

Jörg Immendorf – Sherrie Levine: rediscovering the self, redefining a vocabulary

As previously stated, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern an artist from its context. And the comparison of Immendorf and Levine poignantly confirms the chasm between the two cultures in which the artists are enveloped. And, therefore, their distance in the approach and in the production.

Jörg Immendorf

Born in Bleckede, Germany, in 1945, he lived and worked in Düsseldorf, where he died on 28 May 2007. He studied with Beuys who influenced him greatly.

After the end of War World II, the Nazi heritage remained like an irremovable stain on the younger European generations, - and on German's in particular - weighing heavily on consciences, leaving an incurable sense of guilt and insecurity, and marking indelibly the personal memories of many.

At the same time, the late sixties saw in Europe the raising of a new political attitude by the younger generations, fascinated by the Marxist ideals of "collectivity", by the desire for peace and play, by a brand new attitude change in morality values, and by the rejection of the conservative views associated with the previous European regimes combined with a moment of economic growth and affluence.

With this preamble, then, it is easy to read and understand the scenario in which seeds the common ideals of the German "neo-expressionists" and the powerful struggles that permeates this generation of artist.

If one is to identify a common tract that characterizes these artists, that would be the violent presence of *emotions* erupting from their work, and the powerful (and probably painful) struggle between "high" ideals (political, ethical, philosophical) and "lower" human drives (egotism, sensuality, ambition, power, recognition, success...). It may be interesting to notice that the assertion of individuality will become one of the principle traits of the following art movements.

It is a time of soul-tearing contradictions: a time of guilt and denial; a time where the ideals of collectivity clash against the powerful strive for individual recognition. The time of a completely new freedom, opposed to the lack of real purpose. A time of conflict: generational, political, cultural...

It should also be noted that this can be considered the beginning of the globalization process: through television, people begin to see what happens in the rest of the world and to be influenced by the fads, fashion, music, ideas that begin to cross borders.

Also, the visual and symbolic dictionary gets a boost from the contamination brought forth by popularization of culture, providing thus a new vocabulary for these artists.

All these struggles and contradictions are easily read in Immendorf's works, both in each piece as well as looking at his entire body of work, that through it's own semiotics, establishes a very personal reading code. His paintings get very oneiric, at times, for example in the Café Deutschland series: strange sets of events and characters removed from timelines and perspectives, as dreams are, where the artist is always a presence.

Sherrie Levine

While Europe struggles between the desire for a fresh new start - impossible to obtain, as the scars left by the conflict were too fresh and too deeply cut - in America the scenario is somewhat lighter, primarily - probably - because the country remained somewhat less touched by the consequences of WWII, which also took place, for the most part, so far away.

After the struggles for integration and for civil rights - culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - after the anti-war protests of the late sixties, the younger generations, fed with television, frozen tv dinners and an unprecedented freedom of thought and expression, seemed to have run out of things to oppose to and the late seventies all through the eighties can be viewed as a time of opulence, self centeredness and self celebration.

The concept of "appropriation", then, fits pretty well in a context of visual and sensorial "over-exposition" which had produced so much information to provide enough neologisms to form a new, rich visual vocabulary.

With an almost total lack of rules (even the "rules" of contestation, so popular for the generation before) in the application of moral, social and cultural values, supported by the notion of the untouchable right to express oneself completely and freely and in a baroque context of self gratification, opulence and overexposure to anything (money, sex, drug, freedom..."anything goes"), artists begin to contest and feed upon art itself, opportunely appropriating themselves of Roland Barthes' theory that "originality does not exist" and that every form of expression is nothing but a further manipulation of something already existing.

It is interesting to notice that the concept of appropriation crosses through different art forms, the most popular and visible, possibly, being music: rap music represents a new vocabulary too, that is rooted in history but feeds upon itself to produce new contents.

And so Sherrie Levine's statement is one of re-presenting previous statements (worldly recognized as art forms of value) assessing them (or trying to... or pretending to...) a new meaning, a new purpose, a new point-of view.

This art can only be viewed as a conceptual attempt at proving a point, as, unlike rap music, which gets somewhat "digested" and turned into a new product, Levine often simply re-proposes existing artworks (as in the After Walker Evans series, or in After Alexander Rodchenko), without adding anything except the process, leaving the viewer with a puzzling thought: while copying a painting (or a sculpture) requires on the artist's part at least some technical ability, photographing a printed catalogue, offering an almost exact copy of the original, adding nothing, isn't a bit of a rip-off?

More interesting may be the attempts at taking an art statement and bringing it further, as, for example, in After Man Ray (La Fortune) or in Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp: A.P.), where the artist begins where the previous author leaves off, making a statement that (successful or not) brings the discussion further instead of revealing a (not-even-so-interesting) monologue of self celebration.

1. What does the work of these two artists tell us about the culture and society within which they work?

The primary notion I get is the almost overbearing self-attention that the artists give themselves: whether by portraying (sometimes obsessively) themselves or by considering their ideas as worthy of public attention and recognition, the artist, for the first time include themselves in their work openly, almost "coming out". This speaks of the freedom reached in all areas of life: of speech, of being, of expression, of sexual preferences, of self-determination...

In the European works you can read the signs left by history: the previous years of domination and the scars left by the horrors of WWII.

In the Americans, you can read the beginning of a decadence brought forth by the excess of wealth and the lack of real issues to confront with.

2. For many critics, postmodern art of the kind discussed here signifies a relapse into an obsolete past. Others celebrate it as a release from the strictures of Modernist painting. Which opinion do you hold?

I personally believe that art cannot help but portray its context, its story and its history: art is produced by artists, who are people, and as people are subject to their own past, their own scars, their own experiences, whether acknowledged or removed, whether metabolized or repressed, whether conscious or unconscious.

Postmodern art reflects the emotions, the fears, the vices, the values of a special moment of time: a time of opulence, a time of sensorial over exposition, of unprecedented freedom and cultural knowledge. An experimental "shake" of new moral values, technology, disease, altered states of perception, sex, science, challenge, egotism, wealth, boredom, emptiness that come together in one common central point: the self, and its gratification.

3. Within Postmodernism, the viewer is acknowledged to be an active participant in an explicit dialogue between the artist, the artwork, oneself and one's cultural context. How does a concern about the way in which an artwork is received affect the practice of these two artists?

While Immendorf seems more concerned in "finding himself" than in interacting with his public, balancing through his ideals and drives, almost using his artworks as a path for psychological self-analysis, a map to find his way through its own surroundings and make it through the contradictions, Levine relies heavily on the dialogue with the receiver: her work is highly conceptual and therefore requires decoding on the perceiver's part to get its point across.

4. How can we judge the work of these two artists? Can we now accept that art is to be judged by criteria that reside outside formal stuff of the canvas and the materials?

As I've stated before, I believe art to be a form of expression, not of communication. And, though I understand (and appreciate) the exposure to art forms, in particular if supported by the explanation of its intended meaning or, better yet, of the artists' purpose or view (therefore the study of the art more in a documentary form). I find that art *is* (and should remain) a dialogue between the producer and the perceiver, and be judged primarily by the latter, through all its senses (including intelligence). So to directly answer the question, art should

a/ways be judged in its complexity, and though canvas, material and techniques cannot be removed from it, any object of art should be perceived and should permeate the perceiver, who can then, in turn, establish its value.

I have put together and published at the following addresses some information on

Jörg Immendorf

<http://www.thesign.it/arthistory/immendorf/JorgImmendorff.htm>

Sherrie Levine

<http://www.thesign.it/arthistory/sherrielevine/SherrieLevine.htm>

References and Resources:

Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/>

Jörg Immendorf

http://www.michaelwerner.com/artist_7_main_1.htm

<http://www.artnet.com/ag/fulltextsearch.asp?searchstring=immendorf>

http://www.arthistoryclub.com/art_history/J%F6rg_Immendorff

<http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk>

http://www.sauer-thompson.com/junkforcode/archives/2005/10/post_21.html

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/I/immendorff/>

Sherrie Levine

http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/levine_sherrie.html

<http://www.artnet.com/artist/10453/sherrie-levine.html>

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/>

<http://www.moma.org/>

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pcgn/ho_1995.266.2.htm#

<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/after-walker-evans/>

<http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/>

https://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=10640579

<http://collections.dallasmuseumofart.org>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/arts/design/30whit.html>