

Revelations from Beyond

Arjen Mulder

Column – March 26, 2007

Pirate copies and fakes have a bad name, yet many an artist owes them a rich body of work. The music Franco et le T.P.O.K. Jazz put out on LPs in Zaïre in the 1980s would typically be on sale throughout the country on illegal cassettes within about four months. Their way of keeping one step ahead of this piracy was a stroke of genius: they produced a new LP every three months. This provided them with a tidy nest egg and us with 150 records of wonderful dance music.

Etcher and painter Anton Heyboer did something similar. In order to assure his five wives of an income after his death, he painted dozens of canvases every day in his characteristic style, each adorned with his sizable signature. His widows still have warehouses full of paintings and sell them under the motto: 'You can only be sure it's genuine if you buy it from us in Den IJp.'

Somewhere in the Dutch polders there's a big barn with good overhead lighting where expert painters and silkscreen artists churn out lithographs of artists like Herman Brood, Corneille and Appel on an assembly line. In smaller, urban studios the work of Picasso, Matisse, Dali, Chagall, Giacometti and Hockney is being reproduced.

The only one who truly profited from this democratization of art is Karel Appel. In his early years he was often too poor to buy canvases and paint, so little work exists from this period. Then suddenly, unknown early works began to turn up. They were submitted to the painter, who must have thought, 'There's no way I could have painted this that year. On the other hand, it's not badly done – if I'd had the money at the time I would have painted something like that; maybe the top streak a bit brighter and blurrier, but still, you know what, I'm just going to say it's one of mine.' This validation must have come as a pleasant surprise to the makers of the paintings, and inspired them to produce even better early Appel work.

It won't be long before literary texts, too, are discovered, which, if their authors were still alive (or indeed are still living) would and will be recognized by them as written in their unique approach to sentence structure and language associations. If only they'd had more peace and quiet, time and concentration, they would have written these themselves! Once authors' names become big brands with price tags to match, it becomes profitable to counterfeit them. Thomas Pynchon's work is probably already being produced by a team of writers.

Some writers anticipate this and develop a style that is so typical, or in fact so generic, that they can be perfectly imitated with little trouble by the fellow writers who will later fill in the gaps in their literary oeuvre. Others attempt to pre-empt this development by imitating Pessoa and writing as much new and unknown work destined for their desk drawers as possible, so that there is enough upon their deaths to supply the market for at least 70 years. In the Netherlands, over the past 15 years, the oeuvres of Nescio, Hanlo, Elschot and Ida Gerhardt have doubled thanks to the publication of suddenly discovered letters and notes.

Other authors wish to remain authentic and write in a style that will never be counterfeited because no one can make head or tail of it now. Or is it better to write clearly for a small

group of attentive readers, providing them with such rich hours that you never need explain anything on radio or television, and therefore never become famous?

I don't know. When I think about what I'd love to happen after I die, I think of Nicola Tesla. He posthumously dictated one hefty tome after another to a medium in Wales, or was it Eastern Europe? I don't care who writes it down. One day a woman will sit at a computer and begin to type. She won't be writing; she'll be transcribing what she hears an external voice dictate to her inner ear. I'll be that voice. I'll come up with new essays, bundles of poetry, enthralling novels, travelogues, works of philosophy and revelations from the beyond. I hereby give my descendants permission to authenticate everything, as long as the work is just like I would have written it. We don't want rubbish. An artist doesn't live on in his oeuvre, but in his fakes. So reinvent me as often as possible.

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Arjen Mulder (NL) is a biologist and essayist, associated with the V2_Institute for Unstable Media in Rotterdam and the course for a masters degree in Editorial Design at the Utrecht College of Art. His recent books include: *Over mediatheorie: woord, beeld, geluid, gedrag* [*On media theory: word, image, sound, behaviour*] (2004) and *De vrouw voor wie Cesare Pavese zelfmoord pleegde* [*The woman for whom Cesare Pavese committed suicide*] (2005).

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