

Proto Realism [Manifesto]

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## Why realism?

It's time for a change! After a century of destroying the classical ideal: dissolution of form, art removed from its pedestal, away from the noble materials, away from the artistic craft, away from the ornament, connecting art with life, every man is an artist ... (nothing against the creative potential of the individual, but we are not all architects, scholars or statesmen).

The old concept of art has been stretched and extended close to its breaking point for over a 100 years. It has been trimmed to fit life. Gradually a great longing for the old ideal grows - a new seriousness, a new carefulness, a new spiritual consciousness, a reverence for the particular, an attractive force of the sublime, which reaches beyond our daily existence. After having brought heaven down to earth, it now seems very small, insufficient to satisfy our deep longing. This tendency is evident everywhere in society.

Maybe it started with a gradual revival of figuration as seen with the Leipzig School. Then came the big blockbuster exhibitions of ancient art - a gradual shift away from the school of "les Fauves". The subcultures have for some time been making use of overflowing ornamentation and figuration.

Clearly, what is growing here is no pure historicism - the rediscovery of values once laid aside is mixing with the modern world - as it always has!

The ornamentation of street art, the language of the street, is woven into a vibrant network of overlapping, layering and serial patterns, quantum mechanics and digital codes. Today's figuration speaks a completely different language than a century ago. If you draw your beliefs solely from textbooks it is impossible to understand the new language - an observer unable to follow the new developments.

The pioneers of classical modernism were tired of the figurative mainstream of their time. This is thoroughly understandable, considering the yawning boredom they encountered in the salons: endless mannered sophistries, bon mots on never changing subjects - the same approach, the same method, today as yesterday. What can we still add to this?

We want something shockingly new! If the destructive revolution has become a **fashion, it doesn't hurt anymore! A complacent attitude of lawlessness has ensconced** itself in the galleries, in the collections and in the mind. We want what is out of fashion!

Today's rebellion is the restoration of the visible - a fundamental realism that is aware of its uncertainty. Reality is the illusory attempt at an interpretation of what our perception allows for interpretation. But it is beautiful! Just because we know that it exists only in our imagination.

We create reality by looking closely.

This is form-finding rather than dissolution of form, this is differentiation instead of leveling, this is content instead of emptiness, this is temperance instead of immoderation - a new set of rules, a new system of values, concentration by limitation.

*(translation Lennard Ortmann)*

## Notes on Changing Values / PROTO.REALISM

New Realism, New Renaissance, New Sincerity – there are many descriptions for this phenomenon in recent art history.

I have talked to several colleagues and friends about it. I have searched the contemporary independent art scene, the art market and the established institutions of the art world (museums, biennales, auctions, art criticism) for clues.

A slow paradigm shift is taking place – a gradual return to values we believed had been lost. The signs of this secret renaissance are also slowly trickling down into the commercial art world.<sup>1</sup>

The shift in values since classical Modernism/  
new values:

### 1. New **sincerity**

- Was considered too intellectually laboured, narcissistic/self-satisfied, humourless, too cerebral
- Sincerity as a counterweight to informality and spontaneity
- Playfulness was previously valued more highly

### 2. New **accuracy** in the creative process

- Was considered petit bourgeois and compulsive
- This attitude was accused of being obsessed with detail
- Lack of generosity in artistic creativity

### 3. A new understanding of **order**

- Order/being orderly/neatness were considered bourgeois and uncreative
- **“The genius controls chaos”**
- Possibly as a result of discourse in science about structures of order in chaos, the connotations of **order is changing, the idea of ‘order’ is being re-evaluated**
- A trend moving away from chaotic expression to ordered structures can also be identified in artistic processes
- Structures, patterns, details appear, form crystallises out of the formless
- This trend has led to the rediscovery/re-evaluation of ornamentation, later also of visual opulence

### 4. A new appreciation of **slowness**

- In contrast to the dynamic creativity and spontaneity in Modernism
- The Modernists celebrated speed and their belief in progress (Futurists)

- Screeching motors, smoking chimneys, the noise of machinery and radioactivity are today no longer viewed as symbols of the advance of civilisation as they were in the early twentieth century
  - The incessant barrage of information in our media society creates an additional weariness of speed – larger and larger amounts of data must be processed in shorter amounts of time (limited ability of the brain to process this)
  - The human ability to take in visual and acoustic stimuli is overwhelmed – this leads to a **re-evaluation of the concept of ‘slowness’**
  - In a time when we live our lives at such speed, slowness is once again considered restorative
  - Slowness becomes an expression of authenticity  
Slowness creates the conditions for sincerity and accuracy, both in a conceptual sense and in the craftsmanship of producing the artistic object
  - I find it dubious and over-the-top when established artists produce their wares as if at a conveyer belt<sup>2</sup>
5. New appreciation for **craftsmanship**
- An emphasis on craftsmanship in art was previously considered bourgeois and mediocrally outdated
  - From the perspective of Modernism, art and crafts were two opposing categories that could not be united
  - Craftsmanship was too strictly bound to rules and traditional methods
  - For a long time there was no model for artists to orientate their independent artistic development around
  - Craftsmanship embodies ideas like sincerity, accuracy, orderliness and slowness
  - As a result of the re-evaluation of these ideas, the ideals of craftsmanship are also being newly appreciated
6. A new understanding of **materials**
- **Rediscovery of “valuable materials”**
  - They were considered bourgeois, associated with aristocratic or clerical decadence
  - The shift to Modernism called valuable materials into question, viewing them as having been abused to impress and for the ruling class to maintain power
  - **On the other hand, “materials with little value” were considered cool, rebellious, anti-bourgeois, critical of the establishment (punk)**
  - After a long period of rebellion, the time is ripe for a re-evaluation
7. New relationship to **ornamentation**
- **Ornamentation was a “crime” (Adolf Loos)**
  - Was considered too playful and superficial
  - Was associated with cake-icing, sweet and kitsch
  - The rediscovery of ornamentation linked to new scientific discoveries like network theory, chaos theory, fractal geometry, nanotechnology, new materials, wave/particle duality (see point 3)
  - Also mutually influenced by new trends in music such as serial music, techno, sampling, etc.

8. A new relationship to **opulence**
  - Previously the maxim “less is more” applied
  - Along with the rediscovery of ornamentation and the visualisation of scientific and technical concepts, there is also a growing understanding and interest for “visual opulence” as opposed to “clarity and emptiness”
  - The pulsating excess of form in subculture and pop culture (graffiti, tattoos, manga, anime, techno, layered sampling)
  
9. Rediscovery of a concept of **beauty**
  - For a long time, a “beautiful artwork” was frowned upon and was seen as “kitsch”
  - Beauty was considered superficial
  - The “beauty of the ugly” was propagated
  - The new receptivity for beauty is also an indication for our wounded and agitated soul (see point 4).
  
10. Rehabilitation of the **pedestal**
  - The pedestal symbolises the sublime, the admiration for what is special, the extraordinary
  - In the period of early Modernism, traditional art had hardly anything to do with people’s real lives anymore
  - Pomposity, vanity, narcissism and megalomania were associated with the pedestal
  - That is why Modernism called for “artworks to be pulled down from their pedestals” and to “link art and life with each other again”
  - In the meantime, this attitude along with the rejection of “valuable materials” has become outmoded
  - A new appreciation for the special is felt
  - The efforts to bring everything onto one level of before has now once again become a tendency towards differentiation
  
11. A new attraction to **spirituality**
  - Was considered sentimental esotericism
  - Rediscovery of private spiritual feelings
  - Personal rituals and intimate forms of “private religion” meet a new need for transcendence (surpassing earthly experience)
  - The search for connection/belonging in a higher order
  - This trend is also a result of the re-evaluation of order and chaos (see point 3).
  - The retreat into the private is an expression of the growing discomfort with our fast-moving and over-stimulating society (see point 4).

It is time that we finally stop trying to destroy and extend the concept of art. There is not much left of it. An expanding universe will eventually die, and then everything is gone. The universe must now contract again – come back to an appropriate human dimension, before it can expand again in the next generation.

I have borrowed the militant language of Modernism – to make it clear: we are just as dissatisfied today as we were back then. We are also rebelling against a seemingly unmoveable establishment.

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[We create reality for ourselves by observing it.](#)

This statement is a poetic abbreviation and like all reductionist statements incomplete. It can be understood if one wants to – one can also deliberately misunderstand it.

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I have tried to integrate one of the core ideas from [quantum theory](#) into concept of Realism: measurement itself (observation) influences the result of measurement (the state of the world).

The moment we take a measurement, the wave model collapses into a particle model – physicists talk about the world becoming grainy in this moment – particles can be located, clear contours identified.

Before the measurement, when we are not looking, the world is in a state of nebulous probability distribution. In this probability model, a particle can be located everywhere – It is everywhere at the same time until the moment when we measure it, when we look at it.

The habitual assumption that reality exists independently of our observation can no longer be sustained from this perspective. To certain extents, reality is dependent on our observation.

It is therefore clear that we do not play a passive role in the world, but rather we intervene in the world through our observation – in a way give it a form/contour it did not have before.

My concept of Realism also takes inspiration from the [theory of autopoiesis](#): living systems are networks of production processes immanent to the system, in which each part has the function of participating in the production or transformation of other parts of the network.

In this sense, perception is the representation of an external reality, but equally the production of reciprocal relationships within the network and based on structural links with the external world to the internal one.

Thus, it is not an independently existing, objective external world that is being reflected, much rather an external world is being created internally that corresponds to the essential nature of the autopoietic network. Perceived reality is a projection of one's own being.

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Most people describe "looking/observing" as a subjective image of an objective external reality – as a passive act of reflection.

In my interpretation, the act of looking is an active process of creating reality, even if this only exists in our minds.

The tragedy of this is that we do not know much more about this reality than that it is an illusion.

Since art has existed, artists believed they were creating images of the world. Having grown weary of this leisurely habit, the artists did not merely want to create images, but also invent.

Today we know – we can only invent it for ourselves.

**That is a completely new artistic perspective on "Realism".**

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Many paths lead to the truth; there are alternative ways of thinking that we can weigh up against each other.

Even if it is hard for us to grasp what is really happening out there – we cave dwellers will not cease to ask questions and we will not grow tired of interpreting our **observations of the shadows on the cave's wall.**

A model of thought or belief does not get any better if we keep simply repeating it like a mantra.

Only when we demolish the old doctrines, will the path be cleared for something new.

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*Note 1)*

*Not to be confused with Michael Triegel, but rather strong contemporary positions like Barry X Ball, Marc Quinn, Ron Mueck, Berlinde De Bruyckere and others.*

*Note 2)*

*The business that is Damian Hirst includes 200 employees and along with pictures and objects, also produces books, jewellery, souvenirs and fashion items.*

*For his series of pictures "Spot Paintings" for example, which by now includes 1,500 pictures, numerous people have been employed for many years to do nothing else but paint small coloured dots on canvases according to a randomly generated pattern.*

*(www.damienhirst.com, www.othercriteria.com)*

*Even Stephan Balkenhol (whom I actually quite admire) produces 100 sculptures a year/around one every three days (profile "Das Wagner-Denkmal von Stephan Balkenhol", Euromaxx Magazin/Deutsche Welle, 2013)*

*(translation Anna Galt)*