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Seriality and esthetic echo

In modern cultural philosophies the topos of repetition is often connected with the pessimism of the end of sense and history. Contrary to Modernism's negatively connoted reality of experience, which is based on incantations of levelling, loss, and decay, the paradigm of repetition has seen a positive reinterpretation within the art of the last four decades: repetitive serial processes have been brought into position against essentialistic commandments of originality, uniqueness, and unity of the work. In this context Pop Art, Minimal Art, and Concept Art may be considered as emblematic examples - artistic movements that, with technical and iconic deployment, have raised the factor of repetition or rather of seriality to subject. The term series denotes an art immanent method of questioning reality, i.e. a sequence of similar works, the synopsis of which is necessary to explain the overall statement. "For the artist who uses the series as artistic principle the synopsis of all pictures with the same subject [...] is indispensable because only it provides the exhaustive interpretation of what is depicted. The priority of the singular work of art gives way to a complete equality of the components of the series among themselves and in relation to the superordinate whole."¹ All forms of seriality have in common that they remove the work of art from the idea of the original.

The Berlin-based artist Sven Drühl works conceptually and serially, though at first glance one could take him for a landscape painter. Unlike the historical avantgarde movements, that were fixed to creating the New by means of radically changed forms breaking with the past and thus bound to the principle of innovation, Drühl's works stand out for their use and appropriation of already existing motifs. With the return to history and the reference to the well-trying he opposes Modernism's belief in progress and its claim to consistent truth, acts

deliberately eclectic and mannered. Thus he stands in the context of a retro-avantgarde characteristic of Postmodernism, which, from a changed point of view, re-examines the fields of themes the historical avantgarde has only rushed through. Drühl does not judge seriality negatively but ascribes a positive innovative factor to it. His special technique creates a distance to the originals, which can be found not only in the historical field of Romanticism or Modernism but also in the contemporary sphere in variations on some works by Eberhard Havekost (E.H., 2003 and 2005) and Stefan Kürten (S.K., 2001). By imitating them in a technique characteristic of him, Drühl gives the works a highly visible independent artistic hallmark. Apart from oil-paint and synthetic resin lacquer he also uses hammer effect lacquer in recent works as well as silicone for the contours. The areas of lacquer are not enclosed but frequently run into each other, thus creating an uncalculatable composition. In several special series, for instance the so-called 'Bastard Paintings', Drühl leaves the models more and more behind, partly by reducing the colouring to shades of white (D. R. [Bastard], 2005) or, as with the new 'Undead' series, by covering the complete area, silicone included, with black oil-paint in a monochrome but strong flow (F. H. [Undead], 2006). Finally the artist leaves the medium painting for good by reducing the motif to the outlines and converting the silicone of the paintings to neon tubes in his light objects (S. B. [Neon], 2005). Drühl's retro-principle not only implies the adoption of an ironical-critical distance or the existence of an irony that is not recognizable at first glance; moreover, his working method is a carefully considered reappropriation of signs and symbolic forms for the purpose of absorbing their ambiguity and chargedness, for example the adaption of a classic, the "Eismeer" by Caspar David Friedrich, which becomes a luminous icon (C. D. F. [Neon], 2003). The works of art prove to be a mosaic of quotations, according to Drühl this is about a form of "retro-avantgarde: one step back and two to the front. Art is not created in a vacuum but always in relation to earlier works and the codes and artistic conventions constituting them. Each work of art is a conglomeration from the store of quotations of art history. It is formed by the absorption and transformation of other works of art. In the midst of these inevitable processes of appropriation the object should be to have something like a recognizable style emerge again."²

Drühl's way of working can be described with the pair of terms "Artistic Research", introduced by Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén: "The accumulation of knowledge in the artistic field is a form of research. Artists carry out research about the reality that surrounds them, about themselves, about their instruments of work, and about the complex networks linking these. [...] Artistic research means that the artist produces an art work and researches the creative process, thus adding to the accumulation of knowledge. However, the whole notion of artistic research is a relatively new one, and, indeed, its forms and principles have yet to become firmly established."³ Consequently Drühl does not regard painting as a medium in the classical sense but rather in the context of Concept Art. In this respect he follows the artistic concepts of Martin Kippenberger and Mike Kelley, for whom the crucial factor is not the dominance of a discourse and a style but rather a genre-exceeding approach incorporating intermedia fields. For Drühl this means : "I would have liked best to pay someone to save me the work."⁴ His attitude, formulated in this context in an interview with Michael Krajewski on the occasion of his first museum solo show in Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen, confirms the conceptual thought and reminds of Kipperberger's action 'Lieber Maler male mir' (1981), in which the latter had actually commissioned a series of works from a poster painter.⁵ Formally Drühl's works show a closeness to Appropriation Art, a version of Western Postmodernism. In the 1980s this term was used to describe a movement in art that quotes already existing images and makes use of existing esthetics. Mike Bidlo, Sherrie Levine, David Salle, Elaine Sturtevant, and in the broader sense Hans Haake and Cindy Sherman too, can be classed as belonging to this movement. Without wanting to differentiate between these diverse positions at this point, it can be generally stated that this "Plagiarism Art" with its appropriation of individual images and whole styles of art and their use as "ready esthetics"⁶ has become an art form of strong impact. The term of the ready esthetics refers to the term of the ready-made, coined by Marcel Duchamp at the beginning of the 20th century. The actual reception of the ready-made began indeed only with the emergence of Fluxus in the 1960s, but since then it is an extremely important conceptual point of reference for different movements in visual arts. So Appropriation Art, distinguishing itself by a deliberately eclectic attitude, is about a radical refusal of terms like originality,

authenticity, and individual creativity. Different from the artists of Appropriation Art Drühl is not concerned with the emptying of the pictures, the removal of the meanings originally included in the images, but with a reconstruction and widening of the different significance- and context-systems.

The historical developments in the field of imitation require a reassessment of the term 'work'. The concept of the ready-made, important for the post-war avantgardes, concretizes the omnipresence of industrial (re)production, already predominant in the historical avantgardes, with regard to the question about the condition of the artist-subject. In 1957, 40 years after the introduction of the ready-made, Duchamp put his conception in concrete terms in the lecture 'The Creative Art'. He considered the artist a "mediumistic being" whose esthetic decisions are not based on consciousness but on intuition and imponderable concomitants.⁷ According to Calvin Tomkins the role of the artist, relativized not least in recognition of the conditions of an advanced industrial culture, meant "to cock a snook at those who express themselves like high priests of a new religion"⁸ (for example the supporters of Abstract Expressionism). In this sense the artists of the post-war avantgardes rose up too, turning to mass culture in differentiation from Clement Greenberg (an advocate of Abstract Expressionism) and bringing up the changed position and role of the artist. But precisely the attempts at deheroizing him (the artist??), laid out in serial work concepts, always seem to be inhered by an ambivalent struggle for counter-models. The artist Sol LeWitt for instance declares on the one hand that "[t]he serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloging the results of the premise,"⁹ to claim on the other hand that "[c]onceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."¹⁰ Following the historical project of Constructivism the paradigm of repetition, taken up by serial artists, was considered an answer to the system of values of bourgeois Modernism that was felt to be obsolete. In this sense not only the esthetics of Andy Warhol's films and serigraphies but also his statement "[t]he reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine"¹¹ can be understood as an ironical dissociation from the tradition of art and its widely unbroken continuation in Abstract Expressionism.

Facing serial processes the viewer has to change his habits of reception. The works of Minimal Art for example imply a phenomenological model of perception based on the bodily experience of real space and real time. Yvonne Rainer's choreographies, Carl André's ground plates, or Sol LeWitt's structures can be regarded as significant examples of the minimalistic conception of "presence" and "place": the recipient consequently constitutes his subject status with his body. In contrast to the incorporeality of the Cartesian subject, still virulent in Abstract Expressionism, he was supposed to experience his proof of existence not primarily in the rationalistic and phantasmatic act of seeing but in the intuitive-bodily and therefore materialized contact with the objects. Rosalind Krauss, taking Minimal Art as the starting point of her historical study in her book 'Passages in Modern Sculpture' (1977), perceives a socio-critical potential in the minimalistic model of the viewer. She calls the use of industrial materials and processes an act of "reparation for a subject whose experience of everyday life is one of increasing isolation, reification, specialization, a subject leading a more and more instrumentalized existence within the terms of an advanced industrial culture".¹² Krauss' view is consequently based on the assumption of a subject, alienated by the reality (of experience) of capitalist Modernism, who can discover his condition or the horizon of "another" reality in the act of perceiving art. Because the ability for bodily recalling the industrial paradigms of (re)production is, she says, a "gesture of compensation", "that we recognize as profoundly esthetic", in so far as it carries the potential of a possible resistance "against the serialization, stereotypization, and banalization of the production of goods."¹³ So Krauss puts the industrial reproducibility of the work of art in analogy to the fragmentation and decentration of the modern subject, who is not - like in transcendental philosophies - assumed as an entity but subordinated to the contingency of the esthetic act of perception.¹⁴ In her revision of Minimalism from 1990 the art historian took into consideration though that "the door it had pushed open to 'reproduction' had the potential to let this whole world of late capitalist production back in again from behind".¹⁵ The thesis of hopeless ambivalence contained in here, intrinsic in a critical-mimetic conformation to a "culture of seriality, a culture of multiples without original, i.e. a culture of the production of goods"¹⁶, is - as mentioned in the initial thought - always based on

a pessimistic-negative assessment of the topos of repetition.

Drühl resolutely resists this negative way of looking at things. His (re)productions confirm that seriality does not only denote the industrial production (product??) or the copy, not only a critical questioning of values but also "the structure of repetition as a constituent part of configuration."¹⁷ Drühl focusses his interest on what Jean Baudrillard has described as "a subtle form of killing the original", a "unique attraction with which every attention that could be directed at the original is deflected in itself by its infinite refraction."¹⁸ In the age of Hyperrealism the gap between experienced and depicted world is minimal. Baudrillard exaggerates this vision with the draft of a world with no work of art left, "only a planetary simulacron through which the whole world bears witness of itself in the moment of a future universe."¹⁹ Drühl's works are simulacrae for "Nature" but also for the enjoyment of art one could have at the sight of the originals, even if or precisely because the artist manipulates the models in his imitations using means from motif obliteration and reinventions to large size collage-like Bastard-Constructions consisting of several motif fragments (see 'I. S. F. H. S. W. S. B. C. D. F. P. V. R. J. A. K.', 2005). Against the background of the serial aspect his artistic examination has got free from the following constituents:

1. from classical esthetics, i.e. beauty of nature and the primary claim to depict something beautiful for sensual perception. In the historical models the attempts at realizing this concern were mostly unbroken. What matters to Drühl himself is not the aspect of beauty but solely the discourse.
2. from realism, i.e. from the claim to represent/depict reality. The mimetic function of art gives way to a transformatory one. Art becomes the generator of independent reality. Drühl abstracts from the constructions of reality including the achievements in abstraction of the predecessors.
3. from materiality, i.e. art frees itself from its material basis or rather its material substances. Drühl does not leave painting; on the contrary, he practises it with classical elements like oil and canvas. The crucial thing is that he converts motif fragments into other forms. The nature of the material dissolution manifests itself not only in the integration of materials foreign to art like silicone but also in their overcoming: from paint to neon light, from line to neon tube.

4. from the principle of authorship, i.e. Drühl uses a strategy of authorship that generally attacks terms like genius, authorship, and author's reference. Owing to their technical stylistic execution, Drühl's works are easily identifiable and relatable to him, however. The creator of the model sometimes remains unrecognized. Only the title-giving initials refer to the original artist.

Drühl's dealing with seriality, resulting in transgressive variants, is based on discoveries, achievements, and archetypes of visual art as the basis of an artistic process combining traditional and contemporary strategies and forms of images. The unity of sign and meaning or significant and significant dissolves. In this context the works of art represent semantic leeways, "communicated units"²⁰ according to Siegfried J. Schmidt, that can serve as triggers for the public's individual cognitive ideas of reality. By picking up the formal vocabulary of the models and adopting it to his own pool of motifs, the artist provides the viewer with a multitude of possibilities of reception and contexts of meaning which are oriented not only to the works of the artist but also to those of the appropriated predecessors.

Despite different artistic expressions Drühl's conceptual orientation shows a lot of parallels to Duchamp's aesthetic idea which he only formulated in advanced age - very clearly so at the symposium on 'The Western Round Table on Modern Art' in San Francisco in 1949.²¹ In conversation with Mark Tobey, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gregory Bateson and others he differentiated between two artistic forms of experience: a perception of art based on categories of taste on the one hand and the experience of the "esthetic echo"²² on the other. It is the attraction of a work of art, linguistically and rationally incomprehensible, that he called 'esthetic echo'. He compared the event structure of the esthetic echo to the psychology of a person in love or a believer who gives up his demanding self and readily submits to a mysterious force. Quite different from the taste based on the affirmation of social conventions, which in his opinion creates no esthetic but only a sensory emotion. With the idea of the esthetic echo Duchamp was in search of denominating the experience of the extraordinary, unusual, rare in art. Other than beauty the esthetic echo does not only explain, integrate, and unify the existing knowledge, it also transcends known experience.²³ Such esthetics

is a theory of permanent derestriction, as it does not deal with definition and determination but with opening, with movement in an endless process of linking and relating.

The adequate expression of this esthetic way of thinking, characteristic of Drühl's artistic approach too, is the game with chance and the dimensions, with visibility and invisibility, with the categories of 'high' and 'low', of art and non-art. In terms of seriality he practises visual art as a game of the possible. The surprise or rather Duchamp's esthetic echo is made evident here by the reassessment of esthetic traditions. Drühl's works lead us to the insight that esthetic experience involves the infinite possibility of concepts of life but at the same time repeats itself again and again. "The world is made in such a way," as Gilles Deleuze explains the assessment of seriality, "that it consists of perfect stereotype repetitions. Within these we constantly enjoy little differences, variants, and modifications."²⁴ The restriction of our possibilities, accompanied by the progressive scientific explanation of the laws of nature of human existence on the intellectual level and escorting every step of our self-realization on the individual one, is foiled by the game with seriality. In this game we enjoy the possibility to free ourselves from the seriousness of life and reach the openness of an undetermined and independent way of living, connected with the realization that "A major part of art was and is repetitive."²⁵

Notes

- 1) Katharina Sykora, *Das Phänomen des Seriellen in der Kunst* [The phenomenon of seriality in art], Würzburg 1983, p. 6.
- 2) The artist in conversation with the author, Berlin 26.09.2003.
- 3) Mika Hannula/Juha Suoranta/Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research – Theories, Methods and Practices*, Helsinki/Gothenburg 2005, p. 5.
- 4) Michael Krajewski in conversation with Sven Drühl. "I would have liked best to pay someone to save me the work.", in: Oliver Zybok (ed.), *Sven Drühl – Die Aufregung* [The Excitement], Exhibition Cat. Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen/Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund, Leverkusen 2002, p. 34.

- 5) Cf. Oliver Zybok, Die Allgegenwärtigkeit der Aktualität [The omnipresence of topicality], in: idem, Colours and Trips, Exhibition Cat. Künstlerhaus Palais Thurn und Taxis, Bregenz/Museum der Stadt Ratingen, Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 9-20.
- 6) Cf. Nena Dimitrijevic, Alice in Culturescapes, in: Flash Art, Nr. 129, Summer 1986, p. 51.
- 7) Marcel Duchamp, Der kreative Akt [The creative act] [1957], in: Calvin Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp. Eine Biographie [A biography], Munich/Vienna 1999, p. 572.
- 8) Ibid., p. 461 et seq.
- 9) Sol LeWitt, Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD) [1966], in: Adachiara Zevi (ed.), Sol LeWitt, Critical Texts, Rome 1994, p. 75.
- 10) Sol LeWitt, Sentences on Conceptual Art, in: Adachiara Zevi (ed.), Sol LeWitt, Critical Texts, Rome 1994, p. 88.
- 11) Cited in Gene R. Swenson, What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I, in: Artnews, No. 62, November 1963.
- 12) Rosalind E. Krauss, Die kulturelle Logik des spätkapitalistischen Museums [The cultural logic of the late capitalist museum] [1990], in: Texte zur Kunst, 2. Jahrgang Nr. 6, Cologne 1992, p. 137.
- 13) Cf. ibid.
- 14) Cf. ibid. "Neither old Cartesian nor traditional biographical subject the minimalistic subject is [...] a subject radically dependend on the conditions of the spatial field and constituting itself in the act of perception, but always only provisionally, from moment to moment."
- 15) Ibid., p. 137 et seq.
- 16) Ibid., p. 135 et seq.
- 17) Elke Bippus, Serielle Verfahren [Serial processes], Berlin 2003, p. 192.
- 18) Jean Baudrillard, Der symbolische Tausch und der Tod [The symbolic exchange and death] [1976], Munich 1991, p. 89.
- 19) Ibid., p. 114.
- 20) Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, KUNST: Pluralismen [Pluralisms], Revolten, Bern 1987.
- 21) Bonnie Clearwater (ed.), West Coast Duchamp, Miami Beach 1991, pp. 106-114.

22) Cf. *ibid.*, p. 110.

23) Cf. Pierre Cabanne, *Gespräche mit Marcel Duchamp* [Conversations with Marcel Duchamp], Cologne 1972, pp. 104-110.

24) Gilles Deleuze, *Differenz und Wiederholung* [Difference and repetition], Munich 1992, p. 12.

25) Umberto Eco, *Serialität im Universum der Kunst und der Massenmedien* [Seriality in the universe of art and mass media], in: *idem, Streit der Interpretationen* [Dispute of interpretations], Konstanz 1987, p. 60.