

REINCARNATION



by Georg Vierbuchen, Valentin Wedde and Cornelius Woyke

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Company party for the arts

The decline of giving is mirrored in the embarrassing invention of gift-articles, which are based on the fact that one no longer knows what one should give, because one no longer really wants to. These goods are as relationless as their purchasers. They were shelf-warmers from the first day.

(No exchanges allowed / Minima Moralia, Theodor W. Adorno)

Transgressions that remain within a manageable scope actually help the smooth functioning of the very system of rules they transgress. At a company Christmas party, for example, it is practically obligatory that by the end of the night you stand arm in arm smoking a reconciliation cigarette with the colleague you normally hate the most, that you finally tell your boss - slurping slightly - what you really think, and perhaps even make out a bit with the colleague from another department whom you had previously only bumped into in the copy room.

But none of these "outbursts" are meant to result in actually becoming friends with the despised colleague, nor in the boss really changing anything about the agenda, nor in leaving your partner at home for the copy-room colleague. On the contrary: such deviations mostly reaffirm the rule - they remind us of how much we do, in fact, love our partner, they reconfirm our hatred for the colleague (who at best becomes a frenemy), and they reassure the boss that everything is basically fine as it is and that she made the right decisions over the course of the year. The whole performance of reconciliation, critique, and desire serves only to rid ourselves of the energies that call for reconciliation, critique, and desire - precisely so that those voices will be quiet for the rest of the year. And yet: the systems in which we live, which appear perfectly "normal" and unchangeable throughout the year, become somehow more visible during the holidays, soaked in alcohol, greasy food, and the proximity of more or less beloved family members. The perfectly ordinary drama stands at the threshold, keeps knocking, and is, not infrequently, even kindly invited in.

At Christmas, questions of normativity, tradition, and the transgression of both inevitably arise. One ritual follows another - and many of them inhabit that space of gestures that waver between mild reluctance and exaggerated over-enthusiasm, as we know for example from the practice of gift-giving. The technique of *Wichteln* - or, more pointedly, *Schrottwichteln* (white-elephant gifting) - also means assigning value to seemingly worthless objects by passing them on. They change owners and, hopefully, with that also their meaning and function. Until, a year later, they resurface in another round of white-elephant gifting - sometimes even making their way back to their original owner.

The pressure is high: the quantity and selection of gifts can become sheer torment for everyone involved. Even the seemingly altruistic act of giving is questionable - for one also gives in order to receive a gift oneself, to absolve oneself of guilt, or quite simply to give more than the other person, to outdo one another and thereby establish a hierarchy.

In *REINCARNATION – Weihnachtsbaum #4*, Cornelius Woyke, Valentin Wedde, and Georg Vierbuchen once again initiate a project concerned precisely with those questions of normativity and deviation, consumption and (re)utilization. The exhibition series has itself become a ritual - a kind of Christmas celebration pushed to the point of absurdity. After the holidays, the artists collect the leftover skeletal remains of Christmas trees, strip them of their branches so that only the trunk remains, store them, and then, nearly a year later, transform them into artworks that sometimes masquerade as everyday objects such as recorders or baseball bats. The relativity of value as we know it from the Marxist concept of the "commodity fetish" - the notion of value being suggested as something inherently natural to the commodity - could hardly become more apparent than in the gesture of redefining a discarded object as a work of art. For *Weihnachtsbaum #4*, the artists extend an invitation: they offer other artists a *carte blanche* along with the corresponding material - the bare wood from which, quite literally, anything can be made. This gives rise to a wide range of variations in the redefinition of the repurposed product, stretching from a matchstick to a fishing rod to a walking cane. Whether the result falls aesthetically into the realm of the gift article, the white-elephant present, or an elaborate piece of fretwork remains undecided - just as undecided as the fine line between over-ambition and reluctance.

In any case, the gesture is specific to the occasion, and the interpretation is as manifold as it can possibly be within the framework of normativity and deviation that characterizes this holiday. The boundaries of the possible are indulged generously and devotedly, much like at the office party after which everything seems to return to its usual course. Or does it?

For perhaps there are moments in which transgression leads to a small, personal shift in one's paradigm. Moments in which the eruption of desire, critique, and reconciliation leaves subtle traces on those involved and introduces small changes into what is familiar, even if unconsciously. For the ordinary drama is, in truth, always standing on the threshold - only that at Christmas it has dressed itself especially festively.

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