

[DO ART OBJECTS AND IMAGES WORK DIFFERENTLY FROM OTHER OBJECTS AND IMAGES IN THE WORLD?]

ART HAS WON (BUT NOBODY NOTICED)

Today, when we look at a work of art, this happens mostly in a museum or a gallery. In the moment of entering the building, we are aware, that we are about to perceive an artefact of a certain cultural value. This obviously already affects our expectations of the work shown to a great extent.

Whatever we, the public, subsequently see within this confined space is valid, no matter what our opinion on it may be, as a piece of art in its own right. Even if the image or object in question is a bin bag (Gavin Turk, 'Bin Bag 3', Venice Biennale 2001) or a messed up bed (Tracy Emin) - everything can become art. In this regard, it is the art-space that works as a 'frame' of the work and gives it that status.

This current situation is the result of a decade-long struggle of artists of all disciplines to free their work from traditional conventions, which defined what art should be like. What cubism started on a formal level by questioning the limitations of their medium, was first explicitly formulated by Marcel Duchamp, when he presented his 'Fountain': The mere act of placing an object into a specific context became a creative act.

At the time still strongly criticized, his position has meanwhile been widely accepted in the academic art world. We no longer only admire the technical ability of the artist to represent naturalistically a reality, as was the case in Europe since ancient Greece, all through the Renaissance until the 20th century. The question *why* the work has been created in that specific manner became more important than the *how*.

Nowadays we ask for the *meaning* of a piece - we are looking for a symbolic value, which we suppose must be hidden in it. That is the expectation we have when entering an art-space and because of it we project *our* interpretation unto the work we see. At this point it does not matter if our view

has anything to do with the artists intention or even is opposed to it. Maybe the work is from the past and can only now be associated with current events. The meaning comes to existence in the space between the work and the viewer, through the dialogue of interpretation. Without an exchange with the public, no artwork has a meaning (though the public can be as few as one person, i.e. the artist).

Therefore a piece of art has as many different meanings, as the number of members of the public who come in contact with it. The interpretations of the artist and of the critics form a minority, which may be relevant for its status in the market, but ultimately they are just views like the ones of everybody else. There might be different *levels* of meaning (Barthes), whose recognition is dependent from the viewer's cultural background and education, but there are also an infinite number of *dimensions* of meaning within them.

Let me explain this with an example: 'The Weather Project' by Olafur Eliasson is a large artificial sun setting in a fine mist. A religious, Christian person might see a reference to apocalypse or hell, while a Hindu would recognize the dance of Lord Shiva in it. These interpretations are both on the same, symbolic level, but they differ due to the identity of the viewer. (In the past one did not have to consider this aspect, as artwork created by a certain culture had been seen only in the same context. However nowadays contemporary art is produced and shown worldwide.)

Most people probably do not even think on that level, they instead experience the sensation of the atmosphere created in the room by the work and enjoy the visual spectacle. What someone *feels* in the presence of the work cannot be put in words; nevertheless a dialogue happens between the piece and each person looking at it and as such becomes an integral part of the works expression.

It is in this sense that art has won – Not only everything is possibly a piece of art, as the artist has total freedom in choice of subject matter, materials and

working processes. But also every interpretation of the work has become valid, liberating the piece from a restricted view on it.

So if everything can be art and we can interpret it in any way, what is it then that makes art art? It is merely the context.

There is the story, that when the 'Skulpturenpark' in the German city of Münster was first inaugurated, the works, which are situated all over the town, were not labelled. Artistically interested visitors to Münster were wandering around looking for the sculptures. All of a sudden, they started to see works of art in everyday things, where no artist had worked on.

If we know, that something is supposed to be a piece of art, we look at it as one. At this point comes into play the expectation described in the beginning of the text. It also works on a historical level: A page of tabloid newspaper for example is just some actual information, layout to be easily readable. With the time passing though, the same page becomes a historic document and the layout can be an indicator of the graphic style of its era.

But all this artistic freedom has had a price, which is the separation of the art-world from the rest of the world. The sculptures in Münster have meanwhile been labelled and even if it was not the case: The majority of people do not have the time and muse to look for art in every aspect of live.

Of course art has always been elitist, as only very few people can afford the luxury of buying artwork. But while in the past the general public did not have physical access to the palaces and castles where the paintings and sculptures belonging to the aristocracy were, today the exclusivity is held up by the very art itself. Even a less educated person, whether in the Renaissance or in the present, is impressed by a painting by Titian. The esteem might be just for the technical skill of realistically representing nature, mythological or historical scenes, but it would probably be stronger than for the 'Bin Bag' of Gavin Turk.

At the point in history where more contemporary art than ever is available to the public less public than ever is available for that art. Although since the beginning of modernism artists were concerned to work for the people (Dada,

‘Manifest Proletkunst’) and not just to support the ruling classes (even if always being financially supported by them), the result seems not to be readable by the public they had envisaged. Or it is readable, considering the different dimensions of meaning, but the public does not recognize its own capability of recognition, due to an over-respect towards the art-establishment.

This is partly because the art scene in Europe and the USA has increasingly professionalized itself during the last century. It has developed art-schools, galleries, museums, research centres and dedicated magazines, books and libraries. New professions apart from the artist have evolved, like curators, critics, conservators, art historians and professors. Art has been institutionalized and became more academic, with artists being recruited by gallerists directly from art-colleges and museum curators adopting new names from the galleries.

As a consequence, the production, exhibition, critique and conservation of art happens in a closed cycle that is the art-world and in itself is self-sufficient. It is funded from public, corporate and private sources, but experts who belong to that same microcosm are in charge of the evaluation of how the money is used. There exists no external point of justification for art.

Whereas in the past art was made in order to glorify God, the king or a political system (Soviet Realism), today art is made for the sake of art. As a result, the viewer does not have or does not find an external point of entry to the concept formulated by the artist. Therefore older works can be more accessible, as the public can definitely relate the content to a certain reality. Even if it is located in the past and the person relies on outdated artistic values.

But then again ‘The Weather Project’ is a huge public success. By using the sun as motive, an image is created that relates to every human being. As stated before, we can have all different sorts of associations with it, but the sun itself is so universal and essential for the life on our planet, that any

person knows what is being represented here. An entry point is given, while by its simplicity still letting the spectator space for his interpretation.

This demonstrates the current situation which art is in at the moment: It is now, after having declared everything in life as its material, struggling to find a position for itself. Not by accident this is happening at the same time as the art business, like all other sectors of economy, has expanded all over the planet. The artists, as well as their public, now are situated, even moving, around the entire world. A global mainstream culture of brands and mass entertainment medias has evolved, also with the contribution of the art world. An example of this being the Toyota TV-advertisement showing a chain reaction that ends with the putting in motion of one of their cars. Because of the apparent similarity to their video “Der Lauf der Dinge” (“The way things go”, 1987), in which a chain reaction determines the life-cycle of objects, the artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss sued the company.

The problem being that the market keeps control over the mass medias by secluding art into its own social microcosm, court cases will not be a solution. Instead we have to bridge this gap separating the art from the rest of the world, by using the newly found diversity of artistic practices and views in a more universal way and maybe step out of the confined space of the gallery and the museum.

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ARTISTS:

- Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)
- Olafur Eliasson, born 1967, Copenhagen
- Tracy Emin, born 1963, London
- Peter Fischli (born 1952, Zürich) and David Weiss (born 1946, Zürich)
- Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), (c. 1485-1576)
- Gavin Turk, born 1967, Guildford