



...most people practice criticism on Art, namely asking: 'does Art render anything to society?'" Joseph Beuys¹

FILMS ON ART: BREAKING THE BARRIER BETWEEN AN ARTIST AND A PUBLIC

I. Introduction

In the following I intend to show that films on art and artists have a specific characteristic which can be of importance in today's society. As point of origin I refer to the book "Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts" by the artist Robert Filliou from the year 1970². Today when everybody is sensing and talking of „deep disagreements“³ in most areas of social discussions, this book still reveals considerable thought and ideas for the handling of conflicts of opinion.

It is Robert Filliou's understanding of the "artist-being" which he develops together with his peers, Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, John Cage, Dieter Rot and others, which shapes my further thoughts. I will address particularly one attribute which they assign to an artist, which is the „professional qualification“ to deal with the unknown, the foreign or the alien. The question is: if artists own such an essential capacity, in which manner can others learn from them?

Now here I am examining one particular medium, namely the genre called "films on art". I hold a view that for a public, films on art have an exceptional potential to facilitate the entry to this artistic practice in question. Films on art are a matter of a specific kind of "film as

medium of communication" which differ in some aspects from the related genres as of documentary, docu-fiction or docu-essay.

My central theses are the following: films on art and artists

1. correspond with the concept of "performance" rather than cinema
2. they have the potential to reflect the "ideal speech situation" as defined by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas,
3. they foster emancipatory behavior through examples of aesthetic discourse,
4. they create universal knowledge,
5. and in order to achieve this, they can only be created by artists or by film makers with high artistic empathy.

II. Preliminary definition of the concept "artist"

In order to talk about films on art, it is essential to define what is understood by the term "artist". I follow the concept of "artist" which the philosopher and artist Bazon Brock, in the tradition of Filliou et al. has elaborately analyzed. In his book "*Ästhetik als Vermittlung*" ('Aesthetic as mediation') he writes:

"The artists claim that you don't trust their thoughts at all, that you are wary of believing the facts. They challenge you to not fall for the objective illusiveness of noble science and art claims but to stir yourself into action at the thought of the always different, the frolicsome, the alien - and yes, to even bring into play, resentments, private concerns and doubts."⁴

The claim to **not** believe what is being shown without before-hand getting down to an independent opinion, implies an appeal for action, reasoning and judging on the part of the audience. To "bring into play resentments, private concerns and doubts" points to the importance to refer to oneself when developing an opinion instead of hiding behind socially authorized arguments.

To mobilize the "thoughts of the always different..." requires a technique which prevents one from losing ground in doing so, particularly in a society which instills in us the need for security, reliability of statements, scientific justification or authority of world views from the very beginning of our existence.⁵

Thus following Brock's definition, one can assume that artists are experienced and professionally in dealing with notions of the evolving, of uncertainty or ambiguity, using

individually developed tools. These differ from artist to artist because explicit working methods for artists don't exist - as they do, for example, in the exact sciences to secure the verification process of the results. Therefore what the artist produces can only be judged by a public through aesthetic discrimination, plus an understanding of the artist's specific modes.

Bazon Brock indicates the fact: "Despite the same physiological 'equipment' of human beings, these human beings reach different judgements about the same objects."⁶

The discussion about artworks opens up the anthropological base of this fact. Through finding judgements about art works and realizing the diversity of possible opinions, one awakens to the need for communication between human beings as an existential factor for a modern society. Filliou says: "One must not influence anyone. We must look for dialogue, not influence. In non-schools, develop the idea of the principle of Equivalence. Equivalence in scope, in spirit, in difficulty, in creativeness;..."⁷

The skills for an appropriate use of the „aesthetic discrimination“ as tool for approaching problems in life can be learned. Particularly useful is being a witness of the ways how artists themselves are judging art works - as after all, they have to be the sharpest critic of their own work. Accompanying this in films on art, offers the chance to study the tools which enable aesthetic discrimination.

III. Definition of "film on art and artists"

Films on art and artists as I mean it, exclude the following: pure recordings of artistic events such as performances, concerts or readings, also art films, educational films, commissioned works or mere documentations, etc. A film on art in our terms is a film which is essentially characterized by the challenge of the film-maker to make a film about another artist.

The research is mainly based on material from the film festival "Temps D'Images Prémios de Cinema para Filmes Sobre Arte"⁸ which I have developed and have been curating for 7 years. Out of more than 240 film submissions each year, an average of 34 films are presented, both shorts and feature films. The base of my analysis is therefore formed by more than 1400 submitted films on art from various countries. Aside from a few exceptions, they came from the so called Western cultural area, thus European, American, Canadian, Australian, New-Zealand but also Brazilian and Argentinian productions. The festival program comprises films of different genres: "creative documentary", essay-film,

experimental films about art or an artist, biographies, autobiographies or docu-fiction. They are films about living or deceased artists, art works, literature, music, musicians, theory, photography, archives, dance, architecture, literature and more.

They all have the following in common:

1. the film is a matter of an individual concern and a statement of the film maker
2. it is influenced by a particular situation: the filmmaker exposes her-/himself to the artist and her/his art work.

The curator and art theorist Achille Bonito Oliva describes the first encounter with an art work as follows: "What does it mean, this confrontation with the works? Surely not to close oneself against the high temperature which emanates from the work. Quite the contrary: a critic takes the trauma and the pathos of the art work into the thick of himself."⁹ Oliva's "critic" here is taken as synonym for the "film-maker who makes a film on art". Oliva has much broaden the term, so that it could signify almost any person who approaches an artwork with the intention to understand it and to mediate what it evokes.

The written "directors' statements", submitted to the festival together with the films, confirm the particularity of the relation between artwork/artist and film-maker. Almost without exception, the film-makers show a fascination toward the personality of the artist and the artwork, which prepares the ground for their empathic attitude to the film's "subject". Also in most of the statements, the film-makers point out the dialogic situation which they find themselves in with the artist or the art work. They indicate the need for a particular strategy for their approach. It is assumed that such directors' statements are written only after the film was completed. So the difficulties mentioned in the texts might have been assigned less meaning than they actually had during the creation of the films. The fact though, that they are mentioned in almost every statement suggests that it is about a fundamental phenomena of a film on art: the "object" in front of the camera is not already understood before the start of filming but is conceived only during the process.

This characteristic applies to all documentaries which are acquired process-related and not through a storyboard. The object to be filmed and explored is behaving, and the film-maker tries to capture it adequately, respectfully, coherently, etc. Those who will judge this endeavor later, are the audience, the scientists or experts on the subject. In the case of films on art though, it is about an unique form of a relation between a film-maker and her/his "object". How I will show below, it is precisely this relation which makes films on art so important for the society.

A film-maker who intends to make a film about an artist, never has an "object" in front of this camera but always a co-creator of the film. The artist himself is professional in aesthetic design and criticism, and in addition, a better expert of the subject, as it is after all his own work to be discussed. The film-maker's position of power is abolished - not voluntarily, as perhaps some documentary film-makers try to achieve when they give a big scope to their "object" - but inevitably, almost forced, in order to assure the genesis of the film.

Hence appears for the audience the special opportunity to become witness of an exemplary approximation to the ideal of the so-called "domination-free discourse" which the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has developed in his theory about the "communicative action"¹⁰. For my opinion, some of its fundamental aspects apply to the nature of films on art: the discourse between the film-maker and the artist is characterized

- by the equivalent ability to aesthetic creation and critic
- by the same intention to produce knowledge and to formulate the better argument
- by the equal possibility to speak out
- and by an honesty in formulating the descriptions and explanations which will later constitute the film.

Naturally I am characterizing an ideal type of a film about an artist as did Habermas in defining the ideal speech situation. In fact, some film-makers even exhibit the failure of the project in the film and admit that the communication with the other has been impossible. Such films actually confirm the significance of the aspects listed above.

Oliva continues his description of the confrontation between a "critic" and the artist as follows: "The critic therefore is the first fireman who arrives at the fire source, he is equipped with his reasoning power, at the same time thoroughly disarmed, for he never knows what awaits him, and he is, to quote Schlegel, the first one who sees himself in front of the obscurity of the art work for which, being something new, no code yet exists."¹¹

Oliva talks about himself when he writes: "I am an authentic companion of the artist, there exist no hierarchic or academic relations. The true exchange happened outside the established places: not again and again gallery, studio or museum..."¹²

The avoidance of hierarchical conditions is the peculiarity in making films on art: two equivalent partners are facing each other by sharing similar interests. Bazon Brock describes this as an exemplary situation which, witnessed by an audience, conveys

important fundamentals for a modern society (i.e. a society defined by agreements of its citizens). He explains: "This 'collective of enthusiasts' lives from the dissent of its members, not from a similar opinion."¹³ That is to say in our case, that two individuals, enthusiastic about the same issue, will start a constructive dialogue, guided by the equal skills for aesthetic discrimination. To be able to reasonably justify dissent, develops a comprehension for the differences in the opinions of others; and for the "prototypical representative" question in a community (as Habermas quotes Melvin Pollner): "How come, he sees it and you do not?"¹⁴

If based on true discourse, a film on art will always provide the process of the exploration of the unknown world (that of the artist) as an occasion for the audience to experience. The spectator - as in theatre - becomes a co-constructor of the situation. She/he undergoes a kind of dialogue which usually she/he doesn't live. In general, the matter of documentaries is the discussion of realistic, "correct" or scientifically proven presentation of subjects, here the main subject is basically "intermediation" itself – conveyed through artistic communication of initially unverifiable, unknown topics.

The artist, as often described by Baz Luhrmann, sees a problem there where others don't see one. Solely because the artist claims that what she/he is depicting, signifies a problem, the audience has to ponder on it. The artist demonstrates how she/he approaches the analysis about her/his detected problem. Often the artists are concerned with the very problem for a long period if not their whole life.

This leads us to the next question:

IV. What is the benefit for an audience viewing films on art?

Perhaps it is not straightaway visible how "individuality" or even "uniqueness" may have such an importance for a society. A certain generalizability seems to be rather significant for statements of social relevance. But if one imagines that in a "films on art"-festival hundreds of such individual analyzers of problems can be "met", this experience unfolds de facto a general evidence. It is the insight that there exist many more "problems" as we are usually informed of, and that it is possible to responsibly live with these numberless uncertainties.

The actual discussions about changing values, changing paradigm in science or the problems in intercultural studies relate to these "uncertainties" in justification of informations. While in those areas the tools for the meaningful handling of this lack of

knowledge are still searched for, this phenomena is known to the artists from the very first. Uncertainty is intrinsic to artistic practice and notion of life.

Films on art and artists comprise the emancipatory force of artistic work since here neither scientific nor political "correctness" play a role. Instead, they open up to the venture and the challenge for a "*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*" (domination-free discourse) about the unsolvable yet discussible questions of the human society, beyond the potency of a church or a cultural entity.

Rajele Jain, November 2014

1Beuys, Joseph. In: Filliou, Robert (1970), Teaching and Learning As Performing Arts (p. 172).
Cologne: Dumont

2Filliou.. R. (1970). Teaching and Learning As Performing Arts. Cologne: Dumont

3 for example, see the title of an actual research project and conference (2015): “Deep
Disagreements” by the Universität Freiburg and Universität Berlin. Retrieved Dec 1, 2014
from <http://deepdisagreements.de>

4Brock, Bazon (1977). Ästhetik als Vermittlung (p. 35). Köln: Dumont

5 see also: Illich, Ivan (1970). Deschooling Society (p. 58). New York: First Harrow Edition.
“People who have been schooled down to size let unmeasured, experience slip out of their
hands. To them, what cannot be measured becomes secondary, threatening.”

6Brock, B. (1977), p. 36. Translated by the author.

7Filliou, R. (1979), p. 82

8see: Festival TEMPS D'IMAGES LISBOA, PRÉMIOS DE CINEMA PARA FILMES SOBRE ARTE,
www.films-on-art-portugal.org, www.tempsdimages-portugal.com

9Oliva, Achille Bonito (1992). Eingebildete Dialoge (p. 33). Berlin: Merve. Translated by the author.

10 see: Habermas, Jürgen (1981). Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, vol. 1. Frankfurt:
Suhrkamp

11 Oliva (1992), p. 33. Translated by the author.

12 Oliva (1992), p. 27. Translated by the author.

13 Brock, Bazon In. “Kunst und Leben des Bazon Brock”, Radio-Feature by Natascha Freundl,
NDR Kultur, 2006. Translated by the author.

14 Pollner, Melvin (1974). Mundane Reasoning, Phil. Soc. Sci. 4, (p. 40). Quoted in: Habermas,
J. (1984). The theory of communicative action, vol. 1, p. 13. Boston: Beacon Press