02 2011

Knowledge versus Creativity?

On Ways of Describing Art and How They Relate to Economic and Social Contexts

Judith Siegmund

translated by Aileen Derieg

Art is increasingly defined today as a way of producing knowledge. How the concept of knowledge is used in this context first needs to be explained and also problematized. It is to be understood as an indicator for transformations that take place partly in art itself, but also point beyond it, sometimes taken up by institutions – whereby the concept of knowledge is probably instrumentalized more than it is used in a merely descriptive way in the institutional context. The motive of this article is therefore to scrutinize the concept of knowledge on the one hand and on the other to position it in relation to contrary descriptions of art, which understand art practices specifically as the opposite of rational action. An outmoded understanding of art is currently evident in the inflationary use of the concept of creativity in economic and general societal contexts.

Projecting "Creativity" Back Onto Non-artistic Work

In his late lectures Michel Foucault discussed variations of neoliberal economic models, Ordoliberalism and "American neoliberalism", the "Chicago School".[1] Here he is ultimately also concerned with the question of how subjects are capable of being conditioned from the inside, so to speak, without being constantly governed from the outside.[2] In both economic theories that Foucault analyzes, the freedom of the market is contrasted with a state framework limiting this freedom; in both theories it is said to be the function of the state (although in different ways) to ensure the competitive ability of the subjects in the free market. From this approach of Foucault's, Ulrich Bröckling derives the thesis that the decisive new form of living for our time is entrepreneurship. Subjects as entrepreneurs of themselves – and that not only in the economic sector, but in all situations of life – are said to be solely responsible for input and output in various areas of their life.[3] According to Bröckling, the individual models him- or herself by continually making decisions about investments in the self according to the economic principle of utility maximization as a life-long entrepreneurial project.[4] Starting from four different types of descriptions of the entrepreneur (as utilizer of profit opportunities, as innovator, as risk carrier, and as coordinator), Bröckling seeks to demonstrate that specifically creativity is the principle, to which self-entrepreneurship is oriented – creativity, he says, is "a governmentality program, a mode of self-management and management by others".[5] At first glance at least, it seems obvious that Bröckling draws on the creativity of artists as a model, to which the entrepreneurial self is to refer: "Entrepreneurship tends much more to find a model in the genius of the artist, in the

strategic skill and determination of the general or in the athlete's striving to break records."[6]

However, this does raise questions: Was and is it not rationality that is supposed to be the compelling characteristic inhering to an entrepreneur? Are not reasonableness, calculation, forethought, being informed and also knowledge the crucial characteristics of entrepreneurs? Why are the allegedly artistic and athletic moments so highlighted? Or in other words: Does entrepreneurship mean primarily innovation and producing something originally new?

Bröckling's analysis, which mainly deals with describing a tension or overload, under which the creative entrepreneurial selves suffer, is contrasted by the description of a different phenomenon: artists (especially visual artists) have recently been claiming for themselves that they produce knowledge. But what is knowledge, what is artistic knowledge, and how does it differ from the purported creativity of entrepreneurship, which is to be found far beyond art in completely non-artistic capitalist working conditions as well? Why do artists want to generate knowledge, and why would or should non-artists be creative?

Whereas Foucault speaks of "a completely *different* rationality" of the economy and economic interests in comparison with the rationality of state governing (in other words, of different rationalities),[7] Bröckling proposes, in reference to the Austrian liberal economist Friedrich August von Hayek, a scenario of market events playing out contingently, which economic agents are confronted with as an opaque event. According to Hayek, economic forethought can be rewarded by the market or may not be; there is "no necessary relationship" between gain, created value and need satisfaction.[8] Hayek's liberal theory is directed against socialist and National-Socialist planned economies; because of its

theoretical trajectory, it emphasizes that progress cannot be planned and speaks of the "presumption of knowledge", meaning more the presumption of science, particularly of economy, of being able to plan and steer everything.[9] In my view, Bröckling can only define creativity as the mental paradigm guiding all actions as being central to entrepreneurial action, because he presupposes Hayek's model of the market, which he understands as the explanation of an irrationality of the market. This is necessarily reacted to with artistic-athletic strategies. "The contingency of market events thus effects no release from the permanent compulsion to self-mobilization, but indeed sets it in motion."[10]

Projecting Creativity onto Art

An interest in the irrational aspects of life and improvised or creative reactions to them have traditionally been attributed to art, or rather artists. If a judgment is to be made about the plausibility of Bröckling's description (which ties into the current inflationary use of the concept of creativity), then the question must first be raised: Why and by whom is artistic agency described as creative agency? It is obviously not the artists themselves who assert that they wish to take leave of their own rationality or that of their works by means of creative agency.

The conjecture takes the direction that, from a historical perspective, it was the "governors of knowledge" that viewed art and thus the agency of the artists as absolutely alien, indeed incomprehensible, and contrasted this with their own scientific forms of agency, intending to thus highlight the rationality of their own strategies. By "governors of knowledge", of course I mean primarily the scientists, including the humanities scholars, concerned with cognition; entrepreneurs, on the other hand, have

been governors of practical knowledge, perhaps for a longer period of time. (However, entrepreneurs were probably not involved in the definition of art to any great degree, unless it was as patrons.) Since this is not the place to pursue this conjecture to the requisite extent, it must suffice to explain provisionally how aesthetic perception was systematically separated from cognition and from the ethical-practical in aesthetic theory following from Kant's definition of the beautiful. Distinguishing an aesthetic approach to the world at a philosophical-systematic level means separating the aesthetic from the attainment of cognition and practical judgments. From this isolation of the aesthetic from cognition and ethics, it is still a long way to the understanding that art is not definable, since it cannot be a matter of gaining cognition nor of morally practical knowledge in its experience structures. However, a mental link between an aesthetics of the beautiful (which Kant also relates to the perception of the beautiful in nature) and a definition of art that is positioned beyond cognition and morality, was indeed made. And so it belongs to the "legacy" of this kind of theory tradition that large portions of aesthetic theory deny art knowledge in the sense of being able to generate cognition and convey ethical-practical knowledge. At the same time, this does not involve characteristics attributed to art among other characteristics, but rather what distinguishes art per se as a form of aesthetic experience, in other words the central moment of its philosophical definition. Philosophical theory (in reference to Kant) isolates art from ethics and cognition, thus also limiting its intrinsic field of theoretical effect at the same time. What is sacrificed with a description like this is the possibility of substantially describing art as having an effect in fields that are specifically non-artistic. For the only possibility that art has of being effective in the realm of the non-artistic, according to aesthetic theory, is its subversive "intervention" through the

strangeness/differentness of its aesthetic experience and perception structures. Subversion through strangeness cannot become concrete, but is always ties to a figure of thought of disruption or dissolution.

The working world, in which the concept of creativity has undergone a boom recently, has developed trust into the subversive. What was previously formulated and appraised as critique now seems to function as the measure for demands on every person in working life.[11] Artistic behavior and its resultant products in the sense of something unintelligible, as something at odds with cognition and practical knowledge, have developed into a figure of orientation in entirely non-artistic contexts, such as the working world. In addition, some notions are borrowed from the romantic figure of the artist genius and the proliferation of his overflowing powers. Nevertheless, genius moves "[...] in a sphere beyond the norm, which is why common sense shifts it into the proximity of madness [...] Creativity, on the other hand, is normal."[12] Creativity is supposed to be normal, because almost everyone is supposed to be able to come up with it as a means of being able to cope better in everyday life. In its application in working life, the false projection of creativity onto art is placed "in the service of problem-solving action".[13] What cannot be planned or understood, what is astonishing, which is first projected onto art and artists, is now expected to serve, in a domesticated form, increased efficiency and economic profit. If we envision these kinds of concepts of the usability of creativity in economic contexts and those of practical life, then it is astonishing how far removed the creativity that is imputed to art is from the creativity demanded in the realm of economical-practical applications. The image of acting in complete freedom sets a standard on the one hand and on

the other, according to Bröckling, confuses people, who remain tied, for their part, to concrete efficiency and use optimization.

There seems to be an affinity between the description of the compulsion to creativity that is thus constrained and the thesis from Axel Honneth about institutional aspirations for the self-realization of individual subjects. According to Axel Honneth, the individualization tendencies of subjects, which are characteristic for western societies, meanwhile turn these against the subjects themselves, as the formerly subjectively initiated aspirations to self-realization have become the foundation for the legitimization of the entire system and are presented to the individuals as demands, so that the individuals suffer under these aspirations.

The question that is decisive in the context of this essay is whether a creativity thus defined or the self-realization achieved through it, is not actually far more absorbed in rational operations. This would mean that there is a kind of artistic or social-critical/alternative habitus, which can be employed with deliberate calculation on behalf of one's own career.

Is Art Production Knowledge Production Today?

While the image of creativity, to which, for example, the working world today is oriented, appears to be outmoded from the perspective of artists, at the same time artists and art institutions claim to be generating knowledge through creative formation. I interpret these kinds of claims as a rejection of the historical, theoretically determined pureness of art, which is presumed to be evident in its systematic detachment from cognition and practical action. Contrary to this outdated attribution on the part of aesthetic theory, many artists do not want to have their actions

regarded as the opposite of rational operations. They seem to understand knowledge as more than propositional cognition capable of being reformulated, also as more than the ability to represent the known in verbal arguments. The question of how broadly the concept of knowledge has to be framed in order to apply to what is meant here, is just as obvious as the question of a criterion for differentiating knowledge in the arts and in the sciences. The concept of knowledge in the arts would have to be largely explicable, in my opinion, from its definition as practical knowledge, or respectively as a special kind of practical-cognitive approach to the world. Knowledge can be understood with Heidegger as a knowledge that "lies existentially in understanding"[14], in other words as knowledge that has always already been given to all of us for orientation in the world – the world that Heidegger conceives of as being a priori opened up in its individual contexts. Heidegger continues: "And only because Dasein, in understanding, is its 'there', can it go astray and fail to recognize itself."[15] "Go astray and fail to recognize itself" are modes of error, one could say false knowledge. So from a theoretical perspective, it must be possible to imagine the possibility of coming to at least partially right knowledge, which for Heidegger has nothing to do with stated truth; this takes place not through improved argumentation, but rather through establishing new manners of action. In this sense, "art as knowledge production" could be understood as creating outstanding concrete modes of approaching the world, its contexts and objects. It is obvious that this concept of knowledge cannot be a universal one. If there are new, or rather more valuable or more important modes of access in the respective social context, then this can only mean that something hidden is uncovered, something unnoticed shifted to the center, but not that something new is created in an avant-gardist sense. In contemporary art production,

the “new” does not designate universal progress, so it is defined differently from in the natural sciences, perhaps more closely affiliated with the humanities, which deal – hermeneutically conceived – with the same subjects starting from different historical contexts.

The classical avant-gardist idea of the new, on the other hand, has much more to do with the dictate of creativity or genius: innovative new solutions are to be created, which did not exist before, as in the non-artistic areas of application as well. For profit-oriented creativity is also supposed to generate something new. It seems that a universal concept of progress applies here, one that is considered outmoded in art itself and among its actors. The idea of progress for art as knowledge production – as is evident from what has been shown – cannot refer to the development of art itself either, which would also be an avant-gardist idea and belongs to the meanwhile past epochs of (classical) Modernism. If art as knowledge production takes places within a respective context, then there can also be no innovative problem-solving thinking in a strong sense or a sense of closure, because social contexts, and hence also what has previously been regarded as valid, are constantly changing. It must therefore be considered, whether it even makes sense at all to insist on the “newness” of artistic production; because what is new in one context, is not new or not even suitable in another. If the concept of the new is perhaps replaced by the terms “improvement” or “alteration”, then it is very important to point out that this kind of knowledge production (unlike applied creativity) has nothing to do with use optimization, at least not with a calculable use that could be calculated beforehand by the one commissioning the art. This is where the interesting gray area with respect to other forms of creative formation seems to lie, for example design. For all areas of creative

formation there is a creative “surplus” that is not only to be identified as use. Usability and surplus are differently weighted in every creative formation. The boundaries between art and design are fluid for this reason, also in terms of this relationship.

In conclusion, another, meanwhile widespread misunderstanding should be addressed, which could be connected with the idea of artistic knowledge production. The expression “art as knowledge production” cannot be meaningfully explained by defining knowledge as an immaterial entity and asserting parallel to this that work is done in art today with communicative, digital materials and no longer with solid material like wood or stone. Nor is the authorship of artist groups, in which undoubtedly much communication takes place, a sufficient indication for insisting on a concept of knowledge for the arts. For communication and knowledge also remain (systematically envisioned) tied to objects. Nothing can be abstracted that is purely immaterial, so this cannot be meant with the concept of the immaterial either. From a theoretical perspective, it thus seems more plausible to me to speak of an interlocking of knowledge and materialities. In this context, the concept of material does not at all mean something like substance or hardware. The world as a pre-interpreted one consists itself of materials, to which meanings already inhere. The abilities to deal with these kinds of meanings can be called knowledge. Communication that has taken place can thus also be used as material like news or information. Human relationships do not “materialize” solely in the form of produced goods that are exchanged, but also in the form of texts, images, sounds, broadcasts, etc.

Even though services and communicative forms of work have increased in our living environment, we still live from the “manual labor of the ‘Second’ and ‘Third’ world”, as is stated in the

theoretical point of departure for the project “Creating Worlds”. [16] If labor had generally become “immaterial labor”, then the question would be raised of what should distinguish artistic knowledge production from other forms of produced knowledge. It is clear that art and artists today do not want to be fixed by definition to the sensuality of their products. For this, however, it is by no means necessary to absolve the concept of knowledge from every form of objectness.[17] That would be overshooting the mark.

By agreeing to define art as a mode of producing knowledge, even if labor in general is not understood as being immaterial, one is obligated to show what is still supposed to be specifically artistic about art production. Art no longer takes place in the sense of an autonomy taken as isolation beyond the realm of formulating cognition or outside modes of action of the good. Nevertheless, it must still have its own modes of approach and action – or indeed its own ways of generating knowledge. If this were not the case, then sooner or later art would do away with itself as a form of action. A certain autonomy must hence be assumed for artistic practice, even if the concept of autonomy is not used in the traditional sense. The art field can only be distinguished from other fields of society through its own specific manner, which cannot be structurally or systematically defined, but rather historically. What it has in common with other contexts, on the other hand, is that artistic agency is also suitable for gaining cognition as well as for purposes of changing and establishing new moral forms of agency. I understand this definition as a challenge to artists to intervene (in a specifically artistic way) in realms outside of art, indeed to artistically appropriate modes of action outside art.

[1] Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2008, trans. Graham Burchell.

[2] I refer to the concluding sentence of Lecture 12: "What should now be studied, therefore, is the way in which the specific problems of life and population have been posed within a technology of government which, although always far from having been liberal, since the end of the eighteenth century has been constantly haunted by the question of liberalism." The Birth of Biopolitics, p. 323-324. See also: Michel Senellart: "Course Context", in Foucault: The Birth of Biopolitics, p. 327ff.

[3] Ulrich Bröckling: Das unternehmerische Selbst, Frankfurt a.M., 2000.

[4] Bröckling: Das unternehmerische Selbst, p. 93.

[5] Ibid., p. 153.

[6] Ibid., p. 124.

[7] Foucault: *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 282.

[8] Cf. Bröckling: *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, p. 100.

[9] Cf. Hayek: "Die Anmaßung von Wissen", in: ibid.: *Die Anmaßung von Wissen*, Tübingen 1996, p. 3-15.

[10] Bröckling: *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, p. 103.

[11] Cf. Axel Honneth (Ed.): *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit. Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus*, Frankfurt a.M./New York 2002.

[12] Bröckling: *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, p. 161.

[13] Cf. Ulrich Bröckling: "Creativity", in: *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, p. 152-179.

[14] Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*, Harper & Row, 1962, §31, p. 183.

[15] Ibid., p. 184.

[16] http://eipcp.net/projects/creatingworlds/files/about, 29.12.2010

[17] On the contrary, there are more and more proposals for a material conditionedness of knowledge production in the sense of the body of the knowledge producer and her/his situatedness ("bodypolitics of knowledge").