

*Carola Giedion-Welcker's Response to a Turn Towards the Biomorph in the Art of the Early 1930's*

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It always intrigues me, when a writer uses keywords of his time, that is to say words which embrace the spiritual mood or important contemporary concepts of its time, in this case for contemporary culture and art, - perhaps even neologisms for his special way of thinking or just to give his criticism a new and sensual term. It might not always be moral to use new keywords which are fashionable at the very moment of the writer's professional activity. The political meaning of the keywords could be awful and inhuman, arrogant, and socially and ethically wrong. So one has to say that it might be good or bad – in the eyes of later judgement – to use keywords of one's own time. But however, with these keywords you can demonstrate that one is a child of one's own time, comparable with the motto of French intellectuals, mainly the impressionists, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who wanted to be: *etre du son temps* (of their time).

Let us ask how as creative a writer as Carola Giedion-Welcker, who wrote, sometimes as the first author, about some of the most important artists of her time, made use of keywords, showing how she was familiar with the use of words of artists and writers around the late twenties and mid thirties.

She was young and married to one of the most famous cosmopolitical writers, who compared ideals about modern architecture with temples, as he wrote about 1912, a decade before Carola Giedion-Welcker started to write, and gave her the prospect on art. He was already familiar with: abstract art, constructivism, all the ideals of modernity in art and architecture. Surrealism existed as well, but both of them, Siegfried and Carola had no eyes for it: The creativity of dreams, sexuality, the primitivity and wildness in everybody, even communism *à la Breton* and the new methods of painting in a rather odd sort of photographic realism were not at all the business of this intellectual couple. But Carola was open to what Sir Herbert Read later called: 'vitalism' and Alfred H. Barr 'the biomorphic construction'. These words came up much later in the 30's and even 60's, so we do not expect to see them in her texts.

The physicist Werner Heisenberg called the period of the twenties and thirties 'very stormy', because in the natural sciences and art many 'revolts' took place. And of course we remember that the quantum mechanics of Max Planck which Heisenberg developed further, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and the 'Unschärferelation' (uncertainty principle) of Heisenberg, radically altered traditional knowledge about the world. The same can be said about the results of the new study of the microcosm, of cells and crystals and the results of new research about the human brain and mind, the subconscious. In art as well constructivism, surrealism and biomorphism offered the world new visions, and very often as a parallel to the subjects of sciences. Drawings by the biologist Ernst Haeckel were, for many artists, a fascinating resource for natural forms from the beginning of evolution. Artists made use of it for their own repertoire of cells, which differed from those of Haeckel insofar as they mostly were not shaped symmetrically but asymmetrically as if they want to move in any direction. Haeckel was one inspiration for them, Henri Bergson's 'elan vitale' and – as we now know – D'Arcy Thompson's book on 'Growth and Form' of 1917 were others.

Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí as well as Joan Miró had already started, in the twenties, to take a special interest in forms of nature, which very soon was concentrated on cells as the *pars pro toto* of the organic world. Kandinsky, Moore, Hepworth, Calder and even Kiesler followed. They were fond of a holistic vision. These cells did not have to be fixed, but seemed to be able to grow into a fluid existence. Nothing historical, narrative or anecdotal could be seen in these cell-forms. Although they seem timeless, even infinite, preserved since primordial times, they suggested a processual effect, being able to exist with vitality but with no psyche at all. In 1916 during his dada period, Arp started with his first organic reliefs. These works did not have the wide effect that Max Ernst had with his 'Histoire naturelle' series in 1925 (34 of which were published in 1926 in Paris), which were seen as the beginning for a new view on the micro-forms in wood-nerve, where everything of the world was included: birds, leaves, a horse, even Eve as 'No. 34', as he called one of his frottages of the wooden floor in a hotelroom in Pornic/ Brittany. It is 'Eva, the only which is left over for us', as the title of this work tells us: Eve still living in a tree and found centuries later by an artist. Actually, Ernst did find some organic cells in the wooden floor which were semen-shaped, but the – mystical and even alchemistic - idea of 'all in one' started with his frottages. This holistic idea of all in one, to refer here to the term holism, which was also a philosophical school started in 1928, was later transformed into the main motif of organic cells in art.

Arp was not so much a surrealist, but coming from dadaism on the edge of constructivism and surrealism. He started around 1916 with organic forms which were cut out of wood and glued onto each other, using a method, he later adapted in the thirties for his work in marble when he put round cellforms on each other, for example 'Two thoughts on a navel' (1932). He even took the navel as a monocle to look through the world. Quite early, Constantin Brancusi started to shape his motifs as simply as he could in organic forms, which looked to be a concentration of many meanings in one form: a meteor and a cell-form or water or a complete animal, like his famous 'Fish', all together in one unit. So Brancusi as well as Ernst looked for the holistic motif as we see in Ernst's painting 'The Inner Face' from 1929. Let me just give you a short glimpse of Paul Klee's drawing 'Vegetables' of 1930, which seems similar to Brancusi's or Arp's work. However Klee was, on his own, already analysing the essence of nature compared to the essence of art, when he was a teacher at the Staatliche Bauhaus in Dessau. Furthermore Picasso and Alberto Giacometti as well as Andre Masson and Salvador Dali, Tanguy and even Kandinsky started in the late twenties with their round, jelly-fishlike or doughy motifs, which seem to retain the promise of change and flow. Their latent metamorphosis was pronounced by these artist as the true law for life and imagination.

### **How did Carola Giedion-Welcker respond to this?**

Nowadays we can take an over-arching view of this art-history, but Carola Giedion-Welcker lived in it. So her Ariadne's thread was simply her own interest, knowledge and her judgement for what could be important and had quality.

She worked herself in to it. Let us just follow her language in detail throughout her early writings.

Having written her thesis about 'Bayerische Rokokoplastik' (The Sculpture in Churches and Castles of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Rococo in Bavaria) in 1923, Carola Giedion-Welcker was a specialist in round and fluid forms as well as ornaments in C-bows in sinus- and cosinus-curves. But the Rococo contains no cell-forms that can be interpreted at all as a *pars pro toto* of the universe. Nevertheless because of her dissertation she was already trained in seeing and describing organic forms as such.

It took her 3 years before she started to write about the art of her time, in 1926 she wrote a review of *Ozenfant et Jeanneret. La Peinture moderne*, edited in Paris, in which she dared to

put some keywords of her time. She diagnosed ‘a new optic educated in a new mathematical – crystalline sort, with which the position of the artist to nature altered’ and she continued: ‘This Nature is in fact only a factor N, which can be altered in a sense of order due to the needs of its time’. This was the new view put into the nutshell of her sentence: The role of natural science, the scientific interests of artists in mathematics and order, the needs of their time and their own interest in forming an artistic language. To give her sentence a witness, she quoted Le Corbusier, brother of Amedé Ozenfant, with his statement: ‘L’homme c’est animal géométrique’ (Man is a geometric animal). This motto sounds absurd, but it brought the scientific interest in the organic and the mathematical abstraction to a point, which made Le Corbusier’s architecture and paintings fundamental. Funnily enough, Giedion-Welcker in her essay then imagined what would happen if one met the quite unusual ‘Körperballungen’ (body-concentrations, as she put it) in fields of nature: She did not answer this rhetorical question herself, but added to it a psychological and lyrical description of these body-concentrations: ‘totally wrapped in the cocoon, although grown together with the cosmic universe’. In this analysis she was right from the beginning, because both aspects were intended for this sort of art. Interestingly enough, she declared that she could see in this a special ‘geistige Haltung’ (spiritual mentality) towards the world. We can argue that Carola Giedion-Welcker was very contemporary with this visionary statement, because she made use of the term ‘mentality’ instead of style or character, which meant that she was pretty much aware of the new theory of mentality as a viewpoint for the discipline of history. The term mentality was introduced by Emile Durkheim into philosophy around 1900 and afterwards very seldom used for culture; you hardly find the term in essays in the twenties, in contrast to the French cultural philosophy after the Second World War and books of Pierre Bourdieu and other authors nowadays. It was simply her review, so Carola G-W put a critical note into it: she was against any misuse of meaning if the form itself did not bear it: ‘Great art is never misused by a meaning’ she declared. This statement was written in 1926, and is perhaps a subversive criticism against surrealist art.

Two years later she wrote two essays about James Joyce, one on his early work, and the other on *Ulysses*. We could leave this for what it is, if she did not use keywords about the organic in them, which she subsequently continued to work with in her essays on art. In her first essay, she introduces Joyce as someone to whom we owe some insights into the human ‘Innenzelle’ (inside the human cell), because he would analyse the kernel/ essence of the world or ‘Kern’ (kernel) as she put it. She compared Joyce’s writing with the discovery of subtle rootcells.

Cell and kernel became important for her further vocabulary as well as the word 'Durchdringung' (penetration), a term that had been used already by futurists such as Giacomo Balla for the radius of light he painted around 1912/1913. The word 'race', however, which Carola Giedion-Welcker more than once put into her arguments, as she praised Joyce for his details 'From the registration of the speciality of a race' demonstrates she was a child of her time. She must have quickly seen the consequences of using the word race for the discrimination of people by the fascists, because she abandoned it shortly after and never used it again in her writings. But the use of the organic metaphor of a 'Schale' (skin or pod) which Joyce was able to peel off one after another to get to the kernel/core of a person's existence, shows Giedion-Welcker's affection for the botanic imagination which could easily be transformed to organic matter. 'Entwicklung' (evolution), she stated, 'means here: clarification, concentration on a basic substance'.

In *Ulysses* Joyce described the constantly returning 'primordial substances' of life, Giedion-Welcker declared in the beginning of her second essay on Joyce in 1928. The term 'Urkräfte' (primordial power) of life gets a place in her vocabulary for analysing the book. Joyce analysed the process of events microscopically, she said. She compares Bloom's visit to the newspaper-house to looking into the 'Eingeweide' (intestines) of a gigantic machine. For the first time she compared the work of the Irish author with the intentions of the Russian artist Naum-Gabo who wrote with his brother a manifesto about the importance of space and time for art. Furthermore she gave us her astonishing point of view, that seen hierarchically metaphysics are placed above natural sciences because they are better directed to all the vital-dynamics of life than scientific research. Furthermore, she used her poetical talent in saying about *Ulysses*: 'thoughts were put into a *status nascendi* and discovered as a fermenting mass of dough'. Her third essay on Joyce's work in progress a year after in 1929, took the method of 'penetration' again as a main principle of the author and praised his suggestive way of writing as a means to 'Versinnlichung' (to sensualize) the narration. 'Kernpunkt' (the central point - but the German metaphor keeps the organic core/kernel), was, she said, to discover the essential identity of all humans under the variety of outside phenomena. In doing so Joyce would pose 'Urfragen' (primordial questions).

Many of these keywords come up again in her following essays about art. A year after, in 1930, she used the term 'cell' in the title of her essay *Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experimenting cell*. This meanings which Giedion-Welcker put in this one word of scientific practice were

firstly the experiment (which was at that time essential for the courses at academies, especially in the Bauhaus) together secondly with a poetic metaphor: the cell. As she stated in her text, a typical experimenting cell was in her eyes Max Ernst's frottage 'Histoire naturelle', which she stressed to be an important step after Cubism, Suprematism, Futurism and Surrealism. Shortly after this statement she praised Hans Arp, an artist who she would follow faithfully with essays in the following years and who is in fact one of the main artists of biomorphism in sculpture. His work, she said, shows in principle always returning 'Ursymbole' (primordial symbols) and is the result of a long and consequently 'Durchbildung' (penetratingly forming) of an 'Urform' (primordial form). She also named the sculptor Constantin Brancusi here in connection with Arp as someone with similar interests. But she did not compare their interest in the organic with the former Jugendstil nor with Ernst Haeckel's drawings or even Goethe's search for the 'Urpflanze' (primordial plant) or any of the typical anthroposophical ideas of the 'Ganzheitliche Pflanze' (holistic plant) for example those of the botanic scientist Adolf Portmann, as the law for scientific research. She did not ask herself if these parallels could be relevant for these artists at all. By principle, and with one exception, an artist was for her nearly always without inspiration from others. Her only wish seemed to be to give room to the ideals of the artists Ernst, Arp and Brancusi within the stream of art movements – a purely art historical point of view, in a sense. She made her belief in these artists clear and took their side in using keywords.

Let us look to her other essays to see if it is the same case. In the same year, 1930, she focussed on *Hans Arp, the poet and painter*, which is extraordinary and difficult to understand, as Arp had just started his new stone sculptures of organic forms, which she did not even name. She praised his vitalistic manner of working and the original forms of penetration and brought his humor in contact with such of the artists Duchamp and Picabia, who did form a similar 'cell' of working in New York – as she stated.

Well, experimenting cells, primordial cells, cells of art-groups - we now can now conclude, that the metaphor 'cell' had in her language many different meanings, as perhaps the real cell in an organism can have too. She then discovered 'Optical cells' in Arp's sculpture, when she wrote an article about it just two years later. She now tried, in contrast to her previous way of writing to be very objective and less poetic. I quote: 'Forms taken from organic life, irregular circles, oval, leaf-like shapes return in changing sizes, in changed composition and quantity, they are the alphabet of Arp's vision'. It was a neutral summing up of items she saw in Arp's

sculptures. But nevertheless she came to the judgement: 'They seem more important than his earlier humorous associations of forms of human legs, noses, moustaches, forks, bottles, because they surpass all misunderstanding of the viewers'. She concluded in a metaphysical style, saying: 'The last works bring pure optical cells, out of them might grow a new optical orientation and meaning'.

Carola Giedion-Welcker moved her language in a new direction, she evidently wanted to get rid of emotional and subjective poetic idioms, metaphorical and associative words. 1930-1932 must have been the time of a critical turn in her mentality as a writer. It can be argued that she had already altered her language in 1930, when she wrote an essay about Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. She weighed her words in an unemotional way with the aim of reaching a point of critique: She questioned, how far his kinetic object (his Light-Modulator) can be considered a creative piece of art and asked, if art would be able to step out of its 'Isolierzelle' (isolated cell) into another space of life, to maintain itself vitally. To these questions, she shrugged her shoulders. It could be that she considered that it would be decided in the following decades with their important social problems. She did not have the same hesitation for Moholy-Nagy's proposals for spatial forms, because in doing so, she said, he tries to come to a biological solution, which does not only privilege some exceptional people's aesthetics but has to succeed in all basic functions of life for people in general. Maybe, the reasons she hesitates to use pathos and calms her language down to reasonable and quite objective sentences was her consideration of Moholy's intentions, as well as the fact that the Bauhaus had to close because of the Nazi's after two final years of this famous institution in Berlin and furthermore by the news of Moholy's emigration to the USA along with so many other artists moving from Germany to Switzerland, England, the Netherlands, France and even Sweden. She must have noticed that the Fascists used metaphors of the organic world to advertise their discriminating aesthetics and power: using metaphors such as 'Blut und Boden' (blood and soil), the 'entartet' (degenerate), the race and motifs as the sportive body packed thickly with exaggerated muscles.

During these years Carola Giedion-Welcker shaped her language concerning the organic motifs in plastic art in two main texts, which built up her fame, and she was able to place herself far away from such political use of natural metaphors. Safely living in Switzerland, she saw a special need and duty to go on writing about the sculptors she thought were most important for the evolution of art of her time, but who were despised by the fascists in neighbour-

countries. Three years before the catastrophic exhibition of *Degenerate Art* in Munich and elsewhere, which toured through 12 German cities from 1937-1941, Carola Giedion-Welcker wrote in 1934 an article with the programmatic title 'New ways of plastic art today'. In it, she stated that the fundamental starting points were 'Shaping of volumes and motion, relations between mass and material within an elementary organic or stereometric corporeal world'. She spoke of 'Körperwelt' (corporeal world) and no more about the 'organic' as such. It was a neologism, a fashionable one perhaps, but she certainly meant it in an abstract, general way. At first her quotation sounds very objective, as if she wanted to give every art-movement the same right to be, but the word 'Körperwelt' for the organic art of biomorphism as well the stereometrical art of the constructivists gives a glimpse of her preference for artists who worked with organic volumes. Let us look at the artists she listed: Laurens, Boccioni, Duchamp-Villon, Man Ray, Ernst, Brancusi, Arp, Miró and Giacometti; you can easily conclude that her interest in the constructivists obviously vanished, even when she did touch on their ideals in her phrase about the two starting points of artists.

This article was a sort of prologue for her great work which she published in Zürich 1937 in English with the title: *Plastic Art. Elements of Reality, Volume and Disintegration* and which was reedited and widened in 1955 in Stuttgart on a German edition under the title *Plastik des XX. Jahrhunderts: Volumen und Raumgestaltung* changing the word 'Disintegration' into 'Raumgestaltung' (the forming of space), which sounds less vital. It seemed that she was a teacher at the late Bauhaus herself, choosing a very objective and neutral point of view: the forming of volume and space. The suggestion could be that Arp and Moholy-Nagy were meant together as *pars pro toto* for her general view on plastic art. It is quite true: her main purpose was to discover structural and formal similarities in the plastic art of the 20th Century in Europe, in relationship with examples of global Art and Non-Art. This viewpoint and comparisons of modern art, classical antique art, celtic dolmen, the art in grotto's, Stonehenge and Tribal Art had been also the main interest of the surrealist Magazine *Minotaure*, published from 1933 until 1941 in 11 unique book-editions. But Carola Giedion-Welcker must have felt the need to write a counterpart to *Minotaure*, because although the surrealist writers and the editor André Breton were focused on the organic as an essence of human life, they were mainly interested in images of and suggestions of the psyche, and were therefore looking to primitive art for expressions of anxiousness and dreams, magic and ecstasy. This focus did not coincide with Carola Giedion-Welcker's interest, she looked intensely for 'general values' with a law-like impact, not at all for surrealist values. So the keyword

'mentality' is no longer mentioned in her book. A biomorphic work of Picasso's, a woman in plaster she now called 'ectoplasm' projected from an unconnected fragment of a dream. So she not only referred to the surrealist keyword dream, but also to biology. Her main guide (her 'Virgil', as her son put it during the Symposium in Leeds) was at first Hans Arp of whom she wrote in 1937 'All vital transformations in art seem to them just as detestable as life's own eternal transformations. Art is as fruit which is born of man himself, as a fruit grows on a tree or an embryo in its mother'. We can easily see, how she repeated words and meanings in one sentence, which made her language un-poetical, although she used metaphors like fruit and transformation, but it gave her words the intention of a mathematical and pedagogical effect. She was looking for parallels, so she compared Arp's work to a photo of snow on stones laying in water and another of stones laying on a bigger one, a so called 'Gletschergarten in Luzern' (his method of putting round things together). It was her method of showing that art was not aiming at 'art for art's sake', but at being 'an intrinsic part of a much wider cosmic unity'. She therefore found a parallel in the 'system of axioms', the Philosopher Bertrand Russell was searching for. So Giedion-Welcker tried not to put her words next to the illustrated art-work, but a wordless correspondence with another illustration of non-art, as an argument within this system. A common motif, the so-called the 'Urei' (primordial egg), she discovered in Brancusi's and Medardo Rosso's work as well as in Tribal Art. She would no longer dare to say things like that herself, as if she did not believe in them anymore, but loved to quote the artists themselves. She famous for this method, because this was a sort of art history of a quasi-neutral writer who chooses the main topics and essential sentences for artistic intentions, brings them together and makes from this sort of collage a portrait of art history. She did not really undertake research, but wrote a thoughtful and highly readable book for a broad public about artistic, although in fact intellectual, academic, even abstract ideas, and she made it fascinating for everybody to compare the global plastic art and non-art, here and there, now and then, in a timeless manner. With this method she formed a school of art history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Germany and America and inspired museum collections all over the world, for instance the Kröller-Müller-Museum in Otterlo and the Du Menil-Museum in Houston.

Let us look at the historical context, in doing so we will see her book as a political manifestation, because Carola Giedion Welcker presented the contemporary sculptors of the Western World in a global context and did not work with any racial or any other ethnic criteria as the organisers of the *Degenerate Art* show of the same year did. Although she used

a neutral tone in her language, it actually was not neutral at all, because her neutrality came from a highly political effort. In the year before the department of modern art in the National Gallery in Berlin had to close to the public, and that began the prohibition of many artists like Klee and Ernst who subsequently had to hide themselves from the Germans.

We now can sum up why her texts about biomorphism were so important in her early years as an author:

- she was one of the first art historians at all who admitted organic metaphors for plastic art.
- around 1930 she found a great variety of metaphors for the organic style which in themselves could convey many different meanings, such as cells, kernels, corporeal world, primordial question, primordial symbol etc.
- she toned down her poetic potential to a more neutral language around 1930-1932, possibly to be more objective; This must have been on purpose, because, as we know, she was definitely very aware of poetic language and wrote often about it. Her wish to make statements about laws in art was perhaps the reason that she gave no attention to the humour of an art work, as in the work of Arp.
- at her best as an author about art in 1937 she widened her view to works of contemporary sculptors of many countries and compared it with global tribal art and photographs of non-art and images of nature.
- she was not interested in the expressions of energy as a general principle of the world in art, but in the expression of organic growth.
- this might be meant as a continuation of the intention of *Minotaure* as well as an opposition to its narrow minded aims.
- her book of 1937 has to be seen as an political act against the *Degenerate Art* show
- her method of writing in objective sentences altered with quotations of the artists created a school of art history after 1955.
- she never compared the biomorphic art with tendencies in science towards drawings like those by Ernst Haeckel.
- artists hardly mentioned in her first articles and in her book in 1937, she went on to write about later, such as Klee, Giacometti and others. This means that in 1937 her work did not stop and she continued to write many important monographs on some of the most famous artists of her time.