Stefan Banz
**Shift of reality, suspense and interaction**
Once more on criteria1

Minimal art
In the sixties, artists like Donald Judd or Robert Morris begin to look for elementary forms of expression which, entering into relationship with their surroundings both aesthetically and formally, sensitize perception. They make use of the traditional range of plastic values, such as light, shadow, proportion, rhythm, pulsation, negative space or positive form. To them, the way their works are positioned is of utmost importance. Donald Judd, for example, places his reliefs on a wall at a height that enables the viewer to see not only the front, but also the top and bottom sides of his boxes without difficulty. And Robert Morris, in his later work, explicitly drew attention to the fact that the values ascribed to a work of art are not really founded in the work alone but essentially defined by the viewer's point of view. Unfortunately, his interest is finally limited to form and proportion, or, in other words, the aesthetic appearance of his works.2
To the minimal artist the work is a factual given of objective reality, and since in this sense it is simply there, they want to leave it at that. Their intention – to sensitize perception instead of communicating content – represents a restriction of our sensory and intellectual possibilities. As soon as the reception of a work is limited to its surface, it loses its power of imagination and becomes boring, trite and dull. We need concentrated form, but we need aspects of emotion as well, even if – as in Manet or Antonioni – they merely describe the unique emptiness resulting from a lack of relationship. On this background, a work by Donald Judd is not exhausted in the reception of its form and proportions. Jacques Derrida says that "form captivates as one loses the power to understand its inner force."3 Donald Judd's intention to conceive his "specific objects" as a whole denoting immediate presence cannot be maintained in retrospect, as they linger in the mind. His works in Marfa,4 for instance, have a touch of transfiguration which, in connection with the architecture there, is similar to the appearance of wood in the films of David Lynch. This quality of double coding, however, is not a weakness, as the artist may have felt, but the condition of a creative work that can be interactive with the viewer.

E.T.A. Hoffmann
Already in the literary works of E.T.A. Hoffmann we are again and again faced with characters who are concerned with the relation between art and life, and through an unusual way of perceiving reality produce works that cannot be separated from either the author or the recipient. We see this in the hermit Serapion in "Die Serapions-Brüder" and the cousin in "Des Vetters Eckfenster." The cousin, for instance, is an excellent observer who imagines the most wonderful stories as he looks down on the marketplace from his corner window. Inspired by what he finds, the everyday and the marginal, he gives a wonderful aura to each figure, each thing and each event he sees during a conversation with his cousin. However, as soon as he wants to put in writing what he sees, not only do his fingers fail him, but the thought itself also evaporates into nothingness. This makes clear that as soon as his stories were fixed on paper, the interactive role of his listener would be lost. For the work is realized not only by the cousin's narratives, but also by the part of his listener who can view the same scenes from the window and is therefore confronted with two levels of reality. This is to say that the decision as to what is eventually the cousin's work depends on what his audience (the cousin's cousin) interprets in relation to what he sees himself. We, as readers, are on yet another level of reality, and therefore doubly challenged.

Godofredus Bercklinger, the old painter in "Der Artushof," who, in the presence of Traugott, paints his pictures with a deep gaze and great power of imagination on a naked, grey-grounded canvas (without ever painting a single brush stroke), also lives this idea of inner perception and outside reality as a dematerialized form of interaction. He might even be a precursor of today's conceptual art. At the same time, he speaks of creating not allegorical paintings, which have meaning, but works which are: grey-grounded canvases drenched with the wonderful harmony of the most diverse elements of life. Bercklinger imagines pictures "with rich groups of people, animals, fruits, flowers, stones, joining to form a harmonious whole, its resounding and magnificent music being the divinely pure chord of eternal transfiguration." With glowing eyes he points "at the mysterious distribution of light and shadow," "at the sparkling flowers and metals, at the wonderful shapes rising from lilies and joining in the sounding dances of divinely beautiful boys and girls."[5]

Hoffmann's characters basically criticize all the structuralized attempts in art and try to present the indivisibility of the whole as an existential interrelationship between inside and outside, form and content, producer and recipient. He intends to show that as long as we do not think beyond what we see, the world is the way it presents itself. If we trust our imagination, however, things change and we plunge into another world which, as it were, is our own. Art in this sense has the chance to show something in such a way that it brings into consciousness what cannot be seen on the surface, namely, the fact that we live in a variety of realities which it is our task to relate and at the same time differentiate in order to increase the richness of our ability to have experiences.

Dennis Hopper's The Last Movie

In the early seventies, Dennis Hopper pointed out the importance of interaction and shifts of reality for our perception in his extraordinary film The Last Movie. The film combines rather different levels of action, it plays with breaks, paradoxes and the fusion of real documentary scenes with fictional ones: a religious procession with a statue of Jesus Christ in a village in the Peruvian mountains mixes, among other things, with an American film crew shooting an action-packed western directed by Samuel Fuller in the same area. The procession is performed with great seriousness by the faithful, although Jesus Christ, in the form of a portable statue, is only symbolically present. The scenes shot for the movie are very spectacular and feature a lot of stunts: innumerable brawls and gunfights are staged on horseback and on houses. The scenes seem exaggerated and implausible. Shooting finished, the crew returns to Hollywood except for one stunt man. The natives, having watched the shooting with great interest, now build a wooden mock camera and microphone which they treat like the statue of Jesus. Inspired by the events observed they start shooting a movie themselves. In contrast to the Hollywood crew, however, they do not simulate their action, but rather do it in reality. They fight each other under the direction of a self-appointed director and have gunfights with real bullets. When the stunt man, begged by the village priest, tries to explain how dangerous their procedure is and how easily they could do stunts, their initial reverence for him turns into fury and aggression: he is beaten up, driven away and eventually even shot at.

Dennis Hopper's film gives an outstanding example of the way our standardized mechanisms of perception work. The movie does not make sufficiently clear if the Peruvians really do misunderstand the shooting and interpret it as a new and authentic form of a test of courage or a contest – for the procession organized by the catholic church in the village is not simulated either, but seriously intended, although Jesus is just a statue – or if they deliberately misunderstand in order to establish a new ritual in which they can legitimately execute violence.

The first alternative would point at the fact that any form of expression and behaviour, any language newly breaking into a culture needs to be learnt in order to be understood. If these Peruvians really do not understand the meaning of a film production, then they cannot understand the functions of the camera and the microphones either. All that happens are abstract events that have to be interpreted individually from their own personal stock of knowledge. On second thought, however, we cannot quite shake off the suspicion that, rather, the Peruvians deliberately do not understand the functional meaning of producing a movie because they intend to live out real violence in a new ritual and religious form. The reduction and reversal of realities, then, would not be accidental, but a perfidious means to an end.

In other words, we always reduce events or what we see to those elements that are most useful to us, that give a feeling of immediate reward. We arrange them in our minds in a way that allows us to re-interpret and reassemble them without much difficulty. This fact we cannot change, as it is one of our archetypal     patterns of behaviour. What we can do, however, is to bring them up again and again in order for us to be able constantly to reflect on and take into account all forms of reduction and their consequences.]

Hans Emmenegger
Starting out from impressionist reflections, the Swiss painter Hans Emmenegger (1866-1940) always tried to commit marginal experiences to canvas as immediately and precisely and unreduced as possible. He painted, for example, two lanterns in the foreground as seen from a running train, or flowers, insects and birds by moonlight, with only minimal artificial light, or at dusk. The large green leaves of the Red cinerarias (1922, private collection), for example, seem so stiff and unreal in Emmenegger's depiction that we ascribe them to the artist's lack of skill and do not spontaneously think that this could be what we immediately see at night close to a lamp, captured in a precise image in duration.

One of his most convincing and enduring works, his late Gliding blackcock (1935, Kunstmuseum Luzern) shows a blackcock in close-up at dusk rapidly flying over a tree top. The subdued light and the speed of his flight leave a strangely stiff afterimage of his line of flight on the retina. This afterimage, by its retention in painting, is so immovably present in the picture that, spontaneously, we read it as an abstract element of composition. Blackcocks are most active at dusk, and this is the time of day when we perceive things and events most unconsciously, as long as we do not connect them with the danger or suspense lurking in the falling night. In this painting, Emmenegger proceeded with an extraordinary gift of observation and precision, in terms of framing as well as composition and colour. It is precisely his absolute will to precision, to non-reduction, that provokes our conviction that this is an unusual and strangely curious stylization of an element of nature in movement, rather than the depiction of observations meticulously made. And, although at first we are all too easily tempted to regard this reduction as plausible, we are – once we notice the precision of depiction – again at a loss, since in the end it is not totally wrong to say that the picture is an interpretation after all, and, through the transformation into painting, a reduction of the factual.

The example of Hans Emmenegger shows very beautifully how dealing with shifts of reality both clarifies and obscures the interrelationship between differentiation and reduction, and how the recipient can no longer position himself outside the work. That may be the reason why even today Hans Emmenegger is still widely misunderstood and only marginally received in art history. But the factual and sequential rendering of a moment of movement in a starlit night sky would – in the age of transformation, virtual reality and interaction –

precisely be a highly topical problem. For it is nothing but the "iconization of pure seeing as a reality of the image. Real events reveal their irreal constitution through transformation into painting. A problem which is optical in itself turns into a problem of the image and develops a new (paradoxical) relation between concretion and abstraction."6


Marcel Duchamp
The viewer's participation in the realization of a work of art was probably for the first time explicitly taken up by Marcel Duchamp in La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (The Large Glass, 1915/23). In this work, Duchamp "dispenses with a viewing perspective defined by the artist" and "forces the viewer to establish his own point of view and to accept his share of responsibility. Ultimately, the viewer must establish his own perspective and find out for himself how he wishes to perceive the object."7 In contrast to later minimal art, however, Duchamp holds that art is not only an abstract or real "construction of forms and colors, space and volumes, masses and surfaces," but expresses ideas as well.8 Objects need to be regarded not only as themselves, but also and at the same time as possibilities of an other not immediately visible. Everything that exists in the three-dimensional world, according to his view, is "only the 'projection,' the 'depiction,' the 'reflex' of invisible things existing in another world of a higher dimension. Since our organs of vision are limited to three dimensions, the continuum of higher dimension is only open to access through imagination. This makes it a world particularly appropriate to the artistic realm." All objects are images of other, invisible objects, which in turn are images themselves. To him, "the world is an endless tunnel of mirrors, projections and illusions," where our understanding "only deals with appearances, and is not confronted with the real objects themselves," and where "that which some philosophers call objective reality" is in principle unknowable.9 In order to demonstrate this unusual view also when one is looking at a real object, Duchamp for example proposed to exhibit his Bottle rack (1914) in a hanging position, floating in space. This shift of reality, he says, transforms the simple tool into a transparent geometric model in space.10 Surely it cannot be denied that with such gestures he somewhat undermines the seriousness of his own postulate in order not to keep out the pleasure of humour and irony.

Nevertheless, we can assume that as soon as we depict ordinary things – as in Emmenegger – or present them outside their function – as in Duchamp – their appearance begins to feel irreal and abstract. In contrast to mythological illustrations or contemporary documents fom subculture, to pornography or scenes with graphic violence, we are as viewers not forced into the role of the outsider (because we feel that the depictions and presentations have nothing to do with us), but, instead, they invite us to relate. That is an important reason why renderings of daily, even bourgeois life can have a surprising or even disturbing effect, namely, because they immediately concern us and bring things to light that we usually tend to repress into the outer limits of existence.
Bruce Nauman, Jacques Derrida

I feel that we have come to a point today where consciousness of the immediate appearance of things, and their metaphorical, symbolic or referential forces is much more developed. This consciousness liberates new energies to question more deeply the problem, taken for granted, of the inner meaning of a work of art. Shifts of reality and interaction play an important part in this, not least because they have become a fact of everyday life in the development of media such as television, video and computers. Bruce Nauman pointed out this meaning very early in his work. His Corridor installations, for instance, can be perceived and felt only through the viewer's interaction. They make explicit that every form of reality generates an allegorical reality that describes the creative process of condensation and on the other hand

addresses the factuality of things in its continuous uncertainty. His corridors often turn out to be miscalculations holding reversals and blind spots. Therefore, it is our task to determine their real way of working. In his writings, Jacques Derrida has always pointed out that a more open and precise perception can only develop when we break up boundaries at the same time that we mark them, since it is only on this condition that we can be inside and at the same time outside. To him, this double perspective is the condition for viewing something both as producer and recipient in a concentrated and differentiated way, which, for example, can unmask and limit the suggestive machinations of demagogy.

Cindy Sherman, Arnold Schwarzenegger
This condition is essential when we remind ourselves that today mainly works that entertain, amuse or shock are in the centre of attention. This is related to the fact that art has become a business determined by the same mechanisms as the movie or pop business. I do not mean to say that there is no difference between Cindy Sherman's photographs and Arnold Schwarzenegger's movies. The difference – media aside – lies in the fact that with Schwarzenegger every trick is used to blur the difference to reality and make the effects appear as real as possible. Cindy Sherman, on the other hand, is concerned with emphasizing artificiality. But how artificial must a horror or crime scene be in order not to be experienced as violent? Or, putting it the other way around, how artificial must depictions be in order to have artificiality explode? Certainly no one will feel either insulted or forced to take them really seriously. Neither the artist (despite the fact that she is always herself the actress in her works) nor the viewer is challenged to identify, because it has already abstracted from both: we remain nothing but simple voyeurs in an entertaining play of suspense. In contrast, Arnold Schwarzenegger went very far in his film The Last Action Hero (1993). He even attempted to deal with the problem of shifts of reality and interaction, and to take the viewer (in the film) into responsibility. That made the viewer (of the film) so insecure that this film was a flop.

Works which are both entertaining and confusing are never well received, this is obvious in, for instance, the comparison of a Marlboro and a Benetton ad. As soon as we feel that we are ourselves an ambivalent element of the whole, subject even to the possibility of being unmasked as one, we get suspicious: a moral component comes in, catapulting us out of the detached role of the voyeur and giving us the feeling that we are ourselves part of what we see.

Therefore, it seems to me that it is very easy at the moment to produce art as entertainment, voyeurism or abstraction. The possibilities made available by computers and cyber space also simplify the problem of interaction because the products primarily focus on awareness and experiencing the phenomenon (hence, a passive form of interaction). What is the use, however, of new techniques of representation as long as they only deal with and illustrate the most elementary and linear mechanisms and the most traditional problems of perception. Here, too, we could call on Duchamp as a corrective. Contrary to the then new media of photography and film (fabricating, as it were, reproduced and transformed ready-mades), he tried to make conscious the problem and the relevance of a shift in perception through the interaction of the viewer in space, without, as mentioned before, disregarding the aspects of humour and irony in the sense of entertainment.

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Translated from the German by Simon Lenz

1 See Stefan Banz. Das Dilemma der Kriterien, in: Artis, Oktober/November 1994, p.52-55.

2 Jutta Held. Minimal Art - eine amerikanische Ideologie (1972), in: Gregor Stemmrich (ed.).
Minimal Art. Eine kritische Retrospektive, Dresden, Basel 1995, p.444-470, p. 448/451.

3 Jacques Derrida. Die Schrift und die Differenz, Frankfurt am Main 1985 (2nd ed.), p. 11.
The complete sentence reads: "Form captivates when one no longer has the power to
understand its inner force, that is, when one no longer has the power to create." The emphasis
on form is Derrida's.

4 Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation is in Marfa, New Mexico. It is an entire settlement he
had restored and then furnished with works by himself and artist friends. See, e.g., Donald
Judd. Architektur, Münster 1989, p. 40-91.

5 E.T.A Hoffmann. Die Serapions-Brüder, in: Gesammelte Erzählungen und Märchen in vier
Bänden, Frankfurt am Main 1983, vol. 1, p. 209.

6 Stefan Banz. Ein trockenes Brechen der Regentropfen. Über die immer wieder
davoneilenden Bedeutungsstrukturen und das Paradoxe im Bild, in: Lettre d'image par Aldo
Walker, Zürich 1989, p. 34-67, p.57.

7 Gerhard Graulich. Neither visual nor cerebral. Duchamp as a pioneer of a conceptual
approach to art, in: Marcel Duchamp, Respirateur, Ostfildern/Stuttgart 1995, p. 88-95, p. 92.

8 Herbert Molderings. The bicycle wheel and the bottle rack. Marcel Duchamp as a sculptor,
in: op. cit., p.146-169, p.156.

9 ibid., p. 166.

10 ibid.