

WHY ART? REMARKS ON THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF ART

By Annemarie Bucher

What are the functions of art? What does art do to society, to the individual? Is art necessary? For whom? For the artist or for the recipient? There are many questions that highlight the current debate on the functions of art in the global context. This debate focuses on the fact that very many different art forms are being displayed concurrently at the increasing number of biennials and exhibition events worldwide. In essence, the debate concerns a paradigm shift in the definition of art. As there is by no means a rigorous definition of art, one has to deal with various sets of assumptions and protocols about how art is produced and perceived.

In attempting to answer these questions, I argue from the perspective of a twenty-first century European art historian and critic. My background is an academic, Western one. This implies an understanding of art as a form of free autonomous aesthetic expression. This notion is based upon a specific construction of the concept of art and its history as well as upon a personal experience of a specific culturally-shaped field. Such a mindset states what counts as art. It includes certain facts and figures, and excludes others.

The freedom of art is a concept that emerged with modern civil society, and it underpins the dominant Western art terms of the 19th and 20th century. The idea of autonomy has been a centerpiece of Western philosophical aesthetics, and of the humanist tradition since the eighteenth century. The basic thought of autonomy in aesthetics is that aesthetic experience, or art, or both, possess a life of their own separate from other human affairs. The rules are only made by art itself. Therefore an work of art is unique, and creates its own value. It cannot be reduced to other external values. Artistic production is independent; there ist no utilitarian, political, social, moral, or other governance imposed upon art production. Autono- mous art claims to be neither justified nor caused by external agency.

In recent decades, the concept of autonomy has been debated intensely by philoso- phers, art historians, critics, and artists. The prevailing sacrosanct freedom of the artist has been questioned from different directions. One is the fact that the Western concept of autonomous art was challenged by an internal debate to expand the concept of art. Commenting on this, the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys famously said that "everybody is an artist." Another aspect is that on the global stage different cultural perspectives with different concepts of art appeared. Not all of them were conceived as

independent and self-governed. In the so-called postmodern era, the slogan "anything goes" became widespread and reiterated the question about what constitutes art. As the concept of autonomy was no longer reliable, the return to the function of art was somehow self-evident.

Who defines these functions and purposes of art? Is it the artist himself or herself, the art market, or the public? There are no clear answers but there are many attempts to structure the field. Previous binary oppositions, like applied arts versus liberal arts, or popular culture versus high culture, have returned. In addition, new distinctions like art as protest or affirmation have arisen. And the general benefits of art are fundamentally scrutinized.

To make this field more comprehensible, I would like to discuss some purposes of art mentioned by contemporary artists in Switzerland. It is a personal selection of various (summarized) artists' statements, which aims to show that art is produced and perceived according to different purposes. Based thereupon, I would suggest distinguishing the following functions of contemporary art: first, as a means of criticism; secondly, as a research tool; and thirdly, as a source of happiness.

Art as social criticism, media criticism - art as a protest against reality

Since its birth in Western culture, artistic expression has reflected and influenced the time, place, and culture from which it evolves. In Western art history, there are many such focal points. The French Revolution, for example, marks a fundamental change in the production and perception of art. Nineteenth-century art movements in Europe mirror a continuous development of modern civil society. In the twentieth century, profound revolutions in economics, politics, technology, and science influenced artists working on the levels of content and positioning. Many artists have seen their art as a laboratory to develop tools for changing society. This position of the artist as a complementary precursor to society has shaped not only modern art but also its aftermath. Many contemporary artists follow these principles of protest.

San Keller- (confusing) actions in the public sphere: One representative of art as protest is San Keller. Born in Bern in 1971, he is a well known Swiss artist. His work mainly consists of highly conceptual and participatory actions. Since the 1990, he has staged performances in public space that were perceived as confusing and provocative. For example, he could be seen sleeping in the background during the daily news broadcast on Swiss national television. Everyone watching the news could see a sleeping artist in the background. This action was part of a work called "San Keller sleeps at your workplace." As a result he sold a picture of the situation to the keeper of this place. The main message was: the artist earns his money in a position of total passivity. He delivered another performance in urban public places. He chose two cities for this action:

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in one case, he promoted the offer "San Keller demonstrates with your message." In the other one, he demonstrated in the streets, using posters bearing the messages submitted by other people. Participants could decide on the length of the written message and on the duration of the demonstration. They were charged by the minute of demonstration time and for a video documentation subsequently received.



San Keller,
Performance with Children.
Opening of a School Building
in Zürich, 2004

Dias & Riedweg – Video/New Media as a critical instrument: Mauricio Dias & Walter Riedweg are an internationally recognized duo of artists, from Brazil and Switzerland respectively. For over fifteen years, Dias & Riedweg have collaborated on multidisciplinary projects all over the world, in which they have tested the critical potential of the moving image. Through video they have explored the relationships between ethics and aesthetics and between art and politics. They do not document critical aspects of global society by video from an outside point of view, but instead they involve the viewer and the viewed by constructing a space and a narrative. Dias & Riedweg's practice tackles social and political issues through a poetic fusion of video, ethnography, and performance art, opening up new lines of thought about human interaction and identity across borders.

Art as a tool of creating knowledge, as a research tool

The use of research in the visual arts or using theoretical knowledge to develop artistic work is by no means a contemporary phenomenon. The notion of artistic research has become one of the current buzzwords. Contemporary art practice is so highly saturated with theoretical knowledge that it has moved closer to science and has become a research practice in and by itself. Now what does such a concept entail? There is a wide range of definitions and dimensions.

A first form of artistic research includes works that focus on research and its genuine procedures and conclusions. Research, in this sense, is the object of an art practice that does not restrict itself to functioning as an object of science. Another form of artistic research is art that understands itself as research, in that scientific processes or conclusions become the instrument of art and are used in the artworks. In this case, research is considered as a part of the artistic process and art is a form of knowledge.

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Artists act as researchers and present their findings in the form of artwork.

To give an example, I would like to introduce the work of Ursula Biemann. She is a Swiss artist, theorist and curator who has produced a considerable body of work on migration, mobility, technology, and gender. In her video essays, she connects a theoretical macro-level with a personal micro-perspective on political and cultural practices on the observed territories. One of the projects is called "The Maghreb Connection" (2006). It is a study of the migratory systems in North Africa, and brings together facts and atmospheres while creating a memorable network of knowledge. Her video essays reach a wide and diverse audience through art exhibitions, conferences, activist networks, and educational settings.

Another collaborative art research project has recently been established between the Federal Aquatic Research Center and Zurich University of the Arts. The former allows artists to join their scientific experiments and to comment or criticize these from an artist's point of view.

Art as a source of happiness (Art makes you happy)

The German sociologist Gerhard Schulze notes that the social benefits of art and culture are less patent than those of a sewage system. He claims that the cause of an art-dependent joy lies in an individual's direct encounter with an artwork. This sublime moment is a source of happiness, and it inspires many artists.

Olaf Breuning: criticism of the consumer society: The Swiss artist Olaf Breuning was born 1970 in Schaffhausen; he now lives and works in New York. He has gained recognition through his films, staged photography, and colourful, huge-eyed, infantile sculptures and drawings, which comment on reality in a ironic manner. Since the late 1990s, he has produced quotation-rich artworks, which refer back to the imaginary visual memory of the West and its pictorial worlds. On the one hand, he aims to deal with the large existential questions of life. In his childlike drawings and sculptures, the artist wants to speak about life in a very simple and direct way. On the other hand, Breuning's work deals with popular culture and consumerism. He does not recognize a difference between mass culture and the art world. For him popular culture is the reality we all live in. He somehow plays with the hierarchy between so-called high and low culture, between high and low art forms. He aims to find a language that anybody can understand.

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Olaf Breuning, The Band,
Photo 2007

Pipilotti Rist – the construction of dream worlds: Born in 1962, the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist creates dream worlds through on-site multimedia installations. During her studies, Pipilotti Rist began making films that lasted for not more than a few minutes and which were adapted in colours, speed, and sound. Her main subjects are the human body and gender. Therefore her work is regarded as feminist by some art critics. To construct virtual dreams or sites that recall paradise, she organizes teamwork. For instance, I took part in a project that involved the making of two allotment gardens during a garden exhibition 2000 in Germany. Under certain conditions, the gardens were open to the public. The main purpose of this project was to animate all kinds of people to visit these allotments and to relax or plant something or harvest the vegetables and flowers. It was not a useless place (it attracted frequent visits), but it was declared an artwork.



Grill 5,
Allotment garden,
2000,
Singen, Germany

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Art as a promotor of life skills

There are certainly many more functions of art to discover and to discuss. A core issue of our research project is to collaborate with partners from different cultural contexts and to learn about other understandings of the functions of art. Within our research, we have become aware of one function of art, which seems to us to be quite important and explosive: art as a promotor of life skills.

The World Health Organization defines life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." UNESCO divides life skills into different categories: - Learning to know: includes critical thinking and identifying relevant information

- Learning to be: This set of skills varies from self-esteem, self-monitoring, dealing with anxiety to stress management. - Learning to live together goes from communication to conflict management and networking.

Often the teaching of life skills is linked to topics like health care and food organization. It could also be connected to art. Notable artistic expression is not bound to affluence, it also matters in the context of so-called underdevelopment. From the perspective of development cooperation, it is widely accepted today that artists and the cultural community help to bring about social change and economic development. Creative people are able to trigger interaction between communities or to stimulate general debate and discourse in a society. Art can have a vital impact on self-managed development.