

# **Death, humor and responsibility**

## A very short story of art

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### **0. Nothing comes from nothing.**

If there can be a goal of art at all, it lies in making something happen. But often it is only in the retrospect of a future unknown to us that we recognize the unexpectedness of an act, which is then seen as the fulfillment of a prophecy or as a promise - for example: what else could art have changed in society? Art comes only conditionally from skill; primarily from the chosen complexity with which one translates such a scarce rare commodity as a work into a present form - For example, a theory into a form of text. The more complex an art (or a theory of art) the more likely there will be demand for its abridgment. What is in the air at the moment can also become language. Successful art forces us to approach it without knowing when a goal, its goal, might (ever) be reached .

### **1. On death and life**

There has always been a latent sense of art in the production of moments that could offer its users the possibility to venerate life in order to banish death - while still alive. This motif - Henry Kahnweiler spoke pathetically in 1919 of the urge to immortalize, to redeem from transience, which would characterize all art-making - has been fundamentally reversed over time. Life, it seems, has displaced death.

Today, many performances are still about life (in art) and death (in the life of art), but the emphasis has shifted towards a life made present. Today, users no longer venerate works of art in order to banish death in their own lives, but rather strive to celebrate life, their lives, as a semblance of a contemporary form of immortality during the communication now underway. When individual artists, designers, and authors publish exclusive ideas, it is no longer a matter of veneration, pausing, and quiet contemplation as in earlier times, but rather of evaluation and exploitation - works that are especially successful when they are collected by collectors or are liked millions of times on the net - in order to be exploited even more. In this way, art today celebrates - almost compulsively successfully - our living present and

tends to suppress the unpleasant thought that death in particular can be present in every moment of life and will reach us at some point. "When death comes, that one still dreams over into death, that would be the most beautiful thing" (Margarete von Trotta 2019, youtube) In modernism, humility even before death has been replaced by a desire to (over)increase present life and its arts.

## **2. The role of the artist**

Is the artist an outsider by profession, as a critic recently said? Whether outsider, insider, healer, charlatan, observer or social critic - the function of the artist has expanded extremely in a short time. Who today does not work in some way as an "artist"? Artists like to speak of themselves not necessarily as artists but as actors who move back and forth between paradoxical, provocative, and productive moments in their work. The times when an artist like Beuys explained the pictures to the dead rabbit with mysterious gestures seem to be long gone. Or maybe not? To this day, Beuys' 1965 action is considered a provocative and visionary gesture. Above all, it forced the audience, which was locked out at the time, to become aware of its disappointments. What was the point of explaining art to a dead rabbit anyway? With his action, Beuys made the audience's relationship to art an issue. The artist, equipped with a gilded face mask, cleverly transformed the audience from a passive recipient into an active counterpart. The fascinated viewers found themselves in a reception dilemma: on the one hand they were disappointed by the possibility of recognizing a certain message of the event, on the other hand they were challenged to use the event as an indeterminate productive thought image. Just as Beuys metaphorically saw himself as a transmitter, his materials, fat, felt, etc., functioned as flexible, usable materials that were intended to communicate a message: to stimulate in the audience the idea that the substance of art lies in the expansion of itself and in the creation of expanded, liberated living conditions.

## **3. Are you already laughing or are you still looking at it?**

A wonderful work by Martin Kippenberger is called "Martin, off to the corner and shame on you"(1989) Could you imagine this work in an exhibition today? And what would be all in the comment text in the socialmedia involved? Who else did Kippenberger want to annoy here - apart from the museum audience present, of course?

For contemporary art and especially for the responsible curators, humor is a mined terrain; who likes to laugh voluntarily about terms such as "the spatial", "context", "diversity" or other clouds of concepts? And one does not like to laugh about a realization that could not have been formulated in any other way. Or do you? But applied humor is always an attempt to jump over a shadow - especially if it is one's own. In Niklas Luhmann's Art of Society there is a - very short - sentence that could probably also apply to art: "What is reproduced by communication are the misunderstandings." (Niklas Luhmann, Die Kunst der Gesellschaft, Ffm. 1997, p. 467.) Or put another way: Communication is not destiny, misunderstandings are not art. Or speaking with Nam June Paik, another master of the ironic: If too perfect, love God evil!

#### **4. *Change art! On the responsibility of art***

A well-known and by now banal saying from politics is: We shape the future. How does art position itself today in relation to this x-rated mantra? Every future increases the pressure on a present that is unwilling or reluctant to change. The beauty of art encounters is that it systematically questions, irritates or at least sustainably unsettles certainties and especially self-certainties of its users. Those who - like art - produce futures by creating additional spaces for thinking do not want to (and do not have to) please everyone. This sentence does not please the majority either. In other words: Whether art, and especially publicly financed and publicly installed art in space, is pleasing is not the question. Today and in the future, it is much more a question of how art can take an appropriate stand in a society that has become too inert to want to change. Today in particular, art thrives very well on the collectively prevailing lack of responsibility.

In this sense, art today more than ever has a not new but certainly dynamic competence, which in earlier times was attributed especially to all citizens: The ability to take responsibility (Verantwortung). The willingness to change not only art but above all society in which it is necessary to address collective irresponsibility. Today it is no longer enough to exhibit beautiful or ugly works of art; actors who are serious about their claims must approach the community differently than before - art that was exclusive and experienced as exclusive should be communalized individually. Everyone has a right to experience and

shape the readiness for change that art sends out. Art is not a new religion, but a misunderstanding that challenges us all. Between the increasing demands on oneself and the expectations of a society for ever more and ever faster, there are ever deeper chasms.

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