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Index and Power

Artists, Collectors, Curators and the Brave New World of the Contemporary Arts

Heiko Schmid

The concept of the index covers phenomena that emerge as traces of any kind of action. In his essay, Heiko Schmid discusses the ‹traces› of political and economic interventions in the art industry as well as the impact reactionary artistic approaches have on the production of art and exhibitions.



Artistic Modernism is characterized by an intensification of sorts: in the course of the twentieth century, a large number of artists came to question not just their established practices and concepts, but also the context of their work which they, as contemporaries, always helped shape. This crisis gave rise to both formal and socio-political transgressions with the explicit aim of changing (artistic) realities. Following art theoretician Arthur C. Danto, one could retrospectively speak of the visual arts taking on a philosophical-critical charge.[1] The modern time of upheaval unfolded more or less between the appearance of the Italian Futurists at the beginning of the twentieth century and the socially engaged or informed art projects of the 1970s. At the time it was no longer the studio or exhibition space but, rather, the sociocultural present that was declared the site of artistic interventions. What existed was critically questioned to enable a progression to new states of artistic and sociocultural (self-)assertions. Based on this premise, artists turned into philosophers, into critically analyzing and intervening contemporaries. They started to question not just their practice but also their social role and position, in order, as Wassily Kandinsky for one declared, to tear down the wall between material and spiritual life, between art and everyday reality.[2] Fascinatingly, it was only this discursive or critical positioning that made possible the profession of curator (in its present-day form) and, with it, the contemporary exhibition industry.

Although contrary artistic approaches emerged in recent decades, the aspirations formulated in Modernism have remained a dominant model for artistic activities. Nowadays, however, this legacy of Modernism is repeatedly questioned, as will be shown below with the aid of different theoretical adaptions of the concept of «index».

The fundamental meaning of this concept was famously explicated by art historian Rosalind Krauss in her essay «Notes on the Index». As Krauss notes, «indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents». And she continues: «Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints).»[3] Hence the term «index» is used to describe traces of any kind of action.

Artist-Curators

In the summer of 2016, Zürich hosted its largest art event ever: Manifesta 11. The biennial was promoted with the announcement that it was the first time an individual artist, Christian Jankowski, was organizing a Manifesta (and, ipso facto, an event of a certain magnitude).[4] This is astonishing inasmuch as from an art historical perspective it is not particularly innovative today to have artists curate exhibitions. Why, then, was the artistic profession of the curator, Christian Jankowski, given such prominence even in the run-up to Manifesta 11? [5] This issue has an extremely complex background which I will turn to using a topical adaption of the concept of index: the currently prominently discussed concept of (power) indexing. The concept of indexing was established by the American political theorist, W. Lance Bennett. It serves as an explanatory model for the observation that, since the 1990s, the media tend to more and more emphatically even out the range of views and arguments in official political debates to ultimately represent (to index) the positions of the establishment. [6] The hidden journalistic agenda in this is «to give more space to those agents who presumably will have the greatest influence on what happens in the future — to the journalists the others obviously seem irrelevant ».[7]



PEGIDA-Demonstration Dresden, Image: Thomas Witt- Eigenes Werk, CC-BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=44635022 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=44635022]

Currently, the concept of indexing is also discussed specifically in the context of populist media scoldings and interventions of extreme right-wing agents such as PEGIDA in the German state of Saxony or the American media conglomerate Breitbart News. Yet indexing strategies are central not just to journalism, but revolve around the serious question «who is represented in public in what way?» and «why?» When we remember in this context the criteria the official webpage of Manifesta 11 listed for the choice of Zürich it becomes clear that (power) indexing concepts are by no means just used in the contemporary media landscape. I am citing the official statement of Manifesta 11 about how Zürich was selected as the venue for Manifesta 11: «The Director of the International Foundation Manifesta, Hedwig Fijen, selects the city which fits mostly in Manifesta's strategic vision of how cities represent a certain stage of transformation or unique status quo in dealing with climate change and migration.»[8] Climate change and migration are the current sensitive topics of the European political establishment (as well as of the right-wing populists). In her statement, Hedwig Fijen indicates her ambition to be able to index these very subjects in Manifesta biennials. This is an obvious strategy, inasmuch as the European political establishment comprises the targeted funders and/or hosts of future Manifesta biennials. Yet politicians rarely are art experts. In the years 2015 and 2016, moreover, Zürich and Switzerland were at best sideshows when it comes to buzzwords such as climate change and migration — at least when we leave out complex topics which Manifesta 11 completely avoided, such as the role Switzerland plays in the global commodity trade and in labor migration. It is accordingly dubious why, based on the described search criteria, Manifesta came to Zürich at all.

Concept Discussions

In retrospect, the title *What People Do for Money*, which was met with controversy in Zürich, did offer hope that Manifesta 11 would pursue a critical approach. The title fueled the expectation that an attempt would be made in the eleventh edition of Manifesta to critically and informedly question the power structures of the art market as well as the structures of the global economy. Yet in the run-up it already became clear that this was not the case. In mid-

2015, for instance, people at a public presentation at the Zurich University of the Arts were shocked when Christian Jankowski asked art students to become involved in his Manifesta on an unpaid basis. The fact that someone, who had actually come to ask what people in a financial capital (an expensive one at that) were willing to do for money, in the same breath asked precariously-living cultural professionals to work for him for free pointed to serious deficiencies already a year before the opening of Manifesta 11. The problems thus hinted at have their underlying basis, as I would like to argue, in current economic structural developments of the art industry.

Similarly, the strategy of filling the posts of Manifesta curators with artists can be analyzed in terms of indexing. With such line-ups (the seventh and eight editions of Manifesta were already partly or mainly curated by artists) Hedwig Fijen aims at validating artists as central agents of the art industry and thereby extrapolate relevance for Manifesta itself (as a grassroots biennial, as it were). In other words, Fijen indexes the important, yet frequently marginalized position of artists in the art industry, in order to be able to invoke these putatively influential agents as evidence for the relevance of Manifesta. In this context it is important to understand that for indexing strategies it is secondary whether high-quality work is delivered. What is central, instead, is to position oneself well: absolutely no one can say something against demands for greater relevance of artists in the art industry. However, complex questions about qualifications and concepts, about the relevance of (individual) artistic tools for sociocultural analyses and problems, about the importance of topics such as climate change and migrationfor cities such as Zürich tend to be relegated to the background by indexing strategies. Indexing strategies are good tools to cover up conceptual superficiality by bringing allegedly influential agents to the fore.

If we remember in this context that, by appointing Jankowski, Manifesta officially took up the cause of emancipating artists, the artist's (self-)staging as curator is of crucial interest. In 2016, for instance, Jankowski explicitly started to bolster his artistic positioning versus his function as curator. In January of 2016, a few months before Manifesta 11, Christian Jankowski opened the exhibition Retrospektive at Contemporary Fine Arts, the renowned Berlin gallery.[9] A retrospective presents the apogee of an artist's creative power. By personally organizing an exhibition with such a title at a time when preparations for Manifesta 11 were in full swing, artist-curator Christian Jankowski highlighted great achievements of his artistic career. The fact that in the process, as part of his «play» of professional attributions, he really only defined the artist Jankowski as a valid position by presenting Nina Hoss, an actress not exactly known as an art expert, as curator of his retrospective similarly points to a methodical approach. Hedwig Fijen's indexing strategy, which consisted in staging the emancipation of artists in a high-profile manner, was thus straightforwardly taken at face value by Jankowski.

Decline of Relevance — New Elites

How can it be that one of the largest contemporary art biennials, in order to clarify the question «Why Zürich?», unashamedly emphasizes sensitive topics of mass media discourse to underscore its relevance? And how to explain that this very institution at the same time allows an artist to undercut his own aspiration to examine European identity as reflected in artistic (research) concepts[10] with trivial self-staging strategies? These questions are, as mentioned earlier, linked to the transformation of basic global conditions. As a matter of fact, the 2008 financial crisis put an end to the previously enthusiastically acclaimed biennial boom and, as a result, put the non-commercial art scene under enormous pressure.[11] For a migrating biennial such as Manifesta, which (aside from subsidies from the Dutch state) doesn't have recourse to any steady financial sources, a transformation such as this has twice the precarious impact. Factual constraints were what made Manifesta eventually come to Zürich as well as to Christian Jankowski. It can, indeed, be shown that, for some time now,

dominant agents of the art industry are no longer established in the context of biennials. As art theoretician Wolfgang Ullrich, for instance, demonstrates in his book titled *Siegerkunst* (Winners' Art), collectors have for some time now been moving ever more vehemently into the center of the art industry. This affects the way in which exhibitions are produced and, above all, where contemporary art is shown. Exhibition centers founded by lifestyle corporations such as Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris or the Milan branch of Fondazione Prada bear witness to a proliferation of museums founded by private collectors. What characterizes these establishments even in their very names is a high-profile association of art with luxury brands from the fashion industry or with the collectors linked to those corporations. Bernard Jean Étienne Arnault, for example, who is CEO of LVMH, the conglomerate to which Louis Vuitton belongs, is well known as a solvent art collector. Fondazione Prada is nothing more than the collection of Patrizio Bertelli and Miuccia Prada, the couple that runs the Prada fashion house.



Fondazione Prada, Image: Heiko Schmid

Both the Fondation Louis Vuitton and the Prada Collection raised their public profiles with the help of a lot of money and renowned architects. The Paris home for the Fondation Louis Vuitton, for example, was built by Frank Gehry for an estimated 135 million Euros (approx. 143 million Dollars) and Rem Koolhaas built the probably considerably cheaper complex in Milan. We are dealing with a problematic conflict situation here, because in such collector's museums exhibitions are less theme-based than in traditional, public institutions. These private museums seem to place greater value on the overall impression of their institutes than on individual artistic positions. The collection of Bernard Arnault at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, for instance, is thematically rearranged every six months to show previously hidden

aspects of his collecting activities. Its Milan counterpart has clearly more complex aspirations: the Prada couple seeks inspiration from numerous scholars and curators in its work and offers artists such as Thomas Demand (an artist whom Miuccia Prada has supported for many years) a chance to develop curatorial visions of their own. Although Demand, for one, did manage to produce a cultural-historically compact presentation of tendencies in contemporary art in his exhibition *L'image volée*, it, too, is embedded in an ensemble that reflects the collectors' access to contemporary art. Even if a wider range of protagonists is obviously given space here, the choice who can become active here ultimately reflects the collectors' obsessions, inspirations and approaches. This personalized approach, this individually shaped attention economy is relevant for many collections as well as private museums. Their increasing dominance is paralleled by another significant development hinted at by Wolfgang Ullrich: in and around an art industry dominated by collectors and «winner artists» such as Jeff Koons and Olafur Eliasson he observes a conservative backlash in which the ability to conceive, the capacity to develop brilliant ideas — in other words, pre-modern images of the artist in connection with which the realization of artworks is regarded as a secondary work process that would better be outsourced to workshops and specialists — are once again in the ascendancy.[12] Ullrich thus currently observes an increased focus in publicly established collections on artistic personalities and/or ‹grand› and effectively pre-modern artist gestures, which relegate the actual production of exhibitions and art into the background. I will further clarify this observation below.

Indexing Art

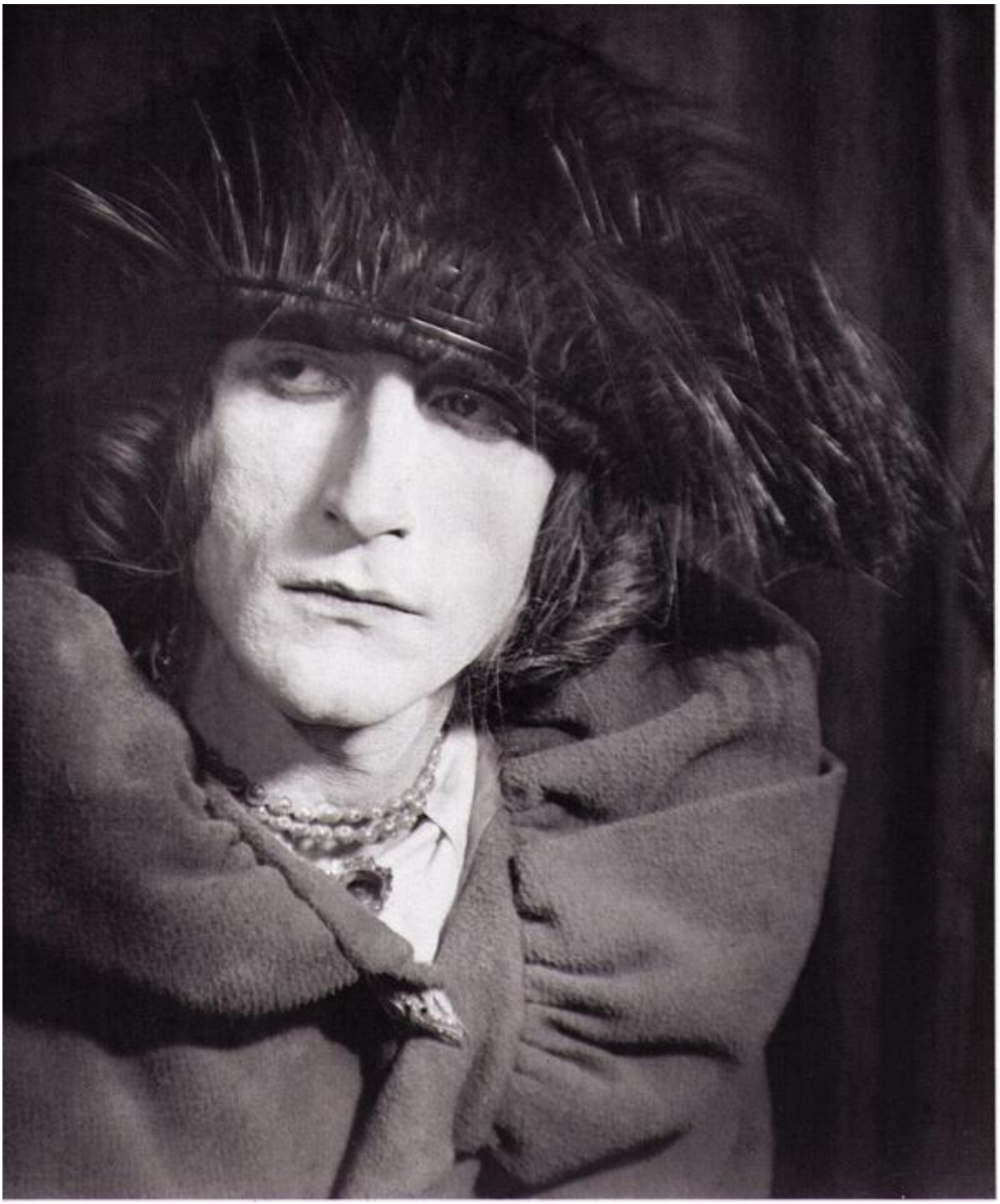
The artist Christo represents such a pre-modern image of the artist almost perfectly. His latest large-scale project, *The Floating Piers* (2016), for example, combines all relevant characteristics of a successful winner artwork. It involved a floating dock system that made an island in Lake Iseo, Italy, accessible by foot. As the project website proudly proclaims, *The Floating Piers* involved the use of 100,000 square meters of yellow fabric which were made to float as an accessible pier by means of 220,000 polyethylene cubes.[13]



Christo, *The Floating Piers*, 2016, Image: Heiko Schmid

In other words, we’re dealing here with both a financially and technically extremely demanding project that is impressive in its operative elaborateness. However, the artwork’s complexity exhausts itself in this expensive installation. The final result was a visually exciting and therefore, in terms of tourism, very successful intervention in a cultural landscape. The color yellow, rather unusual for technical structures, as well as the geometric forms of the piers highlight the artistic ambition of the intervention and can be read as index of a grand artistic conceptual gesture: technical precision combines with ‹ingenious› design work and virtuoso execution to form a high-profile ensemble. Hence this artwork is primarily a powerful ‹expression of artistic will›[14] which in its entrepreneurial audacity is quite comparable to, say, the decision to found an art museum. Such an artwork obviously promises success at a time when collectors become ever more dominant.

Another characteristic of this artwork is its pre-modern *dispositif*, an assessment that, tellingly, can be substantiated by a comparison with Duchamp’s readymades. When considering the conception of these classical modernist artworks, it becomes clear that Duchamp aimed at subverting the historically grown ‹connection› between artist and production of meaning.[15] Duchamp developed a clear set of rules for his readymades, which were based on pre-defined points in time for encounters with objects.[16] This strategy allowed him to ‹abstract› his artworks from himself, as it were. In doing so, Duchamp transformed his readymades into something which can be understood primarily as index or trace of a discrete concept (and not indeed of an expression of artistic will).



Man Ray, *Portrait of Rrose Sélavy*, 1921, Image: http://www.wikiart.org/en/man-ray/portrait-of-rose-s%C3%A9lavy-1921 [http://www.wikiart.org/en/man-ray/portrait-of-rose-s%C3%A9lavy-1921], Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36997034 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36997034]

With his intervention Duchamp put the artist's position into a conceptual limbo. Modern artists such as Duchamp can thus be credited for having clarified that the program or the idea of art is a phenomenon that can be disconnected from the artist. Hardly surprising, Duchamp's approach opened up perspectives especially for art historian and artists (that is, specialists), while alienating classic recipients. Artistic Modernism pursued the explicit goal of changing (artistic) realities, which requires contextual knowledge for the recipient to be able to appreciate it. On the other hand, when considering Christo's approach in this regard, we find that he undoes what Duchamp did exemplarily to overcome the classical coordinate system of artistic activity and meaning. Anyone visiting *The Floating Pier*s can understand Christo's spectacular artistic vision and be fascinated by his ability to make nature — that is, a lake — the canvas of his art. The index Christo produces as a result solely refers back to him as an

artist. Christo conceives of his artwork primarily as index of an artistic intervention and, in doing so, basically reactivates the artist's workshop that featured so prominently in the history of art from Lucas Cranach to Raphael to Peter Paul Rubens. What we are dealing with here is a fundamentally reactionary understanding of the visual arts.

On the Art Market

Christian Jankowski initially seemed to position himself differently with his concept for Manifesta 11. The idea to bring artists together with professionals from Zürich and the rule that all invited artists were to come to Zürich thoroughly unbiased, in order to first engage in research — all this seemed to point to a quasi-Duchampian conceptual work.



Christian Jankowski, Curator Manifesta 11, Photo: (c) Manifesta 11

But Jankowski had not come to depersonalize his «artwork», or to make an exhibition newly conceivable as an independent artwork. This would have required such things as an in-depth analysis of backgrounds, interventions in sociocultural power structures, context analyses of local conditions and, more generally, more detailed questions regarding historical and contemporary approaches of artists and curators — in other words, a lot of work and much knowledge. In retrospect it becomes clear that Christian Jankowski didn't really want to open up new sociocultural points of reference for artistic interventions. Even if he staged Manifesta 11 in Zürich in classical art institutions such as the Migros Museum, the Kunsthalle and Helmhaus, his apparent aim was, rather, to make himself attractive to the private collections described above. Interestingly, this is evidenced precisely by Christian Jankowski's references to his abilities as an artist and the abilities of artists (such as the «artists' guild» he established [17]). With this self-positioning, Jankowski promised that a biennial used as «canvas» for an artwork would produce a spectacular wow effect. In doing so, he single-handedly made an entire biennial the index of his artistic project work in a self-presentation and modus operandi comparable to Christo's — something he himself obviously failed to see. Accordingly, I would like to argue that the reference to the curator's artistic profession incessantly repeated by Manifesta and Christian Jankowski is indeed consistent with a thematic-conceptual statement. This assessment can be clarified by the example of the most extensively discussed and advertised artwork of Manifesta 11, Mike Bouchet's *The Zurich Load* (2016).



Mike Bouchet, *The Zurich Load*, 2016, Ausstellungsansicht, Photo: (c) Manifesta 11

This work consisting of 80 tons of sludge is likewise distinguished primarily by project work carried out with technical precision, which was made accessible in a spectacular display. What the meaning of displaying the feces of the entire population of Zürich for an exhibition could be was a question less considered in this context. This artwork, too, can primarily be understood as index of an artistic intervention. The fact that *The Zurich Load* was placed so prominently in marketing terms shows, moreover, that the artists of Manifesta 11 obviously went on to proceed in accordance with Christian Jankowski's curatorial guideline as they adapted his pre-modern artist's approach.

Thus the conceptual gist of Manifesta 11 is a re-activation of pre-modern images of the artist performatively realized by Christian Jankowski. With this approach, concept discussions focusing on sociopolitical issues became irrelevant, while Jankowski was able to put himself as curator center stage and position himself as part of an «innovative avant-garde» of winner artists. In the case of Christian Jankowski's Manifesta 11, too, we are dealing with a fundamentally reactionary intervention in the art industry.

Void

Artists have always faced the task of having to develop an approach that is only then provided with the index «important» (or «unimportant») by the powerful agents of the art industry (rulers, curators, art dealers and collectors). Hence there is indeed something to be said for attempting to overturn those power relations and establish artists as powerful actors and to index their ‹suppressed› relevance or their modern understanding of their role accordingly. However, what Manifesta 11 showed is that it is impossible to use artists across the board as savers of an art industry steeped in the most diverse (economic and political) interests, claims to power and institutionalized knowledge.

The fact that negating modern models neither promises innovations in terms of content nor provides ‹new› quality standards became finally apparent in the outrageous installation

Christian Jankowski developed for the exhibition spaces of Manifesta 11 (they were filled with found objects, ‹contextualizing historical› artworks and commissioned works appropriated by the curator). What the case of this biennial thus teaches us is that it doesn't work without art historical knowledge after all. This ‹artist biennial› therefore perfectly illustrates the fact that without art historical context a curatorial positioning as a brilliant creative mind, whose ability to come up with ‹ground-breaking› concepts is supposed to qualify it for the highest blessings of the art industry, rapidly leads nowhere — or back into the nineteenth century.

[1] See Arthur C. Danto, *Das Fortleben der Kunst* (Munich: Fink, 2000).
[2] See Uwe M. Schneede, *Die Zwanziger Jahre, Manifeste und Dokumente deutscher Künstler* (Cologne: DuMont, 1979), 190.
[3] Rosalind Krauss, «Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America», in *October 3* (1977): 68-81, here 70.
[4] See http://m11.manifesta.org/en/m11/why-zurich [http://m11.manifesta.org/en/m11/why-zurich][5] For example, http://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/zuercher_kultur/kurator-der-manifesta-11-1.18426754 [http://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/zuercher_kultur/kurator-der-manifesta-11-1.18426754], http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/programm-der-manifesta-11-macht-neugierig/story/22401334 [http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/programm-der-manifesta-11-macht-neugierig/story/22401334], https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/arbeit-am-mythos-1 (accessed 17 January 2017)
[6] W. Lance Bennett, «Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States», in *Journal of Communication* 2 (1990): 103–125.
[7] Uwe Krüger, *Mainstream: Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2016), Pos 719.
[8] See http://m11.manifesta.org/en/m11/why-zurich [http://m11.manifesta.org/en/m11/why-zurich] (accessed 17 January 2017).
[9] See http://www.cfa-berlin.com/exhibitions/retrospektive [http://www.cfa-berlin.com/exhibitions/retrospektive] (accessed 17 January 2017)
[10] See http://m11.manifesta.org/en/about/history-der-manifesta [http://m11.manifesta.org/en/about/history-der-manifesta] (accessed 17 January 2017)
[11] The art historian Robert Fleck, for instance, argues that the 130 biennials throughout the world represented a powerful second art scene involved in a cold war with the art market. See Robert Fleck, *Das Kunstsystem im 21. Jahrhundert. Museen, Künstler, Sammler, Galerien* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2013), 21f.
[12] See Wolfgang Ullrich, *Siegerkunst: Neuer Adel, teure Lust* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2016), 101.
[13] See http://www.thefloatingpiers.com/the-project/ [http://www.thefloatingpiers.com/the-project/] (accessed 17 January 2017)
[14] See Ullrich 2016 (as in n. 12), 102.
[15] As Rosalind Krauss points out, the strength of Duchamp's concept of the readymade lies precisely in what makes this possible apparatively in the same way as a photographic image: «a breakdown of the relatedness of the linguistic sign», meaning a breakdown of the classical coordinate system of artistic activity and meaning or of the classical indexing of «traces» imprinted in artworks by artists. Krauss 1977 (as in n. 3), 68–81, here 77.
[16] Duchamp:
«Specifications for "Readymades."
by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), ‹to inscribe a

readymade.› -the readymade
can later be looked for.» Krauss 1977 (as in n. 3), 68–81, here 77.
[17] See http://m11.manifesta.org/en/cabaret-der-kunstler-zunfthaus-voltaire-0 (accessed 17 January 2017)

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