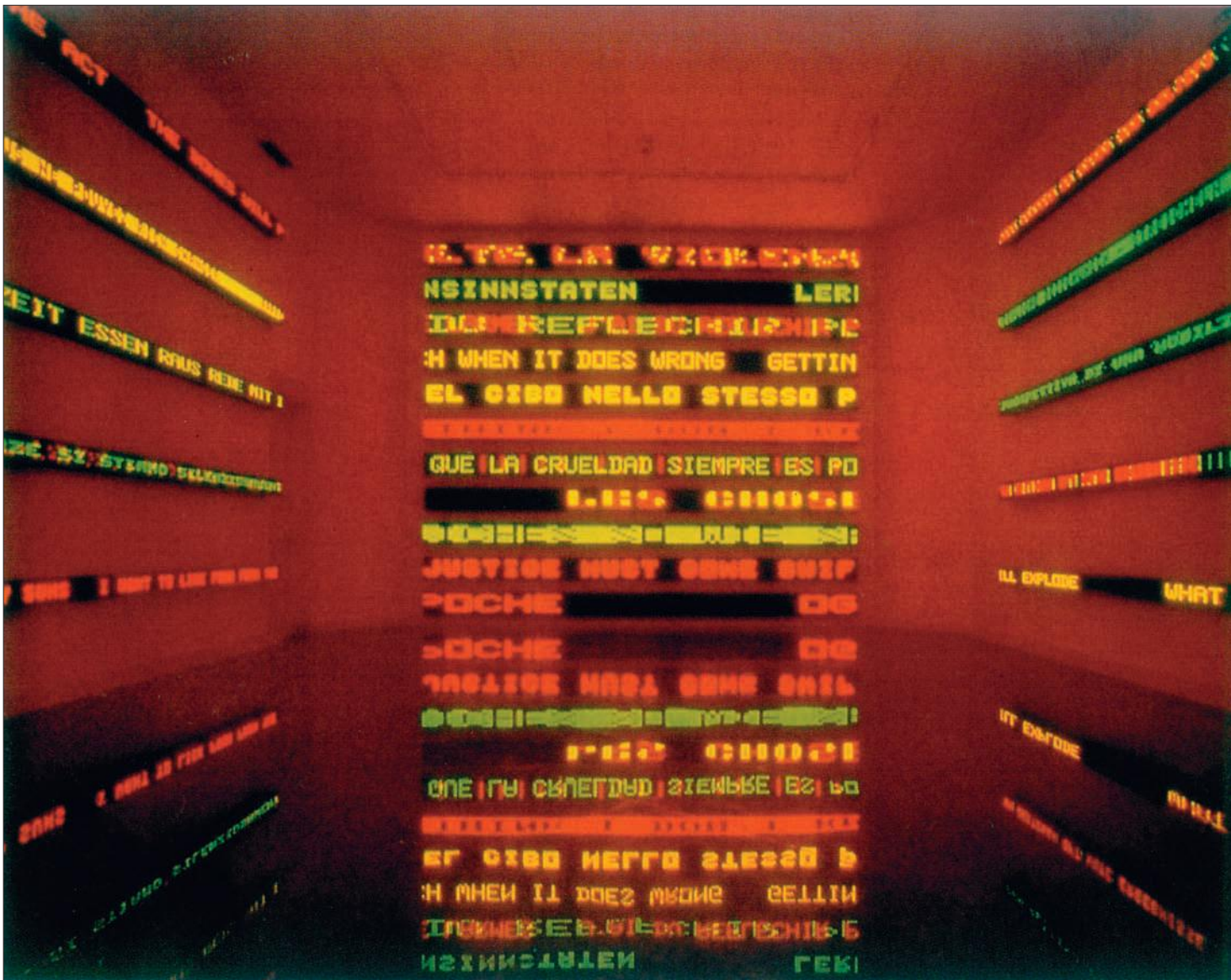


# Accounting for taste

*Contrary to what the old cliché says, it actually is possible to account for taste, provided that you know the boundaries within which discussing art is meaningful.*

Robert Kromhof



Jenny Holzer, Installation, 1990, Venice Biennale

Sometimes we forget that language is merely an abstraction of reality. Fairness, in the sense of beauty, for example, originally only existed as an adjective, such as in 'the fair maid', but it has become a noun as well. Beauty in general is an empty concept, about which nothing can be said; only in relationship to an object can you say something about beauty. The Roman master builder Vitruvius (80 b.C.) made this mistake when he set up *venustas* (beauty) as one of the universal principles for designing buildings. Many have followed Vitruvius and have written down *their* rules instead of universal rules. These authors looked for universal truths in the semi-scientific or metaphysical field. They sought universal truths that would be elevated above mankind. Mankind will never know truths existing outside human truths, just as a fish will never find out what water is. Only in language is it possible to wander off from reality, and many authors have gotten entangled in a language that hardly bears any relation to reality anymore.

The search for Beauty, the Ideal Proportions, or the Devine are searches in vain, on the illusion that objective truths outside of man can be found. All of these age-long searches have come to dead ends. Nothing has been found; it was only word-play. There is no point in arguing about Beauty.

### Plato's "Idea"

Still, it is possible to be tempted by a certain object to enter into a dispute in general terms; that is, when the displayed object is supposed to signify something other than what it is. This temptation could already be found in the philosopher Plato (427 b.C.), who believed that the visible world was not the real world and, from this, built his theory of eternal and unchangeable Ideas behind all things visible. He was the first conceptual thinker and acquired many followers who saw more behind every existing thing and so created room for fantastic stories.

In conceptual art, the concept behind the object is regarded as more important than the object



*A work of art that reveals a miracle*

*Magritte, The Human Condition, 1933*



*Arman, Accumulation of Jars, 1961*

*The artist hopes for a weird and wonderful thought in the spectator*

itself. The object itself is a translation of a grand idea. The sack of potatoes in a spacious white room in a museum is art because it is not a sack of potatoes, but .....and fill in some great thought. Those who see nothing but a sack of potatoes are unable to think at the required level. This uncontrollable need to see a grand idea behind every visible thing gives a mysterious shine to the visible. Priests, philosophers, poets, and painters all want to disclose the great miracle behind the things we see. But the real artists merely try to reveal the intangible world in their works of art. This is in contrast with conceptual artists, because he does not reveal the miracle in his work of art, but instead hopes for an imaginative spectator who will have a weird and wonderful thought inspired by a sack of potatoes. There is no point in arguing about works of art that do not reveal.

### **Arguing is judging**

The Greek *kritikè* means to sift. *Krinein* is sifting through, judging, and expressing a preference. People do nothing but judging; it is even one of their primal instincts to avoid what is not good for them. Criticism was traditionally meant to separate the wheat from the chaff. Criticism can be offered when there are several objects and it has to be determined which of them are good and which are not as good. This can only be done by comparing the object with the existing works of art that the critic knows. The critic has to make it clear why one is better than the other and he must make his criteria known. A good judge of wine has a wealth of material with which he can compare the wine he is tasting, so that he can place it and explain which qualities this new wine has. A person who knows nothing about wine can say two things: either that he finds the wine tasty or not. A good discussion between the two will not be possible

because of the difference in levels of knowledge between them. There is no point in arguing about things one of the parties has no knowledge of.

### **No art without argument**

Often you give up arguing because you have memories of endless, abstract stories of beauty, or fantastic stories about what the artist really intended with his work of art, or of a connoisseur's monologue you cannot interrupt because you lack the necessary knowledge to join the discussion. So what do you say in order to avoid this kind of debate: there is no accounting for tastes. Because this expression is so widely accepted, a tiresome conversation can be avoided.

And it is better to avoid the disputes mentioned above. You should only argue about works of art that are so significant that they touch you. It could be a piece of music, a sculpture or a painting that at first sight comes across as miraculous, enchanting or terrible. From there on, the analysis can take place rationally as well as emotionally with questions such as: what is it that is touching, why is it touching, and is it the same in other works of art?

It is not about fighting our first instinctive judgment, but about intensifying it and turning it into a conscious judgment. Once the first instinctive judgment has crystallized into a conscious judgment, it becomes possible to communicate clearly with someone else.

Because someone whose judgment does not reach beyond beautiful or ugly will learn nothing about himself, nor from anyone else. Through our judgment we can point out to others what they have not seen, and vice versa. If we stop arguing about taste, art changes into a consumer product: it is either tasty or it is not. Then, there can be no more debate at all.

If criticism, interpretation, and arguing about works of art end, it will be an end to the viability of art itself.