

HELMETS

A PERFECT SECOND, CONSTRUCTED.

Presumably, the year 1781 does not feature prominently in school books. No rhymes have been dedicated to it. For the people who lived at the time it must have not been a fairly uneventful 'season'

Five years earlier, the American colonies had published their remarkable Declaration of Independence, but excellent rhetoric alone does not yet make a state.

These things take time. The French Revolution was still some way off; only the dismissal of finance minister Jacques Necker in May 1781 caused a gentle murmur in the European forests. In short: the world was ticking along calmly.

In 1781, Mozart went to Vienna, the Prussian Code of Civil Procedure was announced and in Königsberg, after eleven years of work, a typically eccentric philosophy professor published a critique, known as the 'Critique of Pure Reason'. What Immanuel Kant proposed in his critique was outrageous, audacious even, and would become tremendously influential: in philosophy anyway but also in society and its enlightenment - and in the sciences.

Initially, only a few took notice.

In his critique, Kant proposed an epistemological theory, or, in other words, a concept, of how we acquire knowledge, or more precisely: how we can reasonably know that we know.

Imagine the bewilderment: until then, one had felt safe in assuming that both our perception of things and our thinking were clearly based on how things are. A rose is a rose. But according to Kant, the rose for example no longer appeared to us through objectively given colours and materials - but through our ability to see colours and materials. The rose may have particular object qualities and form, but we approach it with our intuition. We address the rose with the categories of an a priori sensuality, a sensuality that precedes the object. As Kant logically derives, this sensory intuition rules out any correspondence between reality and perception in the sense of a one-to-one relationship. Ever since 1781, a rose has been - if you like - a rose, a rose, a rose....

The above is, of course, a very simple and extremely shortened account.

The important point is this: when asking 'what is?', Kant also takes into account the recognising subject, claiming that knowledge is not generated from the objects themselves, from the nature of things; rather it is reason that predicates. Small wonder that the Critique led to a crisis of representation, paving the way for an increasingly differentiated sociology of knowledge that, by the name of constructivism, was gaining momentum in the second half of the 20th century.

At this point, we have to cite another important paper: in 1970, Chilean neurobiologist Humberto R. Maturana published an essay - 'The Biology of Cognition' - which was, indeed, the founding paper of modern constructivism. Like Kant, Maturana puts the subject at the centre of knowledge. Much more than Kant, however, he focuses on the consequences for the scientific process, summed in a seemingly simple, or possibly naive, sentence: "Everything said is said by an observer."

Everything said is said by an observer: only a person who observes and differentiates and denominates, allows a concept of objects, actions, events, sentences and relationships. Hence, a kind of paradigm: not what is, but what is observed and denominated as a difference (a communicative construction), is the basis of our knowledge (including doubt). Not being as such, but being denominated as this- and not that! - allows progress in knowledge: for example through criticising a denomination in the form of a new construction. We cannot

look into an observer's head but we can hear or read their statements and test them as proposals of reality: there is no connection to reality which would have scientific value while being independent of an observer.

Constructivism has tremendously stimulated the natural and the social sciences, both theoretically and empirically.

Biology and psychology, for example, analyse the construction of reality through cognitive processes, through consciousness, attention and perception. The cultural and social sciences also attend to the same idea - the construction of reality - by focusing on language, media, rituals, organisation and communication. One could say that the sciences observe observers while they are observing, and the observers can be of very different types: brains, communication systems, editorial boards, the society and so on.

As a social scientist, I believe that I fairly consistently use this concept in both research and teaching. At least, I felt sufficiently primed when I was confronted with Ralf Kaspers' Wehrmacht helmets.

First of all, I should say: presumably the observer perspective is not an alien concept in art. But I can only guess at that. I have not read art history, nor am I trained in the language of aesthetics. But each time I came into contact with art, the idea of construction was implicit. There was hardly any talk of an obvious reading or truth. Instead, the term 'interpretation' was often used, while reinforcing that interpretation had to be left to the observer. What is the artist trying to tell us? As a child, this question bothered me greatly - probably because children are so dependent on truths. As a grown-up 21st century child, art leaves all possible interpretations to me: there's no trace of the portrait and battlefield paintings of the 17th, 18th or 19th century. My museums and galleries are places of interpretation, where artists can be observed - or so I thought until recently.

I felt firmly rooted in constructivism and at one with the observer's perspective. And now this: what Ralf-Kaspers is drawing in space, is a very large question mark.

Question marks are an underestimated species, and quite unpopular too. We approach them with uncertainty, confusion and doubt, sometimes mixed with fear and angst. But

question marks are at the beginning of each creative act. Astonishment fuels motivation and (re) action. The same is, of course, true in and for research: nothing is as practical as a good theory - expectations about reality generate hypotheses when reality defies expectations.

People enter a space that Ralf Kaspers has predefined for them and are confronted with a riddle they have probably not expected in this way.

The photographs' similarity alone is an indicator for the riddle itself.

Obviously, the photographs form a series.

I am, of course, unable to reproduce all individual decoding attempts.

(I guess the idea of planets was on the minds of many - given the solution, I actually find the planet idea a quite intriguing thought.) However, what I am interested in is the moment, the second perhaps, when observers know that what they saw were soldiers' helmets.

The series is, of course, far more than just a play with (visual) illusion. The pictures, I think start a process in the observer that author and semiotician Umberto Eco calls 'auroral': feeling your way in the pale morning light, interpreting and shifting back and forth in the face of new, unknown objects. Our symbolic system does not - cannot - live up to these objects. In this case, our uncertainty does not result in the sole recognition:

„Oh, I see: Wehrmacht helmets“.

When the gap between sensing (or: testing) and recognising is large, it will throw us back onto ourselves, on our cognitive inability to reconcile image and semantics. It throws us back to recognising the categories we use in confronting, and coping with, reality.

Thus, this moment, this second, shows us that we are observers and that we construct, always. There has hardly been any other moment where I have been reminded so vividly (and drastically) of my own role as an observer, of my ideas about war, death, violence and history. What remains is the suspicion that museums and galleries are not places where we observe artists.

They are places where we observe ourselves.

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