

**“My Origins? I Made Them Up”
Diedrich Diederichsen**

The classic claim of the avant-gardes that they cut off the lines of tradition entails more than just the liberation of artistic practice. It also changes the institutional landscape of the fine arts. In lieu of the traditional subjects and disciplines within whose frameworks teaching, training, and the cultivation of the lines of tradition occur, there should be defensible approaches that legitimize themselves and prevail by means of their self-image and its rationality, rightness, and truthfulness. But the institutional revolution of the twentieth century did not happen with the same speed as the artistic evolution and often did not even take place at all. Instead, the systems—such as the principle of the master class at art academies—were preserved, people not programs continued to be taught and handed down, while the discourse of legitimizing works of art and artists and educators usually conceals such derivations behind either immanent or political descriptions. Consequently, the personal and interpersonal, to some degree familial, Oedipal, and milieu-specific background of artistic developments, careers, and life paths that is repressed and left unaddressed in this way is redirected to other channels: it is revealed in homages, references and respects, quotations and allusions.

A second complex of ideas associated with the first is the tradition of patricide or, more rarely, of matricide. Here there is no denying the connection, and tribute is paid to the avant-garde obligation to innovate not with defensible decisions but rather by breaking with the figure of a master or father. This negative fixation on a central figure of the older generation ensures, dialectically, both things: break and continuity. It obliges young artists to innovate, but they associate that with an allusion to an older person and hence to lines of tradition and lines of continuity in general. The dramatic break does not so much weaken the latter as emphasize and ultimately reinforce them. Recently, the lament is heard more frequently that young people no longer wish to murder their fathers. This has been seen as an indication that the vital forces of artistic innovation are weakening. This diagnosis finds that children are too obedient, too rational: young artists allegedly stick too much to programs and guidelines, to norms and agreements; they want to do things right rather than be wild.

Two things about that: first, the idea of artistic wildness and Oedipal disobedience is, of course, itself deeply dubious; second, it is, however, indeed striking that the art world and its milieus are full of the children and descendants of famous players in the field. Among artists, gallery owners, and curators these days, one finds an abundance of people who are doing the same thing or are active in the same milieu as their parents. The former law that self-respecting people in the art world should want to distinguish themselves from their parents no longer plays any role. Instead, parents who have made it in the milieu bring with them immense economic and status advantages, which benefits the careers of their children. Even in Vienna, which is clearly less feudalistic in its organization in this respect than, say, New York, a study of the Academy of Fine Arts has shown that roughly one third of the successful applicants for admission to study art have a parent or other close relative earning a living in the milieu of art and architecture.

Around a decade ago, I titled a text “Laios antwortet nicht” (Laius is not responding); it concerned the futility of Oedipal routines in those genres of art that are popularly explained with the concept of “provocation.” Now we are a decade further along. Oedipus has understood this; now he is no longer even transmitting. He has been replaced by a character who misses his parents rather than wanting to separate from them. Not because he has lost track of them or they have abandoned him, but because he no longer even has a parent interface for the manifold occasions on which his talents and aptitude have been communicated and embedded. What we have been experiencing for some time, is that artists are searching for role models they have not necessarily known personally or who have played the role of teachers or parental figures but often could instead have been of the generation of their grandparents, and younger artists of the following generation voluntarily place themselves in their guardianship as a way of connecting to tradition. They seek or invent an

adoptive grandparent who not only offers the paradox of providing precisely their familial connection, their origins, and thus making the classically unavailable available on a résumé, but who also comes from an era when being an artist as such seemed less compromised than it is today—or, to put it another way, more heroic.

The attempt to ensure one's own intention of innovation by appealing to radicalness that emerged under other conditions can, however, perhaps be defended as well. After all, even in the arts there is no action related to history and historical evolution that does not reference the direction of time's arrow and the vanishing points on its axis. The traditional simple forms of positioning oneself as either indebted to the past or oriented toward the future have rightly been recognized as naive—and above all—as politically dubious: as long as remains unstated *which* future for society and *which* line of tradition are being referred to, they are also almost empty. Inferring from this defeat of futurism and traditionalism that we can opt out of questions of the philosophy of history is, however, not legitimate either. After all, our counterarguments against false philosophy of history derive from a virtual better one. The trick with the ostensibly passivist subjugation to a branch of the past that I have thought up or at least prepared myself, and that in a sense places under my control the share in the available that is necessary for any decision, represents a broadening of the possibilities of artistic action. These new possibilities mix with precisely the practices normally or traditionally performed by curators: deciding who among earlier artists has to be rediscovered today.

At the same time, this extension can be seen in terms of an availability of the unavailable, an invention of that which is normally allotted to someone and must necessarily be thought of as fate in order to make an opposition to it seem at all conceivable as a heroic or radical program, that is to say, as an extension of so-called Postmodernism's imperative to "find oneself" that has long since been recognized as dubious: an individualist, narcissistic program for the children of the petite bourgeoisie of the West now expanded to cover history and prehistory. The idea of making the unavailable available has a colonial, conquering quality that could only be overcome if, first, this cannot succeed or, second, the reason for adopting one's grandparents is not only biographically necessary but also results historically or politically from the current situation.

Perhaps that is why there is another alternative to the adopted grandmother or the grandfather drawn from radical corners of art history: making one one's actual origins the theme. This is relevant above all where artistic positions result not from the Oedipal logic of Western, market-oriented series of generations with parricides and successions but rather from minority and marginalized histories that view from outside the fortresses and palaces of an art world in which the Wars of the Diadochi are raging. Here too, of course, there is in the meanwhile a well-known mechanism that tends to lead to a convergence of these two strategies: no matter whether my history begins from an external or an internal position, I will get myself a radical grandfather, an intrepid grandmother, either by way of a relationship of ideas or an actual biological one that in the end is primarily effective as an idea.

One final alternative to these strategies has long existed in musical and literary worlds, ~~but also in~~ the Afro-Futurist position. ~~Rs that have recently~~ it has been discussed more frequently in the fine arts as well: here the (artistic) point of departure of African and African-diasporic artists is conceived not from a shared origin before the scattering but rather as a precursor to a future historical context. Unlike traditional Futurism, it does not take up a specific narrative from technology, politics, or the philosophy of history but rather results only from turning the story of the diaspora upside down: the scattering that seems chaotic in relation to a mythical shared origin and in which individuals are lost becomes a scattering in relation to an imaginary future that will organize very differently how individuals are joined—and whose elements can perhaps already be found in the present. Then they are no longer family genealogies, nor their inversion or extension, but would also come down to ceasing to understand one's current artist position as always a concretion of discovered, invented, or authentic precursors but rather as authentic precursors of quite different forms of organization, such as collective ones.

Translation: Steven Lindberg