

A matter of the heart

In the middle of the room there is a machine that produces hearts. At regular intervals, white hearts are constructed in three-dimensional form by a machine from artificial materials. The result is a growing number of hearts. Those who want to can procure themselves a manufactured heart through financial means and take it home with them as a memento. So, in addition to one's own heart, everybody has the chance to buy another; one that has no function other than adding a little more heart to one's home. Not such a bad idea surely all would concede. It seems it has never been so easy to decorate life with a bit more heart.

Yet the whole thing also conceals a certain element of doubt. The hearts spat out from the machine are objects formed in an anatomically correct way, which have little in common with our conventional image of a heart – red, symmetrical with two round semi-circles that join together to form a point. At first glance, the manufactured hearts are not what we would expect of a gifted or – in this case – purchased heart. White in colour, hard in terms of material, unfamiliar in form, they are vacant, inanimate objects that wish to be filled with life. First, we must project our own feelings into the hearts so that they fulfil for us something which we must openly concede we expect of hearts: warmth. Red like passion and giving love, accepting and giving emotion openly: that's just what we expect from a "good heart". Yet here we are not confronted with the popular image of a heart. Rather it reminds us of the actual organ, which pumps our blood through the veins like a machine and, thus, keeps our bodies alive. However, the white hearts appear unable to fulfil this expectation fully, too. Whilst they do indeed have the correct anatomical form of a heart, they are not able to take on the function of a heart as well. Pumping and pulsating are beyond their capability. They make reference to a functioning heart, but remain calm inside; white and bloodless, innocent and vacant – somehow both a heart, but not a heart.

Nevertheless, the pulsation is unmistakable! A regular beating fills the entire room. It feels as if the whole spatial structure has committed itself to a continuous rhythm. Where is this catchy pounding coming from? Our attention is turned to a large machine which has been placed somewhat raised and in a prominent position. With the metaphor of a machine hard at work, the room, which until now has had a lofty air, is brought back down to reality. That is factory work. That is industry! Our wandering thoughts are re-focused and are now working both automatically and purposefully. The sight of the machine appears to have induced our "mechanical thinking". We observe, process in concentration. Large pistons are set in motion and let the machine enter a continuously rotating rhythm. A lot of force and energy are invested in keeping the machine in motion. This energy is collected by the pipes and channelled into the next room. Our curiosity is stirred and numerous questions arise: Where do these pipes lead? Where are these enormous quantities of energy fed? What purpose does this hard-working machine fulfil? Our desire to investigate is aroused, so we follow the fat pipes, and ... here it is ... gigantically big and nearly filling the room: "The White Heart". The heart in the heart of the exhibition!

At first sight it overwhelms, and to some extent instils fear, too. Out of respect, we take a small step back before we spend time on an intensive consideration of the heart. It is driven by the powerful machine and put into motion through the pipes. It pulsates, too; and how! In a constant rhythm, it inflates and then collapses again a moment later. It

fills the entire room with life. A tightly confined space with an intimate ambience is filled here with a gigantic, almost room-bursting heart. The place and we ourselves are dominated to such an extent that we are almost no longer able to escape.

A short time ago, we were still observing small, rigid hearts. We toyed with the idea of taking a heart back home with us, of gifting ourselves a heart. And now? Now we are confronted with the primordial mother of these small hearts. The same form, the same colour, but much larger in size. This huge heart gave the small hearts their shape. The incessant production of small hearts, the growing heart population, is based on this idea.

The heart mother is alive! Something about her white, plastic-like dress is artificial, however; almost lifeless. Or is that just the innocence that she carries within her? Does she fit the white church interior and its air of innocence, which provides her with the restricting body and thus protection?

The heart is situated in a convent church. Relics were previously stored there, body parts of the Saints, bringing a part of the holiness of the dead martyrs into the church. For example, this included heart relics covered in finely forged gold. Believers were promised hope and health from gazing at or touching them. People came on pilgrimages from far and wide to see the relics. The whole hope of a better life, both before and after death, was contained in prominently presented body parts. Believers still make pilgrimages to the church to this day. They are no longer attracted by religious belief, but driven by art; they travel large distances to reach this place and to lose themselves in prayer before a heart. Now a body part dominates this room once more. The white body of the church has given up its original function as a religious oratory and now functions as a space for displaying works of art. Life is breathed into the room through regular exhibitions.

Does this place need an additional life-maintaining organ at all? Large quantities of power are invested to keep the heart beating. The room in itself would not be dependent on a heart to stay alive. It is the ever-changing exhibitions that guarantee this place continued survival. The heart continues to beat – the actual purpose of the beating remains hidden from us. The lack of a purpose for this heart bemuses: for which body is this work performed here? Without doubt, the freedom of purpose of this heart appears in the first instance to create an *objet d'art*. Were this not the case, we could all consider the hearts pounding inside us as works of art. To a certain extent they are indeed that, too, and yet nobody came up with the idea of declaring their own heart to be art.

The large purposeless heart succeeds in directing attention to our own hearts. The powerful pulsation of the giant heart reminds us of our own unrelentingly beating hearts; our own hearts which keep our bodies alive. And so in some way the big heart also beats for us, too ... and for our hearts.

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John Beech, *The Door to the Window*, Haus der Kunst, St. Josef, Solothurn 2011; Ursula Bohren Magoni and Claudio Magoni, *VonWegen*, Chelsea Galerie, Laufen 2012.