

Zeitschrift: Schweizer Kunst = Art suisse = Arte svizzera = Swiss art
Herausgeber: Visarte Schweiz
Band: - (2008)
Heft: 2: Kunst in der Provinz 1 = L'art en province 1 = Art in outlying areas 1

Artikel: Art in the province - or can a valais artist become a shooting star? : a few deliberations
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-625259>

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ART IN THE PROVINCE – OR CAN A VALAIS ARTIST BECOME A SHOOTING STAR?

A few deliberations

"Most artists (...) seek to gain exposure for themselves and their works as quickly as possible, if for no other reason than to prove the originality of their creations. For Marcel Duchamp, by contrast, the acts of creating and showing were mutually exclusive (...)." He was convinced "that it is actually the viewers who make the paintings by deciding the fate, significance and value of the works. To bring his part to completion without interference, the artist must keep the work away from the eyes of viewers, for encounters with viewers change it and intervene in the process of the investigation. (...) Apparently the practice of art is governed by something like the uncertainty principle postulated by Heisenberg in 1927 for the field of quantum physics, according to which the observation of an elementary particle necessarily alters its state." (translated from Dieter Daniels, "Duchamp und die anderen", 1992, p.272)

Stefan Banz Taking Marcel Duchamp's above-described artistic credo as the greatest possible goal for art, places in the provinces create the ideal conditions for developing an autonomous artistic oeuvre. Yet this requires the artist to possess tremendous independence and a strong will to have the strength to live out such a concept in its radicalism. Such a choice yields two difficulties: One is the near obligation to remain abreast of current developments in art so as to not to run the risk of reinventing the wheel. The Heisenberg theory thus unmistakably impinges on the work of an artist based in remote isolation. The second difficulty emerges in terms of the presence and exposure of an artist work produced on the periphery. An exceptional work of art can only be recognized as such when it communicates. If it is not seen, it does not exist. Like it or not, the

artist is hence forced to do his utmost to engage in this system of communication with his work at a certain point and to find persuasive personalities who will present and promote his work. And even today, it is certainly still much harder to establish the necessary contacts from the alp than when one lives in Zurich.

Yet is the shooting star trajectory really the only way for artists to be taken up into the system of art these days? Hasn't history given us repeated examples of superior works by great personalities that did not become known and influence or alter the course of history until much later or even after their death?

Is the goal of "shooting star" status even worth pursuing in the first place? Or is it perhaps merely a kind of drug that creates a short-lived artificial euphoria but in reality is associated with frustrating and performance-hindering inconveniences and annoyances? After all, looking back at all the shooting stars of the last decades, who's still standing in the spotlight or being talked about today?

Shooting stars gain attention through the considerable powers of persuasion of a handful of influential opinion makers in the art business. But only very few of these artists successfully manage to stay on the forefront and rise to become generally recognized and sustainable artistic figures. Many fail because they were unprepared to cope with the illusion or hope that had been planted. Some even stop working altogether: the sudden pressure, the indescribable compulsion to produce, the ongoing exposure paralyzes their creativity and the necessary creative urge.

And today the kingmakers themselves are often the big stars due to their knack for keeping their platform stocked with new positions. If a promoted artist is not taken up and further promoted by other influential personalities, he is soon back on his own and confronted with his own personal form of provincial existence.

Of course, these failures cannot be attached to individual persons. Switzerland is also simply too small to put itself forward in the world of art as an opinion leader. In the context of the worldwide art scene, it is hence not disparaging to say that our country belongs to the provinces in a certain sense, and this fact remains unchanged by the overwhelming density of art museums, exhibition halls and galleries. On the contrary, these polished service systems primarily aid the international art scene and the institutions themselves and less so the promotion of native talent native. The self-confidence in regard to our own artistic desire is moreover far more modest in scope and structure than in countries like Germany or the USA. We are a truly superior and highly motivated service nation. The most successful Swiss figures in the history of art have either been curators or art historians, or artists who have almost exclusively gained prominence abroad.

But do we really want shooting stars in art like in pop music? Is it our unreserved wish to grapple with personalities like Britney Spears or Ricky Martin? And if our cultural longing for uniqueness and genius make the shooting star system indispensable, then what criteria should form the basis for selecting the talents? Do we aspire to identify with artists like Fischli/Weiss – artists who are extraordinarily lovable and sensible and always do the putatively right thing? What do we do

with an artistic oeuvre that continually presents us with the congenial joker and prompts a round of grinning and backslapping? Is that not – like Toblerone or Emmentaler cheese – merely a further affirmation of the clichés of a sweet, airily light and tranquil Switzerland?

Producing shooting stars with enduring aura and impact is essentially an impossible and even absurd endeavor, often associated with great artistic and human tragedy. Non-cooperative artists and difficult characters, regardless of the quality of their work, will furthermore be left with nothing. But no matter where we put the areas of emphasis – as long as an artist successfully maintains the necessary contacts – it is fundamentally no problem to live in the Canton of Valais and become a shooting star. Valentin Carron provides us with a living example.