www.freilgen.com
freilgen@t-online.de

Berlin, June 9th 2013

MOTIVATION TO REVIEW THE VIEWER

a call to consider actions exploring the link between art and the brain

The usefulness of museums, galleries and other fine art institutions depends on the interest of the visitor, hence, on the viewer. The current international situation shows that masses of people like going to exhibitions though on the spot it is clear that the majority of the visitors seem hardly captivated by the majority of displayed artworks of the last 45 years, while old masters and early moderns continue to attract people's focus. The spark and curiosity to experience art currently is at a low. Much of the current interest only involves the artwork as commodity, or, to a larger group, social pleasure of participation in art events, which both is not about the art itself.

Because art professionals cannot continue to blame the general audience to be uneducated or too simplistic, and (neuro)science offers current knowledge and techniques to improve our understanding of the visitor who walks around in all freedom through an exhibition, it is time the professional art world will see and grasp the opportunity offered by neuroscience. A better understanding of the biological factors involved in the experience of visual art will undoubtedly still not set rules for a masterpiece or lift all mysteries of the individual experience, but surely will stimulate a necessary discussion on the importance of and perimeters for visual art to attract and hold the gaze of exhibition visitors.

Though many theories on art exist, a steady flood of analyses has been explored and published about art, artists and individual artworks, and many statements have been made to activate or involve the exhibition visitor, it is interesting to notice that it has never been properly researched what it is the viewer needs, to be attracted by an artwork while walking around in an exhibition. In other words, it has never properly been researched what happens in the mind/body of the viewer when looking at art in a natural setting. Theories about the biological processes involved in visual perception exist at abundance but are limited to the working of the retina, the optic nerve and the visual cortex. Interesting research is done on eye-tracking of an individual viewer, but as this is done in a lab by a seated test-person looking at a particular artwork, this is merely an advanced variation of traditional pictorial analysis.

For all art professionals, the most valuable contribution we can offer to our communities within the scope of the current focus on the brain, is to find reasons with support by neuroscience, that looking at artworks is good for one's health. For this process it is important we take the courage to re-think how we, all involved in the art world, view and approach our target-groups: the general viewer. We need to improve our knowledge on the viewer as person. Simultaneously, public discourse can prepare and accompany practical and empirical research needed to improve our understanding of the art viewer, provided the right persons are involved in such a discussion.

Museums and other art institutes originally were founded to present art and to educate a wider audience. Especially through the last 40-50 years the emphasis has largely shifted to only educate, meaning to intellectualize art, while in principle disregarding the visual capacities of the broader audience. As times change, it is both crucial and difficult to adjust one's own thinking and role in such changes. Especially in institutions with respect to all well-known obligations and traditions. In a 2010 interview Chris Dercon, now at Tate Modern, described the despair of curators and artists in their ways to be creative and obtain acknowledgement, but as conclusion he mentioned only examples of such curators and artists making a theme of, or illustrating such despair in their artworks, clearly still in an attempt to educate the public, though neglecting the causes for their despair being the lack of interest of the audience to be continuously educated. This loss of interest to be educated by art is partially caused by the overload of art, the overload of exhibitions, but also the excess of information (education) about anything in the world through the media, though the wider audience still likes to look at fine art as objects offering some experience. Projection of one's own expectations onto one's target group is a natural and most common mistake.

A simplified, immediate conclusion is that museums should focus on artworks that first and foremost offer something that visually is interesting by itself (visually appealing is not necessarily the same as merely a beautiful and simple aesthetic pleasurable artwork). An old conclusion, but nevertheless quite actual again. A conclusion one sees confirmed by the multitude of exhibitions in galleries and museums with visually interesting artworks getting a broader attention of the public, and the shrinking amount of interest in exhibitions with a lesser visual challenge, also not intended to be visually interesting, but intended to promote an intellectual concept. Though one should never ignore art historical significance, nor a deeper or even intellectual substance, the current regress of visitors quota in most galleries and smaller museums teaches one has to re-consider the needs and interests of the general audience. The general art viewer is not uneducated (anymore), but at the same time emancipation of the viewer does not necessarily imply to literally ask

the viewer what exhibitions one would like to see.

The best any of us can offer our communities is to demonstrate how natural and basic our need is to experience works of art that offer something visually, which can be backed up by (neuro)science. The interesting point is that, in our current time, on one side, the art world requires to regain the general public's confidence and interest to experience art, while, on the other hand, science needs to make a larger public aware of how it continues to contribute to improve human being. There is an interesting overlap of coinciding interests in the focus on human experience and visual perception. This is not a debate about cultural values but about features as fundamental to human being as human health.

I obviously do not have all answers, but I know from genuine art lovers on all sides of all oceans, that fortunately there is still a hunger for the experience that works of art can offer, but, simultaneously, one cannot help but notice a huge and growing gap between the traditional focus and interests of the art professionals and those for whom art is intended. The challenge is nothing less than a real shift in the thinking of art professionals.

In the past few years I have been moderating a series of public discussions involving both art professionals as well as a wider audience. It is remarkable to conclude that the so-called wider audience is profoundly interested, and capable, in discussing their own experience of artworks that visually appeal to them and to learn what neuroscience has to offer as partial explanation, while any resistance mostly comes from art professionals. A resistance that in fact has no ground, because neuroscience only offers additional information, and does not refute art history or art theory. Any angst for the involvement of neuroscience in the discussion is merely romantic (the fear for a loss of the magic, spirituality, mysticism, or literal meaning of art) and misplaced.

Furthermore, in the past decades, I have been involved in various waves of interest in art and science relationships. For instance, in the attempts to link art with (theoretical) physics in the 1980's, in linking art and computer technology in the early 1990's. From these and some other experiences, I feel obliged to emphasize that currently we do not need any new kind of art, surely not an art supposed to build on neuroscience. We neither should seek for artists who assume themselves to be scientists. Using a ruler, a computer, or depicting illustrations from science (painting a brain, using maps, assembling scientific illustrations), or making conceptual-scientific statements instead of visually interesting artifacts, does not make an artist automatically a scientist. One should distinguish an artist who is interested in science from an artist who considers himself to be a scientist, and we need to acknowledge all existing art through all centuries as basis for our discussions and research.

In a rather comparable way, when scientists demonstrated that it is better for our health to eat fresh vegetables, fruit and the occasional fish, this did not turn chefs into scientists, but they incorporated the new knowledge in their daily praxis.

Fré Ilgen

This call is also signed by neuroscientist Dr. Partha Mitra, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, USA;
www.brainarchitecture.org

Notes:
 # feasible projects include professional multi-disciplinary and public discussions, exhibitions and demonstrations, publications, a large actual and 'walk-in' 3D brain-connectivity model;
 # for each of such projects further descriptions are available;
 # a 30 pages extensive introduction 'Brain-Art-Body' with full argumentation in English, including facts from neuroscience and theoretical implications is available;

Fré Ilgen, 1956, born in the Netherlands, lives/works in Berlin, Germany; artist, theorist, organiser, curator. www.freilgen.com
Many exhibitions in Europe, USA, South-America, Russia, Asia (Japan, Korea, Hong Kong), Middle East (Egypt, Dubai).
Book publication 'ART? No Thing! Analogies between art, science and philosophy', 2004. New book 'I, Artist' is in the making, to be published 2013/2014.

Through self-study Ilgen has extensive knowledge of art history, art theory, psychology, philosophy, theoretical physics, neuroscience. Since 2007 he lives and works in Berlin, and has organized and moderated the discussion and exhibition series 'Checkpoint Ilgen'. Simultaneously, since 2007 he collaborates with Prof. Dr. Partha Mitra, a leading neuroscientist of Cold Spring Harbor Lab, USA. Together they built the first two 'Albert' brain connectivity models and executed a first trial project 'Ethology of Aesthetics' at the Bode Museum in Berlin. The dialogue with The Phillips Collection in DC, USA, is ongoing for comparable but more extensive projects.

Hypothesis:
 # the experience evoked by the visual appearance of artworks is good for one's health and innate in the brain/body.
 # the experience of art is not only a cerebral but a whole body experience.