JACKY STRENZ

Kurt-Schumacher-Str. 2 60311 FRANKFURT am MAIN

MARKUS EBNER

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection)
February 12 - April 23, 2022

TEL +49 (0)69. 21 99 98 70 CELL +49 (0) 151. 11 64 97 37 www.jackystrenz.com office@jackystrenz.com

Exhibition view

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Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 05, 2021
Vinyl paint on canvas (aluminium artist frame)
149,5 x 139,6 cm; 58,85 x 54,92 in.

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 01, 2020

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 02, 2020

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 03, 2020

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 04, 2020

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 05, 2021

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 06, 2021

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 07, 2021

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 08, 2021

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 09, 2021

Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection) 10, 2021

Time Machines

Markus Ebner's Work Series Zuneigung (Inclination/Affection)

Text by Kito Nedo

In 2007, a scandal sent a jolt through Hamburg's cultural scene, making headlines across Germany and meriting a report on one of the country's major daily newscasts, ARD's *Tagesthemen*.[1] The fuss was triggered by an exhibition at Hamburg's Museum of Ethnology,[2] which included eight terracotta warriors flown in from China: three weeks after the exhibition opened, it turned out that these "antiquities" were faithful copies of the originals. Despite the fact that the works being reproductions, there was no dip in the show's popularity, yet even so it closed ahead of time. Why was this? The German media were united in their sardonic view of events: "The Hamburg Museum of Ethnology has been duped. The museum scandal shows that the business of forging works of art is booming." This was the verdict of Deutschlandfunk Kultur, for example, which then went on to quote the museum's director at the time, Wulf-Dietrich Köpke: "In China, anything that makes money is counterfeited–not just brand-name sneakers and luxury watches but art treasures too, of course."[3] It's all the same, it would seem, where the Western concept of the original is at stake, whether we're talking about sneakers, luxury watches, or, for that matter, Chinese cultural assets.

In his 2011 essay *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, philosopher Byung-Chul Han presents a nuanced reading of the Hamburg incident. The text by the Seoul-born cultural theorist suggests that the Hamburg museum may have been remiss in advance of the exhibition, failing to properly explore the intercultural differences between the Chinese and Western understandings of concepts like "copy" and "original." According to Han, the Chinese have two different words for copy: "*Fangzhipin* (仿製品) are imitations where the difference from the original is obvious. These are small models or copies that can be purchased in a museum shop, for example. The second concept for a copy is *fuzhipin* (複製品). They are exact reproductions of the original, which, for the Chinese, are of equal value to the original. It has absolutely no negative connotations. The discrepancy with regard to the understanding of what a copy is has often led to misunderstandings and arguments between China and Western museums. The Chinese often send copies abroad instead of originals, in the firm belief that there are not essentially different from the originals. The rejection that then comes from the Western museums is perceived by the Chinese as an insult."[4] Han locates the Buddhist idea of the eternal cycle of life as a subtle underlying element in this idiosyncratic interpretation of copy and original: "In the unending cycle of life there is no longer anything unique, original, singular, or final. Only repetitions and reproductions exist."[5] But even in many Western museums, the fixation with the historical original has long since begun to relax, giving way to a new sense of pragmatism. In many cases, copies are put on display in deference to conservation or insurance concerns.

In 2012, in reference to Han's essay, art historian Wolfgang Ullrich wrote that the effects of globalization and the increased overall presence of Asia–and China, in particular–are not without consequences for inter- and intracultural discourse. The West's view of its own cultural traditions is changing, and ideas about the value of individuality and originality are becoming more open. Values that were previously taken for granted may now be scrutinized more intensely. "While the globalization debate in the West is only ever about the degree to which expansionism has

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[1] *Tagesthemen*, ARD, December 11, 2007, https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/sendung/tt240.html, 24:38–27:45.
[2] Since its renaming in 2018, the museum is now called Museum am Rothenbaum / Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK).
[3] Werner Nording, "Hamburger Terrakotta-Ausstellung wird geschlossen: Museum für Völkerkunde will juristische Schritte einleiten," Deutschlandfunk Kultur, December 12, 2007, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/hamburger-terrakotta-ausstellung-wird-geschlossen.1013.de.html?dram:article_id=167527.
[4] Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 60–61.
[5] Han, *Shanzhai*, 67.

impacted other cultures, it is also important to reflect on whether there are also influences operating in the other direction. Why shouldn't cultural practices from Asia, for example, have a reciprocal effect on the West? And might the new preference for copying in various forms that has been evident among Western artists in recent years even be stimulated by ideas from the Far East?"[6] Even if artists working in the West today do not make specific reference to approaches informed by Asian culture, we can assume that practices of copying, reproduction, and repetition are naturally part of the contemporary repertoire, especially in that part of the art scene schooled in conceptual thinking.

The conceptual approach adopted by Markus Ebner in 2000, when he began appropriating the work of his former teacher Günter Fruhtrunk in his own artistic practice, has a clear kinship with the Chinese idea of *fuzhipin*, as described by Han in his essay. In the early 1980s, Ebner spent three semesters studying with Fruhtrunk at the Munich Art Academy up until the latter's suicide. His work seems to involve an almost frictionless conflation of original and copy. However, with one key difference: there is no room for any misunderstanding on the question of authorship. Ebner signs his name on the back of his pictures and then adds his stamp, thus maintaining his own individuality as author. Moreover, Ebner's artistic practice involves a radical questioning of the original, and he is as rigorous in this as Fruhtrunk himself, who often produced several versions of a motif in different sizes. The painting *Zuneigung* (Inclination/Affection), for example, which Fruhtrunk finished shortly before his death in the winter of 1982, measures 149.5 × 139.5 cm and is a smaller version of *Bild* (Picture) (207 × 192 cm), also from 1982.[7] In 2006, Ebner actually made this practice of Fruhtrunk's the subject of an exhibition. In *Wendepunk* (Inflection Point), which ran in Frankfurt at Jacky Strenz,[8] Ebner showed seven versions of the Fruhtrunk painting *Wendepunkt* (Inflection Point), as listed in the artist's catalogue raisonné.[9] On another occasion, he recreated the historic Fruhtrunk show at documenta 4 in Kassel in a two-part exhibition in Frankfurt.[10] This form of conceptually oriented artistic reproduction leaves open the question of whether the notion of the original is actually deconstructed in Ebner's work or whether it is, in fact, reinforced in the end–it may even be a case of both/and.

Perhaps another reason why Ebner's way of working seems so contemporary today is that in the sophisticated copy-and-"pastemodern" age,[11] the traditional wall separating original and copy has become increasingly porous. Files can be effortlessly duplicated with a single mouse click; uploading a cell-phone photo to social media is tantamount to a never-ending process of copying. The internet is one giant copying machine. Actions like the German Publishers and Booksellers Association's poster and sticker campaign "Copying is not art!"–which was launched in spring 2007 to make the case for a change in awareness among "digital natives"–seem strangely out of kilter with reality given the

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[6] Wolfgang Ullrich, "Rituale der Wiederholung: Zum wiedererwachten Interesse zeitgenössischer Künstler an Formen der Kopie," in *Déjà-vu? Die Kunst der Wiederholung von Dürer bis Youtube*, ed. Ariane Mensger, exh. cat. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe (Bielefeld: Kerber 2012), 136–45, here: 137.

[7] See *Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings: By Motif*, vol. 1 of *Günter Fruhtrunk: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings, 1952–1982*, ed. Silke Reiter (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018), 500.

[8] Markus Ebner, *Wendepunkt*, Jacky Strenz, Frankfurt am Main, September 8 – November 11, 2006.

[9] Prior to the publication of the Fruhtrunk catalogue raisonné in 2018 (see n. 7), Ebner's primary source was the information contained in Karin Wendt's book *Günter Fruhtrunk Monographie und Werkverzeichnis: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des konkreten Bildes*, which was published in 2001 by Peter Lang in Frankfurt.

[10] Markus Ebner, *Documenta 4, 1968, Part 1* (February 4 – April 22, 2012) and *Documenta 4, 1968, Part* 2 (May 26 – June 15, 2012). Both exhibitions were shown at Jacky Strenz in Frankfurt am Main.

[11] The term "pastemodernism" was a bon mot coined by the Berlin artist and media philosopher Martin Conrads, who was part of the Berlin media art nexus convex tv. In a written communication (October 2021), Conrads told me that the term was originally a playful take on the "conceptual pairing of 'post-media' and 'paste-media.'"

prevalence of online sharing and copying, the dominant cultural techniques of our time.[12] In other sections of society, the idea of copying does not come with any of the overtones of inferior quality or, for that matter, criminality.[13]

And yet comparing Ebner's artistic practice with the copying techniques used in digital culture would surely fail to get to the true heart of the matter. For although Fruhtrunk's hard-edge painting accommodates reproduction, Ebner really builds his pictures from within in a painstaking, protracted process, using repro plots at the same scale as the original. As in the Middle Ages, the painter transposes key points from the plot to the primed canvas with an engraver, before connecting them together with drawing bars and taping them. This gives rise to "an original of an original," as Düsseldorf artist Hans-Peter Feldmann once put it in a different context.[14]

Ebner's own working method makes reference to that of Fruhtrunk, "emulating" it in his own studio practice by using ruling pens, brushes, and masking tape, for example, just as Fruhtrunk would. Old photographs from Fruhtrunk's studio act as technical pointers, with further clues provided by documents that have been preserved like the "artisan's blurb," a letter that Fruhtrunk sent to the deputy director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1978, in which the painter provides rather detailed insight into the workmanship and technical execution of his paintings at the time.[15] Ebner uses the same French vinyl paints (Lefranc & Bourgeois Flashe) as Fruhtrunk did in the latter stages of his career, while also emulating him by adding varnish to his black surfaces. Ebner is always on the lookout too for fine linen portrait canvas, which is difficult to get hold of today. Even so, we're still not talking about an exact copy. "The only difference perhaps is that I paint more layers," Ebner explains. He applies up to fifteen layers of paint to complete an area of color. "It's much easier to paint your own picture than to produce an exact copy," he says. He stresses the fact that even when you're making a copy, you need to constantly make decisions.[16] Whether the copy is successful and how this is achieved depend too on one's "physical and psychological condition that day." The artist's hand, body, and head are thus critical elements in the process of reproduction that give rise to Ebner's pictures. Looked at in this light, the appropriation of each Fruhtrunk motif appears to be the opposite of an alienated, distanced, casual act of copying. Rather, it is a type of empathy specifically performed with a posture of formalized aesthetic rigor. As Ebner says, "I had to teach myself the discipline."

Fruhtrunk's original painting *Zuneigung* (Inclination/Affection) (1982) is now included in the Maximilian and Agathe Weishaupt Collection.[17] The focus of the collection is on nonrepresentational, constructivist concrete art after 1945. Ebner says that he once saw the original in an exhibition at the Museum für Konkrete Kunst (MKK) in Ingolstadt. As with all of Ebner's previous paintings, the gesture remains ambiguous. Is it a "selfless, humble act of copying performed as a service," of a kind that is relatively new, as this type of artistic practice had simply not been part of the repertoire of the avant-garde program, at least prior to the 1980s, because of the "dogma of autonomy and originality" and the central position accorded to the imperative of progress?[18] In his art, with its relationship to the "master" Günter Fruhtrunk, Ebner breaks with modern dogmas, while his productive reference to repetition picks up a

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[12] See Dirk von Gehlen, *Mashup: Lob der Kopie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 13.

[13] To cite one current example: in the pharmaceutical industry, one way of helping to reduce healthcare costs is to use "generics"—i.e., drugs that contain the same active ingredients as preparations previously protected by patent, and which therefore have the same effect. Because of the exceptional threat that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to people in poorer countries, the People's Vaccine Alliance (peoplesvaccine.org), a coalition of more than seventy international aid organizations, is calling for the international waiver of patent protections for COVID-19 vaccines.

[14] Eva Karcher, "Drei Minuten kann ein Herz stillstehen: Zur Ausstellung von Hans Peter Feldmann in Düsseldorf – ein Gespräch über Welt als Chaos und Kunst als Voodoo," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 18, 2010, 13; see also Wolfgang Ullrich, "Ein Original vom Original," in Mensger, *Déjà-vu?* (see n. 6), 25–27.

[15] See Günter Fruhtrunk, "Voilà, der handwerkliche Waschzettel," in Reiter, *Catalogue Raisonné: By Motif* (see n. 7), 75–76.

[16] All verbatim quotes are taken from a conversation with Markus Ebner in his Frankfurt studio in September 2021.

[17] See Reiter, *Catalogue Raisonné: By Motif* (see n. 7), 500.

[18] See Ullrich, "Rituale der Wiederholung" (see n. 6), 140–41.

thread that seemed to have snapped with the advent of modernism. At the same time, his work carries on in a tradition informed by conceptual approaches. In his paintings, Ebner's art shows itself as a surprising convergence of art history and the present operating concurrently. Because these canvases offer aesthetic pleasure while also confronting viewers with a historical dimension and asking them to consider discursive issues, they act with great discretion as futuristic time machines.

Kito Nedo, in Markus Ebner: Zuneigung (with contributions by Jürgen und Ute Habermas, Kito Nedo, Florian Illies, Astrid Fendt und Florian Ebner), d/e, Spector Books, Leipzig, 2022, p. 24-37