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Chosen Topic: 4

“Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough”

Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (1976)

I don't know you, Mr. Goodman. I have no idea, what you have done in your life, I do not know about what you have read or thought (although I assume it must have been a lot), all I know of you is this quote, two single lines and the title of a book which seems to be written by you. And although I have never seen you, read your ideas or heard your voice, I will just assume you there. The dialogue, this very oldest form of exchanging information seems appropriate to me to express my thoughts on this topic, and just assuming a person to be there makes writing a lot easier to me – and especially it makes it easier to begin. You are writing about art, obviously. An exciting topic to choose, without any doubt, and so is your way of expression, your unobtrusive joke, that makes this very thesis interesting and more difficult to criticize.

In 1915, the young socialist artist Ernst Barlach, a citizen of Germany, got rid of his former progressive, pacifist ideas and was infected with the war fever that held so many in its hands at this time. His earlier works had been peaceful, a subtle criticism on war and racism, mostly Russian peasants and landless farm-hands. But in 1915, excited of a war that would smash Germany to the ground for a long time he changed his mind and produced a futurist statue, I think it is called “The Will”. The tiny piece of metal, maybe 30 centimeters high and double that long shows a man in a soldier's coat and a sword held of both of his cramping hands. His face shows hate and anger as his whole body is storming forward towards the enemy. Barlachs piece of art is not only a sad sign for what happened to the people as much as to their ideas in WW 1, but also a piece of art, that shows very obvious impact of different factors I will write about.

To discuss a quotation about art, we should have a common minimum level of understanding what we consider art to be. Art is a very ambivalent thing, it occurs in many forms. But although we could always define the differences between two kinds of art, let us take a play and a statue for example, there are some common things that we can see, define and use for a definition. And there are two factors, we can see on every piece of art.

Art is always an expression and communication; it has an individual and a collective part. Let me begin with the question of expression. Art can be a very personal thing, and it express's needs. On the one hand, needs of the artist, like in Barlach's case the personal believe to need a German victory, his will to go to war and his desperate wish to be on the winning side. So a piece of art will always show the traces of the artist and of what he wanted to remain for eternity. On the other hand, this question of need is always influenced by collective needs, and if we do not see the artist as an isolated factor, the traces of collective needs that influenced the process of production. The Will is not the desperate, lonely wish of one man to win a war, it was also a very widespread opinion in 1910's Germany, that this war is a fair one and one that had to be won. So art will always show us

collective interests or a society's situation no matter if the artist shares those views or opposes to them.

The second factor of Art is communication – the message, the artist wants to send, when people see a play or read a poem. Art without audience cannot be considered as art as there is no one that asks the question if it is art. Communication in the meaning of an appellation, where the artist wants people to share and support his point of view is just one factor here. Art is always part of a discourse, and it is what happens between people, between the artist and the audience, between the person and the society. Art is always a contribution to a happening discourse and must be considered as such just like a politician's speech or an article.

Art would also always be able to say things that must not be said, to do subtle criticism. When Slavoj Žižek talks about culture, he defines it as the unwritten rules or as the third line between the piano notes, the lines that say which melody has to be thought of while playing. So if you know, what you want to read out of a piece of art, you will mostly see a subtle criticism, sometimes more and sometimes less present. This is why art has been prohibited so often, burned to ashes or hidden in cellars when it was generally a bad time for criticism.

And Art is always influenced a lot, and you can see those influences. They are saved in a piece of metal, a bunch of words. So eventually, art is temporary saved information without an obvious use. A school is a useful thing, but the ornaments over the entrance are art. Not because they are beautiful (mostly they are not) but because they were not produced for a reason of stability or safety. I think it was Karl Kraus that once said that we could reduce the daily time of work to four hours immediately if humanity just stopped making ornaments. Not that I share Kraus' vicious hate for ornaments, but I think that we can take them as an example for the question of art and use.

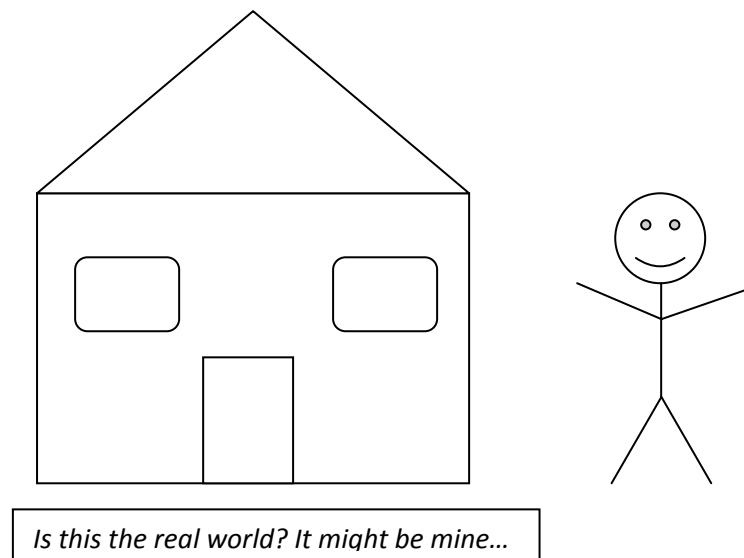
Alright, Mr. Goodman, but there are still some question we got to sort out, right? I mean, what has a piece of saved information, an expression of individual and collective needs, so what links a piece of art with a copy of the real world? Is it, that you consider every piece of art as a whole universe for itself? Or do you think that art is just an expression of how the artist sees the real world? I will probably never find out. But the most important question seems to be: What is this real world Goodman is talking about?

The search for the one, real world is an old one, and it does not seem very original to ask this question again. You could as well ask what is good or evil or if god exists. But however, this question is important, and so I will not try to give an answer but to show answers, that have already been given. The question of the one reality is totally overrated, although I think there is one real world we live in. This world is in my opinion determined not by the real matter that forms it but by the relations between them. An object is defined by its environment, and so are persons or societies, in those relations are what makes a matter what it is. Without a gory crowd our main example, Barlach's statue would not have been what it was, without a war it would not have been an appellation to kill others but a piece of history. Without people criticizing him after the war for his slip into nationalism and militarism we would not consider Barlach as arrogant and uninterested in different opinions, and although he might have been that before, it became a property of his own when he expressed to his environment.

But everyone has his own reality and I would not describe this reality as a product of exploring the reality by finding the objective truth but by a very fragile, closed system that we are and its limited

sense organs bumping against obstacles. Glasersfeld explains this with an example of a blind Ranger, that has to go through a forest to reach a certain river. If this Ranger had an excellent memory and would remember every tree, he ran into, after a few hundred runs through the forest he would know the paths to go, and his memory would be like a map of the forest. And what the blind Ranger knows, is where no trees are, but not, how they look like. I think, it is similar with our reality – we do not know, how anything real looks like, is or what it does, what we know is what we need to know to go between those obstacles. Every time, we run into this figurative trees, or as Glasersfeld would call out, every time our sense organs are irritated by our environment, our memory map knows a new way not to go, but not more.

Those realities, that are probably totally different, are also in discourse with each other. They are meeting each other, irritating each other and adding some two or three new trees to the other reality, and the product of this discourse, the lowest consensus of where not to go is what some like to call reality. This consensus is of course, changing every moment, and we as a part of this discourse are part of this reality.



But Mr. Goodman, or, as we know each other now for so long, let me call you Nelson, can I? No? But... alright, no first names for students, I get it. The question now is how to copy this very reality, and why to do this.

Art is always a picture of the reality, and if we assume as I did before that reality is a very personal thing, it makes perfect sense to say that different forms of art display the same reality, or linked realities. But if we would also regard art as a real, an existing thing what I would do, we have a problem. The real world, that is displayed in a piece of art is not just a tiny piece of what we see, the real world is the universe, it is, as long as we cannot analyze the factors having an impact on each other so well, that we can divide them, all relations between all matters, it is one reality (for each person). So we cannot exclude art from this very universe, it cannot exist in some kind of an empty space, the influence of the reality remains after an artist think he has finished his piece.

But how shall a “copy” be part of its own origin? Endless loops are an interesting thing to display on a piece of paper, but in the reality they produce a huge paradox. Of course we must not see this question on the material basis, but as a parable. “The Will” is, to come back to my example, not only

the materialized thoughts and demands of Barlach, but also an image of the reality that surrounds it – the piece may remain mostly the same in its form and material, but the idea and how it is understood, the message and the expression, in short the art in contains changes with a changing world.

There would be of course a possibility to see a piece of art as a copy of the real world: An interpretation, where not only one but nearly indefinite realities exists, a reality, where every decision produces two versions of the same reality, depending arranged by all possibilities of this decision. This theory is called the Many-Worlds-Interpretation, MWI, and was a present theory in the 70s discourse of theoretical physicists. But the MWI has a problem that made it nearly vanish again. The lasting of theories do not depend on if they are right or wrong, many wrong theories have survived centuries, but by their usability, their viability. As we cannot prove anything right or wrong if we do not know the “truth”, the lasting of a theory depends on if it is useful, if it helps us to come faster, safer or more pleasant through the forest. The MWI has neither an evidence nor a prove, neither for or against its existence. But much more fatal is that it does not help at all, it does not explain phenomena, it does not show us new ways. Which irritation confronting my sense organs should make my reality a multiversal one?

In her novel “Schilf”, Juli Zeh writes about the MWI. The basic plot is that two former best friends and great physicists have a huge argument about this interpretation, and one of them kidnaps the other’s son to bring him to a pioneer’s camp. He wants to show his friend, that the MWI is nothing but losing the control over reality. But as the plot goes on, they come to the conclusion, that the MWI is not more but shifting responsibility, to say that a decision does not matter, because the other choice is tried out in another reality. However superficial this conclusion is, I cannot get any advantage from a MWI, a model with one reality and one common universe is the most viable for me.

You would use other words, wouldn't you, Mr. Goodman? One damn thing is enough, that is what you said. Pretty hard, ah? However, I think we come to the same conclusion – art is not a copy of reality, it is a temporary picture. Without any doubt is it important, without any doubt it holds the tracks of many factors that are worth to be reminded, art saves information in a very pleasant way. But it is not more, not a different reality, not another universe.

Art is an important social expression, it is a chance to escape from reality’s roughest sides for some hours and an interesting phenomenon. The need to produce something that remains may be as old as the humanity itself is, it is transnational, old and uniting. But art is not more, it is not the one natural self-expression, not the way to the one ideal world and not even a holy thing. Art is a matter in this net of matters, interfering and reacting with all those important parts of our life and reality, art is a part, not the whole. And so it is a wonderful thing that back in 1976 someone just told those art-fetishizing Hippies how it is, no hurt feelings, but rough and clear. Because one of those damn things is enough!