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Creativity is overrated! Is creativity overrated?

NEW STRATEGIES FOR THE GOOD OLD
"OUVROIR DE LITTÉRATURE POTENTIELLE"?

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Additional addendum: No manifesto!

Art-isms as ideologies of exclusion and discrimination belong to the 20th century with which they have also disappeared. Likewise: the "avant-garde" as machinery for distinction.

After the termination of all literary avant-gardes and their often totalitarian as well as visionary projects, poetry now seems to be caught in an eternal postmodernism: on the one hand, without a conceptual regime, narration can be again quite conventional, on the other hand a new literary conceptualism adapts tried and tested avant-garde techniques from the visual arts and "experimental" music. Not even the by now also discredited "originality" has to be called upon in order to state: really impressive results

neither come from the conservative neo-narrative front nor from this second-hand avant-garde who believes that new poetic territory can be conquered by borrowed strategies such as sampling, remix, mashup or appropriation. Nevertheless, in reality this only marginally goes beyond the already proven techniques of cut and montage, of serialism and permutation – all of which were developed by classic modernism.

“Writing is 50 years behind painting”, claimed Brion Gysin in 1959, co-inventor of the literary cut-up-technique. “Brion Gysin might still be right”, fears Kenneth Goldsmith in 2011, tireless propagandist of “uncreative writing” as well as numerous other methods for doing away with conventional narrative. One would almost like to agree with Goldsmith, were it not for numerous artists who actually step on “post conceptual” virgin soil. These artists are relatively unknown in literature circles, as a result of many of those authors locating themselves in the context of performance, transmedia and net-activism, because those fields better provide for a process-oriented, combinatorial and boundary-expanding writing than the space between two book covers.

For example: printing out the internet! If someone publicly announced he would “print out the entire internet”, then I would heavily applaud this fantastic fool as if he had announced that he would now go and guzzle the entire Atlantic ocean. Or at least swim across it – just like Herbert Achternbusch had planned in his terrific film “the Atlantic swimmer” and how he had buoyed himself up: “You have no chance, but use it”.

The aforementioned Kenneth Goldsmith used his

non-existing chance in the summer of 2013. In a Mexico City gallery measuring 500 square metres “the entire internet” should be stacked as paper. In his blog Goldsmith asked for printouts of websites and emails that should be sent to him via the good old postal service.

Within two months the pages delivered, including those he diligently printed out himself, already weighed ten tons. Of course, quickly some nit-pickers calculated that the internet on paper would, at that time, already consist of 4.73 billion A4-pages, which, if put on top of each other, would result in a tower 500 kilometres high. This did not further bother Sisyphus Goldsmith. Because first of all, with this mission impossible, the artist wanted to build a monument to net activist Aaron Svartz who shortly beforehand had departed from life by suicide, because he had seen in him an ally in the fight against restricted access to scientific publications and art on the web. And secondly: simply “conceptual literature”. With special regard to divulging each singular authorship, respectively enforcement of an unlimited and multiple one, on the border to sheer cacophony: all postings of all posters in this world – only as an example – as one single poem crying (stinking?) out to heaven!

For sure, in the late 60’s this is not what the funerary speakers of structuralism had in mind when they proclaimed the “death of the author” (Roland Barthes) or at least his/her “demise in favour of a universal intertextuality” (Julia Kristeva). Their - and with them also many other poets’ - main concern was the deconstruction of the author as “creative authority” and the overthrow of an individual command over a discourse in favour of a collective speech

(one was actually positioned in and around 1968!).

In the digital today of blog-culture and social media each reader actually has now also become a writer (so called "wreaders"), but the noble aim of the structuralists, to recognise text per se as alien, as sampled, in order to throttle the highfalutin phantasm of first-person narrator, has stupidly backfired: millions of egos cry out on the web "I! I! I!" and just mean themselves and their small narratives of which they believe to hold the only correct truth and with which they can thrash all those other first-person criers. (It is like in the good old punk times: democracy has won, everyone plays in punk-bands who not a soul wants to listen to.) All I want to say is: neither the old reader nor the new wreader gave/gives a shit about the "death of the author".

And not only them. The literary establishment, too, is relieved that the majority of contemporary writers does not rack their brains anymore about semiotic questions on "originality" and "text as multidimensional room", but finally obediently narrates, preferably in first-person. And of course autobiographical, with a few borrowed semi-I's as postmodern "liquidation". If I were a cynic, who I never ever want to be, then I would go on: Happy the writer who can still call a Nazi-great-grandfather his own! Lucky the writer with a terrible childhood in the DDR! Happy the next "discovery of the season" who has fled his/her parents' house into precarious employment: they can all tell about things which go down well with the readership and the establishment: stories about "blame and responsibility of the later-borns", about "search for inner self and meaning", about "attempts for freeing the individual" and what

else such literary family constellations may sound like in hot-air blurbs.

But I am not such a cynic: all this shall be! As long as we homunculus can be met by fate (who knows for how long!) and our hearts are overflowing or drowning because of it, we have every right and enough reason to put such impertinence into words.

What is nerve-wrecking is the reactionary reduction of literature to the narrative, the getting it off one's chest the easy or hard way and thus the proliferating creative-writing-trained sensitivity prose. The culprits for this backlash in the history of literature are easily found: the big publishing houses with their neo-liberal view on the book as a mere commodity, the mostly hyper-conservative critics of the feature pages, whose radar does not scan anything outside the field of fiction, of course also the readership's conservatism is thus being kept alive and – last but not least – the famous literature institutes such as Leipzig and Hildesheim (regarding the German-speaking countries), all those academic poetry schools, creative writing and weekend courses and workshops that are mostly held by authors whose understanding of poetry does not even touch on the avant-gardes of the 20th century, not to mention honour them with relish.

This is why apparently writers today do not have a problem saying “I”, thus to speak and write on their own behalf, talking about their own experiences and sensitivities upfront, present their own opinion about each and everything, relate their own life-story, the story of their own family, of their own father, their mother, often with a claim to produce the novel of a generation, if not even

the “novel of today”. What’s more, preferably other people’s biographies are being adopted, supported by personal experience and feeling, but then still presented with a historic backdrop and historic complexion – the big literary successes of late were won nearly without exception by an amalgamation of biographic and autobiographic writing, often in connection with historic, also contemporary, topics and materials. Therefore, fiction – not only the one in German – is being enriched by a hybrid genre which brings together fiction and documentation, narration and reportage, a description of one’s own experience and essay-writing, all of which – as one reads and wonders – has by no means led to a multiplication of personal styles, but on the contrary has generated a more or less uniform (narrative as well as lyrical) “style of the period” which, because of its chance of success, is then being taught worldwide at national and regional literature institutes.

This current “style of the period” is primarily set to be suitable for the market and the taste of the audience, but also for easy translation from one language to another or from one medium to another (literature/audio book, literature/film, etc.). Therefore, it has to be inscribed into a pre-defined range of expectation outside literature and leaves only little leeway for individual innovation. Literary originality, especially when it is practised with form, nearly and basically counts as impertinence, as too “demanding”, as “difficult” or “elitist”, whereas conscious, at best ironically exaggerated constructions of clichés and trivia continue to be attested, even if they are not named as such. It is a notable paradox that the so-called “return of the author” has not really led to stylistic differentiation, but even more

to a global unification of authorial speech. The pragmatic dissolution of this paradox does not cause any difficulties, but its actual problem is hardly being noticed. And all this in the name of the often evoked “creativity”, a term that has been owned by the “enemy” for a long time already: the creative industries, PR agencies and advertisement with their neo-liberal dictate of self-optimisation: creativity is the disgusting capitalistic imperative, today, each random corporate manager and each ambitious hairdresser is creative. No hard feelings towards hairdressers! However, they all go towards creative “Me-plc’s”, especially if they appear as contemporary writers.

Nowadays one can hardly imagine how much, and not so long ago, such individual authorship was frowned upon on the international literary front and that one could have brought it back – according to Roland Barthes – to “writing’s point of origin”.

Word artists such as Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, Jacques Roubaud, Ladislav Novak, Eugen Gomringer, Oskar Pastior or the “Wiener Gruppe” turned up and became protagonists of a poetry called “concrete”, “visual” or “auditive”, in general of a “combinatorial art of poetry”, for which the “workshop of potential literature” (Oulipo) established itself as central laboratory in Paris.

It is our duty to support and propagandise this tradition of multiple authorship and conceptual writing, which imposes on itself rules outside literature in order to limit the poetic ego – or as Oskar Pastior nicely and paradoxically phrases it: “I can express myself much better in a corset” – this strand of literature that is primarily not narrative, so that it eventually does not die off in the near future like a

dead branch of history.

For this reason the vienna poetry school recently organised a two-day festival, “the death of the author (reloaded)”, which presented different positions of poetry beyond subject-related literature. For example, at the the venue, the “Literaturhaus Wien”, the Canadian conceptualist Christian Bök presented his equally megalomaniac and pata-physical project “Xenotext Experiment”. Quite simplified, it is about injecting the DNA-sequence of a Bök-poem into an extremely resistant bacterium called “*Deinococcus radiodurans*”. For more than ten years the author has been working together with a biochemist on this bacterial poetry machine, the goal is now finally within reach: the poem will soon more and more procreate authorless and thanks to the resistance of the bacterium it will also survive a nuclear catastrophe. The death of the author in an immortal poem: what a grotesque paradox. Bök’s beginnings were thoroughly “conventional”: his famous book “Eunoia”, published in 2001, is fully bound to the French “workshop of potential literature”, to be precise to George Perecs’ “Novel without E”, “La Disparation”, where the letter E never ever appears. In Bök’s paraphrase and homage each of the five chapters consists of only words with the same vowel: in chapter 1 there is only the A, in chapter two only the E, etc. This limitation in form necessarily also defines the content and at the same time prevents any first-person-directed speech. Just like Elias Canetti brings it to the point so well in his “recordings”: “The words want to speak themselves, so that they are there.”

In line with the tradition of visual poetry as well as the one of surreal “Écriture automatique” one can locate the

project “Science of Sleep/Poetry of Sleep” by Sandra Huber and Thomas Curie, which was also presented at our festival. In this case, the experimental poet Huber from Vancouver and the renowned sleep-researcher Curie from Lausanne transcend the dream experiments of the surrealists inspired by Freud’s writings to the absurdly sober sphere of sleep laboratories and electroencephalography (EEG). Together they create some kind of REM-sleep-poetry based on Huber’s alpha waves which are made visible via EEG. One could say: the literary “stream of consciousness”-technique is being updated on a neuro-physiologically scientific basis. And the ego as the author even remains: the super-ego, the id.

I do not want to recite the entire programme of our conceptual-poetry-festival – what I am concerned with is the necessary shift of focus towards literature that is taking risks again: risks on the basis of trial and error, newly created rules, fantastic constructions, experimental diletantism and, resulting from all this, self-empowerment. So to say on methods of creativity that can neither be taught nor studied, but towards which one can be encouraged.

One does not have to agree with E.M. Ciorans devastating verdict – “For a writer the university is death” – but it also cannot be denied that numerous literature institutes have turned out as collaborators of the market and the primacy of the aesthetic has made room for that of economy. Whether those responsible like it or not, in these courses a double phasing is taking place. In terms of production aesthetics, the students are being re-programmed from inner to outer control, this means that they learn to work at the push of a button and to replace the inner impulse

by outside requirements such as supply and demand. At the same time, the need for individuality, even for non-interchangeability is being played down. Writing the same way as everyone else does and putting that down on paper, today, what has gone through a multitude of other heads in a similar and interchangeable way, does not cause discomfort or problem awareness anymore. However, this is the victory of the craft, the victory of the slick masters, the tedious realists. It had already hurt the great Flannery O'Connor decades ago: „The idea of being a writer attracts a good many shiftless people. ... It is a fact that if, either by nature or training, these people can learn to write badly enough, they can make a great deal of money, and in a way it seems a shame to deny them this opportunity; but then, unless the college is a trade school, it still has its responsibility to truth, and I believe myself that these people should be stifled with a deliberate speed“.

Of course Flannery O'Connor knew all too well that a college and a university that defends this “elitist” definition of literature and that uses terms such as “truth”, “vision” and “education towards sales-inefficiency” is taking itself off the market. One’s market value is just better as a “bestseller factory”. What if not even poets, with the courage born out of despair, don’t give a damn about big business and hold on to visions and unrealistic dreams against all odds – who else does?

There is a hilariously absurd sentence by Groucho Marx. It says: “Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.” O.K. – if it is too dark to read inside of a dog, then we should probably start to dance and sing inside a dog. Or make love. This also works

in a Dark Room.

Pataphysical conclusion: Let's turn poetry schools into Dark Rooms. Writing poetry by touching! Go to writing's point of origin in the dark. Then we'll see further. Hopefully!

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