

ZUR LAGE DER KUNST HEUTE

Materialien zum Vortrag von Beat Wyss

ON TODAY'S STATE OF ART

Materials of the Lecture of Beat Wyss

PETER NOEVER

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herausgegeben von *edited by* **PETER NOEVER**



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Der Vortrag **Zur Lage der Kunst heute** von Beat Wyss, Ordinarius für Kunstwissenschaft und Medientheorie an der Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe, findet im Rahmen des MAK-Jahrespresseempfangs und der MAK Lecture Series „Im Brennpunkt“ statt. *The lecture On Today's State of Art of Beat Wyss, Professor for Science of Art and Media Theory at the Karlsruhe Academy of Design, takes place in the context of the Annual Press Reception and the MAK Lecture Series „In Focus“.*

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These days, a museum should actually provoke and promote art and be more than just an interface between art producers and art consumers. The MAK: a fomenter in the most positive sense of the word, a seedbed of unrest on the national and international museum scene. In our labs, we create turbulences, and this is socio-politically significant: “education” for art by art.

Art as the MAK sees it goes against so-called reality, against the established, the apparently self-evident. What art eventually wants is: to question answers, to enigmatize solutions, to confuse perception, to dynamize the unmovable, to chaoticize order, to anarchize rules, to topple balances, to shift perspectives, to undercut meanings, to revolutionize discourses, to infiltrate complexity, in brief: to unsettle what is settled.

As a place of the programmatic fusion of tradition and experiment, the MAK is aware of the significance of the cultural heritage, whose cultivation is an essential part of the museum mission. And yet: a museum devoting itself merely to conservation becomes conservative. Without courage for experimentation, no museum will be able to actually arrive in the present.

Museums will have to keep redefining themselves in a process of continual self-reflection; it is only thus that they can continue to be test labs of the future. Historically grown holdings have to be exhibited in a contemporary style, only the most innovative of presentation strategies can come into consideration. After all, thinking about the possibility or impossibility of the museum is what makes

the core issue of theoretical, and the propelling force of practical, museum work.

What is essential for an art institution today is having a clear profile, an unmistakable position. Thus seen, Beat Wyss' lecture *On the State of the Art Today*, is a straight-out analysis and a snapshot of the status quo, but also an orientation guideline, so to speak, for art institutions.

Peter Noever, C.E.O. and Artistic Director, MAK

Beat Wyss

On Today's State of Art

(...) That whole roundabout route taken by the long noses from the West: combining colonial subjugation of the world with enlightened do-goodism – this entire missionary concept of ours was made obsolete on the construction sites of the Beijing Olympics.

It makes vulture capitalists and their allied politicians start dreaming: how developable our economy would be if, on the one side, minimum wages would tend toward zero, and on the other, executive's salaries would tend toward infinity. Nothing would stand in the way of a neoliberal slave society controlled by globally operating cartels that follow the model of the Chinese politburo: it would be more than dreamt of in David Ricardo's, Adam Smith's, or Karl Marx's wildest philosophies.

Now the question is: how can the art system bear up under this global development?

The answer is optimistic: surprisingly well. However, certain industry specifics will have to be taken into account. There are art genres that will find it increasingly difficult to cope with the neoliberal idea of *return on investment*; these are the genres informed by courtly tradition. Their characteristic: high investments without any prospect of payback, let alone any realizable surplus value. These are the genres that aristocratic patrons or patrician communities once used to demonstrate their largesse:

opera, the theater, or music, unless it can be made exploitable through reproduction media.

(...)

The good news is that the industry is virtually booming. This success is based on the fact that, in the field of culture, mass reproducibility is not the sole criterion in generating surplus value. On the contrary: electronic progress in copying visual and acoustic wares has in fact had ruinous effects on the CD business. In copyright matters, a devaluation has occurred that has blurred boundaries as were blurred between piracy and Christian seafaring in the Thirty Years' War. In fact, it is precisely the advantage of nonreproducibility that visual art has over all other genres. To put it in Adorno's words: a work of visual art is an absolute commodity, a fetish that is appraised in money because it is a unique original.

In my short lecture on today's state of art, I will stick to the division of the economic field into the sectors of *Production*, *Circulation* and *Consumption* as has become classical since Karl Marx. And my guiding hypothesis is: **“All scientific, social, and cultural problems of the present age can be summarized in one question: how to maximize profit and avoid work?”**

On Production.

The Artist: From Craftsman to Broker and Lottery Player

After the turn of the year, bottom lines clearly show: The art market boom continued throughout 2007 to an extent that made fearful minds apprehensive about when the bubble is going to burst. There was much too much talk about price records and too little talk about the ranks of artists who do not have success. For decades now, there have been growing numbers of people who want to be artists and refuse to embark on a bourgeois occupation. What is behind this is a transformation of society. The students who decide for art do so in a society in which racecar drivers, tennis players, and scandalous celebrities are held up as role models by the yellow press (...) Between me and Paris Holton, there will always be the great divide of the TV screen which will implacably relegate me to my living room couch when there is a talk show on.

Unless, that is, you're lucky and get rich. It is true, there are no state schools to train tennis pros or racecar drivers. But there are public art academies offering a publicly subsidized opportunity of learning the unlearnable artist profession. (...) The current art boom is a symptom of the end of the industrial age. Culture preferably settles in derelict industrial sites: warehouses, closed-down factories, abandoned industry parks. Wherever work has left art is moving in. Young people who would otherwise perhaps be unemployed are being

parked, with public money support, in feel-good spaces where they can be creative. The art boom is the reaction to a society in which labor in any traditional sense is increasingly devalued. Gambling has become a social model.

The art boom (...) is a phenomenon of the postindustrial society. Joseph Beuys still romantically glorified this when he said: “Everyone is an artist.” Today, this message is banalized in casting shows searching prospective pop idols – just for the fun of it. This development goes along with the decay of the bourgeois society and a value system that sociologist Max Weber once called “Protestant ethics”.

(...) It is no coincidence that the figures of Fortuna and the Artist developed simultaneously in the period of Humanism. The painter Giotto became the role model for all those who hoped to make it from shepherd to a famous and wealthy artist. (...) In (...) times of upheaval when old virtues go under artists may actually strike gold if they manage to timely side with the winners. Something like that happened in the Paris of the Second French Empire: aside from a bourgeoisie of nouveaux riches who also asserted themselves in politics a new type of artists emerged who launched themselves to fame with the ruling class with provocative strategies: the Courbets, the Manets, the Impressionists. They were the postmodernists of the 19th century, a type of artist that was again embodied only after the politically and ideologically precarious phase of avant-gardism by people like Andy Warhol.

On Circulation. From the Stock Exchange to the Potlatch Principle

Today’s phase of upheaval is characterized by the global self-assertion of financial capital and increasing devaluation of labor. **The art system offers an alternative to labor which is now no longer felt to be a virtue but badly paid drudgery.** And this is where the artist and a new type of collector meet. There is complicity between these actors; the artist and the collector are mirrored in one another, their respective success has the same roots. Their wealth is not based on work, but on creative decisions.

(...) The successful artist does not create an oeuvre, but makes decisions, chooses the right aesthetic strategy, comparable to the sure instinct of a good fund manager.

It is from these post-bourgeois milieus that the new type of collector comes from: not only does he want to see good works, but he also wants to socialize with the artist. The art scene offers permanent party catering: from the Art Basel to Miami Beach and back, a circuit of short-lived glamorous appearances immortalized by “Gala” or “Vanity Fair”. (...)

In this context, the prejudice should be dismissed that the collector buys works of art in the hope of seeing a value increase like with a block of shares. **Today, it is the act of buying itself that is in the center of collecting:** the *sex appeal* of the man able to fork over twenty millions

for a Jeff Koons without batting an eye. This is what gives art magazines and newspaper arts sections something to write about for several issues.

The label of the bohemian had forced artists to demonstrate indifference in money matters, studied though it may have been. In the second half of the 19th century, the institution of the art gallery came into being in Paris, which accurately corresponded to the steady economic progress in art development. The gallery owner inexpensively bought together works by young and unknown artists and then waited for them to be presented to the public in Salon exhibitions, hoping for a properly controversial reception, that essential prerequisite that made it possible to bring a work to fame. Prices rose accordingly. If there seemed danger of stagnation, controversy had to be stirred up a little. Another deft means to drive prices up was cutting down supply of the commodity. Henri Kahnweiler instructed Picasso and Braque not to participate in exhibitions; their cubist art was supposed to take place in the privacy of his gallery only. The strategy paid well. **“They bark, we ride on”**, Goethe had once put it; a principle that helped Kahnweiler’s protégés to selling success while the intermediate ranks of the cubist movement around Gleizes and Metzinger were working their guts out writing opaque manifestos about mediocre paintings. (...)

The *old art economy* still corresponded to late 19th century capitalism. Gallery owners resembled shareholders who stick to their investment philos-

ophy through all ups and downs. The laws of the *old art economy* were based on a philosophy of never-ending value increase. Being part of this system, the artist had an easy course to steer (...) No experiments, no new novelties! Those would only diminish their market chances. The successful course for the artist was to keep up his novelty like a flag in the thick of competition. Through constant reduplication, the novelty that epitomized his work was supposed to become a trademark. (...)

A felt hat in the checkroom makes you think of Beuys, a bathroom neon of Dan Flavin, a round slice of sausage on a plate of Dieter Roth – this is what makes the refrain scheme of successful art concepts.

The art-and-market strategy that had been in effect for one century fell apart around 1990. Direct dependency on global events such as the Gulf War or economic cycles showed 1991 in the collapse of the Japanese *bubble economy*, whose tycoons had taken particular pleasure in making Impressionist prices soar sky-high. With the beginning of a policy of high interest rates, the resources for art were dried out.

(...)

(...) Value increase once was a good old bourgeois strategy. It takes patience, accumulation, non-indulgence. This economic logic does not work any longer, simply because young artists can get astronomical prices early on in their careers. You get in

when prices are high and so you may take a plunge. The collector's ambition is not making a profit, but the status of being able to stay in the game.

Art possession brings back a glimpse of the splendor of princely sovereignty. **The art market is dominated by prestige gain by value destruction.** But this mechanism is as old as is the wish of distinguishing from the rest of society. The sovereign gift can be found in every culture, it is an anthropological constant. The panegyrist at the French court called it *largesse*, and the Indians of Canada called it *potlatch*. The ritual exchange of artworks is an act that all of us understand at once throughout in the world.

Can it be that art does not need theory any longer? All indicators say so. The business is flourishing like never before, although, or perhaps because it does not need a theoretical foundation any longer. Art has learned to walk, like Zarathustra, and does not want to be goaded on – least of all by the writing fraternity. The sole regulative principle of visual creation is the market which provides the cues and standards for the work. The issue is not questions of style or political theory. It is like in the bargain basement: The price says it all! And the parties. And who was on the guest list: precisely the kind of news, in other words, that is missing in art magazines struggling for survival with a subscriber base of 6,000 faithful and knowledgeable readers. The art magazines of a new type are “Vanity Fair”, “Gala”, “Bunte”. Here you can read how much the Anselm Kiefer

was that Silvester Stallone bought and that it bothers him to see the straw crumble on his expensive carpet all the time.

To be sure, there still are collectors of the old school who pursue their strategies like the banker who refuses to be held to account by his board of directors or his shareholders. The collector of the new type, however, is no longer interested in speculation, that good old bourgeois method of accumulating and augmenting values. The collector of the new type lords over his art. Even a Lamborghini will be not more than scrap some day. The art market is a spectacle of money destruction, and collecting is something for people who have so much money that they need to get rid of some of it. After all, money only has *sex appeal* if it presents itself in a sensually transmogrified form: as luxury. In art, the deliberate destruction of values takes on the visible form of sacrifices and publicly presented gifts. The collector donating his treasures to the public resembles the Indian chief-tain who, by giving away his possessions, declares himself superior to the cycle of giving and taking as is dictated by the dire necessity of life.

(...)

The work of art as a visible gift presented in the symbolical exchange act of the potlatch has the evident immediacy of a sacrificial rite.

The artist is a media star and producer of fetish commodities. His appearance combines media omnipresence on TV, the Internet, and in the

yellow press with the ancient singular real presence of the auratic work. Thus the star art of today holds us in a compelling double grip of hybridity and archaism.

***On Consumption.
From the Museum of the People to the Private
Viewing Warehouse for the Have-nots***

With the emergence of the *potlatch* principle, not only art collecting, but also art consumption has taken on an archaic air today. **Art objects have the status of sacred relics.** People seek to get close to them, bathe in their warm light. (...) A seemingly secular public has adopted the pattern of the pilgrimage, going out in search of the holy fetish and returning home not without some devotional object from the museum shop.

Take, for example, the Louvre. In the Grande Galerie, where today the state-owned art treasures of France are kept, king Louis XIV healed the scrofulous by laying his hands on them on high holidays. The modern absolutist monarch thus stands in a long line of miracle-working French kings. And so thousands of his poorest subjects streamed through the palace at Easter or Whitsun to be touched and healed by their ruler. Today, museum visitors pass through that same Grande Galerie in awe. The blessing of the laying on of hands, the belief in the miraculous power of magic real presence has rubbed off on the art fetish.

Thanks to its new archaic character, art consumption is for the masses today. Art, it is true, has had a religious trait since the Romantic age. But the intellectualized art religion of the educated classes has given way to the down-to-earth popular spectacle of a mendicant sermonizing. This would

also explain why works of art have to be so expensive. A sacred fetish is supposed to come from the heaven of the market like a miracle. Nobody will believe in such an object if it costs a mere 100,000 Euros.

The miraculous fetish character of art also entails social commitment. Art halls have taken over the function of mendicant monasteries. Like their medieval role models, they have established themselves on the outskirts or in the poorer quarters of cities. And like the Beguins and, today, the Franciscans, art associations work to help and to heal in urban problem areas. Just think of the P.S.1 in Queens, east of Manhattan. The advice used to be to keep the doors of the taxi locked when crossing this neighborhood on the way to JFK airport. Today, tourists can safely stroll around the streets near the P.S.1. Art in this form has a placating, civilizing power, and this mission also involves socially committed discourse. Art offers the open microphone for a debate about the state of the world in which everyone has a say. (...)

(...)

Museum art has become the symbolical key currency of globalized capitalism. This development resembles the holy relic trade in the European Middle Ages which accompanied the expansion and strengthening of the Christian Church in the West. Aside from the Holy Land, the main supply reserve then was the city of Byzantium whose treasures were ruthlessly looted. Cultural

cannibalism, the mechanisms of violence and displacement have a religious precedent here. (...)

The parallelism of sacred relics and art becomes even more crucial since the works of classical modernism can indeed be seen as martyrs of the turmoil of contemporary history. Classical modernism currently achieves the highest prices; so it is no wonder that the art market is not particularly pleased to see so much of this scarce premium commodity frozen in public museums. (...)

Notwithstanding all kindness of the heart and that global forgivingness that is taught in the temples of art, what is forgotten today is that every museum, in a historical perspective, is a memorial of political violence and social upheaval. Bringing this fact to attention again may be particularly commendable for a museum of applied arts. (...)

Museums are memorials of violence and displacement. In order for a museum to come into possession of exhibits at all, these have to be removed from their original site. The main reasons for such removal are: secularization, colonialization, forced sale, and war. (...)

Cultural identity derives from things that have outlived their useful lives and had to be sacrificed to economic, political, or social progress. **A museum object is a totem in the strict sense of Sigmund Freud:** the idol of an overcome power subsequently worshipped as a fetish in art form. Museums thus are places of cultural cannibalization. Here we may admire what the ruling society has incorporated in order to gain strength of legitimacy. (...)

The origin of museums is linked with the end of Absolutism. The Louvre Museum in Paris, the first of its kind, was established as an inventory of the revolutionary liquidation of the Bourbon regime. The last great museum complex built in Old Europe, the Museums of Natural History and Art History in Vienna, was the testament of a monarchy built at the time of its slow death. The musealization of the Habsburg collection, belated by one hundred years, was planned to find its monumental conclusion in an Imperial Forum. (...)

Still today, the site of the unbuilt Imperial Forum is resonant with the “ad acta” order of the last emperor. Will it have to stay this way? Should the Heldenplatz be left to people like Adolf Hitler? (...) Would it not be time for the Austrian Republic to take possession of this beautiful site at last? What is missing in this history-loaded place is the epoch mark of contemporary Austria.

(...)

Cutbacks on state-owned holdings of art go along with the fact that – ever since the “ad acta” of Emperor Francis Joseph – public authorities have become tired of making an active contribution to present-day cultural life. **The federal and municipal governments are content to cultivate nostalgic images of the past** in that they restore and preserve the 19th century city for the benefit of the tourist industry. Defining the profile of the present age is left to private collectors who, as in the case of the Viennese Museum Quarter, are per-

mitted to hold court in the court of the former Imperial Stables; a sweeping patriarchal gesture that cannot cover up the cultural-political weakness of the state.

One reason for the retreat of public institutions from collecting contemporary art is high prices. **The public museum has developed into the antagonist of the art market.** This has two reasons: First, the state have-nots cannot keep up with the other bidders.

The second reason is directly related to the mechanism of the *new art economy*: **the museum withdraws works from the permanent cycle of money – commodity – money.** From the point of view of the market, permanent collections are frozen capital, gold ducats in the treasure chest of the cultural commodity exchange. Of course, the price of the market heroes is based on recognition by museums. A work must have discourse currency coverage; without credit from museums and art critics, art will not get too far beyond subsistence level between private living rooms and dentist’s offices. (...)

Convertibility between commodity and money is even more flexible in the case of the so-called collector’s museum, which serves as a booster of value increase while values stored in public museums are being hardly noticed as they doze toward an unspecified eternity in the possession of “the people”. The cultural heritage has little *sex appeal* in a world of upheaval when the canon is slipping away. All the more impressive the collector’s museums appear which afford the visitor a show

of wealth and generosity: take a look and marvel, all this is mine!

Exhibition visitors are graciously invited to be present at a showy art spree. Drawn into exhibitions by the media bluster around them, they participate in a spectacle with mixed feelings of fascination and envy. **Fascination and envy are in fact characteristic of the state of mind in our media society.** We are witnesses to the reconfiguration of the republican structures of the civil state into an absolutism of the super-rich who control art as once did the Medici. Politicians and we all are but fawning courtiers of the international art cartel. As the lottery works only because all the losers stay in, leaving their stakes to the lucky winners, so art today works because of high visitor numbers that boost the market system. Each exhibition-goer is a volunteer in the service of rising art prices ... it's like with Ikea: at the museum, you are both customer and employee.

We are witnesses to the privatization of art possession. However, what is frequently overlooked is the function of the public museum as the central bank of the art system.

Writing off this institution entirely will turn out counterproductive. High art-market prices still rely on what is left of the old idea that art is a stable and long-term value with a tendency for increase. The crowning moment in the market performance of a lifework of art hitherto was acceptance in the pantheon of the museum, which was tantamount to guaranteed everlasting value. Quick profit-taking, the constant peristaltic movement of sucking

in and turning out fresh art material just for profit skimming makes the art trade a business for arbitrageurs.

(...) According to all experience, it is the general assumption of an authoritative cultural canon that the material value of art collections is based upon. Even art as an investment is based upon the consistency of art as a cultural value, which consists in the assumption of an “ars perennis”, the unending cultivation of art which, by building knowledge and memory, provides the basis of value creation. For a stable price policy, the art market will have to invest in productive art institutions. **In this case, that means investing in the workshops of discourse – academies, museums, universities.** Using art historians as badly paid or even unpaid market makers is a symptom of a gold-rush mood that devastates the cultural heritage like the rain forest.

The medieval system of values was backed by the possession and worshipping of sacred relics. This symbolical currency was called into doubt in the epoch of the Reformation, and meanwhile would presumably not stand DNA analysis either. Art will perhaps face a similar destiny some day when it turns out that its value system is not informed by any reliable conviction, but inflated by hot air from a market bubble.

Beat Wyss

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