The Interpretation of Modern Art – What is Possible When Dealing with the Explication of Art [1]

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The attempt to interpret modern art comes from different approaches and moves along several lines of thought. Generally speaking, together these approaches leave no doubt that a linguistic explanation is possible and legitimate. This assumption, which forms a bridge between word and picture, is a decisive, often uncontested problem of aesthetic logic. Spectators should watch out for the traps and fallacies. They may expect that the clear statement a work of art unambiguously makes for them, the unseemingly apparent interpretation of the work, leads back to a lack of understanding of the "real" thoughts and precise statement of the artistic "message."[3] This expectation by the spectator is deceptive. It makes a fertile discussion of the interpretation of a work of art more difficult rather than easier. The thesis of this article claims that through the work of art, modern art does not make reality readily available but is a component part of a wandering culture.[4] The form of our spoken communication is always, at first, produced anew. Although the socially conditioned structure of art allows itself to be explicated, the statement of each artwork does not.

Let us take an example of a current interpretation of The State Hospital, by Edward Keinholtz. We find the following explanation: "Dismayed over sadistic care, indifferent doctors and typically inhuman attention to patients, Keinholtz has represented this hospital as an angry indictment against all such places."[5] Another author interprets Francis Bacon's, Seated Figure, with the phrase "into a three-dimensional scene, a being abandoned, a being thrown-into-the-world of anonymous people."[6] Finally, concerning Max Beckmann's, The Dream, one commentator begins, "The way to the picture is not easy. There already for us his [Beckmann's] displeasure with the world of meaning, which, through his impoliteness and nasty remarks, and moreover through his eccentricity and mysterious absurdity appear to make Beckmann accessible. What do these five forms [in the picture there appear five people], who are found together in a bleak attic in a carnival-dream of misery want?"[7]

Such attempts at interpretation appear to be three-fold. First, they come from life experience, which allows them to be expressed in everyday speech. This is the source of their origin. That is how one deals with an artwork. Nothing more need to be brought to the expression. Since the artistic dimension drops out through the coarse sieve of interpretation, the way to the artwork is able to be shortened. It appears as if the listener was aroused by a spiritual musical score. It makes no difference whether one deals with a Beethoven Symphony, a military march or a popular song. Secondly, these interpretations keep to "representational" art because they are taken as visual illusions of what is seen on the picture's surface, referring to the material part of the empiri-

cal world and are made available like this. This approach leads to the judgment that "non-representational" art (abstract expressionism, information art, constructivism) cannot be interpreted because there is no tangible concrete evidence. Thirdly, these interpretations act as if modern art made use of medieval symbolism, "as a language," wherein each sign has an established meaning.

Where does the error hide? Obviously, it does not hide in the respect that the interpreter is easily able to miss the idea of the artwork, rather it hides in the unspoken premise that the translation of the handicrafts and of the fine arts in the medium of linguistics is, in principle, possible with potential problems. It hides in the belief that the kernel of meaning is fixed in the spoken expression of "only" visually perceptible artworks which is made understandable for everyone, as though everyone masters a language.8 The artwork is now, being entirely disregarded by respective categories of meaning, scaled down to a visual confirmation of an understanding as supported and supplemented through the clarification of facts that one already generally knows.

In the face of these difficulties it is necessary to clarify in general what can be grasped in words when dealing with modern art. Could it be that, during all the attempts at explication of meaning, I say nothing about the artwork but that it is my interpretation which provides me with an understanding as to how I focus on art, what my educational standards are, and what levels of art interest me? This, however, is not a question of artistic sense but my understanding of society. If I dwell on such "attempts at explanation" then I proceed as if I weren't situated in a society in which this artwork also belongs, but view it in such a way that the artwork penetrates from the outside as if it were an unidentified flying object; the astonished population must be put at ease in order to take away their anxiety.9

In the first way there is a problem concerning interpretation. The attempts to interpret modern art will be discussed under three points of view - not that this helps to critically resolve the basic model of existence. After the first viewpoint is examined, the second will question which form of explication can still be meaningful when dealing with modern art.

Why are Interpretations Doubtful?

The hermeneutic paradigm that seemed to allow us to look over the artist's shoulder is, today, being placed into doubt by several critics.10 There are at least three good reasons for this. First, what did not take place in the 18th century was the domination of the idealistic basis for art.11 At that time it seemed that despite different possible accentuations, art began to be assigned verbally its "purpose" and formulated theoretically as to what it "ought" to do. The contemporary theoreticians thought what lay behind and beyond the work of art was as an absolute well-spring of meaning out of which art conceived its cultural and human functions: perhaps an exaggerated idea as to what the artistic expression must bestow. To dwell on this point, one finds up to the present, right within Marxist theories of art, for instance Hans Eisler, that "art will be for the first time the grand masterteacher of society."12

Secondly, we must mistrust attempts at interpretation when they actually do not procure a higher meaning but are determined as being equivalent to other forms of expression. In the discussions over meaningful paradigms of interpretation, entire types of interpreta-

tion, such as art documented as "denial," "decay," "progress," "healing," are today being dismissed as inadequate.13 This is true also of new formulations that are opposed to them which are not so different in principle, for example when art is declared as "protest," as "regression," as "educational product," or psychoanalyzed as "repressed" feeling.14 In this exchange of schematic descriptions, words against words are exchanged, but it remains unclear how word and artwork generally belong together. One argues as if the question of what art actually offers, doesn't exist.

Thirdly, resonating with the excessive endeavor of hermeneutics, the explication of artworks makes them lack independence; art becomes governable and available as though, without the word, art could not exist. The word in this case is complementarily inserted: what matters is that word and picture are revealed together.15 The word, in this process, is to the artwork as the vacation photo is to the experienced vacation. Both testify to the frantic endeavor to take hold of reality through the inclusion of other media and make it publicly communicable. Such intentions become effective magical thinking; they seize hold of a phenomenon through the word. The word takes in a function of power through naming. It puts the phenomenon in its place.

If the critics' attempts at explication appear to be doubtful we should perhaps consider what the artists themselves are saying.16 At first glance it seems as if an artists' commentary would offer an unmistakable authentic report about their work or about art in general on which we can rely. However, in such cases we should pay particular attention. The statement artists make about their art is comparable with those pedagogues say about education. One possibly accepts those which are masterfully worked out on the spot, theoretically beyond the cliches (Hermann Lietz); another artist likes to advance profound theoretical insights the other way around, to identify himself not as a creative practitioner but only as a thinker (Gustav Wyneken). Here, of course, there are also exceptions. One is able to expect that the explication of the educational predecessor is consistent with the limited change of relationships (Janusz Korczak, Anton S. Mararenko).17 These are in accordance with Naum Gabo's theory which explains how artistic forms provide space to be thoroughly optically comprehensible by recipients.18 This doesn't change anything as to how the word and the artwork operate on different levels. These named explications also are not self-explicative. They are testimonies of creative moments of inspiration in the medium of words which possess their own peculiar reality.

The question as to what the artist says about his/her art has become the difference between an old generation and a young generation. The old generation still wanted total action; they wanted to change an entire culture. The explications of art, in all the numerous manifestos of the 20th century, were well-grounded in theory.19 The younger generation distances itself from such programmatic confessions. Their consciousness has been changed by their social possibilities. They appear no longer as potential revolutionaries but as suppliers to a cultural market. Factually, the comprehensive goal of the older generation has disappeared, but for that reason the media of production and the level of expression present a richness of forms. They are no longer able to be neatly and tidily defined compared with graphic application or happenings, or compared with advertising or technical doodling. When art as a market-

supply occurs, there is nothing more to explicate; there is no public interest as to what an artist has in mind. Free, the artist maintains a hold on the market (by this is meant not only whether the artist sells pictures). This new art is multitudinous, it hardly appears possible to overlook the great variety. It does not allow itself to be comprehended under a central point of references by the artist or by the critic.

When art begins to appear as a "cultural" offering for the market, it is considered to be a quasi-plastic phenomena such as advertising, design, and optical media. Since in former centuries art also had a function as illustration in place of reading for an illiterate public, one is able to assume with the growing literacy, that the meaning of art and symbols must have declined. At present that is not the case. Especially in a society with education for the masses, a richness of picture signs and attractions presenting themselves so that art becomes as effective as everyday speech. As well, out of this visual kaleidoscope are cut out optical signals of all sorts for mass consumption as a larger part of the spoken word. Here, submitted to consciousness is an aesthetic foreground which is a narrow interrelation between word and picture. Let us take a common example: comics with "balloon-speech." On such a plane where word and picture are restricted to a figurative superficial communication, there is a correspondence between picture and ballooned speech. Word and picture become synonymous with one another, just as aptly expressed in the title of the German newspaper Bild-Zeitung.20 When we are not excessively discursive and abstract in our speaking and thinking, as in ready-made thought-balloons word and picture supplement each other. What we have to say then, still only has a character of packaged pieces that fit into the standards of the respective situation. Thinking, speaking, and experiencing become functions which merely refer to "aesthetic" pre-determined frames of communication. This is the way problems of the explication of art are processed because society doesn't "need" art at all.

Up to now art, despite its orientation to and share of the market as an independent cultural achievement, and despite its distancing itself by being critical of the everyday world, has kept its public pseudo-aesthetic affinity and indicated clearly the deep rift between word and picture. The more we remove ourselves from the level of smooth controvertibility, all the more evident it becomes that art and word are independent media. Particularly when they are understood differently from one another it could help contribute to the emancipation with which we construct our understanding of culture and also a language that could be stimulated towards precision.

Levels of Possible Explication

After all of this, the question still remains as to what we can grasp about artworks that are generally correlated with words. An understanding between artist and spectator, as well as recipients, is without a doubt necessary. We ought not to be content with the saying: if you can't feel it, you can't grasp it! Also we must not be easily puzzled, brooding, or helpless with artworks that leave us standing, silent by the sheer subjective experience. The fenced off omnipotence of interpretation should not be exchanged for the helplessness of becoming speechless recipients. To what extent an explication is possible when dealing with modern art shall be examined in the following three levels.

Suppositions Concerning Conversation Over Art

First of all, the suppositions of my discussions about art must be clarified through several critical questions. To whom do I address myself [when I speak about art]? I am able to converse with a partner over art when we pay attention to each other in respect to particular forms, perspectives, color effects and so on.21 That is only possible if our cultural level and our art interests are to some extent homogeneous. Like talk about chess, an example taken up by Ludwig Wittgenstein, which is taken for granted, the speech partner readily knows what to play next; therefore, knowing about art in advance contextualizes the talk about art. For that to exist there must clearly be a conscious agreement as to how we comprehend art and handle it. I am not able to bring home with words what we mean by art to someone from another culture who has no perception of art which is like mine. When we mutually reflect how new forms of art change our cultural understanding, our intellectual and aesthetic customs, conversation between like partners must not remain just receptive and understandable but can be innovative.

What do we mean by this? We are able to bring about and establish, through the medium of conversation in which art operates, a logical base from which the artist began. Here there are a rich number of basic patterns: subjects (Carl Hofer's masks), surprising combinations (Rene Magritte's picture puzzles), rhythms of forms and paint (Piet Mondrain's constructive grids). The logic of modern art is not unified but diverse.

With what purpose do I speak? I am able to articulate my own premise and expectations from which I began my dealings with art, just as the claims of society seize hold of art and integrate it. I am able to critically shed light on those interests I am always striving for art to clarify, to make known, to control.

While such an interpretation makes conscious a hidden thirst for power, it attains higher levels of abstraction and becomes a meta-interpretation.

Art as a Specific Level of Reality

If the conversation about art becomes established on a wider basis through the clarification of linguistic conditions then the attempt to conceive pictures as single-pieces (Einzelstucke) leads into a blind alley. What art in a contemporary world achieves by this is already a known assumption; it is only necessary to find out what an artist had thought about this or that picture. To interpret a single picture is similar to giving a piece of advice to a child whom I don't know. By this all the key issues are already taken-for-granted: how we wish to treat children in our society; what matters in our general education; which forms of co-existence between children and adults we can standardize and live with. It is precisely these unarticulated premises that are of real interest.

Art appears to be a basic form for the experience of reality. As a spectator, I must try to comprehend the form and its modus operandi. To make my experience meaningful I debate with and through the artwork's reconstructed dimension of reality. When I view the artwork this way, I am able to verbally ask myself and answer the question: which paradigm of reality do I preoccupy myself with? How do I approach the world? I do not know and do not need to know what the artist wanted to express with a single image. Rather, I am able to clarify for myself what sort of

communication becomes effective here.

What is important is that I accept this art as a legitimate possibility in our culture, that I view artworks as belonging to our culture and that I see in their forms those possibilities of expression that state the rules for us today. If I understand a single image, then the method itself is apparently clear and need only be applied to an individual case. In the case of modern art, the problem lies as to what criteria exemplified the very first understanding.[22] Art has its own dimension, a specific level of reality. I am able to deal with a single picture only when I have comprehended the general dimensions of art.

Decoded Reality

Naive notions of interpretation emerge from the following assumption: our world is clear for we are able to experience and see it with a naked eye; only an artwork is unclear. It conceals its meaning and poses a puzzle that we must decode. This misconstructed perspective leads us to a dead end. We are able to avoid it if we accept an artwork as it is, however our outlook has changed.[23] It comes to light that it is not the artwork that is difficult to understand but the world we live in. My most difficult stretch of the journey begins with the first episode upon the reception of the work of art. The artwork challenges me to a complex mental activity. It starts a process in operation because it has no demonstrative but an appellative character. The "text" which is to be written by me does not translate the picture into the work but is my own productive performance directed at society poetically expressed in Rainer M. Rilke's famous phrase: "You must change your life!"[24]

The artwork is not simply deciphered as a text we know in principle. Rather we could say, reality is a cryptograph full of puzzles that can be deciphered with the help of art. This permits us to see the exemplary paintings by Rene Magritte. By not matching the subject to the caption of the artwork, Magritte's artworks are absurd, e.g., La Clef des Songes. Are they any more absurd than what really happens, for example the family of a concentration camp's commandant under the Christmas tree? Magritte's rhinoceros climbing up a column, Le Montagnard, is absurd. Is it as absurd as the growing mountains of butter that lay wasting while hourly thousands are starving? Here, it becomes clear that this isn't an art that is taken into the intimate realm of the home (Gefilde), but demands a lively debate with the social reality through art.[25]

The current dealings with art belong to the absurdities in society. Walter Benjamin's apt recognition: "The desire to bring things closer together-spatially and humanly - is as impassioned as the wish by the current masses as to what their intention is in overcoming every unique condition through the reception of their reproduction."[26] The "technical reproducibility" is only a material condition by which society is made through artworks' chronicle articulation (the documented interpretation of human existence), domestication (the eventual acceptance of this documentation) and binding of mass produced goods (such documentation becoming part of the larger historical myth). Successful against blockages (from becoming inert), society's own absurdity is allowed to become apparent through art.

Taking Stock: Art as a Constructive Component of Our Way of Life

In conclusion, we risk an answer to the question, "What is possible when discussing modern art?" by recalling Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "way of life" (Lebensform). Art is a part of our way of life in the following three essential ways.

Cultural Logic

Not for everyone, but certainly for those who occupy themselves with art, art belongs to the mental infrastructure, to the conditions of their experience of the world. If there are artists who directly visualize the world in this manner, then located on the horizon is what today can be thought of and visualized. The artwork reflects not only reality, which is how Marxists used to think, but is, itself part of reality, that also shapes the world. There is not only a spoken logic but also a social and cultural logic, a variety of levels of speech and thought as well as the cultural understanding. That makes the dilemma clear for the articulated explications of art. To those who know what art is I need not explain it. I am not able to explain it to someone who does not know what art is. A seemingly comprehensive talk about art meant for the general public (for instance guidance at an exhibition), can perpetuate misunderstandings to a public who does not understand art.27

Art Creates Reality

Like science, art starts out from a "paradigm." Scientific paradigms are the basis for thinking and research, world views and experience. It is not only that a science approaches close to the pre-determined reality according to its paradigm, but through such an act, the paradigm itself becomes a component of reality. Paul Feyerabend had pointed out that with the Copernican revolution not only did the view of the movement of the celestial bodies change, but the whole structure of thought changed too.28 Similarly, it is with modern art. By living with this art I live in a reality which is just that way and is not structured any differently. Art does not point singularly out a particular sector of reality which it then left unexamined. Usually, rather it brings forth a reality about which it provides information for the very first time. This new paradigm comes into being when a group, who sets the tone in a society, admits to a new reality; hence the paradigm defines a culture in a respective historical phase.

Contact with Art as a Requirement of Thinking and Speaking

If art is part of our way of life, then the condition of our thinking and speaking belongs to it [art]. Consequently, we cannot affirm ourselves only through the work of art. On the one hand, the frame of our spoken explications through society and culture is marked out. On the other hand, this culture and society is the field from which we orientate ourselves by means of speech; it arises from those structures we are able to make conscious through critical discussion. If modern artworks seem inaccessible, then we must search for a suitable society they describe and soon we should find out that it is our own. They reveal in their sense, not through clarity, but through those understandings which have truly expired in society.29 The object of our interpretations is not our art but our way of life. Here the dealings with art, the animate, discursive, articulated actions, are in their rightful place.