

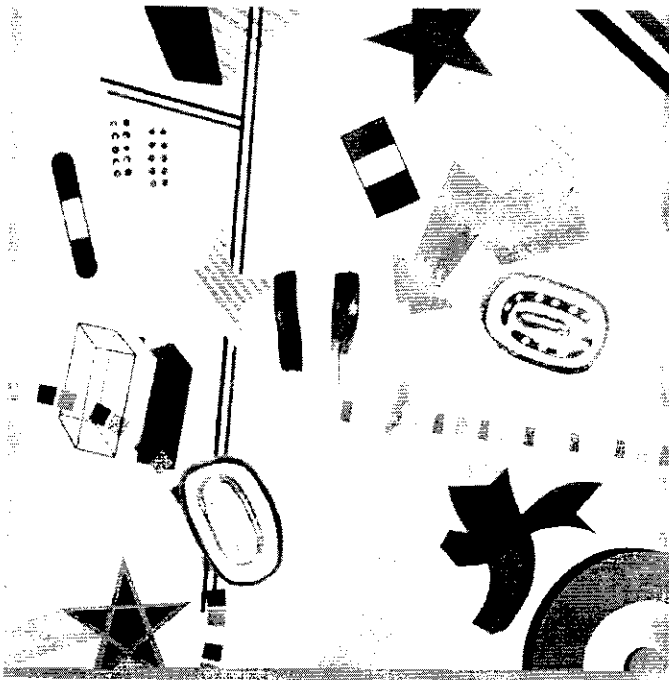


## Interview with Ulf Göpfert: "Obligation is a misnomer"

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*Ulf Göpfert was born in Freiberg/Saxony in 1943. While entering his carpentry apprenticeship and completing his A-levels between 1960 and 1963, he also took private lessons in painting and composition. After that he worked as a furniture restorer in Weimar, Dresden and Potsdam-Sanssouci. His initial encounter with pop art in 1983 inspired him to take up painting again. His first exhibition was shown in 1986. Göpfert's preoccupation with small graphics, large-size canvasses and large-scale decorations of architecture account for the multidimensionality of his oeuvre. During the politically meaningful years directly after German reunification (1990-1994) he was head of the department of culture and tourism of the city of Dresden. Since then he has been working as a freelance painter.*

*Göpfert's exhibitions include:*

2004 *Künstler-Werk-Material. 77 Künstlerwege, Witten*  
 1999 *Wandscheibe, Teil der Rekonstruktion der Stadthalle in Burg*  
 1998 *Ausstellung Stadtarchiv Haldensleben, Regierungspräsidium Dresden*

Questions and translation by Gert Röhrborn

**Gert Röhrborn: Silvestro Lodi, an artist colleague from Venice, recently complained at a Vernissage in Birmingham that modern art degenerated into a market like any other. He called for a new Renaissance. How do you see the relation between art and society?**

*Ulf Göpfert:* The art market has always existed. Certainly it is dominated by then more, now less competent people. The Medici in the times of the Italian Renaissance had a sublime knowledge of important artists with their respective skills and oeuvre. The current financial and economic crisis has brought it home to us that even the art market has taken neoliberal features. Artworks are being traded like speculative objects. Their artist quality is of only minor importance. In the same way as it happened in other sectors of the economy money has renounced the elementary processes of life, of creation and reproduction of values. Yet I doubt that it makes sense to call for a Renaissance. That won't work. The realm of art is structured by absolute freedom and the free initiative that comes from it.

**Throughout the 20th century we encounter a strong tendency to instrumentalise art for political reasons. Do we face social conditions of freedom of art today?**

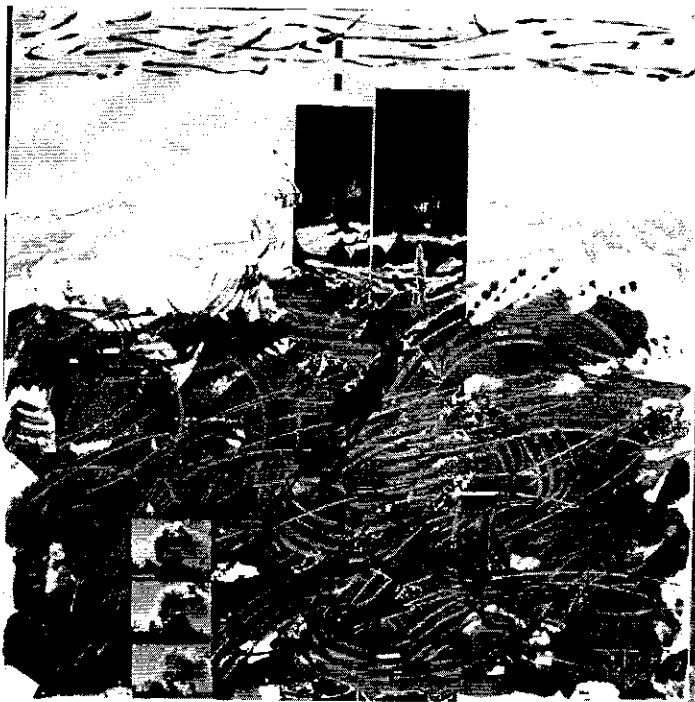
In our time basic rights and civil society protect the artist. As an artist I can do whatever I want to today. Success is a different matter altogether, of course. Attitudes towards art have changed a lot over time and will continue to do so. One time in history people crave for art and give their utmost to support it; then it falls into almost total oblivion. The artist is dependent anyway. Neither he himself nor any kind of social reforms can influence the individual readiness of the beholder to open him- or herself to the artist's oeuvre. I believe the neoliberal approach has failed. Artists should use their avant-garde brain to reflect this social situation. They sense the future and bring it into the contemporary world. Artists, to give you a guess, are fifty years ahead of their time. Take the example of Pablo Picasso: With how much ado were his works greeted in the 1950s! Today we can encounter his reflections in the shapes of modern cars and on textiles. It seems to take about one or two generations until avant-garde positions impact wider society.

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**Since time immemorial artists accessed and quoted the cultural heritage of a given society, or they tried to follow up and prolong certain traditions. Do you think there is something like a European cultural memory which all of us draw upon?**

*Ulf Göpfert:* There is nothing like a common base of European culture. The European characteristic of occidental culture only manifests itself in the expression of explicit individuality. The process of cultural unification by simplification, a matter of tremendous losses already on the national level, is bound to fail completely on the European level. This holds true for further steps and reflections in the institutional unification process, too. Historically Europe has always been shaped by the interrelation between Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Every one may define features of European culture in different ways; yet every single one is just an autarchic component which manifests itself in varying individual and cultural forms.

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**Change has been a faithful companion throughout your life. You never lost sight of your artistic career, although it entered centre court relatively late. During the collapse of the GDR you were politically active. Would you say that back then your artistic convictions influenced your public activities?**

What I did during the breakdown of the old system and the build-up of our new state was rooted in my previous reflections, of course. Otherwise I would never have accepted a responsibility which demanded so much energy and openness to the unknown from me. Just try to imagine: Being a furniture restorer up till then I only had to deal with my carpenter's bench every day. As head of the culture department of the city of Dresden I had to take care of the public budget, employees and cultural institutions. Although I did not have the necessary formal competences and experiences. How much had I longed for this opportunity the old system denied to me. Now I got the chance and I accepted it. Confess, intervene and engage! My interest in epistemology and politics helped me to further develop these attitudes.

**Do you see any emotional obligation to work for you as an artist?**

Obligation is a misnomer. You will find creative and subordinate sorts of people in all strata and sectors of society. A creative individual has to be active all the time, that's a matter of fact. This person needs to realize its creativity. At the end of the day I took the decision to accept office because of my creative personality and my will to devote myself to an inspiring task. It turned out to be a short but very intense period of my life. Regardless of all practical difficulties I had to face I understood it as a fantastic chance to reach another intellectual dimension. Being forced to deal with certain areas in respect to financial, strategic and political necessities was a great blessing for me. I still reflect local politics as an external observer today. Yet there are only a few exceptions to the rule that politics did not impact on my artistic creativity.

**Now and then you apply art to comment social ruptures directly. 9/11 prompted you to paint the collapsing twin towers in real time while standing in front of your TV in Dresden. In 1989 you translated the emerging will of the people on the streets into the colours of a magnificent triptych. Looking back from today: What are the normative foundations of these works, and do they have a meaning independent of the historical situation?**

Now you hit the peculiar character of contemporary time. While being part of a specific situation we can never know what is its meaning and importance. These are intersections of time in which developments we can only judge retrospectively are not yet visible. During the change of power in 1989 we had no clue of the social processes that went on underneath. What we shared was a tremendous impulse to be creative stakeholders of the development. It became increasingly clear to me that we did not only witness two buildings breaking down in New York; we are all contemporaries of a new epoch. Today I am happy that back then I had a sixth sense for an extraordinary historical event. By the way, I am excited by the fact that Beuys had prophetically realized the symbolic value of the twin towers in a much earlier work. Artists can never grasp the importance of their work during creation, because they are not in a position to know all the existing parallel examples of the time. Take a look at the first abstract tableau by Kandinsky; the first Pollock; or imagine Piet Mondrian leaving reality for his rectangles for the first time. History may tell us later which the most significant work of a given artist is. Being the artist yourself you can call yourself a lucky boy afterwards if you managed to picture a tip of the large historical process with artistic means.

**Art maybe understood as a human attempt to give material shape to inner convictions. It is a personal testimonial created in an act of**

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**self-representation. It appears to me that in this respect the creative process is comparable to civic engagement. However, the latter is based on a social process fuelled by exchange, compromise and pragmatism. Does that mean that art is also up for negotiation?**

No, not at all. What the artist creates is never negotiable. He creates it out of intuition. Whereas if I enter into exchange with other people and aim to create something out of this relation, it even needs to be negotiated. Thereby I enjoy the social character of rights, which is totally different from the level of freedom which we find in arts. Just take the example of matrimony: If you do not sufficiently communicate and negotiate with your partner, your marriage will not exist as a social entity at all. Our interactions are based on social contracts and arrangements. In societies of intensive divisions of labour we are no longer able to survive on our own. We are dependent on our fellow men. To live means to integrate them in our life. The quality of life is a relation of our dealings with each other.

**So freedom which is based in arts and the social sphere which applies law to guarantee equality do not go together. What is the appropriate place of solidarity in this reasoning then?**

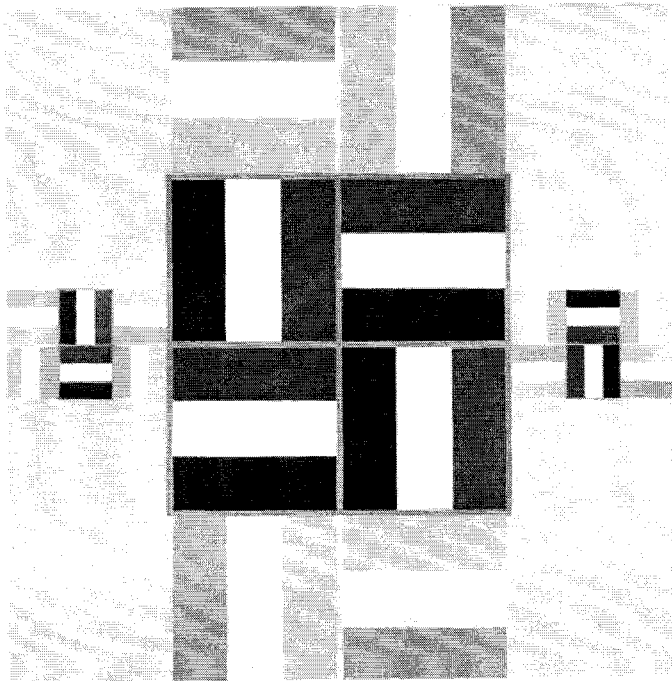
I refer to Rudolf Steiner. In his opinion it is the fundamental function of the economy to beget solidarity. Its sole task is the provision of a sufficient stock of goods. Making profits is a prerequisite of reproduction, of course. There is no need for income return after all. Unfortunately we seem to ride a one-way-road here. Taxpayers are called upon today to show their solidarity with the very people who preyed and crashed our financial and economic system. We are to stand Sam for those guys who have taken us to the cleaners. Vice versa I do not see so much solidarity.

**During the debate in Prague you made it clear that you interpret the guiding principle "unity in diversity" as assignment to maximize diversity. To my taste the heyday of unity is diversity's Last Supper. In your paintings you put the diversity of colours and forms under a unifying principle. Can we learn something from your artistic methods for our dealings with social processes?**

First of all I have consideration for what is in front of me. If I take a canvas I cannot expect to work in three dimensions. The only way to do that would be to cut into it, as was the habit of Louis Fontana. A plane stays a plane, and so I have to bow to its principles. I can blow them away, of course, but why should I choose it then, for God's sake? Second I need to realize who I am and what I want. Do I seek to develop a certain order, or am I bound for chaos? These are individual dispositions of personality which never and in no way should be harmonized. We may allow unity only if diversity is not at stake. Hence only a limited number of areas may be designated for unity. The European principle of subsidiary was put into the treaties to protect diversity. I can imagine quite a few spheres of life which are and should always be realms of the individual. I strongly depreciate the ban on public smoking for example. These regulations affect human communication and deny our right of self-determination. This is clearly a case where unity destroys diversity. We need to compound with each other what we want to understand as uniform procedures. Unity means to sustain a permanent process of unification, a shared vision or idea. People on the European level should concentrate themselves on finding answers to common challenges like ecology. "Unity in diversity" is a grand phrase and a dangerous one indeed. It blurs our vital sense for differences and it belies a lot of the well-meaning statements poured out on us by politics and media every day.

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I suppose you know the Latin proverb "in vino veritas". If it comes to values: do they carry the wisdom we need for living together peacefully?

Surely. Values reflect wisdom. There is a grading of values, according to quality, intensity and durability. Among artists we distinguish these of regional value from those with national or even international value. International value is hard to gain, but wisdom is also reflected in the regional one. Values tell us about appropriate ways to direct processes. We are all not free of negative experiences in this respect. Yet the latter are also expressed in values, namely such which call upon us not to do certain things. All this notwithstanding I would like to stress that values need to correspond with visions. Without distant aims you will never be able to make a difference today. The present is an intersection of past and future. We carry both of them in our body, mind and soul. In interesting times like 1989 some actions are inevitable and of utmost importance for the time being. Other processes take much longer, and we need to think twice how to keep them going. The wise man never asks for too much and keeps his senses open for the gear that fits his

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