

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 10, 2009,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Rudolf Arnheim
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

RUDOLF ARNHEIM

BORN: July 15, 1904

DIED: June 9, 2007

Rudolf Arnheim, Professor of the Psychology of Art, *Emeritus*, in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, experienced the culture and history of the twentieth century deeply and profoundly. A towering figure in the field of visual studies, Arnheim was born in an age when many remembered life without telephones. During his long and prodigiously productive scholarly life, Arnheim would witness the emergence of cinema, radio, and television. He was among the first theorists to write in significant ways about these new media of the twentieth century. A pioneer in the psychology of art with path-breaking books on visual perception and artistic creativity, Arnheim was also among the first to recognize the importance of film as a major art form. The first of his fourteen books, *Film as Art* (1932), is still taught in university courses throughout the world. His most influential work, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, was published in 1954 and enlarged and revised in 1974. It has been translated into fourteen languages and is acknowledged to be one of the most influential art books of the last century.

Known as Rudi to his many friends, Arnheim was born in 1904. In this year, Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Martin House in Buffalo, NY; Paul Cézanne painted *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, and the first motion picture house opened in Pittsburgh, PA. Arnheim's father owned a small piano factory in Berlin and only permitted him to attend university if he spent half his time at the office learning the business. "As you can predict," he related in one conversation, "I went more and more to the university and less and less to the office." At the University of Berlin, Arnheim majored in psychology and philosophy with secondary emphases in the histories of art and music. There he studied with the great Gestalt psychologists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Lewin. After completing his doctorate in 1928 at the age of twenty-four with a thesis on expression in human faces and handwriting, Arnheim worked as a film critic and cultural affairs editor for *Die Weltbühne*, attended the plays of Bertolt Brecht in their original productions, visited the first exhibitions of German Expressionist art, and interviewed the great Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein.

An eyewitness to the twentieth century's dramatic and violent history, Arnheim was a vocal and courageous critic of the rise of Fascism in Europe. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, one of their earliest acts was to forbid publications by Jewish authors. Arnheim's book on film, published only months earlier, was withdrawn from circulation. He decided to leave Germany, moving first to Rome, where for the next six years he wrote about film under the aegis of the League of Nations. He also completed his second book, an early study of radio. When Mussolini withdrew from the League of Nations and adopted Hitler's racial politics, Arnheim left for London, where he served as a translator for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Arnheim came to the United States in the fall of 1940, arriving with only ten dollars in his pocket. Max Wertheimer arranged a position for him as a visiting lecturer on the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research. His career in the new country quickly flourished. In 1942 he received a major grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to pursue research at the Columbia University Office of Radio Research on the public effects of soap operas. Two years later he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study the role of perception in art, which became the foundation of Arnheim's book *Art and Visual Perception*. In 1951 Arnheim was awarded a second grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to complete this path-breaking book, which maintains that perception is an active process inseparable from cognition and meaning making, and that artistic expression is a form of reasoning in which perception and thought are indivisibly intertwined.

Arnheim taught psychology at Sarah Lawrence College for twenty-six years. When Harvard established the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies in 1968, Arnheim was invited to join the faculty as Professor of the Psychology of Art. The appointment was also supported by the Departments of Psychology and Fine Arts. Arnheim taught at Harvard for six years before retiring in 1974. He then moved to Ann Arbor with his wife Mary and taught for ten more years as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. Although his time at Harvard was comparatively short, his cross-disciplinary intellectual influence and his humanity were powerfully felt. Arnheim was a devoted teacher, always easy to approach and willing to spend time with his students. His large lecture course on "Perception and Expression in Art and Design" became the theoretical backbone of the department. It was usually oversubscribed, as was his advanced seminar on "Visual Thinking," which attracted students from across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

Arnheim was active in the American Society for Aesthetics and served twice as its president. For three terms he was president of the Division on Psychology and the Arts (a field which he practically invented) of the American Psychological Association. In 1976 he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Despite being a firsthand witness to some of the most tragic moments of modern history and experiencing the personal sadness of outliving two wives and a daughter who died in childhood of Hodgkin's disease, Rudi loved life and humanity. Almost to the end of his 102 years, he enjoyed reading,

conversing, writing, sketching, listening to music, and playing his violin. He loved art, but never pursued the career of an artist. In 1989 Arnheim wrote, “[M]y life has been one of contemplation rather than of action; and since I watch the artists, who are contemplators, I am twice-removed from active life ‘perchè guardo quelli che guardano.’ I am...the little owl perched on the shoulder of Athene.”

Respectfully submitted,

James Akerman
Eric Rentschler
Eduard Sekler
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