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“Unlike other things, works of art become objective only when they are discussed.”

A conversation between Berthold Reiß and Monika Bayer-Wermuth in August 2020, on the occasion of the publication of *Antinomia, Writings by Berthold Reiß from 1989 to 2019*, edited by Monika Bayer-Wermuth and Daniela Stöppel, Verlag des Kunstraums Munich

Monika Bayer-Wermuth: Antinomia, what does that mean and how did the title of your book come about?

Berthold Reiß: Antinomia stands for doing one thing, and also the opposite. In 2012 I wrote to [the gallerist] Ben Kaufmann and told him I had chosen the title “Antinomia” because it sounds like a disease. That year I found a paperback book at the discount store NORMA called “Paranoia”, which gave me the idea for the book. My father was a Catholic religion teacher and at the same time very critical. Even as a child I suffered from the fact that all the talk at home of religion, and indeed other matters, was always very critical. The title Antinomia stands for my resistance to that. Initially, this resistance was very unfortunate, since criticism is often justified.

Monika Bayer-Wermuth: This ambivalence interests me. On the one hand you are very enthusiastic about topics and things, which can be experienced especially in your speeches and in conversations, but equally you also include the resistance to these things at the very same moment, even if it is painful. This is also reflected in aesthetic form in the cover picture of Antinomia, I think. The monumentality of the Latin letters opposes the playful Greek italics, and yet both are united here in perfection. I didn’t come up with this characterization – i.e. not their union – of Latin and Greek letters myself, rather Wilhelm Worringer noticed it, as you, in turn, once explained to me. But you did not “invent” this design, similar lettering to that used on Antinomia can be found on William Blake’s “Visions of the Daughters of Albion”. This work by Blake was an important inspiration for you in designing the cover. What significance do these sources have in your work – seen in retrospect?

BR: I find both sources unusual. Worringer combines “Ancient Greece and Gothicism” into a “Global Empire of Hellenism” that diverges from the Roman Empire. The book transports this theory in words, but also in illustrations. Even if one had only this series of inscribed pictures, one could come up with a narrative or a vision that a principle is alive in the Greek

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forms which is constantly being recreated. Correspondingly, it strikes me first of all how Blake wrote the word “VISIONS”, weighty and at the same time moving. Two years earlier, Blake had illustrated a children’s book by the women’s rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft: “Original Stories from Real Life”. But although Blake and Wollstonecraft belonged to the same radical group, the “Visions of the Daughters of Albion” is less political and more visionary. Worringer and Blake are as far apart as 1928 and 1793. But I can only refer to these sources in such a way that I see more in them than is apparent at first glance, and that I see them in a close relationship. A dense fabric emerges for me, although my criticism simultaneously dissolves this connection. Sources do not bubble up if they serve merely as evidence. Only a self-discovered form can be a proof; sources that have passed as such become current in this form.

MBW: I like this idea of bubbling sources, or of making them bubble up for themselves. It has become a book purely with your texts, without a single illustration in the entire volume. Yet we should not be deceived by the cover. While it also contains text, it is in the first instance a picture. This combination of text and image is exciting because the letters are not only information, but also forms and ornaments. Ed Ruscha once said about his word pictures that when he paints his letters he always imagines how the shape of the individual letter must once have been invented and created by someone. That is true, and at the same time poetic. What role does text play for you in your works?

BR: The picture “Schrift” was created especially for the book, none of my other pictures are composed solely of letters. I first came across Blake’s lettering in September 2019. Lilian Robl and I handwrote the title of our exhibition “Neue Hieroglyphen” in Milchstraße on each invitation ourselves, always together. Thus the writing on the printed card was original, but never by just one person. You refer to the letters on the picture “Schrift” as forms and ornaments and you speak of Ed Ruscha’s word pictures. I can well understand what he means. I have always looked for forms that I can use, even if they are not mine. Forms of script are among them.

MBW: Though it is less script as a form, but rather the production of text in itself that occupies no small space in your practice, as the size of the book shows. How did you come to write texts and what role do the texts play for you? Do you also regard texts as art, at least in part, or do you classify them entirely differently? In that context I am also interested in speech as a form of expression. Do you understand it as performance?

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BR: I came to the writing of texts for various reasons. Exercises gave rise to applications, such as explanations of my work, or commissions to write something about the work of others. Of course not all of the texts in the book are art. Most likely, the work on the cover forms something like a stable bridge between my pictures and my texts. It occurs to me that the Arabist scholar Angelika Neuwirth uses “Schriftbild” (which translates as “typeface” but stresses the idea of an “image” that writing creates) to explain the Qur’an as a form. In my work, the script, but also the text as a continuation, has the same function as an arabesque. I thereby relate my work to another world, which I subjectively regard as new, even though the Orient is generally considered older than the West. The talks and speeches are different from everything else in that they are more expressive. What is expressive, however, is not so much the texts that are presented than the fact that they become loud and topical in this form. The term “performance” can denote this, but can also conceal it. I use it as pragmatically as “press text”.

MBW: The texts often have an imparting role when you write about your works or those of your artist friends. Isn’t it astonishing that art is such a strong personal expression, yet we always need the text layer in order to talk to each other about it? And this, despite the fact that language is by no means objective... It also amazes me constantly how often this is accepted without criticism. Is art really a matter of interpretation, and does it exist only when we talk about it, or does it not rather have the potential to be something independent of language? I’m being deliberately provocative. At the same time, I am interested in the fact that art is something vibrant that changes – like your sources, incidentally – through the viewer and over time. It also becomes detached from the artist and goes its own way. I don’t know if all of this combines to form a question, but can you understand what I mean?

BR: Talking about works of art does not mean that they are created through language, that they are the “results of negotiation processes”, as is often claimed. But the idea that art exists only when we speak about it can also be meant philosophically, beginning with the fact that we ourselves are related to something that exists, or “is”. The relationship becomes all the more noticeable when this counterpart withdraws. We wouldn’t say of a fork that it doesn’t mean a thing to us. And we not only share this relationship with others like the air we breathe, we also communicate it to them. The communication itself is scattered over time and only ever mine. But it always refers to an object. This emerges only when it does not satisfy just one viewpoint. Unlike other things, works of art become objective only when they are discussed. This speaking is not theoretical, but rather poetic, when it takes place before an object. The making of art also has a part in this, especially when it is isolated in modernity. Baudelaire can therefore say that the modern poet must also always be a critic. That is even more true for artists, who produce objects that are not language as such.

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MBW: That brings us to philosophy. It plays a key role in your writings. Numerous philosophical texts deal with aesthetics and draw on artistic positions. Could one say that your texts, conversely, transfer philosophical ideas into artistic theory? Or am I making too strict a distinction here?

BR: I can see an artistic theory in the individuality that can be found somewhere in every theory. With “Kant”, for example, one tends to associate the opposite. But Kant himself wrote that he was “in love” with the science of boundaries. Schopenhauer says of Kant that he is an exception to the rule, the only professor of philosophy who can be taken seriously. Nietzsche calls it “Kant’s joke” that he says something that everybody knows in a language comprehensible only to a few. Karl Jaspers demonstrates that Kant has generally been misunderstood. And Hannah Arendt calls Karl Jaspers Kant’s only successor. All of this shows (wants to show) that Kant and his texts are, in truth, special. I’m quoting all this from memory and inaccurately. But what is accurate is that this series is a very specific, individual one. What matters is memory.

MBW: Many thanks, dear Berthold!

Translated from German by Carolyn Kelly.