

Souvenir transfert imaginaire

Everybody knows souvenirs and probably there will be nobody who didn't bring at least one when he returned from his holidays. In spite of that a souvenir is a phenomenon difficult to understand. Selected by a traveller, almost everything could be one. So I only try to outline it.

Generally souvenirs are small handy things from remote places. Their value of practical usage is modest, but considered from an idealistical point of view its worth is endless. The value given them by their owner is their only one. In a strange manner souvenirs associate memories with an object.

A souvenir is alien at the place where it is conserved. It gets its vigour from spacial and temporal distance to the remembered experience. The moment just passed over and lost in time will not be recorded as a whole one, but only in facettes, which make him singular. Memories connected with a souvenir are result of a selection made according to the rules of own illusions and yearnings. The souvenir receives its effectiveness from an absence, but paradoxically at the same time it is a tangible prove of those paradisiacal desires.

Journeys are associated with souvenirs. Travellers fall in temptations that the obscure foreign turns out to be something different from the own. Elements which seem to be distant from the well-known world are idealized and convert themselves into a screen for new possibilities and desires. Discontent in the own culture make perceive the foreign as a place of yearning, a dream of better life, of a fairer social order. For example in his publications of a moral philosophy Montaigne painted the image of the "god savage" who lives in harmony with nature, quite peacefully and without any trouble.

Also a souvenir is an expression of this paradisiacal hope for the „best of all the worlds“, in this way almost being a utopia. But it is even more, it is a tangible object, which confers sensual qualities to utopical wishes. And at the same time it is a cursory illusion.

So souvenirs are more relative with all the rarities and curiosities, which once completed the chambers of art and wonders. They were pieces of evidence for the reality of utopical conceptions. In a minor measure those collections reflected the secrets and regularities of the world. In the 17. century their encyclopedical aspects where changed by scientific interests. The universal interpretation of the world was replaced by a more specialized stocktaking based on observations, which broke up the old unity of art and sciences.

The following investigation and exploitation of recently discovered regions and continents, just as the search for raw materials and more places to settle down disillusioned the world outlook. Mostly influenced by the trade with the east-indias emerged new markets and commercial companies. The remaining fascination of foreign and exotic worlds was directed to more and more recently discovered countries and their cultures. People hoped to find there objects to make use of, to trade with or to find new chances and opportunities. One consequence was the creation of different fashions like chinoiserie, enthusiasm for the orient or japonism. After having explored remote worlds people integrated them immediately into their accustomed domestic spheres, their clothing or into arrangements of gardens. Connected with the own world the foreign one became available and its elements were accepted, when they were considered as beautiful or practical, like spices, textiles, useful or ornamental plants. I am also thinking of safran, cinnamon, silk, tea, coffee, cocoa, the potato or tulips.

The intermixture of cultures was pushed by new vehicles for travelling and other means of transportation. At the beginning of the 19th century the construction of railways made travelling more comfortable and allowed more reasonable prices. Quite soon journeys were a firm element of bourgeois culture. But only after the second world war and as a consequence of an expanding air traffic recreational times and journeys became a property for everybody in Europe. Caused by tourism, nowadays holiday-destinations are common places, the souvenirs brought with are predominantly standardized cheap merchandise. Even the good old mussel from our favorite beaches becomes something indifferent. On the other hand the memory itself connected with the object remains something singular, is a remembrance of a personal paradise.

However the yearning for strange worlds stays unsatisfied. It claims repetitions permanently, although there is no more untouched territory, except of the outer space, which could correspond to exotic fantasies. On the contrary the globalisation impulsed with high speed by technical progress is even levelling differences.

If souvenirs nevertheless keep their significance, we could conclude that we don't really long for the strange – so please don't wonder if you meet your own mirror image in this exhibition.

The exhibition „souvenir transfert imaginaire“ doesn't present a simple collection of souvenirs. It shows object art, and „souvenir“ is the topic. The artists accepted an invitation to fill a cardboard box of determined size with a multiple referring to this topics. It should be an object, because a

souvenir is something what you can touch and take in your hands. In this context I reflected if it could be some more as an accidental coincidence that object art appears more or less at the same time – namely at the beginning of twentieth century – like souvenirs came out on the market as an industrial mass product.

In context with the ambitions of painting to get more distance from the mimetical image, at first objects were dispelled from the scene. Later dadaism and surrealism used them in forms of so called “objets trouvés” and “ready mades”. Just at the moment, when those objects just pulled out of their common context were declared objects of art, they slid into a sphere where they allow to think something different as that what formerly was associated to them. So they open new dimensions for completely subjective speculations.

Rita Bischof explains this fact as a fundamental turn. In one of her articles about the virtue of objects in art, she says – I cite: *What it (the object) indicates, is nothing lower than the breakdown of the immense occidental self-consciousness, which identified the true nature of objects with our ideas of them.*

But in return object art succeeds to evoke that what didn't have a direct objective equivalent up to now. Art-objets become metaphors for an experienced intrinsic existence, which couldn't be characterized before.

Upon the tangible object accumulate ideas, which do no longer circle around the object itself, but dig in memories. Also souvenirs exhibit this paradoxical ambiguity, to be object and reference at the same time.

Frequently object art and souvenirs were suspected to be kitsch, because they resolve art into life and correspond to an unmanagable and subjective terrain. Always during the discussion about kitsch many objections were raised against the traditional projection that kitsch signifies a wallow in sentiments. This was charged to the consumer. Against that was postulated again and again to respect the historical, social and cultural context of the suspicious thing. Its moral validation should be referred to its function and not to the thing itself.

What could this mean, concerning both, the mass product souvenir just like object art? Both had their beginning at the time when woke up an intensely interest in the research of unexplored subjective realms. The dadaists experimented with the absurd, with the joke, the paradox, and the surrealists, inspired by the psychoanalysis of Freud, tried to tap the subconsciousness as a

source for artistic production. As a consequence the conditions of perception moved over into the focus of research.

According to their execution and stress ratio related to the contemplator souvenir and object have the potential to revive a disposition for discovering unexplored realms of individual experience. Of course furtheron it stays also possible to circumnavigate dangerous shallows and to enter always again into the same safe harbors. Surely the latters belong to the domain of kitsch. If souvenirs become a topic of serial object art, like it happens in our exhibition “souvenir transfert imaginaire”, both varieties are preserved. But above all, the kitsch - whatever we think what this could be - succeeds to enter into art as a stylistic element affirmatively giving information about kitschy terrain, if we only presume the existence of discovering spirit and adventuresomeness.

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