

Recycle me!

Art between the Eternal Future and the Passing Present

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...language exists only insofar as it does not exist. It is eternal future.

We have it ...by being on the way to it. Analogously, however, with everything else.

(Albrecht Fabri, *Variationen. Essays*. Wiesbaden 1959, 110)

According to Germany's most famous art-historian Martin Warnke (1937-2019), an art-historical object defines itself as an "*artifact that differs from other human artifacts in that it is accorded the special property of being art.*" (Martin Warnke, *Gegenstandsbereiche der Kunstgeschichte*, in Hans Belting, Heinrich Dilly, Wolfgang Kemp, and Willibald Sauerländer (eds.), *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Dritte Auflage, Berlin 1988, 19-44, here 19) The medium of art and its discursive determinations is not meaningfully possible without a reference to currently spoken language. Strangely enough, there is no direct reference in Warnke's decidedly clever determination to the time-circumstances out of which such an artifact suddenly emerges. Precisely such artificially realized works of art are simultaneously time-conditioned as well as timeless modes of expression of their respective presences and thus literally "at the height of their time".

What was once ambiguously and pretentiously called a *Werk* (work) is now more functionally and elegantly called a *product*; one no longer reveres existing old things, but programs new ones. People in the modern age, unlike artists, work "tradition-neutrally" (Odo Marquardt, 1988). Art increasingly operates like language in that it attempts to occupy a common place and a dominant discourse: the present. If language, according to Albrecht Fabri, embodies something like an eternal future, what then does present, i.e. contemporary-triggered art open up for us? In the present, increasingly and more frequently, a historical concept or image (of art, for instance) is replaced by a complex action in the time of its presence: Today the original has (long since) been replaceable by its reproduction, and the action of a replacement has become the problem of present reflection. By present I mean the interface between future and past. Or as the now

forgotten essayist Albrecht Fabri put it unequivocally as early as 1952: "*The new is the old in the form of its actuality.*" (cf. ders., *Variationen. Essays.* Wiesbaden 1959, p. 39).

Is not a future form (also that of an art) basically a mind-accelerated present that has become past the moment it is now contemplated? In this respect, both media, that of a language and that of an art, would be usable realities, which are now still emerging - and later will already have passed away again. Art arises in the infinite moment in which it appears as future, now made present, transformed into past. While in modernism the formula less is more applied to works, the mantra as a functional imperative towards the audience is: Do something! Use me now - differently!

The more the future comes into focus today, the less it will be possible in the future to lose sight of the focus of the present. A time that transforms needs a form in which it appears. In his 1955 book "Von Kunst und Kennerschaft" (Of Art and Connoisseurship), Max Friedländer already suspected the consequences, which have proven to be true: "This is how art fashions are created, not much different than clothing fashions. Since the public has been successfully taught to acknowledge what it dislikes, it goes along with everything." Today, audiences have differentiated: since social media, followers and fans have tended to replace the time-honored connoisseurs* and viewers.

Whereas the originally banal (e.g. Duchamp's *Urinoir*, Beuys' fat, Jeff Koons' toys etc.) was long regarded as random visual by-catch, today it has been ennobled as a high-priced masterpiece and has long since ushered in the Kitschocene (according to SZ author Till Raether). Through endless digital reproduction of reproductions, all signs today have potentially emptied themselves and have become potential super-signs that can generate new content when used in unexpected contexts. A few things end, the rest end in oblivion. It is no longer important whether something is created as art or as non-art, but rather how it could in the future, as an aesthetic event of a third kind, create an expanded, quasi-art-religious meaning in a society that is increasingly devoid of meaning.

Instead of handing down traditions as practiced for centuries and reproducing them variably, authors today replace the artifacts of modernity with a temporal presence of mind: nothing passes as quickly as a future that has become the past through its present. "*When we use communication, and how else could we, we are always already operating in society*" (Niklas Luhmann, *Observations of Modernity.* Opladen 1992, p. 8). When we

consumers use art, we are always already communicating in society with a future that has now become present - should it be otherwise ?

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