

ABSTRACT MANUAL OF ANTI-ART DEFIES CRITICS

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SYNOPSIS

This article on ir-relevance of Art criticism and its perpetrators, the maligned reviewers, explores how close Kurt Schwitters' points of reference here are aligned to ANTOA, the New Theory of Art. Schwitters (pronounce Sh-wit- ash) as main exponent of Hannover's circle of avantgarde artists in interregnum between World War I and II (ca 1920 to 1937), was an accomplished yet often misunderstood creator, busy in fields of painting, sculpting, graphic design and literature.

Furthermore the link between his influential quote on the value of „Abstract Non-Art“ and 1950/60ies phenomena of theatrical performance are investigated. This as much as application of points 3 – old make new, 4 – abstraction, where does it come from and where does it lead to? and 5 – message and symbolism, in relation to ANTOA, come under the spotlight.

KEY WORDS: Anthropology, ANTOA, Art Critic, DADA Movement, History, Literary, Performance, Schwitters, Social, Theatre, Untitled Event.

ABSTRACT MANUAL OF ANTI-ART DEFIES CRITICS

I begin with an imaginary question from my series ROLE OF ARTIST IN SOCIETY, 24 INTERVIEWS FROM SOUTH AFRICA, directed at a master of collage, minimalist sculpting, „MERZ“-construction and apparent nonsense literature that nonetheless favours deep logic, black humour and reversal of the normal into a far-reaching imaginary abnormal, full of irrational yet intriguing thoughts. He was also the famous Hannover rep in north of Germany of the concurrent DADA movement that spread from Switzerland's Zurich to Paris, New York and Berlin in the 1920ies.

Mr Schwitters, is your use of the terms Art criticism and critics in any way connected to ANTOA, the new concept of how creativity can be measured in social and historical terms?

Imaginary Kurt Schwitters answers that he expresses his disdain for Art reviewers in his quote on „Abstract Non-Art“, not really meant as guideline to a future revolution in world of theatre, but certainly linked to ANTOA. Furthermore, in the introduction to his anti-tale, „Auguste Bolte“, published in 1922, he lays into the „cultured“ version of the intellectual animal. In my latter contraption of semantic sense and nonsense, Kurt Schwitters (KS) states, frequent footnotes refer to analogies of text and Art criticism, triggered by Auguste Bolte's so-called scientific research into why the numeration of ten people walking in one and same direction - 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 folks - must surely be an indicator that something „big“ is about to happen. Yet till the tale's very end on a military drill ground dead right in centre of a famous northern German nature reserve, called Heatherland/Heide, nothing „big“ seems to take place. In fact, her scientific research that had earned her title of Dr of Life, Dr Leb, comes to an empty, senseless end as well! Namely she realizes that following two groups of people in opposite directions, as she did frequently throughout the well composed story, after the ten had split up into two groups of five, that such endeavour reveals no insights or knowledge and that the resulting info is indeed worthless. Nobody can know anything in any case. Schwitters then crowning her „academic“ career with the post of Associate Professor, because they know nothing. Just like Art critics produce empty reviews similar to murmur and brabble in a restaurant filled with guests, rather than telling us what really goes down in a certain exhibition, Associate Professors expound ignorance about what really goes on with scientific discoveries. „Auguste Bolte“ is full of intellectual side-kicks like this and surely underlines the concept of Art criticism as long-standing tradition of empty and useless thinking. A certain link to treatment of KS-Art as futile, even schizophrenic and degenerate during fascist rule in Germany comes into play, too. Before I return to frequent referencing between edgy corners of „Auguste Bolte's“ storyline and the ineptitude, plain useless erudition of many Art reviewers, includes the alleged science as a whole, I want to outline the links between Art criticism and DADA's inborn renewal. This the essence of his quote on „Abstract Non-Art“ that well established Art

historian Werner Hoffman uses for highlighting his speech on a Pop-Art show in Berlin's Academy of Creativity in 1964. In „Abstract Non-Art“, critics are compared to small, insect-like creatures who state that the DADA movement is dead. Yet according to KS, the opposite is the case, manifested in an inherent capacity of renewal by DADA, „of cutting rotten growth from an aged body“. But obviously, the critics and Art buffons cannot see that. Then he outlines how such a renewal manifests itself in a theatrical performance: An endless stream of DADAISTS encircles a square table, topped by a white cup. Each time a DADAIST passes the cup, he/she says: „This is a fork“. And to show how the old-make-new capacity involves an innovative relation between spectator and actor, KS also suggests to leave a stage empty of props, actors or actions, „and then see how the audience responds! “The abstract shearing off of sense and logic from such DADA events converts them into the opposite of Art, like „Auguste Bolte's“ misfortunes transform into this anti-tale. By renewing their worn spirits the avantgardists thus defied common standards.

The old-make-new angle in this quote comes to fore in two ways. Not only exemplifies the grand DADA master, whose spontaneous Art making may not really fulfill standards set by fellow avantgardists Tristan Tzara, Raoul Housman or Johannes Baader, the inherent tendency of creative innovation and breaking with the past! This as hinted to in point 3 of my theory, but he unwittingly influenced a whole new trend in post-war theatre as well! Started by John Cage's now famous „untitled event“ at Black Mountain College in 1952, 4 years after KS's passing near England's scenic Lake District, his amazing white porcelain cup makes a grand re-appearance. Cage, painter Robert Rauschenberg and others had invented a multi-stranded performance in which white cups were placed on all spectator chairs, the latter fully integrated into the course of action.

This „untitled event“ now tearing down the barrier between spectators, seated in auditorium, and actors on stage. And the white cups inviting the spectators to take action themselves; if they wanted to sit down; they had to remove the cup on their chair, and later on actors ending this innovative performance by the ritual of pouring coffee into each single cup, no matter if it had been used as ashtray or for anything else.

The „untitled event“ saw a rush of performances creep into the Art world of the 1960/70ies and served as catalysator, too. A shift away from presentation and dialogue to involvement of viewers and spectators questions the acting and challenges theatrical conventions. The white cup of DADA renewal had set a salient signpost in the quest for old-make-new. And can be termed an essential pillar in the 5-pointer concept of creativity. The ensuing revolution was three-fold, it not only established close links between actors and spectators, combined various branches of Art making like collages and assemblies do, where train tickets, postcards and newspaper pages make perfect bedfellows, but also revealed new ways of interpretation and meaning. This by „cutting out rotten growth from an aged body“. Theatre became cultural performance, even a sociological notion, coined by US Anthropologist Milton Singer, while part of the larger socio-cultural context in framework of certain linguistic and geographical boundaries. Similar to ritual, religious performance and even sports contests, theatre becomes most concrete observable unit in a defined cultural space. Yet the question lingers, was this upheaval initiated by the „untitled event“ as break from current form or was it a continuation of avantgarde Art, so harshly interrupted by fascist rule in Germany? I tend to favour the bearing of old-make-new as coming into play, and see the performance rush of the latter 1960/70ies as departure and perpetuation simultaneously. While DADA's fading appeal once more solidified into a universal standard during later periods of Arts upheaval, nonsense turned to sense and logic attracts the irrational, seemingly incomprehensible. Even the often cynical plays and monologues by Austrian writers Peter Handke and Ernst Jandl (poetry) continue the historical storyline right into our own times here.

The use of ridicule, dark humour and seemingly unrelated terminology describes the Art critic well in KS's anti-tale „Auguste Bolte“ (AB). In introduction to the story that has DADA inclinations in content rather than in its well planned execution, KS refers to the dogged, „barking“ appearance of the critics's face, with bullying nose wrecked from alc abuse while arms and legs are missing in any case. This gap then filled by elaborations of an unreal Daily Art Press. A substitute skull, as found in ancient graves of Egyptian Pharaohs and Kings, is awarded instead. The critic's head also wears a scarf to cover those gaps where reasoning and intellectual capacity should sit. In cynical conclusion, KS ends his introduction by appeasing readers and critics alike, so that a favourable review of his amazing anti-story should be the result. „Auguste Bolte“ is an abstruse, illogical yet plausible and catching tale, and ends nowhere, namely in conflict-ridden land of irrational reasoning, fully enactable yet utterly fantastical. When Auguste can't pay the fee for her taxi the driver drops her in the middle of nowhere, here a notorious military area for prepping infantry warfare.

Furthermore, the author awards AB the title of Associate Prof because she came to no conclusions in her research of the „big“ event that never took place. We realize that knowing something about the motivation of those ten folks all marching off in one and same direction is impossible. Just like the position of the Art critic, as KS presents the culture vulture to us, which remains untenable, leaves us with a horribly skew feeling and an awfully foul taste.

In the long litany of analogies in this watershed text, the author compares Art critics to " a woman in her two-part underwear", " an authority leaving a restaurant filled with murmur and brabble", or to " a solid substance crushed into powder", to a "visitor lost in a park", to a „horse relieved of the blinkers“. Then to a „car raging like a street dog“ and finally to a person knowing nothing, just like Auguste B could never unravel the reason why ten numerated folks run off to reach an unreal target.

Hofman's raison d'être for his historically critical approach to Art, surely founded on a treasure of valid insights and comparisons, also reflects in his precise drawing of that obvious connexion between avantgarde expressions from 1920/30ies and post-war Pop-Art styles. While my own justification for driving the multi-stranded creative parabel to new heights – and away from gay restaurant chatter and desolate military training areas - is connected to the 5- pointer ANTOA countdown.

Yet must I as part of the intellectual species attributing deeper purpose to seemingly shorn off, abstracted, incomprehensible works of Art, arbitrarily placed into an irrational and chaotic world, be concerned now? Like Art historian W Hofmann was when giving his speech on a Pop-Art exhibition in the mid 1960ies, introduced by said KS quote on Abstract Non-Art“ and the DADAIST proposal of inner, even formal revolution by having actors encircle said table with a white cup on it, calling the prop a „fork“? Pop-Art's technique of assembling various items of common day usage - I dare not apply the term culture for risk of misintepretation – A SURE LINK TO EARLIER DADA METHODS OF COLLAGE AND UPSTAGED PERFROMANCES LIKE RELIGIOUS CELEBRATION OR A PARLIAMENTARY SITTING IN WEIMAR, the well-known East German Arts and Culture hub. The latter two events conceived by fellow Berlin DADAIST, Johannes Baader!

With KS as accomplished creator fulfilling 3 of those points:

1 - Old-makes-new as symbolized by his abstract idea of DADA's inspiring rebirth, especially in view of critics' inability to speak the truth and inform the layperson of real going-ons.

2 - By his clever use of the abstract angle, telling us where it came from, here the Art critic's ignorance of real conditions, and where it will lead us to: the urgent renewal of avantgarde thought, „cutting off rotten growth from an aged body“. An overlap between points 3 and 4 of ANTOA can be ticked off as well, while thirdly point 5 – symbolism, message and meaning - is highlighted by the fun part in his creativity, an angle, as he says, far too long neglected by serious makers of free-flowing, innovative, stylish artefacts. And later by weavers of socially linked theatre nets, endowed with deep-seated, yet often unrecognized meaning. Yields a joyful symbolism, too, contained in his so-called MERZ-constructions as much as in his numerous pages of literary inventions and snippets of illogical yet plausible texts.

So where does the manual section come in here, the leaflet of instructions for the layperson who can now assemble Art works on his/her own account? Who can now decipher the meaning of creativity in an easily understood booklet?

It comes from a quote, published by his son Ernst in 1965 and stemming from his short-lived asylum from Nazi persecution in Norway, where the two lived and where KS continued his landmark MERZ-constructions, albeit lost to posterity as original source material. In Norway, KS then formalising and perfecting his skill of sculpting Art works from bone, plastic, synthetic rubber and other materials in simple, most abstract and suggestive shapes. This elevation of the creative angle from common day throw-away materials also a preferred technique by DADA exponents world-wide! „Art is an anti-notation, a non-existent term, elevated to godly status, inexplicable like human life, without purpose and with even less sense of definition. Creativity means the downgrading of Art's constituting elements. I can only speak for myself, for the material that I use for which purpose? I don't really know.

The material basis is irrelevant anyhow, is a futile side-effect like my own life. What is important is the way I shape something from nothing. Form and style make the Art work! By tuning into, balancing, weighing up various Art sources like oil painting versus linen canvases, colour against colour or wood and bone against screen, I create the mystery of MERZ (namely for his huge room-filling models of interior furnishings and decorations, made from everyday rubble and throw-away items). This MERZ (the term a shortening of KOMMERZ = BANK OF TRADE AND COMMERCE, and written into one of original collages on his MERZ walls) an utterly innovative view of the world that asks for ultimate freedom from a chained-in life.

From locked up thoughts and mental captivity. True freedom doesn't mean the vagaries of life have a free run, it means hard work and discipline, and stringent, rigorous application of creative standards.“ Here KS departed from the general paradigm of spontaneous and instantaneous actions by DADA practitioners, especially in his literary and sculpted works like “The Dancer“, a refined and strange miniature statue created in exile.

He continues this odd definition viceversa the instructions in his MANUAL OF MAKING ABSTRACT ART with reference to his literary activity, seen as assembly of words, sentences, phrases, idioms, aphorisms, and then the whole lot mixed into a new way of making sense, mainly nonsense so-to-speak. This due to fact that the absurd, illogical angle of literary creativity had been neglected for far too long. “Making sense is definitely not in demand here, even if it comes out a standard of appreciation. I set sense and logic against nonsense and irrationality, and I prefer double-edged nonsense and dark humour...so rarely applied as a skill or technique in inventing true Art!



See for yourself how the master of the erstwhile free-flowing, now classic collages and provocative MERZ- assemblies of everyday items, has changed into a fine, and structured and formalist sculptor in his latter years.

Image courtesy of Lempertz auctions,
www.lempertz.com

CONCLUSION

From curse KS has cast over Art criticism to his insistence on renewal of and innovation in DADA movement, his creations fulfill conditions of true Art viceversa of 5-pointer ANTOA countdown. 3 of these socially related cornerstones come into play anyhow, from old-makes-new in DADA by cutting out „rotten growth from aged body“, to his elaborations on abstraction, telling us where it came from and where it will lead us, to point 5 – message, symbolism and meaning. The latter cornerstone satisfied by his use of fun and dark humour, especially in his literary pieces.

And more than that: KS indeed suggests innovation on the theatre stage in line with his „Abstract Non-Art“ proposal where a white cup on a table marks a definite departure from conventional speak as DADA actors call it a „fork“. The white cup then makes a watershed reappearance in John Cage et al`s 1952 „untitled event“, 4 years after passing of the MERZ-great. This marked prop turning theatre into cultural performance, a universal phenomenon creeping into 1960i/70ies Art. Now active interplay between spectators and actors reigns supreme. The social notion accompanying such shows henceforth also of anthropological interest.

Eventually in his years in exile, KS compares the act of creation to a manual of instructions and says form and shape constitute Art`s essentials rather than content and purpose. Art here also a tool of liberation.

Liberation from mental captivity. A re-reading of his classic anti-tale „Auguste Bolte“ reveals KS as cynical yet far-reaching author who produces double-edged nonsense from a plausible albeit obscure mix of words and other elements of speech, with simple rhymes driving inner dialogue.

PS: We forgive KS the use of a controversial expletive, seemingly out of context or with deeper meaning in “Auguste Bolte“, surely not placed as cynical play of words.

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