

FROM THE OBJECT TO THE CONCRETE INTERVENTION

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THE UNDERSTANDING OF ART CHANGES VERY SLOWLY. The work character of art was already being questioned one hundred years ago. Since then artists have attempted to perform functions that go far beyond the production of objects.

The demand has been coming up again and again for a long time now: Art should no longer be venerated in specially designated spaces. Art should not form a parallel quasi-world. Art should not act as if it could exist of itself and for itself. Art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence. Unconventional ideas, innovative spirit and energy, which for centuries were wrapped up in formal glass bead games, could thus contribute to the solution of real problems.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demands are slowly starting to take effect. The formal-aesthetic discussion has run its course. Its myriad self-referential somersaults have become inflationary, and the worship of virtuosi has given way to other qualities. In the process, a fundamental discussion of the functions of art has arisen: Who does what in art, and why?

Art can perform many functions. For pages and pages, the various functions could be listed like a catalog of stylistic-isms: Art can represent its commissioners and producers; it can be a definer and caretaker of identity; it can affect snobby allures and satiate the bourgeois hunger for knowledge and possession. Art can fatten up the leisure time of the bored masses; it can serve as an object of financial speculation; it can transmit feelings and cause one's heart to vibrate. Furthermore, the many functions are also enmeshed in one another. Abstract Expressionism served Cold War Americans as a political instrument of culturalization just as much as it served the spiritual need for expression of the young painters that created it.

One of the functions of art has always been the transformation of living conditions. Since the advent of Modernism, with its rejection of religiously founded authority, art has been an especially fertile domain for querying irrational taboos and inherited value standards and for correcting social imbalances. This function was first put into practice by the Russian Constructivists. Simultaneously with the 1917 change of regime in Russia, an art was introduced which for the first time sought to directly influence the people's consciousness and living conditions through agitation and activism. Thus a new chapter was opened in the history of art.

don't rescue whales; "Stop AIDS" posters don't stop the spread of the disease; and Klaus Staeck's agitprop posters have hardly hindered speculation in the housing market. Did Picasso's Guernica do anything for the tormented residents of that city? It remains a monument, a ritual of grief and an admission that the power to effect anything with art is limited.

And yet, in the proper dose art can change more than is assumed. Art must devote itself to very concrete strategies of effecting change. Wishing patients in hospitals a quick recovery through artistic decoration of the walls, reading Austrian literature aloud to asylum seekers, or having "Mutter Courage" appear on stage costumed as a Kosovo Albanian are nothing more than easy absolutions for a guilty conscience. The series can be continued. With "Homeless Art" for example. Tania Mourad sprayed window panes with the symbols used by vagabonds: "Here there is food," and "A hospitable woman works here." Then she demonstratively gave out free croissants before returning to her everyday life. There is "Rock Music with Lyrics on Housing Shortage" in which "tenant's need" rhymes with "speculator's greed", and there is a designer, the New York artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who was always inventing vehicles for New York's winos and homeless. Utopian-looking all-purpose vehicles built on supermarket cart chassis that hobos could push around, with storage space for returnable cans and bottles, were designed so that the whole device could be converted into a cot for the night. Wodiczko's approach - he looks for solutions within the realm of existing possibilities, even if they do seem a little utopian - is certainly worthy of mention. Still, his carts are only presented in museums. This could even give rise to the suspicion that he is utilizing social destitution for the purpose of creating "valuable exhibition pieces". It is unimaginable that they would ever actually be employed by their intended users: Even the most banal problems, like storage, would arise.

Social renewal is a function of art after the art of treating surfaces. It makes more sense to improve the carrying structure before improving the surface. This art's big chance lies in its ability to offer the community something that also achieves an effect. The motives for concrete intervention based in art should not be confused with an excess of moralistic fervor. As a potential basis for action, art has political capital at its disposal that should not be underestimated. The use of this potential to manipulate social circumstances is a practice of art just as valid as the manipulation of traditional materials. The group WochenKlausur takes this function of art and its historic precursors as its point of departure. WochenKlausur sets precise tasks for itself and, in intensive actions that are limited in time, attempts to work out solutions to the problems it has recognized. Widespread interest in the theoretical foundations and practical working methods as well as the concrete results of projects in Austria and abroad have encouraged WochenKlausur to continue working in this direction.

to improve odious conditions was not suitable for making a profit. It could not delight the aesthetically seducible eye or awaken any lofty sentiments.

In Poland these times were different. An Actionist group dressed in orange went out on the streets in 1988. Through megaphones they proclaimed the governing General Jaruzelski king. This was not callow anticommunism, but rather a refined strategy that these artists were using to assail the regime's hypocrisy. They also proclaimed an "International Day of the Spy", on which they appeared by the hundred with dark glasses and turned up collars, stopping passersby and halting the secret police to check their papers. On another occasion they sang pathetic hymns in praise of the Red Army and read out the orange manifesto of social-ist surrealism. In this manifesto, the police officer was declared a work of art, as an individual or better yet deployed en masse to charge against the activists: the wilder, the better the art.

In the west, the phase of self-satisfied, market-oriented art production did not last for ever. With the nineties came a change of thinking and in fact a renewal of reflection on the social responsibility of art. Postmodernism's celebrated autonomy revealed itself to be an apparition to which countless palaces and new museums had been erected: They brought dealers dizzying profits at first, but soon enough inflation and losses followed. Political reality was outside of this art's field of interest. The effects of conservative economic policy, creeping social cutbacks, increasing immigration conflicts, and a general insecurity following the dissolution of the east-west power balance first became determining factors in the production of art after the collapse of the market and the demystification of art. Since then visual art has developed in two directions: into an art that is defined by economic interests and bottom-line thinking, that lures the masses with spectacles and lots of horn-blowing. And conversely into an art that acts - independently of profit and populism - in possibilities, that seeks to examine and improve the conditions of coexistence. The latter sounds a bit altruistic and missionary. Too altruistic for the art that just wants to hang free and easy beyond the daily grind. And yet more and more artists are finding that the decision is not so difficult, when in view of the numerous functions of art, their choice leads past the satisfaction of leisure-time needs and toward the cooperative shaping of life in society.

In contrast to the thinking of the seventies, today's Activists are no longer concerned with changing the world in its entirety. It is no longer a matter of mercilessly implementing an ideological line, as it was in Joseph Beuys' idea of transforming a whole society into a Social Plastic, or as it was in the thinking of the Russian Constructivists, the Futurists and many other manifesto writers of the Modern. At the end of the century, Activist art no longer overestimates its capabilities. But it does not underestimate them either. It makes modest contributions. It would be wrong, in a society in which every discussion of basic principles has been lost, to expect that something like art can make decisive changes. Folksongs

In Germany the Bauhaus cultivated these developments. Science, architecture, technology and the visual arts were all working toward one another so as to shape as many aspects of life as possible. Books and posters, vehicles, landscapes and clothing took on new forms corresponding to function and ideology in order to establish the new philosophies of life with a certitude nearing self-evidence. Every formal renewal of the world - so thought the artists of that time - would also have to bring about a corresponding change of attitude.

For many decades it seemed that society actually could be manipulated through alteration of the visual surroundings and of habits of seeing and hearing. This view still had its supporters as recently as the sixties, and the question of whether that era's youth revolt was influenced or even triggered by rock and pop music, or if conversely the music was merely a part of the release of long-accumulated dissatisfaction, is a source of material for sociology seminars up to the present day. Looking back, the idea of "altering social relationships by altering form" appears a little naive. Of course attitudes and habits, thinking patterns and value standards can be marginally influenced through forms. The whole advertising field is sustained by this thesis. But people's ideological principles, their worldviews and values can not really be changed through colors, sounds and forms. Clothes, one could say, only make the man in romantic novels.

Following the Second World War, "socially engaged art" experienced several highpoints. "First of all we think the world must be changed," stands at the beginning of the Situationist Manifesto from the late fifties. Similar proclamations of and demands for change in politics, sexuality, the economy and culture are to be found in numerous initiatives and organizations. In heated discussions with like-minded individuals, the Lettrists and Activists discussed the most basic method of destroying every aspect of tradition, constantly on the lookout against their own institutionalization. What came after the destruction was of lesser importance. The path was the goal, and the goal was conflict with high culture, whose forms of expression were suspected of having been co-opted by the economic ruling class for its own ends. "Artists who withdraw into the reserve of their own areas of specialization are just as much functionaries of an ossified society as skilled workers and file clerks," wrote Subversive Action. These activists, who classified themselves as "para-elites", wanted to achieve that which others did not even dare to think. And yet, when seen from a certain historical distance, they left behind little more than manifestos. It remained at the level of auspicious declarations of

intention and maxims. However: The methods of "constructing situations" have found successors to this day.

Simultaneously with the Situationists and Lettrists came the development of Conceptual Art: No longer the object, but rather the idea behind it, was what counted in art. Aside from early forerunners like the Austrian poet H.C. Artmann in the fifties, the first important phase of Conceptual Art coincided with the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. It was the time of the student revolts, the continuing struggle for civil rights and the growth of feminism. In addition to giving rise to all sorts of playful escapades and self-referential "art industry analyses", the general questioning of value standards and authority primarily led to a marked interest in the political. Starting from the "classical" position, the Post-Conceptualists thus developed their forms of dealing with issues like race, class, nation and gender. They too remained within the traditional context of art in that they transmitted their cause using conventional forms of exhibition and presentation, thus merely placating a specialized art public, whose majority shared their views anyway. Diligently staged and photographed statements on racism, feminism and homosexuality always reached the same few people, who nonetheless enjoyed an opportunity to prove their correctness to one another. Still, this conception of art must be understood as an important precursor of today's political Activism.

In the seventies, the demand for sociopolitical relevance in art was finally put into concrete action - in a variety of ways. Ulrike Rosenbach's alternative television program was to emancipate the people from the media czars' monopolies; video technology was used by Richard Kriesche in the rehabilitation of disabled children (long before medicine came upon the idea); Barbara Steveni and John Latham of the Artist Placement Group presented suggestions for improving educational policy to their government. Joseph Beuys redefined the position of art in society with the concept of the Social Plastic; Hans Haacke showed how political processes can be influenced through intervention; Klaus Staeck's agitprop posters elucidated the relationships between business and power; and groups like the Art Workers Coalition declared war on the conventional art establishment and its rigid admission criteria.

Filled with a euphoria not lacking a measure of hubris (the artist as seer, shaman, healer and revolutionary guru), these artists - and here avant-garde circles were in agreement - wanted to make contributions to improving coexistence: in psychology and sociology, with healing methods or in incarceration. The avant-garde wanted to choose living localities for their creation, to stop working for eternity, and to address more than just the educated classes of the public.

In the end it did not work without the old institutions. The museums, the art journals, the galleries and the art academies had no problem whatsoever integrating the myriad forms of so-called "anti-art". Even the most subversive forms of

Actionism and Neo-Dada were co-opted into collections: Ultimately, objects were still all that remained. Relics of actions, photos and sketches became fetishes for veneration and for sale. For most people at that time - and this still applies today - art had to do with works. It must be something that can be seen, touched and packed away. Everything else cannot be sold, cannot be collected and preserved.

Qualities other than those that are immediately sensorially perceivable, which nonetheless are always tied to objects, took on increasing significance, but only at a slow pace. The seventies did show how art could develop after abandoning mimesis, after abandoning the need for expression, after abandoning the variants of abstraction, and after abandoning the question of form. With Happenings, Fluxus, Performances and Actions, with ironic variants of Ready-mades and with Conceptual Art, a profound doubt of the notion that art can only be fixed in the object became clear. Concept and idea, which were discussed as the actual artistic achievement behind every material realization - even painting - gained ground against a conception of art that only manifests itself in material. The entire complex of production conditions was of course called into question as well.

Action Art also made a significant contribution to the developments leading to Activism. Originally conceived as cathartic satisfaction of the individual's unfulfilled drives and a liberation of the subject from the bonds of convention, Actionism soon changed its thinking and recognized the cause of many individual and psychological problems in social injustices. The desire for catharsis could often not be fulfilled because those involved soon became aware of the senselessness of every primal scream, regardless of the depths from which it may emerge, when social conditions leave no room for an improvement in subjective well-being.

In the eighties it seemed like it was all over. All of the successes and efforts of sociopolitically committed art were pushed to the side. Repeatedly and with growing success, these aspirations were confronted by an art fully devoid of purpose. Contemplation again came to the fore, and with it the objects that were to evoke it: the art shrines. The reversal did not really come so much from the artists' ranks, where there continued to be an interest in utopia. It also did not come from criticism. It came from the powerful scene that viewed art as a commodity, because it earned a living from this sort of art. It was the huge swarm of speculators and collectors, who saw their precious canvases being replaced by forms of art that they could not sell and could not collect. They were joined by conservative art teachers who did not want to change their well-rehearsed old opinions, and by all of the institutions that would have liked to fill their exhibition halls with visitors once again. Altered conceptions of art were nothing they wanted to follow. They preferred one hundred more variations for repeating already-been-there, and they preferred to keep packing and unpacking their wares, all the while extolling them for all they were worth. Art that had nothing more in mind than using its potential