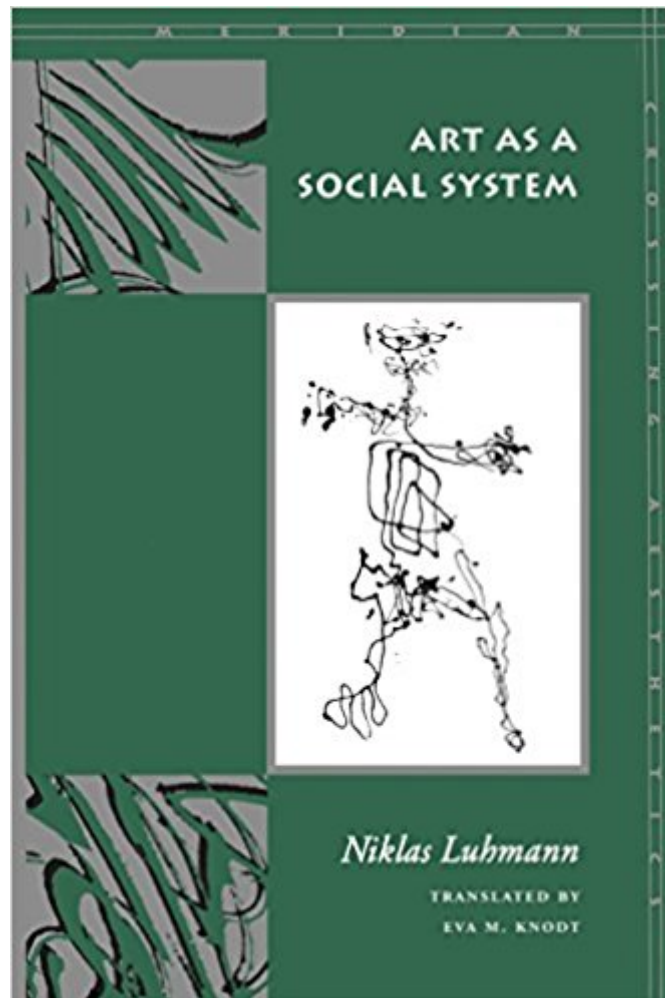




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Art As A Social System (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics)



Synopsis

This is the definitive analysis of art as a social and perceptual system by Germany's leading social theorist of the late twentieth century. It not only represents an important intellectual step in discussions of art—in its rigor and in its having refreshingly set itself the task of creating a set of distinctions for determining what counts as art that could be valid for those creating as well as those receiving art works—but it also represents an important advance in systems theory. Returning to the eighteenth-century notion of aesthetics as pertaining to the "knowledge of the senses," Luhmann begins with the idea that all art, including literature, is rooted in perception. He insists on the radical incommensurability between psychic systems (perception) and social systems (communication). Art is a special kind of communication that uses perceptions instead of language. It operates at the boundary between the social system and consciousness in ways that profoundly irritate communication while remaining strictly internal to the social. In seven densely argued chapters, Luhmann develops this basic premise in great historical and empirical detail. Framed by the general problem of art's status as a social system, each chapter elaborates, in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions, a particular aspect of this problem. The consideration of art within the context of a theory of second-order observation leads to a reconceptualization of aesthetic form. The remaining chapters explore the question of the system's code, its function, and its evolution, concluding with an analysis of "self-description." *Art as a Social System* draws on a vast body of scholarship, combining the results of three decades of research in the social sciences, phenomenology, evolutionary biology, cybernetics, and information theory with an intimate knowledge of art history, literature, aesthetics, and contemporary literary theory. The book also engages virtually every major theorist of art and aesthetics from Baumgarten to Derrida.

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Customer Reviews

"Overall this is a fascinating, stimulating and thought-provoking book not always in ways that may have been intended by the author." "This book is a pleasure to read. It is literate, informed, unpretentious, and patient...The book is a spectacular example of one anthropologist's selection of the technical world as an object of study after generations of sociocultural anthropologists' bias against the same." (ISIS) "Thus, what is most interesting about Luhmann's view of art is also what is most interesting about his general theory: its sophisticated and elaborate explorations in the evolutionary development of the media of communication, which are perhaps unparalleled in contemporary theory." (American Journal of Sociology) "Art as a Social System deserves to be read as a brilliant synthesis of every major philosophy of art, from Baumgarten to Kristeva, and as an ambitious attempt to understand art history in its entirety. . . . It seems inevitable that North American academics in the humanities will soon confront this challenging work." (Literary Research / Recherche Litteraire)

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aesthetic form. The remaining chapters explore the question of the system's code, its function, and its evolution, concluding with an analysis of its self-description. •Art as a Social System draws on a vast body of scholarship, combining the results of three decades of research in the social sciences, phenomenology, evolutionary biology, cybernetics, and information theory with an intimate knowledge of art history, literature, aesthetics, and contemporary literary theory. The book also engages virtually every major theorist of art and aesthetics from Baumgarten to Derrida.

The scope and breadth of Luhmann's undertaking and analysis is truly astounding, and based on this alone, one might be tempted to call his writings in totality a work of art. To borrow a phrase from antiquity, the work of art is created for the sake of astonishment. (p. 40) Luhmann would no doubt have objected to such a description, blurring as it does the boundaries of differentiated subsystems which are operatively closed, according to the theory, a condition which might be described as autonomy[,], meaning that within its boundaries, autopoiesis functions unconditionally, the only alternative being that the system ceases to exist. (p. 157) In this context, an autopoietic system is merely a self-determining process of communication. (p. 11) Luhmann goes on to note that a system that partially relies on external elements or structures because it cannot operate without them "a computer, for example" is not an autopoietic system. (p. 157) This appears to be one of the more problematic aspects of Luhmann's theory, when he states in his conclusion that the "art system . . . remains dependent on its social environment, and such dependencies (of an economic nature, for example) may increase." Luhmann attempts to mitigate (or ignore) this difficulty through the concept of structural coupling[] such as between the nervous system and consciousness[.] (p. 8) Such connections between system and environment are presupposed. (p. 50; citing Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston, 1992), pp. 75ff, 181ff) Indeed, artistic communication realizes specific forms of structural coupling between consciousness and society. (p. 52) Here we see Luhmann's assumption that communication is fundamentally separate from perception. "To be sure, communication can indicate perceptions, but what it indicates remains as operatively inaccessible to communication as does the entire physical world." (p. 10) Luhmann touches on recent evidence that the external world is the brain's own construction, treated by consciousness as if it were a reality out there. (p. 6) For Luhmann, in a kind of second act for the mind / body

distinction, the "world . . . remains undetermined." (p. 36) So far as sociology is concerned, the system remains largely undetermined as well. "An external (in this case sociological) description of the art system . . . says nothing about how the art system handles self-generated uncertainties and difficulties." (p. 315) Then what exactly, does a sociological description of an art system do? The function of the sociological system appears to be a third party observation, that can see both sides of the distinction drawn by the subsystem. "Sociological interest in the notion of function . . . aims at the 'other side' of the distinction that art introduces into the world. The question might be rephrased as follows: How does reality appear when there is art?" (p.143) It may depend to some degree on differentiation, which seems to define "modern society." (p. 133) Luhmann ponders along the lines that "if differentiation in its specifically modern form turns out to be not as beneficial as was previously assumed, then one needs to revise one's judgment of modern society." (p. 133) We are firmly in the grips of a neo-modernist here, as Luhmann wastes little time with the ill-fated title "postmodernism[,]" a topic for which he finds the "relevant literature . . . grown out of proportion[, and]" reason enough for a communication system to end the discussion. (p. 298; footnote 218) In Luhmann's description of modern society "the orientation toward specific functions (or problems) of the social system catalyzes the formation of subsystems that dominate the face of society." (pp. 133-34) For Luhmann, "society . . . manifests itself in the comparability of its subsystems." (p. 134) By comparing different subsystems along general and abstract lines "such as system formation and system boundaries, function, medium and forms, operative closure, autopoiesis, first- and second-order observation, and coding and programming . . . a theory of society emerges that does not depend on discovering a unified meaning behind society" "for example, by deriving societies from the nature of man, from a founding contract, or from an ultimate moral consensus." (p. 134) Luhmann's larger project "may be treated . . . as different forms of self-description available to the system of society." (p. 134) "The self-description of a system is a paradoxical undertaking from its very beginning." (p. 302) Indeed, paradox is central to Luhmann's distinctions, and descriptions of all the subsystems of society: "art . . . law, science, politics, and so on[.]" (p. 134) For Luhmann then, sociology is a method by which society engages in "self-description." (p. 134) He is, in a sense, attempting to describe a system of society which encompasses, as environment, all other subsystems. "[F]rom a sociological perspective[.]" systems must adapt to "the results of social evolution" in order to preserve "autopoietic" or self-generating

autonomy. (p. 302) Thus, Luhmann would seem to attempt an examination of the problematic relationship between art and society[,] a problem that remains unresolved. (p. 302) Joseph Beuys called it something like the fatal distance between the artistic will and social reality. (please forgive, but the external citation escapes me at the present time) It is a problem exemplified by such as Duchamp and the readymade, and a problem which did not present itself until the twentieth century according to Luhmann. (p. 314) Prior to this, art developed such that eventually profit motives became worthy of literature, and peasants became suitable for portraits. (p. 145) Here, as in many places, Luhmann appears highly skilled at describing the evolution of the art system, yet he fails to offer a convincingly articulated point at which operative closure and autopoiesis begins, which seems perhaps a fatal flaw for a theory describing such processes as unconditional. (p. 157) Luhmann states that his description remains external and has no control over . . . the art system. Luhmann's investigations lead him to one question "a question that cannot be answered by sociology or by any other academic discipline, but only by art. . . . [the question] of how the distinction between art and nonart is to be controlled; how, in other words, the paradoxical unity of art and nonart can be dissolved within the art system itself. (p. 314) For Luhmann, art has moved in a difficult direction for any system, a direction in which each communication becomes an attempt to thwart the system's boundaries. Art approaches a boundary where artistic information ceases to be information and becomes solely utterance [Mitteilung], or more accurately, where information is reduced to conveying to the audience that art wants to be nothing more than utterance. (p. 298) Such efforts at self-negation, according to Luhmann, have led to a situation where art becomes nothing but utterance, or conveys solely information to that effect, such as a scream for the sake of screaming one might phrase it. (p. 298) This presents difficulties for any system of communication, when communication is defined by Luhmann as the difference between information and utterance, pp. 39 - 40 (emphasis in original) Hanging over the entire discussion of course, are those pesky psychic systems, or humans as you and I would refer to them. Luhmann does actually break down and discuss psychic systems quite a bit within the text currently under discussion, yet tellingly, the phrase itself is left out of the index. Luhmann (and most of his disciples it seems) would like to ignore such problematic areas of analysis, by moving the frame to the abstract level of communication systems or social systems. (p. 9) In discussing the perception of psychic systems, however, Luhmann notes that a distinction must be presupposed when dealing with the psychic

system's participation in the communicative process"when, in other words, one of the conditions of possibility of society is at stake. (p. 16; Luhmann cites himself here, notably) "Art cannot overcome the separation between psychic and social systems. (p. 48) Yet the "irritation" remains; if a social system falls in the woods without any psychic system with which to structurally couple, does it utter any information? Many more learned scholars in the area of sociology might find such concerns a "trivial distinction," similar to dismissals by internal observers of other system-specific paradoxes which Luhmann describes. Nonetheless to the non-sociologist (or non-systems theorist!), such concerns may appear valid. Certainly as Luhmann defines it, communication exists independently of such individuals or "psychic systems. But is this just an impressive parlor trick, designed to fool us into submission while the modernists continue to operate the machinery of civilization from behind a curtain of ever increasing complexity?

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