

and personal reflection that Eley finds so valuable in Steedman's work. Yet in its refusal to drift into irony or resignation, in its attempt to work through the theoretical complexities of the present moment, and in its plea that historians engage large-scale questions of social and political change, this book is also provocative and timely. In his last chapter, "Defiance," Eley calls for a history that takes on what Charles Tilly calls "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" (193). After all, if historians cede this terrain, others—economists, political scientists, journalists—have shown themselves more than willing to move in and establish a series of simplistic historical narratives that enshrine the market as an absolute good, legitimate reckless foreign policy adventures, and foreclose possibilities for intellectual dissent and debate. "Unless the ruling ideas can also be challenged and contested at this level of their efficacy, left-wing historians will be stranded without a public voice, whether watching powerlessly from the sidelines or clinging, knowingly but fearfully, to the wings of Benjamin's Angel" (198). The challenge, Eley concludes, is for historians to deploy the insights and practices developed in cultural history at the level of grand narrative, and in doing so answer Thompson's call for a true "history of society."

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Harry Lehmann.

**Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst.**

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Just as Hegel's philosophy was continued in different ways by his students and followers after his death, so, too, can we already see various distinct trends among Niklas Luhmann's descendants. If Dirk Baecker and Peter Fuchs represent a slightly more orthodox variant of systems theory (in that they both continue Luhmann's skepticism regarding the philosophical tradition), there is also Oliver Jahraus's magisterial attempt to link Luhmann and media theory back to hermeneutics (*Literatur als Medium* [Velbrück, 2003]). Now Harry Lehmann has put forth, in *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst*, the decidedly unorthodox project of a philosophy of systems theory. Lehmann's title already gives away his secret: his book seeks to rehabilitate the notion, central to the philosophical aesthetics of F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich

Nietzsche, and Theodor W. Adorno, that art may communicate truth content. This idea was strictly excluded by Luhmann, as well as by Jürgen Habermas: for both of them, the modern differentiation of society into distinct and autonomous subsystems of law, politics, economics, religion, science, and art—a tendency already glimpsed by Immanuel Kant and then further developed by Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons—forbids any such linkage of art and truth as metaphysical or “old-European” (Luhmann’s favorite term of dismissal). How can Lehmann defend his idea without either simply falling back into older aesthetics, or forcing incompatible theories into a shotgun marriage?

The key to Lehmann’s book lies in a metacritique of Luhmann. Lehmann shows convincingly that Luhmann’s conception of functional social subsystems, as of the symbolic media of communication that drive them, is better suited to systems like economy, law, or politics than it is to art, philosophy, religion, or love. (Parsons had originally developed this conception of media-driven subsystems in the 1950s and 1960s.) Habermas had already made this criticism in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, but Lehmann draws different conclusions than did Habermas. Lehmann argues that we need to distinguish between *communications* media—in the case of functional subsystems such as law, economics, or science—and what he baptizes *Humanmedien*, for the four subsystems of art, philosophy, religion, and love. This represents a second heresy relative to Luhmann, who was famously as much of an antihumanist as were the French poststructuralists (although with a different accent than theirs, one more of dry Kantian irony than of Michel Foucault’s grand rhetoric of “the death of Man”). Lehmann is not, however, proposing a return to any sort of anthropological foundationalism. He shows that human media work differently than functional communications media. The latter are characterized by autopoietic closure and self-reference, embodied in the operation of *re-entry* (a term borrowed from the logic of George Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form*). This means, for instance, that the legal system alone can determine what is legal or illegal, and it must do so only with reference to itself, not through any external reference to an ultimate reality outside itself (as in natural law). For Lehmann, art functions through what he calls, in an ironic reformulation of Spencer Brown, *re-exit*. In other words, art cannot function through the “business-as-usual” model of Luhmann’s other function systems, which operate by constantly reconfirming their systemic memory: art must continually redefine what it is, in opposi-

tion to its own inherited historical traditions. Art has to constantly reach outside itself (in what Luhmann would call a *Fremdreferenz* or “hetero-reference”) to renew itself against the danger of academic or museal traditionalism. Lehmann’s model here implies a healthy corrective to the sterile tendency of contemporary art and literature to “systematize” itself in a form of clubbish, cliquish insider trading that replaces real artistic innovation and originality with a media- and money-driven politics of power and publicity. Great literary outsiders like Friedrich Hölderlin, Jean Paul, Georg Büchner, or Raymond Roussel would have a hard time of it in today’s “literary system.”

Lehmann’s aesthetic thus corrects Luhmann’s own disguised artistic classicism, most evident in *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, where art is defined as “Formenkombination” (combination of forms), a formulation that gives decided preference to Apollo over Dionysius (Nietzsche), or to construction over mimesis (Adorno). This is why Luhmann’s view of art has a hard time with the avant-garde. Lehmann does not. Moreover, his systematic philosophical argumentation is buttressed with seven analyses of mostly contemporary artworks from all different media, visual arts, architecture, poetry, prose, film, and music. Thus Lehmann seeks not only to put forward a systematic philosophical aesthetic but also to demonstrate how it works in empirical terms.

Lehmann’s close readings of individual artworks are also tied up with a critique of postmodernism (and of the avant-garde), for Lehmann seeks to rehabilitate the idea of the individual art-*work* (*Kunstwerk*). He does so partly in polemical answer to the subjectivizing aesthetics of *Erfahrung* (experience) developed by Rüdiger Bubner, Martin Seel, and Albrecht Wellmer. One of the strengths of Lehmann’s book is its attention to close readings, which was decidedly not Luhmann’s forte. In this, his book may be seen as part of a larger tendency today toward defining a “second modernity” in the wake of postmodernism’s failure. Second modernity is defined, by sociologists like Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, as *reflexive*, in distinction to the avant-gardism of first modernity. The question becomes, for theories of art like Lehmann’s, where to situate this reflexivity in aesthetic terms. In Lehmann, it is linked with a rehabilitation of the idea of art’s critical potential—again something familiar from Adorno, but certainly not from Luhmann. This means that Lehmann is better able than Luhmann to define just what “function” art should have in modernity; one of Luhmann’s difficulties was to locate a genuine social function for art, when his theory of differentiation (like Habermas’s) tended to isolate art from any other

system's content, whether political, economic, legal, or moral. (This is what Hegel and Adorno already diagnosed as art's loss of objective interest.) In addition, philosophical aesthetics, for Lehmann, should have the pragmatic and critical function of intervening in art debates to provide artists with new concepts and programs.

In addition, there is a larger philosophical dimension to Lehmann's critique. Central to his book is a discussion of Luhmann's famously all-encompassing concept of *Sinn* (meaning), which Habermas had already criticized in his 1970 debate with Luhmann. Meaning is, for Luhmann, a nonnegatable "Supermedium" from which there can be, inside society, no escape. Even the negation of meaning cannot help produce meaning. But Luhmann's functionalist generalization of meaning tends also to level the concept, and thus to exclude what Lehmann calls "emphatic meaning," that is, the sort of truth that philosophical aesthetics has associated with art. The systemic, self-referential closure of Luhmann's functionalized meaning also makes the production of genuinely *new* meaning difficult. Habermas's answer to this was to suggest that critical and emancipatory potential had to be sought outside social systems, in the lifeworld. Lehmann asserts that this potential should be found in his four *Humanmedien* of art, religion, philosophy, and love. The "emphatic meaning" of art develops what Lehmann calls a "critical difference" that opens up art both to the world outside its systemic self-reference and to an expressive, mimetic "language character" beyond Luhmann's classicizing "combination of forms."

It should be evident that Lehmann raises more problems here than he can solve in one book. In particular, space constraints cause his characterizations of the other "human media," such as religion and philosophy, to sometimes be sketchier than his discussions of art. One suspects that more orthodox Luhmann followers will not view this critical, close reading of the master from Bielefeld kindly. Yet Lehmann's book, rather than simply mechanically "applying" Luhmann to another literary or artistic work, brings out the inner tensions and dynamic energy contained within the imposing grand architecture of systems theory. *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst* opens up debate rather than foreclosing it with definitive arguments. Because of this, the book ought to be a key point of departure for further work in aesthetic theory.

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