

„Let’s dance like we used to...“.

20 theses on the trend of Appropriationism.

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The following thesesⁱ are based on the public response to several lectures on Ulises Carrión (1941–1989) and his concept of plagiarismⁱⁱ, which I gave in various European institutions on occasion of my contribution to a retrospective of the artist at the Reina Sofia Museum in 2016. They reflect the recent trend of artistic recycling, which I call *Appropriationism*. The term includes every regressive manner of appropriating past concepts, forms and names that conveys a general feeling of nostalgic indulgence, but avoids reflecting on cultural and social horizons. My twenty theses do not correspond to a factual and objective debate; rather, they consciously formulate a concise and subjective, but well differentiated polemic against a particular misunderstanding of what was formerly a very interesting artistic strategy.

1. Appropriation in art is as old as art itself. Art always arises from appropriation, namely by unconscious or intentional strategies of conforming to or defining oneself against pre-existing concepts, materials, technologies, work processes, forms, and names within and outside of human-made visual culture.

2. Referring to Adorno, this kind of appropriation is based on the mimesis of something outside of the known, exposed beyond and deferred from it. Mimesis includes the notions of contact and affection ("Berühren, Anschmiegen"ⁱⁱⁱ). It maintains a non-identical relationship of affinity to the other. The opposite is imitation, the act of incorporation or cancellation of the other which lets differences collapse.

3. *Appropriation art* in the strict sense of the concept exists since the beginning of the last century. It is based on imitation. Imitations in *Appropriation art* are realized by copying quoting, repeating, plagiarizing something existing, sometimes in a variation. Imitated are materials, trivial objects, popular phenomena and existing imitations themselves. Artists have different objectives to appropriate things in an act of imitation. A clear definition of what can be called the *Appropriation art* is nearly impossible.^{iv}

4. *Appropriation art* can be quite fascinating when it gives new visibility to the forgotten ghosts and ignored phantoms of our common, art-related myths, ideologies and control projects. By offering an imitation of something established, the appropriation forces us to confront anew what was once considered conventional.

5. Recently, a new generation of imitation-appropriationists have taken the stages of art, music, literature, dance and film. They consider themselves to be members of the „archeological avant-garde“^v and pretend to produce the „next art“ of the „next society“, the digitized and globalized 21st century.^{vi} Re-words such as remake, reenactment, reuse, recreation, revision, reproduction, reconstruction, reprogramming, reloading, revisiting, recycling etc. are advanced as the mantras of the *zeitgeist* and are constantly and insistently repeated like voodoo formulas. These appropriationists claim to take artistic concepts such as novelty, originality, authorship, ingenuity, intentionality, creativity, expression, autonomy, ownership etc. down from their high pedestals, „to hang them lower“.^{vii}

6. Appropriationists can bore us to death if they merely propagate the chatter of the world by imitating and doubling found materials and subjects, which take on a sentimental retro, vintage and nostalgic look. Although such works are persistently confused with *zeitgeist*, in reality, they torpedo our perspective on the conditions and functions of existing relationships and aesthetic norms. The following sentences speak about this weakened, recent version of *Appropriationism*.

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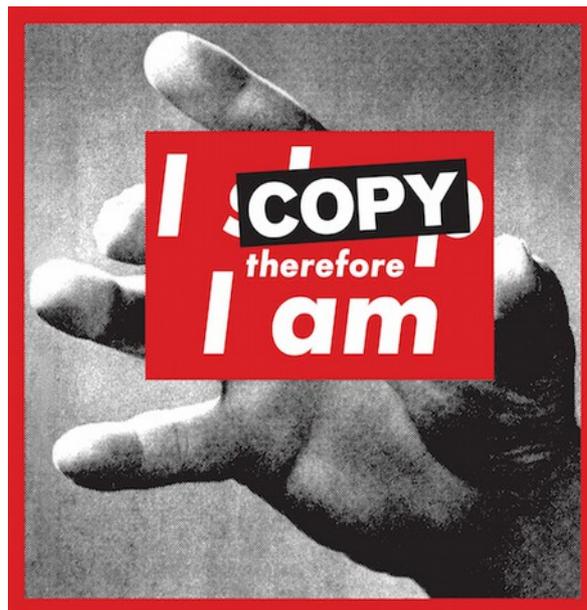


Fig. 1 Superflex, *I copy therefore I am*, 2011 (Courtesy: Superflex).
After Barabara Kruger, *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)*, 1987

7. Although *Appropriationism* artists of the 21st century pretend to create a new, original, unprecedented debate, they actually produce theoretical background music that draws extensively from the quarry of the intellectual avant-garde of the 20th century. Paramount artists and writers such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Georges Braques, Marcel Broodthaers, Ulises Carrión, Giorgio de Chirico, Joseph Cornell, Guy Debord, Marcel Duchamp, TS Eliot, Douglas Huebler, Julia Kristeva, Lautréamont, Claes Oldenburg, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Allen Ruppersberg, Kurt Schwitters, Max Stirner, Andy Warhol, and many others are used – with and without citation – to reject an ostensibly traditional understanding of art.

8. In order to imbue discourses on contemporary appropriation practices with a progressive touch, authors often like to appropriate a jargon which is adapted from the so-called digital natives and DJ's of the 1990s. Artists are then described as hackers and users, who – consuming and producing at the same time – browse through cyber and daily life. They sample ubiquitous and ever accessible images, words, and sounds via copy-paste or drag-drop^{viii}. As the post-producers of the screenplay of culture^{ix}, they re-edit their material in a kind of re-mix or mash-up^x.

9. Appropriationists do not only juggle with factual arguments, but also with moralism when they declare that intellectual property is „disgusting“^{xi}, originality „obscene“^{xii}, and the author „the beginning of the system of lies“^{xiii}.

10. *Appropriationism* artists legitimize their endless, boring acts of multiplication and recycling by arguing that the concepts and criteria of art can no longer be defined in a general way. They misunderstand this fact by using it as an excuse to liberate themselves from the obligations of creativity, innovation, and originality and an invitation to adopt carefree dilettantism^{xiv}, which elevates imperfection as a principle of „Post Art“ over the exclusivity of „Euro-centric, bourgeois“ culture^{xv}.

11. Appropriationists like to ride on the wave of inter-, trans-, and multidisciplinary discourses with their manifold repeated formulas about expanding the field of art and freeing art from the cage of self-teleology. This allows art to extend to and include the useful and marketable fields of consumer culture and creative industries, such as entertainment, design, fashion, etc. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this. But the hodgepodge has now been simmering for too long on the stove. Its genuinely aesthetic flavor and valuable nutrients have dissipated. Its taste is not only bland, but sooner or later it leads to deficiency symptoms.

12. *Appropriationism* artists reduce all artist to a footnote in the flood of torrential virtual data streams in which individual authorships can supposedly no longer be identified.^{xvi} Although the idea of artistic genius has been picked apart many times already, for the first

time the devaluation of the creator myth and the erosion of expert knowledge can now be legitimized by ignorance and lack of interest (in authorship).

13. Appropriationists are benefiting from the digitization and archiving of all artistic creations, easy access to endless databases and quickly and cheaply produced copies and reproductions, which enable them to opportunistically ride the wave of the recent trend of *Appropriationism*.

14. *Appropriationism* artists like to adopt particularly well-known or particularly obscure positions. This strategy promises the highest likelihood of success and recognition in an art world where artists must struggle for the scarce resource of attention.

15. Appropriationists often seem to confuse art with humour and wit, or, at best, with irony. In the long run the misunderstanding is regressive because it removes the sting, subtlety, and subversion from any wittier ideas.

16. Some Appropriationists make use of existing names, styles and concepts, acting thus like karaoke singers of playbacks. Such charming practices of bungled dilettantism allow the artist to establish a relationship to a myth through adoration and elevation as well as through demystification and disenchantment. The stimulating recognition of partying spectators increases a grandiose self-celebration and simultaneous self-oblivion.

17. The restriction of artistic strategies to the imitation of already existing things without any relevant perspective beyond this goes hand in hand with ludicrous overproduction. This paradox corresponds to what Paul Virilio has called the „racing standstill“^{xvii}, referring to the acceleration of random, uncontrollable operations in highly mobilised, fluid Western societies that are governed more and more by abstract forms of control. Believing in the individual freedom of choice, but actually responding to self-disciplining control mechanisms, people can do no more than react. They fall into a hyperactive hustle and bustle in which everything is managed, but nothing is created. The illusion of a well-oiled machine is maintained through the mass proliferation of objects and projects, but as Virilio put it, “in the center of speed, inertia prevails.”^{xviii}

18. The self-exhaustive nature of *Appropriationism* can be understood, perhaps, as passive resistance to the transitoriness, volatility and fugacity of the present time. The tyranny of having to respond to permanent changes does not allow one to position oneself in the here and now. Exposed to a kind of rootlessness, the identification with the past at least promises the tangibility, insurability and manageability of something.^{xix}

19. It is time that the demonization of artistic innovation, originality, independence and

ingenuity is no longer used as an excuse for the production of undemanding art. This does not mean that we should ignore the blind spots and dark points of the past. On the contrary. But to confuse such a past with the endless repetition of bygone clichés means the destruction of desire, fantasy, attitude, sensibility, radicalism, poetry, criticism, sensuality, anarchy, power, magic and many other aesthetic qualities.

20. In order to vivify rusty *Appropriationism* a little, I recommend the mimesis of a bit of Futurism at this point. Its „courage, audacity, and revolt“^{xx} could be an antidote to the passivity of *Appropriationism*; it could launch new expeditions into unexplored territory and visualize, if not perforate, the constructedness of and the agencies at play in the critical present.

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- i The theses were first published in the German art historian magazine *Kunstchronik* Heft 4, April 2016. The present paper dates from 2019 and appears with a slightly modified second thesis.
- ii c.f. Ul. Carrión: Why plagiarism; in: *Fandangos* 1, Dec. 1973, 1
- iii T. W. Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*; in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, hg. von Max Horkheimer, Bd. 5, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 211f. - which is, by the way, a mimesis of ideas of Walter Benjamin
- iv cf. M. Aden-Schraenen, *In Search of Bas Jan Ader*, Berlin 2013, 187–271
- v P. Bianchi, quoted in J. M. Hedinger/T. Meyer, *Die nächste Kunst*, in: *What's next?* Berlin 2013, 68 et sq.
- vi D. Baecker, 16 Thesen zur nächsten Gesellschaft; in: *Revue für postheroisches Management* 9, 2011, 9 et sq.
- vii cf. W. Ullrich, *Tiefer hängen. Über den Umgang mit der Kunst*, Berlin 2003; K. H. Kohrs, *Die Kunst vom Sockel holen*, Mainz 200
- viii cf. Hedinger/Meyer, 2013, 4 et sq.
- ix N. Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, New York 2002
- x cf. F. Mundhenke/F. R. Arenas/T. Wilke, *Mashups. Neue Praktiken und Ästhetiken in populären Medienkulturen*, Wiesbaden 2015
- xi J. Schramm, quoted in M. Mühl, *Wahlkampf einer digitalen Seele*, *FAZ*, 26 April 2012
- xii W. Ullrich, quoted in M. Kampmann: *Die Kultur des Kopierens läuft auf Hochtouren*; in: *Kunstzeitung*, Nr. 201, 2014
- xiii M. Pichler [M. Broodthaers], *Statements zur Appropriation*, in: A. Gilbert, *Wiederaufgelegt. Zur Appropriation von Texten und Büchern in Büchern*, Bielefeld 2012, 27–30
- xiv cf. A. Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, New York 2012
- xv cf. J. Saltz/C. Christov-Bakargiev; quoted in Hedinger/Meyer, 2013, 5
- xvi cf. T. Assheuer, *Tod des Autors*; in: *ZEIT online*, 3 May 2012, <http://www.zeit.de/2012/19/Internet-Urheberrecht>
- xvii cf. P. Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, London 1999
- xviii P. Virilio, *Revolutionen der Geschwindigkeit*, Berlin 1993, 30, transl. M. Aden
- xix cf. S. Reynolds, *Retro Mania Pop Culture's Addiction To Its Own Past*, London 2011
- xx F. T. Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (1909)*, in: U. Apollonio [ed.], *Documents of 20th Century Art*, New York 1973, 19–24