



Notes on Artistic Practice

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Abstract

The term ‘practice’ is used in a loose way in art theory. Using the example of the German artist Fritz Rahmann the text elaborates crucial aspects of artistic practice, taken as ‘bundles’ of different actions: clusters of similar actions, sequencing the clusters, exploring the dialogue with materials, relating them to mental models, ascribing them to social groups. In artistic practice the artwork loses its autonomy and the artist’s role as author is relativized. The approach opens a perspective on an art world that lost its overarching framework in globalization.

Keywords: Author, Artwork, Artistic practice, Community of practice, Material, Model, Discourse

“You can turn any issue into rhetoric, but for questions that relate to practice, practice is better, actually.”

-Fritz Rahmann (Künstlerhaus Bethanien (ed.) 1988:11)

For years now, the word ‘practice’ has been used in critical discourse to connote the activities of artists in a very general way: Okwui Enwezor (2009: 37) for example classifies immersive installation, cinematic projection and tableau-style photography as ‘practices’, but it remains unclear how they function as such practices in the “multiple cultural field” he outlines. Hal Foster (2015: 1) speaks of the abject, the archival, the mimetic as “strategies” in art, oriented by practices. But when it comes to the works of Cindy Sherman, Thomas Hirschhorn or Tacita Dean, the connection between these strategies and practices is left without comment. Nicolas Bourriaud focusing on ‘post-production’ uses the term ‘contemporary artistic practice’ (2002: 8). But when he writes about Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe or Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, the reader cannot find any reference to the term. These authors (and many others) use the term ‘artistic practice’ to refer to what artists do in a very general manner. ‘Practice’ however, is not a mere label; it suggests a different approach to art; one that replaces a discourse revolving around the product with a discourse on production. A superficial use of the term ‘practice’ covers up paradigmatic changes in the field of art. This is what my paper sets out to do: to look more closely at what ‘practice’ means in relation to author, work, audience, so that the term connects to a distinct esthetics.

With this in mind, I will follow an artist’s work over several decades, taking his works as symptoms of a specific, enduring way of doing. That it is the work of the German artist Fritz Rahmann in this case follows from opportunity: It is a nod to a deceased and by now nearly forgotten friend. And an invitation to analyze other more prominent artists’ work in a similar way to enable structured comparison.¹

Practice and practices

Rahmann moved to Berlin in 1979 and immediately participated in a project called ‚Lützowstraße Situation’: a sequence of exhibitions, where each artist is obliged to react to the interventions of his predecessor, aiming at a continual change of the overall situation instead of singular shows (Kummer et al., 1986, 145). Rahmann’s ‘situation 13’ is one of the last installments in the sequence and is therefore faced with empty coffers as well as many empty bottles. He arranges the bottles, the empty color tins, and the shabby cardboard boxes: a square formed from relics neighbored by a rectangular pool he improvised from leftover heaters, wooden planks, and plastic foil. (Tubes connected this pool to another smaller room on another floor, filled with water).

¹ Rahmann was born in 1936 and studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf between 1956 and 1961; between 1960 and 1962 also architecture at FH Aachen. In 1962 Rahmann moved to Friesland/Holland, supporting himself by freelance work as a designer. In 1979 Rahmann changed to Berlin, where he founded ‘Büro Berlin’ together with Raimund Kummer and Hermann Pitz a year later.



Fritz Rahmann: Situation 13, "Lützowstraße Situation", 1979

in 1979, he was forced to leave behind most of his possessions. To help him decide, he would lay out everything under consideration:

For this purpose, all objects were placed on the available floor in more or less logical proximity to each other, in such a way that I could just barely walk between them. It seems like I was so impressed by the procedure that I was eager to repeat it a number of times.

At "Situation 13", he transposed this apparently highly-charged everyday practice onto the field of art and introduced – still unconsciously and improvised – a new type of practice, which would soon become dominant and replace the earlier work, using water. 'Lützowstraße Situation' marks a moment of transgression where one artistic strategy is changing into another.

The layered situation not only indicates two diverse habits of the same artist, it can also raise doubt about any talk of *an* 'artistic practice'. We can observe many and different 'practices' here, some of which seem not even 'artistic', like painting walls or making order. Sociologists differentiate between peoples' singular actions and institutionalized practices, which function as a kind of matrix for their specific actualizations. To arrange private possessions is an action that follows the heuristics of a practice which we might call 'Creating order to decide'. Other actions – like displaying photos on a table – could sustain the same practice. Every artistic act therefore should be treated as an instantiation of a specific practice. This implies that artistic doings are not 'individual', spontaneous acts, but are related to fields of institutionalized actions: practices. These habitualized practices have to be shared by other members of the social group. The use of 'practice' in critical discourse therefore implies an attack on the autonomy of the artist and requires embedding his/her activities in a larger context of connected activities. A practice is never isolated, but connected to other practices in a bundle (Schatzky, 1996). Sociology differentiates different social fields with their respective practices. It became difficult however to delineate a specific field for visual art. Over the course of history, artists referred to everyday practices more and more and left specialized artistic practices like painting, casting, sculpting (Roberts, 2009). Following our artist's development, we also notice that technical forms of production like photography or video, also used by people outside the art field, became more dominant in art, contributing to the 'blurring of art and life' (Kaprow, 1993).

Following Pickering (1995: 102, Fn28) I will make a difference between 'practice' in a generic sense and 'practices' in a plural form to distinguish, for instance, the two complex strategies that meet at this specific moment in 1979. I will mark the generic practice with a capital P while I adopt the conventional spelling for the many practices that make up such a generic Practice. The work of an artist seems to be structured by some of these Practices. Observing Rahmann, a new Practice starts when he organizes the remnants left by his fellow artists. (Its beginnings might even lie earlier and 'outside' art when he prepares his move from Holland to Berlin.) This Practice is defined by a set of specific practices like 'discover objects in situ', 'evaluate esthetic value', 'highlight this value by creating an order', 'documenting the ephemeral installation'. The Practice of assembling found objects develops in rivalry with the preceding Practice, influenced by other contexts (the sea, the flat coast of Holland), answering different artistic interests. It is easy to see that a specific set of practices is characteristic of a respective artistic Practice.² Talking about a 'crossroad' of Practices in Rahmann's intervention at "Situation 13" implies that the artist gradually moved from one set of Practices to another. A Practice whose strategies were defined by an interest in gravitation and equilibrium rivals one centred around found objects and their structured rearrangement.

People who followed Rahmann's work in the years before 'Lützowstraße Situation' would locate this intervention at a crossroad of old strategies and new ones. Before he moved, Rahmann spent 16 years in North Frisia on the Holland coast. Inspired by the horizon of the sea, he developed works dealing with gravity, equilibrium and the horizontal line. Paradigmatic are '7 Elemente' (1974/75) – seven squares with diminishing size, connected by tubes; each square made up of metal gutters filled with water. Faced with the task at "Situation 13", he relied on these experiences by constructing the improvised basin and coloring the walls. But the need to deal with the remnants of the previous shows made him invent a strategy which would not fit these earlier interests: arranging the found objects into a 'picture'. Rahmann (2003: 24) remembers that when he moved

Artistic practices are not voluntary and chosen ad hoc. The artwork appears as a testing ground for actions which are gradually habitualized through probation and turn into practices. They seem routine. But these artistic routines are less stable than those in other social fields. Actions, like Rahmann's passionate arranging of things, are repeated at different moments, in different artistic projects by the same person or by different artists. They must confirm their suitability or they fail and are changed or disappear. In the field of art therefore a de-habitualization of practices has to be allowed for. If practice relates to convention and the social, the artistic practice also implies the deregulation of practice itself.³

One Practice replaces the next so that we can assume it has a kind of life cycle. It develops out of earlier Practices; it moves into focus and elaborates. Then it gets older, is exhausted and finally disappears and is replaced by a different Practice with another life cycle. As Rahmann's project at 'Lützowstraße Situation' demonstrates, there is no clear border between different Practices. Only when the artist becomes aware of the specific potential of a Practice does this Practice occupy most of his/her attention and move to 'center-stage'.

The discourse of the studio: How Practice is articulated

The 'Neuinszenierung des U-Bahnhofs Gleisdreieck' was the next project after 'Situation 13' in cooperation with Raimund Kummer and Hermann Pitz. Every artist installed a one-day intervention at the old underground station. While Kummer made three male models in red overalls parade through the station, Pitz presented the cabin of a toy-funicular equipped with a toy photographer seemingly observing the passers-by. Rahmann worked with water again, following his proven Practice No. 2 from Friesland, at the time apparently not realizing the possibilities of the new Practice No. 3 of arranging objects. It was April, the winter over, but still cold and rainy. He again used wooden planks and plastic foil to construct the pools of water. Water puddles on the platforms were his inspiration. The basins were connected by tubes: One on the platform where trains arrived, the other in the lower hall. Rahmann made his installation look like an official construction-site.

A look at the archive sheds additional light on Rahmann's Practices: Although the artist spontaneously relied on his routines, the development of the installation took months of research, detailed observations and studies. Concerning 'Gleisdreieck' we find many notes, photographs, drafts and drawings in the archive that were the result of an insistent observation *in situ*. In a foundational essay, Reckwitz calls attention to the fact that practices consist of several, interconnected elements and he enumerates: "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (2002: 249). Rahmann apparently visited the station many times to study its architecture and observe the movements of its users. The bodily aspect of practices here not only concerns drawing or photographing, but also engaging in a social situation and observing. Rahmann would also use this station as a passenger. The documents in the archive tell of the things Rahmann used in this practice as an artist: Paper, pencil, photographic film, camera. In producing the installation, he resorted to a certain repertoire: planks, plastic foil,



Neuinszenierung des U-Bahnhof Gleisdreieck, 1980



Study for 'Gleisdreieck'

²Compare Pickering (1995:4): "a distinct set of practices is characteristic of a given science or laboratory".

³We are observing at least six types of Practices in Rahmann. The earliest one connects to his training as a painter at the Academy: traditional experiments around drawing, printing and painting, devoted also to leftovers of houses and interiors. This first Practice has similarities to the third one, we already considered. It also reappears in other Practices (Pennowitz, FRV No.2). and qualifies as a connecting link, indicating a more general conceptual intention of the artist. Rahmann enters a second Practice when he moves to the Netherlands in 1962. He experiments with equilibrium and gravitation. The third Practice is marked by his arrival in Berlin 1979, the topic of this paragraph of my text, using found objects. In 1984 he turns to alternative techniques of visualization: camera obscura – a fourth Practice. The fifth one replaces this old type of image production by a more recent technological invention: computer tomography, Photoshop, Pagemaker. This Practice is interrupted by projects in public space, which – as they demand completely different strategies – could to be qualified as a Practice in its own right, No.6.

tubes, water. He did not invent his installation at will, but copied the design of construction sites, using background knowledge about the outer appearance of such sites. Construction drawings lay out the form of the installation and define the position of the basins. The practice also shows references to contemporary issues of exhibiting (in-situ work) and documentation (the ephemeral, performative work has to be translated to become part of the artistic discourse). Even if the work, in terms of his material realization, lasted only 20,5 hours (from 4.15 in the morning until 0.47 in the night of the 3rd of April), the design process took weeks.

It is not only the resulting artwork that guides the course of Practice. As in ‘Zettelwirtschaft’ (Rheinberger, 2006-B: 352), the idea gradually is articulated through experimental labor, continuously translated from notes to material testing to documentation and notes again; by changing from one medium to the other. The ‘result’, the artwork, does not follow from observations, protocol, experiments in a logical way. Practices are productive in what we might call the ‘discourse of the studio’ in analogy to Rheinberger.⁴ In this discourse, Rheinberger highlights the materiality of articulation, which punctuates the conceptual development. For him thinking has “a graphematic materiality” (Rheinberger, Iterationen, near fn 26). Materialization alternates with the conceptual in an iterative way. Only in this alternation does the possibility of deviance develop. Practice redefines intention. An artist does not embody preconceived intentions in the work, but the concept develops through Practice. “For the artist as well as for the scientist, insofar as he is “in doing”, it is true that he cannot know what he is doing.”(Rheinberger Iterationen, near fn 27)

Pickering (1995: 21) locates a principle ‘mangle’ of practice in the interplay between material and imagination, which he suggestively names the ‘dance of agency’:

“The dance of agency... takes the form of a dialectic of resistance and accommodation, where resistance denotes failure to achieve an intended capture of agency in practice, and accommodation an active human strategy of response to resistance, which can include revisions to goals and intentions as well as to the material form of the machine in question and to the human frame of gestures and social relations that surround it” (Pickering, 1995: 22).

The dance of agency could be classified as a kind of ‘engine’ of artistic Practices. It contributes to its transformation in an essential way. The specific character of a process is articulated in the back and forth between imagination and observed outcome.

The long process of the work’s preparation and its later documentation raises the question of ‘the artwork’. By tradition it is treated as an ordered, complete, even ‘organic’ whole, whose reason to exist is the intentional mind of its author, and whose end is to represent a transcending meaning. It seems to be the only achievement of the process, its endpoint. All other artistic activities are directed towards this aim. Studies, drawings, observations are subordinated to the final piece. Looking at today’s works, for which Rahmann’s installation serves as an example, the processes ‘around’ the final work gained much more importance.

Rahmann’s numerous drawings, the photographs taken in situ, the observations of people’s behavior, the many written notes, appear as an essential activity in itself, relativizing the role of the final work. The transience of the material output – 20,5 hours – underlines the important role of the process and of Practice compared to the product. One could get the impression that the product is even a pretense for the Practice as such – a ‘practiophore’ as one might say varying a term of Krzysztof Pomian (1988). The reason for that might be that a Practice includes several works, is developed or tested by many ‘outputs’.

Art history always tried to generalize upon the singular artworks and establish principles reigning amongst them. Riegl’s ‘will-to-form’ defined types of formal organization to understand late Roman art, for example. Wölfflin, by comparing fifteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian art, developed five oppositions in the realization of form and characterized the morphology of two periods in this way. Henri Focillon introduced biological metaphors of growth and decay. George Kubler criticized his teacher Focillon and his forerunners, because they all referred to the formalist notion of ‘style’. Influenced by structuralism, Kubler described artistic practice as “a work in a series, extending beyond him (the artist, SW)” (1962:5). Differences between artists for Kubler are not so much those of talent, but concern the entrance and position in the sequence. In this sense he can talk of the artwork as an arrested happening, “a graph made visible like an astronomical body”. (Kubler, 1962: 17)

Although critical of biological metaphors, the one of ‘style’ recognized the recurrence of certain kinds of events, instead of treating each event as an unprecedented, never-to-be repeated *unicum*. (Kubler, 1962: 7). Kubler introduces a “history of things” to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of visual forms. The term was meant to unite all materials worked on by human hands “under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence”. A “shape in time” emerges as a visible portrait of the collective identity. (Kubler, 1962: 8) Kubler’s approach still offers inspiration for a discussion of artistic practice.

⁴Rheinberger o.c. calls it the ,discourse of the lab’.

Apart from a development in art history towards a pragmatic understanding of artistic production, we can observe a ‘practice turn’ in the arts themselves, as if for the understanding of practice, practice would be the best tool. Robert Morris’ observation that “the object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic” (Morris, 1993: 15) was a first significant move, influenced by phenomenology. Robert Smithson’s ‘non-sites’ introduced a significant gap into the ‘completeness’ of the traditional work, when he separated the manifest from the absent, a sculptural ‘site’ from the imaginary ‘non-site’, defining the work more as a relation than a unit (Reynolds, 2003). Conceptual art relies on the play between manifest and absent, supplementing the merely visual with the verbal. It gives ‘documentation’ a central role in experiencing the work. Documentation, as the index of the lost ‘original’, starts the ‘series’ into which ‘works’ are embedded and in this way organizes the experience of works as a practice. Ephemeral performances proved to be an ideal pretext to document (as Auslaender, 1999: 43ff claims).

Similarities between Practices: the ‘aesthetic thing’

In 1980 we find Fritz Rahmann and his friend Michael Glasmeier sitting around an old oven, looking at the remnants of ‘Pagel & Wunderlich’ at Boeckhstrasse. The year is coming to an end, it’s gotten cold and they burn some of the wooden things to heat the space. They wonder, as Rahmann later related, about these relics, but their discourse does not quite reach these old things:

Meanwhile the, at least upon closer inspection, whimsical pieces claimed... to not really be affected by the statements that had been subsumed too lightly, methodically speaking, and demanded individual treatment. (Rahmann, 20: 1)

Apparently the abstract, subsuming terms of language prove to be inadequate to the peculiarities of this or that old honorable object in front of them. The two artists seem to share an insight with the philosopher Esposito (2015: 78): “To represent things in their essence, language abolishes them in their existence.”

Rahmann was a close reader of Martin Heidegger and he shared his feeling that violence was done to ‘the thing’ through thought. Maybe, asked Heidegger (1950: 9), that feeling or mood might be more hearing (“vernehmend”) than ratio. And he recommended “that we grant the thing an open field, as it were, so that it might show its thingness with immediacy”. (Heidegger 1950: 9) Everything that could interfere between the thing and us therefore had to be eliminated, so that an undisguised presence (“unverstelltes Anwesen”) could happen. Heidegger took the detour via the essence of the artwork to approach the thing. Rahmann tries to manipulate the objects of his interest so that they reveal their true being beyond verbal explanation. How could things talk for themselves? Rahmann remembers the painful process of selection when he moved from Holland to Berlin, and how he turned this private experience into artistic practice when he organized the remnants at Lützowstraße. Instead of embedding things into a discourse, he developed a discursive practice by arranging objects. “Individual objects ... took the places of concepts” (Rahmann 1984, s.p.). Similar to forming a sentence from words ‘Enzyklopädie’ (1980) is constructed by arranging the found objects side by side. Maybe it was Glasmeier, the poet, who added the word ‘und’ written on the ground, sometimes on a wall.



Enzyklopädie, 1980



Enzyklopädie, 1980

The question that came up in front of the remnants at Boeckstraße is not one borne out by the moment alone. When Rahmann studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, he would take old construction planks as his motif. The way he organized his possessions leaving his Dutch home testifies to a sensitive attention to things, opposing a consumerist habit. But it is with ‘Enzyklopädie’ that he becomes conscious of this specific interest. For a number of years, his work will follow the same pattern: trying to make things ‘talk’ on their own by contextualizing them. But this not

only defines his third Practice. Although he moves on to a next one, with new techniques, the interest stays the same. We detect a ‘Leitmotif’ here, overarching and connecting different Practices.

For an exhibition at Galerie Giannozzo in the summer of 1981, Rahmann and the photographer Florian Kleinefenn closed the display window of the gallery. They stabbed a pin hole in a darkened side window of the entrance door so that the street in front would be projected in a distorted way into the exhibition space. The gallery was turned into a camera of sorts. This is the moment when Practice No. 4 starts to articulate, even while Practice No. 3 is still dominant. Comparing this camera obscura with ‘Enzyklopädie’ the year before, we detect similarities and differences. Both Practices share the same interest in things unmediated by language. But while the earlier practice dealt with material things, the newer one turned to *images* of these things.⁵ This dematerialization allows for the replacement of a static order by a timely flux. ‘Enzyklopädie’ invited the beholder to create an imaginative sequence from the material structure observed. But there was no need to follow the invitation. The camera obscura achieved both at the same instance: Looking at the work equals the imaginative flux in which one ‘object’ is answering the next. If, as Rahmann said, an image is wonderful as long as it is not explained (FRV 44/II,1), then the moving image, which implies a continuous montage, comes very close to it. (And to Heidegger’s philosophical understanding of the thing.) This is the reason why Rahmann refused to produce prints of the volatile images inside the camera-gallery, as the photographer Kleinefenn proposed. The printed and static pictures would equal the objects of Practice No. 3 and once again invite verbal commentary.

At Galerie Giannozzo, the object became virtual, but the scenery was static: Even though people and cars in front of the gallery would move, the perspective would stay the same. In 1983, the nationwide exhibition ‘Kunstlandschaft Bundesrepublik’ was the first occasion that allowed moving the camera obscura itself together with the viewer and deliver an image entirely in flux. Rahmann and Kleinefenn could use train compartments so that the train ride from Kiel to Munich produced an eleven-hour flow of images. This was what Rahmann had been looking for: a correspondence between outer and inner images, a filmic flux where the sequence would replace the verbal ‘explication’ so that things could speak ‘for themselves’. The moving camera obscura, in 1983, became the primary Practice repressing all others.



Zugfahrten, 1983/84



Kamerafahrten (Auto), 1985

Two years later, the artist replaced the train with a car (“Kamerafahrten (Auto)”, 1985, FRV 40). The new tool allowed the driver/viewer to directly interfere in the image flow. However, the car – with all its windows closed – had to be piloted following the images projected inside the car. Because they were upside down assistance from the outside was needed, which resulted in a slow and complicated process. But now the Practice finally met the artistic concept. Therefore, it is repeatedly applied in the following years and has its most prominent appearance at documenta 8 in 1987 (“Watteau”). But by then, this Practice is exhausted. Rahmann had started to move on. The curators of the international exhibition were late when they asked the artist to contribute his car-camera and Rahmann used the opportunity to re-stage the concept in an ambitious and costly manner.⁶

I want to return, however, to the continuity between Practice No. 3 (handling objects) and Practice No.4 (camera obscura). Two types of operation are linked by the same concept, ‘representing the essence of things’. How can we deal with the fact that Practices change, but a ‘concept’ stays the same? Is there a mental order ‘behind’ Practices?

⁵I use the mental ‘image’ in contrast to the material ‘picture’ - paintings, drawings or photographs. (Compare Mitchell, 1986: chap.1)

⁶Something similar holds for the car that appeared again in 1989, when Rahmann was invited by the German ‘Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen’ to do a project at Bombay (“Il Ganesh – Choreographie für Automobil”). It is apparently a series of different and new works, together with the intensity the artist invests into them, which allows to draw a line between old and new Practice. Both projects, documenta and that from Bombay prove to be exceptional, taken the ‘background’ of the other works in these years.

The mangle of practice, as diagnosed by Pickering, forced him to introduce a 'model': If material givens influence the direction a practice takes, it makes an imaginative scheme necessary, planning and continuously correcting the path of action. One could also think of the 'paradigm' that Thomas Kuhn (1962) found to be the principle of a certain period of scientific research, terminated only by an a-normal 'scientific revolution'. 'Paradigm', 'model' as well as Chomsky's (1965) 'competence' however pose a philosophical problem that practice theory promised to overcome: They establish a mental structure 'directing' actions. Pragmatism and Practice theory opposed this type of dichotomy between the mental and the real. Following the premises of practice theory, the conceptual has to be constructed as a practice in itself. Hans Jörg Rheinberger's 'epistemic things' support this other approach. Certainly, they are not things in the common sense of the word. But Rheinberger also would not classify them as abstract models or terms. Epistemic things can only be grasped as manifestation in 'technical things', the equipment in labs, instruments, arrangements, but also notations. While technical things are "machines to deliver answers", epistemic things are "machines to raise questions". As epistemic things embody "what one does not yet know" (*ibid.*), they appear as a trajectory inherent in practices, which manipulate glasses, burners, microscopes, notes and diagrams, a 'heuristics of unclear ideas', a becoming to be detected in traces, indices, symptoms. Because of that, as opposed to models or paradigms, historical development is a crucial aspect of 'epistemic things'.

Rheinberger himself suggested parallels between the scientific experiment and visual-arts practices. He introduced an 'esthetic thing' (Rheinberger, EFK: 16) to describe a similar process of exploration in which this 'thing' only gradually gains form. The aesthetic thing would not be a material artwork as Borgdorff (2013) proposes, for example. The aesthetic thing would rather be an idea in the making that is put to the test and changed in the sequence of artworks which correspond to 'technical things'. The 'esthetic thing' would be latent in the artworks, but also in sketches, notes, theoretical concepts. The family resemblance between Practices would stand for the aesthetic thing that the artist – in his or her Practices – would rewrite again and again, but could never name. For a discourse in art theory it might however prove counter-intuitive to talk about a 'thing' that does not have a material appearance. With the practice of 'modelling' I try to connect processes that Rheinberger observed in scientific practice to connect with a more intuitive terminology, related to Pickering's 'dance of agency'.

Communities of practice

In December 1986 Rahmann, together with his fellow artists Raimund Kummer and Hermann Pitz, organized a conference to prepare a collective exhibition in Berlin's public space. The project was called 'Emotraube'. Like the panicle arranges singular grapes, individual artistic interests should be organized into a superordinate imagination, which by being shared would turn into something public and therefore real. The singular artist was meant to relate to common interest, individual action should appear as shared practice. It is a moment in Rahmann's development, when he himself seems to become aware that his work is a practice in the sense that it has to interconnect with a community.

A great artwork is created by a great artist, the story goes. Practices however presuppose social negotiation, social agreement. "Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of a broader system of relations in which they have meaning". (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 53) Practices as a system of activities and understandings are developed and reproduced within social communities. For Lave and Wenger (1991) 'apprenticeship' is the model for this kind of participatory learning, in which the student gradually incorporates techniques and knowledge. Studying at an academy of fine arts, still today, resembles apprenticeship. Most of what the students learn here is not propositional knowledge, but implicit. Lave/Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991:102) also stress the fact that much of this knowledge is encoded in artifacts – like sculpture or painting, but also a camera obscura - so that by dealing with them the apprentice implicitly learns. But to participate competently in a practice community you also have to negotiate significant explicit knowledge (Wenger, 1989: 136). The community refers to role models; it allows for some styles of expression and forbids others. The role model includes artistic concepts and implies practices. Rahmann entered a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in 1956, when he first studied with Otto Pankok, then Joseph Faßbender at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf. Here he learned not only basic techniques like drawing or painting, but also acquired a political understanding following the example of Pankok, a victim of the Nazi regime.

Lave/Wenger do not restrict the concept of 'communities of practice' to learning situations like the academy, but make them "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (1991: 31). After leaving the academy, Rahmann also tried to embed his artistic activities in a community of like-minded artists. Arriving in Holland he became part of a network of writers and artists (Steiger, 2015). For an exhibition of this group in 1976, Rahmann used telepathy to connect the different artistic imaginations. All the artists focused their minds – at an agreed time, each in their place – on a "transmitter" that would 'receive' their messages to produce a drawing. Telepathy might be a simplistic way to arrive at a shared practice. But it indicated an early interest in overcoming a traditional understanding of artistic production.

Rahmann was apparently attracted to Berlin because of the spirit he shared with Kummer and Pitz. After ‘Lützowstraße Situation’, the group did other collective projects, gradually also establishing an exchange with likeminded artists. ‘Büro Berlin’, founded in March 1979, was an expression of an interest Rahmann shared with Pitz and Kummer in establishing an art practice beyond singular authorship; to establish a self-supporting community of shared interests and intentions. The ‘Office’ institutionalized the collegial support that these three artists invested in their projects and the work of their participating friends. Inspired by Pitz’ and Kummer’s experiences in the film industry, the aim was to turn artistic production from an individual into a collective achievement. ‘Art in public spaces’ became an important field of activity. “Every place could be a place for art” declared a manifesto presented during the opening of the Office on the 3rd of March (Büro Berlin, 1986: 148). From 1981, the Office increased its focus on activities instead of products in public space. A weekly program of performances took place at the Office. When the contract for Boeckhstrasse was cancelled in early 1982, Büro Berlin started a large theatre project at Hebbel-Theatre, which took place on the 27th and 28th of August, 1983.

With their improvised exhibitions in empty houses (like Lützowstraße and Boeckstraße), with their interventions in public space and finally with their performances at the Office or at Hebbel-Theater the artists established different relations depending on the type of audience they addressed. This suggests that in practice theory, the mere confrontation between individual action and the public – so common in discussions of public and interventionist art – might be inadequate. When Lave/Senger speak of the ‘overlapping’ of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 15f, footnote) they implicitly suggest that between a core group of artists, for example, and the so-called ‘public’, we must envision a layering of different communities of practice, where one is gradually handing down their specific practices to another, larger community. As Geels (2005: 23f) indicates, these groups are only ‘partly autonomous’, as their Practices are evaluated by these other communities, so that trajectories are built up across communities of critiques, gallerists, collectors. Only then might we reach a macro-level of the culture of a society in which the many participate. To become of impact for a society, to become ‘political’, Practices have to spread out from the micro-level of the like-minded artist-group, where a Practice is established, to a level where experts institutionalize these Practices in discourse and critical evaluation, to a macro-level of a devoted public, while also participating in the art-market. Only then could art intervene in the “distribution of the sensible”. (Rancière, 2004)

‘Emotraube’ marks a crucial moment in Rahmann’s artistic development. He has become aware that his work is in continuous, although hidden, exchange with other artists’ works. It is legitimated by the achievement of fellow artists; to be valued it has to meet a group consensus.

The moment where you no longer simply promote your own interests, but participate in the interests of others, is the moment where you gain access to reality, i.e. to the public. I can only know where my interest lies and somewhere there’s a limit to it. Public space is the area where interest exists which is not my own. That unfamiliar interest broadens my own, invariably limited sphere of experience. When I interact with unfamiliar interest, it becomes material.
(Rahmannin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien (ed.), 1988: 6f)

A preliminary résumé of ‘Büro Berlin’ was the book of the same title, which appeared in 1986. It was the presentation of this book which turned into the event to propose ‘Emotraube’.⁷ Regrettably, the artists invited to the conference in December 1986 were at the beginning of their career and refused to „assume responsibility for the total concept “as Rahmann notes (Kummer et. Al., 1988: 5). His résumé sounds bitter:” It shows that the generalization expressed in the book, which still resonates in the Emotraube idea, is only fiction. The individual execution is more real, even when it differs from the other work to the extent of being contradictory.”(Kummer et al., 1988: 15)

The relapse to the individual does not, however, dislodge practice theory. More important than group cooperation is an ‘invisible hand’ principle that connects seemingly individual action to a consensus of a specific community of practice. To demonstrate the complex relation between individual and social, the linguist Rudi Keller (1994) chose the traffic jam as an example. To be on the safe side, every driver will use the breaks a little bit more than the one before. Concerning individual intention, every driver avoids the crash with the car in front of him; what concerns the social outcome, intended by nobody, is the traffic jam. The artist, as part of a community of practice, cannot rely on his intentions alone, but must anticipate ‘the traffic jam’: He has to experience himself as a kind of embodiment of shared interest. That a group of experts develops a shared understanding through Practices makes the singular work a significant symptom of cultural production.

⁷The exhibition ‘Emotope’ took place in September 1987

Conclusion

We leave Fritz Rahmann behind us and return to the argument and issues at hand.⁸ A Practice approach works against the autonomy of the artwork. The individual work is contextualized by integrating it in a series with similar pieces, as well as preliminary studies and documentation. The trajectory that articulates in the series is not only the object of the art-historical analysis. It also appears as a primary motivation for the artist and his/her practice. However, we cannot expect that only one of these trajectories characterizes the Practice of an artist. The oeuvre might contain some of these Practices, which again might prove to show some resemblances while differing in many aspects. Different times might allow different variations of Practices: Some artists in the US, for example, tend to develop a recognizable identity that could be marketed more easily and thereby delimit their Practices. The method is one of comparing: If similarities dominate, they unite under the premises of a Practice; if they show significant differences, they may signal the beginning of a new Practice. Distilling a Practice from its various traces demands a significant analytical effort in organizing all the products available into a timeline that has some significance for the reconstruction of a respective Practice. The technique could also impact art teaching: Students could start to learn about their Practices and their identity as an artist, by looking more closely at what they do and make via their portfolios – a trajectory characteristic of their Practice.

A crucial point in the argument is the fact that practices must be institutionalized in a community. In art history, we can often find an exchange within a smaller, like-minded group of – in most cases – younger artists at the beginning of a career. Until now, art history did not devote much attention to these smaller groups of practitioners, which – from our point of view – have a significant influence on the development of practices. Worthwhile targets of analysis would be the development of the Soho artists in the seventies, or the so-called “picture generation”, or the second wave of institutional critique focused on the Whitney Study Program – to mention a few – not only in terms of works and singular biographies but in terms of shared practices. Only if we match the use of documentary practices in the work of, for example, Robert Smithson to the ones of Dan Graham or Gordon Matta-Clark can we detect a general change in communication that will make an impact on museum practices or educational programs in the arts at a later stage. Then we might find out that the early forms of work correspond to general social practices, which might also be propagated by digital media, for instance. Art becomes political indirectly: Neither Smithson nor Graham intentionally tried to change forms of communication. Nonetheless, they ‘unconsciously’ supported a cultural development, into which their practices proved to fit. Forms of artistic activism cut short these developments, thereby excluding the prominent role of material and formal aspects of Practices.

Rahmann's work pulled us into Practices significant for the late 80ies in Europe. It would have been an interesting issue to see how he tried to adapt to the nineties' technical developments and their impact on artistic Practices. Studying artists of the late 90's and 2000s would reveal quite a different type of distribution of specific concepts, techniques, materials, author positions and audiences. Practices change paradigmatically and demonstrate significance for the cultural production of the respective times. This becomes a crucial problem for today, where “sustaining narratives supplied by modernity, including roles for art as mirror, leisure, or licensed dissent, have had their time” (Smith 2009, 1f). There is a consensus among scholars that an overarching framework for practice and interpretation got lost in globalization. (Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Meyer, 2013; Foster et al. (eds.)). As there are fewer and fewer “qualities (...) shared by a sufficient number of works to make their contemporaneousness self-evident” (Smith, 2009: 251), we can no longer construct the great narrations which constituted much of art-historical reflection until today. The “contemporaneous” stage that we have entered provincializes art, fragments Practices, and gives weight to the actual present. A theory of practice is not only a robust tool to order the past, but with this order, it also articulates a tendency of possible future practices. This trajectory connotes possible contemporaneities and creates openings for the future. In this specific manner, a theory of artistic practice holds promise for the demands of today's art.

⁸Rahmann became a Professor at the Bauhaus University at Weimar in 1993. Preparing a seminar on curatorial practice, I remembered him, who had died in 2006, almost forgotten.

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