

Kunstwollen: The Transfer and Precarious Survival of an Artistic-Theoretical Concept in Czech Art History of the 20th Century¹

Tomáš Murár — Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Praha

INTRODUCTION

This article is an insight into the *precarious survival* of a seminal as well as problematic concept of *Kunstwollen* in Czech art history of the 20th century. The concept of *Kunstwollen* was created at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Austria, from where its influence in a modified form was brought into Czech lands. Here it rooted in 1920s and 1930s and then continued to the second half of the 20th century. This aspect of Czech art history, influenced by the concept of *Kunstwollen*, has been highly neglected by its historiography, which is rather aimed at art material expertise. *Kunstwollen* in Czech art history was also overshadowed by historical events following the year 1948, when this type of reasoning and thinking was unsuitable for a new Communist regime. This article tries to look into this omitted *Kunstwollen* problematic of the Czech art history and theory of the 20th century.

Main character of this paper is Czech art historian Vojtěch Birnbaum (1877–1934). I assume that he was influenced by the *Kunstwollen* in his art historical and art theoretical writings. His theories, although they are placed at solid places in Czech art history, have not been yet enough theoretically examined.² His working with the *Kunstwollen* show important reading of an originally Austrian concept transferred in Czech art history.

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2 Main Czech art historiography researches until today are two handbooks, one from 1986 *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění I. Předchůdci a zakladatelé* (Chapters from Czech Art Historiography I. Predecessors and Founders) and the second from 1987 *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění II. Dvacáté století* (Chapters from Czech Art Historiography. The Twentieth Century). These are mainly focused on biographical and bibliographical details. Further texts are written, but those are fractional studies and do not attain the coherence of the 1980s handbooks. In those writings is Birnbaum's work interpreted mainly as an art material expertise aimed at Middle Ages architecture. Birnbaum's theories from 1920s and 1930s are interpreted as thought duplicates and mixtures of other theories, Austrian or German. I do not deny that Birnbaum worked with other theories, but I assume that he did not copy them, because I think he created his own proper theory, which continued the Austrian (and German) theoretical tradition.



OPEN ACCESS

BAROQUE AS THE PURPOSE OF KUNSTWOLLEN

The concept of *Kunstwollen* was created by Alois Riegl (1858–1905), one of the founders of so-called *Vienna School of Art History*,³ which after 1850s established the art history discipline as an academic subject. Riegl used this concept in his three influential books: *Stilfragen* (1893), *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901) and *Das holländische Gruppenportrait* (1902). He used the *Kunstwollen* as an original methodological concept for a new academic subject and with it he tried to come up with a particular original approach to the art history without any connections to other fields, mainly history and archeology.⁴ However, the *problem* of the *Kunstwollen* is that Riegl did not provide an exact explanation of what he meant by it. He used this concept with a confidence of an art theoretical concept, but in his books he used it every time quite differently. That provide a space for interpretations and there does exist a long lasting tradition of what the *Kunstwollen* could mean.⁵

This *Kunstwollen* can have a variety of English translations, for example, *will to form* (Worringer, 1953, p. 9), *will of art* (Binstock, 2004, p. 84), *art drive* (Sedlmayr, 2001, p. 11), *artistic volition* (Riegl, 1999, p. 63) and others. Unfortunately, I do not have a space (and it is not even the focus of this article) to analyze the whole problematic of Riegl's *Kunstwollen*,⁶ but what I would like to do is to offer a short *sketch* of Riegl's perception of the *Kunstwollen*, and that in order to the concept of *history* and *temporality* (Gubser 2005, 2006) and in order to how it is possible to comprehend it with help of another English translation. Last but not least, I would like to highlight the importance of *Kunstwollen* in the theory of Czech art historian Vojtěch Birnbaum.

On the base of Riegl's writings (Riegl 1893, 1901, 1931), we can state two types of the *Kunstwollen*: *historical Kunstwollen* and *temporal Kunstwollen*. This twofold aim, evident during art historian's work with an art object, notes even Michael Gubser: 'The concept of *Kunstwollen* presumed a kind of evidence that took into account the subjective vision of the observer as well as the visual "data" of the observed object. It also offered an inherently temporal and historical account of cultural perception' (Gubser 2006, p. 157).

Historical Kunstwollen can be explained as these 'visual data of the observed object'. It also can be interpreted as one of the most important notions of the *Vienna*

3 For further reading on *Vienna School of Art History* see, for example, book by Mathew Rampley (2013), Christopher S. Wood (2000), Edwin Lachnit (2005) or Leopold D. Ettlinger (1984).

4 This problem of *assigning* and *borrowing* of art history to and from other science fields is evident through the whole history of art history. Most recently art history approaches methods like, for example, literal theory, semiotics or neurosciences. For further reading see, for example, the anthology by Donald Preziosi (1998).

5 From those who tried to interpret Riegl's *Kunstwollen* we can name for example Hans Sedlmayr, Erwin Panofsky, Max Dvořák, Ernst Hans Gombrich, Wilhelm Worringer, Michael Podro, Margaret Olin, Margaret Iverson, Diana Reynolds, Christopher S. Wood, Richard Woodfield, Michael Ann Holly, Alina Payne, Michael Gubser, Wolfgang Kemp, Benjamin Binstock, Lambert Wiesing, Henri Zerner and others.

6 For further reading on different interpretations of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* and for so far the best elaborated reading of it, see, for example, a study by Michael Gubser (2006, pp. 153–163).

School of Art History claimed by its representatives: every art period has to be examined as an immanent scientific subject and that has to be done on the base of the *historical* background of the time when the art object was created. That means the art historian examining the particular art object cannot consider the quality of the object based on his period aesthetic taste, but he has to examine it on the base of its meaning and importance for the time when the art object was created.

Therefore, for example, the art historian of the 19th century should not consider the baroque architecture as *perverse* on the base of his neoclassicism art taste, but should look into the reasons why the baroque art claim art shapes and developments which it does.⁷ Art historian, how the *Vienna School of Art History* tried to show, should grasp the art object's period as the base of the reason for creating a particular art. Thus the art historian should seek for this *period reason* of an art object, in other words, the art historian should understand the *Kunstwollen* of the period, when the examined art was created, therefore should understand the *historical Kunstwollen*.

The other part of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* is then *temporal Kunstwollen*. That is a subjective approach of the art historian, the time of art historian's contact with the art object. This subjective pull towards the art object is necessary for the examination of the *historical Kunstwollen*, and one cannot be without the other. Through the *temporal Kunstwollen* the art historian is creating a bond with the art object and his own *art drive* is the reason why he is examining certain art object or period. So this *temporal Kunstwollen* is the art historian's *period reason* why he is approaching the *period reason* of the specific art object, and his *temporal Kunstwollen* is determining the examination of the *historical Kunstwollen*.

However, both of these aspects, *historical* and *temporal*, are still inferior to the *Kunstwollen*, itself. And this *Kunstwollen* with its aspects toward *history* as well as *temporality* is aimed primarily at the art object. Only the art object is able to connect these historical and temporal *Kunstwollen(s)* together. Only through the art object can art historian link up with the period of art object's creation.

That could mean that the *Kunstwollen* itself is not in the historical period of the art object's creation, nor in the time of art historian examination of the art object, but it is the core and substance of the art object. Alois Riegl's *Kunstwollen* can be therefore interpreted as the nature of the art object beside its materiality, and in the same time only through its materiality. The *Kunstwollen* is why the art object was created and at the same time why it is examined. And it is not because of the external reasons of the art object, rather for the sake of the art object itself. This *wanting* of the *art object* to be created as well as to be approached (examined) is the *Kunstwollen* as the core of the art object, which shows the complexity of this Riegl's art historical concept.

This complexity and in the same time binary nature of the *Kunstwollen* can be also evident when we will try to translate it into English again. I believe that we can trans-

7 Here I am alluding to a problem of 19th century art history, when the baroque art had to be rehabilitated at the beginning of the 20th century, for example in Vienna by Alois Riegl, in Czech lands by Vojtěch Birnbaum. For further reading on this topic see, for example, chapters in a conference catalogue *Rethinking the Baroque* (Hills 2011 and Payne 2011) or for an insight into the Baroque and its origins see a study by Jan Bialostocki (1976) and for further reading on the essence of the Baroque see work by Gilles Deleuze (1993).

late it as *will to art*, which can provide us some space for further interpretation. With the translation as *will to art*, we can state two types of it; firstly *will to art* where *to art* could be taken as a *verb*.⁸ Then we would have the action to make an art, we could say the necessity to make from an object of nature an object of art, some *longing for art transformation*. Secondly, we could have *will to art* where *to art* is a *preposition*. Then we have *will towards art*, in the meaning of our (human) need to repeatedly approaching the art with reason, in order *to understand the art*.

In these two *interpretational translations* we can again see the duality of Riegl's *Kunstwollen*. His concept include all these aspects, aspects of the historical as well as the temporal time, the necessity to approach the art subjectively as well as objectively, and all these contradictory aspects are implied in the principle of Riegl's concept of art.

This principle of *Kunstwollen*, when the art object contain the reason of its own creation as well as its examination, how I mentioned, was not formulated by Riegl as the art theory or art methodology. However, between the years 1897 until 1904 one of his students at the *Institut für Kunstgeschichte* at the University of Vienna was Vojtěch Birnbaum (Hořejší 1987, p. 102). Birnbaum, after his graduation in 1904, a long stay in Rome and a long period as an independent scientist (thanks to his family wealth), when he examined mainly the ancient architecture (Birnbaum 1914, 1923) or early Christian architecture (Birnbaum 1916, 1921) became in 1919 an emeritus professor at the Charles University in Prague. Since that, in the atmosphere of the new Czechoslovakia Republic founded in 1918, he renewed his interest of youth in the Czech art, mainly architecture. He wrote mainly on Czech Romanesque and gothic architecture. Nevertheless, he was interested in the baroque architecture, too. That is evident from the archive research, where is possible to find a lot of pages on the baroque art. Beside that he attended Riegl's lectures on Roman baroque art and he himself was for a long time in Rome. There he principally was to research the ancient architecture, but in Rome is not possible to avoid the 17th and 18th centuries' art and architecture. And in 1924 Birnbaum wrote one of his most interesting theoretical works, *Barokní princip v dějinách architektury* (Baroque Principle in the History of Architecture).

In this work Vojtěch Birnbaum formulated a new view at the *functioning* of art through the time periods. He was able to find a trans-historical principle to which every art style is tending. According to that he founded an art theory and methodology, which was then developed by his students (for example by Růžena Vacková, Oldřich Stefan or Václav Richter). And Birnbaum's theory itself, how I am assuming, is based on the theory of Alois Riegl's *Kunstwollen* and it is its development.

Birnbaum's *Barokní princip v dějinách architektury* has many layers of interpretation and I unfortunately cannot elaborate all of them here.⁹ Birnbaum tried in Prague, as well as did Riegl in Vienna, to rehabilitate the baroque art and beside

8 I am aware that in English *to art* is not a verb, but I am assuming that this theoretical proposal is not at all out of discussion, because Riegl's *Kunstwollen* shows that *to art* could be used as the action of *art* itself.

9 I look into this problematic deeper in my unpublished thesis *Baroko jako styl v pojetí Vojtěcha Birnbauma* [Baroque as a Style in the Concept of Vojtěch Birnbaum]. Univerzita Karlova, Praha 2013.

that he came up with a new theory of art. He was looking for a new definition of the Baroque and in the same time he was searching for the nature of the Baroque itself. Birnbaum showed, on the examples of three main baroque artists (Michelangelo, Borromini and Palladio), different expressions of the baroque architecture and he was looking for what is similar to all these works labeled as *baroque*. And he came up with a thought, that the nature of the baroque art making is in the *distortion* of the style laws.

On the small architecture segment, on aedicule, he showed this baroque art manner of creating, in opposite to renaissance art.¹⁰ He said that baroque aedicule disturbs the clear renaissance architectural articulation and transforms it into the complex units, which are not based in the laws of tectonics, but are created for the visual effect on the viewer. And in that Birnbaum saw the nature and the essence of the Baroque itself: the Baroque *erodes* the laws of the style, which are based on the laws of tectonic (thus natural laws), and re-creates the articulation into the visual mode towards the viewer, in order to astonish him or her. And this *transformation* of the art style laws is made through the subjective inner approach of the artist, how Birnbaum said.

Therefore, the Baroque for Birnbaum was a subjective disruption and transformation of the natural laws of the historical art style. These historical laws are recreated on the base of temporal subjectivity of the artist, who is able to change the historical laws into the artistic play. And in this Vojtěch Birnbaum found the *baroque principle*.

Birnbaum with this definition of the Baroque moved on the second layer of his work, when he said that the *baroque principle* is not inherent only for the time of the 16th until 18th centuries (Birnbaum 1941, p. 15), but it is possible to find the same principle in other periods. Saying that, Birnbaum followed two goals; on one hand he created an art historical theory and methodology according to which is possible to look into the art history and art style changes; on the other hand he was trying to rehabilitate the baroque art for the Czech lands. He showed the existence of the *Czech gothic Baroque*, because in the beginning of the 20th century the Czech Gothic was the main examined art period. And Birnbaum said when everybody appreciated the *first Baroque* (gothic Baroque) there is no reason to deny the qualities of the *second Czech Baroque*, the Baroque of the 17th and 18th centuries.¹¹

Beside this historical-national purpose of his *Baroque principle*, Birnbaum with his *baroque outside the Baroque* created a tool according to which the art historian should be able to look into the art history. His *baroque principle* could be interpreted as the *artistic principle* of every art style, which had the possibility to involve to its final stage (not every art style was able to gain that, according to Birnbaum, for example the Romanesque style of the 12th century). When the style approaches its *baroque* period, it starts to deny the laws of the style, which have been created and developed through the historical time of the style. The artist transforms the tectonic and natural laws ac-

10 There could be observed some connections to writings by Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945; Wölfflin 1950, 1992).

11 There is possible to find an influence of the Vienna School of Art History with its requirement to study the art history as the whole without declines, as an immanent development of art forms and thoughts.

ording the laws of his own artistic subjectivity with the goal in efficiency and visual artistry. How Vojtěch Birnbaum says:

The goal, to which tends every artistic development as to its purpose, is the wholly privilege of the illusion over the reality, completely replacement of the factual reality by the artistic reality. Art, which has not grown up till this point, did not say its last word (Birnbaum 1941, p. 12).

This transform of the art style from the ‘factual reality’ into the ‘artistic reality’ originates in its *art drive*, in the need to make an object into an art object, in other words, in its *temporal Kunstwollen* to recreate its *historical Kunstwollen*.

We have shown that Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* is a complex notion of the nature of an art object, with its position between the *historical* and *temporal*, but this concept was not enough to create an art historical tool to be developed further. As I assume, Vojtěch Birnbaum worked with Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* when he was formulating his *baroque principle*. The reason why that is the *baroque principle* is the *temporal* (subjective) approaching towards the *historical* (objective) art style laws.

In the *baroque principle* are connected the necessity to *understand the art* (an artist to be able to disrupt the art style laws has to firstly know the laws themselves) and the *longing for art transformation* (in the action of denying the laws). In the same time the *time* of the artist leads towards the *history* of the style.

And, according to Birnbaum, the *Baroque* of every art style is the most artistic period, therefore the one which should be studied the most, because is the most art historically valuable. Therefore, the *Baroques* of art are the periods which capturing (or should capture, according to Birnbaum) the most attention of the viewer and art historian, and in order to understand the *Baroque* of the style, art historian has to get know the whole style. So the art historian is brought to the development of an art history and its principles through the *baroque principle*, with which, as a tool, is the art historian able to *decrypt* the art history and its principles.

Thus, we can state, Vojtěch Birnbaum used Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* for establishing a new art historical theory and art historical methodological tool in order to show how to approach the art in the art history discipline. His *baroque principle* as well as Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* built on the *time traveling* of the art object from the *history* to the *temporality*, in other words from the point when it was created to the point when it is viewed. But one without the other cannot show the whole nature of the art object.

The *Kunstwollen* observed mainly the art object and its creation and perception, *baroque principle* on the base of this notion created the theory of the whole art history, when the *baroque principle* is a lawful determination of every style. So while the *Kunstwollen* looks into determination of one art object, the *baroque principle* could be generalized towards the whole art history.

Therefore we can conclude that *baroque principle* by Vojtěch Birnbaum is the goal of the *Kunstwollen* by Alois Riegl, when the *Baroque* is the purpose of the *Kunstwollen*. That is because the *temporal Kunstwollen* is approaching, subjectively as well as objectively, the *historical Kunstwollen* and recreates it into the artistic form, therefore entering its *baroque principle*, which is lawful, required and the one mainly examined by art historians, whose are drag into the art history through the *baroque principle of art* itself.

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RESUMÉ / RÉSUMÉ

***Kunstwollen*: Transfer a překerní přežívání jednoho umělecko-teoretického pojmu v českých dějinách umění 20. století**

Článek sleduje problematiku přenosu a užití vlivného umělecko-historického konceptu začátku 20. století mezi takzvanou Vídeňskou školou dějin umění a českým dějepisem umění. Zkoumaný koncept je znám jako *Kunstwollen* a pochází ze tří významných umělecko-historických studií Aloise Riegla (1858–1905). Tento pojem od svého prvního užití na konci 19. století *přežívá* v umělecko-historickém přemýšlení až dodnes. V odborné literatuře existuje mnoho interpretací, avšak všechny tyto studie mají jedno společné; nejsou schopny s jistotou určit, co *Kunstwollen* znamená v jeho teoretickém a metodologickém rámci. Aby byl schopen dostat se blíže k podstatě tohoto Rieglova pojmu, zkoumá autor Rieglovo chápání času v rámci *Kunstwollen*, užívá anglických překladů původně německého slova pro pochopení jeho struktury a nakonec zkoumá teoretickou práci českého historika umění Vojtěcha Birnbauma (1877–1934), který byl na počátku 20. století Rieglovým žákem. V jeho teoretickém uvažování o umění a jeho zákonitostech lze sledovat inspiraci Rieglovým *Kunstwollen*. Birnbaum však nekopíroval Rieglovu práci, rozvinul ji a transformoval. V letech po první světové válce Birnbaum ovlivnil řadu studentů pražské Univerzity Karlovy; Rieglův koncept tak byl součástí procesu formování moderního českého dějepisu umění.

***Kunstwollen*: The Transfer and Precarious Survival of an Artistic-Theoretical Concept in Czech Art History of the 20th Century**

The influential art-historical concept of *Kunstwollen* or 'will-to-art', connected first with the so-called Vienna School of Art History, then transferred into Czech art history and therein surviving to this day, was introduced in three art-historical studies by Alois Riegl (1858–1905). While the concept has found numerous interpretations, these share the incapacity to define clearly what the concept means in Riegl's own theoretical and methodological framework. In order to gain a better grasp of the concept, the article inquires into Riegl's understanding of temporality with respect to *Kunstwollen*, employs several English translations in order to highlight the structure of the German term, and finally analyses the theoretical work of the Czech art historian and Riegl's former student Vojtěch Birnbaum (1877–1934), whose theoretical claims regarding the arts and their laws are demonstrably inspired by Riegl's concept, while transforming it and developing it further. Immediately after World War One, Birnbaum's teaching had an impact on a number of students of Charles University, Prague, and Riegl's concept was thus part of the formative process of modern Czech history of art.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Kunstwollen; Alois Riegl; Vojtěch Birnbaum; přenos umělecko-teoretických pojmů; české dějiny umění / *Kunstwollen*; Alois Riegl; Vojtěch Birnbaum; art-theoretical concepts transfer; Czech art theory