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Artist and crisis

At times one wins, at times others loose

Damien Hirst knew how to use the flourishing economy - now he masters its failure. The artist as model of the crisis.

By Holger Liebs

Damien Hirst's company Science Ltd. discharges 17 co-workers. Actually this is no important message at all. In many studios run by artists who are successful on the market work is strictly project-related; when the new large sculpture, the space installation, the pill shelf is finished, specialists and diligence bees have to leave again - they usually were informed from the beginning. What remains often is just a glamorous name in the CV.

The art scene is an "informal economical niche" (Isabelle Graw); regular employer-employee relationships are rare, self exploitation the rule. Art production not just coincidentally usually settles in industrial fallows -, where in earlier periods assembly-line factories with time stamp clock were at home, today the post-industrial creativity precarity spreads in form of small workshops, sometimes active 24 hours a day, because sleep is a luxury here, and the next Biennale awaits already.

No doubt: Artists are economical plungers, they sometimes endure enormous financial risks. Jeff Koons ruined during the production of his stainless steel series of "Celebration" first a steel company and then almost his gallery owner of the time Jeffrey Deitch and finally almost himself. Though today he lives well of the *return of investment*.

First rule: Self exploitation

All this is well-known. However the tone of the statement for the *downsizing* of the scarab beetles (Pillendreher) in the house Hirst is new. "Time-related contracts" were not renewed "; one has to keep an eye on the "present economic climate" and how it "affects our future". That is at first glance sheer entrepreneur slang, and if one takes in regard that Hirst with his annual production made 111 million Pounds on 15 September at Sotheby's - already before the direct sales by auction, the day of the Lehman Bros bankruptcy, the fortune of the 43-year old was estimated up to an approximate of 200 million Pound -, then the announcement reminds fatally of enterprises, which obtained record profits during the past years, but nevertheless massively dismissed co-workers.

Hirst has a financial adviser, he maintains the memorabilia shop "Other criteria", he employees (still) over 200 co-workers, his diamond skull was purchased for a record price by a consortium, to which he himself belongs, and he tours through the museums of the world - Hirst understands his art work as "a brand, which is manufactured in a factory". It appears just logical that he himself now, since the brand must survive the lacking sales somehow, makes use of an usual CEO rhetoric like "slimming down", "releases" and the demand for more flexibility. The dismissed human capital of Science Ltd. just has to take over more personal responsibility now.

But the whole thing is not that easy. May be Hirst acts and speaks like a finance minister. But the entire management culture with its rhetoric of the "Ich-AG" ("me company"), "empower yourself" and "permanent self-optimization" relies for its part on a model, which even cultural sponsors of large-scale enterprises don't become tired to praise: the model of the visual artist.

Richard Sennett described the "flexible humans" already ten years ago as a scaring picture of lost identity in times of turbo-capitalism; meanwhile the routine-free fighter, who thinks and acts autonomously, creatively, not-conformal and is prepared to take risks, kicks against the pricks, stubbornly pursues his/her goals, however still permanently questions himself and, if necessary invents him/herself anew again and again - in the meantime this human being became the wet dream

not only of every CEO. This is also a blueprint of the autonomous artist, as formed during the 19. Century. Already the impressionists exemplified the live of “flexible human beings”. The identity “drift”, as Sennett addresses it, - the failure, was their inspiration.

Skilful provocateurs and self marketing agents could succeed within the Paris bourgeoisie of that time, like the painter Gustave Courbet, who, rejected by the official salons, created simply his own exhibition place. What specifically mattered for Courbet’s attention quest, understood as an urge for freedom, also was valid for the arts in general: It set itself apart from the traditional canon, was declared autonomous and created, freed from the obligation of handiwork, the genius artist of the modern, who drew from his own resources.

Price decline? That’s great though!

The bourgeois society though preconceived the artist as remote from the market and misanthropic, as an idealistic, a poor devil, who will be ennobled by a museum some time after his death. Spitzweg’s “poor Poet” is not by accident a creation of the Biedermeier epoch. The modern artist had to let himself been locked up like Modigliani with a bottle wine and a canvas in the morning, and would not emerge until the masterpiece was completed. This legend of the *artiste maudit* still feeds the criticism of today’s market, which accuses artists for their success.

Yet during the 19. Century also the commercial art gallery as we know it today developed its constitutional frame. Already the young Picasso was ordered by his dealer not to inundate the market with his new cubist production. But only Andy Warhol resigned in terms of production to distinguish between art as the other of the market and the logic of manufacturing. Not just accidentally so many heads of big companies got their portrait done by him in the 70s. As a model figure for “creative decisions” and “aesthetic strategies” he really worked well. Many artists today don’t want to have anything to do with this example the *creative industries*, they do not want to serve as guiding stars of precarious employer-employee relationships. The British artist Liam Gillick said to the SZ, that he did not want to become the icon for certain, creative *way of a life*.

Hirst defines this differently. He embraces the role of the insubordinate, obstinate creative. The art scene observes this with increasing stomach ache and has to notice that it reflects itself in Hirst - and glances into its own mug. There are tons of post-industrial self-exploiters busy in the artists studios - however Hirst treats them also publicly like precarity. Art experts scrunch their nose, when collectors speculate at auctions about further sales of their art treasures - Hirst offers the pieces, which are going to be hawked, fresh out of his studio by himself. The price decline in the art trade is a taboo; if it becomes public, usually the concerned artist has a bleak future. Hirst thinks price decline is fantastic - although he earned efficiently during the boom.

There are more than just a few people, who desire a final art crash just because they finally get spared by the topic ‘Damien Hirst’.