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On the occasion of the book launch of *Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelsberg. Netzwerker der Kunstwelt* (Wien, Köln, Weimar 2019).

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**Against mediocrity. Lessons from Eitelberger: Weaving theory, practice and presentation into the cultural and political fabric of society**

It is clichéd to say that someone is ahead of his time, but in the case of Eitelberger it doesn't seem like an exaggeration. He most certainly had visionary ideas regarding the role of art, art theory and art education in both theory and practice within contemporary society. What was originally centred around this one individual is now a thriving field of countless scholars in as many departments and fields of expertise. Moreover, he had a broad cultural-political vision. In Eitelberger's time, art history had not yet been defined but was a field open to all possibilities. Looking back, a mere 150 years later, what has become of art history? Do we still have dreams to build a discipline that can make a difference in the world? To be consequential? In combination with art schools or as a separate discipline, art history has taken root almost everywhere in the world in one way or another. Art is everywhere, museums are thriving, cultural heritage is high on the agenda, archaeology has become a vast field adjacent to art history and material culture studies, and technical art history continues to grow in importance. But there is more, art history is needed for sensemaking. In our overgrown neo-liberal societies, we need the humanities/art history more than ever. Let us follow, then, in Eitelberger's footsteps and dream a committed art history.

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Dear audience, dear colleagues, and friends,

Firstly, I am honoured and would like to thank you for the invitation to participate in this festive occasion. I want to congratulate you on the launch of this impressive and most revealing volume on Rudolf Eitelberger, which elaborates on every angle imaginable. I would also like to thank you for bringing this fascinating pioneer of art history in Austria not only to my attention but to that of many others with this fascinating publication. Considering his groundbreaking work in the field of art history, the study and practice of applied arts, the museum, and, indeed, society at large, a study on Eitelberger has been long overdue. It is the great accomplishment of the present book to have the name of Eitelberger rightfully included as one of the founding fathers of the academic study of art history. What makes him particularly engaging and relevant is that his interest stretches beyond academe, to art and

design education, -practice and -presentation, as well as to the societal role of art. In this respect, he was not just a 'Netzwerker der Kunstwelt', but the architect of it.

### The Book

I will leave a review of this book to others. Pausing momentarily to take in the stern portrait on the cover, I first read the chapter on Eitelberger and the women's movement, pleasantly surprised that this was an issue at that time at all. Given that, as the saying goes, behind every strong man there is a strong woman, this most certainly applies to Eitelberger's spouses, Pauline Lederer who sadly died after nine years of their marriage and later Jeanette Lott. Both the women and Eitelberger moved in sundry circles, salons of the Viennese upper-classes, the intellectual and artistic sphere, but his strong commitment to women's labour and the '*bürgerliche Frauenbewegung*' (the bourgeois women's movement), inspired, in particular, by Lott, is clear. He was also supportive of art education for women, although admitting women to higher art education or to university was apparently a bridge too far. Nonetheless, it does reveal an open mind towards the need for education of all classes in both theory and practice, and the role of art and the applied arts in society.

Eitelberger's quest to be heard is reminiscent of the figure of the little square in Edwin Abbott's lovely 1884 novel *Flatland*. A. Square (also his name) is an inhabitant of a two-dimensional world in which, most tellingly, women are but simple line-segments (i.e. confined to one dimension), and where men occur in a variety of polygons. A. Square is – obviously – a square belonging to the class of gentlemen, but his life was unremarkable. Then, one day, the most amazing thing happens and he witnesses a phenomenon he cannot grasp: he sees a succession of circles, not moving, but getting bigger and then getting smaller again. Was he losing his mind? No, it was a Sphere from a world that A. Square didn't know existed: a three-dimensional world! Then, suddenly, the Sphere lifts him up. A. Square endures a thousand terrors and needs to be lifted up and down a few times before he understands that all the circles that he has seen are actually a single entity, a form he had never before seen and was struggling to comprehend. In order to come to terms with this new world, the Sphere takes A. Square to visit Spaceland. Now that his mind had been opened to new dimensions, he suggests to the Sphere that perhaps there is a world of four dimensions out there. The Sphere is outraged by the mere thought of this and brings A. Square back to Flatland. A. Square is now on a quest: to convince his fellow 2-Ds that other, multidimensional worlds exist and that things look different from another perspective. But alas, in vain!

It is to his credit that Eitelberger succeeded where A. Square failed in mobilizing people into embracing different ideas, seeing relations where others did not, and changing things accordingly.

As the title *Netzwerker der Kunstwelt* suggests, Eitelberger was foremost a networker, marrying thinking to doing, seeing interrelationships between economy, society and education as paramount for cultural '*Bildung*' (a lovely German word that has no proper English translation but that encompasses education, development, culture, civilization, and formation, all of which still slightly miss the mark of the word *Bildung*, which we also use in the Netherlands). Eitelberger believed in *Bildung* not just for the upper classes – although even among the elite he saw a need for a thorough brushing up in this area – but *Bildung* for society at large.

Interestingly, Eitelberger seemed to believe in the force of art rather than that of technology. The high-quality standard of an individual artwork, or perhaps even more so of a design, rubs off, it is contagious, a good example may occasion many follow-ups. In that sense, Eitelberger seems to be a proponent of what today we would call culture's soft power. He had a cultural-political vision that was fueled by ideas stemming from the social, political and liberal revolutions that swept through Europe in 1848's Spring of Nations. It is quite visionary to see the fabric of society as a structure of horizontally and vertically interrelated and connected strands of economics, politics, culture, as well as education and science (in fact, I prefer the word *Wissenschaft* here, because it encompasses the whole of academe), and to see practice and theory as each other's condition. Moreover, from his innovative perspective, the study and practice of art and design is not as a goal, but rather a point of departure from which to move through society, or perhaps, to move society.

In Eitelberger's time, the discipline of Art History was still in *statu nascendi*, and Eitelberger helped to give it shape. The future was still entirely open and all possible courses were attainable, so his founding activities were influential. Vienna found itself in the fortunate circumstance of hosting such an agile mind at work, one who envisioned the study and practice of art and design as affecting the entire social order, and who acknowledged the importance of civilizing through culture and thus fought against mediocrity.

Since then, the field of Art History has grown in multifarious directions and specializations. In the course of the twentieth century, it transformed from a mono-discipline into a vast field of specializations and, subsequently, into a massive field of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary studies as a new century approached. The discipline has become more critical of its methodologies, assumptions, definitions and theorizing, its mechanisms of in- and exclusion, and its own boundaries. Entire libraries testify to this, the accomplishments are simply too numerous to mention here. Suffice it to say that a number of lessons can be learned from Eitelberger. Below I detail four, but many more are possible:

### **Lessons to be learned.**

1. On *Binnenländer* and *Weltbürger* (or: concerning the 'global'). Interestingly, at the dawn of art history as an academic field, when the direction of the discipline still had many options, it wasn't a clear-cut case of just focusing on European traditions in art, as many interesting studies (Kugler, Woermann, Grosse, Strzygowski) demonstrate. Related to thinking in terms of a 'world art history' (*Weltkunstgeschichte*) is the matter of whether the discipline would head towards an art history, i.e. a *Kunstgeschichte* or a *Kunstwissenschaft*. Are we *Kunsthistoriker* with a stronger focus on the historical dimension and genealogies of art (hence inevitably operating on a linear, chronological timeline of change, some say 'progress'), or are we *Kunstwissenschaftler*, adhering to a more systematic approach to art with an emphasis on models, theorizing and methodologies. As I write, this debate is unresolved and, perhaps, it is just as well.

World Art Studies – rather than the singular World Art History – is an approach very dear to me. It indicates the study of art of the world through time and space. For me, art is of all peoples and all times, even if the concepts and language used to indicate these materialized artistic human expressions vary widely. Seeing art history in a global perspective, in its global dimensions of intercultural encounters

and exchange, is a state of mind. This resonates in Eitelberger's endeavour to at least consider *Weltkunst* as a theme; that is, in his efforts to stimulate an artistic awareness of the world. However, let us not forget that Eitelberger's milieu, the nineteenth century, was the era of colonial expansion by European powers, albeit to a lesser extent in Austria under the Habsburgs. On the one hand, the book suggests that Eitelberger resisted the *Spießbürgerlichkeit* (philistinism) of his time and propagated the *Weltbürger* as a mindset; on the other hand, the cultural diversity he refers to is predominantly within the Habsburg monarchy; that is, it does not really encompass the whole globe, but rather the peoples and cultures within the empire.

Despite being a liberal and cosmopolitan thinker with an open attitude, Eitelberger struggled with the relationship between *Eigen* und *Fremd* – but, in all honesty, who doesn't? Recall A. Square's efforts to convince his 2-D compatriots of the existence of other beings than themselves. The issue of Self and Other is as big today as it was then, and matters of identity remain equally predominant. It is laudable that Eitelberger acknowledged cultural acculturation as a process at work within art in his time, but, as Matthew Rampley's contribution to this volume reveals, he also was an exponent of his age in the context of the cultural and intellectual climate of Vienna. Eitelberger was aware of and interested in acculturation, but he was part of and best acquainted with the Austrian-German culture, which he valued over other cultural traditions within and adjacent to the empire, such as Slavic and Roman cultures. In this context, the essential question is what standard should we use to evaluate art and what norm should be applied? This question remains paramount in Art History, indeed more than ever in these times of globalization. The lesson to be learned is to keep an open mind, question one's own assumptions, and not to take one's own culture and art as the measure for all other traditions.

2. *The individual object of art and design.* Disentangling art history from a philosophical-aesthetic view of art, Eitelberger valued the singular work as his object of study, in terms of its design, its operation and its materiality. There is a line to be drawn from this emphasis on the material object to today's field of cultural heritage and the preservation of monuments and buildings, on the one hand, and the museum as place for preservation, conservation, display and learning on the other. After all, he was the instigator of a museum for art and industry, the Museum für Angewandte Kunst's predecessor, and the associated *Kunstgewerbeschule*, the present University of Applied Arts, thus connecting art education in theory and practice with collecting, preserving and displaying objects to learn and to enjoy. Today, cultural heritage studies and museum studies are vast fields of expertise in their own right and they have taken such a flight that they may leave art history lagging behind. For me, the lesson to be learned from Eitelberger is to emphasize Art History's societal role, in telling stories about the art objects, monuments and buildings, to make them comprehensible in respect of their histories and contexts. We must give them meaning, hold them up to the light, examine them, cherish them and relate them to other stories. In short, the challenge is to understand how art moves society.

3. *The object: materiality and high quality.* Understanding the characteristic of the materials, of matter, how to work and create with them, and how viewers respond to them, is more topical than ever. Eitelberger saw the importance of high quality for how it is – *contagious*. But he also saw that good quality design and products would put Austria and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy on the map in terms of the '*Kunstindustrie*' and the world market. Here, art and industry go hand in hand, technological

innovation becomes a playground within art, design and architecture and produces high-quality prototypes for the industry. Eitelberger never tired of stimulating '*Handwerk*' – handicraft or craft – at the same time, feeding the industry with high quality design products. Art/design and technology have a somewhat troubled marriage but their relationship is undeniable. For this reason, I would like to highlight briefly two quite divergent directions regarding the object. The first is Technical Art History's exponential expansion and secondly, in the context of what is called the 'material turn', the idea of material/matter as co-creator.

Technical Art History is the amount of technical and material knowledge needed for the restoration and conservation of art and architecture, for understanding art's material characteristics and the subsequent ways artists and designers work with them. For example, the possibilities that the 3-D printing of artworks (including paintings) open up for research and museum presentations are endless and will almost certainly change our perception of art. Art does not originate from 'higher inspiration' or just 'spring' from the brain; it appears in interaction with the materials and technologies available. This brings us to the 'material turn'.

*Doing* art instead of just reflecting upon artistic end-products is the new turn within the field. The so-called material turn focuses on the agency of artistic material itself, seeing matter as an active agent. There is no clear-cut division between subject and object; in contrast, the boundaries between the two are blurred. This implies respect for the materials, for the way they communicate with the artist in a co-creative process. And it doesn't end there. The viewer is affected by the material presence of a work and must find a way to respond and relate to it. This way of thinking allots a certain agency to the material object in its ability to move people, literally or conceptually. This extends to what some colleagues (see Caroline van Eck's *Art, Agency and Living Presence*) have labelled 'living presence response', i.e. the fact that people respond to artworks as if they are living beings, the insistence of the life, lovability and power to arouse but also frighten viewers. They love, kiss, caress, hate, damage or destroy them. This is what the object in its materiality may bring about.

As a final point about materiality, we must consider Artistic Research, in which art theory and practice, research and making, research through making and handling materials, truly merge. Like the Netherlands, Austria has a thriving field of artistic research and the possibility for artists to, for example, pursue a PhD.

4. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from Eitelberger is to *weave anew art practice, theory and presentation – art history at large – into the cultural and political fabric of society*. We are living in an era of urgent questions, about the environment, the rise of populism and extremism, migration, but also the increasing corporatization of societal domains such as healthcare, care for the elderly. Perhaps the most urgent issue for the field of Art/Design Studies concerns education. Today, education is increasingly seen as something to serve economic productivity and output and academics and students are seen as management material. Arguably, we need Humanities scholars – art scholars like Eitelberger – more than ever.

As a consultant and adviser of many Fortune 500 companies (a ranking of companies from large to small, measured in turnover), such as Ford, Adidas and Chanel, Christian Madsbjerg stands up for the Humanities in his 2017 book *Sensemaking. The Power of the Humanities in the Age of Algorithm*. His keyword is sensemaking, giving meaning to facts and things. Facts require interpretation, a context, a story, and they require data. Not the hard (Madsbjerg calls them 'thin') data, but 'thick' data – the data of meaning. Thick data is essential for arriving at 'cultural intelligence' and 'cultural engagement' and our disciplines are well equipped to impart such cultural knowledge. To study humans in the complexity and beauty of the lived world requires imagination and intuition, an understanding of different worldviews. This calls for developing perspectives, meta-perspectives and methods, which together form an ecosystem that is driven by the urge to examine each developed perspective from a meta-perspective. Put differently, it drives us to look, look again and, on a meta-level, it challenges us to look at our ways of looking. This alone is reason enough for Art History (art and design scholars at large) to claim its societal role.

Perhaps the most salient lesson that Eitelberger teaches us is to interfere in everything, stick our noses in everything, to take a seat at every table and to get involved in everything. 'Infiltrate' everywhere, in every consultation on public and urban planning, education, the museum field, politics, multinationals, the business world. Art History can contribute insights into cultural relevance. The good news is that means there will be jobs always and everywhere, because Humanities/Art-historical thinking is always relevant. That is the importance of our disciplines for the future. And, of course, it is the reason why we must continue to study art.

There is a caveat. Let us not make a saint of Eitelberger. This book is, quite rightly, is not a hagiography but a critical positioning of Eitelberger as a mid-nineteenth-century man of the higher classes, well-established, and with ideas formed according to his societal position. But just as A. Square learned to look beyond his milieu, so did Eitelberger and he teaches us that there are always more perspectives out there to consider.

## References

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