

# *The Medium of Art*

*Niklas Luhmann*

*I*

Works of art are not just traces left by human activity in the observable world. Neither do they arise as mere relics of purposeful behaviour like tools, houses, street noise or radioactive radiation. They serve, to take a minimal limiting criterion, the communication of meaning. This requires a medium in or through which communication occurs.

The following considerations attempt to discover something about this medium. The medium of *art* – we consciously ignore the difference between the arts on the assumption that with the help of the question of medium something in common can be observed and described. To do this we must operate at a level of abstraction which permits applications from the sphere of human perception in general ranging to questions of special symbolically generalized media of communication<sup>1</sup> and even to questions of organisation.<sup>2</sup>

Media differ from other materialities in that they allow a very high degree of dissolution. The original concept for matter – as opposed to form – had precisely this meaning: that which is undetermined in itself and thus receptive to and dependent on form. For an ontological metaphysics, which worked with these concepts, matter was accordingly the medium of reality, then also the medium of a reality-continuum of being and consciousness and finally, in so far as the world was considered as

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a *congregatio corporum*, the medium of a rationality-continuum, which for example alone made perception possible.

In this scheme of matter and form a second aspect was early added: the aspect of self-referentiality, by means of which form was revalued as mind (*Geist*) while matter as unreflexive being was relegated to the other side of the distinction. This posed the problem whether all form was to be attributed to mind, i.e. was to be thought of as a construct of the self-referential processes of mind, or whether matter could itself attain form or thingness and how this, if at all, could be recognized.

This problem already entangled Kant in insoluble difficulties and contradictions.<sup>3</sup> For this reason we abstain from conceptual borrowings from this tradition. We speak neither of matter nor mind but confine ourselves to the concepts medium and form. If a common meta-concept is required then one can speak of substratum. What is important, however, is that both substrata differ only relatively, that neither of them excludes self-reference and that their difference varies historically, i.e. through evolution.

In order to stress relativity and evolutionary capacity we shall characterize media by their higher degree of dissolubility together with the receptive capacity for fixations of shape (*Gestalt*).<sup>4</sup> This means: media also consist of elements or of events in the time dimension, but these elements are only loosely coupled. Relative to the requirements of form or thingness they can be regarded as actually independent from each other. Thus money is a medium because payments can occur in any size, because a payment does not depend on the meaning and purpose of another payment, because the medium is extremely forgetful (because, in order to preserve the value of money, it does not need to remember what the payment was made for) and only the ability to pay decides whether a payment is possible. But equally – to take another example – air is only a medium because it is loosely coupled in this way. It can transmit noises because it does not itself condense to noises. We only hear the clock ticking because the air does not tick.

Forms by contrast arise through the concentration of relations of dependence between elements, i.e. through selection from the possibilities offered by a medium. The loose coupling and easy separation of the elements of the medium explains why the medium is not perceived but the form which coordinates the elements of the medium. We do not see the cause of light, the sun, we see things in the light. We do not read

letters but with the help of the alphabet words; and if we want to read the alphabet itself we have to order it alphabetically. Attribution is directed by the coordination of the elements, whereas the medium itself is too diffuse to arouse attention. It holds its elements ready for coordination through form. Heider thus speaks of external determination.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of forms, and to this extent the distinction remains relative, there can be more or less strict couplings, i.e. a dimension which shares both high elasticity and rigidity. Freedom of manoeuvre and elasticity of adaptation are thus preserved. A clock ticks and moves its hands, a ball bounces or rolls in reaction to impacts and conditions of its environment. A household can spend its money on different (but always specific) needs and a theory holds itself sufficiently undetermined and capable of adaptation in the logically coded medium of truth so that it is not destroyed or unrecognizably deformed by every collision with reality. Works of art, especially those which require "performance" or which depend on the effect of illumination and distance, must not fix their medium invariantly. Despite all these relativizations, the difference between medium and form remains decisive *as difference*. There is neither a medium without form nor a form without medium. It is always a question of a difference between mutual independence and mutual dependence of the elements; and since it is a question of a difference this means that a relation of dependence of a higher degree is involved.

Beside these differences in structures of dependence, of interdependences, of loose and strict coupling differences of magnitude also play a role. Media consist of very many elements, in fact so many that every perception and every operative combination must proceed selectively. Forms by contrast reduce magnitude to what they can order. No medium gives only a single form, for then it would be absorbed as medium and disappear. The combinatory possibilities of a medium can never be exhausted; and if restrictions occur it is because products of form mutually disturb each other, for example one noise shuts out another or one enterprise takes the market away from another enterprise; not, however, because air or money run out.

In the relation of medium and form the more rigid form asserts itself because it is less flexible. The uncoupled (or weakly coupled) elements of the medium can offer it no resistance. They are dependent on external determination. On the other hand form can only shape itself if a medium is available and its elements are suitable. Moreover, a form asserts itself at its own risk. It may suit it or not when it appears; and it remains

exposed to disintegration or to evolution, if it can reproduce itself.

This assertion of more rigid forms over less rigid repeats itself within forms. Sand adapts itself to stone and not the other way round. This too indicates the relativity of the relation of medium and form. A bureaucratic organization can be seen as form but also as a medium receptive to the imprint of interests. By accepting this relativity we obtain a point of departure for theoretical questions regarding evolution: for only then can we ask: how did physical evolution lead to form-structures (light, air etc.) which are suited as media for perceptions which overcome distance, so that corresponding organisms can evolve; or for the sphere of socio-cultural evolution: how do language, writing, alphabetized writing and symbolically generalized communication media arise, which hold ready a not otherwise available potential for form-structures which can be used once social conditions make this possible.

## II

In order to produce form art is obviously dependent on primary media, above all those of optics and acoustics. It must be able to presuppose light and air. Beyond that, however, how can we say that art itself is a medium, a medium of communication? And if art is itself a medium what is then form? In other words: what can we say, about the relation of medium and form in the case of art? We have arrived at our theme.

Of course we must start by assuming that there is already a medium to which form can apply. For the case of art we want to test the opposite thesis: that form first constitutes the medium in which it expresses itself. Form is then a "higher medium", a second degree medium which is able to use the difference between medium and form itself in a medial fashion as medium of communication.

Let us exemplify this thesis in the case of music. There are many sounds which we automatically attribute to a source. The clock ticks, the telephone rings. The attribution to objects which cause the noise serves to direct follow up experience and action. This also functions in the case of music. We get annoyed at radio music in the neighbour's garden and grab the telephone in order to stop noise through noise. In addition to this, however, the form of the musical work creates its own "reservoir" of selection, a space of meaningful compositional possibilities, which the specific work uses in a way which is recognizable as

selection and which does not restrict other compositions. (Or does it? Is the medium in short supply? This we shall have to test).

Even if music creates with the help of instruments pleasant sounding tones, in this medium again in the first instance any tone can follow any or be combined with any, unless the form of the musical work decides otherwise. Here too through particular arrangements a medium is again first of all created in which form can imprint itself; here too we have loose and strict couplings. The differentiation of composition and performance leads in addition to a special medium of notation, which was at first used only as a technical help but then was discovered as a medium for graphic forms which optically restrict what is musically permitted.

Music only functions as communication for those who can follow this difference of medium and form and can communicate about it; only for those who can also hear the uncoupled space in which the music plays; only for those who also hear that through its tonality music makes many more sounds possible than could normally be expected and this in relation to disciplining through form. Art establishes, in other words, its own rules of inclusion, which are served by the difference of medium and form as medium. Whereas we normally hear noises as difference to silence and are thereby made attentive, music presupposes this attention and compels it to the observation of a second difference: that between medium and form.

It is clear that we can also apply this analysis to visual art. It too organizes for itself a medium in the natural world in order to separate itself from the world's conspicuous events and play with its own. Through art, new possibilities of the acoustical and optical world are discovered and made available and the result is this: strategies of dissolution permit more possibilities of ordering the world than would otherwise appear.

Finally we can also maintain the same for literary works of art. The primary medium here is the alphabet. The alphabet permits combinations which are linguistically possible. Through the medium of alphabetical writing language can extend its own function as medium, it can be optically stimulated to new combinations of which one would not be aware acoustically in speech.<sup>6</sup> This applies to every kind of written language but can be increased if written language is used in order to create art forms. The same rule repeats itself here: artistic expression imprints itself due to its bound form on the medium. Only through it do

we actually see how weak and arbitrary normal speech and writing are by comparison. Here too we have a relation of looser and stricter coupling which can be used at the same time to open up spaces of possibility in language which language does not of itself offer.

Those possibilities were first discovered on the basis of rhythmic bonding, i.e. in direct continuation of the necessities of oral cultures. The alphabet then makes the reflected difference between prose and poetry possible. This is followed by ever greater freedom in the choice and combination of words until this difference again diminishes – to the point of the elegance which can be won when the normal word is freed of all the vague extensions of everyday language and used again in its exact original sense. The literary work of art leads to the discovery of language and than not by chance to the scientific form of this discovery: to a linguistics which sets itself goals beyond merely controlling grammar.

### III

The distinction between medium and form competes with the distinction between entropy and negentropy and replaces it. The distinction between entropy and negentropy is current in art theory. It is faced, however, by the problem (to which Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures responds in a different way) that it can only encompass final states or alternatively tendencies but not processes of transformation.<sup>7</sup> If we add the distinction between medium and form then the *dimension* which leads from entropy (chaos) to negentropy (order) can be considered as a relation of increase which makes possible more of both order and disorder.<sup>8</sup> A look at the history of art shows that natural media (media of perception) are always presupposed but that art in the process of its development creates additional media of its own in order to make use of differences. This can best be clarified by an example. The theme madonna and child changes in a process which is later described as the transition from the romanesque to the gothic "style". The child moves from the centre, its meaningful place, to the side where it is more clearly visible in contrast to the madonna; it becomes the element of a difference. In order to hold the child in this position the madonna is forced to a bodily balancing movement which accentuates the difference. Her body, her dress, her expression can be presented as autonomous necessity and at the same time as reference to the other, to the child. With

the choice of this form the human body becomes a medium, i.e. the relatively elastic realm of possibilities from which form selects a certain (and no other) possibility. Form creates its own artistic medium by using it for its expressive purposes. Here too the rule applies: the greater rigidity asserts itself over the greater flexibility – with the risk that this assertion fails, is criticized, can be done better or finally is relegated to history and the museum as the peculiarity of a certain style.

Let us take another example from the representations of modern technology or its objects in art. Where the severity of the intervention in nature (Cezanne's railway cutting) is shown and contextualized in nature, then nature itself can become a medium by making apparent that technology is one (but only one) of its possibilities. In contrast to every day primary experience nature is dissolved into elements which can be differently combined and for this reason it is exposed almost (but not completely) without resistance to the intervention of technology and also art. In its own way modern science has discovered nature as medium for the intervention of theories: as a medium which is open to different (but not arbitrary) possibilities of synthesizing. Compared to its successful sister art is set on seeing and doing things differently. It is thus inclined (but not necessarily) to judge technology negatively – in contrast to the presumed positive judgement by science.

Finally since the Nineteenth Century we can observe tendencies to constitute with the aid of art a further medium: society. As we no longer regard society as creation or as nature but as, we might say, its own concoction or, if we doubt the possibilities of planning, the result of its own evolution, here too it is possible to discover a medium. Sociology can occupy itself with it if it is looking for a medium which is suited for the methodically controlled construction of theory and constitutes it as a scientific discipline. But art also displays tendencies to appropriate the high capacity for dissolution and recombination of social data and to imprint its representations with the force of its own rigidity. Of course there can be no unanimous judgement on success or failure; however, the specific difficulties which result from such an artistic programme can be examined more closely than before. It is self-evident that society as a system of its own operations cannot be a medium (since it can only be actualized in a structurally complex, selectively combined form). The question is thus, how can society behind society actually be projected so that society's choice of form can become grimassingly visible; and how can this occur in the specific manner of art so that the selection

convinces as form and does not merely live as social criticism from a momentary boom in "alternatives"?

Our examples suggest that we describe the evolution of art as the increase in the capacity for dissolution and recombination, as the development of ever new media-for-forms. This would naturally require careful investigation and can only be presented here as an hypothesis. If it is the case, then the use of society as a medium would be the logical conclusion of such a development, its *non plus ultra*. Since art as communication is itself the realization of society, it could then use itself as medium and collaborate in a kind of logical short circuit. Activities in this direction in which finally everything is permitted in art are not difficult to observe on a programmatic level. Even here, however, there are effective limits which lie in the inescapable need to use media of perception: words scattered over the paper must still be legible or at least visibly illegible, and modern music may only transgress the limits of hearability to the extent that this transgression is still hearable.

#### IV

What this means is that art must presuppose socially constituted expectations – such as, writing is readable, music hearable i.e. distinguishable from noises, or simply: that what we encounter in concert halls, literary productions, museums etc. is art. Without presupposing such expectations, however they are used or abused, art could not reproduce itself; it would dissolve into everyday life and drain away. But is the guarantee of perceptibility as art sufficient for the continuation of art as a social system, for the self-reproduction of art, for the "autopoiesis" of art?

In order to investigate this question (we do not claim to be able to answer it) we must use the concept of medium in an additionally limited sense, i.e. as *symbolically generalised medium of communication*. We arrive at this concept when we recall that the difference between medium and form functions in turn as a medium, i.e. as a medium which opens up possibilities of the combination of media and forms for forming through communication.

A social medium only comes about when participants can observe (or assume that they can observe) what other participants can observe. It is thus always a question of second order observation, of observations of observations, and this allows the possibility of detachment from the direct, concrete evidence of observation. When we observe a work of

art we can assume that the artist intended something when he made the work; and we can see that others assume that the artist could have intended what they assumed; and that in turn can lead the artist to talk about his art.

Communication about works of art is of course only possible if there are works of art. It would be false, however, to conclude from this a first this/then that relation, for the opposite also applies: works of art only exist if and insofar possibilities of communication about them can be reckoned with. Once it is set in motion we have an autopoietic system which feeds on the production of works of art. Talking and writing are not the only communication, there is also shared perception, if it is actualized in relation to an object. Here it is not simply the normal presupposition of daily life, that others also see what one sees oneself, but it is a meaning imparting looking (or hearing) which communicates at least to others that the object deserves attention.

The constructive freedoms of such a social system lie in the fact that only communication must function and that everything else is placed in the second rank of a necessary condition. We can express this in reflexion through themes like "beautiful appearance" or "amazement". There is one condition which is decisive and has been termed "symbolic generalisation" since Parsons in a sense which goes far beyond art.<sup>9</sup> The concept of generalization characterizes the capacity of the medium to overcome the differentness of things, i.e. its receptive capacity for different things; and the concept of the symbolic characterizes the condition of unification necessary if action (for Parsons) or in our context communication is to occur at all. Here too we have, if in a somewhat different theoretical language,<sup>10</sup> a relation of dissolution and recombination, of openness to many possibilities and specific selection, of readiness for and dependence on the imprint of form.

In order to communicate about art we must presuppose the difference of primary medium and form and be able to make this difference into a medium. We must be able to recognize and use as medium the freedoms which the artist creates for himself for the choice of form. Communication about art is only possible on this basis, for it must be able to presuppose that there is information to be gained and that means: that it would also be possible otherwise. Communication about art which is conditioned and limited in this way can occupy itself first of all with the medium which forms use in order to bring about distinctions. Our examples: the possibilities of movement of the human body

which are fixed by form as position or movement (dance). A radically changed problem arises when art wants to use society, of which it is part, as medium. Communication about art is now placed in the situation of a medium with which art itself plays. Society as such but also communication about art must now be attributed with a structure in which events scarcely cohere or not at all, occur *en masse* and almost by chance and are exposed to the intervention of more rigid complexes. This can be done easily (too easily) if a negative projection of society is made, since negativity possesses precisely this quality of non-connexion. Society may then be presented as figures without contact, as a bizarre ensemble, as arbitrary and fleeting constellations, and the form only serves to present this conception of its medium (which of course presupposes that it can do this and thus succeeds as form). The consequence, however, must be that art, insofar as it is realized as communication, must accommodate itself to this conception; then it will be able to mock its observers, exhibitors and purchasers and finally itself.

Dissolution can become an end in itself, the medium no longer serves the form but the form the medium until we arrive at the paradox that form only wants to maintain that it is its own medium, that it is not interested in itself. What happens, however, when society no longer accepts this and neither produces nor uses for self-description that entropic state in which it is nothing but a medium? We can take note that art offers such a projection; but we must also recognize that this offer contradicts our own projection, since this offer presupposes at least that communication about it is possible in a determinable way. Art taken to such an extreme behaves for the observer paradoxically and it thereby takes the narrow path on which the attempt to dissolve paradoxes can become fruitful.

#### V

Since communication about art (= art as social system) is dependent on given objects it does not produce abstract conceptions about the ensemble of its possibilities. Although it is placed within the space of contingency created by art, communication does not need a concept of the set of possibilities, i.e. a concept of untranscendable limits. It must be able to distinguish between art and non-art and it can do this in the same way that houses and gardens can be distinguished without having to employ as criterion a conception of the totality of possibilities

of being a house or garden. It is only necessary to determine (and only to the extent that communication leads to consent or dissent) whether an object makes communication about art possible or not. To do this requires that the "reservoir" of selection is also seen and communicated. However, it is neither necessary nor possible to determine this "reservoir" as sum or set. It is sufficient that it functions as medium. The abstractions of these considerations shows that we have already reached the level of third order observation and description, i.e. that we are engaged in the formulation of a theory whose object is the observation of observations. As this theory does not enter art as a work of art it must presuppose the autopoiesis of art. It can give no "thought impulses", let alone recipes for the production of works of art.<sup>11</sup> As far as art is concerned it remains sterile. It can only become fruitful in the context of the autopoiesis of theoretical activity.

It is only on this level that we can meaningfully pose the question whether art can postulate its media at will or whether the possibilities of creating media are limited. It is clear that media of perception cannot be created at will, that visibility and hearability set barriers. The question becomes interesting in relation to society. Insofar as it refers to society art likes to permit itself a partly negative, partly utopian treatment of this material; and precisely when it depicts social situations "realistically", the pure duplication of reality translates the object into the mode of the made, i.e. the mode in which it could be made other. Other – but how?

Theoretically we can of course answer that society can be understood as a gigantic realm of surplus possibilities of communication and action, from which any one – and if any one, why not art as well – can select what works. If this selection can be attributed to agents, e.g. the bourgeoisie, the ruling strata or the combination of party ideology and bureaucracy the gesture of rejection is relatively easy. Art depends, however, on what it rejects and makes itself dependent on tolerance. Despite this it is demonstratively bought or used as object of speculation or it slips in some way through the gaps in the censorship of the regime.<sup>12</sup> But how and where does it find its society? And is it sufficient for it to see society as a medium without couplings, as a medium for its own form?

If, however, society is neither nature nor the work of agents; if what works is what it itself makes possible; if society is an autopoietic system

of self-selection, which also gives a place to those who believe that they can influence what occurs; if it is accordingly not meaningful to focus on rejection because this only blocks access to the medium; and if art can only operate in society and can only create in society a fictional reality, which can be turned against society: what is then medium and what is then form?

There is neither a prognostic nor recipe-like answer to this question. The answer which follows from the previous considerations suggests, however, that only form can determine what is a medium for it and that dissolution cannot go far beyond what is capable of regaining shape. In other words, art must make use of form if it wants to show how far it is possible to dissolve and recombine something, just as it can only gain form if it presupposes an uncoupled medium. The difference between medium and form can be taken to improbable lengths – but only within the limits in which the communication of form still succeeds.

Translated by David Roberts

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Fritz Heider, "Thing and Medium", *Psychological Issues* 1, 3 (1959), pp.1–34.
2. Cf. Karl Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Reading, Mass., 1979).
3. Cf. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* "Refutation of Idealism" (B. 274 ff.), added later, with the "transcendental aesthetics" (B.33 ff.).
4. In contrast to Herbert Spencer's theory of evolution, what is involved here is not a sequence, a movement from diffusion (dissolution into unconnected parts) to concentration and integration but an evolutionary increase in the interdependence of *both* possibilities: dissolution and recombination.
5. Heider, *op. cit.*
6. It is now generally recognized that the alphabet influenced language itself to a considerable degree, e.g. through new words invented for writing and through the need for clearer syntactical structures. Cf. Eric A. Havelock, *The Literature Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, 1982).
7. As Rudolf Arnheim also observes in *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder* (Berkeley, 1971), pp.26 ff.
8. Cybernetics has correspondingly developed from an order from noise principle to an order from order and disorder principle. Cf. Heinz von Foerster, *Observing Systems* (Seaside, Cal., 1981), pp.2–22.

9. For Parsons' most recent formulations see "Social Structure and the Symbolic Media of Exchange" in Talcott Parsons, *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory* (New York, 1977), pp.204-228, and "A Paradigm of the Human Condition" in *Actions Theory and the Human Condition* (New York, 1978), pp.352-433 (pp.392 ff.).
10. I am not aware if Parsons knew the concept of medium used by Heider. No efforts at conceptional approximation are apparent in Parsons' writings. We must therefore undertake our own attempt.
11. As was the expectation in the older cybernetic aesthetic theory. Cf. here Herbert W. Franke, *Phänomen Kunst: Die naturwissenschaftlichen Grundlagen der sthetik* (Munich, 1967), p.110.
12. Such an approach can easily be applied to simple societies. See Elisabeth Colson, "The Redundancy of Actors" in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Scale and Social Organisation* (Oslo, 1978), pp.150-162.
13. In the postscript to a volume of poems by Holger Teschke, *Bäume am Hochufer* (Berlin, 1985), written by a representative of GDR Society, we read: "We made all this effort: totally different property relations, a brand new social order, a completely new state. He (the author) ... doesn't want the world as it is, doesn't want it as we do but better, rummages in the past in search of a future, doesn't want to believe anything and thinks he knows everything. What have we produced here?" And yet Teschke's work is approved and published.

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