Lost in the Canon?

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— A canon is a reed stalk that serves as a measuring rod, a yardstick that one applies, or a rule that is prescribed. It is a weapon of culture. If one follows the canon, one cannot go astray and nothing is lost. A canon creates a community of emulating artists who communicate by way of deviations and perhaps also by virtue of self-reflexive extensions. In their communication, these artists may try to reach an understanding as to why a deviation, or a self-reflexive extension, may be relevant or not. But the community created by a canon is larger. It does not only include emulating artists. It includes beholders of art, too. Beholders of art expect something from artists because they can more or less anticipate what it is that may count as an artwork in the near future and what it is that will achieve renown. Yet whenever one recognises a canon, its measure enters into a relation with an excess, an outside. This outside is populated by artists who do not care for imitation and whose deviations do not seek invigoration or validation. It is populated by artists bereft of good reasons for doing what they do. The beholders who dare enter this outside have no expectations and avoid anticipations. If the canon sets boundaries, the outside opens the canonical boundaries towards an infinite. It remains doubtful whether there will be a way back once one has crossed canonical boundaries. But must one not introduce a distinction between an outside that allows for the construal of an anti-canon and an outside ruled by an arbitrariness that does not necessarily oppose art, an arbitrariness that can be controlled neither by a canon nor by an anti-canon, an arbitrariness that escapes any certainty as to whether it opposes art or not? No, this is all wrong. A canon only ever exists retrospectively, once art has left the scene. The canonical wants to capture art. Its effect is achieved when an enthused beholder says: “That’s it.” It is the exemplary within the singular, the unique and the ingenious that gives rise to the canon. But because the canonical is the exemplary within the singular, the unique and the ingenious, one can never apply the same yardstick twice to an artwork. The concept of the canon thus yields a paradox. The paradox is anti-canonical only to the extent that there would be no canon without it. Where and how does the artist move who is lost in the canon?

— To the extent that the canon exists only retrospectively and that the artist does not fall prey to regression when relating to it, he must stand outside the canon or even reject it. This is what Harold Bloom called the “anxiety of influence”. When jumping, one must push back the shoulders
upon which one stands. In this way one is always inside and outside the canon. As one pushes back the art from which one jumps, it can become canonical. The canon is a temporal figure of belatedness. One may only know what belongs to the canon once the canon is formed; but as soon as it is formed, it needs to be changed. On the one hand, the canon requires the abject dimension of the new. Yet, on the other hand, it is also the background against which the new takes shape for the first time and becomes visible as a figure. The canon is both obsolete and in the process of constantly constituting itself. Thus it is not as stable as it may at first appear. The canon is different from tradition, which is often said to be “blind”. Tradition covertly transmits its rules and norms in the guise of habits and demeanour. The canon, however, resembles an open book that anyone can read and that allows one to make as many comparisons as one wishes. It can also lose its legitimacy. A canon demands explicit consent and differs from tradition in that it allows for discussion. One can also consider its constitution as a manner in which history is narrated, namely the history of the public aspect of art, of collections kept in museums and purchases made by their curators, of new artworks associated with artworks already known, of journals that cast discursive nets. A canon may get caught up in such nets. They may alter it or even trigger its dismissal. The explosiveness of the canon lies in the fact that it highlights the normative side of the judgement of art once it has become institutionalised. It moreover the demand for universalisation that inheres in such judgement. Criticism turns into expertise and bestows value onto objects.

No canon ever emerged from discussion. And no canon ever gave itself up to discussion without a moment of violence, without a moment that resists the claim to universalisation. Why? Because a canon can only be a canon if it possesses a binding authority. One has to measure oneself against such authority. Yet in order to be effective, authority and measure have to interrupt discussion. If a canon did not always presuppose a universalisation to which one has to agree before asking if one agrees, it would abolish itself. One may disagree with the canon, discuss it, complete it, extend it, and even question it. However, if there is or ought to be such a thing as a canon, it must also remain untouchable, a static universality, an imperturbable fact, not something produced and created. And it is because it does not emerge from discussion that nothing is more discussed than the canon. Is this correct? Does the idea of the canon play any role in contemporary art? Is it not like driftwood from a distant past, driftwood that has long vanished from view because it has sunk or because no one looks for it anymore, even though critics are still asked to list the ten best movies in film history? Internet users, or members of the so-called social media, like nothing better than to constantly issue value judgements, thereby implicitly creating a canon or aligning themselves in relation to one. How exhausting it is to talk about canon and anti-canon! How liberating it would be if one could get lost in the canon and surrender to an almost imperceptible drifting! Whatever appears to be lost in the canon does not aim at a universal or communal form of attention. Nor does it elicit the specialised attention of a group of militant outsiders. Idiosyncrasies that cannot be accounted for in terms of the particular and the universal, or the private and the public, and that cannot be drawn upon deliberately, as it were, may prove sensitive to such erring. Is art that is lost in the canon not art that quickly fades when one turns towards it and surprises it, as if one expected it to take care of itself? What kind of weakness does art that is lost in the canon require?

— When one says that one is lost in the canon, that one loses oneself in the canon or that one gets lost in it, one does not take the canon to be something merely external. Rather it functions as a framing device, a horizon, or a background that allows one to appear or to disappear. A canon is like a city that is determined by its architecture, the topography of its streets and the opening of its squares, but that still allows for individual walks, for different series of journeys that keep decentering the urban map. Insofar as the canon is a figure of temporal repetition, it is also a temporally open form that changes visibly or imperceptibly. It changes more slowly than fashion but rapidly enough to flare at the edges and get sucked into the whirl of time. The canon’s performative dimension lies in its need for interpretation. When questioned on his relation to his Bavarian homeland, Herbert Achternbusch threatened that he would stay in Bavaria until Bavaria would wear his mark. Perhaps the canon could be put to a similar test. One may also display the canon for such a long time that it becomes translucent – just as paradigms exhaust themselves. But this is not
the kind of weakness that interests you. Most probably the weakness you mean cannot be limited to the withdrawal of singular artists and their objects. It is a possible strength, as is the apparent weakness conveyed by the famous phrase that Melville’s character Bartleby keeps repeating: “I would prefer not to”. When asked to distribute four copies of an important juridical document and, in a sense, provide it with a canonical form, Bartleby prefers not to do so. He makes his own choice. He prefers not to do something rather than refusing to do something, something specific. This active choice of omission may serve as a model for losing oneself in the canon. In the English language an alluring phrase expresses this relation between activity and passivity: “Get lost!”. Where does one find oneself when one gets lost in the canon? And where can one be found? Will one be considered a figure that, while lost, continues to appear against the backdrop of the canon? Or will one be regarded as the canon’s Bartleby, emptying it out and erasing it?

— Artworks that belong to the canon must appear strong and mighty. They have to be works of art, precisely, and can demonstrate only small weaknesses. Artworks that do not belong to the canon may be weak when measured against it. Do they have their own, unique strength? If one has a weakness for artworks that are lost in the canon or if the aspect of artworks one values is the aspect of their abandonment, does one have a weakness for a weakness that is truly a strength, the strength of a resistance that operates from within, so to speak, even though it does not seek to substitute the canon with an anti-canon? Or does one have a weakness for something that is neither weakness nor strength but a strange indifference to power, to the power granted by the canon and the anti-canon, to the power that is countered by the anti-canon as well as by the emptying-out of the canon? The artwork that is lost in the canon leaves it untouched because it does not want anything. It experiences the peculiar bliss of being forgotten by power, or of power no longer forcing it to speak. Perhaps resistance is the misunderstanding that haunts Bartleby after power makes him say something. Ingrid Caven!

— Lost in the canon? Here is a metaphor. In Gravity, a science-fiction film by Alfonso Cuarón, Sandra Bullock floats through space in a damaged capsule, looking for help from the Russian and Chinese space stations that are both derelict and abandoned. Her companion George Clooney excuses himself in the first third of the movie and rushes off into the universe. When Bullock lands back on Planet Earth at the end of this mute but not silent monodrama, it is as deserted and empty as outer space, but not as beautiful. In this context, getting lost means being afloat, and such floating resists both the force of gravity and the strength of power. It goes unnoticed on the screens of the geolocation systems. Sometimes we are not hunters and gatherers returning with their booty but the lucky discoverers of objets trouvés that are lost in the canon. There it is, a lost property office full of missing keys that fit no lock and that no one ever claims.

NOTES

This short text was read out by the authors at the birthday party that the journal Texte zur Kunst organised in Berlin to celebrate ist 25th anniversary (November 2015).