
»Anerkannt oder Ruiniert«

The Intellectual Politics of Max Bense's *Axiomata* (1944)

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»DIE EMANZIPATION DER INTELLEKTUELLEN,« writes Max Bense in *Technische Existenz* (1949), »von ihrer armen Einsamkeit zu einer reichen Öffentlichkeit des Ernstes und der Verantwortung ist der Fortschritt zur ethischen Perfektionierung dieser Welt, die in diesem Jahrhundert in der unmittelbaren Gefahr ist, an ihren eigenen Sündenfällen zugrunde zu gehen.«¹ With the omnipresent scars of the Second World War not half a decade old, Bense stakes a claim about the role of intellectuals in the betterment of a shattered world, addressing them with an ethical imperative: find their way to a public sphere and establish a discourse of sincerity and accountability. To be an intellectual in Bense's view means to have an audience; to have an audience is, for an intellectual, to be free.

No one embodied this devotion to an intellectual audience more earnestly than Bense himself, whose prolificacy—in both academic and popular texts, from the 1930s to his death in 1990—betrays a deep-seated, constant compulsion to publish. The repeated emphasis on the intellectual's relationship to the public sphere in his *Axiomata* from 1944, itself an unpublished text, is thus not without some irony. *Sed exceptio probat regulam*: locating a work of Bense's that in one form or another did not ultimately see publication is indeed a feat.

True to Bense's form, the *Axiomata* present intellect, *Geist*, as an issue inevitably entangled with the public sphere. Bense depicts the intellectual in a constant process of synthesizing material and delivering it to a public: »Wir vereinbaren, wir machen aufmerksam, wir halten fest, wir überliefern.«² Notably, what the *Axiomata* do not specify are the criteria by which intellectuals choose their material. No stipulation is made for *what* the intellectual is to deliver, or that it intuitively reflect what the public sphere believes to be the contemporary moment. In part, this is due to Bense's conviction that the »contemporary« is always a bit more temporally tangled than the surface of any one instant might suggest: more often than not, *Geist* manifests through *unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*. This alertness to the dis-

¹ Max Bense: *Technische Existenz. Essays*, Stuttgart 1949, p. 74.

² Max Bense: *Axiomata* [Unpublished typescript], 1944, A: Bense, Max, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Axiom 13. Subsequent citations to be given in text.