Art Criticism and Society

Panel 3

MODERATION
CATRIN LORCH

HARRY LEHMANN
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Art and Art Criticism in Times of Political Polarisation

Harry Lehmann

Harry Lehmann explained the political polarisation of contemporary society as a ›CIPP model‹, in which a realignment of the party system takes place. While our party-political space used to be permeated by an economic conflict axis on the one hand and a cultural conflict axis on the other, and this was reflected in an arrangement of parties in a social to liberal and left to right spectrum, a transformation has taken place in the mean-time. The new line of conflict between voters and parties now runs between the national and the global, the winners and losers of globalisation, who define and shape the econo-mic and cultural fields differently for themselves. The political space is thus viewed by two groups of voters from such different perspectives that there is hardly any common basis left for the view of reality and the core problems that are jointly regarded as relevant.

In this situation, art and art criticism would be faced more than ever with the choice of spreading *politically* substantive messages and taking sides or *pre-politically* reflecting the upheavals »in the medium of perception and in the medium of the texts and thus also help to generate a new, sustainable self-description of society«.

The Autonomy of Art is not the Autonomy of the Artist. Possibilities of Art Criticism in a Society of Singularities

Kolja Reichert

According to Kolja Reichert and Andreas Reckwitz, our social reality is full of ›singularities‹ – that is to say, unique events, works, persons, and identities – each of which signifies its ›own world‹ with its own criteria of evaluation, similar to a work of art, which is characteristically always open to interpretation, consequently also to appropriation and exegesis, appreciation, and devaluation. Politics today is also increasingly done aes-thetically and with the help of culture and its allocation to certain identities. Instead of breaking down this initial situation with its strengths of describing decidedly *artistic* forms of expression, art criticism is increasingly becoming ›attitude criticism‹. Works of art are either treated as equivalent to other (digitally) circulating images or as expressions of opinion by their creators. According to Reichert, in both cases, the works are thus ascribed a decisive (image or opinion) power, which in turn can only be broken if the aesthetic inter-pretation of a work is defended against its (purely) political exegesis. Instead of reducing a work solely to a private, singular, or public, representative character, it is important to re-late the specific manner of making an expression, the individual gesture, and even rhetoric within an artistic technique to the subjects and contexts of a work in order to concretise and open up the discursive debate.

Survey of the party landscape of political parties before the 2017 federal election in Germany
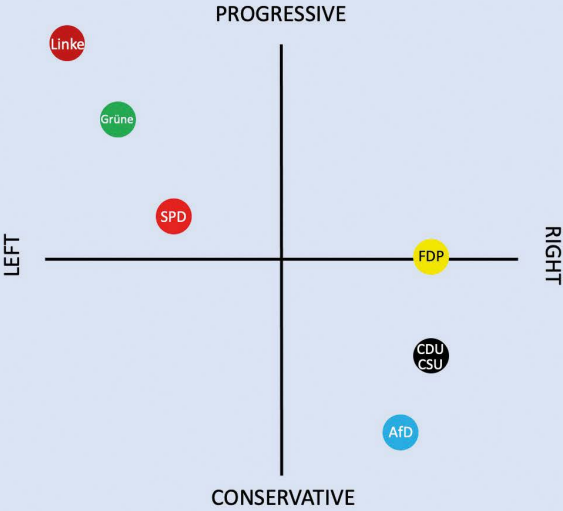with the *Federal Election Compass*

PROGRESSIVE

Linke

Grüne

SPD

LEFT   FDP   RIGHT

CDU
CSU

AfD

CONSERVATIVE

Harry Lehmann

Within just a few years, the situation in the arts has changed dramatically. We all know the examples, pictures are removed from museums, poems are painted over, political criteria supplant aesthetic ones, and the freedom of art is no longer defended from the left but from the right, as Wolfgang Ullrich recently criticised in *Die Zeit*.[2] The question I wish to discuss here is what implications this politicisation of the arts has for art criticism.

My lecture will be divided into two parts. First, I will examine where this politicisation of society actually comes from, and why it has such a strong impact on the arts. Accordingly, I will begin with a political part and present a *Model of Political Space* that can be used to analyse the political situation in Germany in 2019. In the second part, I will then discuss the role of art and art criticism on the basis of this model. In this lecture, I would like to convince you that, as a result of the political polarisation of society, art and art criticism today face two diametrically opposed options.

1   Model of Political Space

Here, you can see the party positions for the German Bundestag election in 2017 as determined by the *Federal Election Compass* (diag. 1).[3] It is a representation of the political space in which we find ourselves in recent years. This Federal Election Compass is based on a standard model of political science, which consists of a coordinate system with two conflict dimensions – one economic and one cultural. Correspondingly, in this representation, there is both the typical left/right distinction on the horizontal axis and a distinction between progressive and conservative cultural attitudes on the vertical axis.

My initial thesis, which I derive from political science and sociological studies, is that in Germany, as in the USA and Great Britain, a *political realignment* is now taking place – that is to say, a reorientation of the party system in the political space in which democratic elections take place. Such transformations occur at intervals of several decades and are based on fundamental changes in the political attitudes of large groups

1   This is a slightly revised text version of the lecture presented; I developed the model in more detail in: »Kunst und Kunstkritik in Zeiten politischer Polarisierung. Ein Kippmodell des politischen Raums«, in: *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, no. 853, June 2020, pp. 5-21; available online at: https://www.merkur-zeitschrift.de/2020/05/29/kunst-und-kunstkritik-in-zeiten-politischer-polarisierung-ein-kippmodell-des-politischen-raums/?fbclid=IwAR0YpwQdyCAP29GT4FgmrpXIpBAQtsb0bkIc6UcFrGDrOX5D67hVaOWjQZs [last vistit on 22 May 2021].

2   Wolfgang Ullrich, »Auf dunkler Scholle«, in: *Zeit online*, 15 May 2019, URL: https://www.zeit.de/2019/21/kunstfreiheit-linke-intellektuelle-globalisierung-rechte-vereinnahmung/komplettansicht; see also my reply to this: »Die dritte Option der Kunstfreiheit«, in: *Zeit online*, 28 May 2019, URL: https://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2019-05/rechte-kuenstler-kunstfreiheit-autonomie-afd-konservatismus-demokratie [both last vistit on 31 October 2020].

3   The graphic was adapted from: Niko Switek, Jan Philipp Thomeczek and André Krouwel, »Die Vermessung der Parteienlandschaft vor der Bundestagswahl 2017 mit dem Bundeswahlkompass«, in: *Regierungsforschung.de*, 5 September 2017, URL: https://regierungsforschung.de/die-vermessung-der-parteienlandschaft-vor-der-bundestagswahl-2017-mit-dem-bundeswahlkompass/ [last vistit on 31 October 2020].

of voters. They arise as a result of fundamental social transformation processes and are often accompanied by a generational change when a new generation of voters with different social experiences, expectations and values enters the political arena. The decisive indication that we are actually dealing with a realignment of the political system today is the successful emergence of right-wing populist parties.

The idea that I would like to present to you here is that the *political realignment* that we are experiencing today can be represented by a renaming of the two coordinate axes that span the two-dimensional political space. The new designations lead, in other words, to a reconfiguration of the political space. This results in two different coordinate systems, which can be used to represent the two political spaces between which we oscillate today. Strictly speaking, the effect of an ambiguous figure (Ger.: *Kippbildeffekt*) can be seen here, which is why I would like to speak of an ambiguous figure model (Ger.: *Kippmodell*). The two questions that first arise are: how was the political space configured in the last decades, and how has the meaning of these two coordinate axes changed in the meantime?

Since the 1970s, the political system in liberal democracies has been faced with the task of resolving or at least defusing two basic conflicts – one economic and one cultural. The *economic conflict* consisted in the fact that liberal democracies are based on a market economy that is, on the one hand, capable of generating wealth but, on the other

for overcoming morality and tradition

liberal

axis

left   economic   axis   **right**

Redistribution   Free market
Regulation   Deregulation
Welfare state   cultural   Private health care
Workers' rights   Employer interests
Protectionism   Free trade

conservative

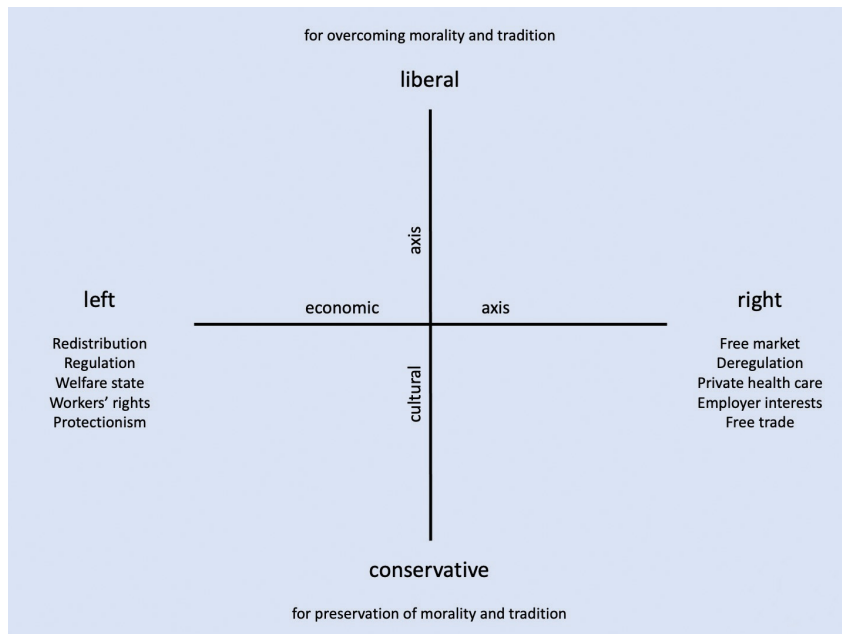for preservation of morality and tradition

Diagramme 2

hand, distributes this very unevenly. This distribution conflict was represented in the political system by both left-wing and right-wing parties. The *cultural conflict*, in turn, unfolded after 1968 between those who had an interest in preserving tradition and morality and those who wanted to override and overcome traditional ways of life and traditional moral concepts. Democratic elections ensured that a majority in society could live with and accept both the given economic conditions and cultural changes. The political system of liberal democracies has thus had to solve a double optimisation problem over the last half century, between a social and liberal economic policy and a conservative and liberal cultural policy.

This is how the political space has been configured thus far (diag. 2). For more than ten years, however, political scientists have suspected that the political space in which we live is undergoing a serious and lasting transformation. Hanspeter Kriesi formulated the decisive thesis as early as 2006 when he wrote that a new structural conflict is igniting between globalisation winners and losers.[4] The questions that arise in this context are then: how do the axes of the political space change under these conditions? And what should they be called when first the voters and later the political parties begin to orientate themselves along this new line of conflict?
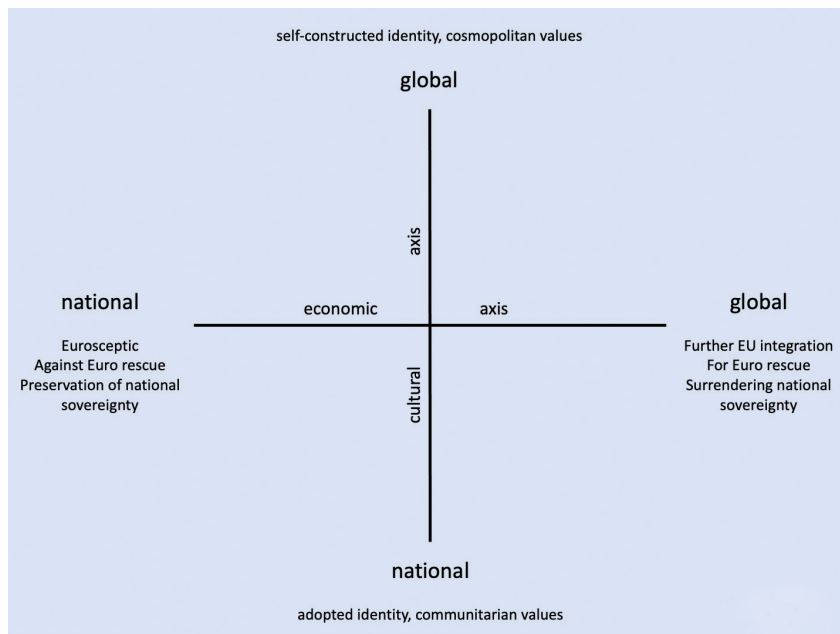

self-constructed identity, cosmopolitan values

global

axis

national   economic   axis   **global**

Eurosceptic
Against Euro rescue
Preservation of national
sovereignty

cultural

Further EU integration
For Euro rescue
Surrendering national
sovereignty

national

adopted identity, communitarian values

Diagramme 3

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4   Cf.: Hanspeter Kriesi, »The Populist Challenge«, in: *West European Politics*, no. 37/2, 2014, pp. 361–78.

The left/right difference on the former economic axis is transformed by preferences for a national versus a globally oriented economic and foreign policy, of which the slogan ›America First‹ exemplarily marks one side of this newly established political distinction. National economies are increasingly determined by transnational factors – that is to say, by free trade agreements, labour migration, or a European financial policy. Due to globalisation, central economic issues are less and less decided at home. For this reason, in the European political context, a position that is critical of the euro and of Europe is establishing itself on one side of the economic axis, while on the other side a position that stands for a deepening of European integration, for a rescuing of the euro, and for free trade, is being consolidated.

The new cultural conflict on the vertical axis is no longer an intercultural conflict – that is to say, it no longer takes place between progressive and conservative attitudes in one and the same culture. Instead, it is now a globalisation-induced identity conflict between those who benefit from the new work and life opportunities in a globalised world, and those who remain rooted in a national culture and whose living conditions are deteriorating as a result of globalisation. The number one conflict topic where the spirits of the cosmopolitan and regionally-rooted, communitarian milieus differ most is that of migration (diag. 3).
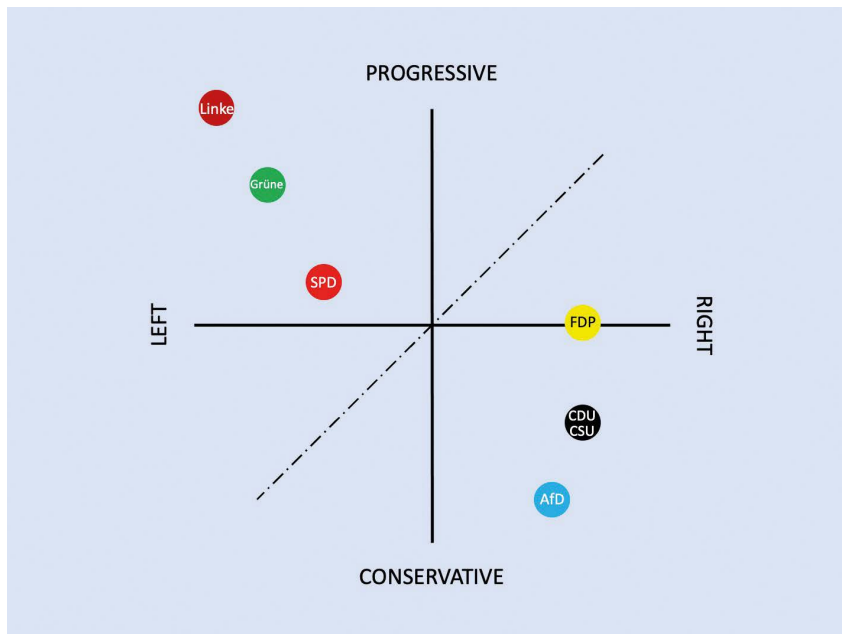

Diagramme 4

When the coordinate system changes in this way, a realignment of the political system occurs, as shown in diagramme 5. This graph is not calculated like the party positions in the Federal Election Compass (diag. 4), but is rather my own graphic projection of the party positions, based on the premise that this new line of conflict between the winners and losers of globalisation has developed in liberal democracies. Parties cannot define this line of conflict themselves but are forced by voter migration to successively realign their programs and personnel to it. In concrete terms, this means that, under these conditions, first of all the Linke, the SPD, the CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the FDP, all find themselves in the same quadrant in the upper right-hand corner, since they all stand equally for a transnational economic policy and for a transnational identity concept due to their pro-European preferences. The AfD is the only party that combines a national identity policy with a nationally orientated economic policy and strives to implement this program as a protest party with populist means.

Times of *political realignment* are extremely unstable and ambivalent for all parties involved, because one is in a transitional phase where two coordinate systems compete with each other, so that there are permanent ambiguous images in the minds of voters, party officials and political observers. This can be illustrated by switching back and forth between the two representations of political space (diags. 4 and 5). The inserted dotted
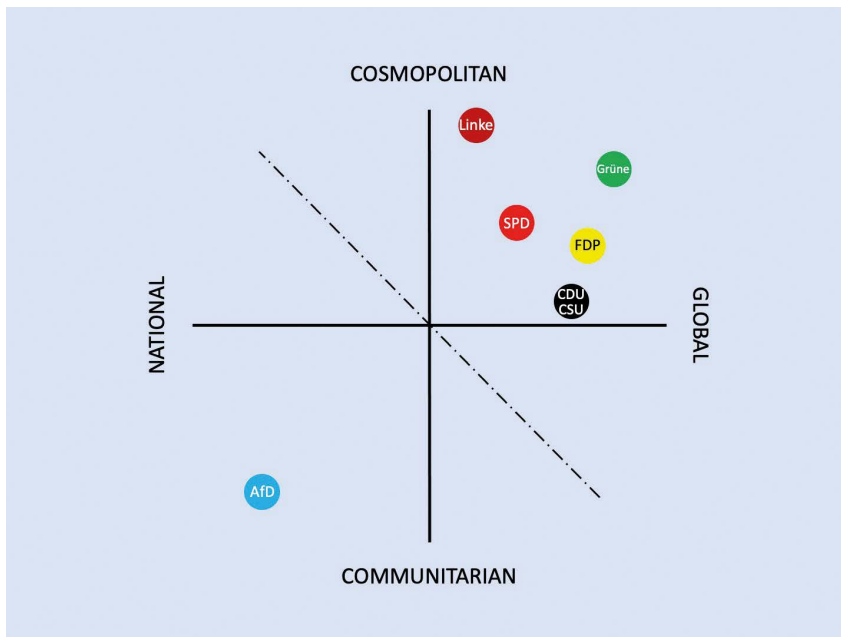

Diagramme 5

line of conflict, according to which the party system aligns itself binarily, rotates ninety degrees, and the parties no longer group themselves in the first and third quadrants but are now split between the second and fourth quadrants. In phases of realignment, the political space seems to be present in both versions of the discourse at the same time, switching from one to the other.

Political realignment brings forth entirely new political alliances. The Linke and the CDU are now on the same side of the line of conflict, while the Grüne and the AfD become antipodes, which also reach new voter strata due to the new conflict issues. Accordingly, the former major parties – SPD and CDU – are losing votes to these two parties. Moreover, the distinction between left and right, which was previously defined primarily along the economic axis, no longer functions; instead, the cultural axis is now becoming the primary axis of political debate. We are now dealing first and foremost with two contrary concepts of identity.

2 Art and Art Criticism in *Political Realignment*

So much for the first part, in which I outlined the CIPP model of political space. In relation to this model, I would like to, and can now discuss the question of what role art and art criticism can play in times of such a reorientation of politics. You are all familiar with the Böckenförde dilemma, according to which the liberal secularised state lives from preconditions which it cannot itself guarantee. If one modernises this dilemma somewhat and reformulates it in terms of system theory, then one could say that the political system in liberal democracies lives from self-descriptions of society that politics cannot produce itself. The political system in liberal democracies presupposes a minimum consensus on what the central political problems and conflicts in society are. It is only in relation to this social consensus that complementary political positions and parties can develop and compete with one another. The emphasis here is on *complementary*, because the political positions available for election must mutually complement each other and be recognised as legitimate positions.

Before the current realignment, that is to say before Donald Trump and Brexit (as well as, to a certain extent, the regional elections in East Germany in the fall of 2019), the basic political conflicts were clearly defined. The issue was a balanced relationship between free and regulated markets and an equilibrium between conservative and liberal values in Western democracies. Within this self-description, the political system operated in normal mode. Society was not polarised, and national populist positions such as those advocated by the AfD could be considered an anomaly.

If a *political realignment* takes place then precisely this self-image of politics is lost. There is no longer a consensus on what the central political conflict is that is up for election, and the political space is perceived by different groups of voters from two very different perspectives. As a result, political ideologies simultaneously construct the perception of what is regarded as social reality. The strong social polarisation during times of realignment occurs primarily because the conflicting political ideologies are no longer linked by an overarching social narrative. They are, so to speak, no longer embedded in a consensus of world views, and accordingly can no longer relativise each other. This loss of

a shared description of reality brings with it the strong political polarisation in which political opponents in democratic disputes increasingly perceive themselves in the friend/foe schema outlined by Carl Schmitt. The friend/foe schema is a typical indication that a society is in a phase of political reconfiguration, where the political crisis is ultimately also a crisis of worldview.

In such exceptional situations art and art criticism play a special role, because they can reflect the political upheaval in the works and in the texts about the works and thus also help to generate a new, sustainable self-description of society. Ultimately, art is capable of seeing the world ›as it is‹ and thus to literally ›see through‹ ideologies. Art does not do this however, in an abstract way like the social or political sciences, but rather carries out this reflection in many different fictional experiential situations. This is the provocation of art, namely – even in the politically extremely polarised times of realignment – to observe society beyond left-wing and right-wing world views.

Such art does not fulfil a political function, but rather a pre-political one. »Prepolitical« does not simply mean »unpolitical« or »apolitical«, because such a pre-political art can by all means address political issues, whereby it then reflects the preconditions of the political in the sense of Böckenförde. Such ›pre-political art‹ thus does not make a direct contribution to the political debate, but rather questions the conditions of the possibility of prevailing political attitudes and discourses.

Today, as mentioned at the beginning, a completely different development can be observed, namely towards an art that itself strives to become directly politically effective and that one would most likely associate with the label of ›political art‹. In times of strong political polarisation, it might be especially important to use a term that is as discriminating as possible. My suggestion is that one can speak of *political art* in a strict terminological sense precisely when art not only articulates a political conflict but also takes sides in that conflict.

The presence of this kind of political art, which has been observable for several years now, is probably unique in liberal democracies, which up to now have been guided by an ideal of autonomous art. I think there are two important reasons for the current politicisation of the arts. First, the artists themselves have become the avant-garde of a cosmopolitan way of life: they have become nomads in the global village and exemplify what it means to form a cosmopolitan identity detached from traditional ways of life.

Second, in recent years, artists have also reconciled themselves with the ideals of neoliberalism. We live more and more in a knowledge-based society, where creativity, border crossing, and openness have become central values of the working world and where the image of the artist merges with that of the entrepreneur. The *political realignment* of today thus catapults artists from their original outsider position into the position of globalisation winners, making it very difficult to be critical of society or capitalism – in the end, one moves in the same quadrant as the CDU and the FDP. With its concept of national identity, the AfD is a natural enemy under these conditions. It is this repositioning of artists as a social group that allows the political polarisation of society to spill over so strongly to the art scenes.

Art criticism today has two options, on the one hand it can write about political art, which, however, is not dependent on criticism. If the call to get involved is part of the essence of political art, then it cannot be interpreted. Criticism can at most bring the clear political message into text form and spread it further. On the other hand, art criticism can deal with art that operates in the realm of the pre-political, which reflects the conditions of possibility of political discourse and thus also makes its contribution to creating a new, problem-orientated self-description of society. Art criticism then makes its own genuine contribution to reforming the existing political space, and this art is also dependent on strong interpretations of criticism.

One example of this would be Ruben Östlund's film *The Square* (2017), which is particularly revealing for art criticism because its protagonist, Christian, is responsible for running a large museum of contemporary art. Here, fundamental questions of the grammar of our world view are negotiated, especially the relationship between openness and unity, between setting and crossing boundaries. Openness, as is repeatedly evident in this film, is not simply a positive value, as Christian and the social milieu from which he comes think in the spirit of the avant-garde; and the ideal of crossing borders has also apparently reached its limits. The film demonstrates this in relation to both art and life (of this museum director). I do not have the time at this point to go into this very enigmatic film in more detail, but you can find a lecture on my YouTube channel titled *The Politicisation of Art*, in which I analyse and interpret the individual episodes of *The Square* in detail.[5]

For art criticism, the times of *political realignment* – and here I come to an optimistic conclusion – are actually very exciting times, because in these moments, art criticism, with its texts on art, simultaneously contributes to the new self-description of society in a state of emergence.

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow

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5   I don't have the time here to go into more detail about this very profound film, but you can find a lecture on my YouTube channel entitled *Die Politisierung der Kunst*, in which I analyse and interpret the individual episodes of The Square in detail; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6d2w8xp1NTA&t=864s [last vistit on 10 May 2021].

THE AUTONOMY OF ART IS NOT THE AUTONOMY OF THE ARTIST. POSSIBILITIES OF ART CRITICISM IN A SOCIETY OF SINGULARITIES

Kolja Reichert

With my lecture, I would like to make a plea for art criticism. This may sound somewhat redundant at a conference of art critics, but it seems to me that today it is crucial to rediscover the political power of precise observation and differentiation, at a time when, while we are still arguing about how politically effective which work of art is, politics and art have long since swapped positions.

Art criticism has a tendency to become a critique of attitudes and a distribution of speaker positions, who may say and show what and how? And politics, at least in the new populist logic as propagated by Steve Bannon, is made with culture; with simple offers of identity; with constructed and asserted identities purportedly derived from the past and natural prerogatives derived from these, but above all, and as a result of this, in offering a simple form in which followers and voters can experience themselves as authentic, vital, and self-effective.

Why is this so? Where does this identity boom come from?

On the one hand, of course, through an infrastructural revolution, through smartphones and social media. Everyone is now a potential cultural producer and critic and has the chance to participate in the struggle for cultural interpretative sovereignty. This means that he or she is ultimately in competition not only with all the others, but also with the institutions that have thus far maintained and administered cultural hegemony, such as newspapers, television stations, theatres, and museums. Their power can no longer be taken for granted; it is constantly being challenged. This explains part of the moral furore that museums and artists have been experiencing the past three years – if you consider Hannah Black's open letter against Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* at the Whitney Biennial in March 2017 as the beginning of a new quality of iconoclastic controversy.

There is, however, also a more far-reaching explanation that is directly related to this, and this was delivered by the Berlin-based sociologist Andreas Reckwitz in his book *Society of Singularities*. There, he describes how, in what he calls »late modernity«, the logic of the general, as it determined modernism with its industrial society, is increasingly overlaid by a logic of the particular, the unique, the non-copiable, the non-exchangeable; he calls this singularity.

Singularities can be: famous people (for example, Michael Jackson or Kim Kardashian); atmospherically charged places such as Paris, San Francisco, or China; subcultures, for example the mod culture, which cannot be simply compared with the rocker culture under the register ›subculture‹ because both produce their own complex role models and values. Then there are novels, festivals, rituals, events; the iPhone; and, of course, works of art. Works of art are the paradigm for singularisations.

Singularities are incommensurable; there is no common measure which could mediate between them. Singularities are created socially. Everything can become a singularity. And every singularity can also be de-singularised or negatively singularised, as has been tried with Kevin Spacey, Michael Jackson, Placido Domingo, and Dana Schutz.

Reckwitz's model of singularities can be applied to the recent culture wars. Indeed, these can be described as wars for valorisation. Scandals play the role of negative celebrations. We find ourselves in an economy of aggressive cultural revaluation and devaluation, in which there is a struggle for positions within the cultural space, as well as for the power of valorisation in general, and thus for cultural hegemony. If it is true that these cultural wars are about singularisations, then they take place within a space without fixed coordinates. The old institutions maintain their power, but it is no longer given to them as a matter of course.

There are no criteria for singularities. Every singularity is its own world and insists on its own laws. This means that our social reality is interspersed with all kinds of unique things, full of their own complexity, which are as open to analysis, appropriation and interpretation, selection, revaluation and devaluation as works of art. At the same time, it can be observed that works of art are treated less and less like works of art. Instead, they are treated like other digitally circulating images – digital reproduction on the screen is the primary form in which works of art today assert their ›pictorial power‹.[1] It was also a digital reproduction in the case of the painting *Thérèse Dreaming* by Balthus, against which, in 2017, a petition was circulated by the art historian Mia Merill. When I stand in front of the painting, the petition is not at all plausible to me. The painting cannot be reduced to a paedophile depiction, whereas the stamp-sized reproduction can. The work of art is thus treated like any other picture, but a bit more aggressively. Because it actually exists. It exists only once, it has its fixed place, and – this has always been the threat posed by the work of art – it lays claim to still existing in a hundred years' time. What will happen to our children if we do not contain its power?

But works of art are also increasingly being treated as expressions of opinion. When Axel Krause was excluded from the annual Leipzig exhibition, no one analysed his art. The debate revolved solely around the question of whether an artist should be excluded because of his political views. In her commentary, Catrin Lorch actually rejected the responsibility for viewing pictures: »Must one now take the trouble and – just because the painter is pushing right-wing theses – have a go at a rather trivial work with all the power of interpretation? [...] Krause's somewhat lame works are not really suitable for debate, have not been for decades.«[2] Lorch denies Krause the honour of art criticism. The analytical view. But at the same time, perhaps precisely because of this, Krause's political market value rises, simply on the level of image power. Through debate, his pictures have acquired a cultural market value. Although they do not represent much more than childish dreams of power of disposal over the history of European painting. They adorned, for example, an entire issue of the right-wing intellectual magazine *Tumult*, in which, in an essay, Krause also ruminated on the clichés of the solitary artist-hermit committed solely to art.

At this point, one can no longer speak only of political sentiment. It is precisely the consolidation of identification with a political camp that further enhances the cultural

1   cp. David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton, 2012

2   Catrin Lorch, »Schuld sind naive Kuratoren«, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung online*, 11.06.2019, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/leipzig-afd-kuenstler-ausstellung-axel-krause-1.4481118 (07.11.2020).

value of Axel Krause's art. But when Ana Teixera Pinto, as in her lecture yesterday, shows and critically analyses an exhibition view of works by Mathieu Malouf, she can actually lower Malouf's pictorial power. It all depends on the constellation in which the pictures are shown. They are not simply what they are.

No one has made a detailed analysis of Banksy's *Love Is in the Bin*. And what happens then? Then it hangs next to Rembrandt in the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. It is our task as art critics to strengthen the faith of the art historians at the Staatsgalerie in the value of their own work so that they do not succumb to the logic of the spectacle that can be measured solely in numbers.

In an essay published this spring in *Die Zeit*, Wolfgang Ullrich cautiously discussed Neo Rauch and his art in the context of right-wing thinking. A few weeks later, also in *Die Zeit*, Neo Rauch responded with the picture *Der Anbräuner* (The Brown-Maker), in which a painter releases his excrement into a pot and intercepts it with a brush to complete with the brown mass a crudely executed figure, under which is written in large letters: *W.U.* Expressionist jags hang down from the ceiling; behind the bare buttocks, the *TAZ* lies on a pile of newspapers, and a cheeky Adolf Hitler peeks in the window behind a shadow figure which functions as an eerie void. Title: *Der Anbräuner*.

In its anality, the picture is beyond comprehension. It seems as if the artist lacked the composure to sort out his material in peace. It is impossible to decide whether it is the painter who is sitting on the pot and painting the critic, or whether it is the painter on the canvas, who in turn cannot imagine the critic in any other way than as a painter, that is to say as a revenant of himself.

Die Zeit described *Der Anbräuner* [3] as a caricature, but in fact it is an oil painting of an opulent format, which Rauch submitted that summer to an annual charity auction in Leipzig to benefit a children's hospice. There, the real estate entrepreneur Christoph Gröne was disappointed that he could not find any more bidders at 550,000 Euros and added 200,000 Euros. He then explained that the picture would hang in the foyer of a yet to be founded ›Verein für gesunden Menschenverstand‹ (Association for Common Sense), which intends to provide ›objective data‹ on topics such as CO2 and migration. [4]

The real estate entrepreneur thus enhanced the value of this painting by purchasing it. This is a cultural act that has become possible at auctions over the last fifteen years, since these have been transformed from discreet salons into arenas of global attention. The real estate entrepreneur makes himself an advocate of artistic freedom through the power of his financial capital. He owns the singular *Anbräuner* by the singular Neo Rauch. And he even has common sense on his side and an overview of the objective facts. This is a highly political act, albeit with the means of culture. It is political as a result of its populist promise; the facts will soon be on the table, and they are culturally legitimised by a painter who is on the right side, without it becoming clear who is actually standing here on which side of what. Ullrich's analytical view no longer plays a role in the result. The discussion on

3   https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/neo-rauch-gemaelde-der-anbraeuner-fuer-750-000-euro-versteigert-a-1279415.html (Last 31 March 2021)

4   See: Kolja Reichert, »Kunst, Markt, Geld«, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 27 September 2020, p. 36.

art is smeared in the shit of the privately personal. But this is the object of speculation for a radically public manoeuvre. It is not about the intrinsic logic of the image, not about what it is, but about speculations on its political meaning. Did Wolfgang Ullrich's criticism contribute to the creation of this political meaning in the first place? I believe so.

What do we do with the fact that Neo Rauch and the real estate entrepreneur are now the advocates of artistic freedom? While in art and art criticism, artistic freedom is currently constantly being weighed up against the concerns of subjects and groups who are allegedly victims of the exercising of this artistic freedom, or who have never benefited from the blessings of artistic freedom? It is perhaps crucial to uphold that which distinguishes artistic endeavour from the efforts of politicians, activists, and philosophers, but it is rather the opposite that happens. The work of art is reduced on the one hand to its private character – here is this unique person or social group, and we need to hear his or her story, this was done at the last *documenta*. And on the other hand, the work is reduced to its public character – who says what where and when?

However, what is decisive about the work of art, namely the difference it introduces, thwarts both the private and the public. It is up to art criticism to work out its inherent logic, to introduce the difference. To support autonomy does not mean simply to invoke artistic freedom. It means sharpening one's sense of what is at stake in the work of art, which cannot be reduced to something already known, an existing identity. As far as works of art are concerned, we indeed need as many singularities as possible. If, on the other hand, art criticism is limited to the allocation of speaker positions, then it gives up on art. Art then becomes stale, meaningless, and empty. It capitulates then to the general cliché that art is about allowing anyone to express what he or she thinks. Of course, this must be possible, and one must fight to maintain this possibility, but if art criticism exhausts itself in this, it loses its meaning.

We must repeatedly demonstrate why it is worth defending one work of art against another, and the aesthetic exegesis of the work of art against its political one.

The provocation of the painting *Open Casket* by Dana Schutz may not have been primarily that, as a *white* artist, Schutz dared to paint a picture of an icon of the Black Civil Rights movement, but rather in how she did it, namely, as a celebration of the power of painting to control its means and its responsibilities. Schutz buried the original gesture of Emmett Till's mother – the gesture to publicly exhibit the massacre of her son by racists. She buried this gesture under a strange blob of paint that bulged out of the picture surface.

Hannah Black's political argument that Dana Schutz cannot do this because she is *white* and because she is rich must be rejected, but her rejection of the image must be made useful. It helps to give meaning to art and debate, to give it a meaning in the first place, for it helps to understand the meaning of each individual painterly decision in interaction with its subject. It is about this specific task, about the removal of political abstractions, the path to the concrete, the concrete relationship between artistic material and people.

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow

Catrin Lorch

Harry Lehmann, your lecture was about the fact that art has become so politicised that we actually negotiate politics when we talk about art. Or, that it is suddenly possible to talk about art and, in doing so, to talk about politics; whereas Kolja Reichert's position, in contrast, is that singularity is also anchored in artworks or an entire oeuvre. But where the discussions themselves were concerned, it quickly became clear that we are talking very much about people. The debates about Michael Jackson and Placido Domingo, for example, are not about the content of their works, but about personal transgressions. Here, we are actually always talking about the singularity of an artist. And now I see a friction between the two positions and would like to ask how one can perhaps build a bridge between them?

Kolja Reichert

Yes, that's true, people are always talking about names and authors. Personalisation is the dominant form. Society is no longer a productive frame of reference, so to speak. Today, everything is dealt with via profiles, faces, and people. But no one stops us from zooming out and putting the people in context with what is happening. A criticism like Hannah Black's of Dana Schutz, that the painting *Open Casket* is inadmissible because Dana Schutz is *white* and rich and has no right to use an icon of the Black civil rights movement – such a politicised argument must of course be rejected. But you cannot simply reject it by proclaiming ›artistic freedom!‹, you have to look at how Dana Schutz made this picture, that she recreated the massacre of the fourteen-year-old boy by racists in the 1950s almost sculpturally with paint in a colourful self-celebration of painting, where, in the place of the massacred face, the paint is then once again virtuously applied as a swelling into the space. Klaus Speidel was the first to explain in classical, level-headed, calm art criticism, what was wrong with this painterly gesture. And then, suddenly, the person is only a node in the discussion.

Harry Lehmann

My concern was to show that the politicisation of art is dependent on the social transformation processes that lie behind it. It is therefore also a plaything of these transformation processes. That was the first point. And the second was that, in the constitution of the works and of art, one can still make a difference, whether art, like such political art, is directly involved in the political debate or whether these works are about something that underlies the processes of political transformation. I wanted to make this difference visible.

Catrin Lorch

But does that work? After all, you also demanded that a more discriminating term be introduced.

Harry Lehmann

Of political art, yes.

Catrin Lorch

Which sounds like it was something new. But if I look back, for example, to the founding of the Green party by Joseph Beuys, how does that differ from what happens today when artists actively found NGOs and are active in them with or as part of their art? Take Jonas Staal, for example, who is designing a parliament building for the Kurdish autonomous government in Rojava.

Harry Lehmann

In my opinion, art now operates in a completely different mode. In the twentieth century, art history could be written according to an inherent logic, a logic of material progress and the dissolution of the boundaries of the concept of art. This resulted in a parallel world: art had its own logic and was judged according to this, and beyond that one could still be politically active, as Beuys was. And whoever wanted to, could then make the connection. And those who didn't want to do so simply accepted Beuys as an important milestone in art history. Things are different today, the progress of materials, the dissolution of the boundaries of the concept of art, and all the inner-aesthetic criteria in general have been exhausted; in a certain sense, art has become postmodern. Then you need new criteria for innovation, which is no longer produced through aesthetics, through aesthetic material, but rather through new aesthetic contents. And there is now the alternative – and here the option is hands-on, so to speak – that one also becomes directly involved in politics, and there is no longer any misunderstanding. Then the works come across directly with their political statement, without one being able to judge them differently from an art-historical point of view.

Catrin Lorch

What would be an example of such art?

Harry Lehmann

The Centre for Political Beauty does something like this.

Kolja Reichert

I see a fundamental difference between us. What you are describing sounds to me like another developmental story or finalism: art has exhausted its possibilities of creating difference or concreteness or its own logic. Now it must speak the language that everyone understands. That makes my hair stand on end.

Harry Lehmann

No, that was not the point. It is not the language everyone understands that has changed, but the criterion of innovation. In the twentieth century, innovation was created through new aesthetic material, through the dissolution of the boundaries of the concept of art. That was an art-immanent logic. When this is exhausted, there is still the possibility that art refers time and again to the social context in new ways. And this can, of course, be made more or less complex and more or less clear and more or less politically engaged.

Kolja Reichert

But this is something that is achieved, as in the past, through the choice of forms and materials. I have always experienced innovations. For example, this permeable, immaterial lightness with which Arthur Jafa stages his things, which insist on identity and thus create a new friction, which frame Black identity in a completely different way and above all encircle *white* identity in a highly exciting way and define it from the outside. That's where a kind of innovation takes place. And that's where it all comes down to how the things are edited and what he appropriates. But, of course, the subject is then identity. In this respect, I would meet you halfway by saying that innovation is produced through the object. But the formal means are already decisive. Like Nicole Eisenman, for example, who works in a similar way to Neo Rauch, but the images are so open. This is not only because, in her paintings, women love each other, but also because the choice of colour is incredible. The precision in the materials, this bright, almost sober inclusion of, for example, a desktop background of a computer. How the things are interconnected there. And it may be that the unique selling proposition that an intrinsic logic is asserted in art is lost; and today, intrinsic logic is really being created everywhere. But art is, I think, the place where this can become concrete, and art criticism is the place where this concreteness can be articulated, where, basically, the present can be regained by agreeing on what is really there. You described that earlier.

Catrin Lorch

What I missed in both lectures was that perhaps not only the art discussion has changed, but that the fact that the person of the artist has become more important is also intertwined with the emergence of the new media. As a result of which the authority of art criticism suddenly finds itself in a completely different position to a blog that posts Michael Jackson and has an opinion about it. To what extent does this not perhaps stir things up, both in the discussion about Axel Krause and about why art might suddenly take up political positions much more strongly or much more actively than before?

Harry Lehmann

That is of course true, the shift in media is changing the art world. What is decisive is that it democratises the art world and also leads to a strong de-institutionalisation of, among other things, art criticism, because many more people can talk about art directly. This creates a new competitive situation, that's true. Perhaps one could already say: if there had not been a digital revolution there would not be such a politicisation of art.

Kolja Reichert

Yes, I think so too. The relationship between concrete place and addressee has become so frenetic, and perhaps this explains why arguments are always so inquisitorial, so martial. After all, the argument about a mural in a school in Chicago could potentially take place anywhere in the world. And it affects everyone, so the stakes are always absolute in advance and are suddenly in conflict with each other. But if you agree that the crucial thing is to defend good works of art against bad works of art, then you get back a little bit of freedom, which in this frenetic logic allows you to stand still and find a *common*

ground. The fact that one gets out of these political oppositions, which in their logic of contradiction – right-wing artist, left-wing artist, right-wing artist – simply increases the whole thing immeasurably. This can only be achieved by a subjective setting, and this can happen on a blog just as easily as it does in a newspaper. In any case, the written word finds itself in a certain competition. Today, image power is stronger than the argument. But I think that even if fewer people read long texts to the end than in the past, the joy and clarity and sovereignty that one creates when writing is very great. And the power that you can usurp is also great enough to completely break through financially legitimised positions such as Banksy or Neo Rauch.

Catrin Lorch

Whereby I would also like to doubt that there are actually fewer readers of long texts than before. It's just that those who prefer to read short texts have suddenly become more visible. We have here an audience full of art critics who are equally involved in precisely these issues. Do we have a microphone for the audience?

Thomas Sterna

I am not a critic, but rather an artist. I recently had an argument on Facebook with a friend who said that Neo Rauch's *Der Anbräuner* is a problematic painting, but it is well painted. But because it's actually only posted on Instagram or Facebook, I can't really tell if it's a good painting or not. I became preoccupied with this issue, namely to what extent problematic content can be well painted.

Kolja Reichert

I am sure that is possible, and *Der Anbräuner* is, of course, a particularly apt case for discussing what is meant by ›well painted‹. On the level of the combination of motifs, I find it poorly painted. Because it is simply chuck full of polemics. Nothing is thought through to the end. What is the relationship, for example, between Adolf Hitler, who looks in so boldly at the window, and the painter or the figure? What does this pile of newspapers behind the painting critic stand for, with the leftist daily newspaper *taz* on top? It seems to me to be no more than a collection of material. When it comes down to that, what is the brushstroke like? I only saw the reproduction, but I was appalled at how sloppily I found it painted. How the unwillingness to give the opponent's face a form is shown by this strange, pocked, dissolving facial skin. So, for me, nothing really fits together in this painting.

Harry Lehmann

I would imagine that that is exactly what is intended. After all, it was not at all intended to be part of a cycle of works. It was a highly political, polemical response, because Neo Rauch obviously felt very offended that he was now being associated with right-wing politics. That's why I think that, from the beginning, this was not intended as a painting that would stand up to the highest standards of art criticism. It was a political act.

Catrin Lorch

Is it conceivable that artists say: ›I paint this picture this way because I'm in a bad mood, and I paint that other picture for my oeuvre‹?

Harry Lehmann

Sure, why not? It is, of course, quite obvious from the context.

Thomas Kuhn

I wonder if we can broaden the discussion about the singularity of the work of art, or the politicisation of art by reintroducing an older distinction that has to do with two very different, competing definitions of culture. On the one hand, there is an anthropological understanding of culture, in which culture is everything that a group of people do: their cuisine, their clothing, their gestures, their language. And on the other hand, there is the description of culture by the Enlightenment. It even goes back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, where culture means the transcendence of the particularity of a group of people and their forms of expression. So one way of understanding the present moment might be to think about the critic as someone who has to articulate an attitude in his own understanding of the role of culture: what part of culture does a critic explain? To play the devil's advocate for a moment, it might be perfectly legitimate for me as an individual to claim that the culture I want consists only of the works that are the expression of my people, my group, or my singularity.

Kolja Reichert

I am very glad to hear you say that, because you point to the central weakness of my contribution. I was aware of this, and I think it is really central to analyse the relationship between these two notions of culture – the more cultural-scientific view and the enlightenment understanding of an autonomous work that transcends identity, this is a *fait social*, as Adorno calls it.

But it is really difficult, I think. It is more difficult to do this than it was ten years ago and certainly more difficult than it was fifty years ago. Because we see how much art becomes ›tokens‹ in these identity struggles. So again, to come back to the example of Arthur Jafa – I think his work is amazing and fantastic – it is fast, it is poignant, it is sharp, it is good autonomous art. But one of the reasons is the choice of his material – namely the politics of identity. In a way, he transcends this identity politics. But where is his work located between these two notions of culture? I think that is really difficult to say. This is a point I would like to continue working on.

Harry Lehmann

I would like to add that, in such phases of political re-alignment art criticism itself must also conduct a kind of self-reflection. It has to make sure: what are the criteria by which art is judged today? How has the social system of art changed? These are all meta-reflections that are part of the process of getting back into calmer waters. Because many disputes are also empty arguments. They have nothing to do with art. They do not open up the works. It is pure polemics, they are political positionings. It is understandable why

this happens, but it is precisely in this situation that a meta-discussion is needed: What are the criteria, what has changed, where do you actually stand within art history? I think these questions are important.

Liam Kelly

Harry Lehmann mentioned today that political art takes a certain side. And in fact, yesterday, Oliver Marchart did indeed associate political art with propaganda. Over the years I have been interested in writing about artists who are socially and politically active, and working with them curatorially. In their works, which are usually multi-layered, these artists agitate and provoke and ask questions about political issues, for example. But they rarely offer solutions to a problem. They leave it up to the viewers or participants to bring their own cultural and educational ›luggage‹. And they believe strongly in the principle that art does not fill a given space. That art finds its own space. And I don't think that the critical distinctions between ›good‹ and ›bad‹ will return, like the word ›beauty‹.

Harry Lehmann

I think that what you describe is exactly right. Of course, political issues can be used to articulate predetermined breaking points. I just think that art becomes uninteresting and redundant at the moment when it clearly positions itself politically. I think it is important to make a distinction, and that is why I have introduced this clear-cut concept of political art. It articulates a political conflict, and beyond that, it positions itself clearly; it takes sides. Then the ambivalence you speak of is no longer there. But you can articulate exactly the same issues in art by pointing out the ambivalence in relation to these political positions and standpoints. And here, art can make its own contribution.

Catrin Lorch

I think it would help us if we were to talk very specifically about concrete works of art. We could clarify a great deal. That would easily be another hour that we don't have. But I would be happy to continue this on another occasion.

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow