

Art and Polarity—Towards a Theology of Art, with Special Reference to Ezekiel's Prophetic Sign-Acts

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Abstract

This dissertation is dedicated to the research of art and its theological significance. A summary of theologically relevant, art-theoretical conceptions of the underlying phenomenon serves as a starting point and allows for a reconsideration of prophetic sign-acts as artistic performances. Both art in general and prophetic sign-acts, particularly those in the book of Ezekiel, reveal polarity as a common and arguably defining feature. Thus, four polarities, which are art-theoretically relevant and prominently featured in Ezekiel's prophetic sign-acts, are studied in detail. The resulting insight, that polarity is a necessary element within the emergence of art, is associated with the revelatory nature of the latter. Thus, it is concluded that art should be considered as a manifestation of divine revelation. Finally, this conclusion is supplemented by an overview of its practical consequences within different theological disciplines as well as contemporary art.

Keywords

art, polarity, Ezekiel, sign-acts

1. Concepts of Art and their Development

1.1 Thesis

The thesis of this study is that the many structural, phenomenological, topical and even methodical similarities between art in general—regardless of its given genre—and prophetic sign-acts, particularly those in the book of Ezekiel, allow for the research of the latter according to art-theoretical considerations to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of art in its theological context and thus lay the systematic foundation for a biblical theology of art.

1.2 Genres of art

When considering different genres of art, and especially their classification throughout art history, a strong tendency towards polar categorizations becomes apparent. These may likely reflect the underlying nature of art which, according to the thesis of this study, is a central feature of art in general.

The first historically tangible example of this is Plato's differentiation between poietic arts and mimetic arts (Waibl 2009, 70–73). Here, the difference lies in whether a certain human activity is creating something, such as a vase, or whether it is re-creating the physical appearance of something, for instance, paintings of animals or people, possibly on a vase (cf. Schleiermacher 1965, 418–422). In Plato's writings, it becomes immediately apparent that the philosopher considered the latter to be of

inferior value (Hauskeller 2020, 9–14). This thought can even be found today, especially among abstract artists (Rebentisch 2013, 21), but it has also been criticized as the “philosophical disenfranchisement of art” (Danto 1988, 6–7). Furthermore, this differentiation hardly takes nonvisual genres of art into consideration and completely ignores both poetry and literature (Tatarkiewicz 2003, 144).

From at least the second century AD (Tatarkiewicz 2003, 82) throughout the Middle Ages, another classification became dominant that divided artistic genres into liberal arts and mechanical arts (Rieger 2003, 799). While neither of the two categories exclusively dealt with what modernity referred to as fine arts, they were divided according to the relative criterion that mechanical arts required some sort of tools or devices to be performed, whereas liberal arts did not (Bacher 2000). However, considering that even intangible faculties might be regarded as necessary tools for the performance of so-called liberal arts (linguistics and mathematics), the mediaeval classification of the arts was eventually challenged.

In 1766, Lessing (2016) suggested that artistic genres be divided into spatial arts and temporal arts. While the works of the first are considered to require space to unfold, such as paintings, sculptures, architecture, etc., the works of the latter are considered to require time, such as music, drama, and especially literature. According to Anglet (2005, 148), this classification is likely the poet’s attempt to elevate literature over other genres of art. A further development of this classification can be seen in Goodman’s differentiation between allographic arts and autographic arts, the first of which could be copied without changing their status as artworks, such as literature, drama or music, while copying the latter, such as paintings or sculptures, would result in forgery (Bertram 2005, 65). However, the

postmodern art appreciation (cf. Meese 2011) has shown that even this differentiation is largely obsolete.

Rather than dividing genres of art according to their respective material or content, Nietzsche divided them according to their psychological effects (cf. Bertram 2005, 68–72). In doing so, the philosopher referred back to the ancient Greek pantheon, and called the approach directed towards dreamful, beautiful, and harmonic illusion Apollonian, and the approach towards ecstasy and euphoria he called Dionysian (Kittler 2013, 29). This differentiation, however, is problematic because it does not allow for a precise categorization of artistic genres and is even less applicable in the context of prophetic sign-acts since they often combine elements of several different genres.

Thanks to the establishment of speech act theory in the early 1960s (cf. Austin 1962), the performative shift took place whose proponents rediscovered that art was essentially a process rather than a product. Even though this understanding had constantly existed from antiquity (Tatarkiewicz 2003, 29–34) until modernity (cf. Heidegger 1960), its practical implications had never actually been explored to the same extent as in the late twentieth century. This has led some art theorists to argue that both content and reception of art are eventually irrelevant from an aesthetic point of view (cf. Mersch 2002). In light of prophetic sign-acts, however, this position is hardly sustainable.

1.3 Models of art

While the above-mentioned attempts to categorize the different genres of art in juxtaposed and often contradictory groups have already indicated that art and polarity are related, an art-theoretical study is necessary to verify this impression and to better understand the nature of their relationship.

This approach has been chosen since art theories serve as explanatory tools for the analysis of pieces of art (Tatarkiewicz 2003, 175). In this context, theories that are based on the same paradigm have been condensed and are presented as models precisely because the main purpose of models is to illustrate paradigms (Barbour 1974, 6; cf. Bevans 2002, 30).

Theories that define and eventually even judge art according to its linguistic content are summarized in the communication model. The core assumption of this is that art generally conveys some sort of message (cf. Kandinsky 1952, 26; Han 2015). According to Schaeffer (2005, 205), for instance, art is the mere reflection of a contemporary worldview. Considering (post)modern art as well as prophetic sign-acts, however, it becomes apparent that in both cases there are numerous elements that cannot be deciphered (contra Friebel 1999; cf. Ott 2009), and whose linguistic content is, therefore, either nonexistent or at least hidden (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 250–255). This is why an opposing approach exists that is referred to as the institution model in the context of this study (cf. Bertram 2005, 32). Here, the central assumption is that the definition of art is the responsibility of certain institutions such as museums. What makes this model problematic, however, is that the establishment of the respective institutions has to be seen as a result of Hegelian aesthetics (Bubner 2005, 164). Thus, it is not logically consistent to assert that the Bible does not feature art because its texts are not intended to match the aesthetic canon of institutions that did not even exist at the time of its writing (Mazor 2009, 14).

An alternative art-theoretical approach is offered by the constitution model which assumes that artworks are constituted in a manner that allows the recipient to gain certain insights about reality (cf. Heidegger 1960, 19–34). This understanding is certainly based on the idealist art appreciation of the nineteenth century which expected every true artwork to reveal truth

(Eco 2010). However, even proponents of the constitution model (e.g., Han 2015, Wooddell 2011) claim that art requires some form of encryption or concealment. Thus, opponents propose a different approach, which can be referred to as the reception model, because it attempts to define art according to the effects it causes on the part of the recipient (e.g., Danto 1981, cf. Liessmann 1999, 149–158). Obviously, however, the respective effects can vary greatly, and in the case of Ezekiel’s prophetic sign-acts, recipients’ reactions are often not even recorded. Despite the fact that both art and prophecy are designed to provoke interaction, the manner of the interaction appears to not be a useful criterion for the definition of art.

Eventually, it seems hardly possible to define art at all. This may not be surprising, considering that definitions require boundaries, whereas art has a tendency to erase boundaries. Thus, much like God himself (cf. O’Connor 2016, 301), art cannot be defined. Characteristic features of art can, nonetheless, be identified. As the above has shown, one such feature is polarity.

1.4 The polarity of art

Polarity appears to be a precisely artistic feature that is evident throughout art history as well as in the history of philosophy. In this context, it is important to note that, within this study, polarity is used in reference to the juxtaposition of two opposing yet codependent extremes that are mutually exclusive even though they belong to a common phenomenon. To illustrate this concept, Johnson and Oswald (2009, 6) use the act of breathing, which consists of inhaling as well as exhaling. While both extremes are obviously vital, it is nonetheless impossible to perform them simultaneously. Despite that, however, this study argues for the simultaneous presence of two

otherwise incompatible extremes in art. This simultaneity is thus being considered as a hint at the divine nature of art.

Nevertheless, polarity is to be differentiated from duality since the latter usually implies an ontological difference between two juxtaposed extremes. As a consequence, the value of this study does not lie in an art-theoretical endorsement of the two natures doctrine. Instead, this research is designed to overcome the common consideration of prophetic sign-acts as mere analogy-acts (e.g., Ott 2009, 22–34) which will then allow for the reconsideration of prophecy in general in light of art. Thus, a biblical-theological foundation for a future theology of art will be laid from which systematic theology, biblical studies, art theory, and the arts themselves will profit.

In addition to the above, it may be mentioned that terms such as duplexity, ambivalence, or ambiguity could be used synonymously with polarity in most contexts. However, such is renounced here since each of these terms has a certain information-technological, psychological (cf. Trémeau et al. 2009), or rhetorical connotation due to its historical development and usage.

2. The Significance of the Book of Ezekiel for Art

While the Bible as a whole includes countless examples of art, the prophetic writings are particularly remarkable due to their formal polarity that features both prose and poetry (Seybold 2010, 15). Among the Prophets, the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are especially outstanding thanks to their numerous accounts of prophetic sign-acts (Friebel 1999, 79–369) which can be seen as prime examples of condensed artistic polarity. Arguably, the artistic nature of prophecy in general, and prophetic sign-acts in particular, are most prominently featured in Ezekiel's performances (Keen 2010). This

is why Ezek 4:1–5:5, 12:1–6, and 24:15–27 have been chosen to exemplify the artistic principles of polarity. The reconstruction of the respective sign-acts is predominantly based on the communication-theoretical considerations by Friebel (1999), while the general exegetical approach largely applies the so-called holistic method (Greenberg 1983, 18–27). This implies that the interpretation of the text relies mostly on the wording of the MT since that is presumably the oldest version of the text. Furthermore, apart from a few exceptions, text variants or translations, such as the LXX or p967, differ from the MT merely in terms of the composition of chapters, which is of little relevance in the context at hand, but not in terms of content (Lilly 2012).

2.1 Prophet vs. priest

The polar nature of art is not only apparent in Ezekiel's prophetic sign-acts, it is embedded in his ministry as a whole in that he serves as both prophet and priest. While one of the core tasks of a priest is to transmit the divine message (Lev 10:10), a prophet is expected to interpret the same (Koch 1987, 22). Thus, the addressee of the divine message is not least the prophet himself, which gives prophecy a certain self-referential dimension (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2004, 240–280). As a consequence, prophecy in general and prophetic sign-acts in particular are both representational and performative. Furthermore, a prophet functions as a foreboder (cf. Ezek 3:16–21), as somebody who has been called to call others in the name of God (cf. von Rad 1987, 18), and as a member of the divine council (Chalmers 2012, 47–48). Therefore, prophets have to be seen as representatives of God. While Israelite priests generally also function as representatives, they do not usually represent God before the people but they do represent the people before God (cf. Lev 16). This double role creates an artistic polarity which permeates Ezekiel's entire ministry.

2.2 Ezekiel as acting sign

Four times throughout the book of Ezekiel, the protagonist himself is called a sign (Ezek 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27), leaving no doubt that Ezekiel is expected to signify something. Therefore, he is to be located in the realm of representation. As Bolt (2004, 15) points out, representation can either refer to presenting something anew, or to the Cartesian concept of standing in place for an absent object. Considering that the content of Ezekiel's oracles deals with Israel's past and future alike, it is best to assume that both dimensions of representation are in effect in his ministry and performance. Furthermore, within semiotics, the Peircean model (cf. Chandler 2002, 36–42) distinguishes between three different modes that a sign can have: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. The differences exist in the nature of the relation between the signifier and the signified. However, there are numerous cases throughout Ezekiel's prophetic sign-acts where all three are simultaneously apparent.

Benjamin (1993), on the other hand, redefines what a symbol is in contrast to what he calls allegory. According to him, the difference between the two is that allegories can have an infinite number of different signifieds, while symbols hide their significance in themselves until the original state of the world—the unity of signifier and signified—is restored (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 250–255). According to Benjamin's terminology, symbols are, therefore, messianic. Nevertheless, the prophetic message is not altogether hidden since a polarity of allegory and symbol is evident in it. The allegorical aspects of the same are, nonetheless, qualitatively different from profane information inasmuch as the resurrection of the Messiah retrospectively lends it ultimate credibility (Bidy 2005, 25–26, cf. Pannenberg 1968, 131). Ezekiel essentially serves as the embodiment (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2004, 130–160) within which the allegorical and symbolic realms culminate.

3. The Polar Characteristics of Art

3.1 Beauty vs. ugliness

While the aesthetic phenomenon of ugliness was treated with little interest up until the nineteenth century (Rosenkranz 1853), and was then even regarded as mere negation of the superior phenomenon of beauty (cf. Liessmann 1999, 65–77), beauty has historically played an important role in theology and philosophy, and continues to do so today (Ensberg 2007). Nevertheless, for centuries both the appreciation and the research of beauty have been dominated by what Tatarkiewicz (2003, 176–184) refers to as “the great theory.” The basic assumption thereof is that beauty can be defined according to objective criteria, namely either perfect proportion (Waibl 2009, 37–38) or gloss (the reflection of light as metaphor for revelation and understanding). However, Bolt (2010, 123–148) criticizes the equation of an increase in brightness with an increase in understanding as a Eurocentric preconception. In addition, the great theory has also been challenged by those who considered beauty to be merely a subjective phenomenon (cf. Chaplin 2006, 33). The harmonization of the objectivist and subjectivist views was made possible by Kant (Friedlein 1962, 285, cf. Recki 2005, 135) who argued that there is indeed an objective criterion whose recognition is, however, an altogether subjective enterprise. According to him, uninterested pleasure serves as the respective criterion. This basically implies that pleasure can only be identified as being caused by beauty; if possible, interests, which may have led to the first, have been eliminated (Waibl 2009, 135). Therefore, uninterested pleasure is ultimately uninformed pleasure. As a consequence, beauty can only be recognized retrospectively and beauty is thus to be located in the past.

Ugliness, on the other hand, is an imminent phenomenon, which is why some philosophers doubt its existence (cf. Bachmetjevas 2007, 33). Nevertheless, Hagman (2003, 101) argues that the threatening imagination, which may be caused by an impending danger, proves that the phenomenon as such is a reality. However, since the recognition of ugliness is not based on personal experience, it has to be learned culturally. In the biblical context, the determining culture is ideally based on divine revelation. Thus, it is not surprising that the imminent phenomenon of ugliness often appears in the form of sinful behavior (cf. Exod 20:3–5). Ugliness is therefore not a merely aesthetic phenomenon but an ethical one, which is why its portrayal is an artistic imperative (Adorno 2009).

3.1.1 Beauty vs. ugliness in Ezekiel 24:15–27

This passage in Ezekiel features an account of the events surrounding the death of Ezekiel's wife whom the prophet loved very much (Eisemann 2003, 422). This is particularly important for the prophetic sign-act in the text since the prophet's non-participation in his wife's burial (contra Friebel 1999, 340–341) functions as an analogy for the imminent non-participation of his recipients in their relatives' burials (Greenberg 1997, 509). Furthermore, in that Ezekiel's wife is portrayed as the desire of the prophet's eyes (Ezek 24:16), her loss is likened to the loss of the Jerusalem temple (v. 21). In retrospect, there are, thus, two prime examples of beauty which are contrasted by the ugliness of death and destruction (cf. Nietzsche 1969, 1001–1002) which are being predicted as the result of, or punishment for, sin (Ezek 18:24, cf. Gen 2:17). Therefore, the apparent beauty, which is located in the past, and the apparent ugliness, which is to be located in the future, create what could be referred to as ultimate presence. As De Vries (2018, 278) remarks, the concept of presence is *per se* theocentric.

Consequently, it is not surprising that what lies at the center of the prophetic sign-act at hand is the recognition of God (Ezek 24:27). In the context of the book as a whole, it also becomes obvious that the recognition of God is not only brought about by his presence, which emerges out of the beauty-ugliness polarity, but that this presence culminates in (divine) glory (Ezek 1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23; 43:2–5; 44:4).

3.2 Illusion vs. reality

The philosophy of the so-called Frankfurt School suggests that the world in itself is illusionary due to its imperfection (cf. Hirsch 2014, 67–69). Nevertheless, certain insights about reality can be gained by means of intuition, reason, and sensation (Locke 2011, 56). Interestingly, there is relatively broad agreement among philosophers that especially techniques of illusion allow for the adequate application of the three just-mentioned faculties (Waibl 2009, 149–180; 207–216). However, two types of illusion need to be differentiated, namely deceptive illusion (Lotter 2017, 29) and artistic illusion (Heidegger 1960, 79–80). While deceptive illusion is merely based on so-called empty signifiers (cf. Chandler 2002, 74), artistic illusion does have empirically measurable references.

With the above in mind, it is not to be considered sinful if, for instance, an actor pretends to be a different character than he is in his normal life since the purpose of acting is embodiment (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 130–160) rather than fraud. Thus, there is no conflict between acting or the creation of fiction, such as parables (e.g., Matt 22:11–13, Mark 4:26–29, Luke 7:41–43; 15), and Exodus 20:16 or Deuteronomy 5:20. Similarly, visual arts are not in conflict with Exodus 20:4 or Deuteronomy 5:8 since their purpose is not the worship of the works they bring forth (Boehm 2006, 330,

cf. m. 'Abod. Zar. 3:4). Instead, artistic illusion is even a necessity for the recognition of data-based or constructivist reality (cf. Danilina 2014, 50).

3.2.1 Illusion vs. reality in Ezekiel 12:1–16

This passage is framed by the revelation formula (v. 1) and the recognition formula (v. 15) and does, therefore, imply that the prophetic sign-act which the text describes, is ultimately directed towards the (deeper) understanding of God's actions. The illusionary aspect of the sign-act lies in the reenactment (Eisemann 2003, 204) or prediction (Friebel 1999, 271) of the forced exile, if not even the dramatic performance of Zedekiah's attempted escape (Greenberg 1983, 217). The presumably deliberate vagueness concerning the sign-act's historical references confirms Benjamin's concept of allegories (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2004, 250–255). According to Allen (1994, 170), Alexander (1986, 796), and Block (1997, 362), the sign-act itself was performed in the daytime (cf. v. 4) so that Ezekiel's fellow exiles would be able to witness it, which supports the theory that the act of seeing functions as a leitmotif in this passage (Friebel 1999, 262). During the performance of the sign-act, the prophet takes on several roles simultaneously—himself, the exiles, the Jerusalemites, the Babylonians, and God—which is why it can be described as reverse cross-casting (cf. Grotowski 2000). This implies that the polarity of the two epistemological extremes (illusion and reality) is not achieved by the mimetic quality of the illusion but by the content of the performance as a whole (cf. Bidy 2005). Given that there is no actual content beyond Christ (Fujimura 2006, 303), it can be concluded that the polarity of illusion and reality culminates in the divine quality of truth.

3.3 *Artwork vs. performance*

Arguably the most relevant debate within current art theory concerns the conservative view on one side (e.g., Gehlen 1986, 187), which considers contemporary works of art to be aimless, and the progressive view on the other side (e.g., Mersch 2002) which considers the work-related focus in itself as a hindrance of an adequate hermeneutics and especially an “erotics of art” (Sontag 2016, 22). While the first of these two approaches focuses on the outcome of the artistic process, namely the artwork, the latter focuses on the process itself, namely the performance. This general difference leads to far-reaching consequences concerning the definition of either artwork or performance. It can be summarized that artworks are representational (cf. Panofsky 1972), they require some sort of frame—either a spatial or a temporal one (Polanyi 2006, 159–160)—they provoke an inward response on part of the recipient, and they are generally directed towards perfection (cf. Danilina 2014, 52). Performances are, by contrast, self-referential (Bersis 2009), they do not require pre-existing frames and even tend to erase the same, they provoke an outward response or responsibility (Mersch 2002, 53), and they are generally directed towards imperfection (Bolt 2010, 76). Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that neither artwork nor performance exists in an absolute form. Therefore, the simultaneous presence of both is essentially inevitable. As a consequence, the favor of one of the two at the expense of the other cannot be justified—neither art-theoretically nor biblical-theologically. Instead, the tension created by the polarity of both extremes should be embraced as the mystery that surrounds art in general (cf. Seidler 2014, 223).

3.3.1 Artwork vs. performance in Ezekiel 4:4–17

The passage at hand features the pivotal part of a bigger sign-act (Ezek 4:1–5:5) whose middle section is being studied separately due to its thematic focus on the general fate of the kingdom of Judah, rather than of the city of Jerusalem in particular. Furthermore, Ezekiel 4:4–17 most prominently displays the polarity of performative as well as artwork-related elements. The beginning of this part of the sign-act is the divine command that Ezekiel should lie on his left and then right side for a certain period of time in order to either tolerate (Greenberg 1983, 104) or bear (Block 1997, 117) Israel's and Judah's iniquity, guilt of iniquity, or punishment for iniquity (cf. Alexander 1986, 771). While lying in this position, the prophet is expected to eat strictly rationed food (vv. 9–10) which may represent scarcity (cf. Block 1997, 185) as well as variety, considering that the loaves of bread are to be baked with six different ingredients. The manner in which Ezekiel is supposed to bake them is most unusual and provokes his objection which Phinney (2005, 75) considers a central element of the prophetic office whereby the objection shows that the prophet's ego is in dialogue with God as well as in action for him.

In summary, the sign-act at hand is framed spatially by the prophet's house (Ezek 3:24) and temporally by the commanded number of days, whose numeric significance was likely not immediately apparent to Ezekiel's audience, and which causes the reception of the sign-act to be performative. Furthermore, the accuracy concerning the ingredients of the prophet's food is obviously directed towards perfection, whereas the use of dung as fuel and the representation of scarcity imply imperfection. Thus, the sign-act is representational, which places it in the realm of artworks; however, the act of eating is a metabolic process which is why the sign-act has to be located in the realm of performances. In addition, the literary

context leaves no doubt that Ezekiel's performance is to provoke an inward and an outward response on the part of its recipients (Ezek 3:17–21). As a consequence, the prophetic sign-act at hand is simultaneously an artwork as well as a performance (contra Ott 2009, 22–34).

3.4 *Transcendence vs. immanence*

Artists (e.g., Kandinsky 1952, 26, Meese 2011), art theorists (e.g., Heidegger 1960, 30, Bertram 2005, 116–123; Danilina 2014, 50), and even art critics (e.g., Lessing 2016; Schmid 1981) generally agree that art enables its recipients and participants to encounter the transcendent, or to at least catch a glimpse of it. Their respective definitions of transcendence are, however, usually very vague. There appears to be general agreement that transcendence is beyond ordinary human experience. Thus, it has to be differentiated from intuition, reason, and sensation (cf. Locke 2011, 56). For the purpose of this study, transcendence has been further defined according to three criteria: its place, mode, and destination. Heaven in its different facets (Beinert 2006, 48), which are all beyond ordinary human experience (Gese 1983, 2011), can be identified as the place of transcendence. Furthermore, truth, as it can be recognized thanks to the polarity of illusion and reality (cf. Gebauer 2000, 250–251), is to be identified as the mode of transcendence. This has also been reflected in art theory since the nineteenth century (Scott 2006, 163). Lastly, eternity has to be identified as the destination of transcendence (Rombold 2004, 14).

Since the concepts of transcendence and immanence are necessarily interdependent in that both are dialectic (Greisch 2012, 196–197, cf. Nabert 1996), immanence is to be understood as the exact opposite of transcendence or the negation thereof (Deleuze 1996). Thus, art is to be defined by its mundanity, fallibility, and finitude. Furthermore, it becomes

apparent that neither transcendence nor immanence is simply available and can, therefore, not be produced or fabricated. Considering that the polarity of the two emerges within art, it has to be concluded that art cannot possibly be a human production either (contra Harbinson 2012).

3.4.1 Transcendence vs. immanence in Ezekiel 4:1–3 and 5:1–5

There are two different parts to be looked at: the first of which (Ezek 4:1–3) deals with the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, and the second (Ezek 5:1–5) which focuses on the consequences thereof. Considering that the sign-act features a clash of theological ideals and the historical reality (cf. Friebel 1999, 196.204), the polarity of transcendence and immanence is immediately apparent. However, this polar structure is not only visible on the contentual level, but also on the technical one, as can be seen by the combination of two-dimensional (Uehlinger 1987, 141–149, Block 1997, 171, Ott 1009, 96) with three-dimensional (Greenberg 1983, 103) representations of Jerusalem and its surrounding siege works. Certain materials (e.g., iron), even though of the most earthly origin possible and thus clearly immanent, bear a certain transcendent significance (cf. Maeir et al. 2012). Furthermore, especially the second part (Ezek 5:1–5), seems to imply that, despite the use of ordinary and mundane items, the acts that are carried out are not only those of a priest (Block 1997, 191) but also of a Nazirite (Allen 1994, 71, Friebel 1999, 234.236) who embodies God’s very own behavior. Consequently, everything the prophet performs in this context has to be considered a holy act.

Here, it is important to differentiate between the etymological origin of the terms “holy” and “holiness” and their actual usage in the Hebrew Bible. While the first may suggest that they have to do with separation (cf. van de Walle 2017, 8), Davies (2009, 5–6) points out that the adjective “holy” is most commonly used in combination with prepositions that indicate a

directedness towards something or someone, namely God. Consequently, Cohen (2008, 133–154) considers holiness to be a concept of relationship, whereby he attributes the holiness of God to the relationship between the creator and his chosen people (cf. Dan 2012, 74). Thus, the author essentially questions the divine sovereignty, which it why it is better to assume that the holiness of God is a consequence of his trinitarian nature. This divine quality is eventually the culmination of the polarity between transcendence and immanence as it can be encountered in the prophetic sign-act at hand (Ezek 4:1–5:5) as well as in art in general.

4. The Significance of Art Within the Book of Ezekiel

4.1 Art vs. prophecy

The comparison of art and Ezekiel's prophecy, especially his prophetic sign-acts, reveals a striking similarity between the two—that both are initiated by inspiration (cf. Markschie 2014, 100). As opposed to the etymological origin of the term “inspiration” (cf. Vöhler 2004, 207), however, the book of Ezekiel demonstrates that inspiration predominantly refers to a change of perspective, often by means of relocation (Ezek 3:14; 8:3; 11:1.24; 43:5). It is this change of perspective which allows for the recognition of God, as the recurring recognition formula indicates (cf. Strong 1995). Remarkably, the just-mentioned formula is not merely used in reference to mediately performed sign-acts but also to immediate historical events (Ezek 6:13; 12:15; 20:42), which implies that just like God reveals himself through history and nature (Rom 1:20), he also reveals himself through art. Thus, it can be concluded that art is essentially a manifestation of divine self-revelation. As such, art is to be differentiated from prophecy in that prophecy assumes art (cf. Meese 2011, 310). Consequently, art is of utmost significance for the

book of Ezekiel since the prophetic message of its protagonist would be unthinkable without it.

4.2 The divinity within

Three of the four polarities that were considered in this study have been shown to reveal certain extraordinary qualities: the polarity of beauty and ugliness culminates in presence; the polarity of illusion and reality culminates in truth; and the polarity of transcendence and immanence culminates in holiness. According to Barth (1940, 362, cf. Holmes 2008, 210), all three qualities are to be regarded as divine perfections. As such, they are neither controllable nor made, but should be located beyond that which is created. Furthermore, since these perfections are essential to art, it has to be concluded that art itself is pre-existent (Heidegger 1960, 7) and, therefore, divine. Art can thus be seen as the sum of divine perfections.

The fact that one of these four polarities, namely artwork and performance, does not culminate in an immediately apparent perfection is probably best explained by the recalcitrant nature of art which has the tendency to challenge, push, and erase boundaries and, therefore, hardly fits into preconceived theories or systems. Given that the same can be said about God (Seidl 1988, 122), this particular characteristic further confirms the divine nature of art.

Since none of the divine perfections, which are to be seen as culminations of the artistic polarities considered in this study, nor the uncontrollability or sovereignty, which has been identified as characteristics of art, can be attributed to one particular hypostasis alone, it is best to assume that art in itself is divine trans-personality, however neither in a Jungian (cf. Vich 1988) nor in a parapsychological sense (cf. Laszlo 2004), but in a trinitarian one. With this in mind, three central insights concerning the

nature of art can be summarized: art is to be seen as manifestation of divine self-revelation, as sum of divine perfections, and as divine trans-personality. Thus, it can be said that much like God is fire (Heb 12:29), light (1 John 1:5), love (1 John 4:8.16), and *Logos* (John 1:1), God is also, and especially, art.

5. Practical Consequences

5.1 Consequences for theology

The above-mentioned insights concerning the nature of art represent three different perspectives: the revelation-theological perspective (art as divine self-revelation), the theology proper perspective (art as sum of divine perfections), and the trinitarian perspective (art as divine trans-personality). While the second and third are certainly to be placed within the discipline of systematic theology, the revelation-theological perspective does have systematic as well as hermeneutical and, thus, exegetical, implications. Given that the biblical canon is to be regarded as normative revelation for the people of God, this causes the Bible to be considered a work of art. Consequently, its content must not be studied merely according to hermeneutical methods (cf. Redditt 2008, 26–50) but also according to methods of art criticism (cf. Lessing 2016) and art theory (e.g., Panofsky 1972).

Furthermore, the implied divinity of art has far-reaching consequences for systematic theology in that it renders the consideration of God as “master of arts” (Stoker 2007) obsolete since God himself is art. In addition to this, the insights of this study emphasize the need for a theology of art as an independent discipline within systematic theology while simultaneously challenging its pre-existing classification by creating cross-connections between different sub-disciplines such as epistemology

and aesthetics, the latter of which is often not even considered to belong to the realm of theology.

5.2 *Consequences for art theory*

Considering that polarity has proven to be a vital characteristic of art (cf. Iser 1999, 39–58), attempts to justify the alleged dominance of either a hermeneutical or a phenomenological approach have to be rejected. Instead, the tension created by the underlying polarity or polarities should be embraced as the driving force of art. Furthermore, the recognition of the divine nature of art causes the notion of creating art by theorizing about it to be untenable (cf. Derrida 1986, 144). This also implies that the definition and, thus, fixation of art is an ultimately hopeless task (Osborne et al. 2012, 9). Rather than being governed, art is to be experienced (Sontag 2016, 22, cf. Mersch 2002, 160–161) and, thus, God is to be recognized (e.g. Ezek 24:24).

5.3 *Consequences for the arts*

The nature of art as portrayed in Ezekiel’s prophetic sign-acts leaves no doubt about the fact that art is not to be domesticated. As a consequence, it must be the task of any artist to overcome the pragmatic approach of utilizing art, albeit it for the most honorable purposes (contra Peacock 2006, 241). In fact, the underlying utilitarian reasoning for art’s right to exist, which is shared by many Christian artists (e.g., Harbinson 2012; Fujimura 2017; cf. Schaeffer 2005; Han 2015) and often believed to save art from its alleged irrelevance, eventually proves to be the exact opposite—a degradation of art.

Therefore, two alternative approaches towards the practical engagement with art are presented: the concept of the *social sculpture* by Beuys (2002, 13) and the concept of the *dictatorship of art* by Meese (2011).

While the first does indeed overcome the notion of mastery by highlighting that art cannot be controlled inasmuch as it is an ongoing social process (Verspohl 1989), it is, nonetheless, based on an anthropological rather than a theological rationale (Stachelhaus 2010, 82). The center of Meese's concept is indeed art, whose divinity he does not question. Despite the divine nature of art, however, Meese rejects the idea of a personal God (2011, 325), even though personality is an essential requirement for trans-personality (cf. Vaai 2007, 144). Thus, it becomes obvious that both approaches need further development.

In addition, it has become apparent that since art can be seen as the sum of divine perfections, it also reveals their close interconnectedness. Considering that polarity, which has proven to be a characteristic feature of art, and is the underlying principle of any complex system (Morin 1992, 373), the development of a theology of art also necessitates the study of art beyond the phenomenon of polarity. On that note, this study at hand is merely the groundwork for a future theology of art.

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