

Documenta XII – God has Committed Suicide **Documenta XII – Gott hat sich selbst umgebracht**

Art is not a *tabula rasa*; instead, art is created in an art context. A second look shows that art is not even democratic, i.e. it is not generally accessible because art requires that its viewers engage themselves intensively with the work in order to achieve understanding.

Franz Wassermann uses this concept to work multifacetedly: he quotes, carries forward and changes that which has been generated by art history as well as uses notable brand names like the titles of renowned exhibitions, art institutions and major works of art. These function like signals and initially irritate the viewer due to their confusability. Yet a very private life becomes visible underneath the surface, which at first is cleverly hidden in the above-mentioned way, but then reveals itself to the scrutinizing observer. Franz Wassermann tries to come to terms with his own history, transgresses it by turning history into his theme and finds vivid pictures for universal themes that touch the viewer.

When Franz Wassermann uses the title **documenta XII**, he uses the brand name for his own artwork; however, he makes the difference visible in a subtle way. He transfers the logo by means of tapestrips, which he uses to pull the logo off the underlying surface, and then incorporates this copy in his work. Almost the original, almost identical, but still recognizable as a transfer, the “action carriers” appear as titles and elements integrated in the artist’s work. It is possible to make numerous references with this method: questioning the original term, the genetic role of the data carrier in the father/son relationship, the deviation in and impossibility of making an exact duplicate, the banality and inflation of protected names, as well as the play on the phenomenon of saving data on a plastic medium—the so-called data hologram of a Tesa[®] tapestrip roll, invented in 1998. Franz Wassermann sees the removal of brand names with a data carrier as an action and has therefore dubbed these actions **Tatenträger** (Action Carriers).

The platform **documenta XII** is used by Franz Wassermann for his works; he claims they have a right to exist within the realm of established art after he had for many years shunned the increasingly aesthetic world of art through political as well as illegal campaigns and interventions. In his campaign for the Arge-Schubhaft (a consortium for protecting the rights of detained asylum seekers who are awaiting deportation), for example, he occupied the premises of the Gallery in the Taxispalais in Innsbruck against the will of those in charge. The conflict lay in the fact that this solid art institution does actually show political art on its premises, yet draws a line when it comes to, and thus refrains from, making political comments. In this case the distinction between aesthetics and ethics becomes particularly obvious: when art, in a harmless and tamed form, finds its place in exhibitions, while art as an active and effective means of communicating political messages is banned from them.

This phenomenon is like a thread that stretches through the works of the artist, describing itself as a virus, i.e. as virulent. This metaphor represents a threat and the subversive production of the self. It is not only seen in political circles as such but has been discussed intensively in recent media debates.¹ When Franz Wassermann raises so-called taboo themes in art institutions, they are rejected. This is true especially when they touch the viewer too directly because they don’t tell an alien story that the viewer might be able to bear, but tell the viewer’s own story, whose protagonist is Franz Wassermann. With the help of the title **documenta XII**, the artist establishes enough distance to the viewers to open them up to the very private themes dealt with therein.

¹ Ruth Mayer, Brigitte Weingart (Ed.): Virus! Mutationen einer Metapher, transcript, Bielefeld 2004

Upon entering the exhibition room, one's first glance falls on a blackboard with the handwritten words: "God has committed suicide." The word *God* was transferred from the opposite side of the board with a tapestrip and therefore exists twice, the first as a faded original and the second as a copy. By observing only this phenomenon, the act of duplicating an identity is called into question. It is a delicate issue that on the one hand denies the sense of the great whole, i.e. metaphysics, and on the other still works with the concept of *God*. Nietzsche's statement "God is dead" is thus cited and is similarly easy to misunderstand because both sentences first say something about the possibility of recognizing the fact claimed therein, which is of course doubtful. In a posthumous fragment, Nietzsche wrote, "God is a hypothesis that is much too extreme."²

However, the two sentences also say something about the doubts with regard to the bequeathed perceptions of morals, with regard to the entire system of norms and rules that would be nullified with this death. In the context of the exhibition, the sentence acquires a further dimension: the video piece entitled **Atem** (Breath) shows the death of his own father, who disappears as an entity through it. The central questions that Franz Wassermann poses with his work are: when does the father's absence actually begin and how much is he responsible for it himself? The connection to Freud and the Oedipus complex or God as a projection screen for human inadequacy appear automatically to the viewer.

It is obvious that the blackboard in this art context refers to Josef Beuys and thus cites a big name that is significantly connected with the Documenta's Kassel location. His most insistent sentence "Show your wound" speaks of society's traumatic disease that can be healed as soon as one recognizes it, and of the injury caused by the artwork, although the process does not stop there. The line that connects Franz Wassermann's statement "I am a virus" is rather apparent here. Art and life cannot exist as isolated fields; on the contrary, they only make sense in connection with each other. This experience does not remain a hollow avowal, because, after all, it is not possible to step behind one's awareness.

The two video pieces **Atem** (Breath) and **Wach auf** (Wake Up) are a very personal documentation of dying for Franz Wassermann. The screen on the one side displays, first sharply and then increasingly blurred, the greatly enlarged detail of an open mouth that is gasping. As the sharpness disappears and the contours become obscured, so does the vitality to a certain extent. On the opposite side of the same screen, one can see the same person, although here he is dead. The poem "Wach auf", with which a granddaughter asks her grandfather to wake up, establishes the connection between sleep and death. It acts as a universal death ritual that euphemistically glorifies and treats the condition of dying in a way such that it seems the decision to continue sleeping is in the hands of the sleeper.

This is a situation that cannot be staged, and it is not a snapshot. It is, however, the decision of the artist to unconditionally document the essential phases of life so that they may be kept and shown again. The documentation appears to be marked by mourning, as well as by estrangement and self-liberation. The valediction from his father reminds one of Peter Weiß's book *Abschied von den Eltern* (*The Leave-taking*), in which the author writes, "The sorrow that overcame me did not arise because of them, for I hardly knew them; my sorrow arose because of the things I missed, which had surrounded my childhood and youth with a gaping void. My sorrow arose because I recognized an utterly failed attempt at living together...."³

² The saying about God's death can be found in the Aphorisms 108 and 343 of the *Fröhlichen Wissenschaft*; the theme also appear several times in the *Zarathustra*. After that Nietzsche did not use it any longer, but continued to study the theme intensively. The posthumous fragment "Der europäische Nihilismus" (KSA 12, 5[71], dated 10 Juni 1887) is particularly remarkable.

³ Peter Weiß: *Abschied von den Eltern*, Frankfurt /M. 1961

Aside from being a very private narrative, the two-part video piece broaches the issue of what Peter Weiß calls a “portal figure” in his life, namely his father, whose portrayal in the video has, in a manner of speaking, become an icon, an existential connection between the viewer and what is being portrayed. Due to the way the scene is cut and its straightforwardness, a relationship is immediately created between image and viewer.

For the artist it is a matter of concern to join that which is personal with universally valid statements, thus transferring his story into an art context. A gesture that he uses is changing or even damaging and destroying others’ works of art so that they naturally enter all the more strongly into the consciousness of the viewer. Good examples of this are the ancient Egyptian reliefs where images of Queen Hatshepsut must have been purposefully scratched out, and the gaps give rise to a great deal of speculation.

Franz Wassermann immerses pictures of famous contemporaries in containers filled with water and entitles them icons. In doing so, he calls on the gesture of Robert Rauschenberg, who erased a drawing of Willem de Koonigs because the art scene had up until that point been dominated by Willem de Koonigs and Jackson Pollock. It took him four weeks to create the work and considered it to be an experiment to determine if the erased image would still be a picture.⁴ Franz Wassermann’s work is still art, even if he submerges it. And it pays off: basically, additional value is created by repeatedly considering and processing established art objects.

The Signature is the Work is simultaneously the work’s title and contents and is just another reflex in response to the question of what art is, its completely new character, which was created after the loss of aura, the possible reproducibility⁵, as well as the increasing degradation to brand-name products. Names are collected, not contents; the extensive art collections of banks are administered, bought, sold and replaced like stock depots. Franz Wassermann incorporates exactly this issue whenever he uses the phenomenon of the art market as a theme for his work.

Text: Dr.Hannah Stegmayer
Translation: Biewald Alexander

⁴ Robert Rauschenberg, Hanno Rauterberg: Ich habe meinen Himmel (Interview) in: *DIE ZEIT*, 12-01-2006, No.3

⁵ Walter Benjamin: Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, in: ders.: *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften I*, Frankfurt/M. 1977