

Dear Stephan and Ralph,

I was delighted to have you visit my studio. It's a pity we only had so little time together. During our conversation I claimed that I used painting in order to adopt things as my own. In response to this, Stephan asked if Russell Young also adopted things as his own in his screen prints. This question, having remained unanswered at the time, has occupied me ever since. Here is the attempt at an answer.

First of all, I have to clarify that what I referred to as 'things' are in fact signs. Both Russell and I quote signs in our works. This is quite symptomatic for the postmodern artist. He does not create anything of his own, because the 'own' has not stood the test of time.

For the postmodern artist to adapt a sign, the sign needs to already exist. In this sense, the postmodern artist is a second-hand creator. What interests him is the truthfulness of signs, not their content, assertion, or message. Hence, for the artist, signs are interchangeable because their contents are all equally weighty – or weightless.

This is different if the artist creates something of his own. An individual, independent creation always implies a personal truth which excludes other truths. In this, the artist does not seek to create something new, as innovation is irrelevant to truth.

If, however, the artist makes the effort to painstakingly copy the signs he quotes (as I do), does he appropriate them more intensively than he would if he reproduced them in screen prints, or even used them in the original, in the manner of readymades? In other words, do the various ways of quoting possess a qualitative difference relevant in art?

Since the onset of modernism we know that an artwork consists of the art and the work. The readymade has de-materialized and spiritualized art, while at the same time turning the work into something profane. Art can now manifest itself in each and any thing, as the work is no longer more than its shell. And above all: art can now manifest itself in a thing that exists already, one which does not need to be manufactured first. Hence it reveals itself to the artist as if by magic, all by itself, without work, almost without any effort at all. Following an intuition, the artist declares as art something that already exists. If this readymade is then effectively recognized as a work of art, by being included in an important art museum or collection, for example, or being sold at an astronomical price, this essentially confirms the artist's intuition that this thing contains art. Naturally, such intuitions cannot be achieved through will and labour, but have to be anticipated. In this way, the artist can be regarded as lazy in the positive sense.

In pre-modern times, greater manual skills were required of the artist in order to produce a work of art. On the other hand, the contemporary viewer was able to distinguish between art and non-art at a glance. Through a radical reduction and a concentration on the most essential, modernity has liberated the artist from time-consuming manual work. At the same time, though, the viewer has to invest much more time to gain access to the work. And above all: without the art museums, collections, and archives, and without the curators, contemporary art would frequently remain unrecognized, because it physically does not distinguish itself from its profane surroundings. All these efforts on behalf of the general public require a lot of work. And this work does not want to be accomplished for nothing, it demands recognition. Hence, today, art has to feign being more sick than it in fact is – just to make a credible show of needing the curing aid of curators... In any case: modernity's attempt to unmask the absolute truth led to the loss of the latter and just left the mask itself.

Thus modern art resembles a masked ball, an extravagant fancy dress party, in which art presents itself in ever changing costume, ever changing disguise. Since the search for truth proved unsuccessful, we are now searching the new, in order to distinguish one from the other, in order to be able to say: this is good art – and this is bad art.

The imperative of the new, however, proves just as obsessive as the demand to guard tradition, or to find truth. This is because the new excludes the old. The contemporary artist is not allowed to repeat anything, not even within his own work – because innovation demands differentiation. Art museums function as sustainers and custodians of differentiation. With the aid of their archives, identities can be uncovered and excluded. Yet many positions in contemporary art are no more than variations on already existing strategies. And yet, they are not identical with already existing positions. Additionally, modern technology brings about the production of a whole lot of good and innovative art that somehow manages to look different each time. Thus differentiation is the defining factor in the appearance of today's art; it is, so to speak, the element that interconnects all contemporary positions in art. However, if differentiation affects identity, everything becomes indifferent.

For this reason, in my work, I do not really search for the new. Rather, I betake myself to find congruities, common features, and other connections that lead to a consensus of signs. 'But less with the aim of inscribing oneself into the archive of innovations but in the hope of discovering tautologies equally visible to everyone.' (Boris Groys, in: 'Logik der Sammlung', p. 91)

The search for tautologies always requires the quoting of signs in a specific context. Within this task, painting offers me a great degree of autonomy. While I have to paint everything I quote (and bring it into a complex form at the same time), I can quote anything, without having to own it. The painter is free of possession because he is able to create anything for himself – he can appropriate everything, without ownership. Hence although the process of painting quite prosaically binds me to the evidence of time and space, I nevertheless feel free and independent in the face of all those things that ask me to possess them. And with it being so hard to chase away the ghost of work, I prefer doing the work myself to having others work for me just in order to spiritualize my art.

My choice of means of expression is a subjective decision, which not least follows the criteria of efficiency. The same is true for Russell Young. Whether he himself poses the question of 'appropriating signs' at all, is irrelevant. And yet, I will ask him when I get the chance. Perhaps a consensus can be found.

May/June 2009