Photograph by Sabine Hauswirth, David Bowie, 1996, during 'Outsider' tour in Vienna; essay by Lidia Martínez Pérez.

On the Art World, Museum 'Prisons' and Artistic Freedom

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Have you ever asked yourself what art is? What is waste? What is not waste? Who rules the art world? What is a museum? Daily we take things like this for granted but rarely do we stop to think what and who turns something into art. In this essay, we shall analyse the realm of the art world and think through the idea of the museum. Furthermore, we shall speak to the artist Sabine Hauswirth about her work and what she considers waste.

Art World

What is art, and particularly, how is what counts as art determined by the art world? A lot of people ask themselves this question. Abbing, following his sociological approach, stresses an interesting point, namely that 'art is what people call art' (Abbing 2002, 19). He argues that often the art world defines what art is within a specific artistic area, and hence some people have a relative influence on defining the art (Abbing 2002). Or as he writes, 'people are always distinguishing products that are considered art from those that are not. Behind this binary ordering lies a continuous ordering. People classify products as being more or less "art". Somewhere a demarcation line is drawn: above this line art is considered high art, fine art, or "real" art, while below this line we find low art, popular art, or non-art' (Abbing 2002, 20). He also speaks about an asymmetrical judgement or cultural asymmetry that refers to the distinction between lower and higher art. Abbing argues that this asymmetry works when the group A, the higher, puts down the art of group B, the lower, while the group B looks up to the art choices made by group A (Abbing 2002). There are two points that are interesting, which the author raises, namely those about the sacred and authentic. For most of the artists and art lovers, art is intrinsically sacred; art is considered as a gift from above, and artists are gifted – the source of the gift is unknown, hence it appears as a miracle beyond human understanding (Abbing 2002). 'The higher the cult value of objects and activities and the more important their ritual functions, in other words, the more sacred objects and activities are, and consequently, the more likely they will be called art' (Abbing 2002, 24). Also, the work of art and the ones who make it are said to be authentic, because they are the only ones that can make that particular art (Abbing 2002). 'Art is about experimenting and ideas, but it is also about excellence and exclusion. In a Society where everyone is looking for a little distinction, it's an intoxicating combination' (Thornton 2009, 12).

Thornton in her *Seven Days in the Art world* argued that 'the contemporary art world is a loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art' (Thornton 2009, 11). But how does this art world work? Thornton discusses the perspective of Jeff Poe who said that art world is not about power but instead about control, and she goes on to explain that power is considered vulgar in the art world, while control is considered smart (Thornton 2009). Thornton also wants to make clear that the art world is much more than the art market, the market itself refers to the people who buy and sells works, but in the art world, there are more players, such as critics, curators and artists themselves (Thornton 2009). 'The art world is a sphere where many people don't just work but reside full-time' (Thornton 2009, 12). Moreover, there is a symbolic

economy where all these people swap thoughts and debate about the cultural worth irrespective of brute wealth (Thornton 2009). Thornton (2009) also refers to Tom Wolfe to explain what he calls the ‘statusphere’ which is ‘structured around nebulous and often contradictory hierarchies of fame, credibility, imagined historical importance, institutional affiliation, education, perceived intelligence, wealth, and attributes such as the size of one’s collection’ (Thornton 2009, 13). Hence, within the art world, different forms of value and value creation, as well as status and capital (symbolic, economic, cultural) meet and interact, thus making it into a complex and nuanced world in its own right.

Museums and Institutional Power

When talking about art, museums are one of the things that come to our mind first. But there is something about the museum that often goes unacknowledged. Namely, as Pécoil points out, the simultaneity of the invention of the museums with the incorporation of the prison within penal law during the eighteenth century (Pécoil 2004). ‘The objects placed in it were as if “on deposit”, so that they might be seen. But over and above this literal visibility, the museum was and remains, first and foremost, a discursive system whose function is to pronounce judgements, and whose ultimate purpose is normalization’ (Pécoil 2004, 436). Hence the uncanny structural similarity between the museum and the prison. Inspired by Foucault’s study of the prison, Pécoil views museums as instruments giving rise to specific systems of knowledge and power (Pécoil 2004). ‘The museum is not “like” a prison but based on a muddle of forms of power and knowledge in which it plays an active part’ (Pécoil 2004, 436). In Foucault’s words ‘the prison fabric of society provides both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation’ (Pécoil 2004, 436). Pécoil further explains that the relationship between the museum and the prison is not a relationship of analogy. Instead, the prison system is the model for the museum (Pécoil 2004). Hence, the museum is not the centre of cultural power; it is rather a kind of a regulating element that contains not only a number of cultural productions but also exclusions and omissions – what the museum rejects is as important as what the museum includes (Pécoil 2004). Moreover, Pécoil links the museums with the modern capitalism from which it borrows its essential paradigm of production that is understood as a rationalised process (Pécoil 2004). ‘The works collected inside museums are arrayed by genres, schools, styles, and areas of origin. This eclectic gathering only holds good as a result of the legitimising function of the museum, which, as a normative authority, relates this varied selection of contents to the oneness of a body of knowledge claiming to the universal’ (Pécoil 2004, 438). Pécoil (2004) affirms that if one imposes an ideal of art and the museum adopts the function of a model in relation to creative work, it encourages and guides production by way of emulation, and hence it teaches taste. In this sense, the artist stops being the subject of production and becomes subordinated to the museum (Pécoil 2004, 439).

Sabine Hauswirth

Sabine Hauswirth is a photographer born in 1963 in Vienna. She joined in the art world decades ago being an autodidact, studying by herself. She mainly shoots portraits, and her work can be found in numerous museums and private collections. She has had her own individual exhibitions since 2012, among other venues in Künstlerhaus in Vienna, in the Town Hall, the Warsaw Cultural Forum, the Photo Month Belgrade and in the

public space. She also worked in cities like London, Paris, New York and Berlin. Sabine focuses on personalities; her images can be described as direct and authentic. It is very important for her to work as a team and for the same purpose with the person she is shooting, to have mutual trust and not to treat the person as a mere model. Also when she takes pictures, she does not aim for beauty. Instead, she wants to keep it real, to go beyond the surface. Sabine thinks everybody is hiding something and she wants to find those hidden thoughts and make them visible in her portraits. Depending on the person and the context, she will show political or emotional statements. She explains that while she is shooting, the other person is performing for her.

Sabine Hauswirth had the chance to work with artists like Dennis Hopper, David Bowie, Julie Christie, Mario Vargas Llosa, Blondie, Jude Law, Georg Baselitz, Hermann Nitsch, Christian Ludwig Attersee, H.C. Artmann, Friederike Myröcker and some artists from Gugging. One of her last works was called *Emotions*, where we can see many performance artists from Vienna; here she was interested in the cultural scene in the city. In this work, she gives importance to movement, the body language. Sabine affirms that a 'photo has to be like a film' and that taking portraits tells complex stories. Hauswirth thinks that the market entirely controls the art world, but at the same time for her, the freedom in art has no limit. She usually works with galleries, and she points out that those are the ones that usually define what is a good art work or not. In this sense, they can operate like the prison that Pécoil mentioned. And yet, she seems to find her little ways to escape this institutional prison and to create art freely, or at least, this is how she perceives it. As a photographer, Sabine works with digital pictures, so waste for her can be something really different to what it is for other artist. When she finishes a shooting, she chooses the pictures she likes the most, and the rest are automatically turned into waste. But she points out that depending on the context, a wasted picture can also stop being a waste. She never throws out any picture; if she has a different exhibition with a different context, she can go back to the pictures and take the one she thinks fit better. So is there really waste? Sabine thinks that more than waste what she has is a storage. She believes that every picture has something special, you can see something different in every picture, in each angle. She also explains that the smaller the picture, the easier it can become waste.

Conclusion

Sometimes we do not question the simplest things or things we believe to be simple. In reality, the structures of the art world are so complicated that it is difficult to draw their rules and borders. While there is a market that controls the art world, things also change with time and particularly when artists start questioning why they follow a certain line or why they should obey and accept what they are told - this questioning is at the beginning of the transformation of the art world. But it is also true that the relationship between the market and the capitalist system is so strong that it will need a major revolution if any significant change is to take place. But nonetheless, it was nice to discover an artist who truly believes in what she is doing, and trying to find something motivating and meaningful. Also discussing the topic of what is waste or not with Sabine was really illustrating, it is true that different kinds of artist have different experiences when it comes to waste, but knowing that she keeps in mind that every picture is worth it and can be used at any other time means that for her every picture has a meaning, has a

story to tell, a feeling behind. So, the so called waste is important for many artists, and maybe we should stop calling it waste; is it really waste when you do not know if you are going to use it someday?

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CV of Sabine Hauswirth.

Interview with Sabine Hauswirth.