

Richard Paul Lohse as Philosopher¹

“On Interpretation”

Certainly “interpretation” is not meant here in the usual sense of attributing associative or programmatic meanings to works of art or music.

The reference in the sub-title is to Aristotle’s *Peri Herméneias* whose concern is the truth status of statements about events that have not yet happened, such as tomorrow’s sea battle.

The outcome of Lohse’s project for a progressive integration of art practice and its proper history and study with presently unfolding social history substitutes here for that sea battle.

The effects of his intervention upon the practices and discourses within the art-related professions are already, to a good extent, available for assessment.

Its effect upon the larger field of cultural theory and practice will naturally take a longer time to make itself felt, but it is in the light of this possible future working-out that Lohse’s theoretical writings should be examined.

In particular, Lohse’s claim to a fundamental socialist impetus in his work, and the relationship of his project to the larger body of specifically Marxist theorising must be taken seriously in any such future study.

¹ This essay is my response to an invitation from Johanna Lohse James, the late Bryn James and Sigurd Rompza to comment upon two pages from the book *Lohse lesen*, Offizin, Zürich, 2002.

The text (pp.188–189) by Lohse is entitled „Entwicklungslinien seit 1943, Düsseldorf“. It is a sub-section of a larger set of “Entwicklungslinien” writings, which occupy twenty-seven pages of the book (pp.175–202).

A translation of the "Düsseldorf" version is appended in which I have taken the liberty of numbering the propositions and sometimes spacing them apart to increase clarity.

The question arises as to how much prior knowledge of Lohse’s painting is required if sense is to be made of the verbal texts, especially given the fact that such knowledge unfortunately still remains, for the most part, confined to a restricted set of people with a special interest in constructive art.

For people with no such interest my hope is that it might prove possible to approach the art through the philosophy, reversing the usual order of things.

For the time being the most interesting work in the universities is preoccupied with other issues and a regrettable ignorance of the functional reality of constructive art and its history prevails:

“Derrida identifies the moment of death, destruction and sacrifice, all that is risked in the risk of life, as the blind spot, the moment of excess around which the representation of meaning is organised but which cannot itself be truly included in the system. Van Gogh’s risk of meaning (= the risk of life, risking the utter loss of representational meaning, turns on the shoes being out-of-service, serving no end, unworn and unlaced, and it will be through the shoes’ suspension of utilitarian purpose (meaning) that Heidegger will be able to reveal, to speculate, a more fundamental meaning and experience (...).”²
(J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, Polity, 1992, pp.149–150)

Whatever interest and value this type of art-related philosophising may have, its general method of *mimetic hermeneusis* has become predominant and all-pervasive.

This paper argues that Lohse’s art is emancipated from some of the baneful effects of this methodology, and that it has the power to generate a wider current of emancipation.

Lohse consolidates some of the main experimental achievements of classical modernism, but he does so by *re-activating* them and re-problematising them in the sense of Edmund Husserl’s 1936 essay “The Origin of Geometry”:

“ (...) a transformation of the original mode of being of the meaning-structure, (e.g.,) within the geometrical sphere of self-evidence, of the geometrical structure which is put into words. It becomes sedimented, so to speak. But the reader can make it self-evident again, can reactivate the self-evidence.

There is a distinction, then, between passively understanding the expression and making it self-evident by reactivating its meaning.”

Lohse’s paintings do not require - and cannot bear – any literary exegesis. But neither are they “self-referential” as is often claimed, in the manner of Theo van Doesburg’s assertion that “the picture has no other signification than ‘itself’.” (Art Concret, p.1)

² In a 1973 lecture Stephen Bann observed with great accuracy that, in addition to its overt constructive principle, Lohse’s work also embodies a logical process of de-construction. This, however, has little to do with the way in which Derrida de-constructs a discursive text, and even less to do with the way Derrida, in “La Vérité en Peinture” persistently treats paintings as though they were themselves discursive texts. Bann’s hypothesis links Lohse’s practice more to the way in which Beethoven – philosophising while composing while performing – de-constructs the tradition of classical sonata form.

They are not *self-referential* because they are not referential.

There are works of art and music which are “concrete” in Doesburg’s sense, but it is also possible to look at *all* aesthetic items concretely, so that their programmatic associations are “bracketed-out” (eingeklammert) and their locus in the linguistic chain is shifted from that of *Denotans* (signifier) to that of *Denotatum* (thing to be signified).

Various descriptions of such objects will have various quotients of truth-value. Such descriptions will form the basis of a general hermeneutic of the actual - or possible – functioning of this art upon its environment, physical and intellectual.

The “Lines of Development” text begins this process of interpretation.

Its context is overdetermined by the so-called “cold” war which lasted from 1945 to 1990 and was fought in large part through ideology and culture.

The details of Lohse’s engagement in the antecedent struggle against fascism provide indispensable background data.

“Lines of Development” implies a constructive critique of other types of art practice, including those from the history of constructive art itself.³

Its main theme is the possibility that Lohse’s own way of conducting his assignment as an artist provides a model for overcoming some of the contradictions and difficulties which he identifies in his particular professional environment.

³ Lohse’s “moment of entry” into the conjuncture of art history and social history is that of the late 1950s and early 1960s, associated with an upsurge of great optimism about the positive potential of constructive art in many European countries, with the success of the design highschool in Ulm, of Nove Tendencije in Zagreb, of the Denise René gallery in Paris and many other manifestations.

This was a summing-up of all of the past achievements in this field of work, given greater impetus by the rapid development of new techniques for production and communication.

Unfortunately the new movement also carried forward and reproduced some of the theoretical errors of the older ones.

Lohse’s greater experience and the more profound structural analysis which he had already carried through in his work enables it to stand as both an integral part of this movement while at the same time as a critique of it “from within”.

Cf. “To the usual coordinates fixing the individual’s position - (...) temperament and (...) training – there is also the moment of (...) *entrance*, this being the moment in the tradition with which (...) biological opportunity coincides.”

(G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, Yale, 1962, p.6)

Lohse's writing does not, however, provide any diagnosis of the sociological reasons why constructive art in its successive manifestations - and this despite its obvious contribution to the evolution of aesthetic form and a certain, strictly delimited market and museum success – has always failed to secure wide popular approbation.

One current diagnosis holds that constructive art enters a “blind alley” due to a narcissistic preoccupation with recondite sectors of specialist interest.

"Lines of Development" suggests the opposite view, namely that art is too often packaged for instant appeal to an imaginary mass audience, and that much constructive-type art fails to deliver the structural content which its presentational context appears to promise.

Lohse never attacks another artist's work, but the criticism can be derived from the structure, rather than the semantics of the text, including the style of Lohse's prose which is akin, in many ways, to the *faktura* of his painting.

This is compressed to such a degree that the meaning-sequence seems ready, at any moment, to explode the formal structure of its containing integument.

The text is an instance of the kind of structure it describes: this is genuine self-reference.

There are no tenses and no *dramatis personae*. Propositions unfold in a continuous present. Apparently an Althusserian “process without a subject”. But wait.

Every word is maximally charged. The responsibility for interpretation is placed upon the reader in such a way that he or she, instead of being interpellated *from* the text becomes a living datum *within* it.

In general it may be claimed that artists' writings constitute a hugely varied and insufficiently-tapped philosophical resource, but “Lines of Development” is unlike any other artist's writing.

Its nearest counterpart is in certain passages from Karl Marx, and in particular the younger Karl Marx of the “Eleven Theses on Feuerbach”.

Once remarked, the stylistic similarity is obvious enough, but it is also possible to elicit a deeper thematic affinity to this text, which was composed in 1845, following Marx' first attempt to formulate a serviceable theory of the political function of ideology, published later as *The German Ideology*.

In particular the famous “eleventh thesis” sets up a dialectic between the projects of *interpreting* the world and *transforming* it which resounds to this day and which is, itself, the object of various interpretations.⁴

At this point indeed there is not mere affinity but complete identity between the two texts. Lohse, too, speaks of the transformation of the world around us (die Umwelt) as the main aim of his project (cf. Appendix 24.2.).

The question then is that of the political engagement of the artist or thinker. How might art or thought contribute to changing the world? It turns up in many places and in many disguises.

John Cage, for example, gives his published diary entries from 1968 to 1972 the general title, “How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)”.

In Lohse’s case we are obliged to ask: in what way are the objects and concepts to which he guides our attention relevant to the aim he shares with Karl Marx?

Hans Heinz Holz is a philosopher who has written prolifically both about Lohse and about Marxist theory. The value of his treatment of both themes cannot be over-estimated, but nowhere does he bring them into satisfactory conjunction.

Holz delights in pointing out, for example, some of the exact passages in “The Critique of Pure Reason” which seem, almost miraculously, to pre-figure Lohse’s art.

An earlier (1768) “Pre-Critical” essay by Kant entitled “Concerning the ultimate foundation of the differentiation of regions in space” makes the reader wish that Kant had had the opportunity to know Lohse’s painting, but in the end there is a great danger here, recognised by Kant, of conflating and confusing the diverse positions which the different parts of a system occupy relative to each other.

Harm is done to both causes when superficial connections between eclectic items of art and philosophy are used in catalogues etc. In the worst instances the thought gets reduced to an “explanation” of the art, and the art reduced to an illustration of the thought.

⁴ “And is it not the historical fate of philosophy, or at least of philosophies, to become something non-philosophical, or otherwise philosophical, which would perhaps be the form par excellence of their accomplishment? We could then speak of a becoming real of philosophy, and it would be fair to say that philosophies, even when they believe they are interpreting the world, have contributed – perhaps unbeknownst to themselves – to its transformation.”

(Pierre Macherey, “Philosophy’s malaise”, Tr. A. Toscano, *Radical Philosophy* 132, July/August 2005, p.16)

Holz of course does not do this, but his line of approach goes some way in this direction by reinforcing the classical division of cultural labour which naturalises the assignment of the artist, confining this to the provision of data for subsequent theorisation by the philosopher.

But in practice no such barrier can exist between the assignment of expressing ideas and that of the critical evaluation, both of those ideas and of the means used for their conveyance (Lohse's "die Mittel").

Because the elaboration of data *for* philosophy cannot be disentangled from the evaluation of that data *by* philosophy, the philosophy *of* art cannot, without unacceptable violence, be separated from philosophy *in* art, i.e. in practical materials, with paint or at the keyboard etc.

Kant's coda to his first great "Critique" is entitled "Architectonic of Pure Reason". Here he introduces the figure of the "artificer in the field of reason" (Lohse in this instance).

This "personnage" is the outcome of Kant's distinction between the noun philosophy and the verb "to philosophise".

A person's philosophical work or project does not reside in his or her *opinions* but in the actual, extended process of devising and criticising a given systematic unity.

Kant even goes so far as to warn his reader against "explaining" such systems "according to the description which their founder gives of them". (Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, trans. N. K. Smith, p.654)

Lines of Development documents Lohse's philosophising in Kant's sense and it invites further genuine philosophising.

Three main "lines of development" can be analysed out of the text, each treating one aspect of Lohse's practice:

1. The technical characteristics of the specific type of pictorial space discovered and deployed by Lohse.
2. The history of the evolution of this pictorial space-type, and the method of its presentation in the operational political context.
3. The principle of the equitability of transactions as manifested in Lohse's personal style (faktura) of painting, writing and of social engagement at professional and affective levels. Lohse himself does not schematise at this level, but the structure and content of the text (cf. the "Düsseldorf" version of 1972) seem clearly to map to the classical Hegelian triad:

1. = thesis or “thing”,
2. = antithesis = method (“Ausführung”),
3. = synthesis, “becoming” (das Werden / Werdegang).

Related triadic schemata, contemporaneous with Lohse’s intervention, are deployed in the semiotic aesthetics of Max Bense and the Stuttgart school (theories derived from Charles Sanders Peirce's “firstness, secondness and thirdness”), in Imre Lakatos’s “methodology of scientific research programmes” (MSRP) and in Louis Althusser’s analysis of “the object Freud”.

The Lohse / Hegel dialectic schema differs from these in the higher degree of antagonism attributed to the contradictions, in the quasi-violence of the struggle amongst the embedded negations.

Lohse’s art is violent in the sense that it tends to make the work of many other artists redundant in the same way that one line of argument definitively refutes another, or a proof supersedes or sublates another by virtue of its greater elegance or brevity.

Lohse firstly sets up an argument which identifies his own art with constructive art in general, and then goes on to explore technically every research avenue within this domain.

His argument is so convincing, and his investigation so comprehensive, that work in its neighbourhood – even that of very accomplished artists – is subsumed within its purlieu.

Diogenes the cynic, honoured by a visit from the great Alexander asked the king for a favour: “Would you mind stepping slightly to one side? You're shutting out the sunlight.”

Anthony Hill observes: “In all of this Lohse stands as a positivist” (Richard P. Lohse, Verlag Arthur Niggli, Teufen, 1962, p.16), but he adds the decisive caveat: “if one may safely use the term”.

The only way out of “Lohse’s shadow” is via the application of a negative dialectic in the sense used by Adorno.

Lohse’s positivism bears within it its own “immanent critique” so that the highest compliment one can pay it is to negate its propositions – wherever this shows itself to be possible – with as much force as Lohse himself brings to their assertion.

The first step is to replace Lohse’s assertoric mode of address with an interrogative one, for example:

How (proposition no.11 of the Düsseldorf version) does a condition of lapidarity transform itself into one of kinetic flexibility? (cf. Appendix)

Lohse is here taking up Theo van Doesburg's argument from his second "ELEMENTARISME (Manifest-fragment)" (*De Stijl*, 7th year No. 7, Series XIII 1926-27, pp.81–88), with its unacknowledged recourse to the propositional system of Bergson's metaphysics of time.

Despite its brevity Lohse's treatment of the problem is an advance on Doesburg's in the sense that it places the two poles of the dialectic into a more productive relationship.

Two other remarks by Lohse bear on this problem of the relationship between that which is *lapidary* and that which is *labile* in his work:

1. "The colour-sequence is a merciless (unerbittlicher) partner, which stops me from being a romantic" (*Fragen an Lohse*, ed. Martin Kunz, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1985, p.38).

However Lohse adds immediately, "but perhaps you find in the determination of these sequences one or several mistakes".

The question here concerns the status of the cyclic progression of colour presentations habitually deployed by Lohse, and secondarily the status of possible accidental – or deliberate (?) – deviations from an implied lapidary legitimacy.

Lohse's colour array is, with very few exceptions, overall positive; there are implicitly equal steps between various locations in the colour wheel, and tonality varies only in relation to the "natural" luminosity of the cycle.

Importantly however, chromatic saturation is always maximal. Hence we find the conventional "primary" and "secondary" colours, but no tertiaries: no browns or high turquoises, and almost no black or white.

No "thirdness" because – and here I speculate – this would introduce an undesired negativity into Lohse's whole system by exposing it to the inherent paradoxes of any three-dimensional, as opposed to two-dimensional colour array.

2. The status of mistakes in an aleatory system, where random variables are permitted or encouraged is entirely different (cf. J. Steele, "Chance, Change, Choice and Order; A Structural Analysis of a Work by Kenneth Martin", in *Leonardo*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp.407–417, 1991).

Lohse, of course, never "uses" chance in the way that very many other constructive artists do, but in a text of 1979 (exhibition leaflet, Galerie Lydia Megert, Bern), while

expounding the problem of the dialogue between core conditions and boundary conditions in the plane, he criticizes quite sharply the traditional conception of the servile function of the canvas as receptacle for any given vocabulary of form, declaring (surprisingly) that “it doesn't really matter here whether the structure is carried out with free or with mathematical means”.

This is surprising because the applicability of a strict *analysis situs*, binding loci in the colour row to positions in the physical plane would seem to be an indispensable factor, both in the construction of the pictorial space of Lohse's paintings, and in the interaction of his painting method upon the recipient subject in his or her social situation and context.

The question of the dialectic between the labile and the lapidary in the construction of a painting leads on to that of the dialectic between freedom and necessity in the larger philosophical sense.

Lohse's approach to this dialectic in his paintings is, as we have seen, “all-over positive”.

It is matched by the general tenor of his social philosophy which is resolutely optimistic.

However, at the end of his life – when it had become clear that the world was not changing in any of the senses that he had hoped for and anticipated - Lohse begins to allude to “our tragedy”.

He links the failure of constructive art to appeal to the large mass of working people to the apparent failure of the socialist project in general.

There is a crucial moment in Hegel's metaphysic, taken up later by Marx, when the contradiction between freedom and necessity is resolved in to identity.

Adorno's treatment of this problem exposes, among other errors, the crassness of the above-mentioned "blind alley" hypothesis as an account of constructive art's lack of success.

Adorno refers his reader back to the main Marxist *theorem* of the necessity for a proletarian revolution, which is central both to the eleven theses on Feuerbach and to the “Communist Manifesto” which followed in 1848:

“I should like to think-over why it did *not* happen and why it *could* never have happened (...). The identity claim announced by Hegel failed in the decisive moment of its going-over into Praxis. According to Marxist theory the domain of freedom and the domain of necessity should have fallen together in reality.

Philosophy therefore requires an extremely radical self-critique and to take very seriously the question of *why* all of these things did not come about.”
(Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, Suhrkamp, 2003, p.72, trans. J.S.)

This is the sense in which Adorno’s negative dialectic is also a “logic of disintegration” (des Zerfalls).

We are now in a position to mount a critical appreciation of the peroration which occupies the final four paragraphs of the Düsseldorf version of the *Entwicklungslinien* text.

This is obviously Lohse’s favourite THEOREM, the culminating point of all of his theory, which recurs in many of his writings and speeches with slight variations depending upon the context.

The claim is that constructive art as described – which, at this stage of the discussion is completely identified with Lohse’s own painting method – provides an actually functioning paradigm for an actually realisable benign social order.

Its main philosophical implications have already been developed by Reiner Kallhardt („Das Werk von Richard Paul Lohse – ein Modell“, in Richard Paul Lohse / Modulare und Serielle Ordnungen, M. Dumont Schauberg, Köln, 1973, pp.18–21).

What follows is supplementary to Kallhardt’s commentary.

Primary contradiction: X (= Lohse’s art) = (is identical to) Y (= the structures of our today’s life-situation), but also X “calls Y into question”. X denies Y, X denies itself.

Secondary contradiction: Something is lapidary (e.g. the “merciless” realities of the colour-wheel which subtends Lohse’s art) but also, at another moment, that same entity is free.

The primary contradiction recalls the dilemma of Aristotle’s “on interpretation”. It is not without relevance to note in passing that *all* philosophers resort to assertions about colour experience when treating such problems:

“Again, if a thing is white now, it was true before to say that it would be white, so that of anything that has taken place it was always true to say ‘it is’ or ‘it will be’. But if it was always true to say that a thing is or will be, it is not possible that it should not be or not be about to be, and when a thing cannot not come to be, it is impossible that it should not come to be, and when it is impossible that it should not come to be, it must come to be. All, then, that is about to be must of necessity take place. It results from this that nothing is uncertain or fortuitous, for

if it were fortuitous it would not be necessary.

Again, to say that neither the affirmation nor the denial is true, maintaining, let us say, that an event neither will take place nor will not take place, is to take up a position impossible to defend.”

(Source: *The Philosophy of Time*, Ed. R. M. Gale, Harvester, 1978, p.180)

Aristotle, in fact, brings the two contradictions together, revealing their connectedness. Lohse's "das Lapidare" = that which "must of necessity take place", or that which is timelessly or mathematically true, or what van Doesburg (aiming an oblique shaft at Mondrian (loc. cit.) condemns as "eener starre statiek", as opposed to some specific future-contingent event such as Aristotle's sea battle.

Lapidarity – its meaning, status and implications as a concept – is the *main* problematic towards which Lohse's art and his writing enjoins our attention.

It places us at the heart of the philosophy of TIME, or perhaps rather at the "stopping" of time, of *unchangeability*.

Max Bill's 1967 essay "Art as non-changeable fact" provides a parallel reference.

Bergson's conception of duration (*la durée*) criticises science and epistemology for comprehending time as a succession of punctual instants. It had wide repercussions in the visual arts including, as we have seen, upon Doesburg's developing thought process.

It is possible to mount, on this basis, a critique of the whole photo-kinematographic method of image presentation to which we are universally subject.

The history of the concept of concretion (or concrete-ness), at least since Hegel, would form a part of this argument, but "concrete" also has implications as a way of stopping or interrupting the temporal flux via the imposition of an artificial and authoritarian closed system of conceptual synchrony.

Art such as Lohse's is criticised by Adorno and his followers (they do not mention Lohse as the outstanding exemplar but this is probably due to ignorance) as having "purely crystallised itself out" and hence, in having at one level emancipated itself from social servitude, but also of taking on "through the back door" a new authoritarian voice (cf. Wolfgang Iser, *Ästhetisches Denken*, Reclam, 1990, p.124 etc.).

Elsewhere Stanley Cavell mounts a similarly ungrounded critique of the composer Ernst Krenek.⁵

By this perverse interpretation the “lapidary” aspect of Lohse’s art is unwarrantably associated with fascist-type dictatorship.

The fallacy rests on a simple verbal play on the term “Herrschaft”. The “Master” side of Hegel’s master / slave dialectic is transferred to the completely unrelated fact of a person’s “mastery” of a given technique or sector of knowledge, as though the superiority of truth over falsehood were to constitute an intolerable social evil.

There can be no such thing as the “completion” of such mastery of a system. Therefore no social practice can be completely lapidary or crystalline. Therefore Lohse’s operational lapidarity in no way entails the closure of any system.

Max Horkheimer defends the “stop time” element of the traditional scientific method against Bergson’s critique:

“This entire intellectual, social activity connected to practical tasks and struggles is called thought; ordering is in reality only an aspect of this, and the products of ordering – concepts and judgements fixed on symbols – are only frozen forms of this living act.”

(„Zu Bergsons Metaphysik der Zeit“, 1934)

There is, however, an important ambiguity – if not an actual incoherence – about the terms in which Lohse formulates his major claim to social efficacy. Kallhardt asks, reasonably enough (loc. cit.), “when will these pre-conditions, upon which all hopes and possibilities for a human society depend come into existence?”

This *petitio principii* – X depends upon Y, which depends upon X – to some degree vitiates all socialist theory and is handled delicately by all serious socialist thinkers including Marx.

⁵ Cavell arraigns Krenek on the ground that Krenek’s misunderstanding of the relationship between art and philosophy leads him towards an art of *total organisation* (a term he borrows from Adorno). He insists that he has no quarrel with Krenek’s *music* but also that “such philosophising as Krenek’s does not justify it and must not be used to protect it against aesthetic assessment” (“Music Discomposed”, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge, 1976, p.203).

One might well ask on what grounds Cavell’s own aesthetic assessment is predicated since he claims for himself, as a professional aesthetic philosopher, the police power of exposing what he calls “fraudulent art” on the public’s behalf.

It is a source of comfort to all apologists for the capitalist status quo.

Lohse's placing of it squarely there at the culminating point of his peroration as a main question for the reader to consider, is more significant than his failure to resolve it.

In the case of Lohse's list of desirable attributes, common to a new social structure and to its means of artistic expression, it is obvious that the same set of words can be used to describe the two projects.

There is certainly a valid metaphor here, but is there any evidence for Lohse's larger claim that his work exercises a transformative influence on the world through its action as a model or paradigm?

To the extent that there is such evidence this weakens or spoils the argument against textual interpretation of the paintings by restoring their prime functional method to that of *mimesis*.⁶

This is especially troubling when the interpretation in question is that of the master himself.

All of the previous work done towards the establishment of an equitable relationship between producer and recipient is called, once again, into question.

The pictorial method of engaging the recipient into the argumentative process, initiated by Manet and continued via Cézanne, through analytic and synthetic cubism, Bart van der Leek (especially praised by Lohse), Mondrian and Art Concret and consolidated in Lohse's work is necessarily and essentially incompatible with the method of symbolic semiosis, wherein the recipient is positioned as a spectator, *outside the action*.

The actual human relationship between actor and audience-member-as-artist is, for example, the basis of Bertold Brecht's political theatre ("eine neue Zuschauerkunst").

⁶ The underlying question here is that of whether Mimesis and Poesis can continue to co-exist harmoniously as they obviously do in all forms of art except the one associated with the terms "concrete" and "constructive", or whether the relevant techniques have been developed to the stage of antagonistic contradiction, such that the actual operation is that the one drives out the other, and the recipient subject is obliged to select one mode at the expense of the other.

Is the difference between symbolic representation and formal architectonic an insurmountable contradiction or a dialectic contrariety which can be "overcome"?

The observable contemporary resurgence of the mimetic/illustrational mode in all forms of art presentation, and the observable enmity of the predominant culture towards aesthetic formalism suggests an "either/or" relationship with no possible "third way".

The argument of Marx's "eleven theses" is absolutely germane here. Marx is struggling against Hegel's insistence that...

"When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."

(1820 Preface to Elements of the Philosophy of Right)

... that the cognitive subject is constrained within the domain of pure contemplation (*reines Zusehen*).⁷

Marx, in his turn, insists upon the union of abstract thought and practical activity, precisely in the domain of the *aesthetic* (*die Sinnlichkeit*).

The most widespread interpretation of Marx's eleventh thesis is as an injunction to give up abstract philosophising and to take up the concrete revolutionary struggle.

This brings with it an anti-contemplative (anti-Hegelian), pro-utilitarian imperative, which is fallacious in that it implies that the philosophising subject is not yet a functional part of the practical world or, alternatively, has ceased to be one.

It forgets that both the active, individual subject and its containing social structures are mutually determinant and always in the process of being formed or "under construction"; in Bergson's sense these are "les faits s'accomplissants" as opposed to "les faits accomplis".⁸

Feuerbach's version of materialism "forgets (...) that the educator, of all people, requires education".

These are the words of Marx's third thesis and they express the sense in which I have ventured to criticise Lohse's philosophy of his own Praxis.

⁷ Ce qui importe, c'est qu'il y a – dans la Vérité – *coïncidence* parfaite du Begriff et du Gegenstand, et que le Savoir y est une adéquation purement *passive* à la Réalité essentielle. Et c'est pourquoi le Savant véritable ou le Sage doit réduire son existence à la simple *contemplation* (*reines Zusehen*) du Réel et de l'Être, et de leur "mouvement-dialectique". Il regarde tout ce qui *est* et décrit verbalement tout ce qu'il voit : il n'a donc rien à *faire*, car il ne modifie rien, n'ajoute rien et ne retranche rien."

(A. Kojève, Introduction à la lecture de Hegel, Gallimard, 1947, p.452)

⁸ Jean Piaget: "En un mot, le sujet existe parce que, de façon générale, l' 'être' des structures, c'est leur structuration."

(Le Structuralisme, Presses Universitaires de France, 1974)

His paintings really do work to change the world, but not in the way he claims (cf. postscript).

Change is effected – not merely affected – in the whole intellectual capacity and psychic disposition of the recipient subject, but not by any supposed message transmitted by the painting from the artist to the spectator.⁹

It is rather Lohse himself who takes up the position of *interpretant* in the very sense created by Peirce, which is that of a “mediating representation” within a process of signification, an assignment which carries great responsibility but no final authority.

This is all the opposite of the assignment of “Herrschaft” as criticised by Adorno, and which is also of course overdeterminant upon the conduct of any person wishing to achieve practical success in the professions of artist or philosopher under the current conditions of political economy.

Lohse’s personal handling of this particular contradiction is itself exemplary.

At the first encounter his oeuvre appears, as discussed above, to be monolithic and impenetrable, with its presentational method recalling that of the infallible master.

Criticism reveals it to be, on the contrary, a collective, collaborative and convivial enterprise *par excellence*.

I conclude with another aphorism, written in the context of an argument in favour of the ideal of the supersession of private property, which might almost have been written by Cézanne or Lohse:

“The *senses* (Die *Sinne*) have therefore become *theoreticians* (*Theoretiker*) in their immediate praxis.”

(1844 Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte, Marx’s italics.)

Jeffrey Steele, Portsmouth, 22.6.2005

⁹ The type of “message” meant here is of course semantic or symbolic via associative signification (Lohse’s term “modellhaft”, Appendix 24.3.). This is without prejudice to the category “aesthetic information” used about work such as Lohse’s by Max Bense, Elisabeth Walther and others, which gives rise to further problematics beyond the scope of the present study.

Appendix

Lines of Development since 1943, Düsseldorf

Exhibition catalogue Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf 1972, pp 4 (unpag.)
 “Richard Paul Lohse / Prinzip seriell“ (12.9.–29.10.1972).

1. Forms of an individual character are superseded by objective elements.
2. Quantity replaces the individual, sets take the place of particulars, themes take over the expressive function of the element.
3. In order to secure new foundations it was necessary to systematise the means so as to engender logical sequences, thus making a number of operations possible. The result: variability and extensibility.
4. The standard becomes the determinant factor in the generation of the image (Bildentstehung).
5. The standard becomes a group, the group becomes a series.
6. Small-order groups make large operations possible.
7. With the emergence of systematically-ordered groups the problem of the colour series becomes critical, colour becomes form.
8. The colour series provides the law which guides the formal expression.
9. The contrariety of colour and form is overcome. It became possible to form (bilden) logical structure-sequences, which allow an unlimited, pre-determined sequence of colours to be generated.
10. The quantity of colours is no longer sufficient.
11. The freedom of the aesthetic, the equilibrium metamorphoses into pre-determinedness of succession (der Ordnung), the lapidarity of the static-tectonic into a freedom (eine solche) of the kinetic-flexible.

12. The microstructure of the concretion of the first period goes over into the macrostructure of the manifold, harmony determined through combinatorial methods.
- 13.1. Anonymity of the medium,
 2. Unlimitedness of the structural laws,
 3. Relativity of the dimensions
 4. Equalised quantities,
 5. Extensibility,
 6. Flexibility of the systems determine the expression of the future.
14. Machine and expression are developed simultaneously, the method is its own representation, which is the image (das Bild).
15. The anonymous element already contains, pre-existently
 1. the combinatorial principle
 2. the large number,
 3. the group,
 4. the series.
16. The image-field is a structure-field.
17. The anonymous element is part and substance of a network of co-ordinates, within which every element bears an equal share of passivity and activity.
18. The logic of addition contains the logic of colour, of the colour series.
19. The polarity of colour metamorphoses into a logic of structure.
20. The task now is to develop systems, which make it possible to engender transparent and combinatorially flexible orderings.
21. Individual expression lies in the choice of methods, in the control of preliminary conditions.
22. The set (Die Menge) includes within itself the possibility for the individual.
23. Serial and modular design methods (Gestaltungsmethoden) are parallels to expression and to activity in a new social reality
 1. by their flexible and dialectical character.

24. Systematic design is an analogous parallel to the structures of our life-situation today, to civilisation
1. – although identical, it at the same time calls them into question in their social effectiveness –
 2. it is aimed at changing the world about us
 3. paradigmatically (modellhaft) in its thinking and working methods, by way of
 4. the application of objective means,
 5. the transparency of its methods,
 6. the possibility of pre-calculability, and
 7. the formation of unlimited rule-governed structures.
25. 1. In its directness of presentation,
2. the open-ness of system and methods,
 3. the making-visible of processes
 4. the possibility comes into being to make comparisons between complex research-findings and the real situation of the world about us (der Umwelt).
 5. Planning on the basis of social justice can only be achieved on the basis of the new methods of work and of structuration.
26. The integration of these new methods and systems of design into a society will not be possible until that society becomes capable of appreciating this analogy with its own mode of conduct and its own self-intelligibility.
1. And a pre-condition for this is a non-hierarchical and transparently ordered social system.

(Translation by Jeffrey Steele)

Jeffrey Steele

Postscript to “Lohse as Philosopher” text:

Having at last written down what I have long wanted to say about Lohse’s art I find myself in a position to sum-up the main subjacent premise of my argument.

Lohse’s paintings really do work to “change the world” in a positive way, but this change only comes about on the basis of the recipient subject’s acceptance of a more important anterior fact, namely, that their having come into being is an irrefutable index of the fact that the world *has already changed*.

Something is possible which previously was not possible.

And indeed the history of van Gogh’s “shoes” – the starting point for Heidegger’s meditation - has a central relevance to this change.

Edouard Manet, for the first time, demonstrated how it is possible to eliminate (Aufhebung) all reliance upon fictitious reference in his painting by placing the spectator *there*, in Manet’s own shoes so to speak, *that* morning, with *that* particular painterly problem and *those* particular materials to hand as, for example, in “Breakfast in the studio”.

The painting method Manet devised for achieving this is the *homogeneous colour presentation*, such that, in this case, a body of pigment *is identified* with, say, a piece of tablecloth or of lemon peel etc.

The aesthetic identity supersedes (das Auflösen) the previously dominant (Herrschaft) epistemic or narrative history of and in the picture (Bild).

Without Manet no Monet, no Cézanne, no van Gogh, no Gauguin, no van der Leek, no Mondrian, no Lohse.

1.7.2005

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