

Chamber Pot, Urn and Their Proper Uses

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In keeping with Adolf Loos' renowned analogy between art and architecture, Karl Kraus attempted in the December 1913 issue of his magazine *Die Fackel* to demonstrate the distinction that distinguishes objects from one another. He did so by referring to the unique and non-interchangeable concept of use for each:

»Adolf Loos and I—he, literally and I, grammatically—have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot, and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room. The others, those who fail to make this distinction, are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.«¹

The idea of *proper use* is key to the Krausian position cited above. Kraus claims different and plausible uses for two almost identical objects that share the same shape and design. Both urn and chamber pot make ideal storage containers, and both often have a handle and a lid. Nevertheless, one is used with some ritual significance for preserving cremation ashes while the other is used as a urinal. For Kraus, the essential distinction between the two objects lies in their dissimilar uses, and the meaning each object acquires, depending on its particular mode of use within a given cultural context. Thus, he accuses people in a certain social circle of using every container as a chamber pot or urn and criticizes the interchangeable and improper use of artifacts as a sign of mediocrity in *fin-de-siècle* Viennese culture.

Since Kraus himself identifies his task, as writer and social critic, with that of Loos as designer and architect, we might return to the original argument Loos presented in his essay *Architecture* (1910) to examine the distinction he draws between art and architecture (barring tombs and monuments), one that is based on concepts such as need, use and purpose:

»The house has to please everyone, contrary to the work of art which does not. The work is a private matter for the artist. The house is not. The work of art is brought into the world without there being a need for it. The house satisfies a need. The work of art is responsible to none; the house is responsible to everyone. The work of art wants to draw people out of their state of comfort. The house has to serve comfort. The work of art is revolutionary, the house is conservative. The work of art shows people new directions and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present. Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and disturbs him. Thus he loves the house and hates art.«²

The Loosian quotation above suggests that the purposefulness of a building transforms it into an object of daily use and exerts a significant influence on

1 »Adolf Loos und ich, er wörtlich, ich sprachlich, haben nichts weiter getan als gezeigt, dass zwischen einer Urne und einem Nachttopf ein Unterschied ist, und dass in diesem Unterschied erst die Kultur Spielraum hat. Die anderen aber, die Positiven, teilen sich in solche, die die Urne als Nachttopf und die den Nachttopf als Urne gebrauchen«
Kraus 1913: 37. [Translation as quoted by Janik / Toulmin 1996: 89.]

2 »Das Haus hat allen zu gefallen. Zum Unterschiede vom Kunstwerk, das niemandem zu gefallen hat. Das Kunstwerk ist eine Privatangelegenheit des Künstlers. Das Haus ist es nicht. Das Kunstwerk wird in die Welt gesetzt, ohne daß ein Bedürfnis dafür vorhanden ist. Das Haus deckt ein Bedürfnis. Das Kunstwerk ist niemandem verantwortlich, das Haus einem jeden. Das Kunstwerk will die Menschen aus ihrer Bequemlichkeit reißen. Das Haus hat der Bequemlichkeit zu dienen. Das Kunstwerk ist revolutionär, das Haus ist konservativ. Das Kunstwerk weist der Menschheit neue Wege und denkt an die Zukunft. Das Haus denkt an die Gegenwart. Der Mensch liebt alles, was seiner Bequemlichkeit dient. Er haßt alles, was ihn aus seiner gewonnenen und gesicherten Position reißen will und belästigt. Und so liebt er das Haus und haßt die Kunst« Loos 1995 [1910]: 84. [Translation as quoted by Safran / Wang 1987: 107-108.]

both its form and appearance. The architect designs a building according to the functional requirements the building's users want fulfilled to ensure their comfort. The way we want to use a building determines how the architect should design it. According to this claim, then, we can assume that every object of use – such as a building – has a singular use which best meets the purpose for which it is designed. A work of art, however, is just the opposite of a utilitarian object: intrinsically, while rather useless, it aims to counter the dreariness of daily life by introducing revolutionary concepts.

On the basis of this distinction, Loos battles against the notion of *applied arts*, regarding that term as a contradictory combination of aesthetic and purposeful aspects in a single object. For him, a decorated door, a design product by an applied artist, is not more useful than a simple door. So he not only condemns all forms of meaningless decoration on articles of use, but also expresses his admiration for the healthier American and British society in which use took precedence over beauty. Loos was to say, »If you want to understand the significance of, for example, the system of water piping in a house, look at the *use* to which that system is put. The meaning *is* the use.«³ According to Loos, the architect should take the plumber as his model, not the sculptor.⁴ As a result of such a theoretical approach, Loos concentrates on the concept of utilitarianism in his designs and radically simplifies the appearance of his buildings.

Returning to Kraus' attempt to adapt his own analogy to Loos', we can readily see that his distinction between chamber pot and urn is hardly the same one Loos found relevant for distinguishing objects of use from genuine works of art. We can point to a disparity between the two concepts here. In fact, if Loos' claim that uselessness is the characteristic that distinguishes works of art from utilitarian objects indeed holds true, then, the *useless* qualities of artworks are not applicable to an urn. Neither the great ritual nor religious significance of an urn is sufficient reason to raise its status to that of an artwork; the object still meets certain functional requirements. In this sense, the urn is just as conservative as a chamber pot and should please its users in the same way a house or other object for use does.

At the same time, we should emphasize that Loos' endeavor to adapt every design to its own specific use does not release architecture from carrying symbolic meanings beyond the concept of everyday use. Whereas the design of a dining room, for example, satisfies the client's architectural requirements for having a meal at home comfortably, that design can also help confer a specific cultural identity by providing space where pictures of symbolic significance can be hung near the dining table. Like an urn, then, the house is not necessarily the realization of a pure system of utilization. Nor does the distinction between the urn and chamber pot claimed by Kraus work in relation to Loos' analogy of art (beauty) and utilitarian objects (use), since the urn, chamber pot and house can all be held in the same category of utilitarian objects.

Moreover, the Kraus quote cited above seems to be contradictory in its argument on another point: if we accept the principle that meaning comes from use, then we cannot criticize someone on the basis of making *improper* use of something. Earlier, we saw Loos identifying the task of objects for daily use by stressing their commitment to the provision of comfort. Subsequently, if someone, within the sphere of his comfort zone, chooses to use a chamber pot in an unusual way, he may derive some meaning out of the object by doing so. Hence, the critique leveled by Kraus is less a critique of impropriety in use

3 Janik / Toulmin 1996: 252

4 In 1898, Loos wrote an essay in honor of the Plumbers and criticized the backwardness of his country and its culture, where most of the apartments did not have integrated bathrooms (Jormakka 2011: 290).

than a critique of a form of life in which one decides to use a chamber pot in a different context.

Perhaps an example would better substantiate this position: if one criticizes a doctoral hat for not being particularly good protection against the rain, it can be argued that doctoral hats are not meant to be worn outside and are more commonly used indoors by professors and PhD recipients on official academic occasions. Once the criticism escalates and calls the very use of hats in an academic context into question, however, the statement should be considered a critique of the whole academic system in which the use of a hat connotes symbolic meanings that go beyond utilitarian function. Of course, the use of strange-looking academic hats in a doctoral defense meeting, which should, in the first instance, be a place of reason and sound judgment, is *per se* irrational and non-justifiable behavior. Nevertheless, the absurd use of one element should not drive criticism of a whole system.

From there, one might also study the assumptions of Loos and Kraus in terms of Umberto Eco's *primary and secondary functions* and regard the use of the objects as »an act of communication, a message, of which the parts and the whole can perform the double action of every communication, connotation and denotation.«⁵ Eco elaborates his position on the relationship of the primary and secondary functions by giving a concrete example: he is convinced that the primary function of a chair is to offer a place to sit, but when the chair is to be used as a throne, then it should also fulfill secondary functions and connote the concept of royalty by stressing the act of sitting with dignity. Although both chamber pot and urn immediately signal that storage is their primary function, providing a space for storage is only the most direct or elementary meaning of both objects based on the concept of their conventional use. More important are the symbolic connotations (secondary functions) deriving from higher cultural associations that aim to create the distinction between a chamber pot and an urn and to recognize the unique aspects of each.

5 Eco 1990 [1967]: 291-307

Agreeing on dual communicative nature of objects and their denotative and connotative meanings, we may argue that each sign does not necessarily have just one original connotative meaning, such as the one Kraus prescribed for Viennese society around 1910. Instead, it might have other related connotations based on different cultural, social and historical conventions, any of which could give rise to the formation of new secondary functions and alternative uses for one particular object. What Kraus has distinguished as *proper use* seems only the primary function of objects for use, one that disregards any plausible secondary functions. In this instance, we can recall the example of the architecture of contemporary expositions Eco offers in the same essay, where he emphasizes how the connotative and symbolic meaning of exposition buildings minimize the importance of their primary function. Although expositions are used primarily to house products and invite people to come in and see something, their utilitarian function is small compared to their secondary function: acting as a communication medium. »In an exposition, architecture proves to be message first, then utility [or use].«⁶

6 Ibid.: 299

Returning to Eco's example of throne, the idea of *proper use* for objects can be theoretically justified based on one of the following arguments: something can be used for sitting on as a throne when 1) the British monarch, for example, has used it historically in coronation ceremonies; 2) the designer intended to design it as a throne; 3) the role assigned to the throne in a system results

in efficient operation of that given system (systematic or causal role—a more comprehensible example: the proper function of heart is to pump fresh blood, resulting in efficient operation of the human body). Apparently, the historical argument can provide stronger grounds for maintaining the accuracy of *proper use* identified for an object. In fact, designers do not have (nor should they have) the power to force people to use the objects in precisely the way they intended. While the causal argument ordinarily presupposes the existence of some kind of system, the historical argument can still justify, for example, the use of a throne or a doctoral hat with all its connotative meanings.

Further, it appears that Kraus' critique of improper use is based on the same historical argument in response to the changed spirit of an age that took aim at Viennese society in the beginning of twentieth century. In all likelihood, the mention of »those others who use the chamber pot as an urn« might be the Viennese *Jugendstil* designers, such as Olbrich and Hofmann, who strove to elevate utilitarian objects into art by ornamenting them according to the principles of the *new art*. By the same token, the mention of »those others who use urn as a chamber pot« might be found among the Austrian well-to-do who imitated the art of previous ages and used it as means to an end. In this vein, the most important point of convergence between Loos' and Kraus' ideas can be seen as their struggle against the cultural corruption caused both by rebellious artists and the Austrian's bourgeois classes' passion for ornament.

Wittgenstein's idea of *meaning as use*⁷ reminds us, in a way, of Loos' and Kraus' position to derive the meaning of objects from their use. In his *philosophical investigations*, Wittgenstein postulates that the meaning of a word derives from how the word is used practically in a language. Referring to numerous and varying uses of a word in a given tongue, he calls each use a *game* and develops his argument further into the notion of *language-games*, where every word may be given different meanings, depending on how it is used in a language-game. Subsequently, he argues that meanings emerge from the different *forms of life* that involve people. To use words meaningfully, people must decide which language-game they want to play, and which form of life they are able to take.⁸

According to this position, we may argue that identical objects may have different meanings when used differently, and that each use is correct in and of itself as long as it is practiced within the conventional rules of one selected *form of life*. Hence, one cannot accuse someone of using a container in a wrong way, for the citation of improper use resides, not in the object, but more in the form of life being practiced. Further, one cannot criticize a particular form of life unless able to claim a position of authority over everyone else. In other words, if Kraus is claiming that the true meaning of things relies on their uses, then, he should also consider the social categorization of the society that generates other *forms of life*. Around 1910, Vienna was not a united society and its social fabric was made up of many traditions. From this point of view, Kraus' analogy could be more viable if he addressed different *forms of life* while elaborating on his *proper use* concept.

One obvious difference between Loos' ideas about art and architecture and Kraus' use of those ideas is Loos' awareness of the *life form* concept. For Loos, »objects of use are among the conditions of a particular way of life while art reflects that way of life.«⁹ He wrote: »We have our culture and our forms that reflect our life as well as utilitarian objects that make our life possible.«¹⁰ And

7 Wittgenstein 1953: § 43. »For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word »meaning« it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.«

8 Ibid.: §7: For Wittgenstein language-game is »consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven,« consider also § 23: »Here the term »language-game« is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the »speaking« of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.«

9 Jormakka 2011: 290

10 »Wir haben unsere Kultur, unsere Formen, in denen sich unsere Leben abspielt, und die Gebrauchsgegenstände, die uns dieses Leben ermöglichen« Loos 1997 [1908]: [Translation as quoted by Jormakka 2011: 290.]

he continues: »We do not sit in a particular way because a carpenter made the chair so and so, rather the carpenter made the chair in that particular way because that is how we want to sit.«¹¹ Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin have attributed to Loos the view that »the architect could not prescribe in advance the future forms of life or forms of culture; changes in those external forms would call for new creative responses from the architect himself.«¹² This position implies that the design of objects for use is determined by the context—that is different forms of life in a society—and thus the critique of one form of life is not possible from the premise of another.

For Loos in the sphere of design, and Wittgenstein in the sphere of philosophy, architects and philosophers count among the group of people who are alienated from the truth; they tend to stand out of a system and pass judgments on how other people should live their lives. At the beginning of his essay *Architecture* (1910), Loos takes us to the shores of an alpine lake and describes the *beautiful* scene there as reflected in the water. »The sky is blue, the water is green, and everything is at peace.« There is no disharmony between the landscape and the man-made. The farmers' dwellings and chapels, even the railway on the shore and the ship cutting through the lake's surface »stand there as if they had never been built by human hands.« It is only the villa, the work of an uprooted architect, which disrupts the beauty, peace and quiet of the landscape »like an unnecessary scream«. Thus, Loos criticizes architects by asking: »Why is it that every architect, whether good or bad, desecrates the lake?«¹³

Likewise, Wittgenstein accuses traditional philosophers of obscuring meaning by misusing the language and by asking meaningless questions. For him, »a language means to imagine a form of life«¹⁴ and »philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language.«¹⁵ Thus, the philosopher's attempt to ascribe meaning to the words could be legitimate only insofar as the words are used in the same language-game as their ordinary use implies.¹⁶ As such, those philosophical arguments formulated outside a relevant language-game are meaningless and those philosophers who fail to distinguish the unique character of each form of life and argue across different language-games are wrong and alienated from the truth.

According to Wittgenstein, then, the philosopher's treatment of a question should be like the treatment of an illness,¹⁷ meaning the pursuit of philosophy should aim to completely clarify the uses of language and end the process of questioning. To this end, there is not only a single »philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies,«¹⁸ all of which Wittgenstein seems to find acceptable. By rejecting the authoritative voice of the philosophers and accepting the multiplicity of language-games, then, the business of philosophy will no more be to resolve a contradiction or to grasp the essence of a thing, but to put everything—as it is—in front of us. »Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain«¹⁹ anymore, and hence, what was formerly thought of as a philosophical problem may now dissolve²⁰ so that silence becomes the target of the philosopher's mode of life.

In summing up this section on the analogous position of Loos and Wittgenstein in focused critique of their own professions, one might argue that, in fact, architects and philosophers are not the only group of people who claim authority over other forms of life being practiced. To name just a few: religious leaders, a judge, teachers at schools and parents, for example, would demand the same position with regard to their privileged access to truth. In a concrete sense, the

11 »Wir sitzen nicht so, weil ein Tischler einen Sessel so oder so konstruiert hat, sondern der Tischler macht den Sessel so, weil wir so oder so sitzen wollen« Loos 1997 [1908].

12 Janik / Toulmin 1996: 252

13 »Wie kommt es, daß ein jeder Architekt, ob schlecht oder gut, den See schändet?« Loos 1995 [1910]: 76. [Translation as quoted by Safran / Wang 1987].

14 Wittgenstein 1953: § 19

15 *Ibid.*: § 124. Not »in«.

16 *Ibid.*: § 116. »When philosophers use a word—knowledge, ›being‹, ›object‹, ›I‹, ›proposition‹, ›name‹ – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.«

17 *Ibid.*: § 255

18 *Ibid.*: § 133

19 *Ibid.*: § 126

20 Biletzki / Matar 2011

form of life in parenting practiced by many cultures includes absolute authority over children, both by giving orders and taking responsibility for any offsprings' well-being and socialization. Nonetheless, no one dares accuse parents of exercising an authoritative power over their children. Hence the authority argument offers no firm foundation on which Loos' and Wittgenstein's critique of their own professions could be grounded.

From here, we can also question why Wittgenstein's general »recognition of cultural diversity and of the relativity of language games to the modes of human life«²¹ cannot at the same time be applied to the language-game of those authoritative practices as exemplified in the works of architects and philosophers? To maintain Loos' and Wittgenstein's position, it seems we must eliminate the misconception of architecture and philosophy as unique and exceptional professions, both by expanding the critique of authority to other professions and recognizing the legitimacy of the many diverse ways in which language is put to use in given forms of life. The very fact that in some everyday situations the use of authority is never called into question proves that authoritative uses of language can still be as legitimate as its other uses.

21 Cernuschi 2002: 175

Furthermore, following Wittgenstein's idea of *meaning as use* to its logical conclusion would seemingly result in a contradictory situation: if we assume that the meaning of given words are related to their practical uses within the limits of a particular language-game, then, speakers of German in both Germany and Austria would practice two different language-games. There are slightly different vocabularies and grammar rules governing how to use words in each language-game. To be served potatoes, for example, one needs to order *Kartoffeln* in Germany and *Erdäpfel* in Austria. In this case, the meaning is to be found in the *successful use* of the word. Lastly, if one gets what he wants by using the language, then that use of the word must have been the correct one.

If we continue to follow this position, arguing from the successful use to a corresponding meaning, then one must ask how we would ever be able to reconstruct what successful use is. In fact, in unfamiliar situations where further distinctions in vocabulary and grammar persist, the possibility of understanding the true intention of an Austrian German speaker from his use of verbal expressions may become less and less plausible. The High German speaker can only speculate about the intended use of a word by an Austrian speaker and hence, the reconstruction of the successful use remains only a wild guess for him. As a result, no convincing case to prove abuse or misuse of language can be ever made and all current uses of German language will be considered legitimate. In addition, the very fact that Wittgenstein himself criticized traditional philosophy for its authoritative use of language implies that he recognized the multiplicity of ways in which language could be put into practice. This position would ultimately lead to a situation in which language becomes very fragmented and its every use constructs a different and unique language. To use the concept of Saussure, we collapse the difference between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech / individual use of language) and the language becomes the same as *parole*.²²

22 De Saussure 1986: 9-10, 15

This situation will almost inevitably bring us to the idea of *private language*, which Wittgenstein himself introduced it in §243 of his book *Philosophical Investigations*: »The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language.« By adhering to the concept of private language,

then, any way of speaking German would be considered correct and people would no longer be able to share an understanding of the meaning of specific words. Yet, Wittgenstein is as reluctant as many of his successors to accept the possibility of such language and immediately goes on to argue against it in subsequent parts of his book. It seems there is a problem at the point we have reached so far; we cannot follow Wittgenstein's principle logically to its conclusion without saying that his argument against private language must be wrong. In other words, the kind of relativism that the standard reading of Wittgenstein – with his introduction of new concepts such as *language-game* and *form of life* – would imply is no longer sustainable with regard to his arguments against *private language*.

Paul Engelmann said that »What Kraus, Loos and Wittgenstein have in common, is their endeavor to separate and divide correctly. They are creative separators.«²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein also considered using the quotation »I'll teach you differences« from Shakespeare's *King Lear* in his *Philosophical Investigations* to disclose his interest in demonstrating that things which look the same are really different.²⁴ However, as addressed in the course of this essay, endeavors undertaken for creating distinctions are not in every respect as *correct* as it is claimed by Engelmann. Indeed, some incoherencies and misconceptions emerge upon closer examination.

To be clear, the purpose of this essay is not to reject the distinction between a chamber pot and an urn; rather, it is an attempt to clarify the nature of this distinction. Kraus formulates his critique of *improper use* with respect to Loos' dichotomy of *work of art* and *article of use*. However, his distinction does not represent Loos' original analogy; what Kraus has in mind is more a metaphysical identification of what the definite function for objects of use should be. My position here is to argue on Wittgensteinian grounds against the existence of a metaphysical basis, which would connect a predefined use with an object. The differences between the objects are not in form, material or qualities of their physical appearance, but in properties generated by particular uses to which these objects are being put.

²³ As quoted by Bakacsy / Munch / Sommer 2000: 35

²⁴ As quoted by O'C Drury 1981: 157

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