

## From science to art - on the 80th birthday of Uwe Sleytr

Verena Winiwarter, 18.7.2022

[slightly edited speech manuscript]

First of all, I would like to thank you, dear Uwe, for the invitation to speak at your celebration. I feel very honored; but I am also a little challenged, especially since I am not an art theorist or art historian.

Uwe Sleytr is one of those artists who provide the interpretation of their works, he has provided me with a great deal of information in advance (for this, in any case, many thanks), one might even think that he is one of those who would prefer to keep the description of work and person completely under control. But, dear Uwe, only the outsider description has surprise value and my immodest hope is that my explanations will surprise you.

All those who prefer the version authorized by the artist are referred to the (by the way really excellently designed) website and his own publications.<sup>1</sup> But we remain here with the surprise. This is just as inherent to science as it is to art. In his study of RNA research, the historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger distinguishes "technical things" from "epistemic things". The technical things are those reagents and apparatuses used in the laboratory that are considered to be known and controlled; the epistemic thing is that from which one wants to wrest its secrets. The epistemic thing (the sample, the unknown) is the source of surprise.<sup>2</sup> Uwe Sleytr as a scientist approached the epistemic things in order to use them under the control of the technical things of the laboratory for the production of surprises. As an artist, Uwe Sleytr is concerned to control the element of surprise of the recipients of his works as far as possible, to make art a technical thing in the eye of the beholder, so to speak, instead of understanding it as an epistemic thing from which meaning must first be wrested in interaction. For he has gone through this process of acquiring meaning in the artistic work, and he wants to suggest to us as recipients the result of this process, his own interpretation of the work of art. I, on the other hand, allow myself in the next few minutes to understand the artworks as epistemic things, as emanations of the artist, whose artworks far exceed his own ability to interpret them, and to engage in my own analysis.

Questioned by Martin Bernhofer for the radio station Ö1 about his double-talent, Uwe Sleytr describes the difference of the systems by emphasizing the rule-like nature of science, art transcends the realm of the rule, it may be for him the realm of (rule) freedom.<sup>3</sup> I offer you all, and you, dear Uwe, another difference as argued by Niklas Luhmann, that modern science and art are two functionally differentiated subsystems, each with its own codes. In science, the difference that matters is that between true and not true, while in art, original-inventive versus

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<sup>1</sup> <http://art-and-science.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Experimental Systems and Epistemic Things. A History of Protein Synthesis in the Test Tube*. Wallstein, Göttingen<sup>2</sup> 2002 (original in English 1997).

<sup>3</sup> <http://art-and-science.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/DIM-190619-Von-der-synthetischen-Biologie-zurKunst-Uwe-Sleytr.mp3> (Alle Rechte beim österreichischen Rundfunk)

imitative, imitative is the crucial difference. Every mature artist is compelled to originality.<sup>4</sup> However, he may first, in the apprentice stage, prove his mastery as a copyist.

At this point, a biographical detail is worth interpreting, which proves that the jubilarian is well aware of this difference. Whoever is lucky enough to be invited to tea at Sleytr's and to be given a small tour of the artistically (in both senses) designed household, also gets to see a mask that the youthful artist had modeled from a picture. His wife had discovered the original by chance during a visit to a museum in Canada. Uwe tells this story very proudly and thereby shows how well he understands the rules of the art system. Whereas the stamp of value in your science, dear Uwe, is put on the peer-reviewed publication in a high-ranking journal and on the patent, the inclusion in a collection or the purchase by a museum is the counterpart to this in art. That little Uwe had managed to imitate a mask so well that it can be recognized in a museum object ennobles the juvenilia.

Uwe Sleytr describes this difference differently when asked, but he knows the difference as Luhmann defines it. That is what this anecdote may suggest.

Having said this, let me stay with the mask and now delve into Uwe's art a bit more substantially. To do this, I would first like to remind you of the invitation designed by Uwe.

A plaster mask of the young Sleytr, cast by a friend, a play on transience, the death mask of the living. It is directed sightlessly at one of the many masks that the artist has designed. First, I paraphrase Uwe Sleytr as an interpreter of his art. It is about evolution, with the means of art he wants to exceed the limits of science, to speculate about (synthetic) biology in the realm of freedom. His mask with sightless eyes cannot do that, but we look into a post-human future that we cannot understand: no being can understand what has grown out of it. Uwe Sleytr shows us how evolution will continue AFTER us, actually not even HOW, but that. However, the multiplication of the sense organs corresponds to an evolutionary trend: the more sense organs, the more behaviors are possible.

So far I paraphrase the interpretation of the artist. We see in another of his works how the mask can become a double backbone, although here too it remains conceivable that we are dealing with an object suitable for masking. I will come to the materiality of these objects later. However, Uwe Sleytr is not concerned with the object, but with the process of evolution, which is based on a highly random mechanism, mutation. The random emergence of variants, in combination with a second process independent of it, selection, forms the driving force of evolution. The randomness, but perhaps also the processualism itself, are difficult to make visible in static objects. It is part of the artistry of the jubilarian that he has succeeded in creating images with the highest dynamics, in which the randomness becomes visible through the pouring of colored water. One could almost consider this an ecological advancement, but I want to stay with the masks. In one of the Schütt pictures in particular, the choice of detail can be used to illustrate the mask-like quality that continues to be present and likewise to point out the thoroughly frightening appearance of these objects.

**Masks.** Masks on the invitation, the first self-designed mask still hangs in a prominent place at Sleytr's, the artist generally calls his objects masks - here I locate the blank space of the self-description, here the substance of my outsider description begins.

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<sup>4</sup> Luhmann is considered difficult to understand. Recommended is the collection of his lectures edited by Dirk Baecker: Niklas Luhmann. Einführung in die Theorie der Gesellschaft, Carl-Auer-Verlag, Heidelberg,<sup>2</sup> 2009.

First I refer to what the artist himself provides: the artworks are formed from clay. Uwe Sleytr does not follow a pre-drawn plan. The interaction between the material and the artist is highly physical. He works the moist clay with the strength of the muscles in his fingers, fists, and elbows. This material has, almost like honey, the property to dissolve the perception of body boundaries, it is highly libidinous. Uwe's work with the wet clay would probably be described by Lotte Ingrisch as a chymic wedding. For me it is an act of transcendence through corporeality. We cannot imagine the evolutionary beings emerging from us, but perhaps we can create them with the body, just as God formed Man from clay.

Yes, God. God Almighty did not snap his finger to create Adam. He formed him out of clay, in his image, but endowed with the freedom to surprise his creator. Uwe forms masks out of clay. The parallel is unmistakable. However I mean that the artist, who in his act of creation uses the wisdom of the body to advance into a future that can no longer be cognitively grasped, is active in a different role. I will come to that.

After shaping and drying, Uwe gives the clay no more freedom. I can't help but think, "Evolution, yes, but controlled." He fires and gilds the sculptures, forcing the material into a permanence whose psychohygienic function I do not want to speculate on here. Rather, I am interested in considering why the objects are called masks by the artist. To follow the trail of the mask, I have chosen the theater scholar Alfred Schäfer, who together with Michael Wimmer published a remarkable anthology in the Springer series "Grenzüberschreitungen" in 2000, as my guide.<sup>5</sup> The pair's book underscores the importance of masks and masking in modern thought. Masks, according to the basic idea, disrupt the dualistic structures of imagination inherent in the Cartesian conception of man as well as the foundations of our logic. In their introduction, the two scholars discuss what meaning(s) masks might have in secular, enlightened societies in which they have lost the original, archaic, role of masking as a medium in the shamanistic ritual of contact with the supernatural. They write: "Even today, there is something mysterious and uncanny about the use of masks. It is true that wherever masks are used, this recedes behind the clearly recognizable purposes and practical functions. But it is not only in their misappropriations or in their uses in other contexts that the uncanny character of masks reappears. Already, their intended use can trigger mixed feelings: an interlocutor wearing sunglasses as well as a police force armed with gas masks, a nuclear worker equipped with a full-body mask or a team of doctors in the operating room masked from top to bottom. The primary purpose of such masks, like probably most masks in use in everyday and professional life, is indeed protection from injury, infection, contamination, or contact of whatever kind, rather than protection from visibility itself or the representation of other persons or figures. But the effect of even these everyday masks is not absorbed in their function. Even the middle character of those masks whose meaning is completely reduced to the protective function is not consumed in the realization of the purpose, but brings into play independent and only with difficulty definable effects in front of and behind the mask, which become fully dominant when masks are used alienated from their purpose, as for example in the film "Blue Velvet" by the burglar with the gas mask or also in "The Silence of the Lambs" with the night vision device."<sup>6</sup> Following this conclusion, the authors wonder how to explain that masks have effects when these effects cannot be explained by a collectively shared meaning, nor by the power of a transcendent entity to which they refer. They conclude that masks serve as gateways to an elusive form of strangeness.

The metaphor of the "gateway" brings them to the analytical concept of the medium. They

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Experimental Systems and Epistemic Things. A History of Protein Synthesis in the Test Tube*. Wallstein, Göttingen<sup>2</sup> 2002 (original in English 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. 12.

refer to Gotthard Günther's epochal philosophy of technology, quoting from his "Consciousness of Machines." Masks are neither identifiable with the realm of things, nor with the realm of ideas. They evoke an intermediate reality, a world between reality and fiction, man and God, life and death, man and animal, woman and man. As mediators, as intermediate or middle members, they are neither the one nor the other and yet not nothingness, and so they embody a third, an "intermediate beyond" that is as different from the lack of reflexivity of the thing as from the reflexivity of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Masks possess an intrinsic lawfulness that is only partially accessible to the subjects. Thus, they disturb the subject-object relation laid down in the Cartesian concepts of Man and the dualistic ideas resulting from it (including probably that of the double endowment of the jubilarian). Let us stay for a moment with Gotthard Günther, from whose "Die Amerikanische Apokalypse" I would like to quote an important sentence: "Für das weltanschauliche Bewusstsein einer kommenden Kulturstufe wird [also] der Kausalnexus nicht mehr wie für uns das einzige Realitätsschema sein, in dem sich Wirklichkeitsvorgänge abspielen."<sup>8</sup> (Translation: For the ideological consciousness of a coming cultural stage [thus] the causal nexus will no longer be, as it is for us, the only schema of reality in which real processes take place.) While the modern duality of logic places causality and thus science at the center, according to Günther a post-human world is no longer locked into this schema alone.

One can read this as a reassessment of art, which would then no longer be regarded as the superfluous, the additional, but as equally fundamental for being-in-the-world, beyond causality, but in reality.

Uwe Sleytr is a child of modernity. Born in July 1942, he grew up in the wonder years of the 1950s, in a family that encouraged artistic activities. His father had good carving tools and was willing to teach young Uwe how to use them. From then on, Uwe would be as much a hand-being as a head-being. But the world was dedicated to progress, biotechnology was the paradigmatic science of the post-war period: in 1962, when Uwe was 20, Crick, Wilkins and Watson received the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine for their spatial model of DNA; four years earlier, Crick had formulated the central dogma of molecular biology, describing the relationships between nucleic acids and proteins, which in some respects are overcome with synthetic biology.

As Uwe celebrated his 30th birthday, the Club of Rome report "The Limits To Growth" appeared, and the postwar utopia of the quasi-infinite availability of cheap energy in the form of oil from the Middle East was cracked by the oil price shocks of 1973 and 1979. In the same year, the results of the Zwentendorf referendum showed that the project of modernity had reached its limits, and not only with regard to oil. Uwe Sleytr was 44 when the reactor accident at Chernobyl shook the world, but at 47 he witnessed the end of the Iron Curtain, on November 9 the Berlin Wall fell and the world was freed from the shackles of the Cold War for the time being (though probably imagined as "finally" at the time). Uwe Sleytr retired in 2010, just before 9/11.

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Gotthard Günther, Die Amerikanische Apokalypse. In: Kurt Klagenfurt Wissenschaftsforschung. Band 36. Profil Verlag, München / Wien 2000, 144.

The humanistic self-conception of modernity, places the subject, conceived as autonomous as well as authentic, as an individual in the center. Modernity wants to believe in the superiority of reason, and thus degrades the objections of thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno into interjections. This self-conception is, as we know, only possible through increasing mediatization. The media create the *a priori* of sensory perception; Marshall McLuhan formulated another form of this conclusion by Bolz with the dictum of "the medium is the message". In other words, people are thrust into a certain, restricted world relationship by those forms of perception that they receive through the intermediary channels they allow. Today's mediatization goes hand in hand with a preference for visual perception and its fragmentation into tweets or Instagram reels.

Uwe Sleytr fights as a synthetic biologist in the role of Prometheus at the forefront of modernity. Whether he occasionally also feels like a sorcerer's apprentice, he does not share. In any case, he does not express the Promethean shame of a Günter Anders.<sup>9</sup>

But Uwe Sleytr as a human being is thrown into the mediatized world of global structures that cannot remain without moral dilemmas. Uwe meets them in personal exchanges with a flirtatious reference to what a simple natural scientist he is not. However, dear Uwe, I do not believe you, although I find your coquetry in this context charming and in any case more honest than the assumption of omniscience that other natural scientists have about themselves.

Uwe Sleytr needs a way to come to terms with the cruelty of the idea that with the help of his techniques we could be in the process of abolishing ourselves without even giving evolution a chance to make something of us. The masks of Uwe Sleytr are mediators, the artist is not a god but a shaman, a mediator between the world of organismic evolution and that of post-humanistic man-machine synthesis. His spiritual relatives are post-humanists like Nick Bostrom.<sup>10</sup>

But his method is completely different, he opposes the technical mediatization with another kind of mediatization. He digs into the clay, gives birth to sculptural emanations, which he subsequently banishes almost alchemistically under gold leaf, only to reveal their processualism again later with high artistry by pouring them over. He oscillates between control and loss of control. Finally, he places his products in front of distorting mirrors, in which they dissolve into colors and shapes that somewhat resemble 1960s Pop Art in their appearance. Uwe, I like the distorting images, but the artistic program of masks as mediators is your most significant achievement.

Let me conclude: the mask in modernity may no longer conceal anything; it is even conceivable as a medium of revelation, or so Uwe wants to read it: as an invitation to the imagination of post-human worlds. But as with Schäfer and Wimmer I also read them as a medium of transformation, as objects of metamorphosis, which in their irritating liveliness

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<sup>9</sup> Günter Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Band I: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*. C. H. Beck, München 1956, 7. Auflage ebenda 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Among others: Nick Bostrom, Julian Savulescu: *Human Enhancement*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

allow the modern subject to display his own self-alienation and his obsession with the alien.

Uwe Sleytr is an artist who tries to come to terms with the disjointedness of modernity, and thus with his own disjointedness, with the archaic ritual of the mask. The mask makes the shaman a mediator, the masks of Uwe Sleytr are more personal than the transcendence beyond science, of which he himself speaks interpretively.

The masks of Uwe Sleytr mediate across the chasm of double endowment, across a chasm that can also be thought of as a chasm between the libidinous hand-being and the superego-oriented head-being. They heal or at least conceal the rift and create the one subject, to whom corporeality and spirit are equally given and given up. Only in the mask is Uwe Sleytr, child of modernity and the separations associated with it, whole, and only in the mask is he (paradoxically) completely himself.