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## Aura-Politiken.

El Lissitzkys  
,Kabinett der Abstrakten'  
zwischen  
Musealisierung und  
Teilhabe

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Musealisierung und Teilhabe

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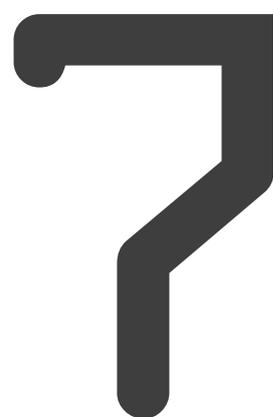
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STEVEN TEN THIJE

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Notes on the Actuality of  
Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet

The *Abstract Cabinet* of 1928 designed by El Lissitzky and commissioned by museum director Alexander Dorner is perhaps one of the most famous exhibition designs of the twentieth century. When considering, as the Sprengel Museum in Hanover is currently doing, how to produce a new copy of this iconic space, it is important to inquire into its current meaning. What can we still learn from this remarkable space? How does it resonate with questions that are urgent now? One of the more obvious, yet also profoundly uncomfortable observations one can make, is that there is an uncanny parallelism between the growing geopolitical tension of the late 1920s and the fragile world order of the summer of 2016: the United Kingdom decided by referendum to leave the European Union; Turkey experienced its fifth military coup since 1960, which was unsuccessful yet destructive nonetheless. Combine this with the ongoing crisis in Syria and the still precarious state of the world economy, and one cannot escape the feeling that we are only one step away again from an all-encompassing conflict.

In this climate it is perhaps best to analyse the *Abstract Cabinet* in the context of its production at a turbulent time that ends with the Second World War. To understand the nature of this political moment and the role the *Abstract Cabinet* played within it, it is helpful to note a constellation of agents who can be connected to it. Together they give better insight into how it was situated within its political momentum, spurred by economic crisis, new media, and growing xenophobia. The main character in this constellation is perhaps not so much El Lissitzky, but the Jewish-German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin. In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility* of 1936-1939 he reflected on the rise of fascism and sought to understand how new media such as film and photography related to and could even counter this political movement.<sup>[1]</sup> Lissitzky's work or the Constructivism of which he was part is not mentioned directly in the text. But the central notion of "aura" in many ways touches on the main elements and effects of Lissitzky's exhibition design, all of which makes it worthwhile to analyse the *Abstract Cabinet* through a Benjaminian lens. The affinities between the *Abstract Cabinet* and Benjamin's analysis of art, technology, and politics become especially pertinent when brought into dialogue with both the work's commissioner Alexander Dorner, and the art historian Alois Riegl, who inspired Benjamin and Dorner.

For this approach it is best to start with something that may appear to be a slight paradox in Benjamin's text. The main objective of the text is to introduce certain art theoretical notions on film and photography that are useless for fascism. In his opening statement he makes his own ideological affiliation explicitly clear, positioning his texts within a Marxist tradition.<sup>[2]</sup> Benjamin understands photography and film as events – instances that inaugurate change – in a development trajectory that will lead towards communism, just as Marx understood industrial capitalism to be one step on the road to communism. When, however, considering the source of the most effective means in using film and photography in the late 1930s to support a political ideology, it was without doubt fascism. The question that presents itself therefore is whether Benjamin was ignorant of this obvious possibility to use photography and film to support fascism, or if there is another way in which he understands fascist propaganda films in relation to his theory on art, film/photography, and politics.

It seems the latter is true. Benjamin returns to the question of fascism at the end of his text, noting in his epilogue that fascism will give

<sup>[1]</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften Bd 1*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, pp. 471–508; English translation used: Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge/London 2003, pp. 251–283.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473; *ibid.*, p. 251.

the proletariat a means to express itself, but will not grant it its rights.<sup>[3]</sup> Fascism frustrates the development trajectory, as described by Marx, in which industrial capitalism in the end creates the conditions for its own destruction. In the 1930s with the Russian Revolution only a little more than a decade away and the Great Depression raging throughout Europe and the US, capitalism appears profoundly weak and on the verge of collapse. In this charged climate, fascism, in Benjamin's view, instead of allowing property relations to change, created a system in which it can redirect the energy of the masses and divert them from overcoming the capitalist order. This energy then has to find another outlet and this, Benjamin states with little decoration, is war. One of the main argumentative threads in Benjamin's essay is that if the energies released by modern society and its new forms of expression – film and photography – are not allowed to have their “natural” political and social-economic consequences, then they will find their expression in an “unnatural” destructive form of war.

Today this argument is worth revisiting, as again new technological forms of communication, in this case the Internet, are deeply intertwined with the spinning out of order of the global economy. Everywhere we can find indications of a profoundly unbalanced distribution of property and wealth. Even if the numbers are symbolic, the prevailing sentiment is that of a struggle between an affluent 1 per cent and a middle class or even impoverished 99 per cent. It takes little imagination to understand that this inequality is unsustainable in the long run, and all over the globe the conflict between the “haves” and the “have nots” is intensifying. This struggle is not fought in classical Marxist terms and more often takes the guise of cultural politics. And it is precisely at this point that similarities with the 1930s become uncanny. National Socialism also merged notions of culture and race with social economic issues. Without aspiring to offer a comprehensive analysis of the situation today, revisiting Benjamin's text and how it resonates with elements of the *Abstract Cabinet* offers us one of the rare arguments that seeks to link new forms of art and technology with the complex socio-economic and political context in which they are situated.

Benjamin's text deals with the situation of the 1930s by analysing how new art and technology affect the “superstructure” – the intellectual, political, and economic elite – of society. Where Marx gave a “prognostic” description of the development of industrial capitalism,<sup>[4]</sup> even if it was still in a very rudimentary form at the time of his writing, Benjamin wants to see if he could understand how the upper echelon of culture, knowledge, and art will change through the technologies of industrial capitalism. The main transformation he thereby identifies is the rapid increase of the possibility of mass reproduction. In the field of culture, reproductive technology such as film and photography have an equally profound impact on how ideas would disseminate through photographic and cinematographic image production and how also the understanding of the self would even change through confrontation with the photographed or filmed double. Benjamin describes the main consequence of these new media famously as the “withering” of “aura”.<sup>[5]</sup>

The concept of aura remains profoundly complex and even in the short text is given a double definition. At first he describes it as the “here and now” of the work, the simple fact that the work exists as a singular, unique, and an original object at one location at each moment.<sup>[6]</sup> Later in

<sup>[3]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 506; *ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473; *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>[5]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477; *ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>[6]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475; *ibid.*, p. 253.

[7] Ibid., p. 479; *ibid.*, p. 255.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., pp. 476–477; *ibid.*, p. 254.

[10] Ibid., pp. 498–499; *ibid.*, pp. 265–266.

[11] Ibid., p. 263; *ibid.*, p. 495.

[12] Ibid., pp. 495–496; *ibid.*, p. 263.

[13] Ibid., pp. 504–505; *ibid.*, p. 268.

[14] See Alois Riegl: *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 2nd ed., Vienna 1927.

[15] Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften* (note 1), p. 479; Benjamin: *Selected Writings* (note 1), p. 255. On the topic of Benjamin and Riegl see also Wolfgang Kemp: *Fernbilder. Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft*, in: Burkhard Lindner (ed.): „Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträteln...“ Walter Benjamin im Kontext, Frankfurt am Main 1978, pp. 224–287.

[16] Alois Riegl: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Vienna 1996, pp. 27–37.

the text he deploys somewhat more poetic language, describing aura as the “apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”<sup>[7]</sup> In philosophical terms, in the first formulation Benjamin describes the ontology of aura, the fact that it can only *be* if it can be linked to the certainty of things being unique, singular, and located. The second description touches upon the epistemology of aura, focusing on how aura appears and can be known. Then new media like film and photography disrupt both the ontological and epistemological structure of aura. In these media it is possible to have multiple versions of the same, which can then appear to many people at similar moments in newspapers or movie theatres. How this changes aura is, in Benjamin’s analysis, by reducing the sense of separation or distance between person and event as it can now occur within the vicinity of multiple people at the same time.

To Benjamin overcoming “distance” is one of the most important things to understand. Throughout the text this point is returned to all the time. It starts by noticing “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things.”<sup>[8]</sup> This desire is answered in photography which makes it possible for artworks to move from their place of origin. Sculptures on buildings that could first only be viewed from far away, can now “meet” the spectator at home.<sup>[9]</sup> Photography and film can even improve the human eye through special lenses and slowmotion technology, which allows time to slow down or the eye to scan the surface of things in a manner before impossible. Here the senses are stretched to allow the subject to dwell closer to things or events, watching them from very nearby or through slowing down the unfolding.<sup>[10]</sup> Describing how the camera operates when recording, Benjamin again points to the annihilation of distance that results from the physical presence of the camera “in” the scene recorded.<sup>[11]</sup> He even presents the cameraman as a surgeon who enters the body of his patient,<sup>[12]</sup> radically reducing the distance between himself/herself and its subject to the degree of penetration of the body. Benjamin ultimately turns to architecture and considers how the common mode of engaging with the world for the modern masses is by moving in and through things, rather than observing them from a distance.<sup>[13]</sup> The optical appreciation of architecture, characterised by observing the façade of a building from a distance, is replaced by the distracted familiarizing of a building through its “tactile” use.

Interesting in Benjamin’s analysis of the disappearance of distance in modern society is that it runs exactly counter to the theory presented by the art historian who is one of the key sources of inspiration for Benjamin: Alois Riegl. The notions of “optical” and “tactile” as used at the end of the text, for instance, originate from Riegl’s study *Late Roman Art Industry*.<sup>[14]</sup> It is Riegl who Benjamin quotes as the exemplary scholar in his text and it is Riegl who writes on modern art as defined by a distinct use of distance.<sup>[15]</sup> Only Riegl defends the exact opposite of Benjamin’s position by understanding distance as the essential positive value of modern art. In the text *Atmosphere as the Content of Modern Art* (Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst) Riegl starts with an anecdote whereby he positions himself on the top of a mountain while observing a beautiful valley.<sup>[16]</sup> In his description he explains how confusing and sometimes even unpleasant the things he observes are at close range. When observing things nearby, Riegl details, one tends to analyse the phenomenon primarily in terms of how it might threaten or impact oneself. This makes it impossible to understand the thing in its context and as part of an overall historical

development. Only if one can observe something “relaxed” and “from a distance” is it possible to appreciate it, because only then is it possible to place the phenomenon within the development of the world.

Even if not explicit, it is hard to ignore Benjamin’s uses of the same metaphor of viewing a mountain range to explain aura: “To follow with one’s eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.”<sup>[17]</sup> In this description Benjamin clearly introduces the exact same ingredients as Riegl does in his text on modern art: relaxation and distance. Only instead of believing that only the distanced observer can understand the things properly, Benjamin suggests that the masses are able to absorb the meaning of things through touching and in a mode of distraction. How are we to understand this contrasting view to Riegl, while simultaneously paying tribute to him?

The key lies in a philological observation made by Georges Didi-Huberman when doing a close read of Benjamin’s text.<sup>[18]</sup> Didi-Huberman notices that while Benjamin might speak of the disappearance of aura, he has a very particular understanding of what this disappearance means. Early in his work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* published in 1928, Benjamin formulated a different notion of origin as a whirlpool of remembering and forgetting. What happens in modern times is not that aura vanishes off the stage altogether, but it is displaced and folded into an experience, which now no longer “imposes” aura upon the image, but “supposes” it. The return to the “tactile” therefore is not a return to a pre-auratic, or post-auratic perception, if ever such a thing could exist, yet it can better be understood as a calibration of perception whereby it approaches and moves through (or with) the image in a different manner. Distance is, as it were, folded into perception to unravel through new forms of perception, which can constructively draw on a form of distraction that allows the subject to develop an embodied understanding appropriate for the age of reproduction.

To Benjamin the overcoming of distance was a consequence of the proliferation of technological reproducibility. Referring again to Riegl and his seminal work *Late Roman Art Industry*, Benjamin states “just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.”<sup>[19]</sup> His anxiety when it comes to fascism is that it keeps the structure of the old mode of perception, with its inclination towards distanced observation, while using a new medium radically disposed to annihilate distance. Why this is problematic becomes most explicit at the very end of the text:

„Fiat ars – pereat mundus,“ says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. [...] Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.<sup>[20]</sup>

The metaphor has a clear spatial structure, again repeating the image of the mountain view, only now not by a man, but by the Olympian gods. The divine attraction of the view from afar comes at the cost of separation that inspires a dangerous form of alienation, especially when what is viewed from the mountaintop includes oneself. Indirectly the final metaphor of the text refers to a disembodied watching of the self, which can be realized

<sup>[17]</sup> Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften* (note 1), p. 479; Benjamin: *Selected Writings* (note 1), p. 255.

<sup>[18]</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman: *The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, The Then, and Modernity*, in: Andrew Benjamin (ed.): *Walter Benjamin and History*, London/New York 2005, pp. 3–18.

<sup>[19]</sup> Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften* (note 1), p. 479; Benjamin: *Selected Writings* (note 1), p. 255.

<sup>[20]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508; *ibid.*, p. 270.

in watching cinematographic recordings of a mass rally or event.

Even if not mentioned explicitly in the third and last version of the text, in the first version this section was linked directly to fascist propaganda film:

In great ceremonial processions, giant rallies and mass sporting events, and in war, all of which are now fed into the recording apparatus, the masses come face to face with themselves. This process, whose significance need hardly be emphasized, is closely bound up with the development of reproduction, or as the case may be, recording technologies. In general, mass movements are more clearly apprehended by the camera than by the eye. A bird's-eye view best captures assemblies of hundreds of thousands. And even when this perspective is no less accessible to the human eye than to the camera, the image formed by the eye cannot be enlarged in the same way as a photograph.<sup>[21]</sup>

<sup>[21]</sup> Ibid., p. 467; English version translated by Michael W. Jennings in Grey Room 39 (spring 2010), pp. 39–40.

This section seems clearly inspired by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* of 1935, the year Benjamin started writing his text. Riefenstahl is a master of the spectacular overview shot, dramatized by the monumental stage of Albert Speer for the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg. The film starts in a plane, following how Adolf Hitler oversees his country from Olympian heights. Throughout there is a constant interplay of large vistas that show endless masses of uniformed men, who in the vastness become one homogenous body. When the youth have playful competitions, they play human horse-chariot, whereby one youngster stands on the backs of several others. All the time individual bodies are absorbed in the bigger body of the movement and finally in the ultimate, larger than life body of Hitler himself, who in the documentation of the speech is shot so that he does not fit the screen. In pre-modern, pre-mass society only a small societal elite could experience these large vistas, understanding, as Riegl did on his mountaintop, how from a distance things display their position as part of a whole. It was the privileged view of the elite who obtained right to govern due to this comprehensive perspective. The National Socialists kept this view from afar, only they offered it to all "the Germans" who all should feel they are the successors of kings. They could all oversee the whole, but at the same time were cunningly tricked to forget that they themselves are also in the image as cannon fodder necessary for the inevitable war when this race of "kings" demand other races serve them.

In Benjamin's text this use of film is presented against socialist films, most notably those of Dziga Vertov, whose work shows an interesting contrast to Riefenstahl's approach. Benjamin refers to Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* of 1934,<sup>[22]</sup> a film that celebrates Lenin through three songs that mark the diversity and unity of the Soviet Union. Yet even more instructive is his earlier masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera* of 1929, which Benjamin did not mention here. Vertov also depicts Soviet society as an organic and dynamic whole, though he constantly emphasises that the whole only becomes visible through the lens of the camera. In Vertov's 1929 film the main hero is not Lenin nor a political leader, but the man with the movie camera, or even the movie camera itself. The whole film follows a man with a camera who records daily life in the Soviet Union. In several scenes the camera even comes to life through stop-motion animation, actually becoming itself a moving, seeing animal. Instead of allowing the viewer to associate with the noble perspective of the elevated king, Vertov pushes the viewer to associate with the camera. At the end of his text Benjamin laments that "society was not mature enough to make technology its

<sup>[22]</sup> Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften* (note 1), p. 493; Benjamin: *Selected Writings* (note 1), p. 262.

organ.” It is well conceivable that he saw the first possibility of such organic merging of life and technology in Vertov’s films.

The Soviet filmmaker provides a bridge to Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* as he visited the space in Hanover the same year he presented *Man with the Movie Camera*. After sitting in the *Abstract Cabinet* for quite a while, he wrote to Lissitzky: “I sat there for a long time, looked around and groped.”<sup>[23]</sup> In a 2003 essay, art historian Maria Gough has used Vertov’s description of Lissitzky’s design as the basis for a very rich and detailed analysis of the *Abstract Cabinet*, which I will essentially follow here.<sup>[24]</sup> What Vertov referred to with his remark is the wondrous effect the space had on the viewing subject, as the space was decorated with thin strips of metal orthogonally attached to the grey wall, painted white on the one side, and black on the other. When moving through the space this created an “optical dynamic”, a type of flickering sensation that today one would associate with certain forms of Op Art. The metal strips were but one – even if the most spectacular – of several elements of the *Abstract Cabinet* that introduced dynamism into the gallery. Next to this Lissitzky had added a type of wall vitrine with paintings in them, which the viewer could move to decide which painting to watch where. One wall of the space was completely covered with a large piece of display furniture, which also blocked and diffused the light of a large window on one side of the gallery. This display cupboard could be used to show graphic work, but also had space for a small sculpture with a mirror behind it. This seemingly insignificant gesture allowed the viewer to see the back of the sculpture, as it was impossible to walk around it. Yet it also again introduced another image plane that would move and change with the viewer, further confusing the viewing experience as it would also present the metal strips. It intensified the experience of the metal strips further, as the viewer would see the other side of the strips, seeing both the white and the black sides at the same time. The whole room full of tricks in the end left Vertov “groping”, which is the translated term from the Russian “*oshchupyval*”, a rather harsh, sexually charged term that refers to “feeling your way around”.

Within the context of a museum space it is rather unusual to end up with such a bodily qualification. As Brian O’Doherty has so elegantly described in his famous *Inside the White Cube*, in the gallery “the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion.”<sup>[25]</sup> On all fronts Lissitzky’s design breaks with this modern museum logic in composing a space that at no point ignores the body. First Lissitzky allows the viewing subject to intervene in the display, giving them the chance to move the works around in the wall vitrines. Second, the metal strips produce a constant flickering sensation with each movement of the head or body. Finally, the mirror even brings the viewing subject into the room as a (mirror) image. Constantly, the presence of the body thereby is acknowledged, but also specified. What Lissitzky highlights is the fact that what is seen is the result of the relational presence of the viewing body and what is viewed. Distance is perhaps not overcome in this strategy. Yet it is constantly emphasised as a quality that defines what is seen, which then no longer exists on its own, but only in relation.

Lissitzky’s motivation to design a space that constantly points towards the constructive distance that exists between viewer and object has a different source than Benjamin’s Rieglian speculation. In her study on the impact of the theory of relativity on modern art, art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson traces back how Lissitzky was part of a large group

<sup>[23]</sup> Quoted in Maria Gough: *Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitzky's Dresden and Hanover Demonstrationräume*, in: Nancy Perloff/Brian M. Reed (eds.): *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow (Issues & Debates)*, Los Angeles 2003, p. 81.

<sup>[24]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77–125.

<sup>[25]</sup> Brian O’Doherty: *Inside the White Cube, The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1999, p. 15.

[263] Linda Dalrymple Henderson: *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Revised Edition, Cambridge/London 2013, pp. 427–434.

[271] This conclusion is deliberately speculative. It can be that Lissitzky was aware of Riegl's theory and that his understanding of fascism is built up along similar lines. In my research, however, I found no indications of this.

[281] On Dorner's education see Samuel Cauman: *Das Lebende Museum, Erfahrungen eines Kunsthistorikers und Museumsdirektors* (1958), Hanover 1960, pp. 27–37 and also Alexander Dorner: *The Way Beyond 'Art'*, New York 1958, pp. 15–19.

[291] I have published earlier on this point in Steven ten Thije: *A Space Beyond Dualism – On Alois Riegl's Influence on Alexander Dorner's „Atmosphere Rooms“*, in: Kai-Uwe Hemken (ed.): *Kritische Szenografie. Die Kunstausstellung im 21. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 411–416.

[301] See Alexis Joachimides: *Die Museumsreformbewegung in Deutschland und die Entstehung des modernen Museums 1880 – 1940*, Dresden 2001.

of early twentieth-century artists who were fascinated by Einstein's discovery.<sup>[26]</sup> The inspiration artists took from Einstein was often based on a quite limited understanding of the mathematics that informs the theory of relativity. Only Lissitzky was a trained architect and engineer and in the 1920s took time to study the history of geometry. After this he came to the conclusion that the fourth dimension could never be “spatialised” as for instance Kazimir Malevich believed. Instead of searching for a pictorial or graphic translation of the fourth dimension into the image, Lissitzky became convinced that the fourth dimension could only be introduced through the active consideration of time. His shift in the 1920s towards spatial installations as in the *Proun Room* in Berlin from 1923, or a later installation of the work in Dresden and the *Abstract Cabinet*, all function as experiments to incorporate a spatialisation of time in a literal manner, by taking into account the time it takes to physically move through space while viewing the work. Lissitzky's work is in this sense in line with Benjamin's (Rieglian) observation that over time the human “modes of perception” change. In his exhibition design Lissitzky gives shape to a type of experience that incorporates another understanding of space and time. He did not consider the image a coherent container of a moment in time, as the traditional “window to the world” understanding of painting maintains. Lissitzky instead made works that understand experience as informed by a temporal unfolding. If incorporated in the way in which an artwork or spatial design is organised, it would allow the viewing subject to decode their experience in a different manner, allowing for a new understanding of the world. Lissitzky did not seem informed by Riegl's description of modern art, as based on distance, nor does he seem to arrive at his design in the same manner as Benjamin arrived at his understanding of the political importance of repositioning distance in the manner in which people relate to world.<sup>[27]</sup> The person who seems to bridge Lissitzky's interest in distance and his source of inspiration for the theory of relativity, with Benjamin's understanding of the aesthetic problems of fascism, is the commissioner of the *Abstract Cabinet*, museum curator Alexander Dorner.

Dorner became director of the Provinzialmuseum Hannover (now Landesmuseum Hannover) in the 1920s and took on the task to restructure the rich museum collection, which ranged from fossils and archaeological finds to contemporary art. Trained in Berlin as an art historian, he was part of a small clique, which included Erwin Panofsky, who favoured the newly developed art historical perspective of Riegl, over the dominant empirical positivism employed by, among others, his teacher Adolph Goldschmidt.<sup>[28]</sup> Even if he would later distance himself from Riegl, during his Hanover years, his activities as a curator appear to be strongly influenced by the Austrian art historian – the “atmosphere rooms” he developed to show the collection have quite a profoundly Rieglian twist.<sup>[29]</sup>

When working on his new collection display, Dorner joined a young generation of new museum directors who in different ways tried to break out of the “warehouse” model which they inherited from the nineteenth century.<sup>[30]</sup> Instead of simply cramming as much work as possible onto the gallery walls, the new generation tried to create open and legible presentations of the collection that combined seduction with education. Within this group Dorner took an experimental position, going beyond a focus on elegant display. In the Provinzialmuseum Hannover he presented the collection as a progressive story in which every period was marked by its own distinct visual logic. The method he developed to do this

he named atmosphere rooms, in which he would unify the art presented in the room by adding distinct, coloured wallpaper. These colours would optically allow the viewer to link the works, bringing them into an “atmosphere” which highlighted their similarity. He actively distinguishes this method from the practice of period rooms that presented artworks in a recreated ‘original’ context. The atmosphere rooms did not want to reproduce a context, but to stimulate the sensibility of a historical period. The focus was more directed to the experience, than to the notion that the room should produce a historicist copy of a previous historical moment.

In itself this might be a relatively modest innovation within the field of exhibition design (especially considering the widely spread practice of coloured wallpaper in exhibitions).<sup>[31]</sup> What makes Dorner’s innovation interesting within the framework of our discussion here is that the strategy shows strong parallels to a particular reading of Baroque art advanced by Riegl just before Dorner’s installation. Riegl had recently finished the quite remarkable book *The Group Portraiture of Holland* in which he offers a reading of especially Rembrandt’s work.<sup>[32]</sup> In this study he understands the chromatic unity of Rembrandt’s painting as instrumental to the visual logic (and achievement) of the work. Rembrandt’s use of a quite subdued palette of colours, combined with a specific use of shadows whereby the edges of solid volumes as it were ‘bleed’ into the space around them, allows him to create a whole different type of relationship between the figures in the painting and the space in which they are situated. In Riegl’s analysis Rembrandt manages to create a type of painting in which there is no hard separation between a solid volume and the space around it. The figures are therefore not painted by defining their edges, which are projected into an empty box, but are contractions in a continuous plane of visibility and materiality that lose their massiveness at the edge and then blur into space.

Dorner, at that time still under the spell of Riegl, was undoubtedly aware of this text and appears to have introduced part of Rembrandt’s strategy into the exhibition design. By picking a dominant colour from the works in a gallery to use as background, the overall range of the colours in the space is not so much reduced as it is offered a strong foundation. The viewer will then also, just as in Rembrandt’s paintings, be able to allow for the different paintings in the gallery to blur into one another.

What makes Dorner’s deployment of a visual strategy that shows strong similarities with Riegl’s reading of the Dutch group portrait even more interesting for us, is both Riegl’s and Dorner’s explicit linking of these visual strategies to sociopolitical formations. Riegl in the introduction of this book considers the Dutch genre of painting as contiguous with the proto-democratic shape of society of seventeenth-century Netherlands.<sup>[33]</sup> Older representational strategies were based on a hierarchical model, whereby all things are organised in a clear relation of authority to each other and then governed by God’s creation in its totality. Dutch society knew a strong merchant class who made decisions as equals. The relationships between the subjects therefore needed to reflect this equality, from which Rembrandt drew the ultimate pictorial, philosophical consequence by optically allowing subjects to blur into each other.

Dorner draws similar parallels between the visual logic of art from different periods and the political, economic regime in which they are produced. When discussing Romanticism, for instance, Dorner links the movement to the introduction of a conflict between the notion of “free enterprise” and the “mechanical” understanding of nature as governed by laws which keep the totality of all being always intact.<sup>[34]</sup> This creates an

<sup>[31]</sup> Charlotte Klonk: *Spaces of Experience, Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, New Haven/London 2009, pp. 75–79. On the *Abstract Cabinet*, pp. 116–120.

<sup>[32]</sup> Alois Riegl: *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*, Vienna 1931, pp. 187–189.

<sup>[33]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>[34]</sup> Dorner: *The Way Beyond 'Art'* (note 28), pp. 100–101.

<sup>[35]</sup> Ibid., pp. 114–115.

untenable tension between a desire to freely maximise one's abilities, always at the cost of the freedom of someone else, hence the increased "exploitation of the worker". In art Dorner sees a parallel to Romantic art's introduction of a notion of freedom and autonomy situated completely in a marginal zone of leisure and relaxation. Autonomous or free art in this sense is perfectly contained in the mechanical whole of society.<sup>[35]</sup>

The *Abstract Cabinet* for Dorner then marks a next step towards a new visual logic and society. In this development Dorner also deploys an approach to art in tandem with Benjamin, as he also believes that the art appropriate for the modern society is so different from the art before that he gave his later book the title: *The Way Beyond 'Art'*. The formula that Dorner uses to understand this shift is not so much "distance" as such, but is more located in how "space" is understood in different periods. In the classical, pre-modern period, space, in Dorner's analysis, was understood as homogenous and continuous, an empty container in which objects were positioned as having fixed entities with hard edges. Modern culture breaks with this idea of "empty space", seeing it the result of interaction between things that have movement and energy. Things exist not in empty space, but "produce" the space they are in through interaction with one another. The *Abstract Cabinet* is a strong example of this, as it constantly makes the viewer aware that it is movement which influences what is seen. What is in a sense subtly added to the viewer's experience in the atmosphere rooms – the binding together of different works through a linking colour – is made explicit in the *Abstract Cabinet*. Here the walls no longer allow things to blur into each other, but with each step the viewer creates a new space with its own specific colour intensity. The works here are also no longer linked through colour, but need to be brought into relation through a physical action by moving the vitrines. Finally, the mirror in the corner reminds the viewer that he or she has only one perspective and that a body situated elsewhere would experience the space again in a very different manner.

After this small mapping of the overlap and differences in the work of Riegl, Lissitzky, Dorner and Benjamin, which run through and become explicit in the remarkable exhibition design of the *Abstract Cabinet*, we can return to the initial question of what we can learn from it today. Even if technology has now advanced again in very different trajectories than the film and photography that fascinated this group of artists and thinkers, there is still a lot to be learned from the manner in which they tried to come to terms with what was happening around them. Today it may be digital media and computing, which has profoundly restructured how we engage with the world and communicate with each other. Still, the type of analysis done by Benjamin, Dorner, Riegl and Lissitzky has not lost its relevance. Digital technology has not cancelled or resolved the reconfiguration of the manner in which distance plays an important role in our experience and knowing of the world. Today we can see a similar tension between the direction and possibilities of new technology and the ways in which they are embedded in the governing of our societies. Again there is reason to fear that if we cannot constructively integrate these new forms of exchanging and knowing into our lives, we might redirect its energy to destructive forms of capitalism and cultural politics. Because also again, all across Europe, we can see the beast of a singular, national identity, as defence against current geopolitical uncertainties, rear its ugly head. In times like these it is important to remember and continue the work done in

the 1920s and 1930s to understand and counter this move towards nationalism. In the museum it can be done by trying to understand how the structure of our experience of the world is organised today and how we can positively interact with our communication technology as one way to mediate our experience of the world. There's a poetic justice to the fact that we don't engage with this inspired thinking and work of the past – as with the *Abstract Cabinet* – through an original, but through a copy. This is undoubtedly the best way to reduce the distance between now and then.

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