

In the last decades, the discourse on the impossibility of the new in art has become especially widespread and influential. Its most interesting characteristic is a certain feeling of happiness, of positive excitement about this alleged end of the new—a certain inner satisfaction that this discourse obviously produces in the contemporary cultural milieu. Indeed, the initial postmodern sorrow about the end of history is gone. Now we seem to be happy about the loss of history, the idea of progress, the utopian future—all things traditionally connected to the phenomenon of the new. Liberation from the obligation to be historically new seems to be a great victory of life over formerly predominant historical narratives which tended to subjugate, ideologize, and formalize reality. We experience art history first of all as represented in our museums. So the liberation from the new, understood as liberation from art history—and, for that matter, from history as such—is experienced by art in the first place as a chance to break out of the museum. Breaking out of the museum means becoming popular, alive, and present outside the closed circle of the established art world, outside the museum's walls. Therefore, it seems to me that the positive excitement about the end of the new in art is linked in the first place to this new promise of bringing art into life—beyond all historical constructions and considerations, beyond the opposition of old and new.

Artists and art theoreticians alike are glad to be free at last from the burden of history, from the necessity to make the next step, and from the obligation to conform to the historical laws and requirements of that which is historically new. Instead, these artists and theoreticians want to be politically and culturally engaged in social reality; they want to reflect on their own cultural identity, express their desires, and so on. But first of all they want to show themselves to be truly alive and real—in opposition to the abstract, dead historical constructions represented by the museum system and by the art market. It is, of course, a completely legitimate desire. But to be able to fulfill this desire to make a true living art we have to answer the following question: When and under

what conditions does art look like being alive—and not like being dead?

There is a deep rooted tradition in modernity of history bashing, museum bashing, library bashing, or more generally, archive bashing in the name of true life. The library and the museum are the preferred objects of intense hatred for a majority of modern writers and artists. Rousseau admired the destruction of the famous ancient Library of Alexandria; Goethe's Faust was prepared to sign a contract with a devil if he could escape the library (and the obligation to read its books). In the texts of modern artists and theoreticians, the museum is repeatedly described as a graveyard of art, and museum curators as gravediggers. According to this tradition, the death of the museum—and of the art history embodied by the museum—must be interpreted as a resurrection of true, living art, as an turning toward true reality, life, toward the great Other: If the museum dies, it is death itself that dies. We suddenly become free, as if we had escaped a kind of Egyptian bondage and were prepared to travel to the Promised Land of true life. All this is quite understandable, even if it is not so obvious *why* the Egyptian captivity of art came to its end right now.¹

However, the question I am more interested in at this moment is, as I said, a different one: Why does art want to be alive rather than dead? And what does it mean for art to look as if it were alive? I'll try to show that it is the inner logic of museum collecting itself that compels the artist to go into reality—into life—and make art that looks as if it were alive. I shall also try to show that "being alive" means, in fact, nothing more or less than being new.

It seems to me that the numerous discourses on historical memory and its representation very often overlook the complementary relationship which exists between reality and museum. The museum is not secondary to "real" history, and nor is it merely a reflection and documentation of what "really" happened outside its walls according to the autonomous laws of historical development. The contrary is true: "reality" itself is secondary in relation to the museum—the "real" can be defined only in comparison with the museum collection.

This means that change in the museum collection brings about change in our perception of reality itself—after all, reality can be defined in this context as a sum of all things not being collected yet. So history cannot be understood as a fully autonomous process which takes place outside the museum's walls. Our image of reality is dependent on our knowledge of the museum.

One case clearly shows that the relationship between reality and museum is mutual: it is the case of the art museum. Modern artists working after the emergence of the modern museum know (in spite of all their protests and resentments) that they are working primarily for the museums collections—at least if they are working in the context of so-called "high art." These artists know from the beginning that they will be collected—and they actually want to be collected. While dinosaurs didn't know that they would eventually be represented in museums of natural history, artists on the other hand know that they may eventually be represented in museums of art history. As much as the behavior of dinosaurs was—at least in a certain sense—unaffected by their future representation in the modern museum, the behavior of the modern artist *is* affected by the knowledge of such a possibility. This knowledge affects the behavior of artists in a very substantial way. Namely, it is obvious that the museum accepts only things that it takes from real life, from outside of its collections, and this explains why the artist wants to make his or her art look real and alive.²

What is already presented in the museum is automatically regarded as belonging to the past, as already dead. If, outside the museum, we encounter something which makes us think of the forms, positions and approaches already represented inside the museum, we are not ready to see this something as real or alive, but rather as a dead copy of the dead past. So if an artist says (as the majority of artists say) that he or she wants to break out of the museum, to go into life itself, to be real, to make a truly living art, this means only that the artist wants to be collected. This is because the only possibility of being collected is by transcending the museum and entering life in

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the sense of making something different from that which has already been collected. Again: only the new can be recognized by the museum-trained gaze as real, present, and alive. If you repeat already collected art, your art is qualified by the museum as mere *kitsch* and rejected. Those virtual dinosaurs which are merely dead copies of already-museographed dinosaurs could be shown, as we know, in the context of *Jurassic Park*—in the context of amusement, entertainment—not in the museum. The museum is, in this respect, like a church: you must first be sinful to become a saint—otherwise you remain a plain, decent person with no chance of a career in the archives of Gods memory. This is why, paradoxically, the more you want to free yourself from the museum, the more you become subjected in the most radical way to the logic of museum collecting, and vice versa.

Of course, this interpretation of the new, real and living contradicts a certain deep-rooted conviction found in many texts of the earlier avant-garde—namely, that the way into life can be opened only by the destruction of the museum and by a radical, ecstatic deletion of the past, which stands between us and our present. This vision of the new is powerfully expressed, for example, in a short but important text by Kasimir Malevich: "On the Museum," from 1919. At that time the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and the general collapse of state institutions and the economy, and the Communist Party responded by trying to secure and save these collections. In his text, Malevich protested against this pro-museum policy of Soviet power by calling on the state to not intervene on behalf of the old art collections because their destruction could open the path to true, living art. In particular, he wrote:

Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on a single

chemist's shelf. We can make a concession to conservatives by offering that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up one pharmacy.

Later, Malevich gives a concrete example of what he means:

The aim (of this pharmacy) will be the same, even if people will examine the powder from Rubens and all his art—a mass of ideas will arise in people, and will be often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).³

The example of Rubens is not accidental for Malevich; in many of his earlier manifestoes, he states that it became impossible in our time to paint "the fat ass of Venus" any more. Malevich also wrote in an earlier text about his famous *Black Square*—which became one of the most recognized symbols of the new in the art of that time—that there is no chance that "the sweet smile of Psyche emerges on my black square" and that it—the black square—"can never be used as a bed (mattress) for love-making."⁴ Malevich hated the monotonous rituals of love-making at least as much as the monotonous museum collections. But most important is the conviction—underlying this statement of his—that a new, original, innovative art would be unacceptable for museum collections governed by the conventions of the past. In fact, the situation opposite in Malevich's time and, actually, had been opposite since the emergence of the museum as a modern institution at the end of the 18th century. Museum collecting is governed, in modernity, not by some well established, definite, normative taste having its origin in the past. Rather, it is the idea of historical representation that compels the museum system to collect, in the first place, all those objects which are characteristic of certain historical epochs—including the contemporary epoch. This notion of historical representation has never been called into question—not even by quite recent post-modern writing which, in its turn, pretends to be historically new, truly contemporary and up-to-date. They go no further than asking, Who and

what is *new enough* to represent our own time?

Precisely if the past is not collected, if the art of the past is not secured by the museum, does it make sense—and even become a kind a moral obligation—to remain faithful to the old, to follow traditions and resist the destructive work of time. Cultures without museums are the "cold cultures," as Levi-Strauss defined them, and these cultures try to keep their cultural identity intact by constantly reproducing the past. They do this because they feel the threat of oblivion, of a complete loss of historical memory. Yet if the past is collected and preserved in museums, the replication of old styles, forms, conventions and traditions becomes unnecessary. Even more, the repetition of the old and traditional becomes a socially forbidden, or at least unrewarding, practice. The most general formula of modern art is not "Now I am free to do something new." Rather, it is impossible to do the old any more. As Malevich says, it became impossible to paint the fat ass of Venus any more. But it became impossible, only because there is the museum. If Rubens' works were really burned, as Malevich suggested, it would in fact open the way for painting the fat ass of Venus again. The avant-garde strategy begins not with an opening to a greater freedom, but with the emerging of a new taboo—the "museum taboo," which forbids the repetition of the old because the old doesn't disappear any more but remains on display.

The museum doesn't dictate how this new has to look, it only shows what it must not look like, functioning like a demon of Socrates who told Socrates what he must *not* do, but never what he must do. We can name this demonic voice, or presence, "the inner curator." Every modern artist has an inner curator who tells the artist what it is no longer possible to do, i.e. what is not going to be collected any more. The museum gives us a rather clear definition of what it means for art to look real, alive, present—namely, it means that is cannot to look like already museographed, already collected art. Presence is not defined here solely by opposition to absence. To be present, art has also to *look* present. And this means it cannot to look like the old, dead art of the past as it is

presented in the museum.

We can even say that, under the condition of the modern museum, the newness of newly produced art is not established post factum—as a result of the comparison with old art. Rather, the comparison takes place before the emergence of a new artwork—and virtually produces this new artwork. The modern artwork is collected before it is produced. The art of the avant-garde is the art of an elitist-thinking minority not because it expresses some specific bourgeois taste (as, for example, Bourdieu asserts), because, in a way, avant-garde art expresses no taste at all—no public taste, no personal taste, not even the taste of the artists themselves. Avant-garde art is elitist simply because it originates under a constraint to which the general public is not subjected. For the general public, all things—or at least most things—could be new because they are unknown, even if they are already collected in museums. This observation opens the way to making the central distinction necessary to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon of the new—that between *new* and *other*, or between the new and the different.

Being new is, in fact, often understood as a combination between being different and being recently-produced. We call a car a *new* car if this car is different from other cars, and at the same time the latest, most recent model produced by the car industry. But as Søren Kierkegaard pointed out—especially in his *Philosophische Brocken*—to be new is by no means the same as being different.⁵ Kierkegaard even rigorously opposes the notion of the new to the notion of difference, his main point being that a certain difference is recognized as such only because we already have the capability to recognize and identify this difference as difference. So no difference can ever be new—because if it were really new it could not be recognized as difference. To recognize means, always, to remember. But a recognized, remembered difference is obviously not a new difference. Therefore there is, according to Kierkegaard, no such thing as a new car. Even if a car is quite recent, the difference between this car and earlier produced cars is not new because

this difference can be recognized by a spectator. This makes understandable why the notion of the new was somehow suppressed by art theoretical discourse in later decades, even if the notion kept its relevance for the artistic practice. Such suppression is an effect of the preoccupation with Difference and Otherness in the context of Structuralist and Poststructuralist modes of thinking which have dominated recent cultural theory. But for Kierkegaard the new is a difference without difference, or a difference beyond difference—a difference which we are unable to recognize because it is not related to any pre-given structural code.

As an example of such difference, Kierkegaard uses the figure of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Kierkegaard states that the figure of Christ initially looked like that of every other ordinary human being at that historical time. In other words, an objective spectator at that time, confronted with the figure of Christ, could not find any visible, concrete difference between Christ and an ordinary human being - a visible difference that could suggest that Christ is not simply a man, but also a God. So for Kierkegaard, Christianity is based on the impossibility of recognizing Christ as God—the impossibility of recognizing Christ as different. Further, this implies that Christ is *really* new and not merely different—and that Christianity is a manifestation of difference without difference, or, of difference *beyond* difference. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, the only medium for a possible emergence of the new is the ordinary, "non-different," identical—not the Other, but the Same. Yet the question arises, then, of how to deal with this difference beyond difference. How can the new manifest itself?

Now, if we look more closely at the figure of Jesus Christ as described by Kierkegaard, it is striking that it appears to be quite similar to what we now call "readymade." For Kierkegaard, the difference between God and man is not one that can be established objectively or described in visual terms. We put the figure of Christ into the context of the divine without recognizing it as divine—and that is new. But the same can be said of the readymades of Duchamp. Here we are also

dealing with difference beyond difference—now understood as difference between the artwork and the ordinary, profane thing. Accordingly, we can say that Duchamp's *Fountain* is a kind of Christ among things, and the art of readymade a kind of Christianity in art. Christianity takes the figure of a human being and puts it, unchanged, in the context of religion, the Pantheon of the traditional Gods. The museum—an art space or the whole art system—also functions as a place where difference beyond difference, between artwork and mere thing, can be produced or staged.

As I have mentioned, a new artwork should not repeat the forms of old, traditional, already museographed art. But today, to be really new a new artwork should not repeat the old differences between art objects and ordinary things. By means of repeating these differences, it is possible only to create a different artwork, not a new artwork. The new artwork looks really new and alive only if it resembles, in a certain sense, every other ordinary, profane thing, or every other ordinary product of popular culture. Only in this case can the new artwork function as a signifier for the world outside the museum walls. The new can be experienced as such only if it produces an effect of out-of-bounds infinity—if it opens an infinite view on reality outside of the museum. And this effect of infinity can be produced, or, better, staged, only inside the museum: in the context of reality itself we can experience the real only as finite because we ourselves are finite. The small, controllable space of the museum allows the spectator to imagine the world outside the museum's walls as splendid, infinite, ecstatic. This is, in fact, the primary function of the museum: to let us imagine the outside of the museum as infinite. New artworks function in the museum as symbolic windows opening up a view on the infinite outside. But, of course, new artworks can fulfill this function only for a relatively short period of time before becoming no longer new but merely different, their distance to ordinary things having become, with time, all too obvious. The need then emerges to replace the old new with the new new, in order to restore the romantic feeling of the infinite real.

The museum is, in this respect, not so much the space for the representation of art history as a machine to produce and stage the new art of today—in other words, to produce “today” as such. In this sense, the museum produces, for the first time, the effect of presence, of looking alive. Life looks really alive only if we see it from the perspective of the museum, because, as I said, only in the museum are we able to produce new differences—differences beyond differences—differences which are emerging here and now. This possibility of producing new differences doesn’t exist in reality itself, because in reality we meet only old differences—differences that we recognize. To produce new differences we need the space of culturally recognized and codified “non-reality.” The difference between life and death is, in fact, of the same order as that between God and the ordinary human being, or between artwork and mere thing—it is a difference beyond difference, which can only be experienced, as I have said, in the museum or archive as a socially recognized space of “non-real.” Again, life today looks alive only when seen from the perspective of the archive, museum, library. In reality itself we are confronted only with dead differences—like the difference between a new and an old car. Not too long ago it was widely expected that the readymade technique, together with the rise of photography and video art, would lead to the erosion and ultimate demise of the museum as it has established itself in modernity. It looked as though the closed space of the museum collection faced the imminent threat of inundation by the serial production of readymades, photographs and media images that would lead to its eventual dissolution. To be sure, this prognosis owed its plausibility to a certain specific notion of the museum—namely, that museum collections enjoy their exceptional, socially privileged status because they are assumed to contain very special things, i.e. works of art, which are different from the normal, profane things of life. If museums were created to take in and harbor such special and wonderful things, then it indeed seems plausible that museums would face certain demise if their claim ever proved to be deceptive. And it is

the very practices of readymades, photography, and video art that are said to provide clear proof that traditional claims of museography and art history are illusory by making evident that the production of images is no mysterious process requiring an artist of genius.

This is what Douglas Crimp claimed in his well-known essay, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” with reference to Walter Benjamin: “Through reproductive technology, postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.”⁶ The new techniques of artistic production dissolve the museum’s conceptual frameworks—constructed as they are on the fiction of subjective, individual creativity—bringing them into disarray through their re-productive practice and ultimately leading to the museum’s ruin. And rightly so, it might be added, for the museum’s conceptual frameworks are illusory: they suggest a representation of the historical, understood as a temporal epiphany of creative subjectivity, in a place where in fact there is nothing more than an incoherent jumble of artifacts, as Crimp asserts with reference to Foucault. Thus Crimp, like many other authors of his generation, regards any critique of the emphatic conception of art as a critique of art as institution, including the institution of the museum which is purported to legitimize itself primarily on the basis of this exaggerated and, at the same time, outmoded conception of art.

That the rhetoric of uniqueness—and difference—that legitimizes art by praising well-known masterpieces has long determined traditional art historical discourse is indisputable. It is nevertheless questionable whether this discourse in fact provides a decisive legitimization for the musealization of art, so that its critical analysis can at the same time function as a critique of the museum as institution. And, if the individual artwork can set itself apart from all other things, by virtue of its artistic quality or, to put it in another

way, as the manifestation of the creative genius of its author, would the museum then be rendered completely superfluous? We can recognize and duly appreciate a masterful painting, if indeed such a thing exists, even—and most effectively so—in a thoroughly profane space.

However, the accelerated development we have witnessed in recent decades of the institution of the museum, above all of the museum of contemporary art has paralleled the accelerated erasure of the visible differences between artwork and profane object—an erasure systematically perpetrated by the avant-gardes of this century, most particularly since the 1960s. The less an artwork differs visually from a profane object, the more necessary it becomes to draw a clear distinction between the art context and the profane, everyday, non-museum context of its occurrence. It is when an artwork looks like a ‘normal thing’ that it will require the contextualization and protection of the museum. To be sure, the museum’s safekeeping function is an important one also for traditional art that would stand apart in an everyday environment, since it protects such art from physical destruction over time. As for the reception of this art, however, the museum is superfluous, if not detrimental: the contrast between the individual work and its everyday, profane environment—the contrast through which the work comes into its own—is for the most part lost in the museum. Conversely, the artwork that does not stand out with sufficient visual distinctness from its environment is only truly perceivable in the museum. The strategies of the artistic avant-garde, understood as the elimination of visual difference between artwork and profane thing lead directly, therefore, to the *building-up* of museums, which secure this difference institutionally.

Far from subverting and delegitimizing the museum as institution, critique of the emphatic conception of art thus provides the actual theoretical foundation for the institutionalization and musealization of contemporary art. In the museum, ordinary objects are promised the difference they do not enjoy in reality—the difference beyond difference. This promise is all

the more valid and credible the less these objects "deserve" this promise, i.e. the less spectacular and extraordinary they are. The modern museum proclaims its new Gospel not for exclusive, auratic work of genius, but rather for the insignificant, trivial, and everyday, which would otherwise go under in the reality outside the museum's walls. If the museum were ever to actually disintegrate, then the very opportunity for art to show the normal, the everyday, the trivial as new and truly alive would be lost. In order to assert itself successfully "in life," art must become different—unusual, surprising, exclusive—and history demonstrates that art can do this only by tapping into classical, mythological, and religious traditions and breaking its connection with the banality of everyday experience. The successful (and deservedly so) mass cultural image production of our day concerns itself with alien attacks, myths of apocalypse and redemption, heroes endowed with superhuman powers, and so forth. All of this is certainly fascinating and instructive. Once in a while, though, one would like to be able to contemplate and enjoy something normal, something ordinary, something banal as well. In our culture, this wish can be gratified only in the museum. In life, on the other hand, only the extraordinary is presented to us as a possible object of our admiration.

But this means also that the new is still possible, because the museum is *still there* even after the alleged end of art history, of the subject, and so on. The relationship of the museum to its outside space is not primarily temporal, but spatial. And, indeed, innovation does not occur in time, but rather in space: on the boundaries between the museum collection and the outside world. We are able to cross these boundaries at any time, at very different points and in very different directions. And that means, further, that we can—and actually have to—dissociate the concept of the new from the concept of history, and the term innovation from its association with the linearity of historical time. The postmodern criticism of the notion of progress or of the utopias of modernity becomes irrelevant when artistic innovation is no longer thought of in terms of temporal linearity, but as the

spatial relationship between the museum space and its outside. The new emerges not in historical life itself from some hidden source, and nor does it emerge as a promise of a hidden historical telos. The production of the new is merely a shifting of the boundaries between collected items and the profane objects outside the collection, which is primarily a physical, material operation: some objects are brought into the museum system, while others are thrown out of the museum system and land, let us say, into a garbage can.⁷ Such shifting produces again and again the effect of newness, openness, infinity, using signifiers that look different in respect to the musealized past and identical with mere things, popular cultural images circulating in the outside space. In this sense we can keep the concept of the new well beyond the alleged end of the art historical narrative through the production, as I have already mentioned, of new differences beyond all historically recognizable differences.

The materiality of the museum is a guarantee that the production of the new in art can transcend all ends of history, precisely because it demonstrates that the modern ideal of universal and transparent museum space (representing universal art history) is unrealizable and purely ideological. The art of modernity has developed under the regulative idea of the universal museum representing the whole history of art and creating a universal, homogeneous space allowing the comparison of all possible art works and the determination of their visual differences. This universalist vision was very well described by André Malraux in his famous text on the "Musée imaginaire." Such a vision of a universal museum is Hegelian in its theoretical origin, as it embodies a notion of historical self-consciousness that is able to recognize all historically determined differences. And the logic of the relationship between art and the universal museum follows the logic of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit: the subject of knowledge and memory is motivated throughout the whole history of its dialectical development by the desire for the other, for the different, for the new—but at the end of this history it must discover and accept that otherness as such is produced by the

movement of desire itself. And at this endpoint of history, the subject recognizes in the Other its own image. So we can say that at the moment when the universal museum is understood as the actual origin of the Other, because the Other of the museum is by definition the object of desire for the museum collector or curator, the museum becomes, let us say, the Absolute Museum, and reaches the end of its possible history. Moreover, one can interpret the readymade procedure of Duchamp in Hegelian terms as an act of the self-reflection of the universal museum which puts an end to its further historical development.

So it is by no means accidental that the recent discourses proclaiming the end of art point to the advent of the readymade as the endpoint of art history. Arthur Danto's favorite example are Warhol's Brillo Boxes, when making his point that art reached the end of its history some time ago.⁸ And Thierry De Duve talks about "Kant after Duchamp," meaning the return of personal taste after the end of art history brought about by the readymade.⁹ In fact, for Hegel himself, the end of art, as he argues in his lectures on aesthetics, takes place at a much earlier time—it coincides with the emergence of the new modern state which gives its own form, its own law, to the life of its citizens so that art loses its genuine form-giving function.¹⁰ The Hegelian modern state codifies all visible and experiential differences—recognizes them, accepts them, and gives them their appropriate place inside a general system of law. After such an act of political and judicial recognition of the Other by modern law, art seems to lose its historical function to manifest the otherness of the Other, to give it a form, and to inscribe it in the system of historical representation. At the moment at which law triumphs art becomes impossible: the law already represents all the existing differences, making such a representation by means of art superfluous. Of course, it can be argued that some differences always still remain unrepresented or, at least, underrepresented, by the law, so that art is keeping at least some of its function of representing the uncoded Other. But in this case, art fulfills only a secondary role of serving

the law: the genuine role of art which consists, for Hegel, in being the *modus* by which differences originally manifest themselves and create forms is, in any case, *passé* under the effect of modern law. But, as I said, Kierkegaard could show us, by implication, how an institution which has the mission to re-present differences can also create differences—beyond all pre-existing differences. Now it becomes possible to formulate more precisely what kind of difference is this new difference—difference beyond difference—of which I was speaking earlier. It is a difference not in form, but in time—namely, it is a difference in the life expectancy of individual things, as well as in their historical assignment. To remind us of the "new difference" as it was described by Kierkegaard: for him the difference between Christ and an ordinary human being of his time was not a difference in form which could be re-presented by art and law but a non-perceptible difference between the short time of ordinary human life and the eternity of divine existence. If I move a certain ordinary thing as a readymade from the space outside of the museum into its inner space, I don't change the form of this thing but I do change its life expectancy and assign a certain historical date to this object. The artwork lives longer and keeps its original form longer in the museum than an ordinary object does in "reality." That is why an ordinary thing looks more "alive" and more "real" in the museum than in reality itself. If I see a certain ordinary thing in reality I immediately anticipate its death—as when it is broken and thrown away in the garbage. A short life expectancy is, actually, the definition of ordinary life. So if I change the life expectancy of an ordinary thing, I change everything without, in a way, changing anything. This non-perceptible difference in the life expectancy of a museum item and that of a "real thing" turns our imagination from the external images of things to the mechanisms of maintenance, restoration and, generally, material support—the inner core of museum items. This issue of relative life expectancy also draws our attention to the social and political conditions under which these items get into the museum and are guaranteed longevity. At the same time,

however, the museum's system of rules of conduct and taboos makes its support and protection of the object invisible and unexperienceable. This invisibility is irreducible. As is well known, modern art had tried in all possible ways to make the inner, material side of the work transparent. But it is still only the surface of the art work, that we can see as museum spectators: behind this surface something remains forever concealed under the conditions of a museum visit. As a spectator in the museum, one always has to submit to restrictions which fundamentally function to keep the material substance of the artworks inaccessible and intact so that they may be exhibited "forever." We have here an interesting case of "the outside in the inside." The material support of the artwork is "in the museum" but at the same time it is not visualized—and not visualizable. The material support, or the medium bearer, as well as the whole system of museum conservation, must remain obscure, invisible, hidden from the museum spectator. In a certain sense, inside the museum's walls we are confronted with an even more radically inaccessible infinity than in the infinite world outside the museum's walls. But if the material support of the musealized artwork cannot be made transparent it is nevertheless possible to explicitly thematize it as obscure, hidden, invisible. As an example of how such a strategy functions in the context of contemporary art, we may think of the work of two Swiss artists, Peter Fischli and David Weiss. For my present purpose a very short description is sufficient: Fischli and Weiss exhibit objects which look very much like readymades—everyday objects as you see them everywhere.¹¹ In fact, these objects are not "real" readymades, but simulations: they are carved from polyurethane—a very light-weight plastic material—but they are carved with such precision (a real Swiss precision) that if you see them in a museum, in the context of an exhibition, you would have great difficulty distinguishing between the objects made by Fischli and Weiss and real readymades. If you saw these objects, let us say, in the atelier of Fischli and Weiss, you could take them in your hand and weigh them—an experience that would be

impossible in a museum since it is forbidden to touch exhibited objects. To do so would be to immediately alert the alarm system, the personnel, and then the police. In this sense we can say that it is the police that, in the last instance, guarantee the opposition between art and non-art—the police who are not yet aware of the end of art history!

Fischli and Weiss demonstrate that readymades, while manifesting their form inside the museum space, are at the same time obscuring or concealing their own materiality. Nevertheless, this obscurity—the non-visibility of the material support as such—is exhibited in the museum through the work of Fischli and Weiss, by way of their work's explicit evocation of the invisible difference between "real" and "simulated." The museum spectator is informed by the inscription accompanying the work that the objects exhibited by Fischli and Weiss are not "real" but "simulated" readymades. But at the same time the museum spectator cannot test this information because it relates to the hidden inner core, i.e. the material support of the exhibited items—and not to their visible form. This means that the newly introduced difference between "real" and "simulated" does not represent any already established visual differences between the things on the level of their form. The material support cannot be revealed in the individual artwork—even if many artists and theoreticians of the historical avant-garde wanted it to be revealed. Rather, this difference can be explicitly thematized in the museum as obscure and unrepresentable. By simulating the readymade technique, Fischli and Weiss direct our attention to the material support without revealing it, without making it visible, without re-presenting it. The difference between "real" and "simulated" cannot be "recognized," only produced, because every object in the world can be seen at the same time as "real" and as "simulated." We produce the difference between real and simulated by putting a certain thing, or certain image, under the suspicion of being not "real" but only "simulated." And to put a certain ordinary thing into the museum context means precisely to put the medium bearer, the material support, the material conditions of existence of this thing, under permanent suspicion.

The work of Fischli and Weiss demonstrates that there is an obscure infinity in the museum itself—it is the infinite doubt, the infinite suspicion of all exhibited things being simulated, being fakes, having a different material core than that suggested by their external form. And that also means that it is not possible to transfer “the whole visible reality” into the museum—even by imagination. Neither is it possible to fulfill the old Nietzschean dream of aestheticizing the world in its totality, in order to achieve identity between reality and museum. The museum produces its own obscurities, invisibilities, differences; it produces its own concealed outside on the inside. And the museum can only create the atmosphere of suspicion, uncertainty, and angst in respect to the hidden support of the artworks displayed in the museum which, while guaranteeing their longevity, at the same time endangers their authenticity.

The artificial longevity guaranteed to things put inside a museum is *always* a simulation: this longevity can only be achieved through technically manipulating of the hidden material core of the exhibited thing to secure its durability: every conservation is a technical manipulation which means also simulation. Yet, such artificial longevity of an artwork can only be relative. The time comes when every artwork dies, is broken up, dissolved, deconstructed—not theoretically, but on the material level. The Hegelian vision of the universal museum is one in which corporeal eternity is substituted for the eternity of the soul in the memory of God. But such a corporeal eternity is, of course, an illusion. The museum itself is a temporal thing—even if the artworks, which are collected in the museum, are removed from the dangers of everyday existence and general exchange with the goal of their preservation. This preservation cannot succeed, or it can succeed only temporarily. Art objects are destroyed regularly by wars, catastrophes, accidents, time. This material fate, this irreducible temporality of art objects as material things, puts a limit to every possible art history—but a limit which functions at the same time as the opposite to the end of history. On a purely material level, the art context changes permanently in a way that we can not

totally control, reflect or predict, so that this material change always comes to us as a surprise. Historical self-reflection is dependent on the hidden, unreflectable materiality of the museum objects. And precisely because the material fate of art is irreducible and unreflectable, the history of art should be revisited, reconsidered and rewritten always anew.

Even if the material existence of an individual artwork is for a certain time guaranteed, the status of this artwork as artwork depends always on the context of its presentation as part of a museum collection. But it is extremely difficult—actually impossible—to stabilize this context over a long period of time. This is, perhaps, the true paradox of the museum: the museum collection serves the preservation of artifacts, but this collection itself is always extremely unstable, constantly changing and in flux. Collecting is an event in time *par excellence*—even if it is an attempt to escape time. The museum exhibition flows permanently: it is not only growing or progressing, but it is changing itself in many different ways. Consequently, the framework for distinguishing between the old and the new, and for ascribing to things the status of an artwork, is changing all the time too. Such artists as Mike Bidlo or Shirley Levine demonstrate, for example—through the technique of appropriation—the possibility of shifting the historical assignment of the given art forms by changing their material support. The copying or repetition of the well known art works brings the whole order of historical memory into disarray. It is impossible for an average spectator to distinguish between, say, the “original” Picasso work and the Picasso work appropriated by Mike Bidlo. So here, as in the case of Duchamp’s readymade, or of the simulated readymades of Fischli and Weiss, we are confronted with a non-visual difference and, in this sense, newly produced difference—the difference between a work of Picasso and a copy of this work produced by Bidlo. This difference can be again staged only within the museum—within a certain order of historical representation. In this way, by putting already existing artworks into new contexts, changes in the display of an artwork can effect a difference in its reception,

without there having been a change in the artwork’s visual form. In recent times, the status of the museum as the site of a permanent collection is gradually changing to the museum as a theater for large-scale traveling exhibitions organized by international curators, and large-scale installations created by individual artists. Every large exhibition or installation of this kind is made with the intention of designing a new order of historical memories, of proposing a new criteria for collecting by re-constructing history. These traveling exhibitions and installations are temporal museums which openly display their temporality. The difference between traditional modernist and contemporary art strategies is, therefore, relatively easy to describe. In the modernist tradition, the art context was regarded as stable—it was the idealized context of the universal museum. Innovation consisted in putting a new form, a new thing, in this stable context. In our time, the context is seen as changing and unstable. So the strategy of contemporary art consists in creating a specific context which can make a certain form or thing look other, new and interesting—even if this form was already collected before. Traditional art was working on the level of form. Contemporary art is working on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation. But the goal is the same: to create a contrast between form and historical background, to make the form look other and new. Fischli and Weiss may now exhibit readymades looking completely familiar to the contemporary viewer. Their difference to standard readymades, as I said, cannot be seen, because the inner materiality of the works cannot be seen. It can only be told: we have to listen to a story, to a history of making these pseudo-readymades to grasp the difference, or, better, to imagine the difference. In fact, it is not even necessary for these works of Fischli and Weiss to be really “made”; it is enough to tell the story that enables us to look at the “models” for these works in a different way. Ever-changing museum presentations compel us to imagine the Heraclitean flux that deconstructs all identities, and undermines all historical orders and taxonomies, ultimately destroying all the archives from within.

But such a Heraclitean vision is only possible inside the museum, inside the archives, because only there are the archival orders, identities and taxonomies established to a degree that allows us to imagine their possible destruction as something sublime. Such a sublime vision is impossible in the context of "reality" itself, which offers us perceptual differences but not differences in respect to the historical order. Also through change in its exhibitions, the museum can present its hidden, obscure materiality—without revealing it.

It is not accidental that we can now watch the growing success of such narrative art forms as video and cinema installations in the museum context. Video installations bring the great night into the museum—it is maybe their most important function. The museum space loses its own "institutional" light, which traditionally functioned as a symbolic property of the viewer, the collector, the curator. The museum becomes obscure, dark and dependent on the light emanating from the video image, e.g., from the hidden core of the artwork, from the electrical and computer technology hidden behind its form. It is not the art object that is illuminated in the museum by this "night of external reality," which should itself be enlightened, examined and judged by the museum, as in earlier times, but this technologically-produced image brings its own light into the darkness of the museum space—and only for a certain period of time. It is also interesting to note that if the spectator tries to intrude on the inner, material core of the video installation while the installation is "working," he

will be electrocuted, which is even more effective than an intervention by the police. Similarly, an unwanted intruder into the forbidden, inner space of a Greek temple was supposed to be struck by the lightning bolt of Zeus.

And more than that: not only control over the light, but also control over the time of contemplation is passed from the visitor to the art work. In the classical museum, the visitor exercises almost complete control over the time of contemplation. He or she can interrupt contemplation at any time, return, and go away again. The picture stays where it is, makes no attempt to flee the viewer's gaze. With moving pictures this is no longer the case—they escape the viewer's control. When we turn away from a video, we can miss something. Now the museum—earlier, the place of complete visibility—becomes a place where we cannot compensate a missed opportunity to contemplate—where we cannot return to the same place to see the same thing we saw before. And even more so than in so-called "real life," because under the standard conditions of an exhibition visit, a spectator is in most cases physically unable to see all the videos on display, their cumulative length exceeding the time of a museum visit. In this way, video and cinema installation in the museum demonstrate the finiteness of time and the distance to the light source that remains concealed under the normal conditions of video and film circulation in our actual popular culture. Or better: the film becomes uncertain, invisible, obscure to the spectator due to its placement in the museum—the time of film being, as a rule, longer than the average time of a museum visit.

Here again a new difference in film reception emerges as a result of substituting the museum for an ordinary film theater.

To summarize the point that I have tried to make: the modern museum is capable of introducing a new difference between things. This difference is new because it does not re-present any already existing visual differences. The choice of the objects for musealisation is only interesting and relevant for us if it does not merely recognize and re-state existing differences, but presents itself as unfounded, unexplainable, illegitimate. Such a choice opens for a spectator a view on the infinity of the world. And more than that: by introducing such a new difference, the museum shifts the attention of the spectator from the visual form of things to their hidden material support and to their life expectancy. The New functions here not as a re-presentation of the Other and also not as a next step in a progressive clarification of the obscure, but rather as a new reminder that obscure remains obscure, that the difference between real and simulated remains ambiguous, that the longevity of things is always endangered, that infinite doubt about the inner nature of things is insurmountable. Or, to say it another way, the museum gives us the possibility of introducing the sublime into the banal. In the Bible, we can find the famous statement that there is nothing new under the sun. That is, of course, true. But there is no sun inside the museum. That is probably the reason why the museum was always—and still remains—the only place for possible innovation.

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- (1) I have in mind the books of the German scholar Jan Assmann on the Egyptian civilization and historical memory. Jan Assmann "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen", C.H. Beck Verlag, München 1992, p. 167ff.
- (2) The "old things" collected by the museum always correspond to "new trends" in art historical writing and curatorial practice: art history is, as we know, being reconsidered time and again. This means that all the things accepted by the museum must be new in a certain sense—recently produced or recently discovered, or newly appreciated or recognized as valuable. Private collections do not fulfill this role because they are governed by individual taste and not by the general idea of historical representation. This is why private collectors of today seek the confirmation and nobilitation by the art museum system: to have confirmed the historical and, therefore, monetary value of their collections.
- (3) Kazimir Malevich, "On the Museum" in K. Malevich *Essays on Art*, New York, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 68-72.
- (4) K. Malevich, "A Letter from Malevich to Benois," in *Essays on Art* New York, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 48.
- (5) Sören Kierkegaard, *Philosophische Brocken*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, Düsseldorf/Köln, 1960, p.34 ff.
- (6) Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, The MIT Press, 1993, p. 58.
- (7) Actually, it happens. De facto, the museum system as a whole—if not an individual museum—sorts things out all the time, allowing some to be preserved, exhibited, commented on and others to disappear in storage on the way to the garbage can.
- (8) Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton Univ Press, 1997, p. 13 ff
- (9) Thierry de Duve "Kant after Duchamp", MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma., 1998, p. 132 ff.
- (10) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vol.1, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 1970, p.25: "In allen diesen Beziehungen ist und bleibt die Kunst nach der Seite ihrer höchsten Bestimmung für uns ein Vergangenes".
- (11) See Boris Groys, "Simulated Readymades by Fischli/Weiss," in *Parkett*, no. 40/41, Zürich, 1994, pp. 25-39.