

Between two Deaths: Ellen Blacettia, Felix Easton (1899), Ausstellung, 1. Oktober
ZKM, Karlsruhe, ZKM Karlsruhe and Ingrid Göttsche-Gibolt, 2007
Marie Perle, Ostfildern
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1 T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London, 1999).

Today contemporary art begins where modernity ends—and ends anew. Along with T.J. Clark, we have to say "Farewell to an Idea" and take leave of modernism.¹ The separation from this beloved project of modernity signifies a symbolic death analogous to the melancholic experience of a child having to separate from the mother's breast, the moment in which—according to Jacques Lacan—the child feels the pain of loss that prefigures real death for the first time. The merely symbolic death of modernity causes pain and generates melancholy already before the real death of modernity has taken place. The exhibition *zwischen zwei toden / between two deaths* explores this experience. What comes after the death of modernity? Where does the ship of modernity sail to on a journey in which, in the words of Otto Neurath (1932), "we are like sailors having to rebuild our ship in the open sea, without ever being able to take it apart in a dry dock or, even better, to redesign each of its parts anew"?

It is obviously part of the modern canon to question itself permanently by means of self-description, self-observation, and self-reflection. Modernity is the name of a strategy to create transparency through self-observation. Thus, modernity is one of the most pronounced results of European rationality since the Enlightenment. European modernity progresses in response to the pressure to legitimate itself and the need to constantly ground itself through reason, permanently rewriting itself in the process.

2 Jürgen Habermas, "Die Moderne—Ein unvollendetes Projekt?" in his *Kleine politische Schriften* (Frankfurt/Main, 1981).

In this sense, modernity is an "unfinished project."² The dialectics of modernity and its programs of revision in the name of transparency and rationality drive modernity towards its own dissolution; only what permanently transforms and rewrites itself up to the point of revision and transgression of modernity itself is modern.

Through the interpretation of human beings as *Subjectum*, René Descartes, the founder of continental rationality, created the metaphysical preconditions of rational modernity. The subject stands not only in the center of morality, metaphysics, and anthropology, but also in the center of the aesthetics of modernity.

If we now take leave of modernity, it thus follows that the concept of the subject implicit in European rationality is called into question. This farewell from the "subject of the West" is yet another cause for pain and melancholy, yet another symbolic death.

Where then does this voyage in the open sea take us? After all the "turns" and re-writing of modernity—from the "linguistic turn" (Richard Rorty, 1976) to the "pictorial turn" (W.T.J. Mitchell, 1992) and the "iconic turn" (Gottfried Böhm, 1994)—can there be another? It is the anxiety before a voyage around the cape of modernity that is represented in the artworks of this exhibition. Just as there is naturally anxiety and depression when one is forced "to rebuild one's ship in the open sea," so these effects are also present now, because in our escape from the canon of modernity, from its processes of rewriting, we risk losing our gratifications, the rewards for the inscription within the symbolic order.

The exhibition shows contemporary art that, while produced in "Euramerica" (John Clark, 1999), no longer sails with the wind of "Euramerican" modernity. As the title of the exhibition indicates, the artworks presented are anchored in the zone "between two deaths," the symbolic and the real. The art works thus emerge in the

horizon of the death-drive, the Thanatos principle. So what follows from this for aesthetics? If it is true that we are dealing not only with post-structuralist philosophy's "death of the subject," but also with the symbolic death of modernity, then it follows that there are core elements of modern aesthetics that, after having been transformed, have to be sacrificed or offered up. I want to present here a short sketch of the elements of aesthetics that have to be sacrificed and displaced, as well as the consequences and effects of this as they can be observed in the exhibited art works. The "feeling of pleasure" plays a central role in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) in both the aesthetic representation of an object as well as in the judgment of its aesthetic quality: "When the form of an object ... is, in the mere act of reflecting upon it, ... estimated as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object, then this pleasure is also judged to be combined necessarily with the representation of it ... The object is then called beautiful."³ This pleasure is tied back to the subject. It is a property of judgment. At the same time, for Kant there is an alliance of ethics and aesthetics, as he claims in a letter to Johann Friedrich Reichardt in October 1790, such "that nothing beautiful or sublime can exist for us without a moral feeling."⁴ Kant's aesthetic pleasure is not necessarily tied to works of art since the pleasure "appears always to consist in a feeling of the furtherance of the entire life of the man."⁵ Through the alliance of ethics and aesthetics, pleasure is tied to life, to the realm of Eros. Thus, aesthetics becomes a pleasurable affirmation of reality through the judging subject.

But Kant's aesthetics has been confronted with new insights of psychoanalysis from Freud to Lacan. The triad of superego, ego, and id is the key to their concept of pleasure or enjoyment, because as is well known, "Where Id was I shall become." This means that the pleasure-impulse and the life of the drive (the id) are censured by the superego and, thus, that the ego must forgo the goal of its drive or find other means of satisfaction.

The superego is represented by the entirety of the symbolic order in which the ego is embedded. Appellations of the master-discourse of the superego like "This is your task!"—"Fulfill it!" and "This is your goal!"—"Achieve it!" clearly show the force exerted on the ego; the force of commandment. "Enjoy" can also be an imperative, for behind this imperative stands a commandment, "retour à l'ordre," return back to the symbolic order, while enjoyment would have consisted in an escape from the symbolic order. The burden of the symbolic order negates enjoyment. For this reason, the narcissistic subject attempts to enjoy without following the appellation. Behind every aesthetics there is an imperative, a commandment.

"*Imperare*" means to command, or to issue an order. The imperative is a type of imploration, a commandment, a law. Kant's categorical imperative is a universally applicable law of practical reason and ethics that says: "I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law." Analogous to a natural law, the categorical imperative can be viewed as a "practical law": "Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature."⁶

The categorical imperative is a law of reason, "a fundamental law of practical reason." The philosophy of aesthetics has since been based on the assumption that the same rational conditions also apply to aesthetic experience, that is, that aesthetic cognition follows universal legislation and that aesthetics is not simply a subjec-

3 Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgement" (1790), Section VII: *The Aesthetic Representation of the Finality of Nature*. <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Kant%20Crit%20Judgment.txt>

4 Immanuel Kant, "Letters," to Johann Friedrich Reichardt, October, 1790.

5 Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgement" (1790), Para. 54, quoted from <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Kant%20Crit%20Judgment.txt>

6 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, (1785), quoted from http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/kant_groundwork_metaphysics_morals01.htm.

tive field. What is implied in Kant's famous maxim "the starry sky above and the moral law within," namely, in the relation between aesthetics and ethics, is the following question: how can aesthetic pleasure, which is proper to the experience and appearance of the beautiful and lies at the center of what we call an *epiphany*, be conjoined with the ethical law of Kant's categorical imperative? How can we describe an aesthetic experience that does not negate our enjoyment and at the same time can be brought into alignment with philosophy? Is the beauty only a product of the intellect, and thus of truth? Is the assertion that the world has become absurd and meaningless synonymous with the demand that art be ugly? Are processes of cognition not the precondition to the enjoyment of beauty? And is it not the real itself that is the condition of enjoyment?

Thus, becoming the bearer of his death-drive, the writer does not separate from life through writing and the artist does not separate from life through his work. On the contrary, writing or producing art or reading are enjoyment as such, and are the act of life. It is in this way that aesthetic experience can be brought into alignment with enjoyment.

The new generation of artists, finding itself beyond modernity, follows Lacan, who taught us that every enjoyment which is turned into a commandment or a prohibition by enjoyment only strengthens prohibition. We can see that this commandment orders the subject to "enjoy," and it is this very commandment that cruelly shows the subject its castration. The order "Enjoy!" castrates the subject and makes enjoyment impossible. Aesthetic enjoyment can thus only function when it is induced not by a commandment or a prohibition, but by the real of enjoyment itself. One should not shackle aesthetic enjoyment, because this creates resistance, which, in turn, makes enjoyment impossible.

Enjoyment without imperative, like enjoyment without goal or fulfillment, is melancholy, unfinished enjoyment. This is part of the new aesthetics. However, enjoyment without imperative also refuses to force pleasure in the act of transgression in the way that modernity does. What characterizes this new aesthetics is its acceptance of symbolic death; it thus lies open, and reveals and makes transparent a hidden wellspring of our "culture": the "pleasure of death," or the shift of the pleasure principle from Eros to Thanatos, one that we have experienced in the twentieth century due to the era's extremes and excesses. This new aesthetics shows Thanatos as the realm of commandments and contradictions that arrive when death orders life to "Enjoy!" The new aesthetics sails around this commandment to enjoy, which also includes death, and reveals it as one of the hidden axioms of modernity. It thus shows, with an emancipatory purpose, the inhumane aspects of modernity.

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