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HANS-JÖRG HEUSSER AND KORNELIA IMESCH

Preface

Societal developments of recent decades have decisively altered the very structure of the western world. Important areas of our artistic, cultural and scientific system have also been affected to varying degrees. The institutions and protagonists of this system must reorient and realign themselves. This also applies to the academic discipline of art history, which, due in part to the complex changes which its field of research is currently undergoing, is in a state of upheaval; indeed, it is considered by many to be in a state of crisis.

For some time now, the prevailing opinion has been that our discipline – in the context of an increasingly economy-regulated and aestheticized ‘information’ society – is showing a deficit, since its problem-related and theoretical consciousness and also its subject scope render it unable to keep pace with scientific and societal developments. Various attempts, of differing degrees of intensity, have been made to confront this problem and to give art history a new direction. These efforts manifest themselves in a pluralism and a multifaceted wealth of interdisciplinary approaches by means of which older and more recent methods and positions can try to offer an answer to the art- and culture-specific issues and problems posed by both past and present. This opens up to our discipline several opportunities for development, which, exploited creatively, will enable it to redefine its relationship with art and the art world, and to establish a critical academic stance towards our constantly changing visual culture.

At an international symposium organized in collaboration with the Kunsthalle Zurich in the summer of 2002, the Swiss Institute for Art Research discussed the potential for reform in our discipline, particularly in terms of exploring these interfaces between art, the art world and art research that are currently in a state of upheaval.¹ This bilingual publication, featuring summaries in English, is based on that event.

Without claiming to be a representative or complete survey of pioneering art-historical research perspectives, methods or topics, this book contains a small selection of forward-looking essays on the current state of our discipline and its relationship to contemporary art. The contributions of the 21 – mostly younger – authors do not, however, constitute a uniform vision of the future. Yet the pluralism apparent in the

approaches, themes and issues handled and the lack of a connecting or binding central theme or vision seem to be characteristic of the current state of our subject.

The five chapters in which the articles are presented serve as thematic contexts which, we believe, make a fruitful contribution to or represent an approach towards the current discussion on the relevance of and the various possibilities for the development of the discipline in research, teaching and cultural practice. The essays in the first two chapters, which analyse the current profile of and the opportunities for the development of art history and its traditional institutions in German-speaking countries, and illustrate in a critical manner its relationship towards the ‘Bildwissenschaft’ that is now becoming established, are of a predominantly fundamental, methodological and theoretical nature. Based mainly on case studies, the articles in the three other chapters present selected new areas of research in European, (Afro-)American and African art, as well as methodical approaches to and art-historical and culture-historical exploration of works of contemporary art, electronic media (art), and image databases.

The first chapter, entitled ‘Art history: a discipline in crisis?’ and featuring articles by Stanislaus von Moos, Anne-Marie Bonnet and Christoph Zuschlag, analyses and discusses from various perspectives and areas of activity the situation of upheaval and crisis mentioned earlier, showing how this state of affairs – despite the current boom in the world of art and museums – is characteristic of the discipline and its central institutions in German-speaking countries. The authors provide a description and criticism of the state of the subject as it has traditionally been taught, and is still taught, at universities, or practised in museums and other art-historical institutions. Yet this type of art history is becoming increasingly incapable of keeping pace with artistic, societal and economic developments, and so the authors’ description and criticism are combined with proposals for revising the discipline’s position and with the presentation of new ways of rendering art more accessible. They postulate that this should be based on a critical attitude towards the traditional concepts of research, and that it should comprise a re-definition, in terms of both the contents and the methods, of the areas of research and the objects examined by art historians. This should allow art history and its practitioners to establish themselves within the art world, and in close collaboration with its other exponents, as critical authorities, who are in a position to enter into a productive new relationship with current aesthetic practice and its protagonists.

The second chapter, ‘Art history and “Bildwissenschaft”’, which features essays by Jörg Huber, Joseph Imorde and Sigrid Schade, places the forward-looking analysis of the state of the discipline in the context of the relationship between art history and the

various forms of ‘Bildwissenschaft’. In their essays, the authors discuss whether the methods of ‘Bildwissenschaft’ can really be regarded as a viable replacement for or alternative to art research. They reveal the weaknesses of current efforts to effect the development of art research into a discipline of ‘Bildwissenschaft’ or ‘Bilderwissenschaften’, and analyse the specific problems arising from the authorial and viewer-focused hermeneutic approaches. The authors favour the idea of a movement of art research towards cultural studies that should creatively explore the diverse new areas of research and the challenges posed by our visual culture by means of fundamental criticism of its categories of investigation, its definition of the concept of science and its scientific practice, and in collaboration with other disciplines.

‘New areas of research – new methods’, featuring contributions by T. J. Demos, Caroline A. Jones, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, Jonathan D. Katz, Isabelle Graw and Wolfgang Ullrich, focuses on artistic trends, research methods or theoretical categories that have so far been neglected. The essays by Demos, Jones, Ogbechie and Katz, based on case studies from the world of western and African or (Afro-)American art, explore the transnational concept of the ‘diasporic public sphere’, ‘queer’ artistic strategies, the importance of local semantics and micro-history for the perception of art within the global (art) market, as well as the marginalization of African art by the traditional discipline of art history. The essays by Graw and Ullrich, on the other hand, critically analyse traditional patterns of thought, terms or categories – such as the assumption that the artist’s intention is authoritative or the art world’s ‘obsession with intention’ – in connection with the traditional genre of artist biography or with the way in which the business world currently perceives art, a feature that is typical of the excessive demands placed on art since Modernism and Postmodernism.

The fourth chapter, ‘The digital challenge’, which includes essays by Pascal Griener, Oliver Grau, Johannes Gfeller and Irene Müller, is dedicated to both earlier and the most recent visual technologies and media art. The development of the facsimile in the 18th century, the invention of photography in about 1840 and of cinematography at the end of the 19th century or the emergence of electronic images in the second half of the 20th century brought about paradigm changes that affected our faculties for reception, our attitudes, forms of communication, formal principles and cultural transmission. The essays also examine the changes in and the characteristics of our notions about art and images connected with the new visual media art, various forms of artistic exploration of such ideas as storage or ‘memory’, or the complex challenges posed by the restoration, conservation and handing down of the new media today and in the near future.

In conclusion, the last chapter, 'Writing contemporary art history', with contributions by Michael Diers, Matthias Bruhn, Philip Ursprung, Andrzej Szczerbski and Peter J. Schneemann, once more focuses on the academic discipline itself, the new professions exercised by the various protagonists of the art world, or on the forms and methods used by those engaged in art research for the exploration of contemporary art. The essays examine the development potential open to art research as a history of contemporary art or as project-oriented writing of art history, as well as exploring the relationship between art research and art criticism. The authors present models for a historiography of contemporary art and culture that can be made accessible via 'performative writing' or a new concept of documentation, which expounds the problems posed by the dialectics of distance and proximity that are characteristic of the narratives of contemporary art history.

1 Artists, art historians, media theorists, curators, art critics and gallery-owners from Europe, Africa, Japan, Australia and the United States took part in the conference of the same name, which featured seven thematic modules and was held under the patronage of the RIHA (International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art). The organizational committee, consisting of Jacqueline Burckhardt, 'Parkett', Beatrix Ruf,

Kunsthalle Zurich, Philip Ursprung, Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, and Juerg Albrecht, Dina Epelbaum, Hans-Jörg Heusser and Kornelia Imesch, Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIAR), would like to thank the speakers, over forty in number, for their lectures and contributions to the discussion. The SIAR would also like to thank J. Burckhardt, B. Ruf and P. Ursprung for their assistance in preparing and conducting the symposium.