

# Extended Cognitive Ability Through Cultural Contextualization

*Criteria and dispositions of a critical-aesthetic practice*

Ruediger John  
*(translated from German)*

Alongside artistic creativity aimed primarily at the classical art market, a new, society-oriented, interventionistic, process-based art is beginning to manifest itself.<sup>1</sup> Going beyond art's common functions as a sophisticated leisure activity or a means of social dissociation and representation of power, Systemic Art is taking a new role in society and culture. In a highly qualified way, it is bringing new areas under the microscope of critical evaluation with aesthetic means, aiding, for example, in the re-evaluation of corporations and their cultural development. As such, Systemic Art is claiming new areas of action – which brings with it the need for new forms of cooperation.

## Corporations as Micro-Societies – Value Acquisition and Cognitive Capability

In a simplified way, it is possible to »consider a corporation as a micro-society – an organization (more precisely: a system) which in fundamental aspects creates self-referential contingencies, i.e. considers itself to be structured (efficient), compatible (capable of interaction) and necessary (effective) and thus socially congruent. As in society as a whole, fundamental activities have been ritualized and the criteria for perception and evaluation collectivized.«<sup>2</sup>

As with any autopoietic system, the system ›corporation‹ tends towards decoupling, so that perception within a corporation becomes simplified to terms of economic criteria. Action is only reflected on to a very limited extent and is thus equally limited in its facility for insight and interaction. (This may lead to, amongst other things, insufficiency in terms of both social integration and competition fitness.) Criteria, norms and resulting actions may develop which have an unconsciously negative effect on internal structures (including areas of responsibility and internal communication). A corporation operating in a competitive environment, providing vitally obsolete services (demand orientation), requires a high level of

cognitive and communication capabilities. These arise in the context of entrepreneurial activities relating to cultural value creation processes, social communication and interaction. It requires therefore a (conscious) contextualization of the corporation in society and they cannot be simply restricted to the optimization of products or manufacturing processes.<sup>3</sup> It is of decisive significance that reflective analysis can only take place within the differentiation of contexts, i.e. within differentiating evaluation (criticism)<sup>4</sup> of descriptions (constructions) of reality<sup>5</sup> – otherwise it is autistic (operatively closed).

## Value-based/systemic coaching and Critical-aesthetic Coaching

In spite of this fact, so-called value-based or systemic coaching programs in corporations operate only within corporate hierarchies and organizational structures. This clearly demonstrates that the definition of the term ›value‹ has become blurred; often, something closer to ›interests‹ or ›qualification‹ is meant. ›Values‹ are in fact social constructions, whether within a society or a corporation as a subsystem. They can therefore not be conclusively and logically discussed unless

one is prepared to strengthen ›value islands‹ within a corporation, so undermining the corporation's ability to make social and cultural connections.<sup>6</sup>

›Critical-aesthetic Coaching‹<sup>7</sup>, as a form of Systemic Art, relativizes cultural and social criteria and critically associates them with those of the respective corporation, making use of aesthetic<sup>8</sup> approaches. Thus, it is not simply a matter of considering questions relating to the motivation for actions and the causes of behavior within the corporation itself and within the result-orientation of a commission or sales order. Rather, relationships between perception contexts and questions of meaning and value are analyzed as the basis for cognizance acquisition in senseful orientation. These facilitate differentiated reflection and understanding which can be permanently established. In this context, art does not function in the simplifying and thus limiting way of descriptive models and (reductionistic) formalizations from economics and science. Rather, it facilitates or indicates an indirect impression of complexity and establishes the contingency of a primary experience.<sup>9</sup>

Critical-aesthetic Coaching and Systemic Art are not artistic activities limited to the corporate arena. To the contrary, this systemic work must always be understood in an extended, social context, so that the reflective artist is not only a participant in the differentiation of the system of art and its forms in everyday practice, but also – and primarily – a ›cross-border commuter‹ (in the sense of a second-level observer).

## Process-oriented artistic work – Systemic Art

›I use the term ›Systemic Art‹ to refer to artistic practice which, by means of abstraction and association, differentiates critical-aesthetic meanings and value contexts; is definitively engaged in communication and contextualization; and aims at efficacy in relationship to social subsystems. The artist thus uses the active principles of a process-oriented reflected approach to defining media of form, object and design not as a form of expression but rather as a politically<sup>10</sup> relevant observation – the realization of an idea or target.«<sup>11</sup> Simply put: Systemic Art often renounces the creation of works of art in favour of a strategy of social construction of situations which do not aim explicitly at the system of art but rather at the complexity of interactions in the frame of reference.

## Concept of Culture and the Horizon of Corporate Activity

The systemic expansion of the horizon of perception and realization so as to take in the social embedding of a corporation (i.e. the corporation's dependence on an intact society) is only possible with reference to cultural issues. ›Culture‹ should not be confused here with the culture industry or market, nor with an event-oriented leisure activity. Simply expressed, culture refers here to society-specific traditions, a canon of cognition and value-creating ritual and reflection: effectively, as a ›contract dealing with obligations of meaning, identity and mutual interaction‹.

Corporations can only exist within a ›civilized society‹ (in common parlance), i.e. the relative obligatoriness (attitude) of values as *conditio sine qua non* for ethics, morals and the resultant laws and regulations. (As a simple example, contracts can only be sensibly concluded when the liability they impose are generally accepted.)

Business activity (or the economy as a subsystem) that negates social integration and cultural development is not capable of realization and destroys its own future basis, i.e., its action is not culturally sustainable. It is clear that short-term and marketing-oriented periods of observation (such as share value performance) do not allow for the formation of adequate behavioral options. This is because they do not, for example, consider on social development spanning generations, but also because the assigned assessment criteria are reductionistic and therefore ›only partially true‹.

Economic behavior in the ideology of ›neo-liberalism‹ reveals a gap in reflection: the biography of civilization (socialization and the process of subject formation) of the actor itself is neglected, making such behavior not only reductionistic in perception but also actively socially destructive.

The question, then, from the perspective of an entrepreneur, is: How can I identify and recognize personal concernedness (responsibility) and the complexity of activity in a social context (cultural sustainability), and how can cultural criteria be integrated into ritualized business activity (everyday life) and cognizance acquisition?

## Artistic Action as Critical-aesthetic Coaching

A characteristic of artistic coaching is the effect on everyday business activity, in terms of the application of aesthetic criteria to the daily routines and rituals of the corporation. An active phenomenological analysis of the differences, additions, criteria, and value systems of both of these social areas is created. This confrontation allows for the problematization – the discovery – of established rituals, habitual understanding, perception deficits and simplified forms of communication. Artistic involvement thus differs fundamentally from common personnel development and creativity training programs, because it considers the complexity and association of contexts based on the foundation of personal (systemically reflected!) plans and attitude of the artist. That is to say, it employs subjectivity as a qualitative aspect,<sup>12</sup> resulting in the overlapping of the criteria (and their differences) of art and economy along with the contextualization of the corporations activities, both internal and with relation to society.

For this reason, the goals set by the corporation or those involved are not the unconditional (!) focal point of measures taken, but artistic and aesthetic concerns. The concrete action of the artist escapes immediate control and influence. This situation demands of the artist a different self-image and persistence along with critical self-reflection, characteristics requiring discursive and cooperative modes of work, since a one-sided assimilation would otherwise result in a loss of autarkic acting possibilities. A corporation needs particular curiosity if it is to embark on such critical cooperation – with the great possibility of obtaining a fundamentally different viewpoint of the organization's situation and an expanded horizon of options for both personal and institutional activity. Artistic coaching thus effects the social constructions of the organization, and the way they are communicated, whereby the coaching is not purely visual<sup>13</sup> and is not intended to be the simple accumulation of knowledge<sup>14</sup>. Rather, it intervenes process-oriented and aims at primary experience.

## Process-oriented artistic strategies in corporations

Process-oriented<sup>15</sup> artistic work does not mean that specific media form the foundation of a process, rather that the development and execution of adequate artistic measures are in the foreground. Acts of intervention, changing habitual (i.e. leading to stagnation) patterns of behavior are therefore possible, along with accompanying observation (aesthetic analyses) and moderated discussions as well as the analysis and evaluation of such discussions. Aspects of such an initiative could include consciously dealing with fuzziness (<diffusion>), strategies of misappropriation, deconstruction and infiltration, the fictionalization of reality (and vice versa), and the re-evaluation and dramatization as well as the revision of one's own work in a new context, research, exploration and wandering about. It is the attitude of the artist that all of these activities have in common and not the functionalization<sup>16</sup> or self-determination of specific media and forms of presentation of the art canon – the latter actually common practices in cooperations between art and economy and one of the greatest taboos in the system of art.

## Results of critical cooperation

Art is primarily effective in economy when the criteria and value structure of art are confronted with those of economy (overlapping of criteria). Results cannot be established using the techniques of classical controlling<sup>17</sup>, but they make themselves felt through their long-term effects, so that instead of a marketing-oriented ›Corporate Identity‹ (an imposed surface construction), a ›Corporate Standing‹, i.e. a (relatively) authentic organizational stance, can develop. Part of this Corporate Standing is popularly described as ›Corporate Culture‹, which has a positive effect as cultural added value according to both economic and ethical criteria.

An actual ›Corporate Cultural Responsibility‹ is not seen in punctual promotions and sponsoring, but rather in the permanent reflection and contextualization of the corporation's own actions according to social and cultural criteria – a developed ›Corporate Standing‹.

## Conclusion

The qualified involvement of artistic capabilities in reflection processes in economy and the sciences opens up an expanded contextualization and differentiated perception framework for ›constructions of reality/the world‹. ›Critical-aesthetic Coaching and Consulting‹ is an approach to escape from usual modes of thinking and working that are limited by subject/discipline orientation and to indicate culturally connotated references to society and values. The artist is not a moralistic, warning figure, but rather introduces attitudes and action patterns specific to art, whereby complexity can be presented as primary experience and a capability to differentiate can be created. He or she is thus not a producer or supplier of tangible works of art, but rather an interventionistic advisor.

Artists working according to traditional, medium-oriented habits and canon are insufficiently qualified for this mode of work. For critical cooperations that will produce substantial results, primarily those artists are needed, who consciously work in a process-oriented way, whose work is self-reflective and includes the systemic perspectives.

- 1 This text is an advance publication of extracts from Ruediger John et al. (Ed.), *freundlich behauptet - Gespräche zwischen Kunst und Wirtschaft*, Baden-Baden 2006.
- 2 Ruediger John, 1991.
- 3 It is common practice for corporations to adjust precisely these two ›regulating screws‹, instead of becoming familiar with the far more complex, systemic relationships of economic activity.
- 4 The term ›criticism‹ is used imprecisely in the everyday world. ›Criticizing‹ is often sweepingly understood as ›making negative comments‹, but ›criticism‹ (in simplified terms) is the appraisal, differentiation and analysis of actions, norms and targets – encompassing both positive and negative comments.
- 5 Reality is a socially influenced individual construction and thus a relative truth. »Reality is in truth a reality« (D. Granosalis).
- 6 This is indeed an everyday thing, seen not least in a number of ›scandals‹, where the top managers of German stock exchange listed corporations have demonstrated their ignorance differentiating the terms ›value‹ and ›values‹.
- 7 I defined Critical-aesthetic Coaching in 1995 as part of the ›Art and Context Initiative‹, and have been developing the concept ever since.
- 8 The word ›aesthetic‹ is often equated with ›beautiful‹ in the sense of ›pleasing‹. ›Aesthetic‹ (gr. aisthesis), however means (in simple terms) the epistemological, subjective investigation of the constructions and structures of the object under consideration, along with that object's relationship to reality and the conditions and forms under which it is perceived.
- 9 That is to say, art aims at immediate experience (and the creation of a subjective field of association and realization), rather than a mediated, explanatory (verbally rationalizing) approach.
- 10 The term ›political‹ is used here with reference to ›zoon politikon‹, not in the sense of party or career politics.
- 11 Cf. Ruediger John, 1998.
- 12 Because of space considerations, this text avoids a thorough analysis of the terms ›objective‹ and ›subjective‹.
- 13 Artistic commercialization programs such as ›Image Management‹ or ›Visual Management‹ are thus too small in scope, concentrating as they do on a specific medium of communication rather than dealing with relationships and definitions as the basis.
- 14 It is common practice in business to consider ›knowledge‹ as a ›raw material‹ or ›resource‹, reasoning according to the tradition of the production of goods. A systemic understanding, however, quickly reveals that we live neither in a ›knowledge society‹ nor in a ›media society‹, but rather in a ›communication society‹, where ›knowledge‹ is a social construction based on primary experiences.
- 15 Cf. Ruediger John, 2002.
- 16 Recent examples are the campaigns of Louis Vuitton, where the artist Takashi Murakami selected new colors for their stereotypic patterns; the company Longchamps for which the artist Tracy Emin commercialized her typographics or a series of advertisements by Boston Consulting Group which hired artists to design the image backgrounds for their advertisement slogans.
- 17 It has been demonstrated that owner-managed family businesses, with their long-term strategies, produce better results – also when measured according to classical market criteria. This can be seen for example in the newly introduced GEX stock index as well as in the performance of share funds whose portfolios are concentrated on such businesses.

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## Information on the author

Ruediger John, artist; creates situative, installative, interventio- nistic, research- and publication oriented works and exhibitions; definitoric and practical works in Artistic Research, Systemic Art and Transfer Art; numerous invitations to events, exhibitions and participation on discourses. Since 1995 he also works as an artist as ›Critical-Aesthetic Coach and Consultant‹ placing aesthetic inter- ventions with a critical standpoint into the routine context of companies and institutions. Since 2000 he has several teaching positions (a.o. State Academy of Fine Arts and Design Stuttgart, Pforzheim University of Applied Sciences, University of the Arts Berlin). He is a founder of the ›Gesellschaft für kritische Ästhetik‹ (Society for Critical Aesthetics). Ruediger John studied at Staat- liche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart (MFA equiv.) and was invited to Columbia University and NYU, New York City (affili- ate/guest). [http://artrelated.net/ruediger\\_john/](http://artrelated.net/ruediger_john/) and <http://www.kritische-aesthetik.de>

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