

## Acceptance Speech Prix Aurélie-Nemours

Helmut Federle

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you for this prize which is awarded me today by the Fondation Aurélie-Nemours. My gratitude extends first of all to the artist Aurélie Nemours herself. Without her there would be no prize, hence no laureate to receive it. Indeed, I express my gratitude with all the respect due her. I wish, secondly, to thank the jury, which, in according me this prize, sought to express the fact that it recognized my labors—and also, I hope, my outlook.

But who is the man to whom the prize has been given this year? How could it be that a painter born in Switzerland and beholden to Switzerland, in particular Basel, for having been able to pursue his studies there, and having discovered, notably in the Musée des Beaux-Arts of that city, the artists who had most influenced him, should always have been seen refused this form of professional recognition there? How could it be that eight years of teaching as a professor at the Düsseldorf Academy, in Germany, hadn't left any trace and hadn't attracted any notable interest in him? How could it be in France that this painter should receive the first prize of his career? Hadn't one, or couldn't one, not perhaps make the same claim, for example, to accord me the prize for the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1997? One had to wait until he was sixty-four years to have one's work as a painter, draftsman, and creator of architectural forms rewarded—one who, to be euphemistic, obviously does not entirely correspond to the moral life of our time. This situation, then, makes all the more honorable the jury for the prize.

I trust that the differences between my creative drives, my ideals, and those of Aurélie Nemours, may be less important than is the case, for instance, for the Turner Prize as often playing a gross propaganda role for the United Kingdom. It is not for nothing that Turner, a magnificent painter, is truly, in that case, misapprehended. What is more important to me is the haze of intellectual and spiritual excitation once it takes form. For me, then, his form rises from the depths, as vulnerable as it must be to climatic hazards. I no longer have the habit of branding my works, as with a branding iron. And I remain constrained to establish the existence of this notion of avant-garde which perpetually reproduces itself, venerating an altogether sullied concept of liberty, and its consequence, the maniacal need to invent whatever can break a new taboo. Such strategies of artificial socialization assume an over-evaluation of the self, often independently of any experience, and one is quite right to consider them incestuous; they seem to serve the driving forces of society, fulfilling in this a role analogous to that which the tides of the currents of the stock exchange have so grandly retained for some decades. The artistic bubble of this arrogant and propagandist culture will probably burst, like, in fact, today, that of the economy. But I suppose that that will not only take the form of a "purification"; and those who would expect this to lead to more substance will be disappointed.

For a century since the advent of modernity, no period, no *Zeitgeist*, has seen artists so satisfied by mediocre expectations and the largely infantilizing demand of the society for consumption as is the case today. Our structures of Western socialization and their values have been seriously turned bad, notably by a generation of 1968, if quite lacking the cultural depth of a Marcuse. In the artistic context the greatest cynics have been made of religious and spiritual figures, as one could see here,

in the Pompidou Center, during the exhibition *Traces of the Sacred*; or when a Viennese museum director found nothing to take exception to in being photographed and congratulated in the arms of an artist as a work of art; or again, when we sell Bernard Buffet as a concept for a decisive exhibition, as was the case at Frankfurt. I ask myself what is going on in the brains of these people. Where does this decadent apprehension come from, this affectation so thoroughly governed by these conventions? Whoever places Damien Hirst on a footing of metaphysical equality with Kandinsky is in my opinion an incendiary agitating with premeditation. This rather conventional disrespect, this positivist activism, is insupportable, and constitutes, to my eyes, the proof that we are fully embroiled in a clash of cultures. But this clash is not an opposition of different religions or cultures: no, it takes place within the very bosom of our respective cultures and religions; so we must not be surprised about this anger and violence around us.

I would like to express, once again, my gratitude for the recognition expressed by this prize, and also for the fact that it has been accorded to someone as implacably critical as myself, who does not consider his perhaps socially autistic behavior extraordinary, and hence does not accept using it to justify his marginalization. The allocation of this prize to that person does not seem to me at all a matter of course. I would like to express the very great gratitude that inspires this courage in me. I would love to give to this isolated acknowledgment the same weight that on other occasions a cascade of conventional thanks would confer on it. The Aurélie-Nemours Prize deserves such engagement.

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