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Which do you prefer? The end of art or its disappearance?

In 1985 a discussion took place in Basel between four prominent artists at that time : Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Enzo Cucchi and Anselm Kiefer. The theme of the discussion was: the decline of art, of its truth and of its depth; and the question that had to be answered was: how can Art be given a new identity, regain its credibility, and preferably re-establish its social dimension and its historical mission. The sadness caused by the decline of art and the hope of a revival, these are themes that have come up in practically all discussions about art in the last few years. The fact that such discussions are held between European artists is not accidental. To save art is to save Europe.

However, it will be a pointless rescue operation. In the past Art was an investment, it held promises of a world more authentic than the one we knew. In our day fashion and the media have robbed art of its body, its depth, its dimension; through them art has become a large-scale ,fleeting, volatile business. The 'true art' of the eighteenth century produced an effect, the art of our day is an effect , one of the 'special effects' of the mass media. One of the topics that kept coming up during the Basel discussion was the resistance against fashion, that rapid and pointless alternation of trends; the refusal to go on contributing to a history of art that proceeds without consequences. It would be a false continuity, which has nothing to do with art and its inalienable autonomy. According to these artists Art has lost its soul. The core, the binding factor of religion and morality, have disappeared. Kounellis would like to build a cathedral again; until the time that such a possibility

presents itself, the image must remain fragmented. Beuys wishes for the restoration of the original unity of nature and spirit, and that of cosmos and reason. The present-day concept of art should be broadened to a 'soziale Plastik': and the central figure is 'anthropos'. Cucchi longs for the moment that images again spring from an inner necessity, and he brings the energy of the womb into play. Also Kiefer offers nothing but 'Sehnsucht', coupled with his melancholia about the decline of art: the essence is still to come .

This desire for restoration is as old as art itself. In the eighteenth century it was presumed that the Greeks already had knowledge of the secret of true art. An unattainable ideal for the contemporary artist, but one that aroused 'Sehnsucht' and incited 'Nachahmung', according to one of the first advocates of 'true art: Winckelmann. But 'Art' could only be deployed by simultaneously calling into play its adversary: the baroque. Art was to be purged of all baroque excesses. That was its long-term task, which it carried out successfully in the case of the baroque which, in the course of the nineteenth century, came to be appreciated as art .In this way its undermining force was neutralised. However, modern art doesn't insist, it resists ,it feels powerless. It has no role to play anymore and its crisis is being mourned. But the moment it wants to get back on the stage, it is forced to place itself and a new adversary is created. During the discussion in Basel, it is Kounellis that has the most outspoken views on this: 'one should always have something to fight against. Fortunately right now we have the Americans'. Americans don't know anything about real life, they only know ' the American way of life' which moves around the surface of

existence. The lack of a distinction between true and false makes everything about them utterly false, totally fake, pure pretence. Our critical attitude, sense of history or melancholy speculation are alien to them. Americans have surrendered their existence to the void, to the indifference of the media. They are actors in a new scene: the obscene. An a-social but vital scene that immediately absorbs any presupposed depth. Memory will be cancelled, every trace will be wiped out. A thoroughly primitive existence which runs parallel to a highly developed system of media and modern technology. And one artist that convincingly incorporates this obscenity, is undoubtedly Andy Warhol, conspicuously absent from the discussion between the European artists, more American than America itself.

The judgment that Kounellis passes on Warhol is shattering: 'he has no talent whatsoever, he is no artist, he's only involved in propaganda and publicity'. Kounellis may be right and perhaps Warhol isn't an artist at all, maybe he opens up a domain different from that of art and aesthetics, which can only be saved and continued. Warhol makes the assumption that art has simply disappeared. He becomes fascinated by the exchangeability of all signs, the disappearance of every reference, the final triumph of indifference, the moment when every goal, every sense is lost. He accepts this as a 'desert forever'. 'All is pretty'. 'Everything is good'. Who departs from the idea that indifference is part of the human condition, can only respond to it with an indifference which at least equals it; for we are dealing with a force which is stronger than the force of the distinction which is cultivated in Europe, but which, through endless repetition, ends up in the realm of indifference as well. The brilliance of

Warhol lies in the fact that he manages to turn the disappearance of art into a grand event. He uses the weapons of obscenity, but he points them at himself. Indifference is not doubled in endless succession, but in his films and screens it is transected for just one moment at a time to give the course of the world a new rule. It's not his aim to provide an addition to the stream, but a restriction. As he decides not to give any comments, judgment or interpretation of the world, Warhol is able to ward off banality in a flash, to catch it in one fatal image. Warhol's enterprise is characterised by a great severity. He challenges anyone that in the future will try to protract the life of art. Warhol only wants to be a mirror: 'I'm sure I'm going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?'. A mirror merely reflecting other mirrors. An endless reflection, that's the void itself. The mirror knows nothing, and it rejects nothing; it receives everything, but only for a short moment. Warhol initiates us into the void, without occupying it himself.

Joseph Beuys superstar. The impressive portrait that Warhol made of the magus is based on the negative of a photograph which gives an extra brightness to the hat. A unique duplication of the image of a real artist. It's not surprising that also the attempts to give Europe back its art could in those days count on Warhol's strategy of indifference. Art was to be re-inserted into the continuity of its history, it was to be harmonised with the spirit of the times (hallmark of authenticity), and chained to the repetition of the difference. In a number of large exhibitions the return to expressive painting and sculpting was exuberantly celebrated as the new spirit of the Eighties. At the

Documenta in 1982 Warhol's 'Piss-Paintings' were a cynical comment on the predilection for alchemy and the drive to create wild paintings(at that time). Abstract paintings that originated from urinating on canvas that was covered with a thin layer of copper paint. In the same year he was invited to the 'Zeitgeist' (Berlin), where his 'Zeitgeist-Paintings' caused the whole exhibition to disappear as it were. His celebration of German art and culture (the Valhalla at Regensburg; Speer's 'Lichtdom' above the Zeppelinfeld) reminds one in a flash of other moments when Europe is trying to find a new identity with the help of art, but at the same time it made clear that in the meantime the image of the catastrophe had become a sign fit for quotation, an empty image. In Warhol's paintings the spirit of the times wasn't reflected or expressed, but the duplication of this stale concept was absorbed by them. The process of screenprinting contributed to this, the paint merging completely with the surface, not expressing anything. His paintings were nothing but screens whose loud pop colours against a black background gave them a morbid kind of beauty. In that sense they also formed a direct challenge to Kiefer whose works were also exhibited and whose paintings covered with thick crusts of paint in gloomy earthy colours rather seemed to re-enact memory. The melancholy longing for the resurrection of art (and of Europe)was cruelly and simply dissolved in Warhol's screen.