№100

Rudolf Arnheim

Introduction / Einführung:
Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken | №100

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Introduction

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Notes on Perceptual Thinking and Its Possibilities Today

Recent writings about art have tended to focus on the intention of artists and the effect their artworks have on viewers, as well as the social consequences of these effects. Often, these writings do not speak about the artworks themselves, but about curatorial positions in art today, constituting a meta-artistic discourse. A question, then, might be how to reconnect with the visual, structural, and phenomenological analyses of the twentieth century without sacrificing the political and social dimensions of recent art theory.

After more than a decade of these discourses, mainly dedicated to curatorial practices or to broader cultural studies and postcolonial theory, it is pleasurable to re-read, for example, Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007) and the gestalt theories of perceptual psychologists. According to these gestalt psychologists (the German word *Gestalt* indicates a "whole" impression), perception is not just retinal vision, and a "visual pattern" is not simply the sum of retinal registrations (the physical process of light refracting from objects in a space, captured by the ocular lenses that project these images onto the retina; from there, the

images are transmitted to the brain). Perceptual psychology is interested in the mental experience of vision: you think while seeing, you see only while thinking, thought and perception are not two distinct moments, and vision-thought is based on the apprehension of a hidden field of energy forces. For the gestalt, a line or a shape mobilizes space and perception, with all of its psychological and emotional expression.

While this psychology was not focused on artistic practice but on how perception works in general, it was Arnheim's original viewpoint that connected the two fields—art and perceptual psychology. Born in Berlin in 1904, he studied with Wolfgang Koehler and Kurt Lewin, and his thesis supervisor was Max Wertheimer. He edited the magazine *Die Weltbühne* and published on film as an art form as early as 1932. He fled Nazi Germany to Italy, then to England, and finally settled in the U.S., where he initially taught at the New School for Social Research and at Columbia University. From 1943 onward, he taught psychology of art at Sarah Lawrence College, and in 1954, he published the first edition of *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. From 1968, he taught at Harvard, and at the age of 102, he died of pneumonia.

Arnheim understood art as a special kind of meta-perception. Of course, not all of his conclusions can be shared today. Indeed, he supported a conventional, essentialist perspective espoused by the conservative circles of art at the time: according to him, humans respond to a sense of equilibrium, reached either through simple strategies such as symmetry and centrality or through contrapuntal balances of opposite masses and forms, as well as positions and colors that are in dynamic but balanced equilibrium. He found that when this overall balance was not achieved, an artwork remained in a state of ambiguity and un-definition: "Ambiguity confuses the artistic statement because it leaves the observer hovering

between two or more assertions that do not add up to a whole."[1] This partial view is based on a preconception that has formed the basis of much commercial advertising and design, and it seems obvious today, in a fractured world characterized by the dominance of the media and of simple, balanced communications that foreclose forms of life and emancipation, that the validity of much artistic practice lies precisely in its ambiguity and non-closure of meanings.

Aside from this, however, Arnheim's theories are today extremely refreshing. He went against the excess of art criticism ("Art may seem to be in danger of being drowned by talk. Rarely are we presented with a new specimen of what we are willing to accept as genuine art"), adding, "Our experiences and ideas tend to be common but not deep, or deep but not common. We have neglected the gift of comprehending things through our senses. Concept is divorced from percept, and thought moves among abstractions."[2] These words might well be used in our contemporary era of excess theory, information, and immateriality. One does not perceive separately all the characteristics of a scene: forms, shapes, positions, colors. Rather, one immediately perceives the whole, and this whole is both sensual and emotional—it is intuitive. This does not mean that reasoning and thinking destroy the experience of art. For Arnheim, one can break down the impression and meaning of a "whole" into its components and analyze why one circle in a square seems static and centered, while another circle in another square, positioned slightly to the right and slightly higher, suggests a tension, a pulling away from or closer to the center.

For Arnheim, viewers in the past did not look at the hidden structures of artworks and only focused on the level of their representational content. He argued instead for a gaze that would acknowledge the overall tonality of each artwork, the first impression it makes on us, the dynamic of its shadows, etc. For him, visual art was always about