

## Is there an ecosemiotic perspective for today's heterogeneous knowledges in the global culture industry?

*Globalization is the extension of imperialism, capitalism, and the world market by new means; the ecosemiotic effect of which is to extend the symbolic domain of exchange value into new areas of the semiosphere. Money as a symbolic exchange system has the social advantage that otherwise incommensurable phenomena may be compared. But the systematic abstraction from use value (and intrinsic value) involved in exchange may have a drawback of creating a risky non-knowledge. Claus Emmeche (Sign Systems Studies, 2001, p.242)*

The phenomena of increasing bioinvasion, globalisation, and decreasing biological diversity of the planet's ecosystems along with diminished cultural diversity, have recently been addressed by various authors as exemplifying an ecosemiotic problematic (e.g. Emmeche 2001). In their view, ecosemiotics could offer insight into the limitations inherent in seeing nature as "a garden that can be managed by a gardener", and help recognise the complexity of the interplay between human activity and ecological and evolutionary processes (Ibid. 2001, p.259). From within the scope of an ecosemiotic perspective, I would like to explore the significance of these problems in relation to human material and symbol-

ic culture, as well as our *epistemological* relationship with it, in a world challenged by the far-reaching developments of the global cultural industry and its burgeoning markets. My first question is therefore about the relation between cultural production and the commercialisation of knowledge. Is there an ecosemiotic perspective for the culture industry and the commercialisation/social contextualisation of knowledge? My second question is about the problem of globalisation. What link is there between the global forces of commercialisation and that of local social accountability and reflexivity? Hence, my third question is: To what sort of symbolic, ecosemiotic space of knowledge can we aspire?

The rapid commercialisation of knowledge, its social contextualisation and the heterogeneity of knowledge production in the culture industry play an increasingly significant role as they embroil the humanities and the social distribution of knowledge in markets in a more diffuse sense (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.91,93,95).<sup>1</sup> As much as hybrid knowledges are specific to our "modern" way of thinking and organising social life manifested by what Bruno Latour described as the "every day churning up of all of culture and all of nature", which results in "imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology and fiction" (Latour 1993, p.2), they are also the marker of an expanding Western way of life. This expansion can be summarised under the term *globalisation* with an ecosemiotic effect to extend the domain of the symbolic exchange value into new areas of the semiosphere (Emmeche 2001, p.242). Ecosemiotics, as the interface between semiotics and ecology (cf. Nöth 2001, p.71), concerns the complexity of the interplay between human activity and ecological and evolutionary processes; it should therefore also help us recognise that we treat culture like a battlefield for limitless production. Ximena Dávila and Humberto Maturana call this facet a "blind expansion of entrepreneurship",<sup>2</sup> based on an understanding of human actions and their spontaneous forms rooted in biological-cultural foundations and an "epistemological substrate" on which our collective lives take place. Today, the economy of cultural production with multimillion dollar films can be reasonably compared with big science projects (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.96). They, as well as art fairs with one billion euros in sales, which makes their ethos blatantly commercial, depend on privately funded consumption and individual entrepreneurial choices exercised through mass markets. Are not the global museum construction boom with 1,200 new museums in China alone,<sup>3</sup> the global art market, its fairs and its auctions, as well as the growing conflict-ridden relationships between a new generation of private collectors and public and unfortunately conservative museums, today all manifestations of a problematic change in



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the institutional ecology of culture and art?<sup>4</sup> Cultural institutions like the museum, instead of taking on more decisive and influential roles as mediators, authorities, and arbitrators in the business of defining and grasping part of social reality, are increasingly embroiled in the markets – risking their long-term reputations in protecting public interest. An example of this development are decisions taken today by art museums about what objects to acquire and what to exhibit, which *affects* the prices that those works of art and others related to them can command in the market.<sup>5</sup> Another pertinent example is the rush of numerous international collectors to this year's Art Basel, Switzerland, to fill newly-founded independent museums and prestigious public spaces, blurring the boundaries between private collectors and museums reselling works to refresh collections and converting art into a vehicle for financial profit.<sup>6</sup> Colonised by the effects of imbroglions of global or local cultural interests and rivalries predominantly oriented at commercial control, Latour's concept of incongruous horizons, stakes, time-frames, and actors, the separation of the "heavens, industry, texts, souls, and the moral law in our hearts" (Latour 1993, p.1.5) points to a different apprehension incompatible with our present understanding of human forms of life. Moreover, the advancement of globalisation as an extension of Western imperialism and capitalism, one of the major factors of the world's growing food crisis, which potentially will cause unprecedented starvation in the near future, should alarm us to think about and work on an alternative understand-

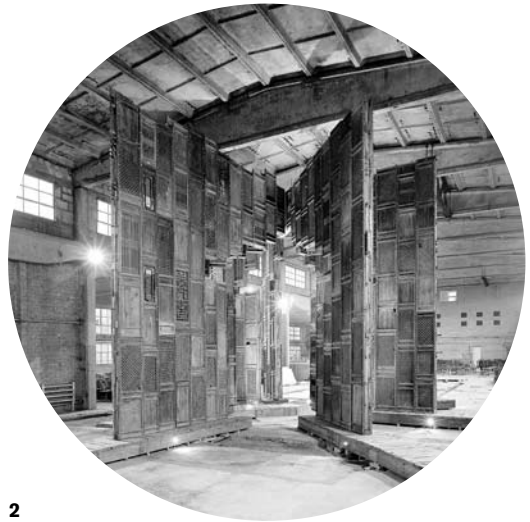
ing of our ways of controlling the material world and the markets. These reflections, which need to be rethought at a fundamental level, touch not only on the problem of the institutional ecology of culture and the increasingly commercialised social practice in the humanities, but also on the problem that globalisation displays a more material face instead of following ethical and reflexive directions (Emmeche 2001, p.238). These issues have recently come to the awareness of scholars with a growing interest in rethinking the public role of culture and art<sup>7</sup> in order to reflect on the deeper effects of globalisation, the impact of commercialisation, and the pervasive contextualisation and distribution of knowledge.

The overall aim of my text is therefore to present a rationale for an ecosemiotic perspective in relation to human culture, and to reflect upon the outlook of a truly ecological and epistemological relationship with it. I wish to emphasise – by referring to the more general understanding of ecosemiotics defined as "the semiotics of relationships between nature and culture" (Nöth 1998, 2001) – that my propositional understanding of an epistemological and ecological relationship is deeply intertwined with an apprehension of the radical continuity between the human mind and culture (nature).<sup>8</sup> From such a perspective, cognitive processes or any mental activity are connected to a cognitive reference on another level: a *meaning*, a purpose, a goal, or a law that transcends the immediacy of a crude semiotic interaction (Nöth 1998, p.335). There is an analogy here to what Ximena Dávila and Humberto Maturana have considered a core concept of the human biological constitution. As affectionate beings with an "epistemological substrate" in us, we reflect on our seeing of the outcome, which our productive actions produce, and we have thus an experience of ethical reflection.<sup>9</sup> As the humanities now play a key role in cultural sophistication, they are generally deeply implicated with the problem of reflexivity and individualisation. In fact, the link between the humanities and culture has a direct impact on the real-world economy insofar that it shapes and manipulates lifestyles, values, and the political culture through advertising campaigns, which accelerates consumption patterns (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.104). These developments point to a slide towards subjectivism, which in Gibbons et al. finds itself expressed by the assumption about modern societies' tendencies towards narcissism and atomism, the decline of civic participation, an increasing sense that all relations and commitments are revocable, and the growth of increasingly '*instrumental*' attitudes towards nature and society (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.102). Expressions such as "*Instrumental attitudes*", the "every day churning up of all of culture and all of nature", the "blind expansion of

1 Ai Weiwei, *Template 2007*, Detail, wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses [1368–1911], wooden base 422 x 1106 x 875 cm, after collapsing during rain storm. Installation at Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, 2007.

entrepreneurship”, and the “systematic abstraction from use value” best describe our key dilemma with culture; it also depicts our critical stance regarding the often self-contradictory extremes (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.103) that Post-Modern thought is imposing on us, as we do not know what we can expect from what we have constructed around us. This can be best summarised with the question: Where are we now and where do we go? Since we certainly want to move on, new ways should be found to promote reflexive thinking about issues to do with ontological security, ego-oriented cultural behaviour and its hidden interests, economic imperatives and utopian prescriptions, and our unwillingness (although we may see beneficial changes that could happen) to address problematic developments involving those knowledges that sustain the cultural Disneyfication (to put it mildly) that we are *experiencing* today on a global scale.

This calls for a strategy involving a strong degree of challenge, cultural change, and also institutional risk. I will present some final considerations to express just how serious I feel the recognised symptoms of unhealthy developments are. In this paper, I have attempted to analyse key issues concerned with the commercialisation of knowledge touching on the ecology between cultural production, commercialisation, and the humanities. The problems are complex and they emerge from strong and pervasive socio-political forces. A major overall observation by Gibbons et al., introduced here as a problematic key issue, is that greater social accountability and deepening reflection of the values implied in human aspirations and projects are at stake (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.7). An ecosemiotic approach to the complexity and the many faces of cultural mediation may offer the possibility to transpose the symbolic domains of the exchange value into new areas of the semiosphere. This aspect has thus far remained unanswered. How far can we progress along these lines in face of the global acceleration of the culture industry and its institutional and strategic involvement to socially distribute heterogeneous knowledges in markets? How well will we (or will not) be able to implement sustainability, dialogue, reflexivity, and social accountability in these developments? Whatever the answer will be: these issues will remain altogether problematic. A crucial element in these processes, generally, is the commodity-like character of today’s culture and the radicalisation of this development during the past decades. It has made politics – due to a problematic aesthetisation – to appear as culture.<sup>10</sup> Have politics and culture become indistinguishable in this sense? Theodor W. Adorno reiterated almost three decades after the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno 1947) that “cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer com-



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modities but commodities through and through”, and has anticipated today’s overall observable tendency to commercially control all sorts of social practices. Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s earlier assumption that the culture industry “transfers the profit motive onto cultural forms” (Adorno 1975) has thus turned into a consistent conceptual observation. To what extent is the culture industry with its inherent capability to sublimate, suppress, and deceive the masses through endless entertainment (Horkheimer & Adorno 1947) nevertheless capable to constitute us spiritually (Adorno 1975)? Gibbons et al. have argued that the quality in the humanities embroiled in markets is no longer determined largely by academic or other expert communities but validated against more diverse, and diffuse, external criteria (Gibbons et al. 1994, p.100). Could it be that today’s cultural products may in fact be some sort of “symbolic currency in the market of life chances” as Gibbons et al. have suggested (Gibbons et al. 1994, p.91)? This would seem to be indicated by the phenomenon of emerging and increasingly mixed new social and cultural arenas with natural scientists, humanists and activists publicly debating issues that no longer respect the traditional boundaries between the natural sciences and the humanities (Ibid.). It would however mean a “symbolic currency” that stands for more than only cultural dreams, habits, objects, goals, or references on which to construct new reflexive identities exclusively; more specifically for broader social issues and policy concerns. The list of specific topics is comprehensive: sustainable development, the protection of natural and cultural diversity, globalisation, commer-

2 Ai Weiwei, *Template 2007*, Wooden doors and windows from destroyed Ming and Qing Dynasty houses [1368 – 1911], wooden base 720 x 1200 x 850 cm. Installation view at Ai Weiwei’s studio, Beijing, China, 2007

cialisation of knowledge etc. – all of them open to a variety of equally legitimate interpretations discussed in new cultural arenas. Such arenas may be for the production of knowledge along with its spatialisation; they could be constitutive in our moral, epistemological, and political endeavours to transform the world (Turnbull 2000, p.12). Moreover, the true pursuit of a cultural ecosemiotics as a reflexive, goal-, and value-directed mediation of signs may be linked to the understanding of the many challenges to sustainability in a world in which the cultural, linguistic and biological diversity is seriously threatened (Ibid.). Thus, a truly ecosemiotic perspective may become important for reflections on our anthropocentric ways of thinking and individual, production-oriented choices and approaches to all sorts of problems; moreover ecological dimensions may become an imperative for politics on the whole (Emmeche 2001, p.239). An ecosemiotic perspective for knowledge mediated within a particular culture (Hanley 2005, p.88), be it local or global, may affect our entrepreneurial and production-oriented ways to organise, standardise and utilise the hybridisation of knowledges. It could assist us to create sustainable ecosemiotic, social, material, or virtual knowledge spaces in the midst of our precarious dilemma, which Freeman J. Dyson, quoting feminist thinkers, has called an “overwhelmingly capitalist, patriarchal and militaristic contamination”. And that is the task that we have in front of us.

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### Notes

- 1) In *The New Production of Knowledge* (1994), Gibbons et al. have identified a transformation in the mode of knowledge production from a broad scope, exploring changes in the mode of knowledge production concerned with the social sciences and the humanities as well as with science and technology. The transformation described in terms of emergence, called “Mode 2” by contrast with traditional knowledge called “Mode 1”, shows various characteristics among them transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, and contextualisation. “Mode 2” knowledge is created broader, transdisciplinary, social and in economic contexts. According to Gibbons et al., the emergence of “Mode 2” entails severe consequences as it calls into question the adequacy of familiar knowledge producing institutions. They claim that knowledge today is produced as outlined by the prognosticated “Mode 2” knowledge production; the subsequent foundation of a number of Institutes of Advanced Study at German universities is for them a confirmation of their in-depth analysis presented in their study (personal mail dated 15 June 2008 to author from Helga Nowotny, one of the co-authors of the study)
- 2) Dávila, X., Maturana, H. 2008. Kulturelle Biologie. Be-

- wusstsein und Ethik – Einem neuen psychischen Zeitalter entgegen. *Lette International*, Europas Kulturzeitung, 81, Summer 2008, p. 201.
- 3) Pollack, B. 2008. Making 1,200 Museums Bloom. *Artnews*, 107 (3), p. 123-127.
  - 4) Ellis, A. 2008. The problem with privately funded museums. *The Art Newspaper*, 188, Available at: <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/article.asp?id=7509>
  - 5) Ellis, A. 2008. Museums should beware of being used as marketing tools. *The Art Newspaper*, 190, Available at: <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/article.asp?id=7765>
  - 6) Pollock, L., Adam, G. 2008. Why the rise of the private museum is rewriting the rules of the market. *The Art Newspaper*, Available at: <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/article.asp?id=7960> [accessed 18 June 2008]
  - 7) See, e.g. in: Schenker, C., Hiltbrunner, M. ed. 2007. *Kunst und Öffentlichkeit. Kritische Praxis der Kunst im Stadtraum Zürich*, Zürich: JRP | Ringier.
  - 8) With reference to Charles S. Peirce's thesis about the continuity (instead of opposition) between the mind and the natural environment, Winfried Nöth writes: “Mind, thought, and semiosis are basically synonyms to Peirce. His radical thesis is: wherever there is semiosis, there is mind. Mind is not only in humans, but also in their natural environments. Peirce did not even believe in a dualism between matter and mind. Instead, he defended the general principle of continuity from nature to mind, which he called synechism” (Nöth 2001, p.75).
  - 9) Dávila, X., Maturana, H. 2008. Kulturelle Biologie. Bewusstsein und Ethik – Einem neuen psychischen Zeitalter entgegen. *Lette International*, Europas Kulturzeitung, 81, p. 201.
  - 10) Babias, M. 2007. Die Kunst des Öffentlichen in der Arena der Politik. In C. Schenker, M. Hiltbrunner, ed. *Kunst und Öffentlichkeit. Kritische Praxis der Kunst im Stadtraum Zürich*, Zürich: JRP Ringier, p. 13.

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