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THE IMPORTANCE OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

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When I received the invitation to this congress a few weeks ago, I was pleased to find that one of the themes to be discussed was the capacity of language to interpret contemporary art.

If we, at least for the time being, try to avoid the many obvious semiotic complications involved I think there still are a few aspects of this question that should be examined, and I would like to mention three of them.

1. How does the interpretation of a specific contemporary work of art affect that work of art?

Because of our professions we are all close observers of the enhancing importance and impact of the media, and it is quite possible that a critic can not only direct but also govern the reactions of the public. Today we are not primarily concerned with this question, but, as a way of approaching the theme of my contribution today, I would like to mention that there also is an enhancing possibility for the critic to influence specific artists, at least through the earlier phases of their careers, once he has interpreted their works of art.

2. Should an art critic "explain" contemporary works of art?

A large degree of the art criticism of today is demythologizing. As a consequence of the expansion of semiotics in the scientific world,

as well as the expansion of Conceptualism in the world of Art, this demythologizing tendency has caused many art critics to "explain" the works of art with an almost educational zeal. But, if I may ask, are we really certain that this is the best way to interpret the art of today?

3. Does the artist, the art critic, and the public, have different criteria of exactness when they are interpreting a work of art?

We all know that the articles or the reviews we publish are written according to a set of rules, and that some of these rules have nothing to do with the subjects of the texts. How does this affect our interpretation? Does it, just as one example, happen that the critic uses an exactness close to truism just to be able to publish a readable text within a certain space?

While I was examining questions like this I happened to turn on the radio the other day... I thought about the concept of meaning, or rather the meaning of meaning, and I began to wonder if it really was desirable to isolate one single meaning in a work of art... That single meaning could, I thought, be an extraordinary part in a text - but then I came to think about some of the artists I know, how they often contradict themselves in verbal language; why would they have disliked the rational dogma I heard on the radio?

I got quite confused, and I decided that my contribution to this congress would consist of a short study of the different relations artists and art critics of today have to the concept of ambiguity.

Throughout twentieth-century art there is a changing and expanding concept of the meaning of reality and a corresponding attempt to create a language



of symbols and images by which to express it - a modern iconography. Throughout the same period there is however also another tendency present; since the very first years of Modernism a small group of artists have been working in a very conscious way with the implications of tautology, with the ambiguity we experience when confronted with a fact so total that it expells our interpretation.

Quite often, and especially so during the last decennary, these works of art have been made in accordance with a formula recently expressed by Laurie Anderson. For her the best way to invent a tautology is to "let  $X = X$ ", and it does not seem to matter what this unknown factor consists of.

A paradox may, just like a tautology, reach us in many different forms, but whatever the form it still expells our interpretation. Since Marcel Duchamp we know that an object can be one thing and another at the same time, that a door can be open and closed at the same time, that misunderstandings can be crucial to art - and it is my conviction that a consciousness similar to the consciousness we are discussing here is evident in the very recent developments of painting in New York and The Federal Republic of Germany.

In recent years, many younger artists have moved away from the strict formalism of minimal art and the austere intellectualism of conceptual art. They have rejected the look of cool refinement in favor of diverse, highly personal styles which give rein to emotions and irony. Expressionism and representation have emerged in vast array at the forefront of contemporary art. Artists are employing recognizable imagery, often laden with connotations and imbued with references to history, contemporary culture, autobiography and longscorned academic traditions of art.



Many of these artists retrieve historical subjects and styles with cavalier ease. They view "The Past" not with a paralyzing reverence but as a vocabulary, freely available for them to tap. These artists blend their use of history and convention with their complete understanding of the lessons of contemporary art. In their works, meaning (expressed in representational terms) does not take precedence over visual impact; style is never subsumed by subject.

Representational art, however, brings with it the question of interpretation. Current imagist works of art are often purposefully confounding, since there are usually no standard identifications or meanings for the depicted imagery, which often consists of banal objects.

The two young artists shown above are Walter Dahm and Jiri Georg Dokoupil of the "Mühlheimer Freiheit", a group of artists working in Cologne. The six members of the group share a large studio together, they work and live close to each other, and Dahm and Dokoupil especially have made it a habit to work together on the same paintings. Although this cooperation might be based on a joyful friendship and the seemingly eternal youthful optimism I think it also involves two more important aspects; as I see it their cooperation includes not only a wish to avoid "the unique touch" of the famous artist, but also a hope to disintegrate ego.

In this collective work of 1981 Dahm and Dokoupil make a jocular comment on the famous The Island of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin; instead of the calm and quiet mourning of the original their version is filled with happy expectations about the future existence. Once again they are together, and they wave merrily to the crania waiting on the beach.

It goes without saying that this pastiche... has nothing to do with the pathos of older German expressionism. Many of the works of art that today are labeled "expressionistic" are in fact "emblems of



expressions". They are pictograms, and their different codes almost "melt down", they are mediated, made equal, and the artists who make them are oriented towards <sup>the</sup>consumption as much as the production of images.

To a young artist the consumption of images consists, of course, of a consumption of contemporary images from different strata as well as the consumption of older icons. As the communicative network between young artist<sup>s</sup> of different countries now is tighter than it has ever been it is quite natural for them to use the characteristics of a far away colleague just to joke with him; they trust in the efficiency of the press, as well as in the efficiency of their own network, and they are convinced that the joke will reach the person it was meant to reach. In this painting Dokoupil has commented on the fragile surface, and the superficiality, of the work of Julian Schnabel by making a huge painting on layers of pasted books instead of the fragments of porcelain usually associated with the work of this painter based in New York.

This is an example of the art Dokoupil commented on: Blue Nude with Sword, made three years ago by Julian Schnabel. The terrifying giant balancing between the decisions to commit suicide or to accept his fall from the columns seem to have the obvious quality of a character in an almost forgotten classical drama; he could be an archetype indicating something we can not really decipher.

But the giant is a "found motive"; the original can be seen on millions of coffee-house paper cups of a certain brand distributed every day in the United States, and this reduces the powerful symbol to a vague stereotype of the popular mythology.

The impact of the motive is further reduced by the seemingly irrelevant treatment of the surface of the painting. We get the impression that the discrepancy is too wide to bridge, that Schnabel has failed to unite the different elements into a genuine work of art.

This painting was done the same year, and here Schnabel introduces another strategy. The intense brushwork could easily be mistaken as being "expressionistic", but as we notice the transparency of the motives, and the pink velvet of the background, the violent movements of the hand suddenly appear to float in front of the surface. The grim reaper becomes nothing more than a sign, and the mediation of emotion, essential to expressionism, ceases. The intensity of an emotion is related to its complexity, and for Schnabel it is impossible to summarize a total world view in one unambiguous statement. He is working with the concept of style, and the moral, if it can be so called, is that all representations are more or less false, that reality eludes representation.

Julian Schnabel has cooperated on a few paintings with David Salle, another artist working in New York. To Salle this cooperation must have been quite natural; even when he is working alone his distinctive feature is the juxtaposition of elements.

On the example shown, I like Intransitive Verbs of 1982, we can distinguish three different elements indicating three different ideologies; to the left a line of unemployed workers are depicted in a somewhat depressive realistic tradition, to the right we see a male nude rendered with the seemingly neutral tradition of croquis, and floating in front of those grey parts we find



non-representational forms with an evident origin in Modernism.

The manner of execution in this painting is cursory, almost indifferent, and that gives the imagery a distant expression. No attempt is made to bring out a salient detail here and there; the painting is made deliberately without emphasis. It is as if the artist is content with the idea of the image and that alone. He has an extreme consciousness about images and their impact, an alertness to the politics of style that makes style itself an overarching, underlying subject matter. His paintings seem to have an inheritance from conceptual art; they seem to have inherited conceptualism's disbelief in painting's efficiency. But in place of the moral fervour that armed the conceptual artists Salle, it seems, have inherited only disillusionment. Salle works with [and I quote] "a drama of comparisons instead of a unified, strong and generalized image". This quotation fits the paintings of Salle as the glove fits the hand, there is only one problem involved; it was first used more than fifty years ago when Eisenstein criticized the technique of montage used by D. W. Griffith.

But Of course there are forerunners also to this vague sensibility. Francis Picabia has been tagged as the inventor of the layered eclecticism used by Schnabel, Salle and others. Just like them he worked with an art of "intermezzi". He enjoyed the popular mythology of his time, and like them he also had an ironical consciousness of style. Picabia understood that the ideal of fragmentation is a high condensation, and he frequently received nourishment from the conventions of media.

His way of following his fancies reveal a disinterest in the final result similar to the momentary joys of Dahn, Dokoupil and other young European painters, and I am convinced that they



not only accept, but also appreciate his famous recommendation that "one must be a nomad, pass through ideas as one passes through countries and cities".

If I dare to say that we have found a forerunner in regard to two of the noticable aspects in a discussion about ambiguity and contemporary art there still is an aspect we must study; where in the history of Modernism do we find a forerunner with a tendency to disintegrate his ego?

In the beginning of my short survey I mentioned Marcel Duchamp, and it would be quite appropriate to crown him the most de-personalized artist of Modernism considering his suspension of art practice as well as his discreet private life, but I would like to complicate the survey by considering Salvador Dali worthy of the title.

In his case it is a disintegration made by division. Since 1930 he signs his works of art "Gala Salvador Dali", and their paradoxical symbiosis has also led to quotes like his dictum that "every good painter who aspires to the creation of genuine masterpieces should first of all marry my wife".

But the main reason to discuss Dali today is the fact that he is the only artist in classical Modernism to combine a disintegration of ego with an art practice involving layers of representation. In this painting of 1938, L'énigme sans fin, we can find six different layers, among them a resting man, a greyhound, a traditional still life, and, as the artist once wrote, "the face of the big, one eyed fool".

In this work, as in others, Dali has managed to compress the meanings of his images until they signify only the authority of his presence. Being art critics we know that presence, the projection of importance, necessarily implies its opposite, an absence, the hollowness behind the projection, and this is precisely the point where I find a relationship between Dali and the young painters of today. The art of Dali, and



the new painting discussed here, is an art of deceit and manipulation, and as all artifice it needs an audience.

Dali has managed to find an audience because of his extraordinary optical ability, because of his supreme craftsmanship, and because of his exhibitionistic personality, but will the young painters manage to reach an audience; do they even want an audience?

This is where the art critic enters.

It is obvious that an important change is taking place within the visual art of Western Europe at this moment. As many of the artists involved tend to have a world view that seem to be quite different from the world views of many critics the interesting question now is how the art critics will react.

Will the role of the art critic change if we, as some of these artists claim, are entering a situation in history when the concept of evolution, of origin and originality within art will be replaced by an open field character?

Will the emphasis on ambiguity, juxtaposition and emotion among the artists lead to an art criticism less based on valuation and historical references?

Will the deconstruction of representative elements among the artists lead to an art criticism that deconstruct the ideologies that makes these elements the clichés they appear to be, and, if so, are we really the best candidates for such an important task?

Will it be possible for us to use our misunderstanding of the situation not only in a significant, but also correct way?

Thank you!