

Wolfgang Ullrich

A Muse with  
an Oeuvre

A Soliloquy on Eckart Hahn  
2017

When I received the request to contribute to this book and began to research Eckart Hahn, for I felt that I did not know him, I realised that I had already seen a few of his pictures. I had encountered them in various locations, and they had stayed in my memory, albeit unattached from Hahn's name, which I evidently had not memorised. That already seemed an interesting starting point: why does one recognise pictures, but not their creator? And why had these stuck in my memory? Still, other aspects of Hahn's work that also seemed deserving of contemplation stood out to me too. Above all, isn't the concept of this book somewhat unusual?

What struck me at first was how elaborately Hahn painted his pictures, how precisely he plans and executes them. They are works in the traditional sense of the word, which these days is anything but the norm. By this, I mean not only in terms of their craftsmanship but also with respect to genre: pictures, painted in acrylic on canvas – an unambiguous, solid object. With many artists, it is difficult to identify what belongs to their oeuvre and what does not; they express themselves in ephemeral forms or stage interventions, which result from and depend on a given situation. More consequentially, they often do not make use of the term 'oeuvre' and see their creative work not as a whole or continuum but rather as a sequence of individual moments and phases. It would, therefore, be difficult – if not impossible – to compile a 'catalogue raisonné' of their work, for where would one draw distinctions? Is a site-specific installation that changes slightly depending on location, one work or many? Do photos that an artist has posted on Instagram belong to

the work or not? What seems particularly remarkable about Hahn to me, however, is that he does not see himself as an artist with a perpetually-growing oeuvre, but apparently considers himself as more of a kind of muse: as someone who manages to inspire others so strongly with his work that they become creatively active themselves. This book documents not only Hahn's works but also those, which they have stimulated. It shows how they have driven other artists, but also writers, actors, academics and even caricaturists to write, compose or design something themselves. I know of no other book that achieves something comparable – at least not one where the inspirational artist themselves is responsible. In my youth, I was impressed by an anthology titled *Poems on Pictures*, which collected poems from different centuries inspired by various paintings and sculptures.<sup>1</sup> The genre of the *Festschrift* makes us think of contributions by peers showing a fellow academic how much they have influenced their thought and research. In the case of Hahn, however, the initiative comes from the artist himself. What that means though is that he explicitly wishes to demonstrate his capabilities as a muse – a 'muse with an oeuvre', mind you. So much the more interesting, because one cannot forget that muses traditionally create no work of their own, but rather exclusively function as mediums that allow others to produce works. Certainly, in recent times this idea has functioned in reverse – Bazon Brock, at least, has given himself the title of 'artist without an oeuvre'<sup>2</sup> – however, someone understanding themselves as a 'muse with an oeuvre' seems to me to be Hahn's unique hallmark.

Still, what exactly is supposed to be attractive about explicitly challenging the impact of works and presenting this in a book?

For me, that is why this book's project is both timely and essential because it gets to the heart of a change regarding the expectations placed on art. Throughout

time, artworks have had many functions, but what seems most important for people today is that art inspires them. In earlier times there was the belief that art should foreground the prevailing morals as attractively as possible – one must merely think of the formula ‘delectare et prodesse’. Alternatively, one entertained the hope that art could reform its public, or believed it capable of changing or even revolutionising society. Today, these aspirations have not entirely faded into oblivion, but have indeed receded considerably. The most common response to the question as to why people seek out art is the expectation that they understand themselves as creative – as inventive, vital, and strong. The desire is that art creates spaces in which to feel more alive and self-assured. Above all, however, art is no longer something contemplative that viewers wish merely to admire and gaze at in awe. In contrast, art is supposed to have a motivating effect, embolden individuals and unleash forces in them that would otherwise lie dormant. With this book, Hahn proves how well his works comply with these expectations of art. The book is a showcase in the best sense in that it demonstrates what the artist as muse is capable of achieving. Additionally interesting is that Hahn still manages to claim for himself what others take from his works and bring into the world themselves – at least symbolically. After all, these works find themselves in a book that is, in fact, dedicated to his work, as if they were a part of it – as if he understands himself as their creator, at least indirectly. At any rate, the ability to simultaneously see and appreciate an artist’s works can diversify our perception and enrich our reflections upon them. One could even say that what takes place in this book runs contra to the provenance research that has become prominent in recent years. If this type of research is dedicated to the question of who an artwork has belonged to and when, and how transfers of ownership took place, Hahn makes clear who his works inspire and how, and, through the

concept of his book, is apparently much more concerned with provoking numerous and positive creative reactions. The way in which a work's provenance can increase its value also functions in the context of the inspiration that emanates from it and towards others. Who knows, perhaps in the future it will become standard to record in auction catalogues not only the provenance of works but equally the influences that enabled their creation? However, does the meticulous and time-consuming execution of Hahn's paintings not, in fact, lead to the observer still gazing at them in wonder, to the extent that it becomes for them all the more difficult to dare to do something themselves, and feel encouraged to engage in their own creative activities?

To me, there seems to be a substantial difference between viewing Hahn's paintings in the original or as reproductions. In a gallery, one can fall into a mood of astonishment, and engage with the minutiae of Hahn's technique, to appreciate his virtuosity. These aspects are absent in the context of reproductions, however, particularly as within them Hahn's photorealistic style cannot correctly be discerned, i.e. what we see is, in fact, a painting, and above all, the particular motif. At the same time, it is also striking that the character of this motif stands in contrast to the way it is painted. In this way, all of Hahn's paintings have a punchline. Although they do not one always immediately amount to much, one still has the feeling of very quickly understanding them. The length of time the painter has taken to complete a picture stands in direct contrast to the speed at which an observer has a sense of achievement. They are immediately rewarded, do not first need to engage in a lot of fruitless work concerning reception and interpretation, and it is this sense of achievement, the joy derived from a particular painting's visual humour, which stimulates the observer and furnishes them with the desire to become active. For a long time, it was common to believe

that only originals had the power to stimulate viewers. Albert Barnes, for example, who invested in an extensive art collection for the employees of his industrial concern in Pennsylvania in the first decades of the 20th century, even forbade the reproduction of works in his collection. He considered reproductions to be blunt instruments that conveyed an utterly inadequate impression of a given work, from which he expected a great deal. His employees had to spend one afternoon a week in the collection, in order to inspire more independent thought and more creative expression – which for Barnes, as with Hahn, also played a particularly important role. In this respect, it would be a paradoxical development if reproductions of Hahn's work were to be more effective than the originals.

I think that it is just as important as other more 'serious' gestures that Hahn presents his pictures not on his own website but on a Tumblr blog, a platform on which the complete structure of 'liking' and 'reblogging' pictures is already inherent, on which recipients can directly express their gratification. If they share an image that they particularly like on their own blog, they have already done something active. The image that stimulates them moves into a new setting; through this, it changes some of its meaning and is slightly reconfigured. Through his Tumblr blog, then, Hahn signals how important to him it is that people who are inspired by his pictures can immediately and straightforwardly take them on as their own. For his pictures to be as effective as possible, he is quite liberal regarding authorial and usage rights. But through this, the same thing happens that I observed in my own experience: via every reblog and newly found context, the images separate from their creator. There is a parallel here in what the artist and theorist Brad Troemel described regarding digital culture a few years ago: "the more famous an art image becomes, the less its author will be attributed".  
3 In this regard, a visual joke does

not distinguish itself from other jokes. If a joke is successful and retold, soon no one knows who actually came up with it. With jokes, anonymisation is not generally a problem, but with images, it is different – particularly when they are created by artists and professionals who have to make a living from them. In this context, two of Hahn's previously mentioned characteristics appear again in another light.

Firstly, his refined painting technique ensures that the originals are at least always perceived as something special – as something with material value – and remain connected with the name of their creator.

The fact that this book records what Hahn's pictures have inspired should likewise also be seen as an attempt to counteract the disentanglement of works from their creator and, in contrast, even ensure that his works are enriched with the meanings of those that took inspiration from them – thereby becoming imbued with an even greater weight. Through this, Hahn protects himself twofold against the idea that his pictures may one day only function as recyclable material.

But is it merely the punchline-heavy humour that confers Hahn's pictures their stimulating impression? Does this not also require still other characteristics?

I believe that his pictures do possess additional characteristics that predestine them to give viewers a kind of kick – and which correspond to Hahn's self-perception as a 'muse with an oeuvre'. I formulate this in reference to the art scholar Annekathrin Kohout, who coined the term 'kick-off images', with which she means images that trigger an action in the viewer.<sup>4</sup> She too also thinks initially – and most simply – of reblogging on social media. However, at the same time, these platforms also facilitate activities such as the creation of a new picture or the writing of a text. Kohout discerns several characteristics that give a picture a kick-off quality. It should be "free of fixed meanings" to "be able to be individually appropriated", which means it must therefore not have a specific statement

or message attached to it. Hahn's images fulfil this criterion because although the subjects they show are readily recognisable, it is far less clear what could be meant by their configuration and visual joke. Instead, the thrust of the visual joke is often mysterious – at the very least, it is surprising, and thus not already codified. What emanates from what are in fact quite simple visual motifs is almost a plea for them to first be interpreted. They are therefore 'emblematic' – another criterion for a kick-off quality – and stimulate reflection; that is, autonomous activity on the part of the viewer. According to their character, their interpretations can be both profound as well as cheeky – in one instance their mysterious potential is more strongly exploited and in the other the winking potential of the visual joke. The fact that they deal with simple everyday subjects facilitates their appropriation all the more, as it means that the viewer can therefore easily make a connection to their environment – to their own experiences and perceptions – and even develop the suggestion that they could create quite similar images and configurations at any time. Who doesn't immediately form a range of associations when it comes to cords, plastic bags, rubbish bags, or some of Hahn's other beloved motifs?

Given their characteristics, can Hahn's pictures also be placed within a tradition?

I see similarities with the pictures of some social media stars, such as the photos of Ren Hang from China or the Ukrainian artist group Gorsad.Kiev. A more precise look at art history, however, reveals Hahn's formal proximity to some varieties of surrealism – in particular, of some of Giorgio de Chirico's works as well as many of René Magritte's. In his works, Magritte similarly returns to the same everyday motifs time and time again; to apples, hats, or cloudy skies, and combines them in mysterious configurations to create emblematic compositions. The way that this can have an inspiring effect on others can be seen, meanwhile

– once again – on social media, above all on Tumblr and Pinterest. On these platforms, one encounters numerous rendering of the same subjects – not created by Magritte, however, but by the platforms' users. They continue what the artist initiated, to the extent that it can sometimes hardly be determined which versions are by Magritte and which come from someone else. Magritte himself also acted similarly, referring to pictures of his own works as well as famous works by other artists. Take, for example, his humorous variations on two paintings by Jacques-Louis David and François Gerard, each of which show Madame Récamier. In his works, he imagines that the moment in time captured in the original paintings has not stood still but continued to run. In the intervening 150 years, the once young Madame has of course died and finds herself therefore in a coffin. Hahn does something similar in his painting XIV from 2010, where he distorts Hyacinthe Rigaud's famous portrait of Ludwig XIV from 1701 by putting a rubbish bag over the king's head and torso.

If the extent to which a work inspires its viewers has today become a criterion of its value, then how does Hahn's project also stand in relation to other concepts? To discern this, it is worth considering other areas of culture. One frequently hears of how strongly people feel the need to be active in a way that can make them individually and creatively visible. Because of this, they are also always on the lookout for sources of inspiration. Most of them can only really satisfy this desire if they are given the feeling that they indeed have the space and potential for creative activity in the first place. Almost nothing else makes this need clearer than the phenomenon of the 'Influencer'. They are the muses of mass and popular culture, people who – quite literally – influence others and in doing so help them express and realise their true selves. Influencers impact others in many ways, from how they dress and apply make-up to how they furnish their homes.

All of these are activities with great creative freedom, which means that many people find them difficult to navigate. For this reason, they orient themselves around others they consider to be role models – and the term ‘Influencer’ signals that the specific power exercised by those seen as such authority figures is clearly recognised. The term ‘Influencer’ reveals an awareness of how people affect others and the connections that exist between them. In turn, this is also consistent with the broadly observable development that more respect is paid to connections – to origins and outcomes. One could here perhaps think of the changes in the understanding of consumption: more and more, people want to know where exactly their groceries come from, what they contain, what their environmental footprint is, and the consequences of their disposal. Usually, however, this is not formulated in terms of the metaphors of influences and sources – that is, metaphors centred around liquids – but rather with ones that recall the idea of a network. It’s a matter of connections and links – and the idea that because everything is somehow connected to everything else, then nothing can be independent, autonomous, or completely original. Here we can see an interesting link between the idea of an ecosystem, in which everything relates to everything else in a complex nexus, and the concept of creative activity. Since deconstruction and post-modernism, creative activity has been understood as something still indebted to something else – that there always exists a multiplicity of influences lying under the surface.

To me, there is too little research on the fact we also see the return of ideas that were once common in the premodern world. Aristocracy thought always in terms of genealogies and connections, and the premodern concept of the artist and genius also implied such an idea. For a long time, the quality and rank of an artist was dependent on how powerfully they were able to influence other artists. Genius

could not be discerned solely from the works themselves, but rather only in relation to how authoritatively and for how long they served as models and subjects for forgery, as Immanuel Kant put it.<sup>5</sup> For artists, it was also natural to admit to their influences, such as their affiliation to a school. This notion only changed in the modern period, when all of a sudden no one wanted to be influenced anymore, and instead pursued complete autonomy and originality. The anxiety of influence became a major issue, an idea refurbished in Harold Bloom's classic work of literary criticism that bears the same name, published in 1973. In his book *Modernity's Enfants Terribles* (Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit, 2014), Peter Sloterdijk describes the modern period as a particularly irresponsible and aggressive phase of world history, in which the figure of the 'happy egoist' dominates, who "formally severs his connections to both the past and the future with an expressive rudeness". Particularly in literature and the fine arts, the 'non-continuation of heritage' had become a kind of dogma.<sup>6</sup> In the past few decades, however, there has increasingly been an observable departure from such fantasies of uniqueness. The anxiety of influence is receding, and with the 'Influencer' there is, for the first time, a specifically named figure who is defined by how they influence others. That is certainly true for mass and popular culture at least, but not so much for high culture, within which the defence of influences was more strongly pronounced, but the concept of the influencer doubtlessly shapes any perception of the phenomena of influence. Hahn's project achieves the same, but this time within the sphere of high culture. At least, many well-known artists and authors evidently seem to have no problem presenting themselves as being 'influenced' by Hahn. Indeed, the anxiety of influence seems to be in the process of disappearing. Instead, the contributors to this book seem to perceive themselves as part of a broad intellectual and artistic ecosystem.

