Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory

Sonderheft 16 der
Zeitschrift für Ästhetik
und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft

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Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über ‹http://portal.dnb.de› abrufbar.

Sonderheft 16 · ISSN 1439-5886 · ISBN 978-3-7873-3425-4

 Satz: Jens-Sören Mann. Druck und Bindung: Beltz Bad Langensalza. Werkdruckpapier: alterungsbeständig nach ANSI-Norm resp. DIN-ISO 9706, hergestellt aus 100% chlorfrei gebleichtem Zellstoff. Printed in Germany.

Modes of Aesthetic Ambiguity in Contemporary Art*

Conceptualizing Ambiguity in Art History

Verena Krieger

I. Introduction

That art, and especially contemporary art, is equivocal, open, and enigmatic – and that exactly this gives it its particular quality – is a commonplace of art history and art criticism. To characterize this lack of explicitness in artistic productions, it has become usual to use concepts from other disciplines, such as ambivalence and polysemy – and particularly the term ambiguity from rhetoric and linguistics.[1] Transferring a discipline-specific term into another discipline is a common practice, but there is also something problematic about it since – as in all translations – transformations and reinterpretations are inevitably connected to it.[2] But the concept can prove to be productive for the new discipline if it is able to make new aspects of an object visible. This is the case with the concept of ambiguity, which is suitable for naming artistic phenomena of equivocation and indistinctness.

* I would like to thank my colleagues and students at universities and art schools in Bamberg, Bochum, Freiburg, Jena, Lucerne, Tübingen, Vienna, and Zurich for discussions that helped me sharpen the clarity of my argument. Special thanks go to Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Michael Lüthy, Rachel Mader, and Miriam Rose. I thank Elisabeth Fritz for her astute revisions, and Margarete Clausen and Anthony Mahler for translating the article into English.

1 Cf. Andreas Emmelheinz: *Ambiguität in Goyas Caprichos*, in: *Spanische Kunst von El Greco bis Dalí*, ed. by Michael Scholz-Hänsel and David Sánchez Cano, Berlin 2015, 283–301; Verena Krieger: *Ambiguität und Engagement. Zur Problematik politischer Kunst in der Moderne*, in: *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit. Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, eb. by Cornelia Klinger, Berlin 2014, 163–192; *Radikal ambivalent. Engagement und Verantwortung in der visuellen Produktion heute*, eb. by Rachel Mader, Zurich 2014; *Erosionen der Rhetorik? Strategien der Ambiguität in den Künsten der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Valeska von Rosen, Wiesbaden 2012; Ulrich Pfisterer: *Akt und Ambiguität*, in: *Erosionen der Rhetorik?* [op. cit.], 29–60; Ulrich Pfisterer: *Bildbegehren und Texterotik. Ambivalente Lektüren weiblicher Aktdarstellungen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Bilder der Liebe. Begehren und Geschlechterverhältnisse in der Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit*, eb. by Doris Guth and Elisabeth Priedl, Bielefeld 2012, 191–217; Marianne Koos: *Das Martyrium der Liebe. Ambiguität in Dosso Dossis "Heiligem Sebastian*," in: *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 38 (2011), 43–73; *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, ed. by Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2010; Valeska von Rosen: *Res et signa. Formen der Ambiguität in der Malerei des Cinquecento*, in: *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, ed. by Inigo Bocken and Tilman Borsche, Munich 2010, 243–274; Valeska von Rosen: *Caravaggio und die Grenzen des Darstellbaren. Ambiguität, Ironie und Performativität in der Malerei um 1600*, Berlin 2009; Dario Gamboni: *Potential Images. Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002; Oskar Bätschmann: *Lot und seine Töchter im Louvre. Metaphorik, Antithetik und Ambiguität in einem niederländischen Gemälde des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Städel-Jahrbuch. Neue Folge* 8 (1981), 159–185.

2 Cf. Ludwig Jäger: *Transkriptivität. Zur medialen Logik der kulturellen Semantik*, in: *Transkribieren. Medien/Lektüren*, ed. by Ludwig Jäger and Georg Stanitzek, Munich 2002, 19–41.

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Yet the question remains as to what exactly is meant when art is characterized as ambiguous. Is it not essentially a tautological statement since being ambiguous belongs to the nature of art? Are there different stages, degrees, or variations of ambiguity in or of art? And how can these be understood? Do artworks function at all analogously to the phenomena of language referred to by the linguistic concept of ambiguity? Or is the designation of art as ambiguous purely metaphorical?

The foundational premise of this article is the conviction that exactly because phenomena of ambiguity substantially characterize contemporary art, this ambiguity should be viewed as a phenomenon that requires analysis. It cannot be the task of art history to resolve the ambiguity of art through logic and disambiguation[3] or simply to note it apologetically or even to double it discursively. Instead, art history should carefully describe the artistic phenomena of ambiguity and investigate what means are used to produce this ambiguity, how it functions, and what different levels and forms exist in its production and reception. To do so, we need both a theoretical conceptualization of artistic ambiguity, which would consider its etymology and conceptual history,[4] and analytical instruments, which would include accurate and reflected terminology.

The goal of this article is to produce these foundations by developing a theoretically grounded and systematic perspective on artistic ambiguity that is supported by the analysis of exemplary artworks. I present terminology and an analytical model that will facilitate in-depth investigations into the ambiguous phenomena of contemporary art.

The argument will unfold in three steps: a theoretical one, an empirical one, and a systematic methodological one. The theoretical part considers the extent to which the concept of ambiguity is transferrable from language to images and the shifts in meaning this transfer entails. In this part, I differentiate systematically be-

[3] For example, Arthur C. Danto understands the artwork as a metaphor for discursive content that is to be disclosed; and Hans Sedlmayr speaks of how there is only one 'right' interpretation (cf. Arthur C. Danto: *The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art*, in: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York 2005, 23-46; Hans Sedlmayr: *Probleme der Interpretation*, in: *Kunst und Wahrheit*, Mittenwald 1978, 96-132, esp. 111-113).

[4] On the etymology and historical semantics of ambiguity, see Matthias Bauer, Joachim Knape, Peter Koch, and Susanne Winkler: *Dimensionen der Ambiguität*, in: *Ambiguität. Special issue. Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 158 (2010), ed. by Wolfgang Klein and Susanne Winkler, 7-75; Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz. Die Struktur antagonistisch-gleichzeitiger Zweiwertigkeit*, in: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz*, ed. by Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer, Würzburg 2009, 7-30; Wolfgang Ullrich and Stephan Meier-Oeser: *Zweideutigkeit, Vieldeutigkeit*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* XII, ed. by Joachim Ritter et al., Basel 2005, col. 1514-1519; Matthias Bauer: *Ambiguität*, in: *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, ed. by Ansgar Nünning, Stuttgart 1998, 12; Wolfgang Ullrich: *Grundrisse einer philosophischen Begriffsgeschichte von Ambiguität*, in: *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 32 (1989), 121-69; Tom Tashiro: *Ambiguity as Aesthetic Principle*, in: *Dictionary of the History of Ideas. Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas* I, ed. by Philip P. Wiener, New York 1973, 48-60; Helmut K. Kohlenberger: *Ambiguität (Amphibolie)*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* I, ed. by Joachim Ritter et al., Darmstadt 1972, col. 802-806.

tween an ambiguity of the image and ambiguity as a defining feature of art. The two may be closely connected, but they cannot be reduced to one another. Building on a summary of the debates in different disciplines, I propose a theoretical conceptualization of aesthetic ambiguity that can conceptually and structurally differentiate between various levels of ambiguity in art. In the second step, I inverse the perspective and turn my attention to the phenomena themselves by submitting four exemplary works of contemporary art to close readings focused on the works' ambiguity. Beyond just ascertaining its presence, I will demonstrate how ambiguity can be precisely described in its inner structure and way of functioning. In the third step, I systematize the results of these individual investigations by extracting four foundational *modi operandi* of aesthetic ambiguity from the four works I analyzed. Based on these modes, I develop an analytical model that makes it terminologically and conceptually possible to describe and examine the specific complex structures of ambiguity in works of art in a nuanced manner.

II. The concept and theory of aesthetic ambiguity

A. From the ambiguity of language to the ambiguity of the image

The transfer of the linguistic term ambiguity to images or artworks creates a series of problems and entails foundational expansions and shifts in meaning. This first concerns the question of its valuation: in ancient rhetoric, the Greek *amphibolia* and Latin *ambiguitas* (from *ambo* meaning both and *ambiguus* meaning equivocal) are clearly pejoratively coded. This is already the case in Plato and Aristotle and remains so in Roman rhetoric.[5] In law, one of the primary fields for the application of rhetoric, perspicuity (*perspicuitas*) and unambiguity are to be pursued especially, and equivocation and obscurity (*obscuritas*) are to be avoided since they produce unintended misunderstandings and conflicts (for example, when writing a will or a law). The Roman rhetorician Quintilian (first century) was the first to deal with the topic systematically.[6] In his teachings on oratory, he devotes a whole chapter to ambiguity, in which he offers advice on avoiding it but also notes that it represents an unavoidable quality of language. Furthermore, a whole book of his rhetoric is devoted to irony, which is an expanded form of ambiguous speech. There he describes the various possibilities and potentials of indistinct speech (without using the concept of ambiguity). By reflecting on the strategic use of ambiguity in speech,[7] Quintilian implicitly allows for a positive valuation of it, but this is only

[5] Cf. Ullrich and Meier-Oeser: *Zweideutigkeit, Vieldeutigkeit* [op. cit.]; Roland Bernecker and Thomas Steinfeld: *Amphibolie, Ambiguität*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. by Wolfgang Ueding, Tübingen 1992, col. 436–444.

[6] Cf. Quintilian: *The Orator's Education* III–IV, trans. and ed. by Donald A. Russell, Cambridge/Mass. 2002, esp. books 7–9.

[7] Cf. Bauer, Knape, Koch, and Winkler: *Dimensionen der Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 24–26.

explicitly undertaken for the first time in the art-oriented discourse of baroque rhetoric.[8]

The negative valuation of ambiguity is first completely overcome in modern linguistics, which adopted the concept from rhetoric and further differentiated it. Linguistics views ambiguity as a constitutive quality of natural speech that fundamentally contributes to the ability of language to be used flexibly.[9] Linguistics differentiates between various types of ambiguity, in particular phonetic, orthographic, lexical, and syntactic ambiguity, and the last two encompass further subcategories.[10] The variety of ambiguous phenomena increases if one takes the different structural levels of language into account.[11] Linguistics adopted the differentiation between equivocation and vagueness from classical rhetoric, but the distinction itself proves to be fuzzy upon closer inspection.[12] In addition, ambiguity does not only concern the structure of language but also its pragmatics: in literary language but also in everyday communication such as international diplomacy, ambiguity is produced and made productive either consciously or unconsciously.[13] In the end, the concept of ambiguity therefore serves in linguistics, as Veronika Ehrich notes, in a broad sense as a "generic term for all varieties of nonexplicitness."[14]

While the concept of ambiguity thus already itself exhibits a certain ambiguity when it concerns language – since it refers to a multitude of different phenomena on different levels of language and is used both in a narrow and a broad sense – this complexity increases as soon as one transfers the concept to images (and here I just mean images in general; I will first discuss artworks in the second step). Scholars in perceptual psychology and visual studies therefore debate the extent to which there is an ambiguity in images that is analogous to language, and the views differ considerably.

8 Cf. Renate Lachmann: *Synkretismus als Provokation von Stil*, in: *Stil. Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, Frankfurt/M. 1986, 541–558, esp. 546–557.

9 Cf. Manfred Pinkal: *Vagheit und Ambiguität (Vagueness and Ambiguity)*, in: *Semantik. Ein internationales Handbuch der zeitgenössischen Forschung*, ed. by Arnim von Stechow and Dieter Wunderlich, Berlin 1991, 250–269.

10 Lexical ambiguity is differentiated into homonymy and polysemy, and syntactic ambiguity is differentiated into attachment ambiguity, scope ambiguity, and referential and functional equivocation (cf. Pinkal: *Vagheit und Ambiguität* [op. cit.], esp. 263 f.).

11 Cf. Bauer, Knape, Koch, and Winkler: *Dimensionen der Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 40–64.

12 Cf. Pinkal: *Vagheit und Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 264–266.

13 On ambiguity and indirectness as social techniques, see, from an ethnological perspective, Birgit Mattausch: *Die Kunst der Ambiguität. Indirekte Kommunikation im historischen Äthiopien und den Gäbrä-Hanna-Anekdoten*, Wiesbaden 2006, 1–19.

14 Veronika Ehrich: *Ambiguität aus(sc)halten. Strategien der Vermeidung und Ausbeutung von Ambiguität Paper presented at the graduate day of the DFG-Graduiertenkollegs 1808 Ambiguität: Produktion und Rezeption at the University of Tübingen, 6-8 February 2015*, unpublished manuscript, 2, a publication is planned. Unless otherwise noted, Anthony Mahler translated all citations into English.

The analogy to linguistic ambiguity that first suggests itself – if one understands linguistic ambiguity in the narrow sense as lexical ambiguity (for example 'bank' or 'match') – is the optical illusion. Optical illusions are images that display another interpretation in addition to the interpretation one makes at first sight; they are not to be confused with reversible figures, which also offer two different interpretations, but they are not perceivable at the same time and, instead, can only be realized through a change in the orientation of perception. Optical illusions have a long history and role in many cultures. On the basis of their ambiguity, they often traditionally have cultic, occult, or subversive functions; they frequently thematize something sexual or something that is politically or religiously forbidden. Since early modernity, they have also served as curiosities for entertainment.[15] Finally, optical illusions frequently enter into art. In European history, particular high points in the cultural valuation of optical illusions include early modernity, especially mannerism, and the decades around 1800 when puzzles of all kinds, such as charades, were especially popular. Optical illusions particularly challenge the activity of the viewer. Their doubled 'readability' is based on two factors: (1) optical illusions contain certain qualities within the image that make them ambiguous; and (2) the viewer must activate these different interpretative options by actively looking at them with imagination, knowledge, and experience as well as the conscious decision to move between the different interpretations or their combination. Sometimes textual explanations, which can be like instructions as well as witty and puzzling allusions, also help the viewer along. Well-known examples of optical illusions include Giuseppe Arcimboldo's anthropomorphic still lifes and the popular print *The Tomb And Shade of Napoleon. From A Natural Curiosity At St Helena* by Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives (19th century).

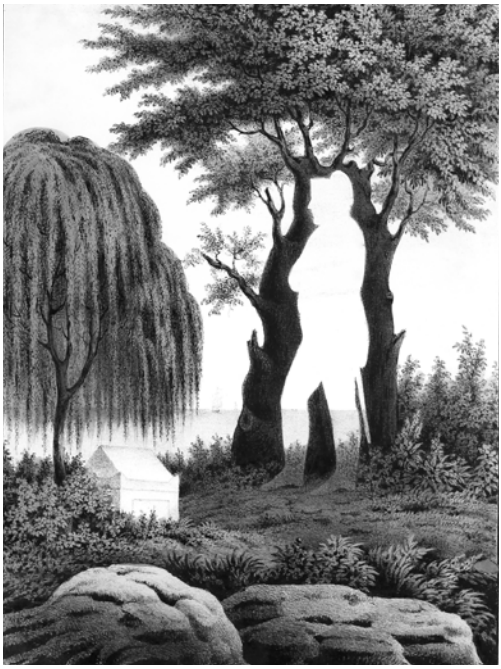


fig. 1: Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives: *The Tomb And Shade of Napoleon. From A Natural Curiosity At St Helena.* Mid-19th-century. Hand-colored lithograph. 28 x 42 cm. Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts.

15 Cf. Jean-Hubert Martin: *Doppelbilder*, in: *Das endlose Rätsel. Dalí und die Magier der Mehrdeutigkeit*, ed. by Jean-Hubert Martin and Stephan Andreae, Ostfildern-Ruit 2003, 11-28, catalogue for an exhibition at the Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.

In addition to optical illusions, there are also other types of equivocal pictures, including anamorphic images, such as in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533); Droodles, which are based on extreme abstractions of what is represented; impossible figures, such as the Penrose steps and M. C. Escher's prints; and reversible figures, which are also called reversible images or ambiguous images. There are three subcategories of reversible figures: (1) a change in the distribution of figure and ground, such as in Rubin's vase; (2) an inversion of the relations of depth, such as in the Necker cube; and (3) a change in orientation (such as in the rabbit-duck illusion).[16]

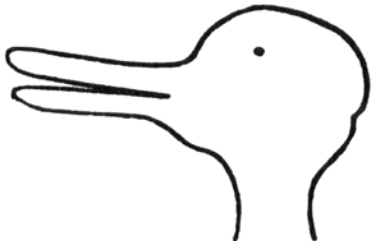


fig. 2: *Rabbit-duck illusion.* From Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

This third type is the most interesting in our context because, whereas the illusion in the other two types of reversible figures has to do with logical-geometric phenomena, in this case, the viewer chooses the content. In recent Anglo-Saxon literature, this type is thus referred to as a 'meaning reversal.'[17] In my view, Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of aspect change is even more apt since it names the decision of the viewer to choose which aspect of the image to concentrate on. But Wittgenstein uses the concept in a more comprehensive sense, referring not just to this third subcategory of reversible figures. Instead, reversible figures serve Wittgenstein only as a starting point to think more fundamentally about images.[18] I will return to this point later.

Now, to what extent can these types of images be described as analogous to linguistic ambiguity? If one takes as a basis the narrower concept of ambiguity from linguistics, which refers to the structure of language, then optical illusions are not ambiguous since one can typically perceive both of their interpretations at once. Thus, one sees both a bust portrait and fruit at the same time in Arcimboldo's cycle of the *Four Seasons* (1563). And once one has found Napoleon standing between the trees next to his own grave in *Napoleon's Grave*, then one can no longer not notice him. In contrast, reversible figures like the rabbit-duck illusion force the viewer to choose between two viewing options. One either sees the rabbit or the duck – seeing both at the same time is impossible. The reversible figure is therefore the actual counterpart in images to linguistic ambiguity since, with an ambiguous word like

16 This categorization comes from Ottilie Redslob: *Über Sättigung gesehener Bewegungsrichtung*, in: *Psychologische Forschung* 22 (1938), 211-237, cited in Hermann Kalkofen: *Inversion und Ambiguität. Ein Kapitel aus der psychologischen Optik*, in: *IMAGE* 3 (2006), 25-42, 31.

17 Cf. Gerald M. Long and Thomas C. Toppino: *Multiple Representations of the Same Reversible Figure. Implications for Cognitive Decisional Interpretations*, in: *Perception* 10 (1981), 231-234, cited in Kalkofen: *Inversion und Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 31.

18 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, Chichester ^{4}2009, esp. 203^{e}-225^{e}, esp. 205^{e}-6^{e}, 211^{e}, 223^{3}-24^{e}.

'bank,' one also can only mean and understand one of the two interpretations at once and never both together.[19] The perceptual psychologist Hermann Kalkofen thus strictly differentiates between optical illusions and ambiguity, and he only allows the special type of the reversible figure to qualify as an ambiguous image.[20] In contrast, Nicolas Romanacci speaks of a 'pictorial ambiguity' that refers to many various phenomena of indistinctness in pictures, including also other forms of obscuration such as blurriness and abstraction in addition to reversible figures.[21] The art historian James Elkins supports an even more broadly conceived notion of ambiguity. He lists a series of different 'arenas' for ambiguity in images, and he not only includes specific pictorial means and structures but also semantic aspects such as psychological complexity, discursive context, and so on. He emphasizes that, in the end, the number of these arenas is endless.[22]

These opposing positions on ambiguity in images are, in a certain way, reflected in the different perspectives in linguistics, in which both a very narrow (referring to certain types of linguistic signs) and a very broad (referring to all the phenomena of linguistic nonexplicitness) concept of ambiguity exist. Both fields accordingly face the same problem: ambiguity unfolds an enormous potential and incomprehensible variety in the usage of language, which provides numerous starting points for research. In contrast, lexical ambiguity is a very specialized and, in its appearances, readily comprehensible phenomenon, which presents few questions. It is exactly the same with ambiguity in images: images have an immense spectrum of possibilities for producing nonexplicitness. This spectrum largely resists a comprehensive overview and includes – to only name some important elements and techniques – pictorial means (color, line, perspective, and so on), iconographic contradictions, hybrid combinations of different media, and many other possibilities. Within this diversity in the ways that ambiguity appears and functions in images, the reversible figure is only a very special and rare case, and it is of very limited relevance for understanding the entire range of the phenomena.

Against this background, a narrowly conceived notion of ambiguity in images (just like a narrowly conceived notion of ambiguity in language) proves to be of little help; instead, one should understand the concept of ambiguity related to images (just as the ambiguity related to language) in the broad sense of nonexplicitness.[23] It is, furthermore, not very productive to focus investigations of ambiguity

[19] Of course, the double meaning of a concept can also be consciously employed and simultaneously invoked, such as in lyric poetry, jokes, political rhetoric, and so on, but this is a case of the pragmatics of language and not the structure of language.

[20] Cf. Kalkofen: *Inversion und Ambiguität* [op. cit.].

[21] Cf. Nicolas Romanacci: *Pictorial Ambiguity. Approaching "Applied Cognitive Aesthetics" from a Philosophical Point of View*, in: *IMAGE* 10 (2009), 12–40.

[22] Cf. James Elkins: *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origin of Pictorial Complexity*, New York 1999, 96–110.

[23] I thus support a different position than some literary scholars who favor a narrow definition of ambiguity (cf. Benjamin Specht: *Polyvalenz – Autonomieästhetik – Kanon. Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von Textstruktur und historischer Ästhetik bei der Herausbildung des deutschsprachigen*

in images on special types of equivocal images such as reversible figures. Not only are there other important groups of nonexplicit images, such as blurry images[24] and what Dario Gamboni calls 'potential images',[25] whose degree of abstraction extends right up to the limit of still being able to recognize objects, which makes these images particularly stimulating for the imagination. But these images, too, only represent a special variety of ambiguity in images, whose potential is much more extensive. It is productive to pose the question about the ambiguity of images much more fundamentally.

B. From the ambiguity of the image to the ambiguity of art

The pioneer for such fundamental reflections is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who primarily deals with language but also with ambiguity in images in his *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953). Wittgenstein's reflections on the theory of the image are often only tied to the rabbit-duck illusion, which he discusses. They are thereby reduced to the reversible figure, but they actually go well beyond it. As already mentioned, the concept of the change of aspect, which he introduces, is of central importance in our context. According to Wittgenstein, it is possible to see two or more aspects in one image.[26] That means that depending on who is viewing it, or how or when it is being viewed, one can see something different in one and the same image. At the same time, it is also possible to switch between these different aspects. Wittgenstein uses the rabbit-duck illusion as an example of this, but he does not stop at this most simple and radical form of changing aspects; rather, he also discusses other variants. As further examples he names, among other things, "a jumble of meaningless lines, and only after some effort do we see it as, say, a picture of a landscape,"[27] and a triangle that can be seen, alternatively, "as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing, […] as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object […], as a half parallelogram, and as various other things."[28] What is noteworthy about these examples is that they are precisely not reversible figures, which fix one's view on two options and always only allow one of the two to be perceived; instead, a freer (although not arbitrary) activity of the imagination is possible and required here.

Literaturkanons, in: *Kanon, Wertung und Vermittlung. Literatur in der Wissensgesellschaft*, ed. by Matthias Beilein, Claudia Stockinger, and Simone Winko, Berlin 2011, 19–39; Berndt and Kammer: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz* [op. cit.]; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: *The Concept of Ambiguity. The Example of James*, London 1977, 9).

24 Cf. Wolfgang Ullrich: *Die Geschichte der Unschärfe*, Berlin 2002.

25 Cf. Gamboni: *Potential Images* [op. cit.].

26 Cf. Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* [op. cit.], esp. 203e–225e.

27 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Zettel*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, Oxford ²1981, 33.

28 Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* [op. cit.], 200e.

According to Wittgenstein, seeing aspect is namely not about pure perception but rather about a connection between seeing and thinking;[29] it thus has a conceptual character. Changes of aspect are consequently not primarily a quality of the image but, above all, a mental activity of the viewer: the image must make changes of aspect possible – it must provide the structural preconditions for them – but the viewer must carry them out; otherwise they do not exist.

Thus, while Wittgenstein does not use the concept of ambiguity, he does describe the different varieties of nonexplicitness in images, which can appear both in the form of a tipping one way or the other between opposing interpretations and in the form of abstraction that stimulates the imagination. More important than the difference between both variants is their commonality, which consists in how they set an active process of perception and meaning-making – the seeing of aspect – into motion in the viewer. Ambiguity in images thereby also becomes essentially a question of reception.

Wittgenstein's image theory has been formative for image studies up to today; in applying his approach, authors have expanded it – but they have also made it narrower in an unfortunate way. Ernst Gombrich provided the earliest reception of Wittgenstein in his book *Art and Illusion* (1959), which deals with the "psychology of pictorial representation" from an art-historical perspective.[30] Gombrich shows that images fundamentally produce illusions and do so in a variety of ways that change throughout history. A whole chapter is devoted to the ambiguity created by linear perspective: when, for example, linear shortening or blue staining engender the impression of spatial depth, then the illusion of three-dimensionality is produced on a two-dimensional surface. As a consequence, the perfectly illusionistic image, which seems to be particularly true to nature, is actually the height of visual ambiguity because it is a piece of colored canvas that is perceived as a table or as Madonna.[31] From observations such as this one, Gombrich derives the general assessment that a double structure is fundamentally characteristic of all images: on the one hand, they are a material thing (canvas, paint) and can be perceived as such; on the other, they are what they show (an illusion). According to his conception, viewers can always only see one or the other.[32] We have thus arrived again at the tipping effect: according to Gombrich, not only the reversible figure but every image forces us to change aspects. Thus, whereas Wittgenstein started with the rabbit-duck illusion and came to an expanded understanding of changes of aspect, Gombrich goes precisely in the opposite direction and declares the reversible figure as a model of the image as such.

The philosopher Richard Wollheim contradicts Gombrich emphatically. He also ascertains a fundamental double structure in images, whose perception he therefore

[29] Cf. ibid., 207e.

[30] Cf. E. H. Gombrich: *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. Millennium ed. with a new preface by the author.* Princeton 2000.

[31] Cf. ibid., 242-287.

[32] Cf. ibid., 236-238.

describes as twofold,[33] but he characterizes both possible ways of perceiving images differently than Gombrich. On the one hand, there is 'seeing-as', the perception of what is shown in the image as a real object; on the other, 'seeing-in', the perception of what is presented in the image as representation. Whereas seeing-as does not constitute a special capacity of perception but rather a form of immediately perceiving existing things, seeing-in requires imagination. Seeing-as corresponds to everyday seeing; seeing-in, in contrast, is true aesthetic perception. Wollheim refers to it as the seeing appropriate to representations ('representational seeing').[34] For Wollheim, there are thus two fundamentally different modes of perception. At the same time, he insists – and in this he vigorously criticizes Gombrich – that both modes of perception do not exclude one another. When viewing an image, one does not have to switch back and forth at all between both options, as one does with a reversible figure; instead, seeing-in simultaneously involves or is based on the perceptual option of seeing-as, which is not possible the other way around. Furthermore, exactly this connection of both options of perceiving characterizes "the cultivation of a special kind of visual experience" [35] that seeing-in performs. Gombrich and Wollheim speak of images generally, but both are, in the end, concerned with artistic images. They are guided in this by different paradigms: Gombrich, who comes from Renaissance studies, mainly considers representational and perspectival images. He deals with cubist painting as a special case. Wollheim's conception of aesthetic perception also includes, in contrast, contemporary abstractionism.[36] While in Gombrich the materiality of the image appears as the hidden backside of the illusionistic pictorial object, in Wollheim what the image shows is not necessarily illusionistic but rather attains autonomous aesthetic value.

As a first synopsis of what I have covered so far, I can emphasize at this point that the question of ambiguity in images is to be differentiated according to multiple factors. First, it is not about the characteristics of particular types of images but rather about a fundamental character of the image as such: since, as an image, it both *is* something and *shows* something,[37] and because what it shows is viewable

[33] Cf. Richard Wollheim: *Seeing-As, Seeing-In, and Pictorial Representation*, in: *Art and Its Objects. Second Edition with Six Supplementary Essays*, Cambridge 2000, 205-226.

[34] Cf. ibid., 205, 218 f. A certain terminological confusion results from the fact that not Wollheim's concept of seeing-as but rather his concept of seeing-in corresponds (though it is also not identical) with Wittgenstein's seeing-as: the seeing aspect (cf. Michael Lüthy: *Die Produktion der modernen Kunst. Habilitation manuscript. Freie Universität Berlin*, 2009, 111-119, a publication is planned for 2019 with diaphanes in Zurich).

[35] Wollheim: *Seeing-As, Seeing-In, and Pictorial Representation* [op. cit.], 223.

[36] He thus also uses Jasper Johns's flag pictures as an example (cf. ibid., 225 f.). On the coincidence of Wollheim's picture theory and contemporary developments in art, see Stefan Neuner: *Die Zweiheit des Bildes. Jasper Johns, Richard Wollheim und Ludwig Wittgensteins Problem des "Sehen-als,"* in: *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science, and the Arts. Proceedings of the 33rd International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg* I, ed. by Richard Heinrich, Elisabeth Nemeth, Wolfram Pichler, and David Wagner, Berlin 2011, 219-250.

[37] In recent image theory and visual studies, various authors have aptly captured the charac-

but not present, it requires a double perception. Thus, the reception of the image becomes central: the seeing of aspect is the decisive process in which pictorial ambiguity becomes manifest. But this seeing aspect is, third, not only an optical but also essentially a mental act. It requires not only a capacity to think but also the imagination. Fourth, seeing aspect can not only or not primarily be a change between or a succession of different aspects of the image; rather, it is also a simultaneous perception of different aspects. Precisely this simultaneity is characteristic for the perception of images. And finally, fifth – this is not thematized by any of the authors named so far, but it is of central importance – the aspects one can see are historically and socially determined, and seeing aspect is thus fundamentally subject to historical change.

Considering that ambiguity is constitutive of images and that the adequate perception of this ambiguous structure is constitutive for the perception of images, it may be surprising that the ambiguity of images has only played a minor role in visual studies since the 1980s. One can, however, read Gottfried Boehm's image theory – although he does not use the concept – as a theory of the ambiguity of the image.[38] Like Gombrich and Wollheim, Boehm ascertains an essential double structure of the image: every image is characterized by a fundamental contrast between the vivid whole of the image and the singular attributes that can be perceived, such as color, form, figure, and so on. He refers to this "foundational visual contrast" as "iconic difference;" he sees it as constitutive of every image.[39] From it one can deduce – this is an expansion compared with the other authors named so far – numerous further contrasts that we encounter in images, such as the contrasts of surface versus spatial depth, opacity versus transparency, detail versus totality, illusion versus facture, and so on. The specific quality of the iconic develops, according to Boehm, within the "tense relationship" between both poles. While the singular image may emphasize one or the other pole, a "strong image" is characterized by maintaining a tension-filled contrast.[40]

Iconic difference is thus, at first, a quality of all images. But some images intensify it, which occurs through an intentional artistic decision. An image becomes an artwork when it optimizes iconic difference by staging it.[41] One can see Jasper Johns's famous painting *Flag* (1954/1955) as a classic example (already offered by Wollheim) for such a showcasing of iconic difference.

ter of the image with the concept of *showing* (cf. Lambert Wiesing: *Sehen lassen. Die Praxis des Zeigens*, Berlin 2013; Gottfried Boehm: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin 2007, an English translation is planned for publication in 2019 with Indiana University Press).

38 Cf. Gottfried Boehm: *Ikonische Differenz*, in: *Rheinsprung 11. Zeitschrift für Bildkritik* 1 (2011), 171-178; Boehm: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen* [op. cit.], 208-211; Gottfried Boehm: *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder*, in: *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm, Munich 1994, 11-38. Boehm's thoughts on iconic difference are, of course, not limited to ascertaining ambiguity, but I will consider them from this perspective here.

39 Boehm: *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder* [op. cit.], 30-32.

40 Ibid., 32-35, citations on 34 f.

41 Cf. ibid., 30.

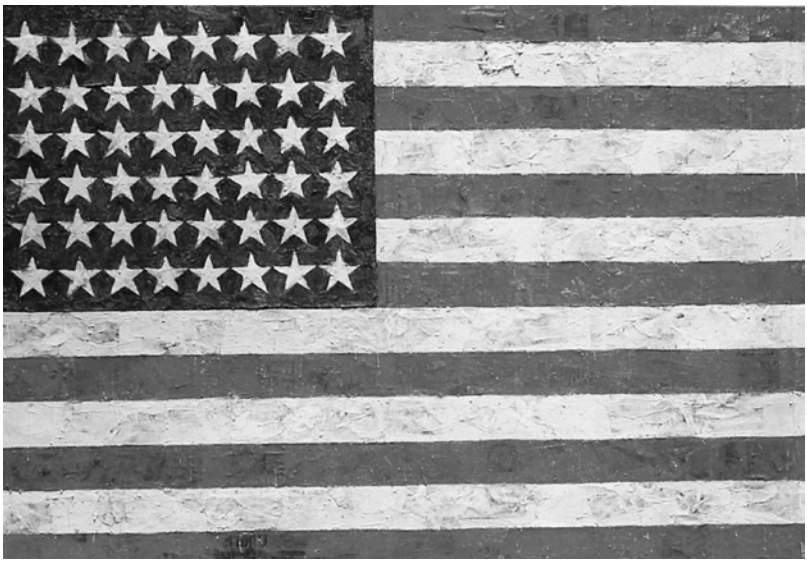


fig. 3: Jasper Johns: *Flag* (1954/1955). Encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood. 107,3 x 153,8 cm. Museum of Modern Art New York.

The essential character of this painting consists in how it is readable in two ways: on the one hand as a representation of the motif of the American flag, and on the other as an autonomous painting.[42] It is thus both at the same time: a flag and a painting, an image and an object, illusionistic and material. Illusionistic painting usually makes this hybrid status of imagehood and objecthood, of representation and material, which belongs to every image, invisible by moving the pictorial illusion into the foreground. *Flag*, in contrast, explicitly thematizes this ambiguity.[43] This is achieved through a double artifice: first, by making the shape of the flag one and the same with the picture plane; and, second, by intensifying both aspects of the work. For the motif of the flag is aesthetically prominent and loaded as a symbol with numerous associations; at the same time, the unusual materiality and technique of the work especially draw attention to themselves. It is made of newspaper that has been glued on top of each other in layers. On top of the newspaper, multiple layers of paint have been applied in a variation of the ancient technique of encaustic.

[42] Jasper Johns himself rhetorically asked: 'Is it a flag or is it a painting?' (cf. Alan R. Solomon: *Jasper Johns*, in: Jasper Johns: *Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture 1954-1964*, London 1964, 4-25, 9, catalogue published for an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London). John Cage and Alan R. Solomon, who contribute the essays to this catalogue, offer different answers to this question (cf. John Cage: *Jasper Johns. Stories and Ideas*, in: *Jasper Johns: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture 1954-1964*, London 1964, 26-35).

[43] René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929) accomplishes this through other means but just as explicitly with the figure of a pipe and the text "Ceci n'est pas une pipe."

Since wax exhibits a particular surface structure and transparency, and thus lets the text and pictorial motifs of the newspapers show through it allusively, *Flag* looks at first glance like an oil painting but proves to be something else entirely at second glance. Both poles of the work – its representational and material aspects – are thus forced, indeed they are brought into position against one another. By guiding their gaze back and forth, *Flag* challenges viewers to grasp this constant movement between the two polar aspects of the work as a central facet of its reception. Jasper Johns's *Flag* exposes its own ambiguity so much that this becomes its actual theme.

If one applies Boehm's theory of iconic difference to this work, then one aptly captures the structure of the work but not its semantic content. For iconic difference is – as Michael Lüthy correctly states – not itself the meaning of the image but rather the precondition for its genesis.[44] If one determines along these lines that *Flag* is about the principle of representation and thus about the problem that the flag object represented in the image is simultaneously present but also absent, and that the motif of the flag (similar to the other motifs Johns uses like numbers and dart boards) is not a natural object but rather itself already a symbol created by humans,[45] then *Flag* is a self-reflection of the image. But as such, the work also exceeds Boehm's theory, which refers exclusively to the visual.

Boehm's category of iconic difference applies, in the end, to every image; it thereby remains implicit and general. But the fundamental contrast that *Flag* is based on is explicit and specific. For the ambiguity of this work is not limited to iconic difference, which can be evoked in all kinds of different ways; instead, the ambiguity of *Flag* results from the artist's having chosen as the object of the image an object that is itself an image. By intentionally adjusting the format of the picture to the format of the depicted object and through the choice of title – which, in turn, reproduces this ambiguous structure (is it a title or does it refer to a thing?) – the relationship of the picture and the depicted object becomes fundamentally problematic. The ambiguity of *Flag* thus not only operates on the visual level but also has a conceptual dimension. The visual moment plays a constitutive role for this dimension, but the meaning of ambiguity in the work exceeds the purely visual.

This conceptual dimension of oscillating between polar aspects in *Flag* (as generally is the case in works of visual art) can be better understood with Wittgenstein. It has proven to be markedly disadvantageous that the reception of Wittgenstein's reflections in visual studies has reduced them to a pure image theory.[46] Wittgenstein's thoughts about the perception of images are not primarily or exclusively directed at the visual. As I have already mentioned, he defines seeing aspect not only as a purely optical phenomenon but as a connection of seeing and thinking; it

44 Cf. Lüthy: *Die Produktion der modernen Kunst* [op. cit.], 182.

45 Cf. Leo Steinberg: *Jasper Johns. The First Seven Years of His Art*, in: Leo Steinberg: *Other Criteria. Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Chicago 2007, 17–54, esp. 26 f.

46 The following remarks are stimulated by indispensable insights of Michael Lüthy, who conducted a fundamental rereading of Wittgenstein that made him productive for art history on an entirely new and expanded basis (cf. Lüthy: *Die Produktion der modernen Kunst* [op. cit.], 61–195).

thus has a conceptual character. Viewed in this context, Jasper Johns's *Flag* makes a change of aspect possible; indeed, it suggests the change of aspect to the viewer. In contrast to the reversible figure, this artwork does not, however, simply produce an optical switching effect; rather, it has conceptual content (flag versus painterly facture, reflection over representation). Once one has grasped this, then one also no longer has to switch back and forth between the two viewing options; instead one experiences them simultaneously. The fact that *Flag* showcases and intensifies the polarity of the aspects does not alone determine its character as an artwork; this autoreflective move does so as well.

The question of the ambiguity of the image thus becomes a question of the artistic character of pictorial ambiguity. Wittgenstein sees the production of aspect change as a fundamental characteristic of artworks and, parallel to that, the ability to see aspect as fundamental to aesthetic reception. Artworks are artworks because they produce changes of aspect; that is, they invite intensive seeing of aspect and multiple changes of aspect.[47] At the same time, Wittgenstein transfers his theory to other artistic forms of articulation: music and literature can also summon experiences of aspect change.[48] It is thus not at all a privilege of the image.

Lüthy has convincingly shown that Wittgenstein's theory is a theory of art – and not only a theory of pictorial perception as is usually assumed. According to Lüthy, Wittgenstein's theory of aspect unfolds its actual productivity precisely with regard to modern art since "dynamizations of aspect change" occur in modernism.[49] What he means is that modern aesthetic practice is essentially oriented to producing aspect changes – moreover: "Provoking a change of aspect becomes [in modernism] an actual goal of art, and experiencing it becomes the origin of endowing meaning in and through the work."[50] I would like to add: enabling a change of aspect in an artwork is nothing other than the artistic production of ambiguity (which can occur in a work on many different levels) – and this already happens in early modern age, but it is intentionally amplified in modern and contemporary art to a great degree.[51] Correspondingly, the dynamization of aspect change in modern and contemporary art essentially consists in an intensified production of ambiguous phenomena. Wittgenstein's aspect theory proves to be apt for theoretically grasping the ambiguous phenomena in visual art because, first, it understands them as

47 Cf. Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* [op. cit.], 224^{e} f.; Lüthy: *Die Produktion der modernen Kunst* [op. cit.], 78–111.

48 Cf. Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* [op. cit.], 220^{e} f., 225^{e}, and passim.

49 Lüthy: *Die Produktion der modernen Kunst* [op. cit.], 124.

50 Ibid., 123.

51 Examples of the intentional use of ambiguity in early modern art are provided by, above all *Erosionen der Rhetorik?*[op. cit.]; Pfisterer: *Akt und Ambiguität* [op. cit.]; Pfisterer: *Bildbegehren und Texterotik* [op. cit.]; von Rosen: *Res et signa* [op. cit.]; von Rosen: *Caravaggio und die Grenzen des Darstellbaren* [op. cit.]. On ambiguity in modern and contemporary art, see, among others Krieger: *Ambiguität und Engagement* [op. cit.]; *Radikal ambivalent* [op. cit.]; *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.]; Gamboni: *Potential images* [op. cit.].

something genuinely artistic, and, second, it reflects their diversity. The theory of aspect thus does justice to the fact that art produces entirely heterogeneous types of ambiguity.

With that I have come to my second synopsis. It has been shown that images have and can make perceivable various aspects. These consist in, first, the polar tension between the image as material object and its pictoriality, but beyond that, numerous other aspects are possible, which often, but do not necessarily, stand in opposition. All images have this quality and ability, but certain types of images – such as optical illusions, blurry images, images that play with visual equivocality, or images on the border of abstraction – produce special forms of ambiguity. The ambiguity of images is manifested, however, not only on the level of visual perception but also usually on a mental level. Artworks connect both levels of ambiguity and make this connection productive for aesthetic experience.

Reflecting on the pictorial ambiguity has thus lead us, in the end, to the ambiguity of the artwork. But just as not every image is an artwork, pictorial ambiguity is not identical with the ambiguity of an artwork. Instead – as the example of Jasper Johns's *Flag* showed – the ambiguity of art is also essentially generated, but not necessarily and not exclusively, through pictorial ambiguity. For the ambiguity of art, pictorial ambiguity has an ancillary though also often central function, but it alone does not constitute artistic ambiguity. Beyond the purely visual, artistic ambiguity also has a conceptual dimension – it is aesthetically shaped, intensified, complexified, cultivated ambiguity. To make this difference clear and to emphasize the specificity of artistic ambiguity, I believe a conceptual demarcation is required. Following Ernst Kris and Abraham Kaplan, I will refer to the ambiguity of (and in) art as aesthetic ambiguity.[52]

C. Ambiguity as a quality of art

If one discusses aesthetic ambiguity, one moves from the terrain of image theory to that of philosophical aesthetics. Equivocal and indeterminate phenomena in art have been thought about at least since antiquity, and early Christian allegoresis and, based on it, the medieval teaching of the fourfold meaning of scripture represent early forms for conceptualizing ambiguity.[53] In early modernity, there is, as Ulrich Pfisterer has shown, a consciousness for different forms of aesthetic

[52] Cf. Ernst Kris and Abraham Kaplan: *Aesthetic Ambiguity*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8/3 (1948), 415–435; reprinted in Ernst Kris: *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, New York 1952, 243–264.

[53] Cf. Tashiro: *Ambiguity as Aesthetic Principle* [op. cit.], 48–54. On the prehistory of the discourse about the ambiguous and enigmatic nature of the artwork around 1800, also see Bernd Brunemeier: *Vieldeutigkeit und Rätselhaftigkeit. Die semantische Qualität und Kommunikativitätsfunktion des Kunstwerks in der Poetik und Ästhetik der Goethezeit*, Amsterdam 1983, 12–41.

ambiguity in terms of both the problems that result from it and their potential.[54] In baroque rhetoric, ambiguity loses its negative status, and forms of obscuring meaning actually appear desirable. An entire set of instruments of linguistic ambiguity is developed for this. Although art discourse still occurs in the context of rhetorical teachings, the positive valuation of offences against decorum subverts its traditional principals.[55]

But indeterminacy first becomes a central feature of the aesthetic and the independent epistemological potential ascribed to it with the founding of philosophical aesthetics by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who recognizes 'clear and confused' sensual perception as an independent level of knowledge.[56] Immanuel Kant took up these thoughts in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) and developed them further: since the "aesthetic idea" opens "the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations," it exceeds determinate thoughts, and exactly that constitutes its abundance.[57] On this basis and using the concepts of indeterminacy, equivocality, and mysteriousness, art discourse around 1800 elevates aesthetic ambiguity in its different varieties to a foundational feature of poetry and art.[58] The early Jena romantics represent the most radical position of this discourse. For them, it is not just about indeterminacy as a quality of judgments of taste and, therefore, of the aesthetic cognitive faculty of the subject; instead, in indeterminacy they see a characteristic of the poetic artwork itself, which is, furthermore, its actual quality and potential. What is indeterminate, is potentially inexhaustible; moreover, a deepened truth function lies in its enigmatic nature.[59] Aesthetic ambiguity thus at-

[54] Cf. Pfisterer: *Akt und Ambiguität* [op. cit.].

[55] Cf. Lachmann: *Synkretismus als Provokation von Stil* [op. cit.].

[56] Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: *Ästhetik*, trans. and ed. by Dagmar Mirbach, Hamburg 2007; Gottfried Gabriel: *Bestimmte Unbestimmtheit – in der ästhetischen Erkenntnis und im ästhetischen Urteil*, in: *Das unendliche Kunstwerk. Von der Bestimmtheit des Unbestimmten in der ästhetischen Erfahrung*, ed. by Gerhard Gamm and Eva Schürmann, Frankfurt/M. 2007, 141–156.

[57] Cf. Immanuel Kant: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. by Paul Guyer, Cambridge 2000, 191–193, quoted passage on 193.

[58] On this in more detail, see Hilmar Frank: *Aussichten ins Unermessliche. Perspektivität und Sinnoffenheit bei Caspar David Friedrich*, Berlin 2004; Christoph Bode: *Ästhetik der Ambiguität. Zu Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne*, Tübingen 1988; Brunemeier: *Vieldeutigkeit und Rätselhaftigkeit* [op. cit.]; Bernd W. Seiler: *Vieldeutigkeit und Deutungsvielfalt oder: das Problem der Beliebigkeit im Umgang mit Literatur*, in: *Der Deutschunterricht* 34/6 (1982), 87–104.

[59] "A poem must be quite *inexhaustible*, like a person and a good saying." (Novalis: *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Margaret Mahony Stoljar, Albany 1997, 161) This means that it should be infinitely interpretable; the process of interpretation always remains in motion. The poetic artwork is therefore inscrutable, enigmatic, and mysterious. August Wilhelm Schlegel characterizes the novel in his history of classical literature as "endlessly formed art" that expresses itself in "symbols that are always clear and always enigmatic." (August Wilhelm Schlegel: *Geschichte der klassischen Literatur*, in: *Kritische Schriften und Briefe* III, ed. by Edgar Lohner, Stuttgart 1962, 25) Goethe also does not remain untouched by this thought, despite a certain critical distance to the early romantics: "These are precisely the most beautiful symbols, which allow multiple interpretations." (Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Wilhelm Tischbeins Idyllen*, in: *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche* XXI: *Ästhetische Schriften. 1821–1824. Über Kunst und*

tained a normative dimension that would become constitutive for modernism and continue to have an effect up to this day. Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists of art, from Theodor W. Adorno to Jacques Rancière, consider ambiguity – not necessarily the concept but its meaning – to be an elementary quality and foundational potential of art.[60] This normativization of aesthetic ambiguity also gained acceptance in art criticism and, finally, in everyday consciousness. Last but not least, it is also confirmed by the experimentally attained finding that images experienced as ambiguous – at least when they are viewed in the context of a museum – receive more interest and attention.[61]

This raises numerous new questions: What possibilities are there for differentiating terminologically and analytically between the huge number of forms in which aesthetic ambiguity appears, ranging from equivocation to indeterminacy? If aesthetic ambiguity has a normative character, then to what extent can there be nonambiguous art? Is there a historicity of aesthetic ambiguity and how can it be determined? And finally: (how) can one interpret aesthetic ambiguity (at all)? Twentieth- and twenty-first-century art history, literary studies, and philosophical aesthetics offer different answers to these questions.

Long before art history turned to aesthetic ambiguity, it became an object of literary studies. It began with William Empson's study *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which, on the one hand, legitimizes and increases the value of literary ambiguity and, on the other, represents the earliest attempt at a typology of ambiguous phenomena.[62] Empson developed types using the works of Anglo-Saxon authors like William Shakespeare, John Milton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. He differentiates, for instance, among the types of ambiguity that arise when a detail is simultaneously described in different ways, when multiple alternative meanings are given to express a complicated psychic state, or when the text is so contradictory that the reader must undertake intensified interpretive attempts. Empson's

Altertum III–IV, ed. by Stefan Greif and Andrea Ruhli, Frankfurt/M. 1998, 267) Here, of course, the thought of (finite) ambiguity is more at work than that of inexhaustibility. But in a conversation with Eckermann on 6 May 1827, he said: "[T]he more incommensurable, and the more incomprehensible to the understanding, a poetic production is, so much the better." (Johann Peter Eckermann: *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret* I, trans. by John Oxenford, Cambridge 2012, 416)

60 See, for example, Jacques Rancière: *Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien*, in: *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien*, ed. by Maria Muhle, Berlin 2008, 75-99; Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis 1998; Umberto Eco: *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni, Cambridge/Mass. 1989; Hans Blumenberg: *Die essentielle Vieldeutigkeit des ästhetischen Gegenstandes*, in: *Kritik und Metaphysik. Studien. Heinz Heimsoeth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. by Friedrich Kaulbach and Joachim Ritter, Berlin 1966, 174-179.

61 Cf. David Brieber, Marcos Nadal, Helmut Leder, and Raphael Rosenberg: *Art in Time and Space. Context Modulates the Relation between Art Experience and Viewing Time*, in: *PLOS ONE* 9/6 (2004). <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0099019&type=printable> (accessed 5 August 2017).

62 Cf. William Empson: *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, New York ^{3}1966.

book pointed the way for all future endeavors to apply the concept of ambiguity to artistic works. Due to its focus on narrative structures, his typology is, however, only limitedly transferrable to visual art, and, as Elkins has correctly determined, in general it is too narrowly formulated for the sheer infinite possibilities of pictorial ambiguity.[63]

Ambiguity also plays an important role in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, even though he does not use the concept explicitly. Above all, his concept of dialogism is relevant here. Beginning with his investigations on Dostoyevsky and the 'word in the novel' at the end of the 1920s, he developed the concept of the 'polyphony' of the modern novel.[64] Bakhtin differentiates in the modern novel between the voice of the narrator and the voices of the various characters of the novel's plot as well as among the various kinds of texts and discourses that appear in the novel. Since a single word is potentially ambiguous in literary use, it already obtains an inner dialogism that can receive further intensification through techniques of stylization and hybridization, for example through parody. The variety of voices that thus emerges in the novel makes it impossible to fix it on a single and clear meaning and thereby authorizes readers to assign meaning in varied ways. The dialogical novel therefore fundamentally stands in opposition to monological, that is authoritarian and, in the end, unartistic texts.[65] Bakhtin's concept of dialogism thus transfers the ambiguity of the single word to an ambiguity of the entire text, in which this fundamental ambiguity or dialogism appears as a characteristic feature of literature.[66] In addition, one finds a generalization of the concept of ambiguity to culture in Bakhtin's thesis about the 'carnivalization' of literature. Starting with a description of the carnival as essentially ambivalent,[67] he notes that in early modern period the carnivalesque entered into literature, where it has lived on as the grotesque and similar forms after the gradual decline of the real life carnival. It is noteworthy that

63 Elkins applies three of Empson's types to painting: type one (the conflict-free coexistence of multiple meanings), type four (the combination of opposing opinions to express a complex state of mind of the author), and type six (tautology). But Elkins also points out that the possibilities of pictorial ambiguity exceed the "ambiguities of logic" (Empson's own general concept for his seven types) and prefers the much more comprehensive category of "arenas" of ambiguity (cf. Elkins: *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?* [op. cit.], 96–105).

64 Cf. Andrea Meyer-Fraatz: *Ambiguität (nicht nur) als ästhetische Selbstbehauptung. Russische Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert im Fokus der Bachtinschen Dialogizität*, in: *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 59/2 (2014), 405–416, esp. 406–408; Rainer Grübel: *Zur Ästhetik des Wortes bei Michail Bachtin*, in: Michail Bachtin: *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, Frankfurt/M. 1991, 21–78, esp. 42–62.

65 This is, above all, implicitly directed against social realism, which was made into a doctrine in the Soviet Union in 1934 (cf. Grübel: *Zur Ästhetik des Wortes bei Michail Bachtin* [op. cit.], 50 f.).

66 On using Bakhtin's concept of dialogism as an analytical model for interpreting ambiguity and ambivalence in Soviet Literature, see Meyer-Fraatz: *Ambiguität (nicht nur) als ästhetische Selbstbehauptung* [op. cit.].

67 According to Grübel, Bakhtin speaks of ambivalence instead of ambiguity because this concept refers to semiotic hermeneutics instead of linguistic semantics (cf. Grübel: *Zur Ästhetik des Wortes bei Michail Bachtin* [op. cit.], 55).

this thesis exhibits a doubled direction of movement: on the one hand, the ambivalence of the carnival lives on in literature in, as it were, a sublimated form; and on the other hand, ambiguity or ambivalence is expanded into a fundamental figure of a specific "sense of the world."[68] Aesthetic ambiguity thus becomes implicitly linked with aspects of the lifeworld and culture.

The essay *Aesthetic Ambiguity* (1948) by the psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris and the philosopher Abraham Kaplan goes more in the direction of a cultural-psychological interpretation of ambiguity. It has been virtually ignored by art history even though it offers groundbreaking insights. Following Empson, the authors make several important differentiations. First, they differentiate between ambiguity as a quality of language as such and ambiguity as an essential trait of poetic language. For the latter, they coin the concept 'aesthetic ambiguity,' which they would also explicitly like to apply to phenomena of visual art – this concept is taken up in this paper. Within the broad field of aesthetic ambiguity, they then differentiate a series of different types following the example of Empson: disjunctive, additive, conjunctive, integrative, and projective ambiguity. Those types combine or oppose the different semantic elements within a text or image to different degrees. They also advance the thesis, which clearly goes beyond Empson, that these types of aesthetic ambiguity are applied in different discourses and that each creates specific effects in the reader or viewer.[69] Ambiguity is thus not only a structural quality of single artworks but also part of the process of reception; moreover, it acquires an important psychological function. As Kris elaborates in another text,[70] he views the creation of art like its reception as a psychological process that is based on a "shift of psychic level" – that is, a fluctuation between regression and control.[71] Since ambiguity is not purely "decorative," but also "expressive" – meaning that it is connected to inner psychic activities – it can play an important role in this process, and it does this independently of stylistic tendencies.[72] Both on the level of production and interpretation, it can have an extremely stimulating effect.[73] Kris and Kaplan consequently emphasize, above all, the psychological function of aesthetic ambiguity.

Thus, three fundamentally different directions in the evaluation of aesthetic ambiguity arose in the first half of the twentieth century in the study of art. While Empson takes up a purely formal-aesthetic perspective as a representative of New Criticism, Bakhtin places the investigation of the principles of literary structure

68 Mikhail Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. by Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis 2011, 122-132, quote on 122.

69 Cf. Kris and Kaplan: *Aesthetic Ambiguity* [op. cit.], 245-251.

70 Cf. Ernst Kris: *Psychoanalysis and the Study of Creative Imagination*, in: *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 29 (1953), 334-351; Ernst Kris: *Psychology of Creative Processes*, in: Ernst Kris: *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, New York 1952, 291-318.

71 Kris and Kaplan: *Aesthetic Ambiguity* [op. cit.], 253.

72 Kris and Kaplan: *Aesthetic Ambiguity* [op. cit.], 257.

73 Cf. Kris and Kaplan: *Aesthetic Ambiguity* [op. cit.], 257-264.

in the context of cultural theory, and Kris and Kaplan expand their systematic approach with a cultural-psychological dimension. The normative positing of aesthetic ambiguity is thus differently substantiated by these three approaches: Empson attempts to legitimize ambiguity as a literary phenomenon and to assert that it is an independent formal quality; Bakhtin explains this quality by contrasting it with authoritarian and monological qualities; and Kris and Kaplan ascribe to it a productive psychological function. All three positions advance a structural and analytical approach with respect to the interpretability of aesthetic ambiguity.

Around 1960, aesthetic ambiguity finally becomes a central topic in the philosophy of art. Arnold Gehlen, Hans Blumenberg, Umberto Eco, and, shortly thereafter, also Theodor W. Adorno grapple with it.[74] Here I will only treat Umberto Eco's book *The Open Work* (1962), which is the most influential and also most differentiated theory of artistic ambiguity. It was written at the end of the 1950s, so at a time when a significant upsurge of ambiguous phenomena in music, literature, and the visual arts was beginning; this is when Jasper Johns created his work *Flag*. This theory thus comes from someone who directly participated in contemporary processes of ambiguation in art.

While Eco uses the concept of ambiguity multiple times,[75] the concept of the 'open artwork' is at the heart of his argumentation. But he defines openness as the "fundamental ambiguity of the artistic message."[76] He thus turns away, as Empson already did, from the narrow linguistic meaning of the concept of ambiguity and expands it with regard to aesthetic phenomena. Both can thus be considered as pathbreakers for the broad concept of ambiguity that is advanced here. The openness of the artwork consists, according to Eco, in how it opens different options of perception and meaning that challenge the viewer to enter into an active process of reception. Like changes of aspect in Wittgenstein, in Eco openness is what allows art to become art at all. The concept therefore acquires in Eco a normative component. But if every artwork is open, then the term 'open artwork' must seem largely tautological.

Eco therefore undertakes a decisive argumentative turn by historicizing the phenomenon, which fundamentally differentiates his theory of ambiguity from those discussed up to now. For, even though openness is, according to Eco, a structural feature of all art on a fundamental level, it does not at all belong to every style or every epoch. For instance, he considers Renaissance painting, with its perspectival illusionism, and medieval allegory as examples of closed artworks; in contrast, he sees baroque painting as generally anticipating the inclination to semantic indistinctness that characterizes, for example, the literary innovations of James Joyce,

74 For a characterization of the different positions, see Verena Krieger: *"At war with the Obvious." Kulturen der Ambiguität. Historische, psychologische und ästhetische Dimensionen des Mehrdeutigen*, in: *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.], 13–49, 34–38.

75 Cf. Eco: *The Open Work* [op. cit.], 9–11, 16, and passim.

76 This specification is from the untranslated introduction to the second edition (Umberto Eco: *Opera aperta*, Milan 1997, 18 f.).

the musical experiments of Luciano Berio, and the abstract-expressionist drippings of Jackson Pollock.[77] The qualitative difference of works like these to the openness of older art consists in the fact that openness now first becomes an intentionally followed productive program of artists.[78] Eco describes different varieties of openness in art, such as the equivocality of forms, multiperspectivism, and kinetics.[79] He names a series of artworks from the 1950s as examples, but he does not mention Johns's *Flag*. Instead he primarily treats European informal art and abstract expressionism – he especially elaborates on Pollock's drippings.[80] That is certainly not an accident since abstract painting corresponds with his theory of openness much more directly than the sharp conceptual tipping movement of Johns's work.

While his concept of the open artwork may suggest differently, Eco certainly does not assume that artworks possess an absolute semantic openness. With the example of Pollock, he opposes the inclination to an uncontrolled profusion of associations in the contemporary reception of informal painting and insists that every artwork, even a gestural work, is always "a field of actualized choices."[81] The artistic "gestures" that become visible in a dripping orient the viewer in a "direction."[82] Even the "open" artwork is, according to Eco, the result of "a conscious organization, a formative intention;" it thus absolutely consists in a "form," even if it is in the sense of "a new, more flexible version of" form: "form *as a field of possibilities*;" and it is also "information," only that here a "richer" type of information, because it is more complex, comes into effect.[83] Finally, openness guarantees a "particularly rich kind of pleasure."[84]

Openness thus appears as a specific structural feature of artworks, but Eco emphasizes that the concept of openness also names, above all, a particular "receptive mode."[85] Instead of fixing readers or viewers to a meaning given a priori that is merely to be understood, the open artwork invites them to ascertain a multitude of potential meanings and thus to complete the artwork in an independent act of thinking. Eco differentiates here among three different "levels of intensity" for such an open relation of reception: at the highest level of intensity are the "'works in movement,'" works that, because of their physical incompleteness, immediately require the reader or viewer in order to exist as artworks at all (for example, kinetic or interactive art). The middle degree of intensity includes works that, while physically completed, "are 'open' to a continuous generation of internal relations" (such

77 Cf. Eco: *The Open Work* [op. cit.], 5-7, 13-15.
78 Cf. ibid., 4 f.
79 Cf. ibid., 84-87.
80 Cf. ibid., 103 f.
81 Ibid., 101.
82 Ibid., 102.
83 Ibid., 102-104.
84 Ibid., 104.
85 Ibid., 22.

as informal painting); and on the lowest level of intensity, Eco places the openness that is principally ascribed to artworks in the poetics of modernism.[86]

Eco sees two possible approaches for interpreting the open artwork: on the one hand, it is a matter of systematically investigating the possible "readings" of a single work, which also includes examining the conditions that allow them to communicate.[87] On the other, there is the question of the historical causes and cultural background of the phenomenon of openness in art and so also the question of the worldview that is at its basis.[88] This question also concerns diagnosing contemporary culture since Eco locates the greatest intensity of openness in his present when he emphasizes "that now is the period when aesthetics has paid especial attention to the whole notion of 'openness' and sought to expand it."[89] He decidedly sees the open artwork as a contemporary phenomenon, which represents a reaction to the loss of causal logic and unambiguous references in both lifeworld experience and academic reflection. The open artwork not only reflects this development but also, beyond that, allows viewers to engage with this open situation and recognize its potential.[90]

Like Bakhtin, Eco also makes a connection between artistic ambiguity and the historical context in which it arose. Aesthetic ambiguity is interpreted as a form of processing or reacting to social and cultural circumstances. Since it exhibits analogue structures, it functions as an "epistemological metaphor."[91] In the end, Eco's proposed approaches for interpreting the open artwork are classic hermeneutic approaches. Eco emphatically confirms this position in his critical engagement with deconstructivist literary theory at the end of the 1980s.[92]

Eco's judgments of certain art-historical periods and phenomena are, in part, questionable or have been disproven by recent research. Ambiguity and tolerance for ambiguity also play an important role in medieval cultures, as studies from various disciplines have shown.[93] Even early modern linear perspective absolutely creates, as already mentioned, ambiguity.[94] And the euphoric assessment of kinetic

86 Ibid., 21 f.

87 Ibid., 84.

88 Cf. ibid., 86 f.

89 Ibid., 22.

90 Cf. ibid., 89–93.

91 Ibid., 87.

92 Cf. Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. by Stefan Collini, Cambridge 1992; Umberto Eco: *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington 1990.

93 Cf. *Ambiguität im Mittelalter. Formen zeitgenössischer Reflexion und interdisziplinärer Rezeption*, ed. by Oliver Auge and Christiane Witthöft, Berlin 2016; Thomas Bauer: *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin 2011; Silke Tammen: *Stelzenfisch und Bildnisse in einer Baumkronne, Unähnlichkeit und Montage. Gedanken zur Ambiguität mittelalterlicher Bilder*, in: *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.], 53–71.

94 Cf. Regine Prange: *Sinnoffenheit und Sinnverneinung als metapicturale Prinzpien. Zur Historizität bildlicher Selbstreferenz am Beispiel der Rückenfigur*, in: *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.], 125–167. Prange follows Ernst Gombrich.

and interactive art as 'open' to the receiver being involved in its creation has been relativized in recent debates with reference to a frequently inherent instance of authoritarian structuring.[95] Nevertheless, it numbers among Eco's fundamental achievements that he laid the foundation for historicizing the phenomena of artistic ambiguity and connected it to systematic reflections. But a silent teleological structure certainly underlies his argumentation since it presents the 'open' type of the artwork as superior to the 'closed' type and makes the contemporary literature, music, and art of his time appear as the highest form of the 'open artwork.' The normativity of aesthetic ambiguity, which was established in art discourse around 1800, is thus also inherent to Eco's theory of the 'open artwork.' Eco perpetuated it by applying it to the most recent artistic developments; of course, he also thereby fostered the tendency, which would spread in the following decades, to elevate everything indistinct in art to a characteristic that determines its quality.

The concept of openness also contains a certain semantic displacement in comparison to that of ambiguity. For while ambiguity also contains a stronger or weaker instance of tension between different semantic elements, the concept of openness suggests an arbitrary, tension-free, and potentially infinite abundance of semantic possibilities. It thus points in the direction of postmodern conceptions although Eco would not explicitly make these his own. In addition, the concept of openness only names – as opposed to Wittgenstein's change of aspect – the structure of the work, making the activity of the viewer appear subordinate to it. But this is opposed to Eco's own concern for considering the relation of reception. Although Eco emphatically emphasizes the significance of reception, his theory leaves open how the relationship between openness as the structure of the work and openness as the structure of reception is to be thought of concretely.[96]

Only in the late 1980s a work again was published that thematized aesthetic ambiguity from the perspective of literary studies with a similarly broadly conceived aspiration: in *Ästhetik der Ambiguität. Zu Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne* (*Aesthetics of ambiguity. On the function and meaning of equivocality in modern literature*, 1988), Christoph Bode introduces the foundational differ-

[95] Cf. Claire Bishop: *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012, esp. 219–239; Claire Bishop: *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, in: *October* 110 (2004), 51–79. For an overview of the changes and positions in the theoretical debates in this context, see Elisabeth Fritz: *Authentizität – Partizipation – Spektakel. Mediale Experimente mit "echten Menschen" in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, Cologne 2014, in the section *Paradoxien und kritische Ansätze der Partizipation*, esp. 36–39, 48–52, 65–67.

[96] What Eco's concept of openness already refers to would be made explicit in the following years by reception theory and then radicalized by poststructuralist literary theory (cf. *Ambivalenz – Ambiguität – Postmodernität. Begrenzt eindeutiges Denken*, ed. by Peter Koslowski and Richard Schenk, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2004; Eckhard Schumacher: *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit. Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Schlegel, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man*, Frankfurt/M. 2000; Paul de Man: *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis 1992; Hans Robert Jauss: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Minneapolis 1982; Karlheinz Stierle: *Text als Handlung. Grundlegung einer systematischen Literaturwissenschaft*, Munich 1975).

entiation between a "first-order ambiguity" of literary language, such as that ascertained by Juri Lotman and Roman Jakobson, and a "second-order ambiguity" that is characteristic of "highly ambiguous literary texts of modernism," [97] such as by, for instance, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Bode thus separates the two levels on which an artwork can be defined as ambiguous more clearly than Eco. At the same time, he relativizes the emphatic expectations posited by representatives of modernism and postmodernism for the emancipatory effects of aesthetic ambiguity.[98]

The lasting effect of Eco's theory of the 'open artwork' and the contemporary theoretical debate about aesthetic ambiguity has also captivated art history. Understanding "ambiguity as a constitutional component of the artwork"[99] already became prevalent in the 1960s. Nevertheless, for a long time, only a few studies[100] thematized phenomena of ambiguity and the related phenomena of ambivalence.[101] In the 1990s, the art historian Erich Franz transferred Eco's term of the open artwork to images.[102] But the concept of the 'open image' was criticized and, in the end, did not gain acceptance due to its lack of clarity.[103] Only since 2000 has the phenomenon of aesthetic ambiguity increasingly become the object of frequent and broadly conceived art-historical studies, which employ a variety of different categories.[104] These studies have turned attention to foundational forms of visual

97 Bode: *Ästhetik der Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 380.

98 Cf. ibid., 388–394.

99 Werner Hofmann: *Grundlagen der modernen Kunst. Eine Einführung in ihre symbolischen Formen*, Stuttgart 1966, 495.

100 Cf. Hermann Ulrich Asemissen: *Ästhetische Ambivalenz. Spielarten der Doppeldeutigkeit in der Malerei*, Kassel 1989; Bätschmann: *Lot und seine Töchter im Louvre* [op. cit.]; Günter Busch: *Ikonografische Ambivalenz bei Delacroix. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Szenen aus dem Massaker von Chios*, in: *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes. Akten des 21. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte in Bonn 1964* III: *Theorien und Probleme*, Berlin 1967, 143–148; Erwin Panofsky: *Der greise Philosoph am Scheidewege. Ein Beispiel für die "Ambivalenz" ikonografischer Kennzeichen*, in: *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst. Neue Folge* 9 (1932), 285–290.

101 The psychoanalytic term ambivalence describes, in a way similar to the term ambiguity, the simultaneous existence of different or opposing things. Although it did not originally serve to characterize signs but rather psychic states, it is applied like ambiguity to artworks (although to a lesser extent). Like ambiguity, ambivalence also describes something equivocal, though it more strongly implies a polarity. On the history of the concept of ambivalence, see *Forum der Psychoanalyse. Zeitschrift für klinische Theorie und Praxis* 27/4 (2011); Berndt and Kammer: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz* [op. cit.], 18–23; Bruno Waldvogel: *Ambivalenz*, in: *Handbuch psychoanalytischer Grundbegriffe*, ed. by Wolfgang Mertens, Stuttgart [4]2002, 72–79.

102 Cf. Erich Franz: *Die zweite Revolution der Moderne*, in: *Das offene Bild. Aspekte der Moderne in Europa nach 1945*, ed. by Erich Franz, Stuttgart 1992, 11–23, catalogue for exhibitions at the Westfälisches Landesmuseum Münster and the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig.

103 Cf. Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff: *Das "offene" Bild. Überlegungen zu einer ästhetischen Kategorie*, in: *Zeitenspiegelung. Zur Bedeutung von Traditionen in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft. Festschrift für Konrad Hoffmann*, ed. by Peter K. Klein and Regine Prange, Berlin 1998, 347–361.

104 In addition to the publications named in fn. 1, also see Andreas Prater: *Bilder ohne Ikonographie? Velazquez und die venezianische Malerei*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 77/3 (2014), 333–360; Anselm Haverkamp: *Die Zweideutigkeit der Kunst. Zur historischen Epistemologie der Bilder*, Berlin 2012; Ilka Becker: *Fotografische Atmosphären. Rhetoriken des Unbestimmten in der zeitgenössi-*

ambiguity like blurriness and optical illusions, the overcoming of iconography and pictorial illusionism through ambivalence, vagueness, and equivocality as well as to conceptualizations of ambiguity like, for example, 'subversive affirmation'. These studies focus on early modern period, classical modernism, and contemporary art, and initial attempts at systematization have been published. They differentiate between ambiguities or ambivalences that are produced by indistinct iconography, the equivocal shaping of form, the semantics of materiality, the interaction of image and text, and the changing contexts of reception.[105]

D. Five levels of ambiguity of (or in) art

The philosophical assessment of art as constitutively indeterminate – and thus the normative positing of ambiguity as a central quality of art – has, and this is my third synopsis, both been called into question and substantiated by art history and literary studies since the middle of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it has undergone important differentiations in the engagement with empirical material. These should be developed further. To do justice to the complexity of ambiguity of (or in) art, five levels are, in my view, to be distinguished:

1. The *medial* level. Just like language, images fundamentally produce ambiguity. This foundational ambiguity of language and images can be suppressed or intensified, tolerated or intentionally employed, but it cannot be eliminated. It not only has to do with special cases like reversible figures or blurry images but with the fundamental quality that the image as such provides the possibility for 'changes of aspect.' This can be specified for various media of images; painting, sculpture, video, and so on, as well as combinations of these media produce their own specific forms of ambiguity.

schen Kunst, Munich 2010; *Dissimulazione onesta oder Die ehrliche Verstellung. Von der Weisheit der versteckten Beunruhigung in Wort, Bild und Tat. Martin Warnke zu Ehren*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp et al., Hamburg 2007; Martina Dobbe: *Transparenz. Unbestimmte Bestimmtheit und bestimmte Unbestimmtheit der Fotografie*, in: Martina Dobbe: *Fotografie als theoretisches Objekt. Bildwissenschaft, Medienästhetik, Kunstgeschichte*, Munich 2007, 211-229; Nina Zschocke: *Der irritierte Blick. Kunstrezeption und Aufmerksamkeit*, Munich 2006; Angeli Janhsen-Vukićević: *Kunst sehen ist sich selbst sehen. Christian Boltanski, Bill Viola*, Berlin 2005; *Der stumme Diskurs der Bilder. Reflexionsformen des Ästhetischen in der Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Klaus Krüger and Rudolf Preimesberger, Munich 2003; Michael Diener: *Das Ambivalente in der Kunst Leonardos, Monets und Mondrians*, St. Ingbert 2002; Klaus Krüger: *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich 2001; Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss: *Formless. A User's Guide*, New York 1997; Georges Didi-Huberman: *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris 1992.

105 Cf. Pfisterer: *Akt und Ambiguität* [op. cit.]; Krieger: *„At war with the Obvious." Kulturen der Ambiguität* [op. cit.].

2. The *artistic* level.[106] Ambiguity is not only a quality of images and language but also a foundational characteristic of art in the emphatic sense of modernism as it has been developed since the High Renaissance. The ambiguity of art – called aesthetic ambiguity here – is not limited to visual and linguistic ambiguity but rather processes their effects and transfers them into aesthetic experience. In this way, the media-specific ambiguity of images and language play a central but, in the end, ancillary role. In addition, while the ambiguity of art is substantially based on the semantic indeterminacy of the aesthetic, it goes beyond that. For the increasing degree to which a self-reflective instance also plays a role in art after autonomous aesthetics (as has been the case since the High Renaissance and, especially, since the twentieth century) is not accompanied, for instance, by increasing clarity but rather with an expansion of ambiguity, also with regard to the conceptual dimension of the work. From the poetics of early romanticism to Eco's theory of the open artwork and poststructuralist literary theory, the conception of aesthetic ambiguity has progressively separated itself from being connected to the purely sensual and has become a constitutive quality of art. The artwork is "essentially ambiguous"[107] since self-referentiality and making changes of aspect possible is constitutive for it.

3. The *intentional* level.[108] There are, however, also forms of intensified aesthetic ambiguity when the pragmatic functions of recognizability and of conveying meaning are disturbed or suppressed by systematic ambiguation, and nonexplicitness becomes an independent object of aesthetic pleasure. Such intensified ambiguity of (or in) art goes beyond the ambiguity inherent in media but also beyond the ambiguity of art. This is the case, for instance, in mannerism, symbolism, and surrealism, and it has been the case in large parts of contemporary art since 1980s postmodernism. For different reasons and with different means, aesthetic ambiguity is intentionally produced, intensified, exposed, and charged with programmatic intentions in these movements.

4. The *historical* level. The examples discussed so far show that intentional ambiguity appears in certain periods and plays a special role within certain artistic styles and movements. In this way, the ambiguity of (or in) art also has a historical dimension. Not only are the works themselves, intentions (sometimes also programmatically articulated), and self-commentaries by the artists part of the historically specific characteristics of intentional aesthetic ambiguity, reception is also substantially historically specific. Reconstructing contemporaneous interpretative reflection of ambiguous phenomena may offer insights into the contexts in which intentional artistic ambiguity is produced. This also touches on the next level.

106 This corresponds with the concept of aesthetic ambiguity, as Kris and Kaplan already conceived it, and with Bode's category of first-order ambiguity.

107 Bode: *Ästhetik der Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 71. Here Bode relies on Yuri Lotman, Roman Jakobson, and Roland Barthes.

108 This corresponds to Bode's category of second-order ambiguity.

5. The *receptive* level. Ambiguity is not only a structural quality of individual aesthetic objects but also a quality and result of the process of reception. The ambiguity created in artworks thus has a latent character – in the end, it always first takes place in reception. For that reason, ambiguity is a dynamic product of the complex interaction between aesthetic factors of production and reception as well as changing connections of function.[109] For example, the different interpretive perspectives of viewers and the context displacements that result from changing places and methods of presentation create ambiguity. Ambiguity always unfolds in the relation between an aesthetic object and a viewing subject.

In the context of this differentiation, I will now turn to aesthetic ambiguity in contemporary art and come to the empirical part of this essay. For contemporary art, the intentional production of ambiguity is, for the most part, characteristic. I will thus be dealing with the third level, but I will also incorporate the other levels when it seems called for. My concern is to investigate precisely how aesthetic ambiguity is created and made productive in artworks. I connect this with the goal of developing a systematic perspective on aesthetic ambiguity and creating a terminological basis for art-historical analysis.

III. The modi operandi *of intentional aesthetic ambiguity: Four exemplary analyses of artworks*

In the following, I investigate four artworks from the last decades that I have selected according to the criteria of maximal heterogeneity in the employed media, artistic style, and, especially, the structure of ambiguity. The works are by Gilbert & George, Santiago Sierra, Neo Rauch, and Rachel Harrison, and they are a mounted photo board, a conceptual artwork, a painting, and an assemblage. I submit each of these works to an analysis that focuses on their structure of ambiguity. I would like to show the means used to produce this ambiguity and that the ambiguity produced in each case displays specific structural and operational qualities. I will subsequently derive generalizations from these single analyses. These four works are, in my opinion, exemplary for four fundamental *modi operandi* of aesthetic ambiguity. I refer to these as the conjunctive, disjunctive, associative, and indifferent modes. With these four modes – there are also transitional forms between them – it is possible, in my opinion, to grasp systematically the entire field of aesthetic ambiguity and, at the same time, to engage with the specifics of particular works. Starting with these modes, I will attempt to diagram the field of ambiguity and propose a foundational classificatory system for describing it. But first, the analyses of the works.

[109] Cf. Jauss: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* [op. cit.]; Stierle: *Text als Handlung* [op. cit.].

A. Gilbert & George: *Fuck*, from the series *Dirty Words Pictures* (1977)

Despite their international fame, the extensive oeuvre of Gilbert & George has been investigated relatively little. Research has focused on their early performative works,[110] the status of the artist duo as a collective artist subject,[111] and, especially, on the themes they treat, which are often taboo topics such as sexuality, death, and religion.[112] The particular aesthetic structure of their large-format photo tableaus is rarely discussed,[113] and the ambiguity that plays a constitutive role in these works has never been analyzed. Here I will subject this ambiguity to a close reading using one example. The close reading will not be concerned with treating the structure of ambiguity in this work as exemplary for the working method of the artist duo but rather with analyzing a specific way that ambiguity can be organized.

Fuck is part of a series titled *Dirty Words Pictures*, created in the late 1970s, in which expletive terms such as *cunt*, *suck*, *queer*, or *communism* are dealt with visually. According to Marco Livingstone, a certain form of political engagement first becomes evident in Gilbert & George's art with this series.[114] The upright rectangular panel of *Fuck* is divided into a grid of sixteen smaller panels, which are proportional to the whole panel and consist of photographic images.

The panels have been subjected to different strictly executed creative principles. The fields of the top horizontal row are filled with the four letters of *fuck*. On closer inspection, we can see that they are graffiti and therefore photographic images like all the other panels. Besides the division into text and image panels, there is an ordering of black-and-white and black-and-red images. On the right and left sides from the bottom up, three vertically stacked panels are black and red, while all the other images are black and white, creating the visual effect of a T shape in the middle. Linking both patterns – the text-image and the black-white versus black-

110 Cf. Beatrice von Bismarck: *Zwischen Revoltieren und Legitimieren. Aufführungen des Bildes. Zur "Singing Sculpture" von Gilbert & George*, in: *Performance und Bild, Performance als Bild*, ed. by Christian Janecke, Berlin 2004, 247-271; Carter Ratcliff and Robert Rosenblum: *Gilbert & George. The Singing Sculpture*, New York 1993.

111 Cf. *Paare = Couples: Gilbert & George, Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, catalogue for an exhibition at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

112 Cf. *Gilbert & George. Major Exhibition*, ed. by Jan Debbaut, London 2007, catalogue for exhibitions at the Tate Modern in London, the Haus der Kunst in Munich, the de Young in San Francisco, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum in New York; *Gilbert & George. The Cosmological Pictures*, Zurich 1991, catalogue for exhibitions at the Pałac Sztuki in Kraków, the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, the Kunsthalle Zurich, and seven other museums and galleries; Wolf Jahn: *Die Kunst von Gilbert & George oder eine Ästhetik der Existenz*, Munich 1989.

113 Cf. Rudi Fuchs: *Gilbert & George (Notebook)*, in: *Gilbert & George: The Complete Pictures. 1971–2005*, 2 vols., London 2007, vol. 1, 7-12, vol. 2, 627-635, on *Dirty Words Pictures* in particular, see 633-634; Robert Rosenblum: *Introducing Gilbert & George*, London 2004.

114 Marco Livingstone: *From the Heart*, in: *Gilbert & George: Major Exhibition* [op. cit.], 13-25, quote on 19.

-red organization – reveals that the black-and-red panels and the panels with writing form a kind of gate-like frame, directing the gaze to the center images. This, in turn, creates an emblem-like composition, giving the word *fuck* the status of a *motto*. At the bottom, the artists' faces, with their melancholic gazes directed out to the open, incorporate a reflective moment into the panel. One could say they act as a sort of visual *subscriptio*.

fig. 4: Gilbert & George: *Fuck* (1977). From the series *Dirty Words Pictures*. Photo tableau. 242 x 202 cm. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.

The center panels are as symmetrical as the outer ones, giving each horizontal row two similar but not identical motifs. From the bottom to top, we see closely cropped and thus approximate frontal portraits of the artists; above them two puddles; and at the top Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament on the left and Big Ben on the right. This silhouette of London's signature sights from a riverside view forms a unity across both fields (just like the word *fuck* above) while also maintaining the principle of juxtaposing two similar images, in this case two towers. Thus, we have an analogy to the two image pairs below. The silhouette participates in the visual logic of both orders, creating a visual parenthesis between the two. The red columns on the sides are subject to yet a third visual logic. They show different images of an encounter – viewed from the same perspective – as it may take place in a 'cottaging spot' (a subcultural site for gay sexual contacts). The photos look like film stills and at first they seem to represent a narrative that runs from the top left to the bottom right, but they do not ultimately add up to a coherent story.

It is remarkable how the constellation of images interacts and creates allusions. In total, we have the presentation of an urban scene where subculture and official culture are visually entwined. The word *fuck* and the cottaging zone[115] evoke a reading that turns all the other images into *double entendres*: London's landmark towers become phallic symbols, and the puddles – typical in rainy London – become suggestive of a vagina or anus. The capital letters in *fuck*, on the other hand, include UK, the acronym for United Kingdom. The *double entendre* also enfolds the main composition since the T shape of the black-and-white panels in combination with the red-and-black panels could also be read as the visual representation of a sexual act. Even the artist portraits become ambiguous: beyond being figures of reflection they could be integral participants in the whole scene.

Gilbert & George's systematically applied *double entendre*, which encompasses the entirety of the work and all its elements, from the composition and color scheme to the motifs, is reminiscent of optical illusions. By drawing on the structure of optical illusions, Gilbert & George follow a subversive pictorial tradition (e.g. the towers as both phallic symbols and emblems of the UK). It is up to the viewer to make these associations and decipher the obscene *double entendre*. The clue to the meaning that the viewer has to figure out lies in the explication of the 'dirty word,' which is specified to refer to homosexual subculture.

Gilbert & George's *Fuck* systematically plays through the possibilities of visual ambiguity. Images that seem random on their own are combined to create an equivocal whole. The initial spark lies in the translation, so to speak, from word to image, which serves as the premise for reading them as *double entendres*. Without the word *fuck*, the entire associative chain would not be started. The equivocations are then

[115] See Frauke Berndt's article *Zonen. Zur Konzeptualisierung von Ambiguität in der ästhetischen Theorie* in this volume.

repeated on several levels, one literally stacked upon the other, finally generating a complex yet coherent overarching meaning. The ambiguity of the artwork, we can conclude, develops from the interaction of its individual elements, while this interaction simultaneously tends to dissolve this ambiguity and create new meanings.

B. Santiago Sierra: *250 cm Line, Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999)

Based on their provocative character, Santiago Sierra's political performances produce completely opposed reactions and this polarity is structurally built into the works themselves. Art criticism and art history have chiefly concentrated on the political and ethical dimension in Sierra's work while at most noting this structural ambiguity but not analyzing it.[116]

Santiago Sierra paid six young, unemployed men in Havana thirty dollars each to get a line tattooed across their backs. He then arranged them next to each other so that the line continues at the same level across all of them, forming a visual unity. Photos captured both the process of getting the tattoos and the resulting tattooed line. Exhibitions of the work usually only include the photograph of the line on their backs as an aesthetic product.

Let us take a look at the photographic staging. Six young men are shown from the back in a slight diagonal, their heads hanging, their faces in profil perdu, with bare upper bodies and carefully shaved napes, rendering the line clearly visible. Their individuality is not really visible, and yet we can identify the participants' different features such as a stage of youth, skin color, haircut, clothing, and height. But the tattooed line is what overcomes these differences, creating a frame and (of course absurd) unity. The line is the main protagonist of the photograph, giving it a visual structure by producing parallels and even spatial depth. The work's title, *250 cm Line, Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, shifts our focus away from the human beings to the line. This is also a reference to the significance of the line in the history of European art, that is to say to its status as the epitome of the artistic idea. Giorgio Vasari's famous dictum of drawing as "a visible expression and declaration of our inner conception"[117] laid the foundation for a metaphysical notion of the line,

116 Cf. Angeli Janhsen: *Neue Kunst als Katalysator*, Berlin 2013, 78–82; *Santiago Sierra. Sculpture, Photography, Film*, ed. by Dirk Luckow and Daniel J. Schreiber, Cologne 2013, catalogue for exhibitions at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg and the Kunsthalle in Tübingen; Bishop: *Artificial Hells* [op. cit.], 222 f.; Hilke Wagner: *House in Mud*, in: *Santiago Sierra: House in Mud*, ed. by Veit Görner and Hilke Wagner, Ostfildern-Ruit 2005, 17–46, catalogue for an exhibition at the Kestnergesellschaft Hannover; Bishop: *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* [op. cit.], esp. 70–74; Gerald Matt: *Vorwort*, in: *Santiago Sierra*, ed. by Gabriele Mackert and Gerald Matt, Vienna 2002, 4 f., catalogue for the exhibition *Anheuern und Anordnen von 30 Arbeitern ihrer Hautfarbe nach* at the Kunsthalle Vienna, project space; Kristin Marek and Martin Schulz: *Nation und Territorium. Die Topologie des Politischen auf der 50. Biennale von Venedig 2003. Ein Kommentar zu Santiago Serra*, in: *Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 6 (2004), 128–131.

117 Cf. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori* nelle redazioni del 1550

fig. 5: Santiago Sierra: *250 cm Line, Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999). Black-and-white photograph. 75 x 107 cm.

which remained potent far into the twentieth century – for example, when Walter de Maria had bulldozers carve lines into the Tula desert near Las Vegas in 1969, creating a drawing only visible from the outer atmosphere. Sierra intensifies the tension within this charged notion of the line between, on the one hand, the act of drawing as a formative one performed by the artistic subject and, on the other, the artistic material (color, canvas, soil) as the material object that is worked on. Here, the human body, the backs of these men, serves as the material object, the canvas.

Sierra's work is highly ambiguous on multiple levels. First, on the medial level since our gaze is forced to shift back and forth between seeing the men as individuals and seeing their backs as the material surface of the line. The picture forces us to recognize an aesthetic fact as a social one and vice versa. Sierra's aim is to address social injustice and exploitation in a globalized world. His intention is not cynical but rather moral.[118] The evoked sense of moral outrage is aimed at the cynicism of actual working conditions – at the fact, for example, that thirty dollars is a lot of money for young Cubans, that in many parts of the world this amount of money

und 1568, ed. by Rosanna Battarini, annotation by Paola Barocchi, Firenze 1968, vol. 1, 111.

118 Cf. Santiago Sierra and Gabriele Mackert: *Ich versuche Wirklichkeit und Wunschdenken nicht durcheinander zu bringen. Santiago Sierra im Gespräch mit Gabriele Mackert*, in: *Santiago Sierra*, ed. by Gabriele Mackert and Gerald Matt [op. cit.], 13–50, esp. 22 f., 32 f.

can only be earned with much worse jobs, and that 'normal' work can also leave irreparable physical traces. The discomfort created by the photograph is thus primarily based on the obvious absurdity of the line, which neither has aesthetic value nor serves as a permanent monument. The fact that Sierra's project is perceived as much more scandalous than, say, the exploitation of human labor during the building of the pyramids can be explained with the (apparent) uselessness of the undertaking, whose only 'product' is to address a transaction and its underlying socioeconomic structures. The attempt to make social realities visible by applying their rules is morally ambivalent – here we have a second level of ambiguity: the criticism of the imitating gesture is only inherent to the intentional level, not to the factual one, creating an opposition between action and intention. "Subversive imitation" is, after all, first imitation and does not necessarily unfold its critical potential.[119]

Sierra's work is furthermore ambiguous on a third level. We have a real act of payment and service and thus not just a depiction of the criticized social reality but rather an actual taking part in it. But because the project was only realized for presentation within the context of art, it maintains a symbolic role related to dismal social conditions. We can describe Sierra's work as a reenactment of social reality, as an imitative retracing in an artistic context. By transferring socioeconomic structures into the art system, the transaction becomes an image, and monetized human labor becomes a *tableau vivant*. The photograph documenting Sierra's project thus not only works on a visual level but also on a conceptual one, like a reversible figure, forcing its viewers to choose between opposing perspectives and evaluations.

C. Neo Rauch: *Abstraction* (2005)

The forceful ambiguity of Neo Rauch's paintings has often been thematized, but it has been ascribed – as Rachel Mader has shown – thoroughly opposed meanings.[120] Generalizing observations have dominated while analyses focused on single images have rarely been undertaken. I will now conduct such an analysis of the painting *Abstraction*.

In this analysis, I will also be particularly interested in the inner structure and organizational method of the work's ambiguity.

[119] Cf. Walter Grasskamp, *Niemandsland*, in: *Hans Haacke: Bodenlos*, ed. by Klaus Bußmann and Florian Matzner, Biennale Venedig 1993, Deutscher Pavillon, Ostfildern 1993, 51-64, esp. 59.

[120] Cf. Rachel Mader: *Produktive Simulationen. Über Ambivalenz in der zeitgenössischen Kunst am Beispiel von Neo Rauch, Aernout Mik und Santiago Sierra*, in: *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.], 225-240; *Neo Rauch. Para*, Cologne 2007, catalogue for exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York and the Max Ernst Museum Brühl; *Neo Rauch. Neue Rollen. Paintings. 1993–2006*, ed. by Holger Broeker, Cologne 2006, catalogue for an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. Sophie A. Gerlach places a different emphasis by, for example, interpreting Rauch's work from the perspective of the allegorical (cf. Sophie A. Gerlach: *Neo Rauch. Bilder 1984–2005. Ansätze zu einem Werkverständnis*, Hamburg 2014).

fig. 6: Neo Rauch: *Abstraction* (2005). Oil on canvas. 270 x 210 cm.

The upright rectangular painting opens a view from a loggia onto a scenery of houses under a wide sky. Although the roofs recall Chinese architecture, it appears to be a petit-bourgeois residential area in Germany. Our gaze is framed by an architectural structure, opened only on the right side. A short wall and two pillars separate the foreground and background and frame the action taking place beyond the loggia. Front and back, inside and outside, thus act as the first determining parameters of the image while also giving spatial depth to it. This is disrupted in several instances where the rules of linear perspective are broken. One very pronounced disruption is the pillar on the right, which is not attached to the wall, but hovers over the scenery and then flows into a house in a blur of color. The house, in turn, is situated in a way that is illogical in relation to the building behind the pillar. Both pictorial spaces – loggia and scenery – are connected in this breach of spatial logic, emphasizing the dual character of the loggia as both closed interior and open passage to the exterior. In the foreground of this complex spatial arrangement, we see a scene with several human figures unfold. They inversely intertwine foreground and background because the figures in the background are much larger than those positioned in the front space of the loggia. The spatial proportions are thus also undermined.

These violations of the academic rules of painting only become as evident as they are because they are largely adhered to in most parts of the painting. Taken on their own, the figures, houses, and trees are realistically depicted both in color and proportion. They are academically correct and thus fulfill all the requirements of a naturalistic depiction. Moreover, in some instances, these requirements are met with a particular 'painterly virtuosity,' for example in the representation of complex poses such as torsions and the resulting foreshortenings of limbs and complicated situations of lighting. The depiction of architectural elements and landscape is also mostly coherent. Hence, the systematic breach of academic rules is tied to the adherence to said rules – only by means of the latter can the former become fully effective.

In addition to the equivocal application of perspective and proportion, we can also identify ambiguity on the representational level. The figures only partially appear to relate to one another. In the background above the houses, two men are in the middle of a sword fight. Their size in relation to the houses they tower over is not the only thing that does not make sense: their poses do not create a plausible fighting situation, and their movements lead nowhere. Both their clothing and props do not fit together. The two fighting men thus seem more like an apparition than actual figures in a real space. They are also not noticed by any of the people in the loggia. There, the central figure is a man in a white smock at an easel with a canvas full of horizontal and vertical lines. In his left hand, he is holding a ruler; in his right, a long paintbrush, marking him as a painter. He stands amidst a scatter of empty paint tins in puddles of yellow and rust-colored paint, the same color as the lines on the canvas. While the painter is shown from behind, a second man, leaning on the wall, turns forward as he points his index finger toward the paint-

er's right hand. Both figures create a visual unit but without actually interacting. This makes their relationship similar to that of the two men fighting in the back. The scene is completed with two further figures: in the front, a sturdy woman in a vibrant yellow jacket throws yellow paint at two dark birds as if she were feeding chickens; behind her, there is another man at an easel, but he is turned away from his blank canvas and looking in the direction of the other painter.

That the painting simultaneously meets and undermines the academic criteria of perspective and proportion can also be said of Rauch's use of color. Here we also have a naturalistic approach that is disrupted at the same time. We can see some painterly illusionism, for example a stripe of color on the painter's pants, while in other places the color application seems to exist separately from the image. The floor of the loggia, for example, is actually a distinct abstract surface of color. Claims of mimetic precision are disrupted with painterly effects, for instance when the arm of the right sword fighter seems to dissolve. In addition, there is an elementary form of painterly ambiguity when the spilled yellow paint from the foreground evokes associations to chicken feed.

The two easels, the paint tins and stains, and the paint thrown by the woman all give the motif of painting a central role in the image. We can detect a series of correspondences in the picture: the spilled yellow is identical to the color of the woman's jacket, the lines on the canvas, and the puddles of color at the painter's feet. In a muted tone, it reappears in two of the men's clothing. The recurring theme of yellow finds its parallel in the rust-colored tone of the architecture framing the loggia, the horizontal lines on the canvas, the roofs of the houses and church, and the jacket of one of the sword fighters. The abstract lines of the image within the image form a reference to the pictorial sphere, while the spilling of the yellow paint becomes a painterly gesture on the abstract color surface of the loggia's floor. The pictorial world and the act of painting inherent to the image are thus juxtaposed as well. So, the work is a painterly reflection on painterly ambiguity. But instead of representing an explicit art-theoretical agenda, it unfolds the tension between the image's inherent logic and its seeming mimesis on a metalevel – emphasized by the title *Abstraction*. In doing so, the painting provides a pictorial reflection on pictorial ambiguity.

In Rauch's painting, ambiguity unfolds in as many ways as it does in Gilbert & George's *Fuck*, but unlike the latter, it does not generate an overarching meaning. The viewers are offered a range of possible associations that at first seem promising but do not, in the end, add up to a coherent result. Within the painting, we can find several references, analogies, connections, and interactions, but they do not fall into place in a higher logic. The coherence and openness of meaning remain in suspension.

D. Rachel Harrison: *The Opening* (2009)

A completely different type of ambiguity is realized in an installation by the American artist Rachel Harrison that was exhibited at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Harrison's installations are composed of various sculptural and visual elements, which, in turn, are made of heterogeneous materials. They are multifaceted and complex,[121] so I will exemplarily focus on a part of the Venice installation, the assemblage *The Opening*, in my analysis.

In traditional assemblages, such as Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* (1936) or Robert Rauschenberg's combine painting *Bed* (1955), the arranged elements, in all their absurdity, still make some kind of visual sense; they have some kind of point. Harrison's arrangements, on the other hand, seem to follow a contrary principle, namely one of maximum disparity. *The Opening* consists of a plywood box with a functionless brass knob, another plywood box in a different format – both partially painted without any discernible logic – and a brightly colored *papier-mâché* figure, which, in its shapeless abstraction, oscillates between a crystal and amorphous mass, depending on which side one looks at. The view from 'the back' – not that there is a true front or back – opens a completely different perspective, not only because the vibrantly colored papier-mâché seems to ooze from here instead of remaining crystalline. We can also see that the two boxes are interlocked in a more complicated manner than expected. The view from yet another side presents an entirely new element, a photograph of a Santa Claus between two men in the snow. The whole entity rests on a blanket that is commonly used by movers for heavy items, further evoking the effect of something temporary, unfinished, transient.

Rachel Harrison explicitly rejects all attempts at ascribing meaning to her work.[122] Her assemblages make tangible offers of association that never lead to a coherent result. The refusal to generate decipherable meaning is performed with methodical rigor. This rigidity begins in her choice of materials, governed by the criterion of absolute difference: a combination of images and objects, signs and signifiers, *objets trouvés* and self-made elements. This idea continues on a formal-aesthetic level, as geometrical elements meet amorphous ones, and naturally hued parts clash with neon colors. And finally, three forms of visual art – painting, sculpture,

[121] For example, the 2007 exhibition *Voyage of the Beagle*, which could be seen at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zurich and the Kunsthalle Nuremberg. The catalogue for this exhibition contains insightful descriptions of Harrison's artistic strategies (cf. *Rachel Harrison: If I Did It*, ed. by Heike Munder and Ellen Seifermann, Zurich 2007). On the montage and construction character of Harrison's works, see Diedrich Diedrichsen: *Question from an Abstraction Who Reads*, in: *Rachel Harrison: Fake Titel*, ed. by Susanne Figner and Martin Germann, Cologne 2013, 68–73, catalogue for exhibitions at the Kestnergesellschaft Hannover and the S. M. A. K. Museum of Contemporary Art Ghent.

[122] Harrison pursued various strategies of refusing traditional forms of interpreting works, such as answering interview questions with found quotes from different origins, which is a montage technique analogue to her art (cf. Martin Germann and Rachel Harrison: *Interview with an Artist*, in: *Figner and Germann* 2013, 156–159).

fig. 7 & 8: Rachel Harrison: *The Opening* (2009). Assemblage. Wood, chicken wire, cement, acrylic, dummy door knob, moving blanket, and pigmented inkjet print. 235 x 167,6 x 83,8 cm. Installation view Making Worlds, 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009.

and photography – are represented in Harrison's assemblage, so we can say that she systematically runs through all media. The different media are juxtaposed in a way that prohibits them from interacting in harmony; instead, they clash and disrupt each other, making them visible as individual elements in turn. One example is the vertical plywood box and its coloring, carried out purposely in disharmony and stark opposition. The artist intentionally keeps it unclear whether the box is part of a pedestal on which the *papier-mâché* figure rests or a presented object or if there is any pedestal at all. It could very well be both. The heavy blanket beneath the box contributes to the uncertainty since it also takes on a potential meaning. The vertical element also plays a dual role as well, either as presentational object for the Santa Claus photograph or as a self-referential form. The ontological and aesthetic difference between the individual elements and the impossibility of identifying their roles creates an equalizing effect: it is precisely because they do not merge into a whole that they become equal parts next to one another. In the words of Fotis Jannidis, this can be described as an accumulation of "weakly manifested information,"[123] which means that different and at times even opposing singular

[123] Fotis Jannidis: *Polyvalenz – Konvention – Autonomie*, in: *Regeln der Bedeutung. Zur Theorie der Bedeutung literarischer Texte*, ed. by Fotis Jannidis et al., Berlin 2003, 305-328, 324.

meanings – none of which are particularly incisive – exist side by side, creating an effect of diversity instead of contrast.

The determining feature of Harrison's assemblage is that the individual elements of her work refer to different meanings and contexts, but none of them is prominent enough to pursue further, to sift through the layers of meaning, to explore their semantic interaction in our wish to understand the work. What is required is not a hermeneutical approach but rather a receptive attitude of indifference – like a flaneur moving from one view to the next, from one association to the next, without going too deep.

IV. Dimensions and varieties of aesthetic ambiguity: A dynamic analytical model

I have now come to the third step of my paper, which is devoted to the systematization of aesthetic ambiguity. After having undertaken a differentiation of various levels of ambiguity of (or in) art (medial, artistic, intentional, historical, and receptive) in the theoretical part of this paper, I will now analyze the various structures, differentiating within the intentional level between varying expressions of aesthetic ambiguity.

At first sight, it seems to make sense to outline a typology of ambiguous phenomena. Indeed, in this way, both Empson as well as Kris and Kaplan already presented categories for differentiating various phenomena of artistic ambiguity that were obtained empirically from artworks, but their typologies also raise a few problems.[124] Kris and Kaplan's typology exhibits fundamental improvements in comparison to Empson's. Particularly pathbreaking is their distinction between disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguity, that is, between those forms of equivocation in which different meanings contradict one another and those in which different meanings work together. Their categories therefore have a higher degree of systematization, and, at the same time, they also exhibit a higher level of abstraction in comparison to Empson's and thus greater generalizability. Yet language still remains the guiding paradigm in Kris and Kaplan, and visual forms of ambiguity do not play a role in their argumentative presentation, even though the authors view their categories as transferrable to other arts. The way in which the relationship of types to each other is defined should also be criticized. Both typologies line up the different types of ambiguity additively next to each other as isolated monads on an axis, even though these types do not at all structurally function on the same level. Their connection to each other thus remains, in the end, undetermined. While Kris and Kaplan attempt to make such a connection, it is only limitedly successful.[125] The

[124] In addition, Pfisterer has provided a list of seven different "fields of discussion about vagueness and ambiguity in the visual arts" with regard to early modernity, but he does not explicitly refer to the list as a typology (cf. Pfisterer: *Akt und Ambiguität* [op. cit.], 43-57).

[125] Kris and Kaplan place the five differentiated types of ambiguity – disjunctive, additive, conjunctive, integrative, projective – in a logical series that potentially captures possible transi-

existing typologies therefore do not do justice to the complexity of the phenomena.

Indeed, one can ask the fundamental question of whether constructing a typology of the phenomena of aesthetic ambiguity makes sense at all. Since aesthetic ambiguity is always varied and dynamic, fixed types are always in danger of appearing static, anachronistic, and oversimplified. For this reason, I refrain from developing a typology. But I also do not find Elkin's approach of locating ambiguity in a sheer endless number of 'arenas' to be promising. While it makes clear how wide-ranging the possibilities of pictorial ambiguity are, it mixes up the different levels, means, and functions of ambiguity. He thus does not open an analytical approach into ambiguous phenomena.

Distancing myself from these approaches, while also in part building on them, I would like to generate in the following a dynamic analytical model that makes apparent the multidimensionality of aesthetic ambiguity and places the different varieties in relation to one another so that intermediate forms, transitions, and displacements can be terminologically graspable.

As my analyses have shown, each of the four artworks is marked by a specifically structured type of equivocation, based on a specific *modus operandi*. To systemize the heterogeneous phenomena of aesthetic ambiguity, I believe it is fruitful to use the modes as a starting point. I have purposely chosen the term *mode* as it describes a kind of approach and function, which is formative for each artwork's structure as well as for the process of reception that takes place between the work and the viewer. In this understanding, the term mode also refers to a certain tradition in art history.[126]

The mode applied by Gilbert & George can be described as *conjunctive*. The visual chain of reactions created by the ambiguities on several levels constitutes a coherent whole, which, in explicating the 'dirty word' *fuck*, portrays London as a capital of gay subculture. The conjunctive mode is a very old and well-established form of equivocation, which was discussed with regard to the term *ironia* in ancient rhetoric. Gilbert & George's *Fuck* also has an ironic element, but this is not mandatory for the conjunctive mode. In this case, ambiguity serves to create a point

tions between these types. But the logic in the series is shaky. For disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguity form an opposition, just as, on the other hand, projective and conjunctive ambiguity are oppositional. It thus turns out that a single semantic axis is not sufficient for systematizing the field of ambiguity.

126 In the seventeenth century, Nicolas Poussin transferred this term from music to painting so as to characterize qualities of the artwork that can produce certain moods in the viewer. A mode is not identical with a style. This reference to Poussin should not, of course, be overstrained. Here it is not about the musical concept of mode, but rather a *modus operandi* as technique and function. On Poussin, see *Geschichte der klassischen Bildgattungen in Quellentexten und Kommentaren* I: *Historienmalerei*, ed. by Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Uwe Fleckner, Berlin 1996, 142–147; Jan Białostocki: *Das Modusproblem in den bildenden Künsten. Zur Vorgeschichte und zum Nachleben des "Modusbriefes" von Nicolas Poussin*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 24 (1961), 128–141.

that is necessary to understand the work. Different semantic elements conjoin to generate meaning on a metalevel.

In Rachel Harrison's piece, the opposite is true. Here semantic elements diverge. They do not oppose each other; they are simply different. For this reason, they cannot resolve into a singular point, and they do not generate a coherent overarching meaning. This *indifferent mode* of ambiguity, which keeps several parallel elements in suspension, aims at a receptive behavior that forgoes deciphering or deriving meaning and affirms the 'openness' of the artwork as it is. Historically speaking, this mode is much younger and typical for postmodernism, which systematically cultivates the pluralistic interplay of disconnected elements.

The mode in Santiago Sierra's conceptual work has a different quality. Here there are neither ambiguities that culminate in a set point nor an indifferent coexistence of parallel elements of meaning. The work is rather marked by a fundamental ambivalence that results from its oscillation between art and reality and becomes manifest in contradictory moral estimations. I describe this mode of ambiguity as *disjunctive* since it produces starkly opposed positions that exist simultaneously and lead to the collapse of one into the other. Contrary to the indifferent mode, where ambiguity is toned down, the disjunctive mode accelerates and escalates ambiguity.

Neo Rauch, in turn, creates loose ties between different semantic elements. His painting offers several opportunities for associations, encouraging viewers to search for meaningful constellations even though these remain unfulfilled in the end. There is no point, no tangible overarching meaning, but also no randomness. Propelled by hints, the *associative mode* of Rauch's work produces a continuous cycle of searching for meaning, but this search remains, in the end, unresolved. This mode is characteristic for postmodernism but was also widespread in the classical modern period and can be at least traced back to the early modern period, for example in sixteenth-century Venetian painting.

Numerous further examples from the art of recent decades can be named for all four modes: conjunctive ambiguity can be found, for instance, in Martha Rosler; Michaël Borreman's paintings exhibit associative ambiguity; indifferent ambiguity can be observed in Cosima von Bonin and Martin Kippenberger; and one encounters disjunctive ambiguity in the actions of Christoph Schlingensief or the Center for Political Beauty. Of course, the specific structure of ambiguity in an artistic work can never be entirely captured in one of these modes; artworks are always more complex than what can be grasped with one category. But the advantage of the proposed differentiation between these four modes – associative, disjunctive, indifferent, conjunctive – consists in being able to grasp varying phenomenal forms with more conceptual precision.

Starting with these modes, one can achieve a systematic perspective on aesthetic ambiguity. If one views the four modes together with regard to their structural qualities, then one can ascertain two parameters from them that determine the concrete expression of each mode of aesthetic ambiguity. These are:

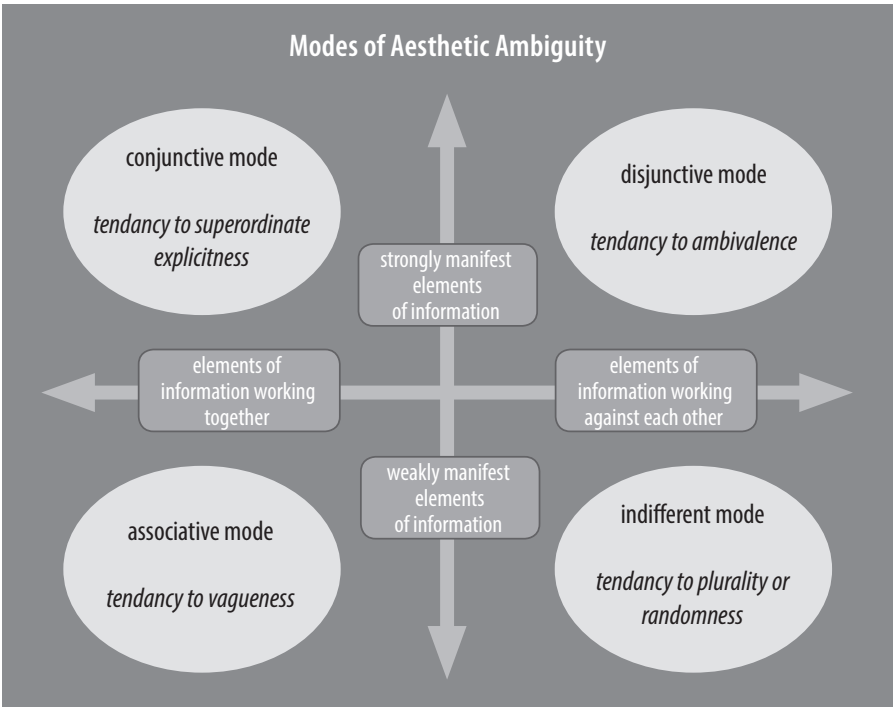
1. The relationship between given elements of information: they can either work together or against each other.
2. The intensity of the given elements of information: they can be manifested weakly or strongly.

With these parameters, I have adopted from Kris and Kaplan the difference between semantic elements that work together and those that work against one another as well as the terms conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguity.[127] But in contrast to Kris and Kaplan, I am not talking about different meanings in an artwork since the concept of meaning is normally related to mimetic content or intended meaning. Since this is not, however, about meaning in this narrow sense but rather about aspects of an artwork (such as color values, the identification of objects, the illusion of space, facture, and so on) that can, in their interplay, produce ambiguity, I prefer the concept of information from semiotics, which serves here in the broadest sense as a neutral general term for all perceived aspects of an artwork. I adopt the differentiation between information that is weakly or strongly manifested from Fotis Jannidis, who defines equivocality as the "existence of a finite amount of weakly manifested information"[128] with recourse to the theory of manifestness by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. In this way, Jannidis opposes the concept of fundamental ambiguity and the potentially infinite profusion of meaning in the artwork that goes back to around 1800; instead, he demands precise descriptions of "what information is made more or less manifest by what strategies."[129] Exactly such exact descriptions of different varieties of producing ambiguity are my concern – I have offered them above using the four exemplary works. For my second concern of offering a viable approach to systematizing different varieties of aesthetic ambiguity, I have combined Kris and Kaplan's with Jannidis's approaches and developed them into a new analytical model. The two named parameters make it possible to differentiate phenomena of aesthetic ambiguity structurally.

Both parameters, which are themselves diametrically structured, generate together different forms of ambiguity depending on how they are combined. While strongly manifested elements of information produce a common meaning in their interaction, they also have the tendency to reestablish a superordinate explicitness. If strongly manifested elements are in opposition, they produce a simultaneous contrast and thus tend toward ambivalence. This can evoke strong affective reactions or opposing moral judgments, or it can even lead to interpretative conflicts. When weakly manifested elements of information interact, they make it possible to link associations and generate meaning, but the links are in the end not conclusive enough for disambiguation. Instead, they tend to engender vagueness. When weakly manifested elements of information are opposed, they create an unsolvable openness and tend to produce plurality or randomness.

127 Cf. Kris and Kaplan: *Aesthetic ambiguity* [op. cit.], 245.
128 Fotis Jannidis: *Polyvalenz – Konvention – Autonomie* [op. cit.], 324.
129 Ibid., 326.

With the help of these parameters, we can diagram a field of aesthetic ambiguity. The two parameters – the intensity of the elements of information (strong or weak) and their relationship (interaction or opposition) – constitute the two axes.



In the resulting diagram of aesthetic ambiguity, each of the modes attains a systematic position: in the conjunctive mode, pieces of strong information work together; in the disjunctive mode, pieces of strong information work opposed to one another; in the associative mode, weak information works together; and in the indifferent mode, pieces of weak information work next to or opposed to one another. On the basis of this analytical model and its categories, it is possible to describe phenomena of aesthetic ambiguity in a more differentiated way and – this is particularly important – to put them into relation to one another. I do not understand these modes as fixed types but as positions in a larger field that have numerous other possible positionings between them. Precisely the intermediate and transitional forms and the variability of the phenomena are of interest.

Since it was developed by analyzing art works, this analytical model applies above all to the structural qualities of artworks – but it also has a dimension of reception. For every *modus operandi* on the side of the work corresponds to an analogue mode on the side of reception: the conjunctive mode (of the artwork) corresponds to a conjunctive mode of reception, which searches in the work for

semantic elements and attempts to develop an overarching meaning from them. The disjunctive mode (of the work) corresponds to a disjunctive mode of reception. It can be best characterized as an ambivalent stance since it experiences and reflects the emotional tensions that are released by contradictory information. The indifferent mode (of the work) corresponds on the side of reception to an indifferent stance that can obtain aesthetic pleasure from semantic openness and the play of changing and competing information. And the associative mode (of the work) is analogous to the associative mode of reception, which endlessly searches for meaningful connections without aiming to achieve or being dependent on achieving a definitive result.

Like the modes of the aesthetic work, the modes of aesthetic reception are also historically specific; they can be subject to changing situations and supported by different theoretical concepts of art. It is, for example, evident that the associative and indifferent modes of reception surged in postmodernism. In no way does an artwork's mode of ambiguity always inescapably summon the analogue mode of reception. Reception always follows its own path. Various contemporary commentaries, new interpretations in other historical, geographic, and social contexts, and opposing art-historical approaches of interpretation are also an inseparable part of the history of decidedly and intentionally ambiguous artworks. Yet the different modes of reception can also be clearly conceptually differentiated.

What are the uses of this analytical model? The goal is not to diagram all the possible forms and phenomena of ambiguity in art – that would be about as absurd as the 1:1 scale map in Jorge Luis Borges's story *On Exactitude in Science*. This would not be desirable or even possible since art can always produce new and more differentiated forms of ambiguity. It has just as little to do with sorting artworks into the diagram. Instead, the analytical use of the model lies, first, in how it makes observing aesthetic ambiguity as a multidimensional phenomenon possible.[130] Second, the analytical model offers precise terminology for describing, in a more a differentiated manner, the varieties of nonexplicit semantic structures in art and their modes of reception. And, third, it allows to place phenomena of aesthetic ambiguity in relationship to one another in their differences and similarities, to name intermediary stages and transitional forms, and to make apparent different dimensions in the production and reception of ambiguity. The analytical model thus connects a systematizing perspective of the general phenomenon of aesthetic ambiguity and a highly diffentiated engagement with individual artworks.

Übersetzt von Anthony Mahler und Margarete Clausen

[130] Bauer, Knape, Koch, and Winkler also speak of different 'dimensions' of ambiguity. But with 'dimensions' they characterize, above all, disciplinary differentiations between rhetoric, linguistics, and literary studies (cf. Bauer, Knape, Koch, and Winkler: *Dimensionen der Ambiguität* [op. cit.]).

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