



The Autopoiesis of the Artworld after the End of Art

■ **Willem Schinkel**

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article critically adapts and applies the views of Niklas Luhmann on the social system of art. Luhmann's systems theory does not have an adequate account of 'the artworld'. Yet by conceiving of the artworld as an autopoietic social system, Luhmann's highly original work can be brought to bear in the sociology of art. This article applies that work by reviewing some historical changes in the autoreference of the artworld as a social system and the type of reference of works of art in the same periods. While 20th-century art saw the dominance of autoreference, which replaced a century-old mimetic reference to reality (social, natural or transcendent), current art seems to be moving in the direction of 'defamiliarization', taking social reality as its referent. While some philosophers have noted the 'end of art', contemporary art seems to be moving more in the direction of some form of sociology.

KEY WORDS

artworld / autopoiesis / 'end of art' / Luhmann / sociology of art / systems theory

Introduction

This article is concerned with the way in which contemporary art upholds its autoreference as 'art', and hence with the way in which the artworld maintains its relative autonomy. In order to do so, the theoretical vocabulary of Niklas Luhmann's systems-theory is deployed. Luhmann's massive theoretical work is gradually finding its way into the social sciences, and his sociology of art has as yet not been much used.¹ This is mainly due to his formalistic conception of the 'system of art', which blocks a view of what is, in the sociology of art, traditionally called an 'artworld'. In order to apply Luhmann's concept

of the autopoietic (self-reproductive) closure of a social system (see Luhmann, 1984, 1987, 1997) to the contemporary artworld, it will thus be necessary to adapt his framework in order to incorporate the artworld in an analysis strengthened by some of the most promising systems-theoretical concepts.

In *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995), Luhmann focuses both on art as a symbolically generalized medium of communication, and on the social system of art, consisting of communications on art. Some clarification is called for with respect to Luhmann's use of 'medium'. Next to (symbolically generalized) media of communication, which Luhmann also calls 'success media', Luhmann distinguishes media of dissemination (*Verbreitungsmedien*) (Luhmann, 1984: 221; 1997: 202), such as writing, press and radio. Symbolically generalized media of communication are evolutionary feats which allow for the acceptance of communications. In his clarification of media, Luhmann shows his operational constructivism. He makes use of Fritz Heider's distinction between medium and form, and defines a medium in terms of a set of loosely coupled elements (Luhmann, 1995: 168; 2001b: 199–200). A form, appearing, so to speak, 'within' a medium, is a set of strictly coupled elements (Luhmann, 1997: 196, 198). Media never appear without forms, and vice versa. Moreover, a medium is only recognizable through the forms that shape it. One cannot observe light, only forms highlighted by it, and neither is the air loud. Form and medium are two sides of a form (namely: medium/form) within the medium of sociological theory. Likewise, words are forms within the medium of language but at the same time media for communicative selections (Baraldi et al., 1997: 59). For sociology, only media of communication are relevant, which means symbolically generalized media of communication and media of dissemination are its main focus. Art is a symbolically generalized medium of communication. That means it is a medium of forms. However, Luhmann also focuses on what he terms the 'system of art'.

Art is a symbolically generalized medium of communication structured through works of art functioning as the forms that become, to use an 'old European' ontological language that Luhmann (1995: 165–6) wishes to depart from, the 'substance' of the medium. On the other hand, however, works of art are considered as media consisting of forms. And, to make matters even more complex, works of art can be forms as well. This has to do with the fact that works of art need to be distinguishable from an *external* environment, and closed on the inside, since each form limits the possibilities of further distinguishing between marked and unmarked space, i.e. of further 'forming' (Luhmann, 1995: 53). Works of art are forms in the sense that they mark a space vis-à-vis an unmarked space outside the system of art. They are media in the sense that they themselves contain forms. A form is then considered by Luhmann as anything marking a difference within the work of art. A brush of paint can accordingly be designated as a form, since it draws a difference within the work of art. Luhmann agrees with Spencer Brown that to observe is to draw a distinction. One can observe that a work of art is made of marble, and this will not be justified when it is made of granite, but the distinction marble/granite

is a contingent one (Luhmann, 1995: 165). In fact, the materiality of works of art (like the lives of artists) is not relevant for Luhmann's purposes (Luhmann, 1995: 86–8, 161, 251; also 1997: 99), for this belongs to the environment of art.

While 'art' is to be considered as a symbolically generalized medium, works of art are to be seen – depending on *where* one makes a distinction – both as forms and as media, but with good theoretical reasons. Luhmann states, using terms coined by Spencer Brown, that works of art can be considered as forms that allow for the observation of 'art' as a 'marked space', leaving an outside world as an 'unmarked space' (Luhmann, 1995: 63). Forms are in this context to be regarded as differences, as marking borders (Luhmann, 1997: 60). Within a work of art, then, one can focus on internal forms. That means one can observe a work of art using other distinctions, which entail different observations. This leads to other 'unmarked spaces' that reside within the work of art (Luhmann, 1995: 63). Art as a medium of communication facilitates what every communication is characterized by: the unity of the difference between information (the content of communication as it is perceived by a 'receiver') and utterance (the communicative act) (Luhmann, 1995: 22–3, 70, 89). It is the artificiality of the work of art which induces the unity of the difference between utterance and information, since works of art are objects made for others, and they are imbued with forms, i.e. with distinctions (Luhmann, 1995: 70). 'The medium of art' is 'the sum total of possibilities of crossing distinctions of form from inside outwards and to find descriptions on the other side that fit but incite a further crossing as a consequence of their own form' (Luhmann, 1995: 191).

The binary code that the symbolically generalized medium of art operates with is 'beautiful/ugly' (Luhmann, 1995: 309ff.; 2001a). However, Luhmann recognizes that 20th-century art has moved away from a preoccupation with beauty (Foster, 1983). Hence, while he also retains 'beautiful/ugly' as system-code, he at the same time speaks of 'fitting/not fitting' as the crucial distinction (Luhmann, 1995: 190; 1997: 378). This has to do with the fact that, since the 17th century, originality has taken centre stage in art (Luhmann, 1997: 354; 1995: 40, 309–18).

What Luhmann understands by the 'system of art' is autopoietic communication through art. Art communicates through works of art, and *only* through works of art (Luhmann, 1995: 41, 88; 2001b: 210). If a system is to exist, then a difference between system and environment, between autoreference and allreference (other-reference, *Fremdreferenz*) must be discernable (Luhmann, 1995: 23, 161–2; 1997: 45, 98, 315). In the system of art, that takes place through the forms of works of art, which differentiate marked from unmarked spaces. The environment of art consists, for instance, of artists and of works of art. In fact, society as such appears in the environment of the system of art. Yet with some parts of its environment – artists, works of art – the system of art is structurally coupled (Luhmann, 1995: 86), meaning that its autopoiesis presupposes the autopoiesis of systems such as the psychic systems of artists. A crucial condition for the system of art to appear is the sequential processing of the observations of fabrication and of regarding the work of art. Only when these

are not conflated does the work of art become a carrier of communication (Luhmann, 1995: 253).

The Function of Art

Specific to art is that its forms thematize the structural coupling between psychic and social (communicative) systems (Luhmann, 1995: 89). That is to say that art communicates without the aid of language, and hints towards the difference between experience (perception, or imagination) and communication. The psyche cannot communicate; communication cannot perceive or experience (Luhmann, 1995: 27, 30, 45, 82). Nonetheless, there is a 'structural coupling' between these systems, as social systems, in that their communications are 'irritated' by psychic systems and vice versa. In a way not dissimilar to Merleau-Ponty's (1964) idea that art thematizes the relationship between the eye and the world, Luhmann holds that art thematizes psychic experience or imagination in communication. Art communicates an abnormal and non-linguistic relationship between experience (imagination) and communication (Luhmann, 1995: 41–2). Art provokes the question 'what for?' (Luhmann, 1995: 42). This provokes a search for information based on a difference between utterance and information. The work of art makes observers attentive to the unlikelihood of its existence (Luhmann, 1995: 204). It thematizes alternative possibilities in the world; it creates a fictive world purely based on distinctions (forms) within the work of art itself. Since 'world' is structured by the medium *Sinn* ('meaning') (Luhmann, 1995: 173), which consists of a selection from a communicative horizon that remains in the background of the communicative act, what art offers is alternative meanings, i.e. alternative communicative selections. Contingency of form is what the medium of art communicates (Luhmann, 1995: 170). And that means that art illustrates contingency of 'world' and the possibility of *another* world: 'The imaginary world of art ... offers a position from which *something else* can be designated as *reality*' (Luhmann, 1995: 229). It has this in common with religion (Luhmann, 1995: 229; 2000). Elsewhere, Luhmann states that art is a medium for a medium/form distinction in the sense that the medium of art communicates what can be communicated (formed) within various media (Luhmann, 2001b: 209–10).

Art thus makes 'world' visible from within the world (Luhmann, 1990: 45, 241). It is a way in which the world observes itself by marking a space and simultaneously closing an unmarked space off from observation (Luhmann, 1995: 149). Art is part of a differentiated societal subsystem that fulfils the function of making alternatives to reality visible, i.e. of making 'world' visible by coming to different observations on the basis of different forms (distinctions) (Luhmann, 1995: 231, 229–42). In other words, it functions as *Weltkunst* (Luhmann, 1990), but it has to deal with the paradox of making 'world' invisible the moment it renders it visible, since it can only produce alternative observations on the basis of alternative forms or distinctions, which each have their

own blind spot. Art, by accomplishing an adequate complexity of form, illustrates that an observer cannot observe unless some kind of order is presupposed (Luhmann, 1995: 239). Art shows that ‘order’ is unavoidable (Luhmann, 1995: 241). It illustrates the complexity of forms, of forms within forms, and thereby the possibilities of observation in the world. In *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann (1997: 352) states this as follows: ‘what art strives for could be described as the *reactivation of non-actualized possibilities (Reaktivierung ausgeschaltener Möglichkeiten)*. Its function is to make “world” appear in the world’.

Two Problems in Luhmann’s System of Art

I wish to lay down a conceptual framework that adapts Luhmann’s perspective to incorporate the artworld and the constitutive function of the artworld in defining art. I will then apply that framework to some late 20th-century developments in art, starting from the philosophical observation of the ‘end of art’.

The Function of Art: A Solution to Which Problem?

Only when art becomes increasingly autonomous does it take on a ‘function’, which acts as attractor for the generation of forms (Luhmann, 1995: 226). As explicated above, Luhmann finds the function of art (Luhmann, 1995: 223) in its relation to ‘world’, in the way it differentiates its own reality *from* the world and at the same time sections itself *in* the world (Luhmann, 1995: 229). It does so by playing out the difference between perception and communication, and it achieves this by simultaneously producing surprise and recognition (Luhmann, 1995: 228–9). That may well be true, but why would this be the ‘function’ of art? Or in other words, what is the problem to which this would be one possible solution? And, what are alternative solutions?

It is difficult to answer these questions. Alternative ways of making ‘world’ observable in the world do not appear to be ready at hand. Luhmann explicitly discusses the near parallel between art and religion but rightly notices that, unlike art, religion is concerned with making the unperceivable observable (Luhmann, 1995: 228–9). Luhmann’s description of religion in *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (2000) does entail the observability of the unobservable in the sense of thematizing ‘world’ in the sense of marking unmarked spaces, and there he comes close to his description of art, but a difference remains. And it remains an open question why the artistic way of making the world observable would be a solution to a problem. Luhmann’s idea that the forms defining marked and unmarked spaces within the work of art convey a sense of order is based on a modernist notion of order, since postmodern works of art at times tend to defy order and thematize disorder or lack of order. To then characterize disorder, as Luhmann might well have done, as another form of order turns the notion of order into a fuzzy concept. Luhmann’s idea of art seems very

much informed by Clement Greenberg's modernism of two-dimensionality: his elucidations of forms in works of art derive mostly from painting. Perhaps the problem springs from Luhmann's systems perspective, for as he admits, a consequence of his operational constructivism is that the object of research – in this case, the function of art – arises as a consequence of the perspective (i.e. the distinction) one selects (Luhmann, 1995: 56). Luhmann moreover tends to shift his description of art's function. He logically, and empirically, needs to, as his is an evolutionary perspective. In the 20th century, the function of art remains solely the reproduction of the difference between itself and its environment (Luhmann, 1995: 233). But this would come down to a solution to a problem that only exists *because* its solution exists. While it is quite the kind of paradox Luhmann would endorse, it hits upon a second, and more serious, problem with Luhmann's perspective for the sociology of art.

The Problem of Communication about Art in Luhmann's Communications about Art

Luhmann's theory remains concerned either with the stimulation of a psychic system in the observer of a work of art, or with the communication between works of art, which can also be called 'intertextuality' (Luhmann, 1995: 395). What he does not discuss is communication *about* art. At various moments, Luhmann makes explicit that he deals with communication through works of art (Luhmann, 1995: 41, 88; 2001b: 210) and considers communication about art, such as art criticism or the world of dealers and museums, as part of the environment of the system of art (Luhmann, 1995: 84, 249–50, 396). Art criticism, according to Luhmann, contributes to the stabilization of the autopoiesis of art (Luhmann, 1995: 84). I claim, on the contrary, that communication in the realm of art criticism is an integral part of the autopoiesis of the system of art. My two main problems with Luhmann's perspective are:

- 1) his lack of a sociological perspective on what makes works of art 'art'; and
- 2) his lack of incorporation of the artworld in the system of art.

The second point is in fact the cause of the first. This section is dedicated to an elaboration of these two points.

The main reason to supplement Luhmann's theory with a social field of communication about art is that Luhmann himself is actually required to presuppose such a field, as a necessary 'supplement' (cf. Derrida, 1974). For what Luhmann's perspective is unable to account for but must silently assume is the recognition of a work of art *as* a work of art (see also Luhmann, 1990: 29; 2001b). When Luhmann poses the question as to what counts as a work of art, he comes up with the historical development of the incorporation of the theory of art into the system of art, to the point of the avant-garde in which 'everything that is regarded as art, is art' (Luhmann, 1995: 77–8). While he recognizes that this has the consequence of a lack of need for the theory of art to think further

about the question of what counts as art, he explicitly states that, for want of a better alternative, he wants to hold on to this (Luhmann, 1995: 78). Yet here he bypasses the *performance of the performativity* of ‘this is a work of art’. From a sociological point of view, it is legitimate to ask who designates a work of art as such, and what is needed for this to occur. Because the artworld is crucial in stabilizing what a work of art is, ‘art’ is an equally absent-present and necessary supplement in Luhmann’s theory. It is a supplement that is either repressed (when it remains undiscussed) or smoothed over (by invoking expectations, experience and knowledge of observers or intentions of artists).

A first treatment of this problem is given by Luhmann in paragraph IX, chapter one of *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*. Here he explicitly raises the question ‘how does a singular work make art visible in such a way that one recognizes it as a work of art and finds therein a chance and a basis to take part in communication?’ (Luhmann, 1995: 78). The answer he gives relies on the concept of form. The ‘imaginary space’ that is created by forms differentiating between marked and unmarked space, such as that for instance created by the frame of a work of art, is what incites the thematization of the difference between perception and communication (Luhmann, 1995: 80). So Luhmann in effect attributes a kind of ‘agency’ to the work of art, or rather, to the object in question.² It is therefore not surprising that he invokes the ideas of Mead, Von Foerster and especially Michel Serres to discuss the power of the object as a work of art to produce forms, demarcations that incite a thematization of the structural coupling between perception and communication. Deploying Serres’ ideas, Luhmann claims that the work of art is a ‘quasi-object’ (Luhmann, 1995: 82). Yet precisely here, Luhmann needs to rely on the world of communication about works of art:

Works of art are quasi-objects in this sense. They are individualized by the total exclusion of everything else ... because their realm of social regulation ... is always already taken into consideration. Like kings and footballs, works of art have to be observed intensively and as objects; only that way – and in case of comparison, by observing other observers with the help of the same object – does the social regularization open up. (Luhmann, 1995: 82)

What becomes clear from this passage is that the ‘social regularization’ (*sozialer Regelungsbereich, das soziale Regulativ*) of objects of the ‘quasi’-kind such as works of art cannot, in the end, do without observation and/or communication about works of art that is not mediated by works of art. Luhmann is not able satisfactorily to capture the recognition of an object as a ‘work of art’ by referring solely to the formal characteristics of the object. How an object becomes a work of art is not solved by pointing out that the object is in fact a ‘quasi-object’ that has the character of pulling off on its own its recognition as a work of art. Every object demarcates certain imaginary spaces as a consequence of its internal forms, shapes, colours, etc. The question remains how objects – and as recent art history shows, *any* object – are, under certain circumstances, recognized as works of art. While Luhmann (1995: 61) holds that

works of art designate *themselves* as works of art, it needs to be said that even quasi-objects need spokespersons (Latour, 2004). The work of art cannot be sociologically considered as a Baron von Münchhausen, pulling itself by its own hair out of the hermeneutic quagmire.

Another explicit treatment of this problem appears in paragraph IV of the second chapter of the same book (the question being raised at the end of paragraph III). His solution to the problem of knowing ‘where in the world we find works of art and artists, which buildings are to be regarded as works of art and which texts as literature with artistic claim’ (Luhmann, 1995: 111–12) lies in a differentiation between first and second order observations. It is the second order observation that ‘changes everything’ (Luhmann, 1995: 112). The second order observation allots the form of contingency, of possibly having been otherwise, to what appears, from a first order point of view, as given. And as discussed above, it is this thematization of contingency which makes for a work of art. But a question follows from this: how do we observe objects in such a way as to gain access to the observation of observers? Luhmann’s answer remains – by regarding forms. Such observation, in other words, emanates from works of art themselves (Luhmann, 1995: 112). It is the work of art itself that ‘disposes limitations on the increase in degrees of freedom to the disposition over further degrees of freedom’ (Luhmann, 1995: 62). And this completes the circle, since we are now back at the point where we ask how do we in the first place observe distinctions as ‘forms’ that form a work of art? Luhmann replies that the being-fabricated of the work of art is crucial in this respect (Luhmann, 1995: 77, 112). Furthermore, works of art do not have any external purposes (Luhmann, 1995: 77). In other words, his argument is that *the purposeless artificiality of the work of art makes for its artistic character*. But many more objects other than works of art are characterized by purposeless artificiality without gaining the status of works of art (e.g. decoration, objects that have lost purposiveness). Therefore, Luhmann’s ‘formalism’, as one is surely entitled to call it, seems to beg the question and avoids circularity on this point only by bypassing the question as to how an object comes to be observed as a something that is to be observed as a work of art in the first place.

At points where this becomes particularly pressing, Luhmann needs to invoke the artist³ in order to bypass the problem of what counts as a work of art (Luhmann, 1995: 43, 66–8, 71, 189).⁴ He says, for instance, that ‘an artist must be able to predict what an observer will observe as a work of art’ (Luhmann, 1995: 394; 2001b: 211). At other points, he invokes the capacities of the observer (Luhmann, 1995: 83, 304), but he thereby invokes psychic systems, since forms of perception are involved. Yet psychic systems (‘people’) cannot contribute to what art is, since knowledge of art must first of all be communicated knowledge. It is thus in communication – i.e. in the system of art – that ‘art’ appears and is constructed. At yet other points, Luhmann retreats into a fully-fledged formalism, and holds that the work of art encompasses the possibility of being a work of art (Luhmann, 1995: 63). He then reifies modernist notions of works of art programming themselves (Luhmann, 1995: 36, 252, 329, 331). But the modern idea

that the judgment of a work of art is to take its clues from the work of art itself (Luhmann, 1995: 334) is not something a sociological theory of art should simply accept as given and thereby reify. On the contrary, the process by which an artworld defines 'art' is part of the research object of a genuine sociology of art. As Danto has argued, the artworld provides a 'theory of art' which enables 'art' to be observed (Danto, 1964). In sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) perspective on the translations between cultural capital and symbolic capital are highly relevant here – and not, as Luhmann (1995: 35) says, only for 'Bourdinvinisten'.

While postmodern constructivism dictates that only the system of art dictates what counts as 'art' (Luhmann, 1995: 394), observers do not observe in isolation from other observers and, more importantly, other observations. Specific to late 20th-century art may be that it has lost an 'essence' of 'art'; it still assumes the recognition of a work of art as 'art'. The problematization of art for instance in Duchamp and Warhol – the problematization along the lines of 'can this object be a work of art?' – can only take place on the premise that the object in question is a priori recognized as a work of art. No urinal poses the possibility of being a work of art other than a urinal that can be observed as a work of art communicating the possibility of being a work of art. The very communication 'I could be a work of art' is possible only on the prior assumption of the object being a work of art. The work-of-art character of the object in this sense can only be fixed a priori, prior to its communication. That means this fixation takes place at the level of the communication about art. Luhmann might again try to bypass this possibility by introducing 'expectations' into the equation. By assuming the expectation of a work of art to be present, the problem of what will be counted as a work of art in the first place is bypassed. But that would beg the question, since the thing to explain remains the existence of the expectation to observe a work of art. One does not expect to see a work of art when going to the restroom of a restaurant, but one might when visiting a museum exhibiting a remake of Duchamp's famous art-work. It was the dislocation of the urinal that made it a work of art, it being out of joint at an art exhibition. Only *then* does the urinal incite the idea that such a thing might be considered as a work of art. The work of art does not incite perceptions by observers wholly by itself, as Luhmann (1995: 36) suggests. And the autoreferentiality of art that Duchamp helped inaugurate consists precisely in the fact that the work of art was posing the possibility of being a work of art. Luhmann admits that 'no ordinary thing reflects that it wishes to be exactly like an ordinary thing; but a work of art striving to reflect this, betrays itself as a consequence' (Luhmann, 1995: 233). But the problem lies precisely in the betrayal: when does an ordinary thing betray itself as a 'work of art'? Surely because of the collective reasoning in something called an 'artworld'?

Why is Luhmann's a priori assumption 'it's art' so important? Precisely because of Luhmann's operational constructivism, which entails the idea that, in observing systems, the first distinction is the crucial one upon which other distinctions follow, which are not wholly arbitrary but contingent upon the first distinction (Luhmann, 1995: 74). Because Luhmann a priori assumes objects to

be works of art, he can dismiss both the materiality of the work and the ‘work’ required by an artworld in producing the work of art. As he admits, his theory is of little use as far as ‘art’ is concerned (Luhmann, 1995: 9). But precisely the social production of the recognition of works as works of art is what one would expect to gain insight into from a sociological theory of art.

The Artworld as a Social System

The circumstances under which an object becomes a work of art – one might say, under which the object is *enabled to be a quasi-object* (or find spokespersons) – are a necessary supplement in Luhmann’s analysis. I therefore wish to take as a starting point the ‘system of art’ not in the purely formal sense in which Luhmann deploys this concept, but in the more traditional sense of an *artworld*, using the concept first formulated by Danto (1964), and subsequently by George Dickie (2001) in philosophy and Howard Becker (1982) in sociology. This notion bears many similarities to the notion of a ‘field of cultural production’ as coined by Bourdieu (1993, 1994). The advantage of taking the ‘social system of art’ to designate ‘the artworld’ lies in the incorporation into the analysis of communication about art that is, cumulatively speaking, authoritative in the meanings attributed to individual works of art. When analysing communication through art, one cannot do without communications by artists, connoisseurs, distributors, dealers, publishers, exhibitioners and the like. All the positions of these actors fulfil gatekeeper functions in the artworld, which is intended here also in the sense of control over legitimate meanings of communications through art. One cannot do without what Bourdieu has called the (struggle over the) ‘legitimate aesthetic disposition’ (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

Pace Luhmann, I therefore maintain that communications through art do *not* gain meaning independently of communications about art. Thus, I take the *art-world itself* to be a social system, which does not mean that connoisseurs, artists, dealers and the like are ‘part of’ the artworld, since a social system is comprised of communications alone. It does mean that the social world we call the artworld is itself an autopoietic subsystem of society, which maintains its systemic closure by means of different legitimizations. These mostly have to do with the drive for renewal in art, which secures a history of innovations and maintains an open yet risky future. The medium of the artworld, I maintain, is ‘art’ itself. Luhmann admits the possibility of ‘art’ being the medium of ‘art’ (Luhmann, 1995: 206, 474ff.). ‘Art’ as a medium enables the communication that constitutes the artworld. Works of art can be seen as the material (which may also be non-material – see De Duve, 1996) substrata of ‘art’. The medium code is ‘art/non-art’. That is, the artworld is a communicative system in which communications are selected with reference to ‘art’. According to Luhmann, such a code is difficult to imagine, since he distinguishes distinctions of reference (*Referenzunterscheidungen*) from distinctions of code (*Codeunterscheidungen*) (Luhmann, 1995: 306). The first

differentiate auto- from allo-references, and thereby system from environment; the second differentiate positive and negative values to operations, thus marking their place in the system. Art/non-art cannot be the system's code, according to Luhmann, because reference to the system's environment cannot function as the negative value within the system itself (Luhmann, 1995: 306, and 2006: 40). Yet again, as argued above, Luhmann forgets that he has a priori made the distinction of reference. Moreover, just as the code of the system of science ('true/untrue') entails that both true *and* untrue communications are part of the system of science, so the code 'art/non-art' entails that both communications stating something is art and communications stating something is not art are part of the system of art. This is a crucial consequence of considering 'art/non-art' as a binary code. And this way, the code 'art/non-art' is perfectly able to function as a distinction of code in the system of art. The environment of the system of art consists of all communication that is not *coded* either as art or as non-art. That is precisely why the artworld reaches a stage of paradoxical self-definition and hyper-reflexivity the moment art starts to define itself in relation to the idea of art.

Thus for the system of art, communications *about* art are in fact more important than communications *through* works of art. The latter type of communication, while it is part of the system of art, is hard to locate in the time dimension, and it is difficult to imagine how exactly one could retrieve such a communication by responding to it in a much later communication. For Luhmann, communications are in this sense always retrievable, and they can always be re-actualized through a response – although Luhmann's (1988) analysis of the economic system appears to contradict this. How such would be the case in works of art is problematic. Nonetheless, while communication about art is crucial in the system of art, it is sociologically extremely interesting to theorize the way works of art take shape as communications themselves. In communications *through* works of art, a distinction needs to be made between two forms of allreference. A primary allreference is 'art'. This primary allreference is achieved by a coding 'on top' of a secondary allreference, which can be seen as the 'meaning' of the work of art. When, for instance, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* can be said to have, as secondary allreference, the gaze at the sexualized body of the prostitute,⁵ this facilitates a primary allreference which, in the context of the early 20th-century avant-garde, refers to 'art'. The secondary allreference is of course subject to interpretation and cannot be wholly fixed. In fact, precisely the difficulty in fixing it facilitates the hermeneutic problem upon which theories and histories of art can be based. *The polysemy of the secondary allreference of works of art facilitates the fixation of the primary allreference of a work of art.* For it is precisely the hermeneutic process in which works of art are 'deciphered' by connoisseurs that guarantees, beyond doubt and whatever the outcome of the hermeneutic process, the stability of the primary allreference ('art'). The hermeneutic process through which secondary allreferences are traced and debated establishes beyond doubt the idea that the work in question is a work of *art*.

The primary allreference is the pretension to be 'art' that artworks communicate. Their reference to 'art' succeeds only when that communication is received in an artworld, and when it is recursively communicated there. In some cases, the primary and secondary allreference of works of art coincide. That, for instance, was the case in the second half of the 20th century. If anything, the artworld of the later 20th century has seen an art in which self-reference has been turned into art, and in which the allreference of art has become autoreference. In Luhmann's terms, this does not concern the basic sort of autoreference that is characteristic of all social systems. Rather, the 'autoreference' I am concerned with here comes close to what Luhmann would call 'reflexivity' (Luhmann, 1997: 757). Applied to the proposed distinction between primary and secondary allreferences, that means that in individual works of art secondary allreference (to what does the work refer? what does it thematize?) coincided with primary allreference (reference to the idea of 'art', an attributed claim to art-status). This coincidence of the two forms of artistic allreference can be called 'self-reference' but not in the case of individual works of art (since the *work* refers outside itself to the *idea of art*). On the level of the *medium of art*, however, which is a medium within the social system of art (the artworld), self-reference is achieved. This is because, from this perspective, works of art become forms within the medium of art, referring solely to the medium of art. The system of art seems to have made a living out of upholding the paradox that most social systems are eager to avoid: the paradox of its self-observation becoming fed into the operational process of the system itself. Art and the artworld seem to make a living out of their own continuing crises, which are crises of form, substance, and legitimation. For this reason alone, continuous sociological observation of the social world of art is relevant to general sociology. More specifically, current developments in the artworld are compelling sociology to take a closer look at such matters, thereby sociologically conceptualizing the notion of a 'crisis' of art. The main subject of the remainder of this article consists of the sociological meaning of these current developments in art, which are interpreted as contributions to the sustained autopoiesis of the artworld.

The Paradoxical Self-Constitution of the Artworld

Modern society, Luhmann says, is made up out of countless systems making up the modern functional differentiation of society as the all-encompassing social system (Luhmann, 1997: 776). Self-observations are crucial in securing operational closure. When self-observation is brought about through communication, the system thus thematizes itself as a unity that is differentiated from an environment, and this thematizing is itself part of the system, since it is communication. It moreover strengthens the system, since it is constitutive of communicative selections that reproduce the system. It enables communications to be selected that are part of the system, not of another, and it fosters the system's identity (Luhmann, 1995: 398–9). With respect to the self-observation or self-description of the late

20th-century system of art, something difficult is at stake. This situation is characterized by paradox. The moment art becomes purely autoreferential – the moment the secondary allreference of works of art merges with their primary allreference – the artworld becomes organized around a paradox, namely the paradox of communicating about a certain something (art) and about what this certain something should be, while this something itself is primarily concerned with what it is or should be. This is a vulnerable situation for any social system. The essential contingency of communicative selections is resolved by many systems through means of processes of ‘deparadoxization’. One highly particular but nonetheless functionally viable way of doing this is to elevate paradox to the level of communicative logic. Once paradox becomes the normal situation, it is neutralized in its possible negative effects in terms of legitimation crisis and, on a psychological level, double-bind. Love is one example of a communicative medium that has at one point assumed paradoxical form (Luhmann, 1982). In 20th-century art, a similar development has taken place. Due to autonomization, problems of paradoxization have emerged, and these have been solved by means of paradoxization of the communicative code of modern art. This entails a form of autoreferentiality as the central concern of art, as well as a state of hyper-reflexivity that characterizes the artworld.

The elevation of paradox to autopoiesis in the 20th-century social system of art also becomes apparent in the role of materiality in the work of art. What makes contemporary art a symbolically generalized medium of communication is not its materiality but the symbolic dimension that transcends it. This nonetheless paradoxizes modern art. On the one hand, art is concerned with *aesthesis*, with sense-experience. On the other hand, the idea is to be upheld that art is more than external or outward appearances, and that the ‘essence’ of art lies behind these appearances, as *substance* or *form*, as *expression* or as *concept*. Even a novel is not to be read ‘literally’. It is precisely the *hermeneutic* problem of the *difference* between the literal word and its actual meaning in a certain setting that needs to be recognized. In Luhmann’s view, the material work of art is part of the environment of the system of art (Luhmann, 1995: 62, 111, 131). It is the communication that the work of art entails that is relevant, and this communication is always ‘in the eye of the beholder’. But this hermeneutic problem is what brings with it the paradox of not being allowed to take at face value that which initially presents itself only as a value to the face. This paradox is resolved for instance by means of the ascetic context in which art is usually displayed (the ‘white cube’ of the gallery). The purely functional aesthetic of the setting of art stresses the denial of the dominance of appearance, for the sake of a more intellectual, or rather, a more *hermeneutic*, view of art that sees beyond the medium towards the message. This way of deparadoxization is, however, being replaced as new forms appear. As art becomes more conceptual, the paradox of the material of art only presents itself to those not well versed in the logic of the artworld. Thus, as Bourdieu has shown, persons not in possession of the ‘legitimate aesthetic disposition’ ask for representation or functionality (Bourdieu, 1993). Current art deals with the

paradox of the material of art in a way that fits with its general paradoxical character. This means that art may be embedded in its environment, and thereby the work of art questions the boundaries between the work of art and its environment. It becomes unclear what a 'work' of art is. Art in the second half of the 20th century sees the artwork transcending the boundaries of a material object or a combination thereof. Art becomes action, or process, as in abstract expressionism, in the work of artists such as De Kooning and Pollock. Later forms of performance art and conceptual art extend this trend, sometimes even to a temporal fixation that coincides with the presence of a public. A relatively early example is Joseph Beuys's *Coyote*.

On the other hand, and coinciding with such trends in art, there is much attention given to the 'aestheticization of life' in general (Featherstone, 1993; Foucault, 1987; Lash, 1992). The background of art has undergone a shift from asceticism to aestheticism. The environment itself is stamped with a mark of art, and by thus universalizing the paradox of the difference between material and substance of the work of art to the environment of the work of art, it is resolved. If paradox abounds, there is no need to question its problematic nature. It no longer poses a problem because it does not irritate as a difference that upsets the taken-for-granted world. In (post)modern art, paradox *is* the world-taken-for-granted.

The hyper-reflexivity of the late 20th-century artworld means that what communication in the artworld is about is what communication in the artworld is about. Equally, the medium of art explicitly takes up the question as to what that medium is and/or ought to be. As of the early 20th century, the work of art itself increasingly incorporates questions concerning the nature of art. That is why Arthur Danto has said that 'what in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art' (Danto, 1964: 581). The same thing of course is at stake in the works that earned Duchamp fame. The rapid successions of 20th-century avant-garde movements led Danto (1986: 108) to proclaim the 'end of art' in the Hegelian sense of art reaching a post-historical phase, in which it had become purely self-referential and purely conscious of itself, and in which the object has entirely disappeared. Luhmann maintains that this leads to a situation in which art takes on a form in which the work of art and its self-observation are one and the same. Art has begun to question art, and thus a 're-entry' is performed in the communicative system of art, which indicates nothing other, according to Luhmann, than a new self-description of art and thus a new stage in the communicative system of art (Luhmann, 1995: 474).

The 'End of Art' in Historical-Sociological Perspective

The notion of a crisis of art, and of the end of the history of art, is of course a non-neutral one in the sense that it presupposes an idealistic theory of history. Sociologically it is clear that whatever crisis of artistic form may have existed or still exists, no crisis exists when its autonomy as a subsystem of society is

concerned. Danto described the ‘end of art’ in *After the End of Art* as ‘the end of a certain narrative which has unfolded in art history over the centuries, and which has reached its end in a certain freedom from conflicts of the kind inescapable in the Age of Manifestos’ (Danto, 1997: 37). But Danto did not take into account in his notion of the ‘artworld’ that such a social system is not only able to find autonomy in a logical construction, but also, if circumstances require, in a paralogical one. The autonomy of the artworld has thus been maintained precisely with the help of a supposed crisis (Luhmann, 1995: 254, 480).

Because art/non-art is a code operating far in the background of the system of art (providing a very basic positive/negative valuation to the system’s operations), *programmes* (Luhmann, 1995: 327–8) are highly relevant in art. If art sometimes seems to be under the spell of style (Kubler, 1962) or mere ‘fashion’, that has to do with the fact that programmes are crucial in fixing communications differentiating between art and non-art. Programmes ensure the ‘substantial’ attribution of coded values in communications. They regulate the correctness of the attribution of positive/negative code-values (Luhmann, 1997: 377). For Luhmann, it is the differentiation between code and programming which ensures both operational closure and openness (Luhmann, 1997: 564–5; 2004: 90). While codes are rigid, programmes are variable and their evolutionary change can be easily traced (Luhmann, 1997: 377, 564). Codes can be kept stable, while programmes can be left to the variability of change and *Zeitgeist* (Luhmann, 1995: 327). It is interesting to chart the way works of art have historically been programmed. This comes down to tracking the secondary allreference of works of art and relating these to the programmes within the system of art which facilitate correct attribution of the coded values (art/non-art).

Table 1 intends to give a rough historical sketch of such issues, from the time before the existence of an autopoietic social system of art, to the post-modern state of paradoxical hyper-reflexivity in the artworld. What Luhmann (1995: 47) calls the allreference of a work of art here figures as the secondary allreference of works of art. This depends on the way this environment, or more specifically the external referent of works of art, is conceived. When nature is seen as art’s referent, imitation (*mimesis*) is a suitable form of programming which allows openness to the environment of art that is nature. When what art is about is conceived to be man’s emotions, expression is a more suitable way of programming.

Table 1 Historical references and programmes of works of art

Art	Secondary Allreference	Programme
18th century	Reality (nature, social and transcendent)	Mimesis
19th century	Feeling	Expression
20th century (first half)	Form	Abstraction
	Cognition/ideational realm	Conceptualization
20th century (second half)	Idea of art	Self-reference
21st century	Reality (social)	Defamiliarization

The programmes in the table are ideal-typically chosen, in order to represent what are crucial stages in the development of art, the organization of which until the 17th century hardly met the requirements of the label of 'artworld', which are:

- 1) a semi-autonomous reflection on its own history,
- 2) the existence of an art market, and
- 3) the legitimate epistemic monopoly of the observation of art.

While the later Renaissance organization of art shows signs of autonomization, these three requirements were not met until probably the late 18th and early 19th century. As Baxandall (1988: 1ff) has shown, art in 15th-century Italy was 'a deposit of a social relation'. Art did not come into being because the artist felt like it, nor was art traded beyond the relation artist-patron, since, as it was commissioned art, it was quite unsuitable for a third party qua functionality. As a criterion for a relatively independent artworld, an at least semi-autonomous reward system is usually mentioned as crucial (Crane, 1976). So while Hegel envisaged the end of the history of art in the 19th century, for the sociology of the artworld it only began around that time. (The above classification is furthermore ideal-typical because it is not all-encompassing and deliberately over-simplifying for heuristic purposes.)

Elements of each programme, and consequently each form of openness (of secondary allreference in works of art), can be found in each period of dominance of another programme. There was always defamiliarization in mimesis, since reality mirrored is not reality itself, and thereby it estranges reality as it moves towards it. There is always mimesis in expression (for instance, in Romanticism and Fauvism), since it is feelings that are mimetically represented. Historically, mimesis has been the main programme of works of art. As Gadamer (1977) has emphasized, ancient mimesis in art does not mean the same as later forms of mimesis in art. Three general pre-modern forms may be discerned: imitation of natural reality, imitation of social reality (which often was not imitation or description *stricto sensu*, but quite often prescription of social customs), and representation of transcendent reality through depiction of religious scenes (which, especially in eastern orthodox art, with its Platonic realism of partaking in the divine, invested the work of art itself with a sacredness). These forms of mimesis of course need not be naturalist, not even in the imitation of natural reality, since a mimesis of the essence of reality is equally possible, as is a symbolic representationalism. In certain Greek theories of art, art already became a kind of correcting imitation, drawing attention to the essential in the world, so to speak, by pointing out Platonic essences with the help of Aristotelian empiricism. Whatever art was conceived to be then, its value *did not reside in itself* (Luhmann, 1995: 401). Medieval styles were predominantly religious in character, representing transcendent reality through mostly biblical iconography (e.g. Christ's eyes depicted as open, indicating victory over death). As of the Renaissance, however, the surrounding environment of the religious subject becomes incorporated in art. Circumstantial detail is inserted into the artwork, and this detail can be sociologically interpreted as a sign of autonomization

of the artworld. Functionally redundant elements appear in works of art. The landscapes of the Dutch masters, while imitating nature, are in some ways a caricature of nature in that they stress aspects of reality by means of artistic style. This relative independence from religious sacrament and naturalist representation in favour of *beauty per se* is indicative of a growing independence of art itself.

As of the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries, commentaries on the failure of mimetic representation as the defining programme of art become incorporated in works of art. Romanticism is one such movement, and while French Realism is a temporary return to Naturalism, the Post-impressionism of Gauguin and Van Gogh can be regarded as an already expressionist kind of mimesis. While Fauvism combines depiction of reality with an already strong expressionism, both Cubism and Surrealism explicitly defy mimetic naturalism. These relatively rapid changes of form have to be seen in light of the increasing autonomization of the system of art. The mimetic programme is specific to art before the emergence of an autonomous artworld. Whatever different styles existed, some form of representation can be assumed to have been a common ground. For the differentiation and thus autonomization of the social system of art, it was necessary for *art itself* to differentiate from the existing programme, thus expanding the scope of art beyond imitation in one way or another, whereby in the end even *l'art pour l'art* became a possible way of facilitating operational closure for the social system of art. The functional uselessness of 'traditional modern' art operating under the medium of beauty is a direct consequence of functional differentiation. For this implies a self-reference that is secured relatively independently of other social systems. Beauty for the sake of itself is a medium that assures at least independence from other function-systems. It is thus not surprising that the 18th century sees the rise of aesthetic formalism, such as Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Kant, 1957). However, it is in the end problematic to monopolize the medium of beauty within the system of art. As Kant's aesthetic formalism shows, beauty is not confined to art. In fact, Kant hardly discusses any works of art. Luhmann states, for instance, that people, and many other things besides works of art, can be beautiful (Luhmann, 1995: 311). Beauty, then, does not secure autonomy and self-observation for the social system of art in the way truth does in the system of science. While there is truth outside science, science is the ultimate judge thereof, and it is even in the nature of science to uncover falseness where commonsense sees truth. Were art, however, to claim to be the ultimate judge over or producer of beauty, this would be experienced as the world topsy-turvy, or at least as misplaced arrogance. Beauty, then, did not function well in providing the system of art with a stable and relatively independent autoreference. Just as love gradually became autoreferential and autonomous of beauty (Luhmann, 1982: 63), so art detached itself from the code of the beautiful and the non-beautiful. In our terms, this is to say that a differentiation was effected between primary and secondary allreference. The primary allreference, 'art', could now be achieved regardless of its 'vehicle', the secondary allreference. Art could now be communicated even if no religious references were made, and even in the absence of reference to nature or beauty.

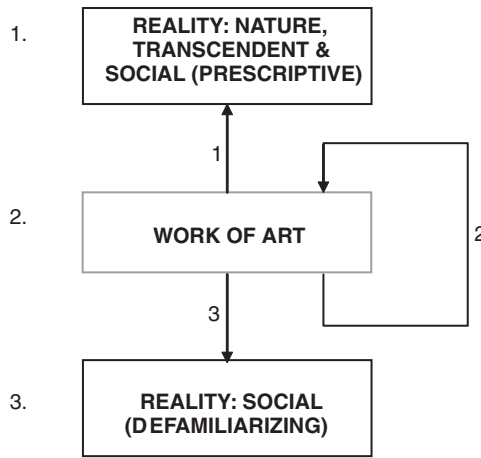


Figure 1 Three stages of artistic reference

Defamiliarizing Art

I believe it is warranted to say that today a new dominant secondary allreferent of works of art and a programme of art can be discerned. Specific to much of contemporary art – its ‘dominance’ of course remains tentative – is its reference to the social world in one form or another.

The following schema (see Figure 1) may serve to capture one historical line in the history of art, with respect to the relation between the work of art and the environment that is its reference.

The first historical situation is characterized by a work of art mirroring, so to speak, what is ‘behind’ the work of art.⁶ This concerns the mimetic relation with reality as described above. This programme was dominant until the 18th century. The semantics of art, or the conception of the communicative medium of art that prevailed in this situation, was coded by mimesis, in each of the possible forms described: mimesis of nature, of a transcendent reality, or of prescribed social reality. The second stage is reached when mimesis gradually loses dominance. This stage reaches its culmination in the late 20th century, when art is most of all an autoreferential medium. As of the 18th century, the very replacement of mimetic forms by other forms is in itself already a sign of the autoreferentiality of art. This autoreferentiality reached its peak during what was for many observers a ‘crisis’ of art, or even its end. During this stage, therefore, the referent of art is not primarily to be found ‘behind’ the work of art, but ‘in’ it. The third stage is currently taking place. After the dominance of autoreference, yet without wholly casting off either autoreference or first-stage mimesis, art seems to have become characterized – to such an extent that it is probably possible to speak of one dominant trend in contemporary art – by what I designate as *defamiliarization*. Crucial here is that the referent of art is

neither found in what is 'behind' the work of art, nor 'in' it, but instead in what is 'in front' of the work of art. That is to say that one dominant trend in contemporary art is *the questioning of the sociality of which the observer of art is a part*. Such art *defamiliarizes*, in Bauman's (1990) term, the social.⁷ Social reality as it is taken for granted is questioned. The very mirror of the social process has the effect of defamiliarizing that social process. That is what may well have become one dominant aspect of many forms of contemporary art.

One forerunner of defamiliarizing art can be found in the 1980s 'commodity sculpture' of Jeff Koons and others (which itself finds its fore-runners in Duchamp's ready-mades and in Pop Art). Koons's squeaky-clean commodities, such as vacuum cleaners, at once defamiliarize the place of those commodities in social life, and associate them with art, implying that the modernist taboo on the explicit association between the economy and the work of art, such as described by Bourdieu, should be lifted. Already prepared by Warhol, the 1980s saw the rise of the artist as a superstar, and the art of the 1980s thereby questioned both the commodified social world in which 'superstars' could exist, as well as the nature of art. This 'decadence' in art reflected the height, as well as the end, of the hyper-reflexivity and of the dominance of autoreferentiality.

One possible clue to the development of defamiliarizing art can be found in the relationship between art and the economy. Rather than problematizing the economic aspect of art, contemporary artists increasingly offer perspectives on the economy as alternatives to the perspectives economists have to offer. Dutch economist Olav Velthuis (2004) has aptly signalled this trend in his book on 'imaginary economics'. One example Velthuis gives is that of the project of the American artist John Freyer, who in 2001 sold all his belongings through eBay, from his *National Geographic* issues to the teeth he had as a child. This modern-day version of Potlatch was an artistic project that raised all kinds of questions concerning social life: can highly personal items be sold?; what is it that is being sold?; does one, after selling everything one has, not lose a part of one's history or even one's personality?; is a person's identity dependent on one's possessions? Other artists, such as Frances Schroeder and Jason Black, Gareth Malham, Martijn Sandberg, Ray Beldner and JSG Boggs (with his Boggs-bills as alternative fiduciary means of exchange), have similarly thematized the economic world through art.

Another type of defamiliarizing art is found in what Joseph Beuys in the 1970s designated as 'social sculpture'. This was conceived as a form of art associated with participation and democracy, and with communication as material. Beuys's 1982 project at Documenta7, entitled *7000 Oaks*, was about planting trees in order to raise ecological consciousness. As Beuys said: 'Thus, 7000 Oaks is a sculpture referring to peoples' life, to their everyday work. That is my concept of art which I call the extended concept or art of the social sculpture'.⁸ Contemporary forms of similar art include environmental art (Ecoart), 'New Community Art', and art focussing on various social problems, in particular those related to the process of globalization. Social Work Art is another example, as in the work of artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn and his piece *Hotel Demokratie*.

In Nicolas Bourriaud's *Esthétique relationnelle* (1998), a theoretical formulation of defamiliarizing aesthetics can be found which consists of observing works of art in light of the inter-human relations they represent. Accordingly, relational art consists of artistic practices that both theoretically and practically refer to the whole of human relations. Relational art is, in some ways, a follower of 'community art' in the sense that the democratic process of the latter is found in the former, by way of creating connections between subjects, while these subjects are at the same time understood as becoming through being related. This becomes apparent in the 2002 exhibition entitled *Touch: Relational Art from the 1990s to Now*.

The Documenta and Biennale exhibitions contain many clues as to present-day attention towards social reality in art. Documenta11, for instance, expanded beyond its customary 100 days' span by organizing four platforms around the world (with a fifth drawing things together in Germany). All these platforms were related to social problems of some sort; they were termed *Democracy Unrealized*, *Experiments with Truth: Transitional justice and The Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*, *Créolité and Creolization*, and *Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. Likewise, the 4th Biennale in Berlin (2006) 'has configured itself as a series of interventions'.⁹ The 'dissecting of private destinies and universal fears' that the exhibition involves, all the while taking clues from the historical spaces of Berlin and wrapping daily life in the garments of history and memory, can be seen as forms of defamiliarization of the everyday social world. Documenta12 (2007) had as its main theme 'government'. Three questions were central here:

- 1) Is modernity our antiquity?
- 2) What is 'bare life'?
- 3) What is to be done?

These questions pertain to conditions of life in which 'bare life', as it is thematized for instance by Giorgio Agamben (2002), is related to questions of security, torture, the state, and in which modernity is thematized in relation to themes such as 'identity', colonialism, and universal rights. The third question has reference to education. A starting point for this third leitmotiv is that 'the global complex of cultural translation that seems to be somehow embedded in art and its mediation sets the stage for a potentially all-inclusive public debate'.¹⁰

The situating of art in the social world is indicative of the necessary autoreferentiality that secures the autonomy of 'art'. Both the secondary all-reference of the social and the primary all-reference to the medium of 'art' secure the combination of openness and closure that characterizes a social system in Luhmann's terms. It thus secures the autonomy of the artworld in a way that differs from the way this autonomy was procured a few decades ago, when both forms of all-reference of works of art coincided, and philosophers dreamt of the end of art (and its simultaneous amalgamation with philosophy). Documenta5 (1972) is an important landmark in the rise of defamiliarizing art. It was the year in which, for instance, Joseph Beuys participated, and in which,

for the first time, a theme covering all works was conceptualized. It broke from the tradition of selecting works on the basis of individual innovative qualities. In that sense, it broke radically with 20th-century avant-garde tradition. At the same time, it stood in between two forms of secondary allreference: it explicitly thematized the question of what art is (self-referential phase), but at the same time took on a defamiliarizing stance, which becomes explicit in its title: *Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds Today*. From this perspective, 1972 marks an important institutional moment in which the artworld started to communicate about art on the basis of works communicating ‘art’ through a defamiliarizing secondary allreference.

Conclusion: Art as Sociology?

Defamiliarization in art is not an entirely new programme. In fact, after the invention of *l’art pour l’art* in the 19th century, the ‘decadents’ were criticized by radical romantics who envisaged an important role for art in social reform. It was said with disapproval of those concerned with art for the sake of itself that ‘they feel that all that touches on modern life is ... absolutely closed to them; it is to the past that they turn. Is this not a singular anomaly in men who pose as innovators, as revolutionaries?’ (quoted in Herbert, 1971: 126–7). What emerged as a consequence of this attitude has been termed *art social* (Pfeiffer, 1988: 81ff.).¹¹ A similar thing may be at stake in contemporary art. Today it is through relationality in art that the social system of art can be operationally closed. Innovation now lies in the *differentiation* vis-à-vis the differentiation between traditional and innovative. This way, art programmed through defamiliarization can function as a communicative medium that allows for the social system of art to retain operational closure, by paradoxalizing the modernist code that used to provide closure for much of the 20th century. Societal changes thus lead to new programmes and new ways of openness in works of art, which in turn procure the operational closure of the artworld. Crucial in defamiliarizing art is that it situates itself in the social world it comments on. While Clement Greenberg (1939) once commented that modern art withdrew itself from civil society and capitalism, it would appear that contemporary art seeks to reintegrate itself into society by defamiliarizing society. Defamiliarizing artists exploit their outsider position by engaging with the everyday world, and then defamiliarizing it. Therein lies their resemblance to the sociologist: they are outsiders, even when commenting on ‘outsiders’. Instead of becoming philosophy, as Hegel envisaged, contemporary art is much more readily becoming akin to sociology.

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Notes

- 1 Some discussions of his work are nonetheless available. See for instance Sevanen (2001) and De Berg (2001). For a comparison between Luhmann's views on art and those of Bourdieu and Latour, see Albertsen and Diken (2004).
- 2 By 'object' Luhmann means not the opposite of a subject, but reiterable descriptions demarcated over against everything else (Luhmann, 1995: 80).
- 3 'Artist' may also designate an observational attribution for Luhmann (1995: 43).
- 4 Luhmann here speaks of the 'planning' of an art form: '*Wenn etwas als Kunstform angelegt, als solche geplant ist ...*' (Luhmann, 1995: 189).
- 5 This is of course not an exhaustive characterization of the secondary alloterference of this work. See, for instance, Steinberg (1972) for an elaboration on this characterization.
- 6 For the figurative terminology of this 'behind' the work of art, as well as of the terms 'in' and 'in front' of the work of art, I am grateful for comments by Mirko Noordegraaf.
- 7 Bourdieu for instance speaks of the 'demystification' of sociology; he also states that '*la sociologie dévoile où démasque*' (Bourdieu, 1994); Luhmann points to the fact that sociology shows '*die ganz normale Unwahrscheinlichkeit*' of social reality (e.g. Luhmann, 1982). Luhmann also advocates 'abnormalization' in sociology.
- 8 Quoted in: '7000 Oaks. Essay by Lynne Cooke with statements by Joseph Beuys', URL (consulted 15 May 2010): <http://www.diacenter.org/ltproj/7000/essay.html#two>
- 9 <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/eng/index.php?sid=index>
- 10 <http://www.documenta12.de/english/leitmotifs.html>
- 11 This *art social* is not to be mistaken for the '*art social*' which appeared as a result of the effect of Enlightenment thought in 18th- and 19th-century France, and which spurred the scientific pursuit of progress by such thinkers as Turgot, Condorcet and Quetelet.

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Willem Schinkel

Willem Schinkel is associate professor of sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Some recent publications include *Globalization and the State: Sociological Perspectives on the State of the State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
Address: Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Room M6–14, P.O. Box 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: Schinkel@fsw.eur.nl