

Address

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“We learn nothing with greater difficulty than the free use of the national.” Hölderlin, letter to à Böhlendorf, 4 December 1801

“All these qualities—frontality, centralization, and literal size and shape—characterize the developed work of most of the abstract-expressionist painters; even those who, like Pollack and Newman, eventually dropped some of these emblematic features but continued to work with the most central aspect of the sign or emblem. And that is its mode of address. For while we can think of a traditional picture or a photograph as creating a relationship between author and object that exists independent of an audience, addressing no one in particular, we must think of a sign or emblem as existing specifically in relation to a receiver. It takes the form of a directive addressed to someone, a directive that exists, so to speak, in the space of the confrontation between the sign or emblem and the one who views it.” Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, pp. 150-152

The concept of address is intrinsically included in that of reception. It is not so much a problem of aesthetics, but rather one for the philosophy of art and the interpretation of the artistic process. *Address* expresses the provenance movement of the creative process towards a receiver. Reception theory is central to art history, but it is even more central to art exhibition setups. The problem can be summed up as follows: can one intervene between the emitter and receiver of the artistic process, and what is the power and limit of this intervention?

The concept of reception is an ancient one, stemming from two fundamental elements: the first is the concept of graduality (human beings are different in accordance with an infinite graduality) or what is called an *ethical differentiation*. Reception theory can only exist based on the idea that each receiver is felt to be unique, and this has the consequence of making any theory of address extremely complex. The second element is *techne*, that is to say the differentiation of interpretation models. *Techne* literally means “a particular way of knowing a lot about” something—in this case the interpretation of artistic processes and art objects. The consequence of ethical and technical differentiation is an increase in the *specialisation* and *categorisation* of reception’s different forms and operating methods.

This is the work carried out by Aristotle on two levels that are distinct but very closely related: that of dialectics as the construction of discourses and operativities, and that of the politics of artworks (and this is precisely the work carried out in the books *The Politics* and *Poetics*). Reception theory is therefore directly linked to a general theory of *poietike techné*, that is to say the technicisation of the sphere of artistic operativity.

So the concept of reception was absorbed into theories of rhetoric. Rhetoric deals with the idea of accurately addressing oneself to others through language (it is a technique that aims at making language effective). In a book by a 1st-century rhetorician, Aelius Theon, entitled *Progymnasmata*—which explores the concept of eulogy—one finds a tripartition of address: that directed at the living, at the deceased, and at the virtual. I will use this structure to propose a modern definition of the concept of address. Address is therefore the operation that consists in producing language for or towards someone, in three distinct forms: what I call **address** insofar as it is produced for a physical person, what I call **destination** insofar as it is produced for a foreseen, non-present spectator, and finally what I call **mass destination** insofar as it is produced for a non-present spectator who has been turned into a customer. The “address” and “destination” categories presuppose that there are still different degrees of sharing and reception, and that the active content of the reception process are recognised. On the other hand, the third one presupposes content that is entirely passive with regard to the receiver. These are the fundamental constituents of the critical and modern history of address.

Based on this, the historical and aesthetic tradition had the concept of reception cover three specific spheres. The first is that of the private, that is to say specifically the essential figure of the interpreter. The second is that of the public, in this case particularly the figure of the spectator. The third one is that which I call the *symbol*, and here what takes precedence is the power of ideological involvement. It was in the Middle Ages and mainly at the time of the crisis of *trobar clus* that the private sphere opened as a singular, autonomous relation that the reader or spectator enjoys with the poetic, the literary and the musical, consequently opening a door to a possible new way of relating to images. The important thing, then, was to define a new sphere of spectator autonomy. The opening of this realm to images can be dated to what I call the *renaissance*. There developed a new way of thinking about images and the reception of images: it was a re-appropriation of the old (the ancient world) and a production of new codes that required a high degree of reading specialisation and a sharp increase in the number of knowledge domains (an increase in the number of encryption and concealment models, and an increase in the number of spheres of privatisation) and consequently a sharp reduction in the field of reception. This led to a sharp reduction in the differences between address and destination in order to promote what could be called a *privatisation of the encomiastic process*. The most enlightening example of this is the *Palazzo Schifanoia* in Ferrara, commissioned by Borso d'Este.

The symbol era can be dated back to the Middle Ages (7th century), beginning at

the time when the West agreed to establish an iconic economy. This established a theory of the economy of the visible (image construction and contents) and consequently an economy of *visibility* (image orientation and destination). It was specifically the economy of visibility that determined the theory of artistic process reception.

This lay the foundations for a crisis that erupted in the realm of modernity, that of the tension between the *economy of the legible* and *the economy of the visible*. This is a different sphere of reflection, but one that is important if we are to consider a reception theory in crisis. What does the concept of *legibility* presuppose? It presupposes a more or less stable relationship between a production operator and a reception operator. It turns out that it initially involved an exchange of statuses. What set the stage for the crisis of modernity was the producer's specialisation and the receiver's assertion of non-specialisation. But initially it was the *same person* that defined both models. This founding relation paved the way for an exemplary crisis, that of the disjunction between the *literal* and the *literary*: this distinction—once the principle of the possibility of a *scrupulous reading* has been ruled out—opened up the theoretical field of the concept that I call legibility, namely the possibility of an alternation between *reading* and *negligence*. The consequence of this—namely the relationship and balance between producer and receiver—presupposes what I call participation in *hermeneutics* and in *critical reception*. What, then, does the concept of *visibility* presuppose? It presupposes a more or less unstable relationship between a production operator and reception operator. Why? Because since the beginning of Western thought, this operativity has been interpreted as a *mimetike techné*, that is to say a specialisation that consists of specific knowledge—knowledge of making *images*. But in that case, there is a significant imbalance between the technicity of the producer and the non-technicity of the receiver. This difference is even the essence of the image concept. It is its substantial content. On this point, we should refer to the ancient thought of Pseudo-Longinus and what could be thought of as the premises of a modern theory of images: the production of what he called *hadrepebelein* (which could be translated as a *projection in density*). This presupposes a high level of technicity for its realisation, and moreover makes it possible to achieve absolute adherence of the spectator in the image. What is obvious is that the history of thought has been a slow critique of this system and an attempt to defend legibility. However, this attempt was at the same time a weakening of the process of legibility in preparation for a triumphant assertion of the process of visibility: this certainly constitutes the field of artistic modernity.

Since antiquity, Western thought on art and artistic activity has been this uninterrupted crisis that lay the foundations for premodern aesthetics: between the stability of the legibility process and the instability of the visibility process. All of the fear of the ancient world consisted of precisely this imbalance between “knowing a lot about” something and a deprivation of this knowledge. It was ideologically asserted for moral and political problems, but intellectually criticised for philosophical reasons. From a philosophical point of view, the reasons were numerous: the first was that knowledge imbalance

produces alienation (that is to say a deprivation of knowledge and a deprivation of access to knowledge); secondly, it constitutes a set of specialists and not a sharing relationship (and therefore opens the door to a hyper-specialisation of the reception space); thirdly, it opens the spectator to passivity and fascination (forms of adherence that lead to a hyper-spectacularisation of the artistic process and its transformation into entertainment and sites of entertainment); fourthly, it overestimates the power of *teche*, and therefore of systems.

The dissensions and crises surrounding thought on artwork are linked to these three critical points concerning reception. There were those who advocated a theory of *legibility* of the elements of creation and those who advocated a theory of *visibility*. Modern thought was an attempt at reconciliation (dialectical thought) between these two systems of reception. This reconciliation began with the assertion of the emancipation of the subject, both as producer and receiver, and led to the theory that the sphere of technicisation itself also belonged to both. In this case, the operator-subject and the receiver-subject have an equivalence in the process of reception. In this sense, modernity is the assertion of this process, from the determination of transcendence to the assertion that the spectator makes the work.

Now we will reconsider the concept of the spectator. He has an obvious but silent relationship, first with the concept of *theory* because it is linked to the Greek root of sight and perspective (*thea*), and then with the Latin root *spec-*. This implies two fundamental questions: 1. a question of the person's *position*, from being in a state of wonder (*thau-mazein*) to becoming critical through observation (*theoretikos*); 2. next it is an essential question of *type*, that is to say of the *kind* of spectating person. The spectator has an obvious but less hidden relation to rhetoric, insofar as it is a *teche* (persuasion and expression) and because as a *techne* it implies essential control over two levels of activity: control of *mimesis* (of *mimetike techne*) and control of *catharsis*. *Mimesis* means representation and *catharsis* means what I call separation (in the non-literal sense in which Aristotle uses it). *Catharsis* literally means cleansing and *catharos* means pure, unmixed. This means that *catharsis* is the act of separating things so they do not mix together. What should not mix together is the foundation of the principle behind Aristotle's definition of the origin of artistic activity: taking pleasure in representing things, but in so doing, maintaining the ability to separate the unrepresented from the represented. This is the spectator's activity: the ability to separate and the ability to interpret relations between elements—in other words elements of the real (the present) and elements of reality (the represented). Then the question is the following: is the spectator capable of doing this himself, or does it need to be done for him? And if it does, to what extent must one mediate the process of separation or mixing-up? Here is what I can propose as a definition of the concept of the spectator: ***the spectator is a category that is variously able to interpret the origin of artistic activity***. That being the case, the act of creation and the act of reception cannot be dissociated from this distinction. The more the spectator is capable of considering *provenance*,

the more this defines what I call *address*. On the other hand, the more the spectator is deprived of (or rejects) the ability to consider the work's *provenance*, the more this defines what I call *destination*. Finally, when this deprivation reaches its maximum, we attain what I have called a *mass destination*.

We must therefore consider the meaning of the concepts of address and destination. If we review the fundamentals of modern aesthetics or art history, it is a series of elements. First, it is the assertion of the transcendence of the subject, and therefore of artistic activity (which presupposes the subject's independence). This consequently implies the assertion of the transcendence of the receiver, and therefore of the process of reception; therefore, the more the process of reception is transcendent, the more it is "open" to any individual who wishes to experience a work of art. This is what will be called the principle of *universality*. Is there a relation between the spectator's transcendental character and the assertion of a universal character in artwork (modern aesthetics)? If the answer is "yes", this implies that *whatever being* (*quodlibet ens*) can become a spectator. What, then, is the criterion of relation between this *whatever* and *the work*? It can be the criterion of universality. But then technical mechanisms are required to make the relation possible between the two of them. If the answer is "no", this implies that the spectator cannot be "whatever being", but must be someone "*already concerned*". In that case, the concept of universality no longer means the form of address that is directed at everyone, but rather the form that leads the people concerned (involved) to agree on a particular direction (*uni-versus*). Modernity was founded on a fascination with, and incessant criticism of, the concept of the universality of artwork and of the process of reception. The first radical criticism was based on a deconstruction of the concept of universality: the work is not what leads people towards unity and non-difference, but the work is a fundamental process of *diversity* and *adversity*. The second criticism was based on Kant's concept of *disinterested pleasure*: if the person was obliged to achieve interested pleasure (enjoyment, mediation, possession, relation, destination), the work would cease to be a work (becoming an object of consumption, a tool of the cultural industry, the entertainment industry). The third criticism is based on the Marxist position that art does not exist, and the assertion of the possibility of an individual having liberated time (liberated by artistic activity). The fourth criticism is based on a Nietzschean position: art is a metaphysical manifestation of being, and a fundamental opening to knowledge as a *gay science*. The fifth criticism is based on the modernity of the concept of environment and the implicit relation with the setting, with the work and with the spectator. The sixth criticism is based on the consequences which Duchamp's readymade had on a redefinition of the creative process, for both the producer and the receiver. The seventh criticism is based on the consequences of Mallarmé's concept of the *book* and the principle that reading is fundamentally relative. The eighth crisis—and as a consequence—is based on a definition of the concept that reading is *dangerous*. This was followed by a succession of crises, either as the assertion of the modern principle of the liberation of the spectator, or as a reactionary position instead advocating the neces-

sary principle of a mediation of the artistic process that must be provided to the spectator, assuming that he cannot attain an authentic form of liberation. Such is the history of modernity and the contemporary.

Then what is the meaning of the concepts of address and destination? *Destination* comes from the Latin verb *destinare*, which means to fasten, secure or allocate. It also figuratively means acquisition, and therefore signifies buying. It probably comes from the Greek verb *histano* (which is only used in the present), relating to the verb *histemi*, which means standing, erecting (statues, trophies, etc.), fastening (whose derivatives are *hostos*: standing object, thread, stick; *stasis*: attitude, *statos*, standing, stiff; *stema*: prop, penis; *stemon*: thread, *stoa*: portico). This is what makes up the term *system* in English and the Latin root *statio*. Here we find an exemplary series of figures, those of fastening, piousness, the thread of destiny, the erection of monuments, allocation, taking possession, etc. This is also what is materially contained in the form of destiny.

Then what is a destinal process in art? This presupposes that the work is allocated a fixed state (that of its form, its meaning, its reception) such that it stays that way. What I call *destiny* is a means of projecting the material and present life into a fixed form that will persist despite changes in space, time and context. The work is allocated a structural stability as well as a stability of surroundings, with a view to maintaining it *ad infinitum*. In that case the work can only be “produced” in an “ideal” interpretation of the process of reception: an ideal and stable projection of the work and an ideal projection of the spectator. In that case the spectator becomes an operator that undergoes a series of transformations. In the context of the first one, the spectator becomes a relatively neutral form (what I call a *receiver* α) upon which it is entirely possible to impose an ideal form of reception, even a re-idealised one. In the second transformation, one must lower one’s skill level (critical activity) in accordance with the increase in the number of the criteria defining the *recipient*: different cultures, ages, continents, etc.). In the third transformation, an interpretation is not required from the spectator, but only the ability to receive mediated information. Finally, in the fourth transformation, the spectator becomes what we call the *public*.

One of the most emblematic transformations of the concept of spectators is when they are transformed into the public: it means that the spectator sphere has been extended to the whole population. As a matter of principle, it is not harmful to consider that *the whole population* could experience the work, but on the other hand, what is negative is to consider that to attain this, it is necessary to lower both the level of production and the level of reception, or that to attain this one must offer an ever-increasing amount of mediation. This means that the whole process of actantiality is degraded: the relation between the transmitter and the work, between the receiver and the work, between the transmitter and the receiver, and finally that of what is called level α , that is to say that of the arena of the common. In its most maximised phase, that which Adorno and Horkheimer called *Kulturindustrie* (the cultural industry), the spectator is maintained in the passive form of the public whose central motive is entertainment, and also in the form of a customer. This

is precisely what is brought into play by Marcel Broodthalers in the *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968–1973) and in his open letter of 7 September 1968, addressed to the *customers* and the *curious*: this is very precisely a parody (*institutional criticism*) of what is called the *cultural industry*.

What does *address* mean? The term *address* covers three meanings: waypoint, short cut, and the way one reaches something. These three elements of address are concurrent based on the meaning of the verb *to address* (in the sense of attaining, rising up), and this verb comes from the Latin verb *dirigo* and from the participle *directus*. As with “destination”, here there is also something of the sense of that which is erected and projected towards a particular point. The difference is that in the case of the concept of address, this “movement towards” is not towards an authoritarian allocation, towards an ideal future, but on the contrary towards someone who would be in a position to receive it. In the case of destination, the work has to be assigned the role of a work beforehand so that it can be projected and maintained as such in its determination (form) and its content. On the other hand, in the case of address, the work does not need to be allocated the role of a work of art, because in the context of reception, it could only achieve this if the address were “successful”, that is to say, if one succeeded in bringing about an *artistisation*. In that case there is no work. It cannot exist. There would only be an indeterminate collection of configurations waiting for address in order to become an artistic process. In this case the creative act stays as such, and then addresses itself to a co-actoriality in reception, in order to possibly arrive at an artistisation. But nothing is guaranteed, and it is the very lack of a guarantee that gives the work its power.

I propose a series of six singular forms of address for artistic activity and the artistic process. The first is a direct address (on the model of *enkomion*), which acknowledges the receiver in order to occur as a creative process.

The second is an address which assumes that the creative process can only occur with co-actoriality on the part of the receiver (it is founded on Duchamp’s process model, asserting that the spectator completes and realises the work).

The third is an address which assumes that the creative process questions and interacts with the appearance context and the social and political context (based on Hans Haacke’s work model).

The fourth is an address that presupposes an interaction between the creative process, the reception process and the exhibition sphere (based on the institutional critique model and the citation model).

The fifth is an address that assumes a collective relation with the receiver (based on the relational aesthetics model).

The sixth singular form of address is what we could call a *specific address* insofar as it summons complex, quiet relations (while making them open) between actors of the artwork and production process (based on the model that we could call an *attribution aesthetics*).

For museums, for art venues, for exhibition spaces, it is therefore a matter of determining their position in a complex history of reception. This complex history is that of the spectator and, consequently, not that of culture, but essentially that of knowledge and the individual's relationship of liberation with respect to knowledge. In short, this means that the question of address is the question of the interpretation of the experience of knowledge at play in artistic activity. But what is at play in artistic activity? Let us admit an experience of the sensible, and let us also admit a gradual intellectual experience. If we admit this, then there arises the question of how we are received—as spectators and not as the public—in order to experience the work. Either we are received as someone able to co-create the sensible and intellectual experience, assuming a sharing of this “sensible” and of knowledge, or we must accept mediation of this experience of the sensible and of the intellectual, which presupposes either the presence of a third party for this mediation, or the presence of critical tools (whose legitimacy and plasticity can and must always be open to discussion), or the impoverishment of that which is at play in artistic activity (reduction to aesthetics, transformation into entertainment, transformation into a cultural industry). The experience of the contemporary should be allowed to play out in the interpretation of these processes: the same applies to a work's ethical and political issues. Under no circumstances should an artwork be confiscated either by economic, institutional or categorical processes. But spectators' transformation into a public (asserting the irrevocable loss of his freedom) is the assertion of this confiscation.