

Abstract:

Exklusivität in der Gesellschaft des Spektakels

Wir leben in einer Gesellschaft des Spektakels, in der unser Verhalten häufig auf schöne, harmonische Erlebnisse und ästhetische Erfahrungen ausgerichtet ist. Aus diesem Grund ist »Exklusivität« zu dem Fetisch des 21. Jahrhunderts geworden. Exklusivität ist notwendig, um die persönliche Identität hervorzuheben, um Individualität und Einzigartigkeit zu demonstrieren und um sich von anderen abzugrenzen. Für die Bewertung eines Spektakels als schön, vollkommen, harmonisch oder ästhetisch spielt die Exklusivität eine entscheidende Rolle. Sie ist ein semantischer und symbolischer Code, der prinzipiell auf jedes Ereignis und jedes Objekt angewendet werden kann. Auf dem Markt des Spektakels, der wie jeder Markt von Angebot und Nachfrage bestimmt wird, setzt die Spektakel-Industrie daher auf Exklusivität – und dies gilt in besonderem Maße für den Kunstmarkt. Er ist – wie die Filmindustrie Hollywoods – als Oligopol organisiert, in dessen straffen Strukturen der einzelne Künstler mit einem Etikett versehen wird und nur noch als Marke fungiert. Das Produkt erhält ein Profil, es bekommt ein Image. Dabei handelt es sich um rein symbolische Zuschreibungen: Neuartigkeit, Originalität oder Exklusivität sind keine intrinsischen Eigenschaften eines Kunstwerks, sondern hängen allein davon ab, ob dieses (vom Kunstmarkt und letztlich vom Kunden) als neuartig, originell oder exklusiv angesehen wird.

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Exclusiveness in the Spectacle Society

Introduction

Exclusiveness is not a property of a material object. It is rather a communication code. Exclusiveness is a matter of access. The question I would like to address is: What function does exclusiveness play in our contemporary society, especially in the art system of today? I will show some examples of how society and the art world operate with highly differentiated mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that cause new imaginary objects of fetish and desire.

First, I would like to clarify my terms that I will make use of in the following arguments. My first premise is that we live today in a *spectacle society*. The second premise is that *in* the contemporary spectacle society most of our behaviors, actions, or intentions are oriented towards having beautiful events or aesthetic experiences. Behind the spectacle orientation of our everyday behavior stands the project of a beautiful life, the aesthetics of the commonplace. My third premise is that exclusiveness plays a significant role in the evaluation and appraisal of a spectacle as beautiful, perfect, harmonic, or aesthetic. Therefore, exclusiveness is one of the central strategies used in the spectacle industry to reach an optimal effect for its products. Exclusiveness is a semantic and symbolic code. This means that each possible object and each possible event in the world can be a fetish of exclusiveness. Which object appears as an exclusive one and which not, is more a question of the specific situation than of properties of an object.

I would now like to describe some basic functions of the spectacle market, the production strategies of spectacles, the consumption of spectacles, and how exclusiveness functions in this market model.

The Spectacle Market

Traditionally, a market is defined as the place where offer and demand meet. If we transfer this classical definition to the conditions of our contemporary spectacle society, we can state that the spectacle market is the place where spectacle offer and spectacle demand meet each other.

What is a *spectacle offer*? As a spectacle offer, each possible product or event can be understood, whose use is defined predominantly in aesthetic terms; for instance as beautiful, excitingly, sensitively, stylish, interesting, exciting, radically, successfully, or provoking. Most of our everyday experiences meanwhile are aesthetic experiences.

Aesthetic experiences, everyday or not, unfold ever more strongly in the context of professionally differentiated market relations. In the contemporary art system, aesthetic experiences progressively become a question of market relations, of a professional organization of the meeting of spectacle offerers and spectacle demanding parties and the successful suggestion of a “beautiful,” “perfect,” or “harmonic” experience.

A perfect example for this is *Documenta*, which has become a professional spectacle offer with organized group journeys, exciting discussions, collective student excursions, exclusive curator guidance and a firm component in the city marketing of Kassel.



Fig. 1: Roger M. Buergel giving a guided tour of *documenta 12* to a group of VIP visitors, Kassel, 2007

The Structure of Spectacle Production

For the spectacle society the relevant organizational model is that of Hollywood. The cultural industries of Hollywood have a long experience with a networked and distributed model of production. They support independent, autonomous production firms. The different companies build up a temporary network, whose lifetime is restricted to the duration of the project. The big studios and entertainment multinationals finance the productions and exclusively control the marketing of the products. The risk of failure for a new product is therefore minimized. It is shifted or outsourced to the various independent production firms and autonomous contractors.

Exactly the same model is practiced by some of the most advanced contemporary art galleries. There are some global players like Hauser & Wirth in Zurich, Larry Gagosian in Los Angeles, or Jay Joplin in London. They control a major part of the global art market. Each of them is a kind of exclusive retailer in each country. For example, Hauser & Wirth in Zurich has exclusive contractors like Esther Schipper Gallery in Berlin for the German market, Air de Paris for the French market, and Micheline Swajzer in Antwerp for the Belgian market. The financial relations between the big global players and the various national "sub-contractors" are very opaque and difficult to research and clarify. But as far as I know, ten percent of each national sale goes to the global player. But there seem to be no written contracts; everything seems to be based on verbal agreements.

This means that the model of distribution of contemporary art we are confronted here must be some kind of exclusive franchising model. For the sub-contractor in a certain country it means that the artist's work he is selling, is sold exclusively in that country only by him. There is no competition and no concurrence between different offerers. You can quite quickly imagine the impact on the market price of an artwork. The art market can be called an oligopoly, where only few spectacle suppliers stand against a huge crowd of potential spectacle demanders. The stories of success that are often told in the contemporary art market are a myth. They have a strategic market function with the aim of

gaining control and exclusiveness over the distribution channels, to control the access to the artwork.

The Oligopoly of the Art Market

A special characteristic of an oligopoly is the reaction solidarity in the price definition amongst the few offerers.¹ Because there are only very few offerers in the art market, everyone has a significant market power and can, by his price or quantity decision, influence or even totally control the market. Therefore, a strategic interdependence exists between the offerers. In the oligopoly itself, the salesmen are thus conscious that their decisions affect those of the other salesmen. The buyers or collectors, however, have to accept the market conditions as given, as a natural price formation. Different reactions of the market players are conceivable against the background of this situation. One of them is the cartel formation. In closed oligopolies, price and quantity arrangements can be easily organized. This behavior is particularly attractive to the offerers, if other forms of competition (like quality or service) are ruled out—which is particularly the case with homogeneous oligopolies. And the market for artworks is such a homogeneous oligopoly.² This means that exclusiveness on the side of the spectacle offerers, the

- 1 With a pluralistic market structure (polypoly) this cannot be the case. A polypoly is a market situation with a large number of relatively small buyers and small sellers, none of which can influence prices.
- 2 Others are:
 - Price leader shank: an oligopolist recognized by the others as the price leader. All market players change their prices only when or if the price leader changes the price.
 - Ruinous competition: if an enterprise can only survive, if it achieves a certain size, the tendency to push out competitors consists in a particularly aggressive price behavior of the market, on which others must react with further price reductions.
 - Price stiffness: with several equivalent strong or weak competitors no one dares to change his behavior because he is afraid that the competition will thwart his strategy.
 - Intensive, technical progress and customer serving competition is particularly the case in heterogeneous oligopolies.

gallerists, is already completely established as an European-wide or even worldwide monopoly or oligopoly. The artists are also cooperating and participating figures in this monopolistic situation of exclusiveness.³

The Artist as a Label

Historically seen, more and more, the production of spectacle offers play into the hands of professional organizations. The spectacle offerers such as artists, writers, musicians, or cabaret artists, appearing as private persons, became the exception in the market long time ago. The majority of these private, individual spectacle offerers remains outside of the spectacle market. They maintain a publicly subsidized, cultural niche existence. The professional artists of the spectacle market have a market chance only in the context of a tautly organized, networked, and distributed production model. The artist functions only as the "surface label" of extremely taut, globally organized background structures. The best example for this is perhaps Jonathan Meese and his spectacle offerers, the art gallery Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin, which maintains a personal background structure of about 15 employees, who worry about nothing else but working on inquiries, art transportation, publications, and consulting collectors. In addition, the gallery has in the meanwhile moved into a spectacular architectural building by David Chipperfield Architects on the border of the museum island of Berlin. Thus the aura of the museal consecration radiates from two sides onto the artists of the gallery such as Jonathan Meese or Tal R, from the German Historical Museum and its new I.M.Pei wing, as well as, from the Old Museum, the Old National Gallery, the New Museum, and the Pergamon Museum.

³ To give a few examples: On the German electricity market there is an oligopoly. The electricity market is essentially divided up between the four large concerns E.ON, RWE, EnBW, and Vattenfall, which control 80 percent of the production market together. The market leader E.ON alone controls 34 percent. A further example is the mobile communications market: there are only four network suppliers, i. e. T-Mobile, Vodafone, E-Plus, and O₂, which millions of mobile phone users have to confront in Germany.

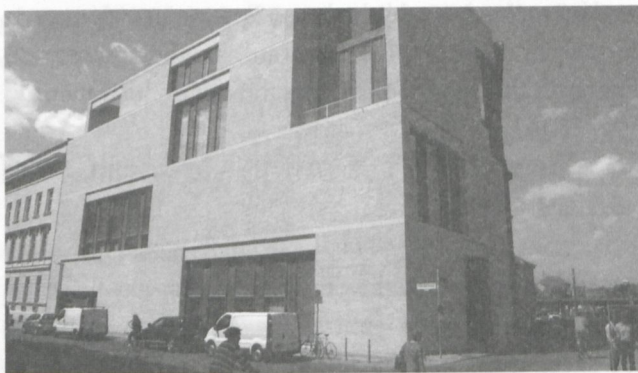


Fig. 2: Gallery-Building by David Chipperfield at Kornmarkt, Berlin, 2008

The everyday life-aesthetic symbolism clearly says: What we issue, is *the* contemporary art of your decade. It can be bought and collected exclusively with us. It is this that will hang in every museum of the world in ten years and what you always wanted to have. The model of a distributed, networked spectacle production already progressed very far in the art system. The spectacle product of a successful exhibition is created from the collaboration of an informal network of curators, restorers, gallery owners, collectors, publishers, authors, interior designers, lighting specialists, graphics designers, museum teachers, public relation agencies, city marketing departments, and critics of different regional and supra-regional daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly magazines. The artist, in whose name all of this is organized, practically operates only as a label, a corporate identity, an image, a symbolic code of everyday life-aesthetic constructions—the projective surface for the production of a perfect, beautiful and aesthetic experience.

He who really wants to achieve a large audience, paradoxically must offer aesthetically specialized and mass-tailored products for special subgroups of audiences. The automobile industry understood this for a long time. Over lacquer finish, interior equipment, coverings, engine equipment up to rims and auxiliary lights, the mass product is aesthetically individualized. The National Bicycle Industrial Company in Japan, for instance, builds only individually assembled high-end bicycles. The customers, with the help of a computer-assisted planning system in a

sales room of the retail trade store, can order exactly that single bicycle, which corresponds best with their personal figure in size and design. The spectacle customer can select for "his" bicycle the desired chains, brakes, circuits, tires, saddle, and steering wheel as he likes. The information is conveyed electronically to the company, where the bicycle is assembled and delivered within three hours. One calls this production method *Made to Order*. It is an outstanding example of the aesthetic individualization and the apparent exclusiveness of spectacle products, which in reality are only mass products for a mass-market. But they suggest exclusiveness and individuality.

The Profiling of the Spectacle Product

With the strategy of profiling, the spectacle offerers equip their products with the aura of singularity and exclusiveness, the so-called *product image*. The everyday life-aesthetic spectacle coding of the products contains a general and a specific component. In the strategy of product profiling, individual properties are particularly emphasized and stressed in favor of others. Altogether they are similar products on the spectacle market, but their specific images are different. Offerers design the exclusiveness of their products on the market therefore as a label-specific spectacle promise.

Symbolic differences are differences in the *image* of a product and are produced by the profiling of a label. The best examples are different cigarette labels and their symbolic images, which are developed especially for the profiling of a label in order to distinguish it from other products.

Special spectacle scenarios, which are added to the product by advertising impulses as a kind of symbolic imagery, establish new aesthetic codes for the label. The goal lies in the distinction from similar products by other offerers. Image profiling is used thus both in an identifying and a distinguishing mode.

To this strategy, especially in the art system, belongs the image of *originality*. It is a model of exclusiveness. The profiling of spectacle prod-

ucts by symbolic image formation can be found nearly everywhere in the spectacle society. The product is specified by personal attributes or symbolic characteristics as something special, singular, extraordinary, and thus differentiated from others. Symbolic images of spectacle offers serve at the same time as social identification and social distinction.

In the art system we know these strategies of profiling very well. Artists often produce certain images or an aura of singularity, which serves for the individualization of the product, for which the artist name stands. An outstanding example is the self-shaping of Joseph Beuys. Also Markus Lüpertz and his attempt of self-spectacularization as a Dandy of the late nineteenth century would be interesting to examine here further. Jonathan Meese, who explores product profiling, which reciprocates between Dandy and Hippie and thus between the reactionary regime of Napoleon III and the *Summer of Love* of 1968, would also be a subject worthy of study.

The Neo Rauch Experience

What kind of fetish does the purchase of a work of art promise, could one ask? It obviously promises an adventure, deviating from the ordinary, an artistic breath or a creative impulse. The artist with a strange, fascinating, unknown nature suddenly shows up behind his work. The best example for this spectacle strategy is Neo Rauch. With the expensive and exclusive acquisition of an original work, one acquires also the right or the privilege, to become acquainted with the artist himself and to be invited to a dinner with him, to be able to perform an exciting conversation with his gallerist and other important collectors. These are some of the spectacle promises the art purchase offers as an exclusive experience. Generally spoken, with the purchase of an artwork one acquires exclusiveness. If one cannot possess the original, the spectacle market offers numerous, differentiated, and gradated possibilities of being able to also participate in the aura of an exclusive original. One can acquire posters or reproductions of the original. In the spectacle market of art there exists a highly gradated system of exclusive partic-

ipation through purchase, which is adjusted through the price of the desired object. It can range from framed posters of reproductions to limited, but unmarked editions up to high-end signed and numbered limited editions of an original. Gerhard Richter, Takashi Murakami, and the collector Frieder Burda are best examples of these merchandising strategies.



Fig. 3: Kaikai Kiki Merchandising Shop during the exhibition © Murakami at the Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt am Main, 2009

The Variation of a Spectacle Product

Due to the dullness that can accompany habituation, a well-known spectacle product with the attraction of the new must be provided again and again. The difficulty must be solved in packing a proportioned and acceptable attraction of innovation into an already long-known product. It may be new, but not too much, or perhaps otherwise the spectacle demanding party is disconcerted and turns to another product of a competitor. That would be the worst-case scenario for spectacle offerers. They must pay attention to the profiling of their “new” product very carefully, to only be a little bit innovative without throwing the well-known and approved properties of the product totally away and thereby disconcerting their customers. This strategy resembles a

paradox. How can one retain the long-known and well-run image of an spectacle product and, at the same time, secretly rework it and introduce new features, without the users noticing which conversions have taken place?

An outstanding paradigm for this is the software industry. At least every year, sometimes even twice a year, an update and/or a new version of the same product comes out on the market. It is exactly the same product arranged in a way that the long-known and trusted features remain to be experienced, but up to two to five innovations are introduced, sometimes it is only the shift of one peculiar function into another menu.

In the art system this mechanism is well-known for centuries under the keyword of the variation on a theme. The outstanding "handwriting" of an artist must remain identifiable and recognizable as such throughout the whole work. The newest work under this condition must be immediately recognizable as a new work of this artist, but it should vary in only one or two aspects in a new and surprising way, in such a daring manner that one did not see previously. This is breathtaking and must be discussed in the art scene. It secures the attention of the spectacle market, which the new work needs for its success. In order to be successful, a new work has to remain strictly in the context of the proven and long-known oeuvre of the artist. A new work of art, which in this moderate way suggests new, beautiful, and perfect aesthetic experiences, can thus be recognized and evaluated immediately by the customers, buyers, or collectors, as new, thrilling, daring, radical, or unforeseeable.

It becomes more difficult if too much innovation is introduced, so that the newest work cannot be recognized any longer as a work of the same artist. This leads to the disconcertion of the spectacle consumers and could thereby lead to short-term turnover losses on the market and the loss of market shares. As a well-known, famous artist, one must paradoxically make certain, that one is not too innovative, but varies the basic product only in a moderate sense.

If, however, the innovation goes so far that one cannot recognize it any longer, whether this work is from the same artist or not, then the critics speak of a style break. The art system reacts to it very sensitively.

Art critics react maliciously, write biting articles, collectors are disappointed, gallery owners go out of business. The artist must get back into the line. The careful modification and variation of a label or a spectacle product already introduced to the market represents the rule, while the transformation and introduction of completely new products form the exception.

Under the condition of the spectacle society, so-called "improvements" of a spectacle product frequently possess only symbolic character and serve, above all, for the image formation. New packaging, new design, new accessories, changes of product designations, additives like "deluxe," "super," "comfort," "special," "plus," "limited edition," or the numbering of model versions (like 2.0 or 3.0) are typical variation strategies of the spectacle market. The goal lies in placing the suggestion of a new spectacle attraction to the delicate and blunted spectacle consumers.

The Suggestion of the New and Exclusive

In the spectacle society, *the new* is only a way of symbolic labeling. It has only symbolic qualities in order to stimulate the spectacle attraction of the consumers to regard the new. The new must be suggested carefully to the customer.

What strategies do the spectacle offerers use for the suggestion of novelty and exclusiveness of their products? Lastly the quality of these suggestions depends on how the spectacle demanding parties evaluate and judge the offered product. If an exclusively offered or suggested spectacle product is *regarded* as new and exclusive, then one can say that it *really is* new and exclusive. But only if it is believed by the customer!

The spectacle offerers give substantial assistance to the customer in the form of explanations and interpretations to place their exclusive products on the market. Particularly in the art system, the role of experts plays a central function. Beautifully and aesthetically designed catalogs with texts by art historians, criticisms of art critics in magazines

or newspapers, many exhibition participations, and purchases of public collections play a role of suggestive assistance in decision, interpretation, and judgment.

Summary

Let me summarize my thesis. We live in a spectacle society where every orientation is directed towards having beautiful, harmonic, or aesthetic experiences. Thus, exclusiveness is *the* fetish of the twenty-first century. The suggestion of exclusiveness is necessary to reinforce personal identity, to suggest the individuality, singularity, and uniqueness of the subject, and to distinguish him simultaneously from the others who are like him but who he does not like at all to be like him. In the art world of today, the original functions as the absolute exclusive fetish.