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RISING FROM THE RUBBLE

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Talking about rubble, talking about "Rising from the Rubble" for Germans like me is somehow very familiar but causes ambivalent feelings and thoughts as well. It is familiar, since having been born some years after the Second World War, "Rising from the Rubble" was **the** experience marking my life. And at least as long as I was a child this was not a bad experience, since the ruins of destroyed buildings served as excellent and most exciting playgrounds, though, as you can imagine, we were forbidden to go into them. But "Rising from the Rubble" at that time also meant that, for example, my parents - my father being an impoverished German refugee from Czechoslovakia, and my mother, in spite of her Jewish background, having survived the Third Reich by luck - wanted to start a new life, and, as a symbol for this, were proud finding an apartment in a new house, one of these fast-and-simple constructions built right after the war, practical but extremely ugly. A house which today is a ruin of this "Rising from the Rubble", whereas many of the ruins caused by the war, having been reconstructed within the last decades, nowadays function as dwellings many people are eager to live in. More, "Rising from the Rubble" at least in my ears has the sound of what, in the early Fifties, in Germany was called "Wiederaufbau", literally translated, "Re-Building", a program which started as a general reconstruction of the damages resulting from the war, but in fact turned out to be a gigantic destruction-movement of the historical substance of our country - comprising much more changes and losses than the war had ever caused. Finally, "Rising from the Rubble" is connected with the recent development within the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, especially Eastern Germany, the former German Democratic Republic. Here "Rising from the Rubble" is understood by many people as a rollback, a 40 years jump back in time, an attempt to deny or at least ignore what happened within the last four decades, trying to start a new life at a historical date, in 1949. And what is getting clear now is that the economic disaster in Eastern Germany meets a Western Germany within which many people do feel comfortable in believing to have been on the right side, and do not notice that they produced a society which has lost flexibility, the capability to change it self, and the courage for innovations, and thus, I fear, will fall to ruins as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen, even if you expect me now to come down to a more metaphoric interpretation of rubble, and to the role of art, I would like to take this unusual chance to speak a little more about rubble, and try to develop

some criteria for the role of art in Western societies by putting up the question how rubble is understood and handled.

First, I would like to mention that in German there are two words for what you name rubble, two words which draw a distinction between its different forms. One, in German: "Schutt", defines rubble as more or less unusable material resulting from a destruction-process, natural as well as man-made, that is a grain-like substance having the characteristic of material which can be poured. (Maybe this understanding meets what you associate with the word rubble.) The other one, in German: "Trümmer", defines a sort of rubble consisting of more or less big chunks resulting from the destruction of anything created by men, chunks which allow the reconstruction of what was destroyed at least in a virtual sense, rubble which is the material that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was probably thinking of when he described the function of what he called "plastische Kraft", that is the "sculptural power", meaning the human capability "to grow out of itself in a peculiar way, to redefine what is past and strange and to incorporate it; to heal wounds, to replace what is lost, and to reshape forms which have been smashed."

Second, I would like to remind you of the "Rubbish Theory", published by the British author Michael Thompson in 1979 (Oxford). In his theory, Thompson develops some distinctions and thoughts which, I believe, are most valuable for our discussion, and this is why I want to recall some of its essentials. Thompson points out, that everything we deal with can be divided into three categories: the Transient, the Durable and Rubbish. Things which belong to the category Transient are things with an estimated lifetime within which they continuously lose value down to the point where it hits zero. Actually everything we deal with once belongs to this category when it enters the market and is sold or bought. I believe, you know what I am talking about, if not, just look at your car. Things which belong to the category Durable, however, have an unlimited lifetime within which they gain value. Things kept in museums are durable in this sense for sure, but anything of value which is out of the market usually belongs to it as well. Now, the interesting point of Thompson's Rubbish Theory is to explain that these two categories, at least within Western societies, are open categories, meaning that each community sets its own convention on what is seen as transient or durable, so that each member of this community can define and recognize which category a given object is relating to. All other items, that is all items which can not be related to one of these two categories, Thompson calls Rubbish. That is, Rubbish is defined as things which have no social definition at all. Based on a lot of examples from different social fields, Thompson from this derives his "law": That things can change from the Transient to the Rubbish category and from the Rubbish category to the Durable, but that there is no way from the Transient to the Durable other than the one leading through the Rubbish.

Taking up these distinctions and definitions, now the path can be developed that things normally travel on within Western societies. Let me just sketch this path in an general manner - in life, of course, objects will have quite an individual and specific career. When it enters society, that is usually the market, a given object will have a certain value, and an expected lifetime, and

belongs by definition to the category Transient. In this state it will remain for the duration of its expected lifetime or as long as it can be used, but will lose value in a continuous way. Sometimes, if it is repaired or resold, it can regain some value, but in general it will lose its value down to the point where this tends to zero, no matter if the object is still in use. If its value is zero, the object will pass over to the Rubbish-category. This transition from the Transient to Rubbish in most cases will be a gradual change of status, a change one might not see or feel directly, because it usually occurs within a long period of time: The object slowly moves to the margins of social life, maybe is given away, or is inherited, or will be stored somewhere until it might get into a dump. In any case, especially if the object is not destroyed, it will live in this obsolete status for some time, maybe a long time, how long actually nobody can tell. But some day someone will draw it to the light, look at it, blow the dust off it and will put up the question if it could be of any use. If this question is answered negatively, the object will remain within the rubbish, or be dumped. But if this question is answered positively, the moment has come where the object can pass over into the category of the Durable.

It is very important to notice, that considering objects from Rubbish at first hand means, that their value can be estimated only by ignoring current social standards, that is only by individuals who feel free to decide by themselves whatever value or use can be ascribed to the object they picked up.

Now, if the object is considered to be somehow valuable or usable, the individuals who made up this assessment usually will start to search for these objects, and similar ones, and will collect them. This movement will draw the attention of other individuals onto these objects, and in consequence more individuals will look for them, followed by professional collectors and traders. As a result of this interest the market for these objects gets tight, and their price takes off. The next step of this development will be that scientists get interested in these objects and do research on them. This again will confirm the collector's interest, and especially when it becomes known, maybe as a conclusion of research-work, that the number of objects is limited, we will have a run for the objects, and their value grows more and more. Now utilization-interests take command, and museums get interested as well, and will start to collect them, and their new rating will be published in exhibitions, catalogues, and other form of listings. At this point, in fact exactly at the point where the objects have been priced at such a level that it gets more or less impossible to trade them, they will be taken out of the market, and are put into museums where they not only keep but gain value - but do not affect the economic process anymore. Only if this has occurred the new assessment of the objects is accomplished, and that means that they now belong definitely to the category Durable, and will stay there usually for an unlimited period of time.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you accept this sketch of the basics of Rubbish Theory, I assume, you will not be astonished, if I now postulate that the relation between the Transient, the Durable and Rubbish does not only apply to the handling of material things, but to the handling of knowledge, theories, opinions, and ideas as well. And I assume that you also will agree that anybody who has just an idea of the function of Rubbish Theory will try to utilize it to

make money, either by diving into the rubbish, looking for objects which could be transferred into the category Durable as many and fast as possible, or, though it is theoretically excluded, by jumping over the Rubbish category, and trying to produce things which can pass directly from the Transient to the Durable. The first move led, as you know, to the development of a big and well established business-branch, reaching from flea-market, second-hand trade, and dealing antiques to recycling trash and leftovers from production processes. But most of the things, and goods, which are moved by this branch just return to the Transient where they again start the career I tried to sketch. The second move, however, that is, the attempt to skip the Rubbish category, and reach the Durable directly with transient products, is naturally, as you may have guessed already, at least in general the business of the art-scene. But here or there, in fact, only a few objects pass the border to the durable category, and the most interesting question rising now is what qualifies things to get transferred into the Durable. To recognize and define these qualities actually is the heart of the phenomenon we are talking about, and it is very clear, I believe, that in order to understand the process of reassessment of things, and ideas, one has to investigate who, and by which means, is setting up the criteria from which the estimation of qualities of objects is derived.

Since Thompson's Rubbish Theory does not answer this question, I have to confront you with my own theorems on this topic. The first may sound a little paradoxical but nevertheless will find, I believe, your approval: Those who believe in standards, and are normatively oriented to a system of values, create, despite their selfunderstanding, rubbish and rubble, whereas those who do not believe in a fixed system of standards, and deal with rubbish and rubble, create values. My second theorem will support this idea and clarify it, since it states: Those who create values have an aesthetic competence: the competence to distinguish between function, form, standards, and value; and that it is artists, scientists, and sometimes critics, who have this competence - if they do good work. But my third theorem says, that the business resulting from the knowledge of these theorems is more or less ruined, even though many, maybe most of the people do not want to admit this.

Let me elaborate on these theorems somewhat more: The general understanding of the function of art within modern Western societies can be described in short as the attempt to create and establish new values by reflecting current standards and values which usually is performed by deconstructing, and reconstructing their form, and function. In other words: The general understanding of artists' work is that their business is situated within the Rubbish category, and is basically transferring objects from Rubbish to the Durable. This understanding of the role of art evolved to the same degree as its traditional function vanished, and artists would lose their economic foothold within the vicinity of the leading social groups, or the dominating systems. This was a long process with many frictions, and dissimultanities regarding the development within different European countries, a process which started maybe with the beginning of the 16th century, and which was understood as a discovery and as an emancipation of the subject. In effect it led to the point where the artists were free to do what they wanted to do but had, in fact, to pay for this freedom by losing a fixed social function as well. At this

point, I would like to date it with the official presentation of the first technical form of image-processing, that is the invention of photography, in 1839, the artists had no other chance but to work within the Rubbish category being themselves within a social Rubbish category, which, in German, we call Lumpenproletariat (raggle), or, more euphemistic, Bohemian. The signature of this state of the art was to establish new concepts of looking at the world, against the increasing fixture of a one-eye-perspective organization of experience established by image-processing machines. It is most interesting to notice that all these new concepts developed by artists were immediately understood in the sense they were intended - but refused by the public as Rubbish styles: the names they were given, for example, Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism and Cubism make this very clear.

A new step in this development was reached when these Rubbish styles proved to be more successful than the art of the Salon, and entered the museums. Since this conquest demonstrated to everybody for the first time, and in large scale, that products from Rubbish could be transferred into the Durable, and that current values could be made Rubbish as well. This experience, however, was the platform for avant-garde artists who would now concentrate on questioning the values and the function of art, and tackle its institutional aspect, the museum. On the other hand this experience led to the insight that nobody could tell, at least regarding recent art, what would prove valuable in the future, and as a consequence whatever looked like art was bought and collected. This new demand met an increasing production of works of art which partially was the result of an artistic strategy against the bourgeois understanding of art, and the museum, and partially resulted from an utilization of this strategy: More and more people became interested and felt capable to become an artist, since producing art not only promised a fast dollar, but the techniques to produce art appeared to be easily appropriable. In effect, the art scene started to boom, slowed down only by external circumstances, like the depression, or the World War.

After the Second World War the boom rose again, but the mechanism, as I tried to point out, now caused a new phenomenon, a sort of self-induced overkill of the art scene. The reason for this, at least in Germany, was that the public art supporting system, namely the museums run by communities, and the state, which actually comprises about 90% of all museums concerned with art, could not match any longer the art boom by their means, and lost influence, in addition challenged by a growing number of private collectors who could buy whatever they were interested in.

And this is the situation now: Along with the economic depression we suffer from especially in Germany, and which effects in the first place what we call "Öffentliche Hand", that is the whole of the public services, and public funds, the museums, and other institutions dealing with art get poorer and poorer, relatively, and absolutely, and in comparison with the private sector. However, the consequence of this development is that the conventions on values and standards regarding art itself turn fragile: not only the *canons* built up by the museums get relativized, but even more, the museums as the institutions of art start to crumble. In short: I believe what we experience in the

Germany context today is the definite collapse of the whole system built around art affairs which developed within the last two centuries.

To draw a conclusion in short: What we experience these days is not a shift within the system, a move making some Durable Rubbish, a shift which, by the way, museums perform daily by putting valuable things into their magazines, but a real crash of the system of producing and distributing art in. I do not believe in a resumption of the development caused by the invention of photography - swallowing traditional functions, and roles from artists on one hand, but triggering them to set up and achieve new aims as well. I rather think that artists, at least in Western societies, will lose their function in general, since handling rubble and rubbish in the sense I tried to point out in my preliminaries, that is, recalling Nietzsche, the human capability "to grow out of itself in a peculiar way, to redefine what is past and strange and to incorporate it; to heal wounds, to replace what is lost, and to reshape forms which have been smashed", since this capability will be taken over by the New Media and be done by machines. At least most of it. And this is why I believe that we need a fundamental new paradigm for artistic efforts. For this new paradigm I would like to propose these three axioms:

1. To give up egocentric subjectivity, establish forms of collective work in freedom.
2. To define the basics of our existence, work out, and present their value.
3. To leave rubbish and rubble, and develop charisma.

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