

Harald Kimpel

You do not see the same work twice

In 2012, when Norbert Pümpel began a series of paper works referencing the number of people living in the world at a given point in time, he combined general physical and chemical realities with individual existence; the works relate the problem of finiteness as embodied in the individual to impersonal natural processes.

The visual action develops on the carrier material of each experimental setup, namely double sheets of Chinese rice paper forming an approximately square process field and soaked in colors, solutions and substances. Each work bears a date – the date on which it was created – and a ten-digit number: the official world population figure as calculated for that date. One out of more than seven billion people is thus the reference, an anonymous specimen out of all the human beings born that day. To that specimen is dedicated this special case of a portrait, this picture without an image, which rejects all physiognomical likeness in favor of a focus on structural similarity. The individual products of the series vary in color and to a limited extent in size, just as individual human beings differ and yet are morphologically comparable.

The date on the paper refers not to the day of completion but to the day on which the work was begun. It indicates the date of birth of the work, which is then left to undertake a journey to decay. As a result of the material properties of the object and the attrition worked by the environmental factors to which it is exposed, it will change in the course of the decades and possibly cease to be. To that extent the works also lend expression to the physical process of entropy – not in the form of a symbolic or narrative representation of the thermodynamic process, but as a direct manifestation. They are a fitting expression of the process, which they communicate in its own language. Change and decay are revealed as functions of existence in time.

Paper and people are thus subject to the same process. They both undergo similar developments and have a limited lifespan; the aesthetic state at any given moment is as incalculable and as dependent on fortuitous factors as the existence of the numbered individual. By omitting to specify a definitive stage for his works, Norbert Pümpel leaves the development of the aesthetic state in the individual case to external influences.

And the self-limiting object is subject to a relentless aging process; it is free of illusionism. The work shows what it is: not an appearance of reality but reality itself; the individual sheets are not a pretense but a presentation, a discourse – insofar as this is possible – of truth, or less rigorously: truthfulness.

Norbert Pümpel's process-oriented works, which offer a direct experience of the phenomenon of time, are a long-term variant of auto-destructive art: a rejection of the hypertrophic claims to eternity traditionally associated with creative work, a strategy against survival. It is an art form targeted at the opposite of what artistic endeavor traditionally pursues: Permanence and the suspension of time are repudiated. It is the negation of the conservative approach to art, of release in terms of materials and ideas – with the exception of *panta rhei* – from the flow of the ephemeral. In their gradual progression, the individual products are no longer designed to escape the futility of all endeavor. They are living objects to the extent that they develop a history – like those of a biography or a fate. The objective of Norbert Pümpel's series is not to eliminate the element of time but participation in time and its consequences. Every work carries its own history embedded within it; it shares in the general thermodynamic direction of flow, which knows no reversal; every work is a reflection of *vanitas*, implementing in itself the idea of transience: the acknowledgement of imperfection and of the futility of artistic activity, too.

Of course, the slow processes of modification in color and substance are imperceptible to the casual observer; they only become apparent over time. And there is no going back: The non-recoverability of past states makes every moment unique. The artist, too, must experience the regression of his unstable product. The same work cannot be viewed twice.

A work of art that does not withdraw from life but participates in it by sharing a key characteristic, namely transience, is also the negation of all restorative endeavors and fine skills to conserve the last meaningless microscopic particle. At the same time, it is a challenge to art collectors to acquire works which can be expected to survive them by only a limited period – or which offer the consolation that the purchases will share with them the burden of aging (or might even age vicariously in an anecdotal version or physical embodiment of the Dorian Gray motif).

The “Fleeting Memorials”, as evanescent as their reference, combine to create a temporary monument to unknown and unnamed persons, who are accorded only the statistical presence of a number: an unfinished and unfinishable memorial, a project that is open to the future, with a tendency to infinity, focussing on a human life but exceeding it in the process. The artist begins the series and sees how far it will take him. At all events, it will not be to an end; the concept of “Fleeting Memorials” offers enough material for a complete life as an artist. It is accordingly for Norbert Pümpel to decide when the responsibility he has assumed can be laid aside, when the series should be discontinued – in the knowledge “that entropy will ultimately be the winner in any case and nothing will remain of the Universe with all its Milky Ways but a whirl of atoms in empty space.” (Italo Calvino)

If the self-dissolving image can be seen as a celebration of entropy, in his “Condensates” series Norbert Pümpel takes a further step towards relinquishing control over his own materials and at the same time applying modern physical models of the state of the world. It is based on the subject of the Bose–Einstein condensate, i.e. unorthodox behavioral patterns displayed by matter at ultracold temperatures. It is in this range that macroscopic quantum phenomena first become apparent and can be described as wave functions; a discontinuous view of the world is replaced by a continuum of superfluid matter, which is perceived as an oscillation without any defined location. Norbert Pümpel’s works describe states of probability, blurring all spatial structures in new aggregate states and creating a liquid, fleeting, wave-dynamic image of the world. With regard to the theoretical aesthetics behind this group of works, the artist says: “The difference as reflected in my works between the view dominant in quantum mechanics in the 1970s and 80s and today’s approach is most clearly reflected in the fact that the early state of my knowledge reflected a continuous world of quantized matter and/or energy, a world of structures comprised of discrete packets of elementary particles, photons, energy packets.”

Norbert Pümpel, who has made visual implementation of the latest theories of physical knowledge (complete with their philosophical presuppositions and ethical consequences) since the beginning of his artistic career in the 1970s, derives new approaches to theory-of-knowledge creativity from the latest approaches to the description of the state of matter. In his “Condensates”, it is oils interacting with “various solutions and substances”, to use his almost alchemistic formulation for the materials he applies to the canvas, through which his current view of the world emerges out of a nebulous haze. The individual works develop in serial experimental designs, in which the atelier becomes a laboratory and the artist the experimenter.

In this play of liquids, the artistic subject is superfluous. With the voluntary reduction of his options, the artist steps back behind a self-organizing organism, which itself takes charge of the final aesthetic decisions. As the initiator – not the consummator – of the empowered work, his function is merely to launch a process which, from that moment onwards, develops according to its own laws. The artist’s role is reduced to that of a catalyst for a development whose process can only be influenced at the originating moment and which generates a result

which will surprise him in its unpredictability. He withdraws to the demiurgic role of an initial stimulator and subsequently an observer of his deed – and so becomes his own recipient.

That lends all the more weight to the original moment: as an irreversible initial decision or, for more pathos, as the moment of creation.

The artist lets art unfold. Something takes its course. This finding from Samuel Beckett's "Endgame" was chosen by Norbert Pümpel years ago as the title of an exhibition – art in a process of change in a world in a process of change, with developing images for a developing image of the world.

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