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AMBIGUITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND THEORY

Introduction

Frauke Berndt & Lutz Koepnick

I.

It has become commonplace to associate art and aesthetic experience with the category of ambiguity. Whereas scientific knowledge and concept-driven discourses seek to disambiguate our approach to and grasp of worldly matters, art is typically seen as a form of human communication that eschews unequivocal messages and certified meanings. Its metaphors unlock open spaces for multiple readings; its images allow eyes and minds to wander without final resolution; its riddles leave readers, viewers, and listeners in states of suspension; its formal experiments make recipients wonder what they face in the first place; and its aesthetic shapes and energies activate affects that may sideline any effort to systematize, streamline, organize, or map the messiness of experience. And yet, associating theory, scientific knowledge, and the work of criticism with an inherent drive toward the unequivocal and thinking of the aesthetic as a realm of untidy, albeit productive, ambivalences and ambiguities cannot but miss the point, not least of all because such a construct itself relies on an understanding of science to define art. More importantly, this binary overlooks the extent to which certain types of ambiguity might themselves be built into and in fact energize the operations of theory, criticality, and scientific knowledge.

This volume and its contributions explore the mutual entanglement of art, aesthetic experience, and theory in different registers of ambiguity and ambivalence. The aim, however, is not simply to deconstruct pretentious certainties and proclaim that theorists and critics often know as much, or as little, as the work they discuss in their learned discourses. Nor is it to embrace the vague and ambiguous as ineluctable, as the stuff that defines humans as humans and thus automatically authorizes the kind of institutional frameworks we have come to build to produce, circulate, consume, market, study, discuss, and theorize aesthetic expressions, past and present. Instead, our objective is to profile different approaches that are all dedicated to stressing the productivity and creativity of ambiguity, be it in the arts or in theory or criticism, without positing the ambiguous, vague, and ambivalent as the mere messy other or dialectical counterpart of conceptual clarity and theoretical rigor. Though each of the essays gathered in this volume may feature and articulate a slightly different understanding of what should count as ambiguous, and even though each contribution will train its critical gaze on different modes and mediums of artistic practice, all are driven by the assumption that our talk about art, like the aesthetic itself, cannot do without the dynamic force of ambiguity;

that arduous efforts to disambiguate aesthetic practice as much as their discursive texts and contexts would eliminate art's unique ability to reshape our knowledge about the world, our sensory encounter with it, and our moral or political position in it.

Consider the 2014 intervention by artists associated with the Berlin-based Center for Political Beauty. On the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, these artists removed seven white crosses commemorating victims of the Wall from their location next to the Reichstag and sent them to Melilla – a Spanish enclave on the African continent. Their aim was to suggest that the victims of the Wall had fled from Berlin in an act of solidarity with the 30,000 people who had died on account of the European Union's political borders since the end of the Cold War.¹ As a result of this controversial intervention, the white crosses have become ambiguous: in addition to serving as a memorial to the victims of the GDR border, they are now also a symbol for these new 'wall victims,' and the latter is only possible through the former.²



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The performance installation thereby negotiates – in a way paradigmatic for German art since the turn of the millennium – both a traumatic past and a traumatizing present by fusing communication, aesthetics, and politics within a zone of

¹ Cf. Zentrum für Politische Schönheit: *Erster europäischer Mauerfall. Zum 25. Jahrestag des Mauerfalls gibt es neue EU-Außenmauern*, 2014. <<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/erster-europaischer-mauerfall>> (accessed 20 August 2017).

² Cf. Zentrum für Politische Schönheit: *Erster europäischer Mauerfall*, 2009–2017. <<http://www.politicalbeauty.de/mauerfall.html>> (accessed 20 August 2017).

ambiguity. More than just an aspect of art's content, the political becomes part of a specific aesthetic that invites the spectator to reflect on his or her political position.³

This 2014 intervention and its aftermath illustrate that, under certain conditions, communication does not and in fact is not designed to follow the maxim "avoid ambiguity."⁴ Instead of misinterpreting ambiguity as an offense against the cooperative principle of communication, the removal of the crosses indicates the great potential of ambiguity for communicative purposes. On the one hand, by producing ambiguity, the artists were able to effectively express their political unease about the current practices and historical blind spots of commemoration. On the other hand, and even more significantly, the participants and viewers of the performances built around this installation were asked to embrace the semantic complexities of ambiguous meanings and perceptions as engines of political self-evaluation and engagement. Thus, just as everyday communication does not actually avoid ambiguity,⁵ the intervention by the Center for Political Beauty employs ambiguity to energize the recipient's sensuous and cognitive response to the ongoing refugee crisis.

It is no exaggeration to say that ever since the onset of industrial modernity and aesthetic modernism, artists, writers, poets, composers, and filmmakers have been genuinely obsessed with the ambiguous, embracing different aesthetic mediums and their formal properties to 'increase ambiguity.'⁶ Though it has taken different forms in different mediums of expression, this deployment of ambiguity can generally be interpreted as an answer to a more and more complex, challenging, and demanding environment – the rise of social, economic, political, and cultural complexities necessitates new aesthetic strategies of presentation and representation. The contributions to this volume all understand the productive engagement and entanglement of art and theory with ambiguity as a sundial for much larger historical dynamics. They focus on German literature, visual art, media art, installation art, film, theater, music, and material culture not simply in order to provide new readings of different aesthetic strategies but to understand strategies of ambiguity that resist normative expectations for disambiguation as adequate and effective.

³ Cf. *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures. Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Thorsten Jost and Saskya Iris Jain, New York 2014, 259.

⁴ Herbert Paul Grice: *Logic and Conversation*, in: *Syntax and Semantics 3. Speech Acts*, ed. by P. Cole and J.L. Morgan, New York 1975, 43–58, 30.

⁵ Cf. Steven T. Piantadosi, Harry Tily, and Edward Gibson: *The Communicative Function of Ambiguity in Language*, in: *Cognition* 122 (2012), 280–291.

⁶ Cf. *Radikal ambivalent. Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten heute*, ed. by Rachel Mader, Zurich, Berlin 2014; Anselm Haverkamp: *Die Zweideutigkeit der Kunst. Zur historischen Epistemologie der Bilder*, Berlin 2012; *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, ed. by Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2010; 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; Dario Gamboni: *Potential Images. Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002.

tive measures to address the complex entanglements of our contemporary world. No matter whether the authors of this volume discuss literary, visual, acoustic, or theoretical material, all develop their arguments with the shared understanding that the arts provide zones in which “ambiguity is not a contingent but a constitutive dimension of communication.”⁷

Linguistics defines interpretive uncertainty in terms of either a discrete (in the case of ambiguity) or nondiscrete (in the case of vagueness) spectrum of possible specifications.⁸ Such a classification, however, cannot do justice to ambiguous phenomena in the arts.⁹ With particular attention to literary ambiguity, Israel Scheffler therefore carefully corrects linguistic classifications by identifying three general types: elementary ambiguity, which may apply to deictic expressions; interpretative ambiguity, understood as something to be eliminated through acts of successful interpretation; and the phenomenon of multiple meanings,¹⁰ which differs from the first two because it does not allow for disambiguation. And yet, Scheffler’s account has its own shortcomings. On the one hand, Scheffler focuses only on language and linguistically based forms of art; visual or acoustic mediums,¹¹ let alone multimodal forms of aesthetic expression and mass communication,¹² remain off-limits. On the other hand, the purpose of Scheffler’s typology is primarily classificatory; it offers categories to subsume individual objects under larger rubrics but no real lenses to inspire intricate readings of individual practices and materials. For these reasons, recent investigations into the ambiguity of literature and art evade both linguistic classifications and Scheffler’s philosophical approach. The essays of this collection instead employ hermeneutic or posthermeneutic concepts of ambiguity that refer broadly to the openness of meaning in art and theory and are, in one way or another, dedicated to the legacy of aesthetic modernism, how it unsettles stable expectations, pushes against closure and certainty, and fundamentally stresses the creativity of reading, viewing, listening, and the general act of reception.¹³

⁷ Frauke Berndt and Klaus Sachs-Hombach: *Dimensions of Constitutive Ambiguity*, in: *Ambiguity. Language and Communication*, ed. by Susanne Winkler, Berlin, Munich, Boston 2015, 271–282, 273.

⁸ Cf. Christopher Kennedy: *Ambiguity and Vagueness. An Overview*, in: *Semantics. An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning I*, ed. by Claudia Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, and Paul Portner, Berlin, Boston 2011, 507–535.

⁹ Cf. 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.

¹⁰ Cf. Israel Scheffler: *Beyond the Letter. A Philosophical Inquiry into Ambiguity, Vagueness and Metaphor in Language*, London 1979.

¹¹ Cf. Israel Scheffler: *Pictorial Ambiguity*, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989), 109–115.

¹² Cf. Gunther Kress: *Multimodality. A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, New York 2010.

¹³ Cf. *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.]; Christoph Bode: *Ästhetik der Ambiguität. Zu Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne*, Tübingen 1988.

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