

# Doing Art

## On the Philosophy of Art as a Praxis

Aesthetics is enjoying wide attention in contemporary philosophy. Concepts such as “aesthetic experience,” “aesthetic rationality,” “aesthetic praxis,” “aesthetic arguments,” as well as theories on the “aesthetics of the sublime,” the “aesthetics of existence,” or on the “aesthetics of performing” are dominating the discourse on the philosophy of art. What meaning, though, does this aesthetical way of looking at art have? Is the predominant philosophical aesthetics the only philosophical access to art? In coming to terms with these questions one does well to remember that, since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, philosophical dealing with art has been marked by an, as we shall see later, metaphysical motive. Basically this motive lies in the philosophers’ attempt to find concepts for and make understandable the “non-conceptual” aesthetical content of an artwork, a content whose meaning is expressed by the artist “only” via the medium of a sensual and aesthetical experience. This philosophical approach to the praxis of art and to its different forms of expression does not let art speak for itself, but rather tries to state the “truth” about art (this form of art were to mean this or that..., this artwork were to be a true masterpiece, or beautiful, or ugly, or avant-garde, etc. for this or that reason...). Let us refer to this approach to art as the aesthetical position.

This, undoubtedly provisional, characterization is not meant to imply a judgment on whether this aesthetical concept of art is meaningful or not. Neither do I claim to be doing any kind of justice in this way to the complex web of art theories within philosophical aesthetics. My point here is that a philosophical aesthetics that claims a theoretical (conceptual, rationally scientific) understanding of art and that wants to communicate or criticize art by way of language does not essentially differ from the discursive work of art experts (art historians and art theoreticians). I think it would be in order to say that the whole purpose of an art expert’s position on the praxis of art is to describe empirically and interpret theoretically the contents of art. The academic science of art tries to understand the content of those “things” (single pieces, works, projects, developments, styles, formats, languages, fusions, etc.) taking place in the inscrutable labyrinth of what is happening in art. For the time being, let’s hold that a well-founded expertise, an expert knowledge well-informed in many details of the field, constitutes the specific essence and the programmatic claim of an academic undertaking whose object is art.

This theoretical focus on an expert knowledge (*Sachverstand*) of art, on the understanding of artistic praxis as an understanding of certain things—contents of art, meanings, works, pictures, products—is shared by both aesthetics and the academic discourse on art. Aesthetics, too, conceives of itself as a reflection on the content of art. I would like now to enlarge this familiar aesthetical position on the praxis of art by another, non-aesthetical position. Such a normative philosophy of art, as I would like to call it, is in its self-concept neither aesthetical nor descriptive (or objectively interpretational, as it were), but it rather reflects on art praxis in society as on a praxis of self-understanding. How does one have to conceive of this self-understanding and how can the normative character of a philosophical concept of art as that of a matter of cultural self-reflection be substantiated? We shall see that the normative aspect of art dealt with here does not coincide with the normative art theories of philosophical aesthetics. Before we can delve into the reasons for that, however, let me first explain what it means to refer to art and to reflect on it as a societal process of self-reflection. A normative theory of art is not primarily interested in the (“aesthetical”) *contents* of art practice, it is rather more interested in the very existence of such a *praxis*, in the cultural event of art work being done and of artworks being present. The phenomenological view of this normatively charged presence of art praxis and of the individual, every-day experience of being artistically active in a way forms the core, the basis, the essence of a non-aesthetical, praxological access to art.<sup>1</sup> The question is what philosophical implications there are if we take art not only as a practice among other social practices, but as the particular praxis of societal self-reflection.

### **Instead of an Aesthetics of Works – A Theory of the Artistic Praxis**

Traditionally, philosophical aesthetics places the work at the center of its art theory. Thus, reflecting on art as an event within society primarily means thinking in terms of the work’s aesthetics, in the sense that “art” happens as the existence of a completed, self-contained product (painting, installation, performance, piece, work of art, for example) or as the object-like reality of something somehow manufactured. What is certainly true about this familiar concept is the fact that any artistic activity results in “something” and that it thus produces some sort of a result. To imagine this in a matter-of-course way, however, as something like a produced

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<sup>1</sup> As will be elaborated in the following, I differentiate between a descriptive notion of practice (as any type of practical activity) and a normative concept of praxis (as a mode of being); see for the concept of praxology: Harald Lemke, Was ist Praxologie?, in: Horst Müller, ed., Die Übergangsgesellschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts. Kritik, Analytik, Alternativen, Norderstedt 2007, pp. 66-85.

work, as it is usually done in philosophical aesthetics (of works), means to misconceive the actual event character of art praxis.

This event character has been described again and again as a process and in this way one has been referring to the process-like nature of art. This is particularly helpful when the point is to reflect on art practices based on temporary projects, co-operations, and various forms of communications. And yet, talking of the “process character of art” (or, at least, of the process-like nature of some art practices) overlooks—similar, by the way, to a concept of art oriented on work aesthetics—its actual event character. Why? Because to a normative philosophy of art the crucial point is not the result of artistic work (which is not to be misunderstood as if the result were of minor importance) but the fact of its praxis, the fact that there are people *doing* art. This praxis generates the existence and the continuous production of an artistically achieved self-reflection.

The fact that, far from being self-evident but rather highly charged with conditions, individually doing art takes place socially and that in this way a cultural process of self-understanding is in existence, has priority over the fact that art either happens as an artwork or as processes or projects of whatever sort. What is essential is the actual event of being artistically active and of an artistically generated self-image as a societal praxis of producing understandings of how we think about ourselves as persons and as contemporary society. In this content perhaps we can talk about a “joyful productivism” (Anke Haarmann) and contrast this joyful productivism or praxism as a basic term of art philosophy to traditional work aesthetics.

In order to correctly understand the praxological event character of art it seems necessary to critically reflect a further basic tenet of philosophical aesthetics. Conventionally, philosophical reflection of art relates less to the process of artistic content and insight, but rather to the “sensual perception” or “aesthetic experience” on the part of the viewer of art. The simple basic idea is that we necessarily perceive artworks, which we relate to as things or reality outside of ourselves, through our sense organs. The familiar concept of aesthetics is based on this idea of *sensual perception* or *aisthesis* in Greek.

At first glance, this theory seems to hold true, because we do see pictures with our eyes, with our sense of sight. We also perceive pictures sensually by inspecting them physically. Likewise music: We can understand music only by way of hearing it, that is, by perceiving its sounds through the sense organ of our ears. Or take

taste: Judging a flavor requires the taste sense organs in our mouth, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Such an aesthetical way of conception, however, implies an (often unnoticed) narrowing of one's concept of art to the reception of artistic work, to its reception by the viewing public. Not to speak of the problem that this theory of perception is based on a physiological reductionism which fails to recognize that we only perceive (see, hear, taste, etc.) that which we also have come to comprehend as something to be perceived (as picture, music, flavor).

If the philosophical concept of art takes on this aesthetic position (that of the viewer), the artistic praxis and the actual production of the art all too easily remain underexposed if not altogether suppressed. The result is that accordingly one-sided basic concepts of art philosophy are predominant and that understanding art remains limited to talking about aesthetic experience and sensuality. This kind of discourse is applicable to the art viewer, but not in the same way to the producer of art. This narrowing down of the basic concepts, to be sure, has necessarily led art philosophy so far to dealing with the already mentioned categories like "aesthetic experience" and "work of art" or with things, in a broader sense, sensually perceived. Qualities of perception of art as well as sense perception activities no doubt play a major role; that is why the point here is not to play them down. It is legitimate to reflect on this aesthetic value and to make it the object of a philosophical school of perception. But under the influence of such a philosophical aesthetics, or better: aisthetics, one's programmatic field of reference disengages from art insofar as a theory of perception relates to numerous questions and objects of perception which have nothing to do with practicing art and with aesthetic experience as art experience. If, however, the philosophical concept of art is meant to relate not primarily to things aesthetical but to the event character of art as a process of cultural self-reflection, art praxis and production will most definitely have to be awarded the position of basic concepts.

### **Cultural Self-Communication between Art and Culture Industry**

The ontological insight that the *praxis* of artistically produced self-images has priority over its contents and perception, however, has not answered the normative question as to the value and the essence of this self-reflection. We should now turn to this question. The praxis of an artistically produced self-reflection is of great value to society insofar as, in this way, a free and public communication is set in motion

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<sup>2</sup> Taking the example of our sense of taste, I have dealt more extensively with this line of arguments and with a critique of traditional aesthetics; in: Harald Lemke, *Die Kunst des Essens. Eine Ästhetik des kulinarischen Geschmacks*, Bielefeld, 2007, pp. 151-192.

as to how we understand “ourselves.” What it means for us as individuals and as a collective to live the way we do in this particular society, at this particular point in time, and under these specific conditions; and which “self” or “selves”—which different and manifold life forms of being this self or those selves—we are able to reflect, feel, invent, and live. Before we begin to think about this or that concrete form of self-image—object contents, art works, pieces, projects, styles, or formats—before we enter into a knowledgeable or academic process of understanding art, we have to comprehend the social value of artistic praxis; in consists in the fact that, because of this very activity, a continuous cultural process of self-reflection is taking place and images of the world or of selfhood are being produced. Before we can attempt to find concepts for what is being expressed artistically and for what an aesthetic experience is, art speaks for itself through its being practiced. It does so by employing different forms of articulation, communication, and experience—non-conceptual ones such as visual, gestural, acoustic, physical, or playful, as well as conceptual ones such as linguistic, conceptual, argumentative, or poetic—to present that a cultural self-understanding has been set in motion: *Doing art* is the ruthless attempt to *understand ourselves*.

Artistically produced self-interpretations or self-creations, to be sure, represents only one of the sources of the cultural production of self-images, only one among other sources from which our age is drawing its historical consciousness and on which the “Zeitgeist” feeds. The competitors of art in the business of offering self-understanding, if you will, are religion and tradition, on the one side, with their traditional or religious world images, and the culture industry, on the other side, which with its mass effectiveness generates secular world models. Two further sources of our societal self-images are science and philosophy; I shall, however, not go in detail with them here. In order to adequately value the peculiarity and the normative content of an artistic praxis of self-reflection, in comparison to the bonding forces of traditions or religions or to the sense-making offerings by the culture industry, we have to characterize, briefly and only in their basic tenets, the competitors tradition, religion, and the culture industry.

Tradition and religion thus bestow the easily understood significance of holistic self-images. This holism, however, is paid for by a religious self-understanding with a mind tied to belief (Latin *religare*, *religo* = to tie up or to tie back) and thus with an *unfree* mind. In the same way, a self-understanding based on traditions and conventions pays for its adherence to and unquestioned, “matter-of-course-like” acceptance of generally values, images, and rules with the lack of cultural freedom of an uncritical mind thinking in terms of tradition, not of autonomous reflection. By

relinquishing the cultural possibility of *free self-determination*, critical of the *zeitgeist* and not bound to ideology, an understanding of self and world is unfolded which is dogmatically (theologically or traditionally) predetermined and closed within itself, heteronomous and filled with unscrutinized meaning. The individual human being or believer can—but also has to—insert himself into this understanding of self.

A second mass supplier of meaning for life is the secularized and post-traditional *zeitgeist* as it is staged in the media and distributed by the culture industry. It reflects the spirit of our times, our *zeitgeist*, in the *most matter-of-factly way*. The culture industry produces self-images *en masse* and generates plausible meaning all over the globe. The general comprehensibility and the popularity of self-image production by the mass media, however, is similarly unfree and bound as a religious or traditional concept of man. In its case, the lack of freedom is not caused by belief but it is generated by economic structures and restraints. Sales figures, not processes of communication are the motives behind popular cultural production. Offerings for meaning and self-images fabricated by the culture industry thus mainly contain the meaning of capitalist values and profitable marketing, not the goal of a free self-reflection, liberated of all commercial interests and imperatives. The *zeitgeist* created by the culture industry offers and condones things “pleasing to all,” palatable, glamorous and successful. While all things “not pleasing,” somehow “difficult,” and not critically self-scrutinizing are being suppressed or are made to fade into a happy ending.

### **Artistic Praxis as Practizing Freedom and Cultural Democracy**

Culture industry, tradition, and religion supply self-images that are religiously, historically or economically tied and that are definitely not capable of being designed and disputed again and again. We are not limited, however, to being present at the societal production of self-images in churches or at home in front of the television set. This is so because artistically produced self-images differs from the already mentioned socially predominant sources of cultural self-understanding in a basic, or at least gradual way through a *freedom of the mind* to be neither economically motivated nor to be in any way tied down ideologically, religiously or by any other “self-evident” traditions or conventions. Contained in the fact that artistic praxis is a way to practice freedom (“of the mind”) is that normativity which is a strong philosophical tool.

The normative value of freedom is demonstrated by the exemplary praxis of artistic self-reflection and it is substantiated in its general applicability insofar as we think of a continuously realized cultural self-determination as *something good*. Aligning

one's life to this goodness means (as one possibility) to be artistically active, because the artistic praxis generates in society a free self-understanding of the minds and a free production of self-images. These connections of free self-reflection and self-creation and artistic praxis lend, I should think, philosophical justification to speaking of the normative significance of art as well as to seeing goodness in art, regardless of its particular contents and forms, in the fact that the cultural *praxis* of freedom of the mind—a person actively involved in producing or handling art—“is” the *event* of free cultural self-understanding.

Talking about art praxis as freedom of the mind, however, could lead to various kinds of misunderstanding, which I would like to prevent. The philosophical heritage of the metaphysical tradition has left us with a deeply ingrained and still vital dualism that separates “mind” from “sensuality” as well as “thinking” from “feeling.” This dualistic concept of man continues to be alive in philosophical aesthetics, too, insofar as the latter renders “sense perception” or “aesthetic experience” as a self-evident opposite to “conceptual thinking” and “mental effort.” We would be well advised, however, to critically scrutinize the (inherited) self-evidences of a metaphysical dualism and to avoid thinking of the free mind of art in an unsensual way. In any form of art there is a mental sensuality no less than a sensual mentality. Artistic activity and its results, likewise, comprise the non-duality of thinking and feeling. If one denominates—and distinguishes—art as a praxis of freedom of the mind, as I have been arguing here, then its aspect of mentality is a mere indication of the fact that this individual freedom of expression has to be assigned to the social field of *culture* (art being a part of culture), differentiating it, in terms of social theory, from other social fields such as *economics*, *politics*, or the *world of labor*.

Just as artistic praxis as a “mental activity” can be misunderstood in a metaphysical-dualistic way, it is of equal importance not to misunderstand the “freedom of art” we have been talking about. Philosophical aesthetics usually assumes autonomy of artistic praxis. According to this concept, autonomy of art and the idea of the artist as an autonomous subject are based on the fact that artistic work is not liable to any kind of direct economic profit. This does cover a central aspect of its essence and value. This negative concept of autonomy, however, has led to the conviction that artistic freedom not only requires an independence of capitalist marketing and exploitation forces but also, further than that, a freedom from *any* kind of purposes useful to society and everyday life. According to this erroneous concept, only by virtue of this activity in some way belonging to a “special field” driven by no other interests but by the spirit of beauty in art—which, in the paradigmatic concepts of Kantian philosophy, renders possible

the “pure aesthetics” of a “disinterested appreciation,”—is it possible for what is happening there to be autonomous, free “art.” This popular concept, on one hand, is correct insofar as artists are free in the choice of their work’s contents and in the way they deal with them, because nobody (at least in the ideal case) would impose restrictions in content or form on their work. On the other hand, artistic activity also is embedded in a field of social expectations and artists depend on the social recognition of their efforts. In the face of the dependence of artistic work on cultural recognition and social appreciation, artists often experience themselves as *too free*, as not integrated enough socially and as not receiving enough public perception. In any case, however, for the reasons stated their art never is autonomous but essentially heteronomous.

This unavoidable heteronomy is no limit to the freedom of mind in art. And yet, this phenomenon (of a heteronomous self-determination of art) has been ignored by the canonic philosophies of art, which orbit only around the autonomy of artistic praxis as their conceptual core. In the final analysis, the theories from Plato to St. Augustin via Hegel up to Heidegger and Adorno or Lyotard establish a metaphysical, that is: ideologically bound, frame of reference that connects artistic insight with an absolute and commits it to an ultimate truth—be it to the comprehension of “beauty” (Plato) or to “God” (St. Augustin), to the “absolute world spirit” (Hegel), to the “non-identical” (Adorno) or to the “sublime” (Lyotard). A post-metaphysical *zeitgeist* like ours cannot be satisfied with such metaphysical “self-evidences,” as to what is true art and true self-understanding—and even less so can any critical thinking. For that reason I propose that a philosophical concept of art recognizes the essence and the value of artistic praxis in the fact that it renders possible a free—manifold and continuously changing and self-scrutinizing—comprehension of ourselves, which, however, requires general (inter-subjective) understanding and social recognition and appreciation.

The point of freedom of art, which implies its heteronomous essence, is simply and exclusively the fact that artistic work allows the cultural praxis of an *ideologically completely undefined self-reflection*. Practicing “free art,” thus primarily pertains to the cultural possibility of all individuals (of a democratic public) to produce, by working artistically, an offer to understand or to produce meaning, questions, or knowledge in order to find out what it means for “us” to be living the way we are in “this” particular society, at “this” particular point in time, and under “these” particular conditions. In order to find out which selves, which different life forms of being oneself we are capable of thinking, feeling, inventing, or cultivating.

Further than that, an artistic self-image in contrast to the other sources of cultural self-understanding we have discussed is free exactly at that point where it can demonstrate what it is like to live depending on the framework of social conditions, but still liberated from direct economic and ideological forces, and to be an artistic self (with a free mind). With a view to this individual creation of a self-understanding, artistic praxis is *per se* a meaningful, irreplaceable resource and *per se* a valuable, inestimable activity of a democratic society. Individuals artistically active not only realize by their praxis the goodness of a cultural freedom that is alive every single day insofar as they practice this freedom, but they also supply everyone with that creative and critical public which is alive when it provides for the dispute on our social existence, our cultural self-understanding. While the political processes of opinion-forming and decision-making within a democratic self-governance are taking place in parliaments and political parties, a freely arranged and self-determined, democratic self-understanding is happening in the art contexts and in countless spaces of cultural life and reflection.

Translated from German by Helmut Bredigkeit