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Making Pictures Speak

In Memoriam Sir Ernst Gombrich

E.H. Gombrich died in the late afternoon hours of the Third of November 2001. In contrast to the recent development of the university institutions the aura of this scholar stands like a fading star in space. Remembering the closeness to a very special person makes it difficult for me to compose an intellectual obituary.

The Voice of Reason

Was euch nicht angehoert
Muesset ihr meiden
Was euch das Innre stoert
Duerft ihr nicht leiden.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Is it arrogant to state that this has also been my life-long attitude, frequently contributing to the alienation and sorrow of some of my contemporaries?

E.H.Gombrich

His intellectual forefather whom Sir E.H. Gombrich had a habit of quoting was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. By continuous reading of the works of the founder of the German educational religion in his younger years he deserved the right to be accepted as a member of the 'res publica litterarum', as he observed during his acceptance speech for the Goethe Preis in 1994 in a kind of understatement characteristic of his generation. As in Goethe's life work Gombrich's was marked by the attempt to rethink large fields of Western Cultural history and thus to acquire it. The intellectual fruits of these labours are reflected in great respect for artistic creation on the one hand and on the other an analytical precision practised on all speculative attempts at explanation. Gombrich's approach was that of a sceptic, of precise analysis and research. Human values and the embracing of the same provide standards and the basis of all criticism. This distinguishes him from all relativist and objectivist philosophy of history, as it developed during German Romanticism and in the footsteps of Hegelian philosophy. The first publication containing a personal dedication given to me by Gombrich in his emeritus study of the Warburg Institute contained his speech on the occasion of being awarded the Hegel Preis in Stuttgart. There I read of Hegel as the 'father of the history of art'. This provided an irritation, which was part of Gombrich's method, to challenge or provoke the critical potential of his students, which would be required by the latter not to loose themselves in the mazes of various Zeitgeist theories. Never did Gombrich formulate a theory of art or hermeneutics, but rather using

narrative means and balanced judgement with a keen eye for the overall picture lead through the labyrinthine structures of the historiography of western ideas with a stupendous knowledge of historical intellectual detail, encouraging his students to explore new terrain. Gombrich was a master who in accordance with the Ionic school saw success in the ability to surmount doctrine. The nature of the goal included the fact that Gombrich did not found a school like Erwin Panofsky spawning many further Panofskys.

Impressed, but never dazzled by the concept of the history of art as a history of ideas Gombrich's explicit goal was to avoid writing nonsense, to ask meaningful questions and to make rational statements. The so-called Viennese School in the history of art had the high aim of contributing towards the development of the history of art as a strict science. Gombrich's dissertation about the Palazzo del Te was written under Julius von Schlosser in which he suggested the thesis that Giulio Romano's genius, encompassing a choice of artistic means, undermined the taste of the patron and not that assumed beings determined the nature of manneristic style. In the Viennese milieu, where an interdisciplinary approach was an accepted mode, Gombrich could nurture his interest his strong anthropological interests in questions concerning art. Influenced by Karl Buehler and Ernst Kris - who had invited him to work on a book about the caricature - early on he turned to the problem of figurative art. The particular closeness to Kris, who was both a gifted psychoanalyst and art historian, caused Gombrich in 1936 to emigrate to London in time to the Warburg Institute that had moved there from Hamburg. When appointed head in 1959, he provided his humanistic integrity by being able to combine his duties towards the institution, whose primary research interests he no longer shared, with his new approach to the history of art, which is now recognised as being revolutionary. In his *Tributes. Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition* (1984) he paid tribute to the curators of our cultural memory, including Lessing, Freud and his best friend Otto Kurz. Referring to their example he protested against the cuts in higher education by the politicians. Who would have dreamt that his fears would prove so well-founded, so soon.

Strictly speaking there is no such thing as art. There are only artists.

This observation he borrowed from his teacher and mentor Julius Schlosser, which also opens his most famous work *The Story of Art* (translated into 30 languages) describes how Gombrich approached the problems of art history. It illustrates the responsibility of the historian to transcend abstract systematising and at the same time generalizing concepts and to study the individual and characteristic aspects of the creation of figurative art and its results. Leonardo, whom Gombrich spent all his life studying, was driven by an epistemic desire, the attempt to grasp reality through painting. The purely aesthetic interpretation of the concept of art would have been meaningless to him.

The Art of Making Pictures Speak

In 1949 in the course of a review in *Kunst und Kritik* 1993, 281 Gombrich had initiated a theoretical debate about depiction (*Das Bild*). He never gave up hope to find a rational explanation of how

shapes and colours can be made to represent other objects and to represent them and attempted an explanation in *Art and Illusion* (German 1967), which since its publication has caused heated argument. Gombrich was convinced of the autonomous character of artistic creation, which was capable of even shaping un(fore)seen reality. The function of the onlooker to him seemed to be a research area of perceptual psychology. Another volume entitled *The Image and The Eye* 1982 (German 1984) conducted further enquiries into the psychological components of the creation and perception of schemata, which form part of cultural convention or tradition. In parallel he was increasingly fascinated by the function of images and visual communication through images. These contributions appeared as *The Uses of Images* 1999 providing a response to Jakob Burckhard, whose intellectual legacy demanded a definition of 'art as tasks' from next generations of art historians. Gombrich continued to be aware of the power of art, created and conceived of by man to have an impact. This approach, to try to understand images and the use of images in the human context, instead of that of abstract mind - whose ever that might be - contrasts with many abstract hermeneutics practised in the history of art, still en vogue. Since the Mid 80s scholars have read and interpreted Gombrich and try to continue his work on 'art as image'. His example of placing the interpretation of images within the context of the results of contemporary philosophy and natural sciences will prove an interesting, but also a laborious task.

Obscure Writing Reflects Obscure Thinking

Some of Gombrich's *bons mots* have, in the course of time, become reference points, such as the above whose clarity of message leaves little room for interpretation. Sir Ernst abhorred nothing more than meta-linguistic technical mumbo jumbo, and a comment on a manuscript he received for careful reading from young scholars in the discipline of art history could not have been more damning: 'I was, unfortunately, unable to understand it.'

His ability to explain even theoretical question in simple and clear terms is unsurpassed. Gombrich's language was of a literary quality not only in German but also in English, the language of the country of his choice. The poetic form determined each and every lecture on art, such as the personal and touching speech given in the Tate Gallery in memory of the painter and childhood friend Marie Louise Motesickzy. The pleasure of the preceding sentence gains in the treasure of the following sentence its full significance, not only in a formal but also in a semantic sense. It is the appropriateness of style that makes Gombrich's argument so persuasive and fitting. Perhaps Gombrich's persistent interest in the problems of style in figurative art is better understood based on his personal experience of handling form.

To Serve Culture rather than Feed Academic Industry (the Vultures)

Gombrich's sceptical attitude towards the methodology of modern cultural science was not ill-founded: traditions like the arts cannot be conveyed by abstract theories alone, but through nurture and the continuation of an ever-present praxis. The art historian thus adopts a new role as defined by his

objects, which require his critical sympathy. By tracing traditions (conventions, common values, on which societies have agreed) and their respective changes and bringing them back to life by reconstructing the historical situation as far as possible, the art historian gives art a voice and influence. His final book, a project to which he devoted many years and which, like his *Meditations upon a Hobby Horse* 1963 (German 1973) and his more recent *Topics of Our Time* (1991), provides a comment on contemporary phenomena in art and science is waiting to be printed by Phaidon Publishers in London: *The Preference for the Primitive*. Again and again we are confronted with Gombrich's unique and typical but in some way strange way of dealing with contemporary culture and its manifestations: by providing a critical analysis based on the criteria provided by *humanitas*.

A more delicate topic is yet to be discussed here: Gombrich's courageously critical attitude towards the nostalgic view of Vienna at the Turn of the Century, which nearly caused a scandal, when he talked about visual arts in Vienna around 1900 on the occasion of the Jewish World Congress in London 1996. In no uncertain terms did he point out that the idea of separating a multifaceted society even in the course of coming to terms with the past easily become dangerously ideological. His work on the history of art did not aim at fame which he gained in the form of numerous awards but in the surfacing of the 'Tagseite der Kunst' (Light of Art) (cf. W. Sauerlander) and thus the responsibility for an Open Society as argued by his famous friend Karl Popper:

It is ourselves in front of every glistening, unbelievably complex crystal that we call art receiving the comforting certainty that the surmounting of conflict and the attainment of a freedom that does not threaten our safety cannot be attained by the striving of the human mind.

Sir Ernst acts as a model in the preservation of a particular form of thinking as represented by Socrates, Erasmus, Hume, Lessing and Kant. Now it is our turn to act and to carry on in the attempt by reformulating the thoughts of our masters to discover how to make images speak - and thus to keep them alive.

Death ends a life, but not a relationship.

The lesson goes on, every Tuesday.

I listen. You'll talk.

(Tuesdays with Morrie. An old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson,
By Mitch Albom, 1997, film 1999.)

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