Malevich and Kandinsky, and Stella's saying that his work is 'based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there' (quoted in Tomkins 1988:31). Interestingly, this is the same opposition which is found between two groups of poets using (apparently) meaningless phrases which were contemporary with the Russian Formalists, the *zaim'* poets, for instance Chlebnikov, sharing Malevich's ambition, while others, such as Krušenyč, relied on the sound effect as such (cf. Steiner 1984:144ff).

1.3 Centrifugal and Centripetal Modernism

Lyotard's paradoxical observation, and the claims of Postmodernism, become understandable, however, in the North American context, where the image of Modernism was very much influenced by the conception of Clement Greenberg writing mainly on the Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and William de Kooning. According to Greenberg, the Modernist work of art was essentially a critical discourse applying to earlier works of art, and its methods required it 'to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium' (quoted in Rorimer 1989:129). Indeed, more recently, Greenberg himself has set up an opposition between Modernity and Postmodernity, quoting, in the latter case, in part the same persons and movements as are the heroes of Lyotard, many of which are contemporaneous with, or anterior to, his Modernists: Duchamp and other Dadaists, certain aspects of Surrealism, and Pop art (see Tomkins 1988:7f).

The result is a curious amputation of the Modernist movement, two of the most important early constituents of which were Dadaism and Surrealism, both of which left their imprint also on such an emblematic European Modernist as Picasso, *the* Modernist of popular opinion. Yet, it may perhaps be said that there were two, in some respects divergent, ingredients of early Modernism: on one hand, an *inward, or centripetal, movement, a tendency to reduce art to its smallest denominator, to highlight, under 'aesthetic focus', in Prague School terms, the minimal properties of the art work as a thing; and on the other hand, an outward, or centrifugal, movement, tending to include ever further properties, objects, and spheres in the world subjected to the aesthetic function* (Sonesson 1999a; Marner 2000). What came to evolve, under the name of Modernism, in the United States, was mainly the first endeavour (with the exception of Pop art). When the second tendency began to predominate in the United States (and, thanks to the cultural hegemony of USA, in the rest of the Occidental world), it was baptised Postmodernism.

Duchamp, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and more recent Postmodernists, also have to work through the problems 'thrown up by the art of the recent pasts', in the formulation of Michael Fried, but these problems are now created, not by an ever finer isolation of the intrinsic properties of the artwork, but by the outward expansion of the art sphere, and the ever more comprehensive absorption of other objects, events and spheres into it.

2. In the Meantime, Back in Pre-history

If the model of art preconized by Russian Formalism and the Prague School, which is the best model of art so far proposed in semiotics, actually turns out to be a model of Modernism, then we seem to be at a loss for suggesting any characterisation of art which is more adequate and more enlightening than those of earlier aesthetics. Indeed, we might have to accept the disheartening view of analytical philosophy, according to which art is anything we choose to call art, or the equally disappointing conception due to the institutional theory of art, according to which art is what the stakeholders of the art world call art. If, however, at some earlier moment of (pre)history, all human beings were stakeholders in the art world, which at the time was co-extensive with the Lifeworld, the latter alternative may turn out to be more productive. Interestingly, in a number of papers, Ellen Dissanayake (2009; 2013a, b; 2014) has suggested that the origin of art consists in making something special, or – as she somewhat pleonastically calls it nowadays – to artify. This is suspiciously reminiscent of the formula coined by the Russian Formalists.¹ But Dissanayake backs this up with a lot of background insights deriving from present-day knowledge of human prehistory.

2.1 What is so Special about Art?

To make strange, to make special, and to artify are all actions, while art is an object or, perhaps better, a domain of objects. As Dissanayake (2013a) observes, contrary to such acts, art in the substantive sense is something which has only existed in particular, notably Occidental, cultures. Normally, I would not make too much of this distinction. A phenomenon may easily be considered an action or event for some purpose, and an object for another, as prefigured by the distinction between 'noesis' and 'noema' in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and as suggested by such linguists as Karl Bühler and Eugenio Coseriu (See Sonesson 2014). In the second place, the Prague School suggests that (artistic) communication consists in an act which produces an artefact, itself giving rise to the experience called concretisation. None of these latter instances have to be material objects, but they certainly have a relatively static character. Still, making strange or special has a property which is important in this context: it is an occurrence situated in time. As conceived both by the Russian Formal-

ists and Dissanayake, that special strangeness or strange specialness is not there from the beginning: it emerges out of the everyday world, also known as the Lifeworld. As Dissanayake goes on to say:

Artifying is the behaviour of intentionally making parts of the natural and manmade environment (shelters, tools, utensils, weapons, clothing, bodies, surroundings, and other paraphernalia) extraordinary or special by marking, shaping, and embellishing them beyond their ordinary functional appearance. (Dissanayake 2013a: 232)

Allowing for an earlier period in which our ancestors (during the Middle Pleistocene, i.e. ca.780 – 127 kya) *recognized* some objects, such as unusually shaped, marked, or coloured stones, as being 'special', Dissanayake claims that, at least from 250 kya, members of our species displayed a mental capacity (and motivation) deliberately to *make* ordinary things extra-ordinary:

The extra-ordinariness of artification is achieved by means of at least five *operations* used by artificers: formalization (a term that includes shaping, composing, patterning, organizing, schematizing, and simplifying), repetition, exaggeration, elaboration, and – in some instances – manipulation of the perceiver's expectation (Dissanayake 2009). Readers who are familiar with ethological concepts will recognize these first four features as characteristics of 'ritualized behaviours' as described in writings by ethologists /.../ (Dissanayake 2013a: 233)

This is reminiscent of James Gibson's point (1980) that, while all animals perceive surfaces, only humans are able to see surfaces as having reference. In other words, pictures have 'referential meaning'; they contain invariants for surfaces but also for the objects referred to. However, as Gibson goes on to say, a surface may be decorated, regularized, textured, painted, or embellished in other ways without acquiring a referential meaning; and deposits of dirt or blots of pigment may be left on the surface without the surface being made to stand for something. According to Gibson, the two latter cases, intuitively describable in terms of the opposition between order and disorder (familiar to all familiar with structuralist semiotics), are not distinguished by children. But they clearly would serve to make things 'special', the first one being most clearly the case of 'formalization', in the sense of the purposeful preparation of surfaces.

Although Dissanayake (2013a: 237) does not refer to Gibson's observations on applying markings to surfaces, she mentions mark-making, along with play, self-adornment, and ritual/ceremony as being four universal human behaviours that were 'steps' on the evolutionary path to artification, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically (See Dissanayake 2009: 150ff; 2013b: 86ff 2014). She also suggests that they all somehow develop out of the kind of recognition ritual that goes on between the child and its parent, considered as an evolutionary adaptation to the frailty of the human baby, which results from it being born too early in its development to be able to survive on its own.

At its most basic, artifying is the deliberate use of the proto-aesthetic operations that evolved—as described above—as mechanisms used unconsciously by ancestral human mothers in the highly adaptive context of reinforcing emotional bonds with ever more helpless infants (Dissanayake 2009: 156).²

According to Dissanayake (2013b: 88), the features found in the interaction between the infant and the parent are the same as those that appear in art: thus, *simplification*, which is manifested in baby talk, and the accompanying body movements, in 'stanzas or framed episodes with a clear beginning or introduction and initial felt closure, sometimes with a refrain or coda'; *repetition*, as in the use of one- or two-syllable words or phrases, and the equivalent gestures, that are frequently repeated and encourages a repetitive regulating meter; *exaggeration* found in expanded vocal contours

and dynamic contrasts such as heavy stresses or accents, again manifested also in bodily movements; *elaboration*, shown in dynamic variations of a ‘theme’ such as alliteration and assonance; and *manipulation of expectation* as in ‘peek-a-boo’ which is a play with the tension and release of anticipation and its fulfilment.

But Dissanayake (2013a: 237) goes on to observe that these behaviours only become operations of artification, once they are associated with a distinction between ‘an ordinary or mundane order, realm, mood, or state of being and one that is unusual, extra-ordinary, or “super-natural”’. This seems to mean that none of these operations give rise to any ‘specialness’ in the children, nor in the parents. But, if so, this begs the question what makes these operations into means of artifying.

What is at issue here is not whether artification, once it has developed, is adaptive: Dissanayake’s (2009: 158; 2013a: 242) suggestion that it can serve to alleviate the deleterious effects of stress within groups, as well as to create feelings of trust and belongingness among the members of a group seems more plausible than Robin Dunbar’s (2005[2004]) more well-known proposal that these effects are obtained by the possession of a language, for reasons mentioned already by Dunbar (See Sonesson & Sandin 2016). But this leaves us wondering what it is that makes behaviours derived from the interchange between parent and child originate the capacity of making special. Indeed, Dissanayake (2013b: 85) herself points out that ‘there is more to art than making special and that making special is not confined to art’, but that still does not tell us what is so special about the making special of art.

What is at stake at present is not whether or not art, starting from the first prehistoric markings, is ‘symbolic’, in the sense in which this term is used by archaeologists, that is, made up of signs, consisting of an expression and a content that can be differentiated from each other and which are related in a doubly asymmetric way (see Sonesson 1992; 2012). Without offering any such clear definition of the sign, Dissanayake (2009: 165ff; 2013a: 243ff) rightly points out that this is a separate question, some results of artifying being signs, and others not, as well as vice-versa. Indeed, art, also in the archaeologists’ sense, may well be semiotic in some sense, but then semiosis must mean something more and less than being a sign. If the behaviour of the Decembrist, as suggested by Jurij Lotman (1984a, b, c) – or, to take an example that is more easily understood by most of us, of the Dadaists and Situationists – is in some way semiotic, then this must mean something else than such stretches of behaviour having the double structure of a sign.

2.2 Some Special Things in the Lifeworld

Making special, as we noted above (in section 2.1.) shares with making strange a temporal dimension: the former applies to the pre-existing everyday world, just as the latter applies to standard language. Indeed, the four first, more formal, operations of artification mentioned by Dissanayake (2013a: 233) could be seen as variations of the fifth one, the ‘manipulation of the perceiver’s expectation’. On the other hand, making special appears to lack the second temporality of making strange: it is not a transgression of the expectancies generated by some particular artistic movement, at least not at the beginning.

Standard language may nevertheless be more of a self-explanatory term than that of the everyday world.³ We will suppose here that the latter is identical to the Husserlean Lifeworld, paraphrased by Alfred Schütz (1962-66) as ‘the world taken for granted’. At present, we are not going to enter any detailed discussion about the nature of the Lifeworld, how it is related to Gibson’s ‘ecological physics’, Peirce’s ‘commens’, and the ‘naïve physics’ cum ‘folk psychology’ of the cognitive sciences (See Sonesson 1989; 2010). Nevertheless, if we take the notion of the Lifeworld to be an explicitation of the ‘ordinary or mundane order’ (Dissanayake 2013a: 237), the obvious problem is that, in the Lifeworld itself, a lot of things are special, in one or another sense of the term. To begin with, there is a difference between living in a Lifeworld, and living in a simple *Umwelt* like that of the tick. According

to Jakob von Uexküll (1956), the world of the tick simply consists of three percepts and three actions which are triggered by these percepts: the smell of butyric acid because of which the tick lets itself fall down, the warmth of the mammal's body which sets it in search for the least hairy part, upon reaching which it bores itself into the skin and drinks the mammal's blood. The repertory of experiences and actions of human beings, and also of many other animals which, also in other respects, are more similar to human beings than to ticks, is of course immensely richer. More importantly, however, we have the experience of a world which is interconnected, not of a few isolate features: rather, some traits are perceived as more salient than others, while still letting the others subsist more or less marginally in the background (See Sonesson 2010: 195ff).

According to Aron Gurwitsch (1957; 1985), every perceptual situation is structured into a theme, a thematic field, and a margin. The theme is that which is most directly within the focus of attention. Both the thematic field and the margin are in contiguity with the theme, but the thematic field is, in addition, connected to the theme at a semantic level. When attending to the theme, we are easily led to change the focus to something within the same thematic field. Changing what was earlier at the margin into a theme, on the other hand, is felt to require some kind of outside incitement. In the margin is normally found some items of consciousness that always accompany us, such as our own stream of consciousness, our own body, and the extension of the Lifeworld beyond what is presently perceivable. But the margin will also contain all items that are not currently our theme, nor connected to this theme (See Sonesson 2011).

This is an excellent beginning for a theory of attention, but it is not a full-blown theory. All changes of theme and the persistent holding to one theme are not of the same kind. It is well known that faces early on attract the attention of infants, and so does human speech. This is why very little may be needed for the face or speech to be made into a theme. It demands more time and effort for lines on a paper or on another surface to become subject to attention. However, lines on a surface which suggest a human (or human-like) face can be recognized as such given much fewer clues than other constellations of lines. A similar *hierarchy of dominance of the Lifeworld* accounts for the fact that it is much easier to conceive two-dimensional objects to be signs of three-dimensional ones than the opposite, and that, in certain cultures, it may be easier to recognize some lines on cloth rather than on paper to represent objects in the world of our experience (See Sonesson 1989; 2010; 2011).

The shift of the centre of attention determines what objects are special in a given situation in the Lifeworld, and the hierarchy of dominance contributes to fix those kinds of objects which are given most salience in the Lifeworld at large. The latter may be seen as a particular kind of typification, of which the Lifeworld is made up. Every particular thing encountered in the Lifeworld is referred to a general type. According to Schütz, other people, apart from family members and close friends, are almost exclusively defined by the type to which they are ascribed, and we expect them to behave accordingly. Closely related to the typifications are the regularities, which obtain in the Lifeworld, or, as Husserl's says, 'the typical ways in which things tend to behave' This is the kind of principles tentatively set up which are at the foundation of Peircean abductions. Many of the 'laws of ecological physics,' formulated by Gibson (1982: 217), and which are defied by magic, are also such 'regularities [that] are implicitly known': that substantial objects tend to persist, that major surfaces are nearly permanent with respect to layout, but that animate objects change as they grow or move; that some objects, like the bud and the pupa transform, but that no object is converted into an object that we would call entirely different, such as a frog into a prince; that no substantial object can come into existence except from another substance; that a substantial detached object must come to rest on a horizontal surface of support; that a solid object cannot penetrate another solid surface without breaking it, etc.

Things can also be special, and still be within the Lifeworld, if they are a kind of *ultra-things* ('ultra-chose'). This is a term coined by Henri Wallon (1963: 647ff), to describe things which, to small children, are somehow beyond grasp, such as birth and death, the sky, the sun, the wind, and so on. It was generalized beyond child psychology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1979[1945]), who no doubt realised that many things are difficult to grasp also for adults. I think we could go further and suggest that ultra-things are precisely the kind of things which are at the limit of the Lifeworld, and thus of what can be understood. Wallon's first example is here particularly poignant: when he asks the children about the time before they were born and the time after their death, they become very confused. But so do we all.

Perhaps specialness in the sense of ultra-things is addressed in the following quotation:

For our Pleistocene ancestors who invented the arts, the important things that were artified had to do with material subsistence – hunting and food, prosperity, preservation of the natural, social, or divine order, appearance of the self, fertility, health, safety, group continuance and harmony, averting misfortune, and successfully traversing transitional stages of life from birth to death (Dissanayake 2013b:91).

Still, these are given here as things which might be 'artified' from the very beginning, not as things which are already 'artified' as such. Indeed, we should not neglect the temporal distance implicit in any kind of making strange or making special.

If the original sense of something being special is that it is at the centre of attention, then it might perhaps become even more special if that attention is directed to it by some other person. A case in point is of course the interaction between parent and child, epitomized in the game of 'peek-a-boo', but also any other kind of interaction in which one person draws the attention of another person to a third person or thing. Jordan Zlatev (2008: 226) distinguishes *shared attention*, when two individuals become aware that they are both attending to the same objects, and *joint attention*, when, in addition, each of the persons becomes aware of the other persons being aware of what they attend to. One may perhaps add to this *conjoined attention*, when one of the the participants in the game is clearly directing the attention of the other.

A peculiar case of conjoined attention is when somebody is somehow taking a stretch of behaviour out of context and 'quoting' it. In an earlier paper of mine (Sonesson 1998), I suggested, when discussing Lotman's idea that the behaviour of the Decembrists was a case of 'semiotization' that this then could not mean that they somehow turned themselves into signs, but rather that they were using another type of meaning-making act, probably of the kind we designate as 'quotation' when it is applied to language. Quotation means that a token is in a way promoted into a type, more precisely into a time-bound type. In this sense even actions may be quoted. All ritual and ceremony could be seen as behaviour quoting other behaviour. This could apply to the actions of the Decembrists, discussed by Lotman (although he obviously does not describe them in that way).⁴

The Decembrists were a group of Russian officers and their sympathisers who, incited by their experiences during the Napoleonic Wars, fomented an unsuccessful conspiracy on December 6, or, according to the old calendar, on December 14, 1825, to overthrow Czar Nicholas I. It seems that they displayed their contempt for the Tsarist tyranny by rejecting court lifestyle, wearing their cavalry swords at balls (indicating their unwillingness to dance), and committing themselves to academic study. My main sources for the saliency of the Decembrists' behaviour, however, is a series of articles by Jurij Lotman (1984a, b, c). Contrasting it with the Decembrists' semiotization of ordinary life, Lotman (1984a) claims that routine behaviour is not semiotic: 'Semiotic behaviour is always the result of a choice'. He also says that 'the very act had to be seen as significant, to deserve the memory of

posterity and the attention of historians, and to be of the utmost value'. So far, I, and perhaps also Dissanayake, should be able to agree. But then Lotman goes on to claim that the Decembrist's behaviour in ordinary life thereby 'has become a subject of attention, in which value is attached not to the acts themselves but to their symbolic meaning'. However, it is not at all clear that the acts have become carriers of a meaning substantially different from what they are in themselves. Rather, it seems that they have been singled out for attention.

One is here reminded of some aspects of the inventions of Modernism, which consisted in placing a routine action or an everyday object in a context where it would be attended to, such as in an art gallery, or on a scene, etc. (an aspect of Centrifugal Modernism; see Section 1.3). This holds true of many parts of a happening or performance and of most ready-mades (see Sonesson 2000). Of course, Lotman's examples actually illustrate a case which is the opposite of the one just mentioned: the acts of the Decembrists took place in the middle of ordinary life, but they had a spectacular quality to them that (at least potentially) attracted an audience. Still, without the presence of a scene or an exhibition hall, the behaviour of the Decembrists is clearly experienced (if we are to believe Lotman) as being acts of conjoining attention. Thomsen (1992: 136), who believes Postmodernity abolishes the distinction between fine and popular arts, refers to the personalities and behaviour of such pop artists as Madonna and Prince as acts of theatre

3. The Theatre of Everyday Life

An important feature of the Prague School model of art mentioned above is that it requires *the spectator to collaborate* in the creation of the work. Such a collaboration must of course always take place (not only in the case of art, as I suggested above, but in communication generally), in order for the work to be transformed into an aesthetic (or more generally perceptual) object, in the process of which empty positions in the structure are filled in from the knowledge of the receiver, and the dominant of the structure is determined. Nevertheless, there is one particular aspect in which the collaboration of the perceiver is surely needed: in the determination of the *aesthetic function*. Indeed, by putting the emphasis on certain properties of an artefact, to the exclusion of others, or rather, by highlighting some properties while downplaying the others, the artist may transform any object into a work of art, and any perceiver may actually choose to look upon any artefact, and even a product of nature, as an art object, simply by taking an aesthetic stand on it. As if to illustrate this point, Marcel Duchamp accomplished his famous act of placing a urinal in the exhibition context.

3.1 The Spectacular Function

Art, according to Dissanayake (2009; 157) originates in 'ceremonial behaviour' or, in other terms, in rite or ritual: 'Because of the inseparability of religious practice and artification, it is plausible to suggest that the arts arose in human evolution as components of ceremonial behaviour rather than as independently-evolved activities.' Since ritual is certainly a kind of behaviour, it might be useful to compare it with a division of art which also consists in behaviour, the theatre.

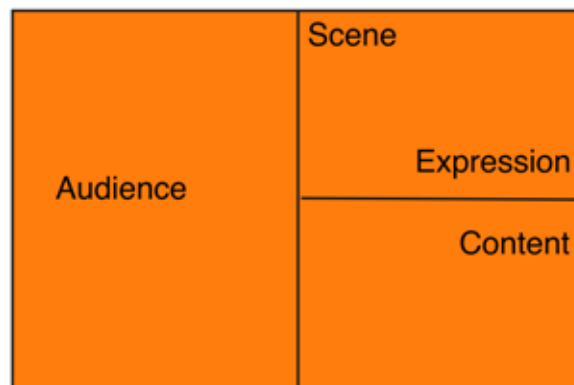


Figure 3. A reconstruction of Hildebrand's (1976) model of what Sonesson (2000) calls the referential and the spectacular functions

In an early paper on 'theatre modernism', Olle Hildebrand (1976), taking his cue from the Prague School, set out to distinguish sport, ritual, and theatre by means of a cross-classification involving the dichotomies between *stage* versus *auditorium*, and *expression* versus *content*, sport manifesting the first dichotomy, ritual the second, and theatre both of them. In his dissertation, which is predominantly concerned with Eivrenov's play 'Harlekin the Saviour', Hildebrand (1978) then goes on to show that the peculiar 'theatrical' style invented by this author combines ritual and theatre, in the senses specified above. Here, of course, the first opposition derives from Mukařovský's above-mentioned theory, while the second is traceable to the Saussure/Hjelmslev tradition. In Prague School terms, this second function may be qualified as *referential* or informational. The other function, which may be termed the *spectacular function*, really consists in the fact that the actors involved in the realisation of a particular process of signification are divided into two groups, one of which is physically realising the process, while the other group is given the task of perceiving the process or its result. Normally, the two groups will also be assigned different localities inside the theatre, so that the transgression of these borders also may become significant, non-theatre becoming theatre and vice-versa, just as non-art becomes art.

Relying on this same double opposition, Lars Kleberg (1977; 1984) embarks on an analysis of Ivanov's conception of the cultic theatre. Expressed in these terms, however, Ivanov's conception certainly appears problematical, for, as soon as it is stated, it tends to vanish as such:

Ivanov's program propagated the restoration of the cultic principles, which theatre – as is usually agreed – has abandoned, thus becoming a secularized art form. The fact that the elimination of the border between stage and audience, in principle, implied the elimination of theatre as such did not occupy Ivanov. In theatre as an art form he was interested in a *shift of emphasis* from the 'spectacle' towards the cult. /--/ The abolishing of the dualism between actors and audience became a metaphor for the synthetic elimination of a series of other contradictions like Poet vs. Crowd, individualism vs collectivism, etc.' (Kleberg 1984: 60f).

Unfortunately, Hildebrand's and Kleberg's conjoint labour leaves us with two paradoxes, which are far from being trivial. If ritual involves the dichotomy between expression and content, and theatre compounds this dichotomy with a further one opposing stage and auditorium, what can it mean that Eivrenov's conception of theatre combines ritual and theatre? And, if, under the same circumstances, Ivanov's idea of the theatre implied the abolishment of the opposition between stage and audience, in what way did he think he was proposing something different from a mere return to ritual? If we rephrase this in Mukařovský's subtler terms, it might be said that Eivrenov and Ivanov wanted, in different ways, to transfer the dominant of the activity they were proposing, from that of

the spectacular function, implying a distinction between stage and audience, to the referential function as such: but then, if Hildebrand and Kleberg are right, the result would simply be ritual.

Even if we accept, however, that ritual differs from theatre in lacking the spectacular function, while sharing with it the referential one, this is hardly enough as a definition: for many phenomena (among them visual art) have the referential function, and many of them (again visual art, among others) have, if not the spectacular function, something similar to it, that is, a division between the perceivers and the perceived (there would be no point in a work of art which is not presented to be perceived). It might therefore be said, that both theatre and ritual are *stretches of behaviour which stand for other stretches of behaviour*, and that they are susceptible of being *repeated* in their entirety, in one case because they follow a script, and in another because they are standardised. Also sport may be qualified as a stretch of behaviour which, though lacking the referential function, is standardised as to its quality, though not, of course, in its quantity. Here, then, we have a difference to visual art, as it is traditionally understood: it is an object, not a stretch of behaviour, though it may, in some cases, stand for a stretch of behaviour. However, already Dadaism invented works of art which were stretches of behaviour, and similar things were later realised, under the name of happenings, events, and so on. All in all, however, the happening may have more in common with ritual than with theatre: it is a Modernist ritual, and as it becomes Modernist, with its requirement of newness, it is a one-time ritual.

In any case, it cannot be right to claim that the rite has no spectacular function; in fact, there is frequently a division, just as in the theatre, between those who perform the rite and those who only participate, like for example, the priest in the Christian mass as opposed to the congregation: that is to say, there is a difference between *those who only observe, and those who, in addition to observing, are also observed*. However, there is probably nobody in the rite who is *not* a subject but only an object of observation, for also the officiator partakes in the experience of the rite; he performs it for himself, in the same sense in which he does so for the others (unlike the actor). Even if we consider rites of the type which seems to have been imagined by Hildebrand and Kleberg, where the difference between the officiator and the participants tends to dissolve in a collective trance (a more Dionysian than Apollonian kind of rite), there still remains a spectacular function of the participant without which the rite would lack any meaning (see Sonesson 2000).

A correlate of this division is that different spatial expanses are normally assigned to the spectator and the observed, which offers the possibility of a transgression of limits between spaces independently of the respective subjects: and such transgressions are really what is often found in the work of Ivanov and Eivrenov, as well in more recent vanguard theatre, as for example the Living Theatre, Théâtre du soleil, etc. But there are also rites in which the space of the officiator is clearly separated from the space of the common participants; this also is true of the familiar Christian rites, particularly in their Catholic variant. But in these latter cases, the transgression of limits does not give rise to new forms of art, but to an act of sacrilege.

It might be said that the spectacular function, as conceived here, is a particularly pregnant version of the act of attention. The sign function also required attention, but to something which is not directly present (see section 2.1. and Sonesson 1992; 2012). However, the aesthetic function, as conceived by the Prague School, is also a variety of the act of attention.

3.2 Aesthetic Focus on its Own

The idea of art being characterized by an emphasis on the very material of the resources by means of which meaning is conveyed in ordinary communication is clearly part and parcel of the message of the Russian Formalists. It was explicitly designed as such by Jan Mukařovský (1974; 1976; 1978; 1986) who, in the communication model, placed the aesthetic function focusing on the message as such, alongside the three functions defined by Karl Bühler (1982[1934]): the referential function, focusing on the content; the expressive function, focusing on the sender, and the conative func-

tion, focusing on the receiver.⁵ Most of us are of course familiar with these functions from the model proposed by Roman Jakobson (1963), in which the aesthetic function is called poetic, and two more functions are added, namely the phatic function, focusing on the channel, and the metalinguistic function, focusing on the code.

No matter the term used, there is an ambiguity in the characterization of the aesthetic (or poetic) function, which is never fully resolved in the Prague School model: is there some property of the urinal, never before apperceived, which in itself is worthy of sensuous, or even sensual, contemplation; or, alternatively, which, once highlighted, comes to refer to some further property which is of intrinsic interest – or is the task of the aesthetic function simply to pick some indifferent property and single it out for observation, that is, is the ‘aesthetic’ property of the object simply ascribed to it (see Sonesson 2004)? And, if the latter, is the point of this act simply to extend the sphere of art? The latter interpretation seems to fit at least some aspects of the Modernist adventure, but there is no reason to think that it applied to the the experience of art at the beginning.⁶

The answer to this conundrum is probably that there were earlier some properly aesthetic, that is, sensuous, properties which made artefacts eligible as works of arts in the human Lifeworld (though sometimes these properties were difficult to discover and were often perceived only when no longer deformed by some prevailing norm), but that Modernism inverted this relationship, and *ascribed the property of being a work of art* (no longer properly called aesthetic properties) to artefacts included in the artistic sphere. Since a work of art, on this interpretation, only possesses the property of being a work of art, once it has been moved inside the sphere recognized as being that of art, it cannot be said to signify any property it possesses, but only a property ascribed to it on the grounds of its temporary relationship to other things, which however tends to attach to it in history: no matter how it is moved, Duchamp’s urinal continues to be a work of art.

Suppose Dissanayake (2009: 150ff; 2013b: 86ff; 2014) is right to think that aesthetic qualities originate in the interaction between the parent and the infant. It does not follow that these qualities are aesthetic because children like them. The opposite may be the case. Perhaps the properties are primary.

Drawing upon their innate sensitivity to proto-aesthetic operations in vocal, visual, and gestural modalities, present from infancy, early humans “invented” ritual ceremonies, packages of salient multi-modal artifications that we as scholars (rather than participants) can separate into their various elements: chant, song, literary language, mime, theatre, dance, and visual enhancement – the arts. (Dissanayake 2013b:90)

This may account for the importance of ultra-things to the arts (see section 2.2.). That is, it may account for what is known as the sublime. But what about beauty?

3.3 Beauty and the Beast

The question I want to broach here is not the classical philosophical issue whether beauty is objective or subjective (see Sartwell 2014); but whether we appreciate certain properties which we describe by the term beauty, because we were accustomed to them in the peek-a-boo games of our infancy, or whether we, just like the infants, appreciate these properties for what they are, given that they are experienced within the framework of our common human Lifeworld – a variant, after all, of the *Umwelt* of one of the primate species (see Uexküll 1956). No doubt there are some properties of shapes as experienced by human beings, and to which small children seem to be particularly susceptible, termed ‘physiognomic properties’ by, for instance, Werner & Kaplan (1963), which, for all we know, may be universal (Sonesson 2013: 2015b). These properties, at least when they are repeated, seem to correspond fairly well to what Dissanayake (2013a: 233) characterizes as ‘the five operations used by artifiers: formalization (a term that includes shaping, composing, patterning, organizing,

schematizing, and simplifying), repetition, exaggeration, elaboration, and – in some instances – manipulation of the perceiver's expectation'. So, in some sense, these properties are no doubt universal, but do they necessarily produce an experience of beauty? That remains to be proven. There probably is (or was) something like the human universal experience of beauty, but it must be (or have been) provoked by something more particular than physiognomic properties, and/or Dissanayake's five operations, which may easily be made to serve other goals as well (see Sonesson 2004).⁷

And then art never was exclusively about beauty. As Aristotle famously remarked, Greek dramas tended to show terrible acts, and still the representation of them gave pleasure to the audience. No doubt, this has something to do with the language by means of which these acts were represented (see Sonesson 2004), but the importance of the meaning of the acts accomplished in the Lifeworld should not be neglected. And these observations may be generalized beyond Greek drama to art in general. This is no doubt the part of the ultra-things, or of the sublime, in art, sometimes being mixed with beauty, and sometimes being on its own, just as beauty may appear alone.

From peak-a-boo to pre-modernist art, there is no doubt some sense in which 'the manipulation of the perceiver's expectation' plays a part, though not singlehandedly, as was often the case in Modernism. From Zeuxis and Giotto to the advent of Modernism, the reigning norm in Occidental pictorial art was the *the striving to render the appearances of the perceptual world ever more perfectly*, and the value attributed to progress in this endeavour, no doubt together with other values, was the regulatory idea of Occidental art, up to, and in a way including, Impressionism. This means that the way to manipulate the perceiver's expectations was to bring pictorial appearances ever closer to the appearances of the real perceptual world. Even before abstraction became its norm (itself broken by de Kooning, Pop art, etc.), Modernism, in its heroic beginnings, put the artist under obligation to give up this particular mode of pictorial rendering, or at least deprived it of its part in making art special. Thus, the two 'giants' of European Modernism, Matisse and Picasso, never, or only passingly, gave up depiction entirely, but the value regulating the kind of art they produced, and for which their works became exemplary, did not require any perfect rendering of visual appearance, but, on the contrary, laid stress on the reinterpretation and resegmentation of perceptual reality. No doubt, Surrealism, Hyperrealism, and Pop Art never gave up depiction as a norm; but there ceased to be a value for them in striving for further perception. Indeed, with the exception of Surrealism, they all depict other depictions, or simulate their effect.

It can certainly be said that Zeuxis in his time, and Giotto in his, and then Botticelli, Titian, Chardin, Courbet, and many others, were out to surprise us, but not to surprise us absolutely: to surprise us with their ever greater ability to create pictorial appearances approaching those of the perceptual world itself. The precise rules of the game were different of course, in other arts, but at least in literature, too, the norm that had to be followed was broadly that of Mimesis, in the Aristotelian-Auerbachian sense of the term.⁸ In a way, literature has remained truer to that norm than the plastic arts.

4. Some Very Preliminary Conclusions

On its own, making strange does not seem to account for more than a particular (if, by now, very long-lasting) phase in the development of Art, Modernism (including so-called Postmodernism). Even if it is reinterpreted as making special, the notion of art faces at least two hurdles: there seem to be a lot of senses in which things may be 'special', and still be part of the everyday Lifeworld. And if we define the specialness of art as some special way of making special, going beyond the ordinary Lifeworld, we still have to explain it what way this happens. Taking another clue from Dissanayake, we might want to say that this specialness is grounded in our earliest infant experience, in the interplay between parent and child, but even if we accept such a peek-a-boo model of art, it is still not obvious whether it is the latter which makes art experience rewarding, or whether art experience and

peek-a-boo both are rewarding because of the intrinsic properties which they bring to our attention. Indeed, if we start from an evolutionary perspective, as Dissanayake certainly does, there seems to be no reason to deny that, already as a peculiar kind of animal, the human being is sensible to certain properties which have long been known as beauty. In addition, as an animal with a consciousness, we are living particular situations, in which ultra-things become pregnant, notably, as Wallon pointed out, the experience of the impossible non-experience of the existence of the world before our birth and, in particular, after our death, and this is certainly also an important ingredient in what we know as art. The manipulation of expectancy, after all, is hardly more than the icing on the cake.

NOTES

1. As far as I have been able to ascertain by reading her publications, Dissanayake herself does not explicitly derive her model from the Russian Formalists, but when she gave an invited lecture at our institute on November 12, 2015, she recognized having been inspired by this tradition. As I later found out, however, in Dissanayake (2009:155) there are somewhat convoluted references to Shklovsky, Jakobson and Mukařovský.
2. When criticizing the evolutionary psychologists George Miller (2000, p. 275) and Matthew Rosano (2003), who argue that there is a 'cultural diphormism' (analogous to 'sexual diphormism') in the cultural sphere, because most artists, authors, and composers have been males, I observed (Sonesson 2016) that the fundamental inventions of art (such as art itself, its different genres, etc.), let alone culture (life in society, collaboration, the city, the public sphere, etc.), cannot be attributed to single individuals, whether men or women. Dissanayake's argument would seem to make art an invention, not of single individuals certainly, but of women to the exclusion of men. To avoid discussing this point, I have here rephrased her argument in terms of parents generally.
3. As Davies (2012, 131) remarks, Dissanayake's 'concept of "making special" seems to be too broad, seemingly including anything which humans experience as interesting, for example "a video of our child's university graduation or of a horse we've heavily backed winning a major race". The point is well taken, but my own critique, formulated before I read Davies' book, aims to be more specific about what is problematic.
4. Although quotation may sometimes involve imitation (that is, mimesis in the sense of Merlin Donald 1991), it can also have different kinds of metalinguistic (and more broadly meta-semiotic) uses, which do not require the reproduction of an earlier token of behaviour, just the reference to a behaviour type.
5. Actually, Bühler used somewhat different terms, but these are the names the functions were subsequently given by Jakobson.
6. The same question could be formulated with reference to what Goodman (1976 [1968]) calls exemplification, i.e. when an object becomes a sign for a property which it also possesses. For further discussion, see Sonesson (1999a: 2004).
7. I do not mean to refer here to gross naturalistic interpretations on the line of mainstream evolutionary psychology, according to which, notably, the breast-hip ratio of a woman's body, which have traditionally been considered a feature of beauty (at least when appearing in paintings), is 'really' a mark of health and ability to have many healthy children. For a critique of this kind of reasoning, see Sonesson, in press 2016.
8. Not be confused with the meaning given to this term by Donald (1991) and Zlatev (2008). Although these two notions of mimesis have a common core in the idea of imitation, it is essential to the latter, but not to the former, to involve an activity realised with the aid of one's own body.

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Book Review

Stratis Pantazis

Waterfield, Giles, 2015. *The People's Galleries in the Victorian Era*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 370 pp., hbk, ISBN 978-0-300-20984-6.

The National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum, now called Victoria and Albert Museum, are found in the centre of most studies on the use of art museums in Britain. This book records the beginnings of art museums in Britain through to World War I, mostly focusing on galleries in cities other than London, such as Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham. The author Giles Waterfield is a distinguished curator and expert on the history of British art galleries and their collections, best known for his book *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* (1991) and the exhibition he curated on *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections at the Royal Academy* in 1998.

Despite the challenge facing the author to distinguish himself within the broad literature and numerous museums that were created or existed in nineteenth century Britain, he does manage to formulate a differentiated intention. He does not seek to explore the entire history of British museums, the inspiration for and nature of these Victorian galleries in depth. Instead he sketches a style of a gallery that to this day is still controversial; and highlights the relationship of the art gallery to the temporary exhibition.

He also distances himself from previous studies, which have appeared since the 1980s inspired by so-called new museology, that have treated museums in a negative light and have presented them as instruments of authority and agents of social control of the low and uneducated classes by the higher echelons of cultured society. In contrast, he views them as monuments to Victorian beliefs in civic order. He concentrates on the motives that led to their foundation such as the private and public philanthropic movements that made the effort to transform and improve these regional cities, mostly through public education, even though those motives were complicated and not always pure.

The first part of the book addresses the role of the Crown, the national government, the Parliament Select Committees, the Royal Academy of Arts, the monarchy and aristocracy, the emergence of the art curator and the many private Societies established in cities in the late eighteenth century such as local art, antiquarian, literary, philosophical and archaeological Societies, that contributed to the formation and development of these art galleries. This part sets the ground for the second, by far the most extensive part, which examines the Victorian art museums, established in different towns in England and Scotland in the second half of the nineteenth century. Waterfield explores the impact of the industrial revolution on the formation of civic art galleries such as the museums in Manchester, the city where Friedrich Engels wrote his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). He highlights the key role played by universal exhibitions, organised in London and Manchester, in understanding the function and formation of the late Victorian art museums. Other issues he addresses in this rich narrative range from the participation of the public and the popularity of galleries; the parallel development of museums with that of concert halls and parks; the significance of the different architectural styles of the galleries; the display of art; the role of temporary exhibitions and their connection to museums and art galleries; the development of British art; through to the different styles of collecting; the significant educational role the museums and galleries played for the best

of the public and finally also to the role of patrons, donors, councillors and curators during this period.

What makes this part interesting is the fact that Waterfield does not only concentrate on the major peripheral cities, but engages art museums in smaller towns such as Burry, Oldham and Warrington, the role of which today is far from central: Their very existence is under threat due to lack of funding and support. At the same time, he sets the history of the British museums in international context, comparing them with their equivalent in other countries such as Italy, Holland, Germany, France and the United States. However it would be particularly helpful for the reader if this wide-ranging study also offered examples in Nordic countries or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The choice of illustrations reveals many underlying and understated details. Looking at the examples from the Harris Art Gallery and Museum in Preston, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and the Birmingham City Art Gallery, the reader recognises how ambitious and extraordinarily grand these museums were in terms of their size, architecture, location (in the heart of the city) and their aspiration to become a meeting point for the public to experience culture. Also compelling are the images showing the streets of Manchester deserted in 1851, as the Mancunians were away visiting the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, and others showing the industrial character of the city at the time.

The last part, which is the shortest and serves as conclusion, deals with the development and actions of British art galleries between and after both World Wars and the change of their role in the twentieth century. Their power weakened as they lost their influence on the public and were no longer a pole of attraction, due to the increasing popularity of cinema, urban shopping and sport spectatorship. At the same time, they ceased to be innovative and did not develop with the success of their American equivalents, while the public became suspicious of the belief that art was used for the improvement of society, and in particular for the working-class.

This book is worth reading. It will interest students, art historians and museum professionals studying the development of British art in its connection to museums and institutions. Most importantly it touches upon issues that are currently the main aim of museums, as today many of them are focusing on the idea of the family gallery that relates to all levels of the community, echoing the legacy of the Victorian art galleries, an element that distinguishes them from their equivalents in other countries.

This indeed is also its contribution to the field of British museum studies: It situates artworks within the institutional context of their exhibition and use thereby providing a further link between museology and art history. Waterfield's book will offer curators not only another careful look into Victorian rigidity, but perhaps also insights as to how an exhibition can become a localized community event that still bears the mark of high culture.

Stratis Pantazis (Ph.D. History of Art) is an independent scholar and managing editor at De Gruyter Open.

Conference Report

“Art History for Artists. Interactions between scholarly discourse and artistic practice in the 19th century“, Technische Universität Berlin, 07 July – 09 July 2016

Merten Lagatz

Set out to “examine the shaping of art history as a discipline during the 19th century in relation to artistic training and exchanges between artists and scholars”, the international conference *Art History for Artists*, held at the Technische Universität Berlin, provided a forum for the presentation of 23 papers by PhD students, post-doctoral scholars, as well as established art historians. The conference was organized by Eleonora Vratskidou in the context of her post-doctoral research project on the transnational mapping of the way art history was taught in Art Academies throughout the 19th century.

The first of three conference sections was dedicated to the manifold institutional framework of 19th-century higher art education. Amidst the seven papers presented were a few trying to highlight broader tendencies in teaching art and architecture history at schools and academies through case studies of scholars. While Eric Garberson (Virginia Commonwealth University) looked into the teachings of Prussian architect Wilhelm Stier at the Bauakademie Berlin in the 1830s, Pascal Griener (Université de Neuchâtel) turned to Swiss artist David Sutter’s influence on the art history curricula at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris during the Second Empire. The forming and reforming of institutions lay at the heart of Heinrich Dilly’s (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle) and Julia Witt’s (Technische Universität Berlin) presentations. Deborah Schultz (Regent’s University London) showed the rise of photographic reproductions as a means of teaching and studying at the Royal Academy London and Foteini Vlachou (Universidade de Lisboa) gave an account of her research into the hitherto ignored Lisbon Academy of Fine Arts in the late 19th century.

Another eight research papers comprised the second section of the conference which charted the entanglements of art historic discourse and its contemporary art production. Two completely different artist-scholars were the protagonists of the papers by Robert Skwirblies (Technische Universität Berlin) and Spyros Petritakis (University of Crete) – the Nazarene Johann David Passavant, who went on to write the first German biography of Raphael and was director of the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt; and the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner whose lecture illustrations showed ties to contemporary artistic production in the early 20th century. The majority of presenters in this section chose another way to tackle the question at hand. Different media of production were the foundation for their search for reactions to the present within the context of 19th-century art historical discourse. Melanie Sachs (Philipps-Universität Marburg) turned to the writings of mostly German art historians to look for critical voices in regard to historicism. The challenge to recognize a contemporary style in printed architectural histories inspired Petra Brouwer’s (University of Amsterdam) talk. Lena Bader (Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte Paris) and Pier Paolo Racioppi (IES Abroad Italy, Rome) contrasted artists’ and scholars’ points of view in the lasting debates of the 19th century – Bader chose the Holbein dispute for her poignant paper while Racioppi discussed the concept of invention among the Faculty of the Accademia de San Luca in Rome.

Art history by artists was the guiding theme in the conference's concluding section and artistic production itself was the focus in these final papers. Michael Thimann (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) and France Nerlich (Université François-Rabelais de Tours) were the only scholars at the conference sticking to the literal academic framework of art production. Thimann discussed the importance of Carl Wilhelm Oesterley's drawings for his lectures as professor for art history in Göttingen and Nerlich argued for an in-depth comparison of "painted art history" by Friedrich Overbeck for the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt with that by Paul Delaroche for the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Through thorough readings of singular oil paintings by Matthew Pratt and Henri Leys, Léa Kuhn (Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München) and Jan Dirk Baetens (Radboud University Nijmegen) offered a somewhat more personal artistic reflection on the history of art. Finally, two more papers should be quickly mentioned: Margherita D'Ayala Valva (Scuola Normale Superiore Pisa) spoke about artists' note-taking and copying from art-theoretical writings of the past as a means to further their artistic production. Anne Gregersen (University of Copenhagen) found in J. F. Willumsen's art collection and private museum a truly unconventional artist's take on the course of art history.

The research presented at the conference offered a kaleidoscope of *desiderata* in the historiography of art history. The founding of the academic discipline of art history was shown to have been accompanied by shifts and constant corrections of its own course, as well as a strong dependency on its local framework. The multitude of methodological approaches mirrored the dynamism of current art historical research and should claim the global scope it deserves.

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