

‘Thus we forever see the ages as they appear mirrored in our spirits’: Willhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* as longseller, or the birth of artistic modernism from the spirit of the imagined other

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So we may advance the following proposition: the simple line and its further development in accordance with pure geometrical rules must offer the greatest possible delight for people disturbed by the unclarity and confusion of phenomena. Because here the last scrap of contingency and independence in life is erased, here the highest, absolute form, the purest abstraction has been attained; here is law, necessity, where otherwise everything is ruled by the caprices of the organic.¹
(Wilhelm Worringer, 1908)

In their search for purity artists were compelled to abstract the natural forms that concealed the plastic elements, to destroy the natural forms and replace them with art forms. Today, the idea of the art form is as outdated as the idea of the natural form ... Concrete art, not abstract, because nothing can be more concrete, nothing more real than a line, a colour, a surface.²
(Theo van Doesburg, 1930)

Thirty years on from William Rubin’s controversial exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1984), the question of the role and siting of non-European art has acquired a new relevance through the globalizing tendencies in art history. At the heart of the debate back then were the objects that Rubin had enlisted to back up his thesis of the affinity of ‘tribal’ and

Translated from the German by Malcolm Green and Teresa Woods-Czisch

¹ ‘Wir stellen also den Satz auf: die einfache Linie und ihre Weiterbildung in rein geometrischer Gesetzmässigkeit musste für den durch die Unklarheit und Verworrenheit der Erscheinungen beunruhigten Menschen die grösste Beglückungsmöglichkeit darbieten. Denn hier ist der letzte Rest von Lebenszusammenhang und Lebensabhängigkeit getilgt, hier ist die höchste, absolute Form, die reinste Abstraktion erreicht; hier ist Gesetz, ist Notwendigkeit, wo sonst überall die Willkür des Organischen herrscht.’ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, Munich: Piper, 1921, 26.

² ‘A la recherche de la pureté, les artistes étaient obligés d’abstraire les formes naturelles qui cachaient les éléments plastiques, de détruire les formes-nature et de les remplacer par les formes-art. Aujourd’hui, l’idée de forme-art est aussi périmée que l’idée de forme-nature (...) Peinture concrète et non abstraite parce que rien n’est plus concret, plus réel qu’ une ligne, qu’ une couleur, qu’ une surface.’ Theo van Doesburg, ‘Commentaires sur la base de la peinture concrète’, *Art Concret*, 1, 1930, 2.

modern art. Rubin's concern was to show that European artists and those non-European artists dubbed by modernism as primitive were driven by similar aesthetic premises and a similar attitude of mind.³

This glossed over not only the extent to which formal aesthetic solutions of non-European art had been appropriated by European artists, but above all the intellectual-historical conditions that had made first the primitivist self-image of the European avant-garde possible.

Bound up to an imagined other, the appropriation of non-European art at the dawn of the twentieth century seemed to mean at first glance its inclusion in European art. But what it actually spelt was its de facto exclusion, as Rubin's critics have shown.⁴ An exclusion that was based on a paradox: Modernism, with its endeavour to tame and subdue nature, was dedicated to progress – while constantly longing for an other with an allegedly pristine self, yet instantly holding this selfsame other at a distance during the process of appropriation.⁵

As Frances S. Connelly has shown in her study *The Sleep of Reason*,⁶ this primitivist figure of thought had developed since the Enlightenment in the shadow of a mode of thinking bound increasingly to rationalism, and can be spotted long before the appropriation of non-European art by the avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Connelly, it was this that made the artistic appropriation of the other possible.⁷

There were many attempts in the waning nineteenth and early twentieth century not only to present the artefacts that had been shipped from the colonies in exhibitions, but also to site them theoretically, taxonomically, and institutionally.⁸ One of the early attempts in the twentieth century to integrate non-European art into the art discourse and interpret it was the dissertation submitted in 1906 to the University of Berne by the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), titled *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*.⁹ Reviewed in

³ William Rubin, 'Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction', in William Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, vol. 1, 11.

⁴ See for example James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988, 195; Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer, Indian Chief: Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art', *Artforum*, 23:3, November 1984, 54–61; Kitty Zijlmans, 'Die Welt im Blickfeld: Unterwegs zu einer global orientierten Kunstgeschichte', in Claus Volkenandt, ed., *Kunstgeschichte und Weltgegenwartskunst: Konzepte, Methoden, Perspektiven*, Berlin: Reimer, 2004, 244.

⁵ The visible expression of this distance is the fact that non-European art has not been admitted to European art museums. It has been and still is being kept in other institutions.

⁶ Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

⁷ Connelly, *Sleep of Reason*, 7-9.

⁸ See for example Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 13-19; Ulrich Pfisterer, 'Origins and Principles of World Art History -1900 (and 2000)', in Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, 69-89.

⁹ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, Munich: Piper, 1908. Beginning with the third edition in 1910, the work contained an addendum titled 'Transzendenz und Immanenz in der Kunst'. This text was first published in 1908 as an

1907 in the journal *Kunst und Künstler* edited by Karl Scheffler,¹⁰ the manuscript came to the notice of the publisher Reinhard Piper, who published it in 1908. Worringer's book has appeared in more editions than any other theoretical work of German modernism, and in international terms has been the most influential. It has been reprinted over twenty times and translated into nine languages.

Worringer's advocacy of including non-European art in art history is in keeping with his efforts to replace a limited 'Western concept of art' ('abendländische Kunstgesinnung') by an art concept 'in the universal sense' ('im Weltsinne'), as he phrased it in a later work.¹¹ He was aware, he emphasized, that the acceptance of non-European art was not easy and required 'cerebral labour' ('Gehirnarbeit'), as the sensibility schooled by classical art cannot yet gauge its aesthetic values.¹²

As welcome as Worringer's plea for a global broadening of art-historical research may seem from the present perspective, his theoretical approach, which is tied to a fictive other and determined by primitivist ideas remains problematic. Certainly, his work helped to draw attention to non-European art, but it impeded its understanding. Not only did he point the European gaze on non-European art in the wrong direction, as will be evident, he also promoted its de-historicization.¹³ So the question is all the more pressing as to what actually made the book an internationally acclaimed longseller of modernism, which is referenced not only by artists but also by art and cultural theorists.¹⁴

The answer is to be sought in the adoption and subtle transformation of the primitivist figure of thought, which corresponded not only to the spirit of the early twentieth century, but to the very self-image of modernism as a whole. This article will attempt to show this. But first, reference will be made to some of the theoretical views on art in the second half of the nineteenth century that Worringer took as his starting point, developed further, and attempted to overcome and transform.

article in the journal *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*. It accentuated one of the underlying thoughts in Worringer's dissertation, without adding anything fundamentally new. For the present article the seventh edition of the book of 1921 has been used, which is identical with the third edition. All verbatim quotations from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, are taken from the English edition *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, translated by Michael Bullock, New York: International Universities Press, 1953. The pagination is that of the German edition. Bullocks translation was available only in a non-paginated epub edition.

¹⁰ Paul Ernst, 'W. Worringer, „Abstraktion und Einfühlung“' in *Kunst und Künstler*, 1908, 12, 529.

¹¹ Wilhelm Worringer, *Griechentum und Gotik: Vom Weltreich des Hellenismus*, München: Piper, 1928, 7.

¹² Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 12 -13.

¹³ See Ursula Helg, 'Bewundern, Ablehnen, Missverstehen, Verherrlichen: Die traditionelle afrikanische Kunst im Spiegel ihrer abendländischen Rezeption' in Thomas Bearth, ed., *Afrika im Wandel*, Zurich: vdf, 2007, 225–238.

¹⁴ For the reception of Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* during the twentieth century see Claudia Öhlschläger, *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005; Norberto Gramaccini and Johannes Rössler, eds., *Hundert Jahre 'Abstraktion und Einfühlung': Konstellationen um Wilhelm Worringer*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012.

Ornament and the origin of art

With the world expositions – as ‘unique assemblages of all things’¹⁵ – a new contact zone came about in the Europe of nineteenth-century colonialism that was significant not only for artists like Gauguin, but also for art theorists like Gottfried Semper and Owen Jones. Unlike the cabinets of art and curiosities from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, which were seen as echoing a divine order and assumed an underlying affinity of all things,¹⁶ the expos – conceived of as showcases of national achievements – were informed by a secular order that was marked by materialism and based on hierarchy and difference. They were designed to maintain a temporal distance to things that had drawn closer spatially: the other was integrated into the narratives of origin and development in an all-embracing world of progress, evidenced in the exhibitions and presented there in a subordinate position as part of an evolutionary whole.

In the art discourse special importance was given to ornament, which was seen as a primordial structure, in the evolutionarily-oriented art theories of the nineteenth century in connection with the genesis and development of art, to which great attention was paid. Ornament was regarded as the counterpart to the classical vocabulary of forms.¹⁷ And the geometrized shapes, which presented a challenge to the nineteenth-century sense of form, were mostly regarded as the first expression of art in evolutionary terms.

In keeping with the evolutionary schema, Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) declared in his book *Der Stil* (1860), which was partly inspired by the London industrial exhibition *The Great Exhibition of the Works and Industry of All Nations* in 1851, that textile design was the ‘primal art’ (‘Urkunst’), visible in ‘the textile products of the savage and docile peoples of non-European culture and in their closeness to the domestic and edificial arrangements of these peoples’.¹⁸ In his reflections on the ‘Development and Origin of Artistic Phenomena’ Semper traced the origin of ornament – as a linear, geometrical structure – to braiding and thus to techno-mechanical causes.¹⁹ Like Goethe in the eighteenth century, who saw the origin of art in a ‘desire for adornment’ (‘Schmückungstrieb’),²⁰ Semper regarded

¹⁵ Charlotte Brontë in a letter to her father, 7th of June, 1851 in Clement Shorter, *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, vol. 2, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, 216.

¹⁶ Ursula Helg, ‘Dann ich hab darin gesehen wunderliche kunstliche Ding: Überlegungen zur Wahrnehmung, Repräsentation und Verortung nichtwestlicher Kunst und Kultur’, in Valérie Kobi and Thomas Schmutz, eds., *Les lieux d'exposition et leurs publics / Ausstellungsorte und ihr Publikum*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2013, 99-119; Gabriele Bessler, *Wunderkammern: Weltmodelle von der Renaissance bis zur Kunst der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Reimer, 2009; Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglaube: Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 1993.

¹⁷ Connelly, *Sleep of Reason*, 55 -56.

¹⁸ Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik: Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860, 238. ‘in den textilen Producten der wilden und zahmen Völker nicht-europäischer Kultur und ihrem nahen Zusammenhang mit den häuslichen und baulichen Einrichtungen dieser Völker.’

¹⁹ Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, 228.

²⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Von deutscher Baukunst*, Rudolstadt and Jena, 1773, 14.

the body decorations of non-European peoples as an expression of a 'barbaric taste in art' ('barbarischer Kunstgeschmack'). Yet by taking this – with Polynesian tattooing as his example – as evidence for his theory that architecture originated from the practice of covering the body and equating it with the genesis of art, which until then had been assigned to Greece, he relativized and thus undermined the absolute validity of classical antiquity.²¹

Unlike Semper, Owen Jones (1809-1874), the author of the richly illustrated *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), attributed the birth of art like Goethe to a desire for adornment. He praised 'primitive', pre-classical ornamentation for its balanced and harmonious treatment of form and colour and recommended 'to get rid of the acquired and artificial, and return to and develop natural instincts'.²² Others again, like the anthropologist Ernst Grosse (1863-1927) saw the origin of art in a mimetic drive, in an 'impulse to imitation' ('Nachahmungstrieb').²³ Grosse dedicated a voluminous publication to the topic, titled *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894).²⁴

Semper, Jones and Grosse were among the first to adopt an approach that did justice to the newly made claim raised by imperialism and evolutionary doctrine 'to include the art of all peoples and all ages' in art history. Semper and Jones called for its inclusion above all because – in a quasi-primitivist spirit – they envisaged non-European art forms using them to enrich and revitalise European art. Jones described non-European ornamentation as an 'evergushing fountain'.²⁵

From *poesis* to *mathesis*

Given the key role played by ornament in nineteenth-century art history, it was obvious that Worringer would also place it at the centre of his reflections. To his mind, ornament offered a kind of paradigm out of which the specific properties of an artistic style could be read. He drew here on the publications *Stilfragen* (1893) and *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901) by Alois Riegl (1858-1905),²⁶ and adopted his postulate 'that the certain something in man that makes us delight in the beauty of forms (...) had created the geometrical combinations of lines' in ornament 'in a free and independent way'.²⁷

It would be wrong, Worringer wrote, to attribute the origin of art to causes brought forward in the nineteenth century such as technical skills or a mimetic drive. It should be assumed, rather, that they lie in a psychological need because 'at all

(reprint 1997).

²¹ Semper, *Der Stil*, 238 – 241.

²² Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London: Day and Son, 1856, 14 - 16.

²³ Ernst Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst*, Freiburg i. B. und Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J.C.B. Mohr, 1894, 65.

²⁴ See note 23.

²⁵ Jones, *Grammar*, 3.

²⁶ Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*. Berlin: Verlag von Georg Siemens, 1893; Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn im Zusammenhang mit der Gesamtentwicklung der bildenden Künste bei den Mittelmeervölkern*, Wien: Verlag der Kaiserlich-Königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1901.

²⁷ Riegl, *Stilfragen*, 32. 'Wir sagen lieber gleich, dass jenes Etwas im Menschen, das uns am Formsönen Gefallen finden lässt (...) die geometrischen Liniencombinationen frei und selbständig erschaffen hat.'

times art proper has satisfied a deep psychic need'.²⁸ And he saw this as no less true of the end-nineteenth-century art that still clung to the classical canon. 'Our aesthetics is nothing more than a psychology of the classic artistic sensibility,' Worringer noted.²⁹ But this was not to be taken as absolute and as the measure of all art. We should in fact strive to leave our 'European limitations' ('europäische Beschränktheit') behind, for otherwise the practice of art history becomes an act of navel-gazing. In Worringer's words: 'Thus we forever see the ages as they appear mirrored in our own spirits.'³⁰

Useful if ultimately inadequate for the young art historian Worringer were the thoughts on aesthetics of Theodor Lipps (1854-1914), which first appeared in 1903 under the title *Grundlegung der Aesthetik*³¹ and in 1906, briefly summarised, as 'Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss' in the journal *Die Zukunft*.³² Worringer adopted Lipps's term of 'Einfühlung' or empathy, which the latter had taken from the contemporary psychology of perception, and made it the starting point of his theory. But the term, and thus Lipps's ideas, seemed to Worringer to fall short. 'This theory of empathy leaves us helpless', he noted, 'in the face of the artistic creations of many ages and peoples. It is of no assistance to us, for instance, in understanding that vast complex of works of art that pass beyond the narrow framework of Graeco-Roman and modern Occidental art.'³³

Worringer attributed art that eluded Lipps's concept of empathy, including all non-classical and non-European artistic manifestations, to the principle of 'abstraction' based on geometry, and saw it as originating in an 'urge to abstraction' ('Abstraktionsdrang'). He equated this with the 'primal artistic impulse' ('Urkunsttrieb') and defined it as the 'mental process' ('psychischer Prozess') that counters the 'objectified self-enjoyment' ('objektivierter Selbstgenuss') gained by empathy.³⁴

The driving force behind abstraction was fear of the world and the endeavour to banish this feeling: 'Whereas the precondition to the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relation of confidence between man and the phenomena of the outside world,' Worringer wrote, 'the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world.'³⁵

²⁸ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 15. 'Die eigentliche Kunst hat jederzeit ein tiefes psychisches Bedürfnis befriedigt.'

²⁹ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 162. 'Unsere Aesthetik ist nichts weiter als eine Psychologie des klassischen Kunstempfindens.'

³⁰ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 13-14. 'So bleibt es denn stets der Herren eigener Geist, in dem die Zeiten sich bespiegeln.'

³¹ Theodor Lipps, *Grundlegung der Aesthetik*, Hamburg: Voss, 1903.

³² Theodor Lipps, 'Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss,' *Die Zukunft*, vol. 54, 1906, 100-114.

³³ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 8. 'Vielmehr stehen wir mit dieser Einfühlungstheorie den künstlerischen Schöpfungen vieler Zeiten und Völker gegenüber hilflos da. Zum Verständnis jenes ungeheuren Komplexes von Kunstwerken, die aus dem engen Rahmen griechisch-römischer und modern okzidentaler Kunst hinaustreten, bietet sie uns z. B. keine Handhabe.'

³⁴ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 8, 16

³⁵ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 19. 'Während der Einfühlungsdrang ein glückliches antheistisches Vertraulichkeitsverhältnis zwischen dem Menschen und den Aussenwelterscheinungen zur Bedingung hat, ist der Abstraktionsdrang die Folge einer grossen inneren Beunruhigung

Further, unlike empathy, abstraction was accompanied by 'a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions', and consequently bound to religion,³⁶ thus making abstract art – in keeping with the primitivist figure of thought and contrary to the worldly orientation of classicism – the expression of an underlying pre-rational religious feeling, or as he wrote in a later work, a 'spiritual statement of intent' ('spiritueller Aussagewille').³⁷ Worringer attributed 'the style most perfect in its regularity, the style of the highest abstraction, most strict in its exclusion of life' to 'the peoples at their most primitive level of cultural development', claiming that there was a 'causal connection between primitive culture and the highest, purest regular art form.'³⁸

With his notion of the urge to abstraction, Worringer reified Riegl's postulate of 'that something in man' which in early ornamentation 'created the geometrical combinations of lines in a free and independent manner.'³⁹ And with his principle of abstraction he integrated the grammar of artistic forms excluded from the classical canon into the art discourse. By that he strove to release the discourse from its 'inner limitation which caused us to descry in the classical epochs absolute zeniths and peaks of fulfilment of all artistic creation',⁴⁰ and to counter the error 'of seeing the possibilities of the pure form only within the classical canon'.⁴¹

In the eighteenth century there were already reservations about the classical canon with its adherence to narrative - *ut pictura poesis*. Art came across as rigid, not least on account of its focus on content. Efforts were made to replace 'literariness' with 'visuality', to give the 'talking head a body' and inject new life into the frozen form.⁴² And here borrowings were made, not least from the primitive vocabulary of forms identified in ornament.

Worringer now subjected this primitive artistic expression to purification, inasmuch as he bound it to the 'regular form' ('gesetzmässige Form') and thus to the mathematical and rational: *ut pictura mathesis*. This way it is no longer physical and passionate as it was conceived in the eighteenth century, but spiritual and intellectual. It no longer has emotional valence, it is law. As such, it overcomes not only the 'contingency and temporality of the world-picture',⁴³ but also nature, body, sensuality and matter. Worringer thus continued the hierarchical dichotomies that

des Menschen durch die Erscheinungen der Aussenwelt.'

³⁶ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 19–20. 'und korrespondiert in religiöser Beziehung mit einer stark transzendentalen Färbung aller Vorstellungen'.

³⁷ Wilhelm Worringer, 'Kritische Gedanken zur Neuen Kunst (1919)' in *Fragen und Gegenfragen: Schriften zum Kunstproblem*, Munich: Piper, 1956, 87.

³⁸ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 22. 'der in seiner Gesetzmässigkeit vollkommenste Stil, der Stil der höchsten Abstraktion, der strengsten Lebensausschliessung ist den Völkern auf ihrer primitivsten Kulturstufe zu eigen. Es muss also ein kausaler Zusammenhang bestehen zwischen primitiver Kultur und höchster, reinster gesetzmässiger Kunstform.'

³⁹ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 10; see note 27.

⁴⁰ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 164. 'die innere Beschränktheit, die uns in den klassischen Epochen absolute Höhepunkte und Erfüllungsgipfel alles künstlerischen Schaffens erblicken liess'.

⁴¹ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 71. 'die Möglichkeiten der reinen Form nur innerhalb des klassischen Kanons zu sehen'.

⁴² Connelly, *Sleep of Reason*, 113.

⁴³ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 58. 'Zufälligkeit und Zeitlichkeit des Weltbildes'.

had determined European thought since the Enlightenment, in a way that fitted epistemic orders in the twentieth century with their making of science and rationality into absolutes. By constructing a model in which the binaries are not only taken to the extreme, but also anthropologized, he succeeded in inscribing them once and for all on the figure of thought of primitivism.

Abstraction as promise and fulfilment

Worringer, who was himself married to an artist,⁴⁴ stated as the essence of his study that the 'primal artistic impulse' had nothing to do with depicting nature, or with other causes referred to by former scholars. Based in the psychological sphere, 'it seeks after pure abstraction as the only possibility of repose within the confusion and obscurity of the world-picture, and creates out of itself, with instinctive necessity, geometric abstraction.'⁴⁵ This abstraction was 'the consummate expression, and the only expression of which man can conceive, of emancipation from all the contingency and temporality of the world-picture.'⁴⁶ Or put differently: the 'primal artistic impulse' was a 'disposition to regularity (...) already present in the germ-cell',⁴⁷ and found expression in a style created in accordance with geometry – until the intellect took over and science, as it had emerged in modern times, assumed the 'transcendental volition' ('transzendentes Wollen') of abstraction while simultaneously rendering it obsolete.⁴⁸

Art generated by the urge to abstraction had been joyless, according to Worringer, because it served a concrete purpose. But once science had relieved art of its function of providing orientation, it became a 'luxury activity of the psyche' ('Luxustätigkeit der Psyche'). This marked the birth of classicism: 'The old art had been a joyless impulse to self-preservation; now, after its transcendental volition had been taken over and calmed by the scientific striving after knowledge, the realm of art seceded from the realm of science. And the new art, which now springs to life, is

⁴⁴ Worringer got to know Marta Schmitz in 1905 in Munich and married her in May 1907. See Grebing, Helga, 'Von München nach Bern: Zwei Stationen des jungen Worringer und ihre Folgen', in Norberto Gramaccini and Johannes Rössler, eds., *Hundert Jahre*, 23-38.

⁴⁵ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 58. 'Der Urkunsttrieb (...) sucht nach reiner Abstraktion als der einzigen Ausruh-Möglichkeit innerhalb der Verworrenheit und Unklarheit des Weltbildes, und schafft mit instinktiver Notwendigkeit aus sich heraus die geometrische Abstraktion.'

⁴⁶ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 58. 'Sie ist der vollendete und dem Menschen einzig denkbare Ausdruck der Emanzipation von aller Zufälligkeit und Zeitlichkeit des Weltbildes.'

⁴⁷ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 24-25. 'schon in der Keimzelle enthaltene Disposition zur Gesetzmässigkeit'.

⁴⁸ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 178. Worringer verbatim: 'Science emerged, and transcendental art lost ground. For the world-picture set out by science and fashioned into a meaningful process, now offered the man who put his faith in the cognitive capacity of the understanding the same feeling of assurance that the transcendently predisposed man had reached only along the laborious and joyless detour of complete de-organicism and denial of life.' ('Die Wissenschaft kam nun auf und die transzendente Kunst verlor an Boden. Denn das durch den Intellekt geordnete und zum sinnvollen Geschehen gestaltete Weltbild bot nun dem an die Erkenntnismöglichkeit des Verstandes glaubenden Menschen dasselbe Sicherheitsgefühl, das der transzendental veranlagte Mensch nur auf dem mühsamen und freudlosen Umweg völliger Entorganisation und Lebensverneinung erreicht hatte.')

classical art. Its colouring is no longer joyless like the old. For it has become a luxury activity of the psyche, an activation of previously inhibited inner energies, freed from all compulsion and purpose, and the bestower of happiness. Its delight is no longer the rigid regularity of the abstract, but the mild harmony of organic being.⁴⁹

However, the growing scepticism that science encountered in modernism marked a new watershed, and abstraction returned: Once modern man had been 'hurled down from the pride of knowledge', art took its impulse once again from being 'lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world-picture',⁵⁰ in other words, from alienation, and manifested itself once again in abstraction. But since modern man no longer existed in the mass, like 'primitive man', but rather as individual, and thus no longer had use of that 'dynamic force resting in an undifferentiated mass pressed together by a common instinct', which 'had alone been able to create from out of itself those forms of the highest abstract beauty', modern abstraction was not so clear and pure as the old had been.⁵¹ Modern abstraction was no longer grounded, according to Worringer, in instinct, but had become the work of the intellect. Although it had affinity to primal abstraction, it nevertheless differed in its manifestations and mental disposition. Although also spiritually oriented, it was no longer bound to religion.⁵²

By distinguishing an urge to abstraction as the inner spring of primitive art, which later was replaced by the rationality of science, Worringer came up with a model – Biblical in pattern – based on promise and fulfilment, which stood for the primitivist figure of thought. Prefigured and simultaneously ennobled by a 'primal will to art' ('Urkunstwollen'), driven on by fear and directed to orientation in the world, an abstractionism now emancipated from nature and going beyond the classical canon of forms became the logical expression of modern art production.

⁴⁹ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 178-179. 'Die alte Kunst war ein freudloser Selbsterhaltungstrieb gewesen ; nun, da ihr transzendentes Wollen vom wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnisstreben aufgefangen und beruhigt wurde, schied sich das Reich der Kunst vom Reich der Wissenschaft. Und die neue Kunst, die nun entsteht, ist die klassische Kunst. Ihre Färbung ist nicht mehr freudlos wie die alte. Denn sie ist zu einer Luxustätigkeit der Psyche geworden, zu einer von allem Zwang und Zweck befreiten, beglückenden Betätigung innerer bisher gehemmter Kräfte. Ihr Glück ist nicht mehr die starre Gesetzmässigkeit des Abstrakten, sondern die milde Harmonie des organischen Seins.'

⁵⁰ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 23-24. 'Vom Hochmut des Wissens herabgeschleudert steht der Mensch nun wieder ebenso verloren und hilflos dem Weltbild gegenüber wie der primitive Mensch.'

⁵¹ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 24. 'der Mensch war Individuum geworden und hatte sich losgelöst von der Masse. Nur die dynamische Kraft, die in einer vom gemeinsamen Instinkt zusammengepressten undifferenzierten Masse ruht, hatte jene Formen von höchster abstrakter Schönheit aus sich heraus schaffen können. Das alleinstehende Individuum war zu schwach zu solcher Abstraktion.'

⁵² When Worringer speaks of modern abstraction, he is referring to what from the present-day perspective is less abstract but rather naturalistic-looking expressionism, whose advocate he initially became before becoming its critic by 1919 at the latest. See for instance Hannes Böhringer, 'Was zum Teufel war abstrakt? Ein Erinnerungsversuch nach hundert Jahren Abstraktion und Einfühlung' in Gramaccini and Rössler, *Hundert Jahre*, 39-47; Oskar Bättschmann, 'Worringer über zeitgenössische Kunst und Künstler' in Gramaccini and Rössler, *Hundert Jahre*, 113-129.

Modern abstraction drew on this argument for its legitimacy and modernism for its identity.

Ars una

Bound to the form, removed from space and time, and based on a human urge, every art is comparable in Worringer's system with every other, and in this perspective world art becomes *ars una*, assigned to the two poles of human artistic sensibility: abstraction (geometry) and empathy (naturalism).⁵³

This concept of art without boundaries was later to find its material expression in publications such as *Der Blaue Reiter* or *Le musée imaginaire*.⁵⁴ Whether and to what extent these publications were stimulated by Worringer's book will not be discussed here.⁵⁵

Among enthusiasts and early advocates of *ars una* were the British art critic Clive Bell (1881-1964) and the German-French artist Hans Arp (1886-1966). In 1914 in his publication, *Art*, Bell wrote: 'To those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago? The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy.'⁵⁶ And Hans Arp remarked in the catalogue to his exhibition in Zurich in 1915: 'The "new art" is as new as the oldest pots and vessels, the oldest cities and laws, and has long been practised by the oldest peoples of Asia, America, Africa, and most recently the Gothic Age.'⁵⁷

⁵³ Worringer did not use the term *ars una* in *Abstraction and Empathy*. Fifty years later, the almost 75 year-old Worringer nevertheless included an article of his titled *Ars Una?* (1954) in a publication of his shorter essays and talks (Wilhelm Worringer, *Fragen und Gegenfragen: Schriften zum Kunstproblem*. Munich: Piper, 1956, 155-163). In it he recants, as it were, the basic tenet of his first work – he rejects the comparability of styles and the term *ars una*. He rejects any kind of parallel between contemporary modernism and 'primitive' art and speaks of their 'fundamental incommensurability' ('völlige wesenhafte Inkommensurabilität'). They are divided, he says, by 'broad differences' ('generelle Unterschiede') which should not be translated into 'mere degrees of difference' ('graduelle Unterschiede') (Worringer, *Fragen*, 159). This recalls the crisis of Primitivism in the late 1910s and early 1920s and the relevant publications (see Miklós Szalay, 'Kunst als Kulturwerk', in Miklós Szalay, ed. *Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Han Coray 1916-1928*, Munich: Prestel, 1995, 236-237).

⁵⁴ Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *Der Blaue Reiter*, Munich: Piper, 1912; André Malraux, 'Le Musée imaginaire', *Psychologie de l'art*, vol. 1, Geneva: Skira, 1947. For further volumes of art with universalistic orientation see Walter Grasskamp, *André Malraux und das imaginäre Museum: Die Weltkunst im Salon*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2014, 98-110.

⁵⁵ See Kitty Zijlmans and Jos Hoogeveen, *Kommunikation über Kunst: Eine Fallstudie zur Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte des 'Blauen Reiters' und von Wilhelm Worringers 'Abstraktion und Einfühlung'*, Leiden: Uitgeverij Alpha, 1988; Grasskamp, *André Malraux*, 207.

⁵⁶ Clive Bell, *Art*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1914, 37.

⁵⁷ Hans Arp, Introduction to the catalogue of his exhibition *Moderne Wandteppiche, Stickereien, Malereien, Zeichnungen*, Zurich, Galerie Tanner, 1915, unpaginated, translation Nicholas Walker in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory*, Harrison & Wood: Oxford, 2003, 276-7. 'Die „neue Kunst“ ist so neu, wie die ältesten Gefässe, Städte, Gesetze und wurde von den älteren Völkern Asiens, Amerikas, Afrikas und zuletzt von den Gotikern geübt.' Like Bell and Arp, Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966) and Le Corbusier (1887–

Through the integration of the non-classical and non-European art into an universal canon of art the primitivist figure of thought appears to dissolve. It seems to disappear in the inexhaustible play of forms transcending time and place, while in fact it gets only invisible, hidden in the concept of geometric abstraction.

'These works are structures of lines, surfaces, forms, colors. They try to approach the eternal, the inexpressible above man', wrote Hans Arp in the quoted publication to his exhibition in 1915 in Zurich⁵⁸ – in accordance with Worringer's words on the 'regular form' in ornament with its bounding to spirituality. Nevertheless modernism hold ornament – in line with the primitivist figure of thought – at a distance. Any mention of the obvious proximity of geometric abstraction to ornamentation was taboo until the advent of postmodernism.⁵⁹ Modernism defamed ornament as empty decoration, so obscuring abstraction's affinity to it.⁶⁰ Concret art, cleansed - like Worringer's primal abstraction – of every last vestige of 'nature' was lauded after the Second World War as an artistic world language. As the expression of mathematical rationalism and as a correlate of technical modernism it would spread all over the world and would gain universal significance.⁶¹

Empathy into abstraction

Although Wilhelm Worringer clearly shifted non-European art into the focus of attention with his global perspective, and in doing so enhanced its appreciation, he was far from attributing it with a 'subtile ingenia', as Dürer did at the commencement of European contact with the outside world, when encounters were

1965) were also convinced of the transcultural legibility of art and made this conviction the guiding thought of their journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* in the 1920s, (see Miklós Szalay, 'Klassik' in Szalay, *Afrikanische Kunst*, 14). The universalization of the concept of art was advanced with great intensity in the 1920s (see Grasskamp, *André Malraux*, 113 – 130).

⁵⁸ Arp, *Moderne Wandteppiche*, 278. 'Diese Arbeiten sind Bauten aus Linien, Flächen, Formen und Farben. Sie suchen sich dem Unsagbaren über dem Menschen, dem Ewigen zu nähern'.

⁵⁹ Some artists broke this taboo, for example Hugo Ball, who was 1917 referring to abstraction as 'a revival of ornament' ('eine Wiederbelebung des Ornaments'). Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, München/Leipzig 1927, 117.

⁶⁰ Ursula Helg, 'Ornament neu denken', in Dora Maurer, ed., *Ornament – Serialität*, Budapest: OSAS, 2011, 5-10.

⁶¹ With no little pride the Swiss concretist Max Bill (1908 – 1994) noted on the occasion of the exhibition *Konkrete Kunst. 50 Jahre Entwicklung* in Zurich 1960 that the abstract geometrical grammar of forms used by the concretists was on the verge of 'becoming a world language, a language that is already spoken by many whose tongue had originally developed in other ways' ('eine Weltsprache zu werden, eine Sprache, die bereits auch von vielen gesprochen wird, deren Zunge ursprünglich anders gewachsen war'), and joined in with the enthusiasm that had greeted the spread of constructive-concrete art since the 1950s as a, in Ludwig Grote's words, 'true style of international magnitude' ('echter Stil von internationalem Ausmass') (*Konkrete Kunst. 50 Jahre Entwicklung*, Zurich, Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, 1960, 5; Ludwig Grote, Introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Brasilianische Künstler*, Haus der Kunst: München 1959, S. 13). Already before Bill's and Grote's enthusiastic statements a publication has used the formula 'Abstraction as a World Language' in its title (Georg Poensgen and Leopold Zahn, eds., *Abstrakte Kunst: Eine Weltsprache*, Baden-Baden, Waldemar Klein, 1958).

not marred by clichés and prejudices.⁶² Unlike Carl Einstein, who a good eight years after the appearance of Worringer's text clearly distanced himself in his book *Negerplastik* (1915) from the 'very vague evolutionary hypotheses', as he puts it, with which people interpret the 'Negro' in order to 'depict him as the inferior part of humanity',⁶³ ultimately Worringer not only adhered closely to the evolutionist fictions of the other, but even imputed new qualities to it in support of his bipolar theory of art. The assumption of a pre-scientific urge to abstraction in so-called primitive cultures seems today more than grotesque.⁶⁴

Worringer's book has no pictures, presumably, since an artwork was interesting to him not in its specifics but as an instance of the 'general', which he strove to formulate in universal terms. This is also why it lacks descriptions and detailed analyses of art works. As a formalist Worringer hoped that the inclusion of non-European art into the art discourse would bring a 'gradual purification of the art-historical eye',⁶⁵ accompanied by a 'gradual rehabilitation of art as a purely formal organism, i.e. one that appeals to our elementary aesthetic feelings.'⁶⁶

Worringer's interest was less in the artistic products of non-European cultures than in legitimizing the abstract art of his day, in which a hierarchical-dichotomous order promised in primeval times, in line with the primitivist figure of thought, seemed to have been fulfilled.

Far beyond the realm of aesthetics, Worringer's work offered a theory not only for modernist art, but also the modernist self-image per se, which allowed it to narcissistically mirror itself. Or, continuing Worringer's line of argumentation, to feel 'aesthetic enjoyment' by 'positive empathy' into his concept of abstraction determined by the 'exclusion of life' and thus to experience the 'greatest delight through objectified self-enjoyment.'⁶⁷

⁶² Helg in Bearth, *Afrika*, 225–238.

⁶³ Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik*, Leipzig: Verlag der Weissen Bücher, 1915, 5. 'Der Neger jedoch gilt von Beginn an als der inferiore Teil (...) Leichtfertig deutete man recht vage Evolutionshypothesen auf ihn zurecht.'

⁶⁴ The equivalence of non-European art and abstraction was still a topos in the 1950s. For this reason the archaeological find of '4000 year-old naturalist Negro art' in Nigeria was received as astonishing news by the art public. As the *Neue Schweizer Rundschau* wrote in 1952, 'the find demonstrates that abstraction is not the *oldest* art of the so-called primitive peoples, but rather their *late work*' ('der Fund beweist, dass die Abstraktion nicht zur *ältesten*, sondern zur *späten* Kunst der sogenannten Primitiven gehört') (*Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, 19:11, March 1952, 720).

⁶⁵ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 71. 'allmähliche Läuterung unseres kunsthistorischen Blickes'.

⁶⁶ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 71. 'allmähliche Rehabilitierung der Kunst als eines rein formalen, d. h. an unsere ästhetischen Elementargefühle appellierenden Gebildes'.

⁶⁷ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 4. 'Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathise myself into it.' ('Aesthetischer Genuss ist objektivierter Selbstgenuss. Aesthetisch geniessen heisst mich selbst in einem von mir verschiedenen sinnlichen Gegenstand geniessen, mich in ihn einzufühlen.')

Coda

Contrary to the prognosis by Henning Ritter the relevance of Worringer's longseller has not abated in the twenty-first century.⁶⁸ In the twentieth century it was chiefly the concept of abstraction that arrested the attention of artists and art theorists, as well as literati and researchers of culture; they were being granted access to non-European art, which until then had been excluded from the discourse, and were simultaneously coming to see the global dimension of modernism. Today it is the antithetical concept of empathy that seems attracting interest.⁶⁹

This is especially the case with the recent questioning of the dichotomous model of thought that has been advanced by a number of researchers in connection with the critique of modernism.⁷⁰ While in Worringer's concept of 'abstraction' the customary binaries, such as subject/object, mind/matter, and nature/culture, are taken to the extreme, they tend to become blurred and dissolve in his notion of empathy.

It is postulated today that a work of art (like every other object of perception) is not a passive but an active entity and as such 'addresses' the beholder, and that conversely the beholder's act of perceiving the artwork is partly constitutional of that artwork, i.e. that an exchange or interaction takes place between the two.⁷¹ This comes very close to the thought expressed in two sentences in *Abstraction and Empathy*, in the tradition of Kant's theory of knowledge: 'In that this general apperceptive activity first brings the object into my spiritual possession, this activity belongs to the object.'⁷² And: 'Every sensuous object, in so far as it exists for me, is always the product of two components, of that which is sensuously given and of my apperceptive activity.'⁷³

In fact it is not the object of abstraction 'brought to rest, isolated, torn from the unending flux of being, purified and made unshakable',⁷⁴ that is generally at the centre of research interest today. Instead it is the vital, dynamically interwoven object, which is involved in a context to which the viewer also belongs.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Henning Ritter, 'Der Schauer des Primitiven: Weltkunst zwischen Abstraktion und Einfühlung. Die Schriften Wilhelm Worringers als Pflichtlektüre', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6.10.2004, L37.

⁶⁹ See for instance Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts: Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010, 122.

⁷⁰ See for instance Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1991.

⁷¹ See for instance Bredekamp, *Bildakt*; Lars Spuybroek *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*, Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2011; François Cooren *Action and Agency in Dialogue: Passion, Incarnation, and Ventriloquism*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010.

⁷² Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 7. 'Indem diese allgemeine apperzeptive Tätigkeit das Objekt erst in meinen geistigen Besitz bringt, gehört diese Tätigkeit zu dem Objekt.'

⁷³ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 7, 'Ein sinnlich gegebenes Objekt ist etwas, das es nicht gibt und nicht geben kann. Indem es für mich existiert, ist es von meiner Tätigkeit, von meinem inneren Leben durchdrungen.'

⁷⁴ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 21-22. 'aus dem Naturzusammenhang, aus dem unendlichen Wechselspiel des Seins herauszureissen, es von allem, was Lebensabhängigkeit, d. i. Willkür an ihm war, zu reinigen, es notwendig und unverrückbar zu machen.'

⁷⁵ See for instance Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Exchanging perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into

It seems that with the recent attempts to overcome modernist dichotomies the distance of Western modernism to its imagined other lessens. Keeping the other away appears to transform in a self-critical encounter with it.⁷⁶ These new attempts together with the modes of thinking and the approaches associated with them may appear to us as alien as the non-classical grammar of forms was to the aesthetic sensibilities of the late nineteenth century, nevertheless we are invited to change our ways of thinking. This change will be a labourious and difficult undertaking, comparable to the change of perception Worringer was talking about in relation to non-European art. He wrote: 'For the directives of judgement that render us so biased, have so entered into our flesh and blood from long tradition that here a reevaluation of values remains more or less cerebral labour followed only with difficulty by the sensibilities.'⁷⁷

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Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies.' *Common Knowledge* 10 (3), 2004, 463-84; Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology.' *Current Anthropology* 40, 1999, 67-91 ; Bruno Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, Le Plessis-Robinson : Synthélabo, 1996.

⁷⁶ See for instance the exhibitions *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, 2002 Center for Art and Media [ZKM], Karlsruhe; *La Fabrique des images*, 2010, Musée du quai Branly, Paris; *Animismus – Revisionen der Moderne*, 2012, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and the accompanying publications.

⁷⁷ Worringer, *Abstraktion*, 12. 'Jene Urteilsdirektiven, die uns so einseitig machen, sind uns aus langer Tradition her so sehr in Fleisch und Blut übergegangen, dass hier eine Umwertung der Werte mehr oder weniger Gehirnarbeit bleibt, der das Empfinden nur mühsam folgt.'