

# MASKS - OR FACES WITHOUT HEADS

By Alexander Damianisch

Thank you for this invitation and for the possibility to say some opening words here in this remarkable institutional context following a remarkable idea, namely the investigation into cases of complexity. Yes our case today is a complex one; it is the art exhibition "From Synthetic Biology to Art" by Uwe Sleytr.

He, Uwe Sleytr studied Biotechnology at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna. He worked as a senior research scientist at the MRC-Laboratory and the Strangeways Research Laboratory, Cambridge, England. From 1982–2010 he was head of the Department of Nanobiotechnology at his alma mater. He received numerous awards and is a full member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. And, that said about his career in the field the sciences, a world that usually is not the world of metaphors of ambiguity and chance ... is it? I - of course rhetorically - wonder if the division into the class of science and of art of is of any help? Heinrich von Kleist said: "People could be divided into two classes: those who understand a metaphor, and 2) those who understand a formula. Those who understand both are too few; they do not comprise a class." But it seems to me that among the institutions of both, the how I call it not only, following Foucault, Heterotopias but places of and for Heterotopoeitics<sup>11</sup> the Complexity Hub Vienna might be a good place for such a class. And besides Uwe Sleytrs remarkable scientific track record, he is one an expert in both fields, with the added value that he is not only capable of understanding, but also of making. He did put it once like he not only does what "he can" but also what he "wants to do".

In the mission of the CHV it is stated that the aim is to be "a special place for free thinking, where creativity unfolds and new ideas are born." Further it say "The Hub catalyzes research in a network of established scientists and the most creative, talented, and open-minded next-generation academics." I believe among them are those who "understand both", the "metaphor" and the "formula".

So it is obvious that in such a context art is well placed, as art is about challenging our understanding, in new and different ways, to deepen understanding; might it be that art sheds a light on complex issues making them easy and on easy things making them complex?

So what is the case today: Uwe Sleytr provides masks. It seems that his masks are tools, tools that help to understand things new and differently. And that is what connects not separates the classes: Whether using the toolbox of a scientist or opening the toolbox of the artists, his research aims to challenge the unknown and our understanding of it and maybe of understanding as such.

Yes art aims to go beyond, to claim ground in the areas of the unknown, Rilke once wrote: "The question arises ... as to whether the extent of these sectors on the plane assumed by us can be enlarged to any vital degree by the work of research. The achievements of the microscope, of the telescope, and of so many devices which increase the range of the senses upward and downward: do they not lie in another sphere altogether, since most of the increase thus achieved cannot be interpreted by the senses, cannot be 'experienced' in any real sense? It is, perhaps, not premature

to suppose that the artist, who develops the five-fingered hand of his senses (if one may put it so) to ever more active and more spiritual capacity, contributes more decisively than anyone else to an extension of the several sense fields, only the achievement which gives proof of this does not permit of his entering his personal extension of territory in the general map before us, since it is only possible, in the last resort, by a miracle.”<sup>iii</sup>

Talking about “sense fields” or better German put “Sinngelände” and about masks one might take a look at Pablo Picasso. 1975 Claude Lévi-Strauss, the famous French anthropologist and ethnologist, pointed towards Pablo Picasso importance in relation to masks, in his remarkable essay “La Voie des masques” (English: “the way of the masks”), he said to picture the spirit of innovation within traditional mask cultures (in the northwest of North America) it needed Picasso and his introducing of masks into modern art. And this is true: Picasso himself said, about his encounter with traditional (African) mask objects in 1907: I did “examine these masks, all of these objects that people had created with a sacred, magical purpose, to serve as intermediaries between them and the unknown, hostile forces surrounding them, attempting in that way to overcome their fears by giving them color and form. And then I understood what painting really meant. It's not an aesthetic process; it's a form of magic that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires. The day I understood that, I had found my path.”<sup>iv</sup>

I wonder what better would describe the common denominator between Art and Science, so let's change one word, let's take out the „painting“ and let us put in (scientific and artistic) “research“, it would read as „And then I understood what research really meant, [...] it is a form [...] that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires.“ So here we are, don't we need these tools? Those intermediaries. Claude Lévi-Strauss called the masks he talks about “simultaneously naïve and ferocious mechanical contraptions”<sup>v</sup>, in the German translation this is called “ungestüme Apparaturen”.

Uwe Sleytr himself filled the intermediary “open space” left between the networks of knowledge in his way, how? “I formed the clay exclusively with my bare hands without any modelling tool for achieving a direct transfer from part of my morphology into the ductile material, like a derivative in the course of an arbitrary evolution event. Most importantly, I did not start with any drawing but simply let the formation happen in a state of “flow”.” And then he points out: “To illustrate the intrinsically unpredictable evolution, even when determined by synthetic biology, the sculptures were subsequently modified in two ways. One procedure involved splashing the sculptures with coloured water which was performed and photographed under the guidance of the recognised conceptual photographer Fritz Simak”. [...] The intention was to symbolize with these snapshots trial and error events during a biological evolution driven by humans. Again, although being part of such a process, the results are unimaginable and incomprehensible due to human intellectual limitations. My contemplations of the relevance and potential of synthetic biology on the future changes to our species, particularly self-enhancement and acceleration of evolutionary processes, led me to the production of images from different surroundings in arbitrarily distorted mirror foils without any mirrored sculptures. These images were subsequently modified in their colours by computer. I associate these pictures with the idea that developments in synthetic biology may eventually lead to beings endowed with cognitive abilities far beyond our present capability for abstract thought and intellectual efficiency.”<sup>vi</sup>

And as a “final remark”, how Uwe Sleytr puts it: “Art work should generate an emotional resonance in the observer and should not leave one in an unconcerned state. There may be a broad spectrum of reactions, reaching from rejection to admiration.”

So let us extend our “sense fields” like Rilke puts it, and before you start to do so, one last thought, introduced again by Rilke “Did I say it before? I'm learning to see--yes, I'm making a start. I'm still not good at it. But I want to make the most of my time. For example, I've never actually wondered how many faces there are. There are a great many people, but there are even more faces because each person has several. There are those who wear one face for years on end. [...] Other people change their faces one after the other with uncanny speed and wear them out. [...] But that woman, that woman: bent forward with her head in her hands, she'd completely fallen into herself. It was at the corner of rue Nôtre-Dame-des-Champs. I began to tread softly the moment I caught sight of her. [...] The street was too empty; its emptiness was bored with itself and it pulled away the sounds of my footsteps and clattered around all over the place with them like a wooden clog.”<sup>vii</sup>

„Out of fright the woman reared up too quickly, too violently, so that her face was left in her two hands. I could see it lying there, the hollowness of it's shape. It cost me an indescribable effort to keep looking at those hands and not at what they'd torn away from. I dreaded seeing the inside of a face, but I was much more afraid of the exposed rawness of the head without a face.“

Let us again: „learn to see“ ... lets see what is in the space between and wonder about our „unconcerned state“ (Sleytr), this will get complex with the help of his art pieces, picturing the mask as the “intermediary”.

Please enjoy the exhibition, Thank you!

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<sup>i</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, *Fragmente*, in: *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, zweibändige Ausgabe in einem Band. Helmut Sembdner, ed., Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2001, p. 338.

<sup>ii</sup> Damianisch, Alexander: Heterotopoetics. In: G. Bast et al. (eds.), *Arts, Research, Innovation and Society*, Arts, Research, Springer New York, Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2015, 223 - 227.

<sup>iii</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Primal Sound* (1919), in: *Rodin and Other Prose Pieces*, translated by G. Craig Houston. London: Quartet 1986, pp. 128-130: here p. 130.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted after Andrew Meldrum, *Stealing beauty*, in: *The Guardian*, 15. 3.2006 (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/mar/15/art>, 16.2.2018).

<sup>v</sup> Lévis-Strauss, Claude: *The Way of the Masks*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press 1988, 7.

<sup>vi</sup> Sleytr, Uwe: *Curiosity and Passion for the Art*. Check: <http://art-and-science.eu/art/>, 16.2.2018

<sup>vii</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria: *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. A new English translation by William Needham. Check:

[https://archive.org/stream/TheNotebooksOfMalteLauridsBrigge/TheNotebooksOfMalteLauridsBrigge\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheNotebooksOfMalteLauridsBrigge/TheNotebooksOfMalteLauridsBrigge_djvu.txt), 16.2.2018.