



# ARTE E SUAS INSTITUIÇÕES

XXXIII COLÓQUIO DO COMITÊ BRASILEIRO DE HISTÓRIA DA ARTE

Organização

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Sobre a imagem da capa: Trabalho de CARLOS ZÍLIO - "Rubens on the beach II, 2007, óleo e bastão de óleo sobre tela, 140x180cm".

## **Beholder and Public – Between Abstract Art Historical Reference and Target Group**

Peter J. Schneemann - (Universidade de Berna/CIHA)

I strongly believe that the topic of this Colloquium targets one of the most crucial questions that our discipline is facing today. When focussing on the institutions of art, we are discussing, I think, nothing less than the link between art and society. What are the conditions of presentation and perception that we want to offer to art? What are the frameworks that structure the communication between art and society? These questions seem to me highly relevant, since they imply that we cannot delegate everything to the power of art as such. We have not only to ask “What does art do to us?” But “What do we do to art and with art”. The notion of art does not exist independently from the institutions. And when Art History analyses the institutions of art, it poses the most crucial question of all: What are the responsibilities that we are taking on in conceptualizing these institutions? What are the consequences of our decisions? As any definition of art shapes the politics of the cultural institutions, any concept of the beholder shapes the institutional language in the most fundamental way. I would like to highlight a discourse that has in a way governed our discipline and shows a variety of problematic implications.

My paper focuses on a figure that can be described with a variety of names, a figure that mirrors the ideological implication we constantly make, when we talk about

museums and exhibitions as institutions of art: the perceiver, the onlooker, the beholder, the client, the visitor, the target group, the customer of art, and then, of course the collective – the public as an alternative concept to the isolated, single individual. Well, we like to make stereotypical distinctions – the informed and the uninformed recipient. And yes, we go further: The western and the non-western viewer, the local and the foreigner.

My thesis is very simple. I would like to ask, what functions does the beholder serve as a reference point for our discourses? And what images of this figure do we draw? What are the problems and implications of the institutionalization of the figure of the beholder in art history?

I would like to follow three aspects as structure of my argument.

The Beholder as Concept - the abstract vision

Profiling a Target Group - the empirical and economical perspective

Liberating the Encounter with Art - a personal Vote

## **The Vision of the Beholder as Pure Concept, the Beholder as an Abstract Construction**

Art Criticism, historiography, aesthetics, or hermeneutics –All fields related to our contemporary Art History operate with concepts of a perceiving figure that reacts towards the artwork: The beholder. His movement is directed by visual impact only. His exact profile – social background, gender, contemporaneity, geographical location, precondition – does

not matter. He is concentrated and open, not distracted. His reaction is unconditional and not driven by any other interest. And the museum offers such a neutral space as art history describes.

Especially with Wolfgang Kemp's adaption of the "reader-response criticism" in his "Rezeptionsästhetik" (aesthetics of reception) for art history we all started to introduce in our writings this imaginary and ideal beholder who would fulfil the strategy of a work of art, would complete it and be its ideal witness.

This fictional figure is meant to serve as stronger evidence than the reference to the individual impression of the singular author, who could only say: "I feel strongly moved". Instead we delegate this concept of effect, we say: "The beholder is deeply moved by the image of ..."; or "The gaze of the beholder is directed towards the centre of the composition". In order to speak about the power of art one needs a coordinate to indicate the effect – especially on the emotional level.

### **Why do we need this figure? How do we use him?**

I think that in this abstract notion two main interests meet: The **legitimation** of art in society and the idea of **judgement**.

#### Legitimation:

By operating with the beholder as rhetorical reference we constitute a notion of art that has its centre in society. It is not defined by its very own ontology, but as a product

of interplay. Art becomes justified in a very fundamental way in offering society a field of experience, a medium of communication, and an object for the negation of its value system. In order to fulfil these utopian functions, we need some kind of testimony of its effect. We want to believe in an encounter between the artistic production and the members of society that leads to reflection and insight.

I have given you this shortened and fragmented version of arguments in the art discourse in order to confront it with the reality of the actual situation. I would claim, that a detachment has taken place – a detachment from actual experience. In appreciating a work of art we evaluate a constellation of effect, of force, we do not have to verify ourselves anymore. Instead of the personal experience the work is enriched or even replaced by a sub- or hypertext that tells narratives about the effect that it would have resonated.

Whether you look at Vasari or the contemporary art discourse you face plenty of anecdotal narratives – referring to a perceiver who was moved to tears, who kneeled down, who became aggressive and so on.

With regard to contemporary art I am tempted to claim, that these anecdotes have become even more important. This has to do with a discrepancy. On the one hand the contemporary art scene, works as a self-referential system, in which the same people meet over and over again – an almost homogeneous group.

At the same time most of contemporary art, you may call it relational or not, has claims to deal with social

issues in the widest sense. Polemically one could say that we operate with scandals as the ultimate affirmation of our concept of art – that people get involved, that issues are addressed etc. However I would claim that we have to be very careful indeed not to exploit the beholder as a fictional construction that implies a stereotypical vision of the authentic other. In the wake of the glorification of “the Beholder” we could also claim, that we lost the artwork as an independent category – in the sense of resistance. We replaced the definition by describing a reaction it would trigger – but maybe both have become an illusive fiction.

Judgement:

With the development of art criticism, when the salon public in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century emerged as a powerful institution, the beholder, the public had to serve an important role in the judgement of art. Already with the abbe du Bos, in 1719, the significant quality of this figure is his direct, spontaneous reaction. In contrast to the “Connoisseur”, at the same time conceptualised especially in England, he does not necessarily have any artistic knowledge, technical or philosophical. Instead he shows an emotional, innocent reaction that is not spoiled by any additional information. Dubos justifies the position of the layman as judge by a very simple comparison: The client in a restaurant would clearly know whether he likes a soup or not - even if he does not know how to cook. We have to remember, by the way, that the artists protested strongly against the new status of criticism that rose from the new position of art criticism. It was an art criticism

written by the most literate people – their arguments were based on fictive profiles of gender, age and education, however.

The liberation of the perceiving act from a compulsory knowledge became relevant again especially for modern art. The subjective approach was strongly advocated by the intellectuals of the 1970ies, like Susan Sontag, who published in 1964 the seminal essay “against interpretation”.

In 1978, most significantly art historians like Max Imdahl started a project in which industrial workers discussed contemporary art. Although this experiment belongs to the most interesting and engaged art historical project to mediate art, we have to ask in how far the worker and his somehow “naive” gaze is instrumentalized to make a point about abstract art.

The idea of art being measured by its direct effect found its revival in the discourse pronounced by the new “supercollectors”, like Charles Saatchi. When the collector takes himself as the ultimate authority he can expect the artwork to convince him – without much intellectual effort.

What happens when we turn the question around and look at the way Institutions and Art History tried to figure out who would be the actual perceiver? Who is this beholder? Where is his freedom not to fulfil the expectations? How do we handle the idea of the right and the wrong understanding? How do we reflect upon the **conditions** of this figure?

In the practice of art history the institutions deal with “real people” – a complex interplay starts with the blending



of developing knowledge about the actual visitor on the one hand and the attempt to shape his behaviour according to concepts.

### **Profiling a Target Group - the empirical and economical perspective**

I have arrived at the opposite perspective and a parallel development: At the same time as the emergence of a general public developed a discourse on the deficiency of the beholder, his lack of knowledge etc. This identification of a gap between the ideal beholder and the institutional reality had serious consequences: The diagnosis of a “misunderstanding” coming out of a lack of communication turned out to be the basis for the most aggressive attacks on modern art. The actual visitor was supposed to be far away from the conceptual highbrow intentions. At the same time he became the object of the educational program. In a polemic way one could say, that the genesis of these programs tried, of course, to follow the old idea, that indeed the work of art as such would have a vital role, a function in society, by addressing it individual members in the sense of education. The art historical institutions, not only the museums, defined their role as **mediators** between the work of art and the public. Museums asked the artists to join the institutions in starting to lecture and to explain. The educational turn we like to speak of today reached a first climax in the 1950.

As a logical step, art history turned towards sociological

models and institutions to the logic of marketing. The inquiry of the notion of the public, the attempts to figure out – “who is it?” introduced the culture of questionnaires, surveys and statistics in the museum. The abstract reference to “the beholder” turned into the reality of specific visitors. The set of data promised an even more powerful potential. The visitors could be grouped according to specific data, sample characteristics, profiles they would share with a certain group. The implications of a division between race, income, education are crucial – we are talking about **conditions - not only for the appreciation of art, but following the logic – the conditions of art itself in society.**

Most interestingly some artists liked the idea of the questionnaire and the survey very much and appropriated it for their artistic strategies. As an example I refer to the famous project by Hans Haacke who belonged to the first artists in the 1970es who addressed the beholder with specific questions and made the outcome visible. In the context of the “information”-exhibition, in 1970, the artist asked the visitors of the Museum of Modern Art to take a position in a political debate, by installing transparent poll-boxes. The visitors should vote with yes or no to the following question: “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for you not voting for him in November?”“ Haacke established a link between the visit of this treasure house of Modernity and the political position of the Rockefeller Family as the main supporter of the Museum. For our context even more relevant was a

project of his for the documenta 5 in 1972. Haacke used a very bureaucratic questionnaire to be filled out by the visitors of the international art show “documenta 5”. The early computer compatible “Visitor’s Profile” recorded data about age, education, sex, profession, income and religion as well as questions of political opinion. The final question then relates to the tax payer’s money that make such an exhibition possible, an interplay between artistic production and public funding that today still plays a major role in the polemics against contemporary art –projects.

Haacke’s demonstration of an inquiry allowed for the social and political reality to be confronted with, and even introduced into a sphere, that originally had been defined as pure, detached from everyday life.

Aesthetic pleasure, the appreciation of formal qualities of a work of art, was addressed as not being independent from income and political attitude. The questions made evident, that the structure of the art system was linked to economy and political interests. In the seventies, members of the Art Workers Coalition demonstrated in front of the Museum of Modern Art against the Vietnam War.

The political level, the demand to face the fact, that the art world is not detached from class society, has become more and more replaced by economic models. The museum visitor is today addressed as customer, as member of a specific target group. The programming, the language of communication, the invitation to participate – the institution tries to diversify its rhetoric to offer art according to the conditions of certain profiles.

Art becomes a commodity that is shaped according to the desires of the respective group. At the Museum of Bern we have an evening opening for singles, in Münster we know the evening for elderly people, for kids, for single parents, for “customers with migration background”, and the Tate Britain offers, with a smile of course, the “hangover” tour as well as the “just split up tour”.

In 1994 the Russian artists Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid used, as Haacke did, a survey. However, the artists who came from a socialist background, hired a professional marketing company. The artists demonstrated what it would mean for the art, when the artists would follow the “most wanted” criterions. They asked for age and income and operated with aesthetic standard categories “abstract” versus figurative, motives, and colour schemes. The project “People’s Choice” confronted art with a system developed by market analysis, aimed to place a product that meets the expectations of a commodity. Of course, this new version of the history of taste, leads to the most horrible outcomes. The poll resulted in „America’s Most Wanted“ und „America’s Most Unwanted Painting“. Some years later, 1995, the „Dia Center for the Arts“ hosted the experimental extension to the World Wide Web. „Web’s Most Wanted and Web’s Least Wanted Painting“. When art is negotiated like this – it has lost its resistance. In a more polemic way, we could say, that the project showed equally clear, that by offering the beholder stereotyped categories, to affirm or to negate, we are shaping the beholder in his attitudes and judgments according to our preconceptions.

## **Liberating the Encounter with Art - a personal Vote**

From a philosophical position, the 20<sup>th</sup> century claimed, that the artwork would exist with and through its beholder only. In other words, the very notion of art became dependent on the beholder. The possibilities to act were limited: The resistant notion of art, the directions for the beholder in terms of instructions or formal language of the work of art, or exhibiting the beholder himself, using him as performer. We face the interesting fact that in this disposition the institution seems to imitate artistic strategies – strategies of participation. When you visit today the Tate Modern you get confused about the status of the questions and directives imposed on you. Is it an artistic project or is it the institution that asks you to express your opinion and to use the colourful flyers and gimmicks?

The Museum has become a strange place of authoritarian directives. The institutional framework is not protecting the beholder anymore, offering him freedom, a freedom of choice. Instead, we are constantly addressed – we have to do this, we are invited to do that. It is very significant, how the language of an institution reveals a pressure on the beholder. The rhetoric has changed, the older set of rules that stated what would not be allowed changed into imperatives to lay down, to participate, to move, to play or to scream.

The conditioned beholder, the directed beholder is turned into an image – his acting is recorded, reproduced, exposed. The institutions “choreograph” the contemporary beholder. Under the premise to offer a stage for the community,

the visitors become exposed as an artwork produced by the institution.

As evidence for this may serve the beholder, who follows instructions and “invitations” and in doing so becomes part of an image production, distributed by artists’ publications and museum advertisement alike. At this very point the economic pressure of the institutions as service agency acts in alliance with most fashionable artistic strategies.

I give you only one example: the German artist Karin Sander became very popular in her use of three-dimensional scanning and also printing technology. She is using these devices for a series of portraits. A climax of the series was reached when she realised the work “visitors on display” in two German museums this year:

981 miniature figures invited the public to look for their respective counterparts, their very own posing as an art work: As an individual and at the same time as an anonymous element in a collective.

We could go further: There is the tendency to over-determine the real beholder. He is not only pushed into predetermined roles. No, Art History claims more and more that the cooperation with **Neuro- Science** would offer a valid explanation for the question of how people look at art.

Some limitations of this project are linked to the limitations of the experimental setting. The beholder is isolated, there is no social communication that shapes our visit to an institution, the produced image of the eye-movement records the very few first seconds only etc.

Did we finally get hold of the real beholder? Honestly, I think that answering with “yes” would be the worst outcome of all – we would claim that we do not deal with concepts- thus forgetting that determinism is one of the worst ideologies in order to discuss art. And, above all, we would delegate our responsibility- our responsibility in taking part in an active conceptualization of the beholder, in granting him all the liberty to find his role in the growing diversification of possible modes of perception.

### **What is my conclusion? My vote?**

In writing art history or working in a museum, we have to be very aware of the recipient that we are not only describing but prescribing. We should be extremely careful not to exploit the very figure we are in need of. We have to grant the plurality of beholders all the freedom that art makes so important and vital, otherwise we are producing a circle of deadly affirmation and narcissistic self-mirroring.

