

“The painter is always without responsibility, he must simply do what he is inspired to do.”¹

The Art of Continuation

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Where does an artwork come from “really”? Who “actually” makes it? One of the favourite answers to such questions was, and still is, that the artist is a driven genius, inspired with visual ideas from “on high”, a figure whose works are created in a state of almost divine intoxication. As early as 1969, Sigmar Polke caricatured this quite brilliantly in his painting *Higher Beings Command: Paint the Top Right Corner Black*. Yet, even after such a work was shown, the questions remain. Instead of focusing on the divine, however, the searching gaze has shifted increasingly towards inherent logic and the structure of art.

Roman Pfeffer’s artworks repeatedly revolve around the issues and myths behind the production of art, too. However, instead of the image of the driven genius, Pfeffer prefers to focus on real things that have a practical or specific significance in the context of art. These can be things from an artist’s daily work - like measuring tapes, sandpaper, spirit levels, chipboards or pedestals - or more general subjects, like language or money. In addition, Pfeffer repeatedly makes allusions to specific works by other artists related to appropriation art², such as Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* or pieces by Elaine Sturtevant, Jonathan Monk and Gavin Turk, as well as to works with art-historical relevance, such as the genre of landscape painting. Pfeffer extracts this pragmatic and theoretical source material from its original context and translates it into conceptually minimalist new forms, questioning its value and significance and conjuring up playful and poetic associations. For instance, in the work *On the Way to Global Culture* (2007), the equivalent of all the black ink used for producing the special edition of the Brockhaus encyclopedia on art and culture is condensed into a black rectangular image. The “knowledge about art” of the educated middle-class is expressed here purely in visual terms as a black surface. In *Alphabet* (2006), Pfeffer adopted a reverse approach, establishing a system whereby each letter of the alphabet could be translated into

¹ The quote is from Georg Baselitz, “Die Sammlung Essl. Eine Beschreibung von Rudi Fuchs”, *Sammlung Essl, the first view* (Cologne: Dumont, 1999), 93.

² See the text by Christian Höller in this catalogue.

a form – thus literally creating a “vocabulary of forms”. For his work *One Million Euros*, on the other hand, Pfeffer converted the corresponding number of 500 Euro notes into their component parts: paper and the proportionate amount of printer’s ink. The result is a small rectangular pile of white paper with a coat of red ink on the top. Although this object, as rigorous as a “diagram” comprises of all the formal elements mentioned in the title, it bears absolutely no relation to the significance that a pile of real 500 Euro notes would hold for society. In the context of art, it is reminiscent of the now auritized formal vocabulary of historical Minimal Art. The pile of *One Million Euros* thus becomes an enigmatic minimal object that both destroys and confirms the status quo of the economy, somehow like at a potlatch. The work therefore primarily addresses the economic status of art and its value, which – rather like shares – is influenced by many “irrational” factors, such as social networks, trends in forms, belonging to the art scene, critics, institutions, curators, collectors, galleries, fairs, and so on. Pfeffer also explores this personal network, sometimes explicitly, by including in various works protagonists from the local art system. One example is his 2006 intervention at Schloss Geymüller, where he replaced eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century landscapes and family portrayals with the descriptions he commissioned seven art historians to draft. In addition to the intended confusion about authorship, these impersonal “text images” aesthetically destabilized the baroque interior in the dining room and resulted in the collision of different worlds and art concepts. Similarly, he had art historians write about works by contemporary artists, like Robert Rauschenberg and Jonathan Monk, and converted their texts into pictorial form before continuing to rework their aesthetic effect. Experimental translations of image into text and vice versa and scrutinizing the relationship between primary source (artwork) and secondary information (communication, description) emerge in Roman Pfeffer’s work time and again. Here, he is drawing on ideas that have become important to our thinking about art since Conceptual Art, in the 1960s. Conceptual Art transformed the negotiation of the cultural meanings of image, language and representation and the act of planning itself into subjects for artistic production. Back then, people saw in the materiality of the linguistic sign an alternative to the naturalistic and mythologizing effect of images.³ Language’s ability to convey objects without depicting them was an important starting point for many artists and was related to the “linguistic turn” postulated in semiological theory by which visual experience can be gained through the model of textuality. Roman Pfeffer also works in this tradition with his translations and corrections of image and text. Sometimes, entirely unintended lines of reference emerge, for example in the video *Waiting* (2012) which shows the artist, in an elegant suit and tie, holding two glasses with outstretched arms, as he tries to catch the constant stream of water from some invisible source

³ Cf. Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken, Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol Le Witt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica* (Berlin: b_books Verlag Berlin Reihe Polypen, 2007), 81.

above. Although everything is flowing, the image of the artist appears strangely rigid in this posture of waiting for inspiration. The creative “source” pours forth in abundance from “above” and is destined to be spilled. The work is like an ironic diorama depicting the myth of the artist as a medium of higher powers, as mentioned above in the introductory paragraph. The artist is paralysed within a larger context that cascades over him. One is reminded of Bruce Nauman’s *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1966), showing the artist with his hands raised, a jet of water projecting from his mouth. Nauman, in turn, was alluding to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made *Fountain* of 1917, a manufactured urinal he used both to dismiss the cliché of artistic creativity and originality and to recharge it at another level.

In contrast to the long influential teleological interpretation of history by the American art critic Clement Greenberg, according to whom painting reveals its self-concealed essence through increasing self-reflexivity, Pfeffer tends to expose the perils of such essential formalism.⁴ In place of a so-called “essence”, one encounters in his work a multitude of commentative rearrangements and caricaturing questioning of accepted values. He counters the former fiction of linear development with a strategy of moving in “frayed” circles. This is far more in keeping with the theory of philosopher Arthur C. Danto, who believed every artwork “answers” questions raised by other works and then raises new questions itself – simply by virtue of the fact that it is already within an artistic context.⁵ It is precisely in this circle that Roman Pfeffer takes his place.

⁴ See the video *Untitled*, 2006

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).