

Meditation 6

On Quality

We may need to invent a new meaning for the term masterpiece.

(Stephen Wilson)

What is quality? How to discern quality? Or, more concrete: what does the hollowing-out of an unequivocal concept of quality mean for evaluations within professional art education?

The question is whether concepts such as 'autonomy', 'self-reflection', 'experimentation with forms', 'innovation', etc. can still be regarded as quality criteria. The 'end of art' as proclaimed by Hegel, among others, and – years later – by Arthur Danto, does not, obviously, refer to the end of artistic activities but primarily to the erosion of a discourse where art production and reception is reflected upon, discussed and evaluated. In short, the legitimization discourse is defunct (according to Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*). And this seems also to entail the end of a clearly definable concept of quality. The so-called postmodern artwork distinguishes itself no longer due to innovation or autonomy; recycling the past, it associates itself with 'low culture' and commercial activities.

What quality actually is, is no longer so clear. Of course, the word still carries on its own existence and is being wielded; every decision concerning whether or not to grant a subsidy, scholarship, diploma is still being legitimized via this concept. But is this concept not (unintentionally) being kept alive artificially? Is this concept 'quality' not functioning exclusively within an institutional 'in-crowd'? Within universities and academies, artistic quality is being talked about and taught. The qualified art is subsequently exposed in galleries, artists' enterprises and museums. Art institutes and their board of advisors use established criteria for the awarding of subsidies, work grants, beginner grants and structural financing. Sitting on these art councils are well-educated critics and artists who write reviews in newspapers and magazines or produce works themselves that are imbued with these same concepts of quality.

In short, quality is, according to this point of view, a fiction that is only being kept alive by institutional feints. The quality criteria cannot be thought up; it is food for thought. It is no objective measure but a nearly incestuous confession of faith in an environment that has long since been secularized.

Quality is not an absolute, but rather a relational concept: it is only experienced in and through the process of evaluation. This means that quality can only be experienced by those who have thoroughly learned (the history of) the medium (and of intermediality). But does quality in these terms not become once again an institutional phenomenon? Or is 'the' institution here already imploded, crumbled into an infinite number of small 'art worlds', each of which has its own quality criteria?