Constructing audiences, defining art. Public Art and social research

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1. Social theory and conceptual art

In her book "De la valeur de l'Art", Raymonde Moulin remarks that the relations between visual artists and sociologists are constant and changing as well. [1] In the late 'sixties "avant-garde" artists were interested in critical sociology as a weapon against the art market and the museum. Subsequently philosophy again - especially in different variants of poststructuralism - was the privileged partner in the discourses of the artistic field. Sociologists in the 'eighties again could write, that art and sociology do not go together. [2] Raymonde Moulin, however, mentions, that in the 'nineties, certain "avant-garde"-artists did show a critical attitude similar to sociology and were investigating the economical and social conditions of the construction of the value of art.

We want to elaborate on that observation, because these developments make diagnoses from the 'eighties like those of Pierre Bourdieu or Vera Zolberg as obsolete as the idea that the struggle between sociology and visual art is any longer about the question of autonomy vs. reduction. Many critics in the artworld - influenced by postmodernist writers like Fredric Jameson or by authors working in the fields of Cultural, Visual or Postcolonial studies - today argue even in a more reductionist way than sociologists, who in the Weberian tradition of the differentiation theory of modernity stress the autonomoy of the system of art (Niklas Luhmann) or the relative autonomy of the artistic field (Pierre Bourdieu). Of course we are referring to a special sub-field of the system of art - the generation of younger artists with "high visibility" in the sense of Raymonde Moulin. [3] This is the field where the discursive struggle for a position in art history is taking place in an international and partly global space, still dominated by western and especially US-American actors and institutions.

In this field an obsession with the "social" came up in the late 'eighties and the early 'nineties, which took different shape in the USA and Europe. In the USA it was connected with multiculturalism, AIDS activism and with identity politics in general. The marginalised approaches of "Public Art", "Art for Communities", "Art in the Public Interest" and "New Genre Public Art" gained a kind of popularity in the art field as perhaps never seen before. On a theoretical level in the US-context anthropology, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies were influential, whereas sociology and social research were more popular in the European context. In Europe the movement, including travelling US-American artists, was characterised by its institutional analysis and critique of the field of art and by the reflexive exploration of the conditions of producing, distributing and consuming art. New labels for these approaches were soon invented like "contextual art", "post-conceptual art" or "neo-institutional critique". [4]

Contextual art had a peak of visibility in the years 1990 to 1995. The first part of the consecration cycle was finished in 1995 with exhibitions all over Europe, from the 45th Venice Biennale of 1993 via such places as Soonsbeek in the Netherlands and Firminy in France to important art institutions especially in Germany (Cologne based art galleries) and Austria (e. g. Generali-Foundation in Vienna, Neue Galerie, Graz). [5] With the consecration of contextual art, however, the attention in the art world shifted to new tendencies. The interest in sociology and social theory in general waned, when counter-movements like "ambient art" or the Saatchi sponsored and media-hyped "young British artists" emerged. [6] On the other hand sociological theory seemed not political and radical enough for some younger artistic movements who in the second half of

the nineties turned to social and political activism.

It was "contextual art" in the European context especially in the first part of the nineties, that brought sociology and visual art closer together than at any time before, including cooperation in exhibitions, projects and in research. In that period sociologists published and were discussed in art journals, the difference to the past being that not only marxist theory was of interest, but also critical sociology (such as Bourdieus field theory) and traditional academic sociology, especially systems theory as represented by the Luhmann school in the German context. Some indicators of the changes in the relations between art and sociology can be easily listed. In that time sociological notions like "cultural" and "symbolic capital", "artistic field", "autopoiesis", "observer of the second order" etc. became part of the jargon of advanced art criticism. Sociologists were invited to the then popular art world panels and to lectures in art institutions. The status of artists of an older generation, who at an earlier time had shown an interest in sociology was redefined, the most prominent example being German-American artist Hans Haacke, with his polls in the Museum of Modern Art, N. Y. and at documenta 5 in Kassel 1972 a pioneer of a quasi-sociological artistic approach in the early seventies. Haacke - riding on the wave of "contextual art" as one of its main precursors - was nominated as Germanys representative at the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993, where he offered a critical comment on the reunification of Germany. After cooperating in the 'seventies with Howard S. Becker, one of the main representatives of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism in sociology, Hans Haacke published a book-long dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu in 1994. [7] Conceptual artists Clegg & Guttmann edited a whole book with sociological and anthropological texts on film and photography, with contributions for example by Harold Garfinkel or Douglas Harper, who is known for his "visual sociology". [8] American artist Andrea Fraser and Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller, who in spite of their non-Austrian origin were Austrian representatives at the 45th Venice Biennale, appropriated sociological research tools (especially the interview and the questionnaire) exemplifying the notion of the "artist researcher".

The art market crisis of the early 'nineties, that Moulin seems to suggest as an explanation for this change, was perhaps a facilitating condition, but certainly not a sufficient one. The contextual art movement had already started in the late eighties before the market crisis could be felt. Paul DiMaggios theory about the reduction of boundary ritualization in the arts might be applied [9], together with considerations concerning the internal history of the art discourse [10] and cultural and political factors of a more general kind, because the tendencies were not the same in different countries. In France for instance the contextual art movement had only weak visibility, whereas it was an important tendency in the artworlds of Austria and Germany. Instead of enlarging on the topic of explanation we will report and discuss one of those transgressions of the conventional borders between art and sociology typical of the first part of the 'nineties.

2. Continuities between sociology and contextual art

In the title of one of his books Howard S. Becker expresses the interactionist understanding of the social in one single sentence: "Doing things together". [11] In this book one also finds a chapter on Hans Haacke. What Becker and Haacke "did together", however, was not social research but publishing a catalogue. [12] The artistic work of Haacke also inspired Becker to some more general reflections about the relation of art and social science. The position he took is basically that: We customarily distinguish between science and art, seeing the one as the discovery of the truth about the world and the other as the aesthetic expression of someone's unique vision. But many artist's vision are of the truth about the world, and scientists discoveries of truth often contain strong elements of personal vision. The two enterprises are confounded in ways that cannot be disentangled. They can be treated as complementary rather than opposed. There are elements of overlap and continuity between the aims of social science and art. [13] Thus Becker made a plea for breaking down the boundaries between art and sociology. The developments especially in the 'nineties showed that such a continuity between aims and even methods of certain kinds of art and certain kinds of social science is not merely a figment of imagination.

The conceptual artists Clegg & Guttmann were among the first of a group of artists (i. a. Christian Boltanski, Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Fabrice Hybert, Dan Peterman, Thomas Locher, Peter Zimmermann, Renée Green, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Peter Weibel, Martin Krenn, Oliver Ressler) that we collaborated with in the last years at the Department of Cultural Studies and the Kunstraum of the University of Lüneburg. [14]

Based on the approach of Howard S. Becker, the work of the Kunstraum of the University of Lüneburg is grounded on the idea of the continuity of certain forms of social science and certain strategies of art, whether this relates to cognitive or social perspectives. Therefore the Kunstraum favours the cooperation with project-oriented artists who are interested in an interdisciplinary exchange with persons, who typically work in the context of an University - scientists, teachers and students. Furthermore this kind of cooperation is orientated towards the opening of art and science towards life. This means that projects often are located in the public sphere and on the campus where a non-art specialised audience can be met.

3. The Open Public Libraries of Clegg & Guttmann in Hamburg

In the early nineties Clegg & Guttmann were invited by the city of Hamburg for an art project in the public space. Clegg & Guttman base their work on some fundamental concepts, among them the concept of portraiture. In the 'eighties for example they were famous for their photo-portraits of industrialised landscapes as well as for their portraits referring to the construction of images of power. In some cases these portraits of individuals, families, corporate managers etc. were rejected by those portrayed.

For the project in Hamburg Clegg & Guttmann tried to extend the idea of the portrait: "In our own past work we have portrayed individuals and groups of individuals as well as the context in which we live, that is to say, portraits of a landscape. We conceive this project as a portrait of a community." It was this idea of a portrait of a community that they thought especially might interest sociologists and students of cultural studies.

The basic idea was to get such a portrait by installing small libraries filled with books - without guard and librarians - outdoors in three parts of Hamburg, and look at its social use. There should only be displayed a notice on each library encouraging their active use: "You can take a limited number of books for a limited time. Contribution of books is welcome". The only indication that there was some connection with the art world was a plaque which directed people to the two art institutions which were involved, the Kunstverein and the Cultural Administration of Hamburg, including their telephone numbers. In contrast to a conventional library the Open Public Library lacks any formal mechanisms of "surveiller et punir" (Michel Foucault). The Open Public Library is seen as an utopian alternative to the bureaucratic institutions of the disciplinary society, to the "trivial machines" (Heinz von Foerster) that control the behaviour meticulously and more or less automatically react to deviance with sanctions. [15] "How will people react", the artists questioned, "to such an utopian proposition? People are very opinionated about questions like that. But they have no data to rely on. We wanted to find out what the real situation was."

The participation of the audience - its self-organization - was part of the project. At the same time it was expected that the social use of the Open Public Libraries would produce a kind of a self-portrait of the social system involved.

The artists' decision to transform power boxes of the local electricity board in Hamburg into libraries for housing the books was obviously based on the idea of the ready made in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp. With the concentration on the audience and its participation, however, the artists also tried to give a new interpretation of the ready made concept: not only the de-contextualisation of an ordinary object, but the self-constitution of the audience as an art audience should constitute the art object as well. [16]

The inclusion of the audience "as the main goal of art production" [17] also implies an extended definition of site-specificity. "Functional site" is James Meyer's term for social and discursive aspects of sites, that transcend the physical and phenomenological parameters, that were of main interest for early site-specific art in the sixties like minimalism. [18]

The expansion of the notion of "site-specificity", also as a method, and not just as an effect of artistic practices [19] was supported by the provision of social area maps of Hamburg. The maps - collected by the research group at the Lüneburg University - informed the artists' choice of the three locations for the libraries. They were situated along the city's north-south axis according to criteria of social stratification - high status (but not in one of the most privileged upper class areas), middle and low. The fourth location, that played an important part in the project, was the Hamburg Kunstverein. In intervening in the public sphere and in the traditional context of an art institution at the same time, Clegg & Guttmann - in distinction to much of the community orientated "New Genre Public Art" of the nineties [20] - did not construct "art in the public interest" as the democratic other of traditional art.

An installation of Clegg & Guttmann referring to the outdoor libraries was therefore part of the group show "Backstage", an exhibition conceived for the opening of the new building of the Kunstverein. Figure 1 (see appendix) reproduces one of the decisive social area maps of Hamburg as a kind of sociological portrait of its "collective personality" (Durkheim), based on a factorial ecology approach. The darker, the more privileged the area in terms of the conventional demographic indicators. It shows the three areas selected - Volksdorf in the North, Barmbek in the middle and Kirchdorf, a part of Wilhelmsburg in the South. The location of the Kunstverein is depicted in the centre of the town. Thus the installation directly referred to the Open Public Library and could also function as an invitation for the art public to visit the three outdoor libraries.

In the research group we decided to draw a random sample for a survey in the art public of Hamburg including some items referring to Clegg & Guttmann's Open Public Library project. Apart from "Backstage" in the Kunstverein, the public of the "Broken Mirror" show (curated by Kasper König and Hans Ulrich Obrist) at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, an exhibition space for international contemporary art in the immediate neighbourhood of the Kunstverein was included.

In the Kunstverein the room with the Clegg & Guttmann installation in "Backstage" showed large-scale pictures (photos) of the outdoor locations. It also included a reproduction of one of the power boxes, as it could be recognized before the opening of the Open Public Library, with graffiti and political posters. Further questionnaires, diagrams and texts of the field research done were made available to the public on three tables.

Attached to the glass wall in the exhibition room there were about ten social area maps and figures - correspondence analyses as well as more conventional representations - of the first results of the research in the neighbourhoods of the libraries copied onto transparent foils.

Some results of this research based on about 100 interviews in the neighbourhoods of the Open Public Libraries, where the books for the libraries were collected, and on responses given by about 660 visitors of the two art institutions in Hamburg are listed below:

- a) "Avant-garde" art has often been offensive to people outside the artworld, with and without the intention of the artists. This was not the case with the Open Public Library, which exemplifies the "double-coding" and "plurifunctionality" characteristic of a certain strand of postmodern art. The evaluations of the idea of the Open Public Library in general were very positive and even slightly more positive outside the art world than within.
- b) Even in a specialised art public moral evaluations of art are important. A multiple regression analysis was based on a model with 16 explanatory variables. It turned out that in the art public the anticipation of success

and failure of the libraries, defined in the moral terms of expected vandalism or disappearance of the books, alone explained about 19% of the variance of the evaluation of The Open Public Library project as a whole. This leads to a more general point. If moral evaluation has such an importance for the reception of art in a highly specialised public of contemporary art, some aspects of Pierre Bourdieu's famous descriptions of the modernist "aesthetic attitude", which according to his model is characterised by "moral agnosticism", no longer applies to art consumption in a general way. [21]

c) Since the installation in "Backstage" included both aesthetic artefacts and results of scientific research, it also symbolised the cooperation between art and sociology. The hybrid installation provided an opportunity to see how the art public would react to the transgression of the conventional boundaries of art and sociology. One of the questions asked in the survey was: "The Clegg & Guttmann project is based on a collaboration between artists and scientists – social area analysis, surveys of the population etc. Does collaboration of this kind a) enhance the project, b) endanger the project's artistic aspects?"

The majority of the art audience thought that the research enhanced the project and rejected the idea that it might endanger the project's artistic aspects. In this respect nearly no differences between the professional centre and the periphery of the field of art could be observed.

Slightly less than one third of the art public thought that social scientific involvement might potentially be a threat. Those, however, who strongly rejected the participation of sociology were limited to a minority smaller than 10 %. The subgroup professionally involved in art did not reject the cooperation of art and sociology any more strongly, though they did not see the positive aspects of this cooperation as frequently as the visitors barely integrated in the field of art.

d) The Clegg & Guttman installation in Backstage was one of the most highly rated ones in the art public, independently of social position – i. e. the extent of involvement in the field of art (professional centre vs. periphery). Together with results that showed the relative independence of the evaluation of the works of art from general social position (such as economic and educational capital, gender and age) this data supported the notion of the Open Public Library as a multi-coded or "plurifunctional" project, appealing to extremely divergent taste cultures. [22]

Research on the use of the libraries followed. It was based on observations of the "traces" of the social use of the libraries and on open-ended interviews with users and non-users, partly recorded on video and CD-ROM.

At the outdoor libraries observations were performed on a total of 20 occasions over a three month period. In Barmbek-Nord and Kirchdorf, the libraries had started out with an initial stock of approx. 300 books, and the one in Volksdorf, the most privileged area, with around 500. The subsequent developments varied greatly. Clegg & Guttmann had conceived the libraries not as permanent but as temporary institutions. In Kirchdorf, the project was terminated before the planned date, in Barmbek-Nord it ran for the foreseen period, and in Volksdorf it was continued even longer.

Already the simple indicator of the amount of books in the libraries made clear that the social context was by no means irrelevant. The developments in a certain way reproduced the social ranking of the areas. In contrast to the rather pessimistic expectations regarding the social survival of the libraries – much more widespread in the art public than in the neighbourhoods –, no problems occurred at two of the three locations. Quite the contrary: the libraries were so popular that citizens' initiatives developed spontaneously in both locations: the initiatives supported the libraries and sought to have their period of operation continued. Thus the project not only yielded a social portrait in a static manner, but also initiated collective action and even constituted social communities in two neighbourhoods by means of participation – communities not as essential categories or as referential signs, but as actors pursuing collective practices. This aspect of collective action as an inherent part of a provisional and open community might also be interpreted as an example for "participatory

communitarism". [23]

In the underprivileged area the books disappeared quickly and the first damage to the library was noticed at the third stocktaking. The results of the project in the various locations thus ranged from vandalism via moderate to high collective support with plenty of books in the privileged North.

It transpired that the more privileged the urban social space in which an library was installed, the longer the duration of its social survival, the larger the number, not only of books donated, but also of books to be found in the library, the larger the number of people involved in indirect exchange processes – solidarity producing according to structuralist sociology [24] – and the stronger the tendency towards collective participation and support. From a more general sociological point of view, the field study provided a "portrait of the community" (Clegg & Guttmann) which corresponds to theoretical descriptions of central parameters and reproduction mechanisms of hierarchic social systems: with social cohesion being higher at the top and with difficulties in creating solidarity at the bottom, in view of the structural tendencies towards fragmentation, division and self-hatred. [25]

There were various critical reactions in the art discourse towards the project. One argued for instance with early conceptual art against the idea of a portraiture in the sense of an objectified representation of a social system. The project was interpreted as purely immaterial, as art evoking and revealing aspects of the social. However, it was interpreted not as revealing social structures and collective behaviour but rather the "freedom of individual choice" of books. It was argued that process art of that kind does need not be registered or documented and objectified in art objects.

Another kind of critique was articulated from the perspective of the more politically orientated activist art movement that in Germany followed contextual art in the next artistic generation. One of the main arguments was the accusation, that the experiment in self-organisation had been initiated in a paternalist way by artists not living in the town and not genuinely locally involved.

The stress upon the local authenticity of a community with the idea of the artist as a kind of local organic intellectual can easily be linked to the romantic and conservative conception of "integrative communitarism" (Benhabib). Clegg & Guttmann did not treat the different audiences in Hamburg in a paternalistic manner, or try to create or rely on predefined communities. It was rather the attempt at providing a model for the idea of a cultural institution without hierarchies and rules, which enabled the self constitution of different audiences.

On the level of "surface interpretations", which according to Arthur Danto should coincide as closely as possible with the artists' own description of their practices and intentions [26], the first kind of critique was perhaps partly wrong and partly right. It was wrong insofar as the idea of the project was not only to initiate an immaterial social process. Clegg & Guttmann explicitly proposed a permanent installation that would include research results and aesthetic artefacts (such as posters) in the sense of an objectified portrait of Hamburg. This proposal was rejected by the City of Hamburg, perhaps because the portrait did show backstage features of the city that it prefers to hide. The material collected – research results on paper, video and CD-ROM etc. – thus became part of Clegg & Guttmann's collection of rejected portraits. Clegg & Guttamnn did not present it in Hamburg, but in the context of a new project ("The Transformation of Data into Portraiture") at the Kunstraum at Lüneburg University in 1995. This installation was also part of the 46th Venice Biennale of the same year.

The allusion to process art and "praxis" in the Aristotelian sense (as distinguished from "poiesis"), however, was accurate in that sense that one of the main interests of the artists was in a self-reflexive experiment regarding the definition of art. In one of their texts that followed the project in Hamburg they expressed this interest in the following way: "Many people implicitly accept a rather simplistic version of the institutional definition of art. They think that relatively stable art institutions are necessary for the very definition of art.

We wanted to experiment with a much looser framework. The idea was to take a non-art entity like an outdoor library and to connect to an art project without physically removing it from its non-art environment. Our point was, the necessary ingredient is a self conscient art audience and not a stable art institution." [27]

The "institutional definition of art" the artists are referring to originally was developed in philosophy by George Dickie. [28] It is highly disputed in philosophy. In sociology it is more widely accepted because of its affinities with assumptions of the labelling theory developed in symbolic interactionism. Thus Clegg & Guttmann's sentences might be interpreted as an implicit critique of sociology. While stronger versions of the institutional definition of art than the one invoked by the artists seem to exist in sociology [29] this critique should be welcome, because the "institutional definition of art" does not seem to have been sufficiently discussed in the field of sociology of art in the past.

Thanks to Russel West (University of Lüneburg) for helpful suggestions.

- [1] Raymonde Moulin (1995). De la valeur de l'Art. Paris, p. 13.
- [2] Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Questions de sociologie, Paris, p. 207; Vera Zolberg (1989). Constructing a Sociology of the Arts. Cambridge, UK, p. 1.
- [3] Raymonde Moulin (1996). Heirs. The sociological identity of artists. In: Beatrice von Bismarck, Diethelm Stoller & Ulf Wuggenig (eds.). Games, Fights and Collaborations. The Game of Boundary and Transgression. Art and Cultural Studies in the 90ies. Ostfildern, pp. 169-172.
- [4] Cf. e. g. Peter Weibel (1994) (ed.), Kontext Kunst. Köln.
- [5] The approach of contextual art is documented for instance in the Austrian and German art journals "Texte zur Kunst", "springer" and "springerin" since 1990 and in catalogues and books like Weibel (1994), op. cit. and Bismarck et al. (1996), op. cit.
- [6] Cf. Rita Hatton & John Walker (2000). Supercollector. A Critique of Saatchi. London.
- [7] Pierre Bourdieu & Hans Haacke (1994). Libre-Échange. Paris.
- [8] Clegg & Guttmann (1996) (eds.), The Sick Soul. Durch 10. Graz (Kunstverein).
- [9] Cf. Paul DiMaggio (1987). Classification in Art. American Sociological Review, 52, pp. 440-455.
- [10] Cf. Hans Bertens (1995). The Idea of the Postmodern. A History. London.
- [11] Howard Becker (1986). Doing Things Together. Evanston.
- [12] Cf. Hans Haacke (1976). Framing and Being Framed: 7 works, 1970-75. Halifax (with contributions of Jack Burnham, Howard S. Becker and John Walton).
- [13] Cf. Howard S. Becker (1981). Exploring Society Photographically. Evanston, pp. 10.
- [14] The interdisciplinary approach of the Kunstraum of the University of Lüneburg is documented in Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (1996). op. cit. and Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (2001) (eds.). *Branding the Campus*. Düsseldorf.
- [15] Michel Foucault (1975). Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison. Paris 1975; Heinz von Foerster (1993), Wissen und Gewissen. Frankfurt / Main, pp. 245ff.
- [16] Clegg & Guttmann (1995). Avantgarde Practice and Democratic Theory. Vienna (basis Wien), pp. 24.
- [17] Mary Jane Jacob (1996). *Unfashionable audience*, In: Suzanne Lazy (ed.). Mapping the terrain. Bay Press, pp. 50
- [18] James Meyer (2000). The Functional Site, or, The Transformation of Site Specificity. In: Erika Suderburg
- (ed.) Space, Site, Intervention. Situating installation art. University of Minnesota press, pp. 25.
- [19] Miwon Kwon (1997). For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities. In: Christian Phillip Müller (1997) Kunst auf Schritt und Tritt. Hamburg. p.103.
- [20] Suzan Lacey (1995) (ed.). Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art. Seattle.
- [21] Pierre Bourdieu (1979). La Distinction. Paris, p. 49.
- [22] Cf. the data in Ulf Wuggenig, Vera Kockot & Kathrin Symens (1994). The Plurifunctionality of the Open

Public Library. Observations from a Sociological Perspective. In: Achim Könneke (ed.). Clegg & Guttmann. The Open Public Library. Ostfildern b. Stuttgart, pp. 57-114.

[23] Cf. Sheyla Benhabib (1994). Self in Context. New York.

[24] Cf. Peter Ekeh (1975). Social Exchange Theory and the Two Sociological Traditions. Cambridge, Mass., pp. 49ff.

[25] Cf. Johan Galtung (1978). Feudal Systems, Structural Violence and the Structural Theory of Revolution. Johan Galtung. Peace and Social Structure. Copenhagen, pp. 197-267; Collins, Randall (1984), Non-Obvious Sociology. N. Y. pp. 103ff.

[26] Cf. Arthur Danto (1986). The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art. New York, p. 45.

[27] Clegg & Guttmann (1996). The Sick Soul, op. cit. p. 6.

[28] Cf. Robert Yanal (ed.) (1994). Institutions of Art. Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy. Pennsylvania.

[29] Cf. Howard Becker (1982). Art Worlds. London, pp. 145ff; Ulf Wuggenig (1995). Rivalität, Konflikt, Freiheit. Ein Vergleich von Pierre Bourdieus Feldtheorie und Arthur C. Dantos Philosophie der (Geschichte) der Kunst. In: Texte zur Kunst, 5, Nr. 20, pp. 86-107. Appendix

Figure 1: Social stratification of the districts in Hamburg (factorial ecological classification, Type I = lowest rank). Locations of Clegg & Guttmann's "Open Public Library" 1993 (W= Wilhelmsburg-Kirchdorf, B = Barmbek-Nord, V = Volksdorf) and of the Kunstverein in Hamburg.