



Origins of Art, or, The Un-timely Jump

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One possible translation of ‘origin’ into German is *Ursprung*, which is literally the ‘primordial jump’. *Ur-sprung*: The pre-historic jump; the jump before history was recorded; the jump before ‘our’ time; the un-timely jump. Thus, in German, when one talks about the origin of art, or the original artwork, one gets a sense of un-timeliness.¹ In such view, art is not something that exists within a linear history that knows an exact beginning and an end. An original artwork is an un-timely call for a jump into something. What is this ‘something’? Can we name it? Is this ‘something’ art? If we could name this ‘something’, it could not be art. Because ‘naming’ is based on a particular history of voice that renders the un-timely nameless: silent. There is thus a silence in the work of art.² This is its secret. This is the gift of art.

The jump that took place at the end of the Trans-Siberian train project was an original artwork, not in the sense of a ‘thing’ to be gazed at, but in the sense of an un-timely performance that produced a space of undecidability. This ending to our conference was also its beginning: a jump into a matrixial³ space of connections that could not be foreseen – nor can they be judged. Some were quick to decide; some were quick to judge. Others took their time to make sense of what took place. But it didn’t matter what actually took place. The jump itself was simply a physical act that engaged with an artwork. What took place was an event that went beyond the physical jump. Here the concrete work of art was merely a transitional stage.⁴ It was something else in the course of its gestation and it became something else again by the way we interacted with it. Art here is not something to be gazed at; it is a transitional event.

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- 1 In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* Friedrich Nietzsche distinguishes between *Entstehung* and *Herkunft* as the two ways of using the word *Ursprung*. If *Herkunft* is origin and descent, then *Entstehung*, as the true object genealogy, means emergence, the moment of co-emergence in a certain relation of forces. See also Foucault, M. (1977) ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
 - 2 Fuglsang, M. and S. Böhm (2003) ‘The Rest is Silence: A Remark on the Micro-Fascism of Critique’, *ephemera*, 3(4): 56-62.
 - 3 Ettinger L., B. (2006) *Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
 - 4 Benjamin, W. (1974) ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I. 3.

What took place was the event in which we begun to be something or someone else. We stopped being individuals, tourists, conference participants. With the jump we started to become: a group that emerged out of different components. We had to decide how to react, engage and go on. Emotions were overflowing. But there was no right and wrong. What matters is that we took responsibility: of responsibility.⁵ Responsibility cannot be a moralistic concept that is simply and programmatically applied to a situation. Responsibility is first of all the event of being/feeling responsible for responsibility. And this is a communal event. Responsibility can only take place in a space where one meets the other. Responsibility is an event of co-emergence, in which egos are relegated to the background in order to let the silence of art speak for itself. Art is transformed from a narcissistic author to an event of copoiesis.⁶ Art is the jump into a unique moment, where we take responsibility for our selves: we take responsibility for our future, for who we are, and who we want to be: we take responsibility for life.

This event of art as responsibility is not simply positive or creative. This event is also an event of death; an event of destruction: of madness, trauma. How can it not be? Great works of art are silent because they render us speechless. Even the chatter of today's hypermodern busy-ness comes to a halt in the face of a great piece of art. The eternal return of history suddenly comes to a standstill – it shuts you up. We can see the face of death.⁷ The primordial abyss of our existence becomes visible. In the face of the origins of art history is killed: morals become sense-less and un-timely. Art is an event, a gift, of death. Art is the event when we take responsibility for any longer. In the event of art we jump into the impossibility of death. The gift of death is when we take responsibility for ourselves. Is this not the attempt to come to terms with death? Is this not the event of taking responsibility for death?

Modern existence is all about keeping death at bay. We drop bombs from B5 bombers high in the sky; their impact is only visible on a TV screen. Today death only becomes visible as a TV event.⁸ During the first world war soldiers still looked into the enemies eyes; they stood in the trenches and saw the face of death. It is perhaps for this reason that those few who returned home after the trauma of war said 'never again'. Today we can often not take responsibility for death because it is kept at bay for us. We cannot stop it, because we don't know what it is. War violence becomes the eternal return of a spectacle that we cannot recognise as death. A press of a button releases the trauma of death, the madness of violence in which time is out of joint – but we are far away from this experience, and so we continue with our 'normal lives' where we don't get involved.

But art is an event of involvement. It is a jump into a collective event of responsibility that hopes to involve the other. Yes, things get messy in such an event. Yes, often we

5 Derrida, J. (1995) *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Willis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

6 Ettinger L., op. cit.; also see 'Copoiesis' in this issue.

7 Salvador Dali, *Ballerina & the Face of Death* (Ballerine en cabeza de muerte), oil on canvas, 4.5 x 9.5 cm, Merz Collection.

8 Weber, S. (1996) 'Television: Set and Screen', in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

don't know how to go on. Yes, we might see the face of death. But for the first time we take responsibility for ourselves and life itself.

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