

The Silent Context – Detachment as Leitwort for Artistic Development

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Post modernism as a philosophical, ideological foundation of artistic practice lives by contextualizing, relativizing; the ubiquitous context, the wandering eye, this is what it is, but on the other hand also that... “Post modernism” is then understood here as a general philosophical foundation of a rich variety of theories and schools of thought, all in one way or another rejecting modernistic thinking, and where “the context” is a central issue.

What is the context? Where am I? Where are you? Who am I? Who are you?

What if I dwell on matters of form, expression, material, techniques and forget the context? Not possible, there is always a context, a historical, social, political, ideological context. We must be critical, look ourselves in the mirror of post-modern dogmas and ask these questions about the situation that define who we really are, what it is that we actually do. But then again, the situation is always much more complex than that, so there is really no definitive answer. Lived experience is the context that makes thinking and saying meaningful, the context where truth has its roots. We must accept the shaky foundations, watch out and be careful. This is where post modernism turns into a sort of sectarian religion and open up for terror, i.e. a readiness to instil insecurity and fear.

What is this as a foundation for artistic practice? If every choice is a possible mistake, creativity turns into something dangerous and art practice will be reduced to a meaningless exercise in, what we can only hope is, righteous thinking.

Around the end of the 1960-ies, still being completely absorbed by the world of late modernism in music – i.e. Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Darmstadt school (Stockhausen) – I went to Denmark. There I was confronted with a world up-side-down, the ideas of a new simplicity (Jacobsen), a reaction against a perceived over-complexity in the music of late modernism, the intricate constructions that built the music was seen as going far beyond human perception, and so on. This encounter with a Danish playful version of post modernism in music was a very strange experience. These were also the days of intense philosophical discussions in Denmark with philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and later on André Glucksmann and others on the menu (Ditlevsen et. Al., cf. also the journal Exil 1965-76).

This was for me an opening to a full speed travel into post modernistic experiments. What was this all about? It was an overwhelming feeling of total freedom. The traditions

and given norms of musical professionalism could just go and take a hike. Everything was up for re-evaluation, nothing was wrong per se.

This also meant that the historical and social context became of central importance. Not just that it was against something, but it was freedom from something, it was bad manners with respect to something, it was amateurish and unprofessional with respect to something given etc. You could not fully understand and appreciate, or with some sort of understanding disapprove, such a thing without knowing at least the historical context and its standards of musical tradition.

Late modernism (Dibelius), such as it appears in the Darmstadt school, was really a guardian of tradition, not traditionalistic in any sense, but firmly built on tradition and musical professionalism. The material and technical experimentation, including the use of new technology and new ways of playing on traditional instruments, was also firmly rooted in the canons of western fine arts music, it was musical development with focus on compositional methods and expressional ideas with strong confidence in the possibilities of the development of new things.

In the beginning of this journey into post modernistic freedom I was still a student of composition at a college of music. A world famous, technically extremely skilled, “modernistic” composer was for a short period visiting professor at our school. During supervision he looked in clear disgust at the compositions I showed him. I don’t know if he thought it was a bad joke, or just a case of a student in lack of any sort basic education in composition. Not to appear rude he gave me some well-meaning advices with respect to instrumentation. To some extent the context was such a central matter that trying to look beyond it almost nothing was left and that was probably what he saw, i.e. nothing, at least nothing of artistic interest.

In these days of late post modernistic authoritarian thinking it is a strange feeling looking back at these “freedom” experiments.

Eventually I was a bit fed up with these experiments. I don’t regret doing this at all, it was fun and it gave me a broader perspective on musical composition as “conceptual art” and today I can, with confidence, claim I have extensive *lived experience* of the art practice of post modernism. But there was something irritating and boring about the whole thing. The idea of the ubiquitous context is in some sense absolutely trivial. Yes, there is always a context. So what? We clearly transcend the context all the time in everyday life, i.e. repeating things, abstracting things etc. Looking for musical ideas as such the context became a burden, such ideas should be invariants providing an aesthetical foundation for the different performances, not something locked up in a contextual prison. The sense of freedom I felt was simply superficial. It was fun, a good laugh, but what was really left? Ok, I understand, but in some sense I was back there joining the baffled visiting professor looking at nothing.

Much later when I saw the magnificent Neue Staatsgalerie by James Stirling in Stuttgart (Baker) there was this expression of freedom, but still careful, strongly professional and respectful over traditions, a sort of very “modernistic” post modernism. Ok, the historical context is certainly important if you fully want to understand the games Stirling plays, but bracketing the context there is indeed very much left.

This is, I feel, very different from the games I was trying to play. Post modernism in the sense of freedom to totally, and disrespectfully, turn things up-side-down is some sense a transitional thing, a rebellion waiting for new things to come along.

When fed up with this there is an obvious risk that you turn your back not only on these post modernistic experiments, but also on the ideas of modernism ending up in a mere traditionalistic turn.

And it was for sure early on a very big disappointment when I gradually realised that this post modernistic reaction, and freedom movement, was just followed by a split between a reactionary opening for traditionalism to come back and take over, and the present days authoritarian version of post modernism, not only leaving late modernism in the wardrobe, but somehow just disregarding this strange and disrespectful refutation of traditions. Order was restored and that was that.

So, what is modernism all about and what would it mean to try revisiting these ideas in search for a way out of the contextual prison of post modernism?

This is not a question asking for the story of modernism as a historical event, i.e. not a question asking about what they did in the name of modernism in the 20th century. It is a question about the fundamental ideas we see as we bracket the historical context. Modernism in this sense is clearly a forever recurrent thing visible in the fight between Apollo and Dionysios as this is discussed by Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche). So even if connections with the canons of the Enlightenment are clear, it is not ideas born there and then.

Yes of course, it makes sense to look for new things, it makes sense to develop things. There are universal values, we can make things better. Reason, not rage. Reflection, not situational action. And so on. But that is not the whole story.

Look beyond the context, transcend the context! That is the essential call modernism, as I understand it, is making.

The St Petri Church, the architectural miracle by Sigurd Lewerentz (Flora et Al.), in the small Swedish village Klippan is a building full of reasons why, a walk through the church can be an in depth course in design semiotics, but what happens when we look

beyond all these reasons why? Can we open up for a deeper understanding of the theology of the building by freeing ourselves of the context? What is still left as we bracket the context, all these initial reasons why? This is certainly a very useful exercise in modernistic thinking.

You could compare this with Hiroshi Sugimoto's exercise in discovering the true masterpieces of architecture (Sugimoto).

Stuttgart is interesting city with respect to the divide between modernism and post modernism. On one hand you have the Weissenhof Estate, the housing estate built for an exhibition 1927 (Schulte) that includes buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Jacobus Oud, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and others, and on the other hand the canonical "post modernistic" Neue Staatsgalerie. We can ask ourselves if the divide still is there as we free ourselves from the context of these buildings.

What is the context? What could it mean to transcend the context as a foundation for revisiting a modernistic art practice?

The context

The context, that which surrounds things, events etc. An event takes place somewhere, the locale where it takes place is essential in understanding the event. Transcending the context means that we turn away from thinking of something as a particular event, or that we, so to speak, try to read beyond the event. The question here is then what that could mean if we look at things from the other end, i.e. not from the perspective of given things, but from the perspective of giving things.

It is clear that design always is design of something. We build a church, we express a locale that opens up for religious sermons, religious practice. But what about the magic of the expressions of the church as such? The locale as that which displays, presents the church.

So we leave the context by looking beyond what it is that the expression expresses and dwell on the expression itself. You can see why arias in the cantatas of J. S. Bach (Marissen) are expressed the way they are in relation to the text, but you can also just disregard that and dwell on the expression as such. It is like Alice going through the looking glass (Carroll) and discover a whole new world full of wonders and mysteries. But you can also go back and rediscover the context through its expression.

Disregarding the context

To pay no attention, to ignore the context. To treat the context without proper respect. This is early post modernism up-side-down in some sense. A mass written by, say Johannes Ockeghem (Reese) is a mass of course, but here we bracket that and may pay

full attention to the formal wonders of the composition more or less ignoring the religious context.

Expressional kernels

As we disregard the context, the first thing we see is just an expression, that which displays the thing. We see the thing in a certain context making the thing relative to what we see, but the expression is anyway absolute.

Revisiting the context

When the context is silent the thing is just form, the expression of the thing displays just form. What we see is the form of a church, not a church.

The expressional reduction

In a process of designing we first introduce the context by asking “what is it?”. It is a church, or a mass etc. It would then be natural to ask “where is it?”. A certain place or a certain intended first performance etc. This continues in a long series of questions and eventually we face the question as how to express this thing we are about to design. Here we go back and forth between exploring the context and exploring issues of form and material, how the context informs decisions about form and material, how decisions about form and material further defines and deepens the context.

The *expressional reduction* is the decisive moment when we ask the context to be silent opening up for the total focus on the expressional kernel. Moments where we see the pure expression of the thing. As a principle of analytic aesthetics this relates to Immanuel Kant’s idea that pleasure in beauty is free from desire, that aesthetic judgment is free of interests (Ginsborg).

When there is something to see (in the broadest sense of the word) this expressional reduction is closely related to the phenomenological reduction, the epoché, (Spiegelberg), but in the process of designing something the situation is quite different as there initially is nothing to see. This is a moment where the border between expression and form dissolves.

In the process of designing, i.e. the act of making/defining something, the context is initially very present. The expressional reduction comes out of acts of making formal decisions without any consideration of the context, the why of the design as the design of something given.

The expressional reduction is the turning towards formal decisions as if form itself is the thing we design. This is also where the difference between expression, that which displays a thing, and form, the way in which material build a thing, becomes a mere mirage. The context is silent. It is not a series of decisions that form a church, it is not the form of a church, just a series of decisions that build a form, no what and no why. It is an

absolute thing. We leave the relativisations of post modernism and open up for revisiting some of the territories of a recurrent modernism. This is also where the experience, the perception of an artwork is put in brackets.

The context is the “that” in the question “How to express that?”. The expressional reduction means truning from this question to the question “What is the form?”. *It is all about bringing expression back home to form.*

The context becomes silent as we ask to be free of expression as expression of something given.

The notion of *detachment (abgeschiedenheit)* in Dorothee Sölle’s work on the teachings of Meister Eckhart is interesting here: “So therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God” (Hawkins, Sölle). A saying of Eckhart that Sölle refer to as the mystical moments of emptiness and presence that opens up. Relating this to the ubiquitous post modernistic “context” we could say: let us free ourselves of the context by asking it to be silent. It is a sort of detachment that welcomes “modernism” back, not as an ideology of the brave new world, but as mysticism of art and artistic practice, far beyond more simplistic ideas of l’art pout l’art. There is no rationale beyond the expression itself, no big “why” (warum) of the art work, it just is caring about basic questions that are always there as we design something, making up the core of art practice from a “modernistic” perspective.

In times when experiments with materials and construction methods were central in art practices all this is clearly visible in some sense, the modernism during the 20th century, the long period of counterpoint experiments in music leading up to the music of J. S. Bach, and so on. We find these recurrent periods in all art forms as a shift in focus towards foundational issues. We should not confuse this with notions of “abstract” art, “absolute” music and so on, i.e. art that is not “about” anything in particular. As the context becomes silent it is still there, it is a church we build, but this as an invitation that now has become silent. Forgetful about, and free from, the given context it anyway comes back and talk to us through the way in which we express and define it. We bring it alive as we express something given in forgetfulness.

What could detachment (*abgeschiedenheit*) as a leitwort for artistic practice then mean in a more general sense? Not as a notion for the categorization of periods in the history of art practice, but as a programmatic call for the development of art practice.

It is not to turn away, but to bring something home as if form is where expression belongs, detachment as bringing something home. It is not a church we express, but a church expression we form.

As you make decisions in art practice, initially you ask the context for advice. But there will be more or less complete silence at certain points. The expressional reduction is

always there in the background, whether we acknowledge it or not. So where do we turn? With respect to what does a decision make sense at these points of context silence? It is really nothing more left here than the logic of form.

As we make these decisions in context silence it is a turning point, it is here that we turn back to rediscover the context through the expressions of things, i.e. we eventually see that it is a church through these church expressions.

This is also why the practice of form thinking is at the center of artistic practice. Post modernism would of course not agree, from this perspective we somehow never reach beyond the context.

Detachment is then listening to the silence of the context, attachment the means revisiting the context through the expressions we form, redefining it.

So when the context fades away and becomes silent, where do we look for a foundation of expressional decisions? The decisions that brings something into being.

It is in this bringing expression back home to form we find a foundation where nothing is found looking for a lost context.

What does it then mean to being answered by bringing something back home? What is form as home?

To bring something home means bringing it back where it belongs, where it comes from, where it lives or was brought up.

Assume there is something given, a piece of art, some music, a film, a performance, a garment etc. Since it is given, we may assume it is documented so that we can have a "look" at it.

Now I point at something in that given, a section of the score, a scene in the film, a gesture, a line and so on. And I ask,

- How did you do *that*?
- Could *it* have been done differently?

In the first question I don't talk about the expression as such, but where it comes from, i.e. the home of the expression. What is important in the second question is the "it", that which is displayed, the "thing" we express.

For the second question it might seem natural to answer,

- Yes, of course. *It* could have been done in a different way.

But as the context becomes silent, the answer must be *no*.

It is *no* since that is what *it* is, the form itself, the way in which material builds the thing.

Bringing expression home to form in this way deepens the understanding of the expression as such, what we see now is expression as that which display form, not a thing.

The detachment involved in this reduction is not a matter of analytic distancing in relation to something I have no close bonds with. It is detachment as turning away from all forms of “why” as we step by step recollect what it is that we actually did, unfolding the simple way in which material builds the thing.

The “no” seems trivial in some sense. Of course, if we just look at what we did how could it be done in another way? But to reach this, performing the reduction, thus defining the thing as pure form is certainly not trivial. Travelling back through series of contextual layers, we travel *with* something. Now the question change character and we gradually see that *it* of course could have been done differently, i.e. we could have expressed it differently. What this could mean is now much clearer.

A natural objection, or comment, is that in many cases there are always lots of things given by the context. In fashion/clothing design the buttons might be given, so of course it could have been different, but it is not my choice.

So, this is the situation when there is something given, something I know. But what does all this mean with respect to a acts of designing, acts of actually expressing something, introducing a new thing – in its most general sense – redefining the initial context? Now we work our way towards the thing. Implicitly redefining series of contextual layers.

Now assume we have an empty canvas in front of us and that we are supposed to paint a picture of a house on it. It is all fine , we perhaps have an image of a house there to help us. But still, where do we start? We can of course in advanced have made up a system of how to copy, or interpret, a given image on to a canvas. So we know where to start since it is already decided in advance. But what does that mean? It tells us where expression lives, it defines form of the picture from the perspective of forming, painting.

We seldom start from zero in real world practice, so there is a context given, we have a way of working, designed by ourselves in combination with the other given context. But we can look beyond that and so to speak go through the looking glass.

Look into the mirror. See your own practice.

The expressional reduction as exercise

So let us do something, design *something*. There is always a bunch of first decisions.

Ask yourself: is it me or the context that will make the decisions?

Say you are about to design a shirt. The context will initially make a series of general and more or less abstract decisions for you. The most important of these decisions result in a series of design variables that shape a design frame.

Consider that done and forget about them.

In forgetfulness of what it is you are about to design you continue. You might say that there is a color, or colors, to decide.

Eventually there will be no *why*. If it is not a reason why, what is it? It is *trust* in the aesthetical judgement. That is, trust in the ability to bring expression back home to form.

Take a series of photos, a series of photos of something. Look at them, put all photos you immediately like, and where you find a reason, aside, this is the context speaking. Look again, and again under a period of a couple of weeks or so, repeating the same procedure. In the end there should, hopefully, be some photos left. Now try to look carefully at what is left. Is there something interesting, or just garbage? If you give up, repeat the whole thing taking photos of something else. Now finally there should be some photos that speaks to you in a somewhat mystical manner, the pure form that speaks as the context finally is silent. Something that you did not see initially as the context, your preconceived ideas of good photography, loudly hides this.

In retrospect you could of course try to find reasons why by various means, but in the acts of reviewing the photos, and generally in acts of artistic work, form speaks directly. This is *one* way of understanding what the expressional reduction means in practice. The series of photos is, of course, just one simple example. The general idea is that there must be lots of material to evaluate and it is an exercise you must repeat over and over training yourself to see and to trust (Cf. Malmgreen de Oliveira).

Another type of exercises are the ones that follows a more or less direct reading of the mantra "bringing expression back home to form". Here we start by making a notion of form explicit and precise in formalizing a way of working. Since this in itself is an act of designing we are caught in what looks like a circle. But there is still a difference in degree of abstraction.

In music you can say that this is what we build on, all the way from improvisational music to score based music. Even if the context expressionally is very present in so called “program music” in some sense.

As time-arts it is interesting to compare music and film here. Film is, in practice, certainly very different from music with respect to the expressional reduction, but this is equally certain not a necessity.

Consider some time-form is given. Make a time scheme in advance without any considerations about *what* to film. It could be based on a sequence of random numbers measuring seconds of filming, or based on some number sequence with predefined properties. Then decided *something* to film, somebody working, somebody walking, people talking, a lecture, etc. Each take you make must now follow the given number sequence, measured in seconds. You could also add further restrictions, such as for instance camera movement, distance to filmed objects, etc. The resulting films should be at least 5-10 minutes long. Watch the film, watch it again and again. Do you see something expressionally interesting? Repeat the exercise using another number sequence and other additional restrictions. See what happens with the way you use your aesthetical judgements. You could also use the number sequence as you edit filmed material.

Weaving and knitting are in their very essence canonical examples of acts of bringing expression back home to form. Here expression could be understood as the yarn in its places where “in its places” is the form as that is given by a weaving or knitting formula.

We may use this idea of something in its places as the foundation for training. What is of particular interest in the cases of weaving and knitting is that “its places” does not exist in concreto until the yarn actually is there. So the challenge is to, in an abstract manner, define a notion of “its places”, the form, and take something putting it “in its places”, the expression. The places we are looking at should not be there until that something is there.

All this is really very simple. For instance, clear the floor of things in a room. Throw say twenty tin cans, or whatever you have at hand, one thing at a time on the floor to form a pattern. It does not matter how much time you will spend on performing the exercise. What is important is that you focus on the form that gradually emerge.

Where detachment is a leitwort for artistic practice we care about the shift from context to expression, what it means to go from asking *what it is* to asking about *the way it is*. Revisiting modernism as an artist and designer is then all about training to handle the expressional reduction in practice.

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