

Heritage and Actuality: On the Sense and Nonsense of Talking About “Heritage” in the Study of Electroacoustic Music

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1. Heritage and Actuality

Let me get into the heart of my topic by sharing an anecdote that really happened to me only some weeks ago. While reviewing concerts for some German newspapers, I got involved in a discussion with two concert-goers that culminated with the question of a shocked well-distinguished lady, “But is it possible that they play composers who are not yet dead?”

Since most people cling to life, I guess most of us would not be very happy about the assumption: “only a dead composer is a good composer”. And beside the question how to exist – in this case – between composing and dying, nobody can be sure what posterity is going to do with his or her bequest.

Thus, as we all know, the idea of an accomplishment of the composer’s work by death cannot be an official criterion. Nevertheless, it takes us into the centre of an important cultural problem of our time. This problem can be applied to electroacoustic culture too, as it grows older and develops its own history.

To ask in an a bit provoking way for the beginning: How much past does our future need? And does the measure of useful bequest differ in an art very much related to the concept of innovation from that of others?

Indeed, reading the programs of public concert halls, theatres or newspaper reviews, we could easily come to the argumentation line: Culture is heritage. Music is a part of culture. Hence, music is heritage too. How far would that go, and at which point does this circular reasoning drop us, as observers, into an existential crisis?

It is not accidental that the title of this talk can provoke an association with Nietzsche (NIETZSCHE, 1874; see also BÖHME-MEHNER, 2001). Nevertheless, I will avoid any strong or detailed Nietzsche-“lection”, but the Nietzschean point marks in some cases the other extreme of human positioning in terms according the past.

2. The Idea of Heritage

Let us first have a look at the term “heritage”. The attempt to do bibliographic research in the narrower sense on and around the terms “heritage”, “h ritage” (French for heritage), or “Erbe” (German for heritage) drops the researcher abruptly into an unusual uncertainty, a kind of information lack, appearing deeper if one compares the situation to the same research on related terms such as “history”, “tradition”, or even “past”.

The number of publications is not small at all, but there is no article, no book, or no part of an encyclopedia explaining the social meaning or the function of “heritage”. First, there are big numbers of guidebooks on the huge topic, “How to Inherit and Bequest Most Profitably”. Second, there are incredible numbers of novels – although not often great literature – that discuss the fantastic or horrible role of something from the past taking power on today’s life. These titles sounding like: “The Heritage of the Violet Monk”, “The Bequest of the Rose”, and “The Castle of Dark Heritage”. Finally, there can be found a relatively small number of books from the social sciences and arts, all of them treating heritage as a certain concrete item. Here, the term heritage is nearly always related to a selected thing that is left to people to be preserved or to deal with. Here, the fact that this item was of value is given as a premise, the only premise touching the idea of heritage. By that definition, heritage always appears as something concrete – the representational concrete summary of something terminated.

In summary, the concept of heritage is a legal and cultural, thus a social, construction used to regulate the relationship of the present to the past. Furthermore, as this paper will demonstrate, this is especially of interest in order to regulate the relationship of a complex and innovation-oriented society to its past.

At this moment, it is not important whether this regulation is more materialist or idealist. Of course, regarding our problem, the cultural perspective is more interesting for the moment. Nevertheless, I found a lot of inspiration for this

approach from a more juristic perspective.

The important difference amongst all the other terms mentioned before is that the concept of heritage aims to regulate a real and actual relation, containing at the same time a privilege and a responsibility. Of course, at the level of cultural heritage this can't be the obligation of an inheritance tax or something like that, but the closer we look at the cultural situation, we discover a number of parallels.

3. The Cultural Use of Heritage

As previously shown, the concept of heritage marks a kind of regulating contract between the present and something in the past. At the level of culture, this is not necessarily a written and signed contract, but in every case a social action. The concept of heritage, compared to those of tradition or history, has the advantage and disadvantage to be quite limited and thus clear, but out of a time-scale saying on the level of chronology more than "terminated" and "actual".

Of course, we know today more and more artists believe they were able to regulate the procedure of inheritance of their work on the cultural level by implementing a juristic act before their death. However, we can be sure and happy that cultural inheritance functions on a different and more multi-layered way than the juristic transfer of an estate. This is because – as I will discuss in more detail later – cultural heritage exists on three levels: tangible, ideal and spiritual. Of course, these three levels are usually interlinked.

Nevertheless, compared with history and tradition, heritage can be used without using a construction of causality. There are two sides, inheriting and bequeathing, but it is not necessary to have a direct or causal progression of the two. Thus, heritage is a great thing to be declared if we would like to let some historic steps out or if we intend to refer to values taken from far away – temporally or geographically. The concept of cultural heritage thus becomes more and more important the more complex the possibilities of history construction become and the more difficult it becomes to construct a linear history or tradition, or the more we dislike the result of such a process.

Thus, the concept of heritage in all its particulars demands another intensity of activity. Heritage, by principle, cannot be still there. It is there because there is someone doing something to it. As in everyday life, in the more abstract world of cultural heritage, the inheritance could be accepted or rejected, but in every case it demands a clear positioning. Crucial parts of today's image of cultural progress are based on a continuum of refusal actions and their special relatedness.

This fact guarantees and demands the presence of the bequest. Thus, heritage can be interpreted as a vehicle to communicate the presence of the past, and the awareness of this presence in this kind of society guarantees in some ways the possibility of having future. Also, to address the other part of the title of this talk, heritage always has to be current and somehow in actuality. Thus, we – in the study of culture, in cultural life, and in the arts – use the idea of inheriting something if the image of the past is too complex to make sense of one linear history or tradition.

Thus, heritage can be defined as a socially constructed reintroduction of the concrete to reduce a kind of complexity at the abstract social gateway of past and presence.

To explain the sense and nonsense of adapting the concept of heritage to the arts, I would like to cite the traditional parable of the 12th camel, taken from sociology and the philosophy of science (see: LUHMANN, 2000). This parable is important, not at least because it shows an interesting perspective of the dangerous side of the cultural construction of items, such as heritage.

4 The Parable of the Twelfth Camel

Also the parable talks about trouble with an estate, but I would like to outline that the idea of inheriting in this instance leads me only on the level of methodology to explain the introduction of a more concrete workaround.

A rich Bedouin had – of course – three sons and a big herd of camels.

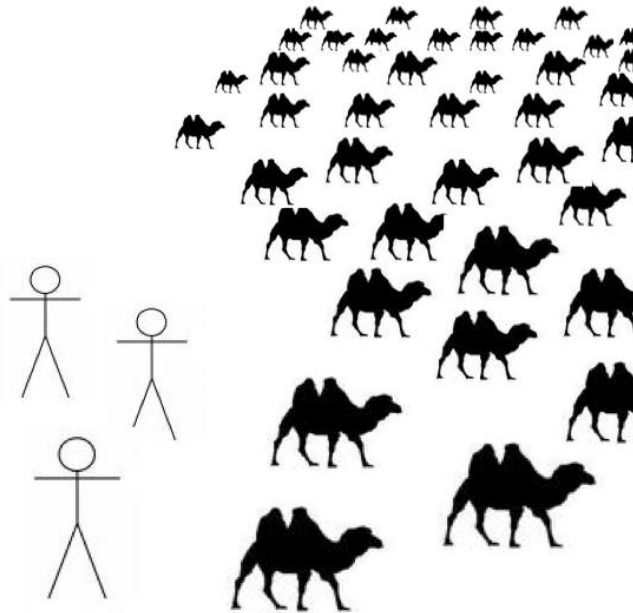


Figure 1: Initial situation – three sons, numerous camels.

To be sure, the man went quite early in his life to fix his will and decided to bequeath half of the camels to the oldest son, a fourth to the second son, and a sixth to the youngest.

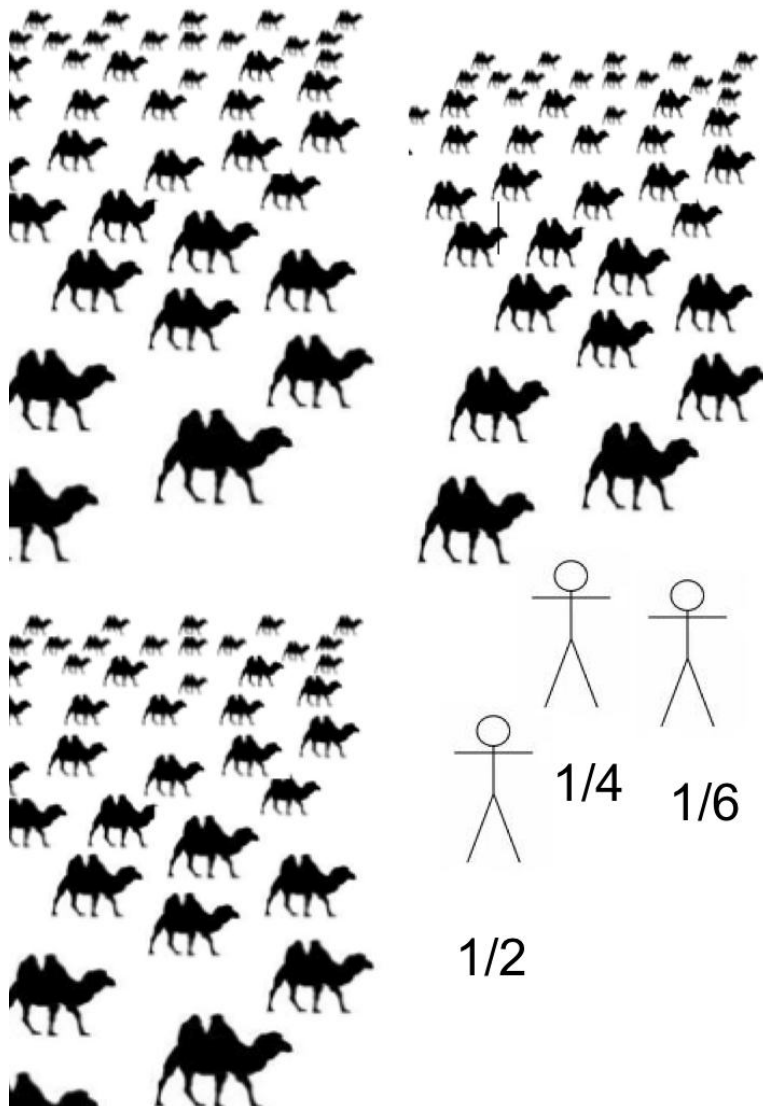


Figure 2: The testament

But when he came to die, life had changed – maybe there had been a financial crisis or a personal losing streak – and the herd had dwindled to eleven camels.

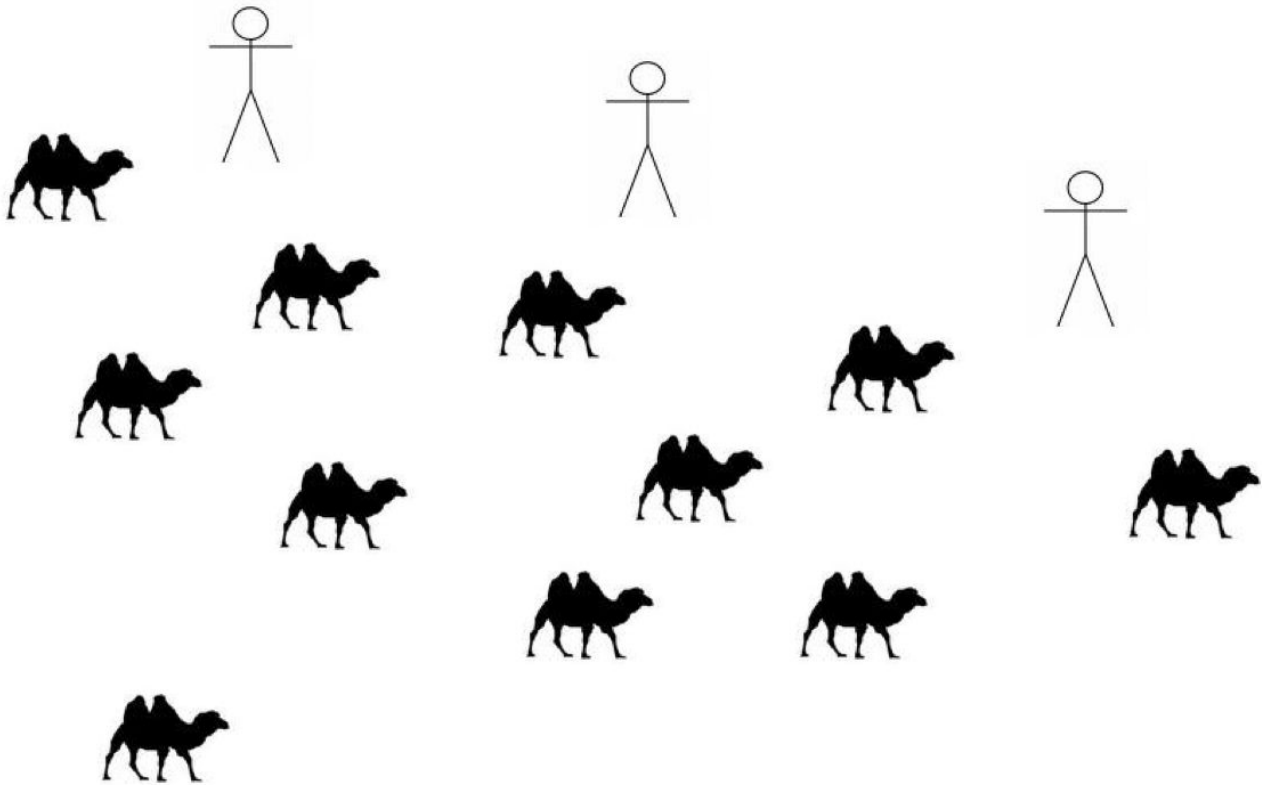


Figure 3: The inheritors and the heritage: three sons, eleven camels

Reading the will of their father, the sons of course got into trouble, because when the oldest called for six camels – the younger ones felt discriminated by the fact that the five remaining did not represent a half.

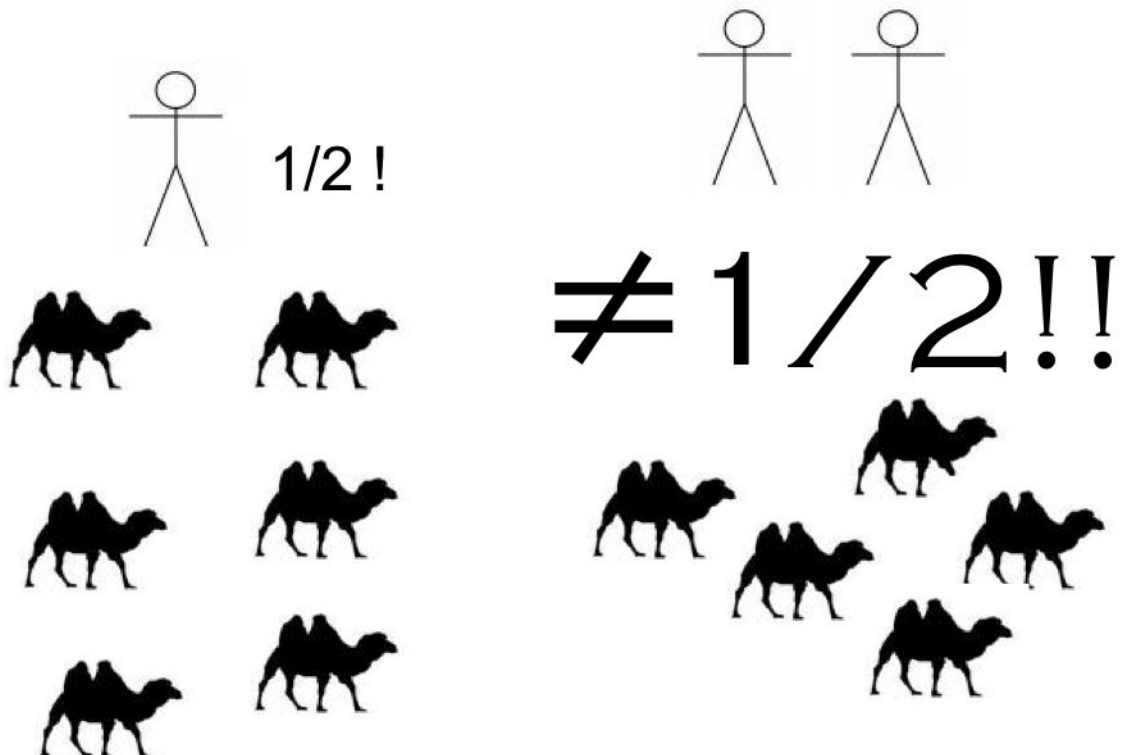


Figure 4: The first step of inheriting

No solution was found, aside from legal action. And thus, the three explained the situation to the judge. The decision of the judge was to lend one of his own camels to the three to make their calculation and to be given back if they wouldn't have use of it according to the father's will.

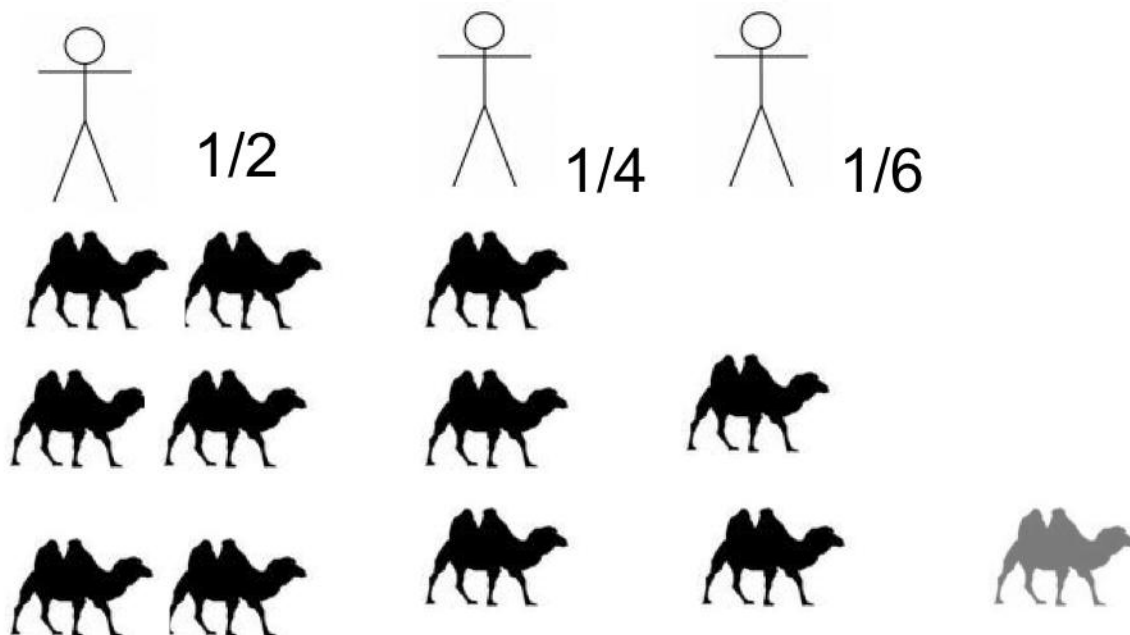


Figure 5: The sentence

Thus, the three made their calculation with twelve camels: the first took his six camels once more, the second took half of the remaining half and thus got three, and because one sixth of twelve is two, the last son took two camels. More or less surprisingly, the judge's camel was left.

Of course they could have figured out from the beginning that their father's calculation did not add up to the whole number of camels, but this is not of interest for the use of the parable in logic and science philosophy. This parable is used by Heinz von Foerster (working with 18 camels), later by Niklas Luhmann, and currently by Dirk Baecker (see: BAECKER, 2000) to explain, among other things, the construction of value and to ask whether, when, and how the 12th camel has to be given back. The parable had been recently introduced into musicological study by Klaus Mehner to discuss a certain circularity in the self-reference of music studies. The 12th camel represents the paradox of the construction of necessary concreteness to reduce methodological abstraction in a special way.

When one of the central questions for Luhmann and Baecker is whether the 12th camel had been given back, and what would happen if it was not, it makes sense for us to ask whether we, in the study of electroacoustic music, have a kind of 12th camel, too.

5. Where is the Twelfth Camel in Electroacoustic Culture?

It seems to be certain that in social sciences we have a number of camels taking the function of the 12th one. The idea of the musical artwork in the field of musicology would be a good example, too.

However, according to the central topic of this conference, I will keep my focus on the concept of heritage by questioning the paradox of heritage in an innovation-oriented art.

As already mentioned, I would like to establish differences amongst three levels of cultural heritage, tangible, ideal, and spiritual. I will use an example from everyday life to illustrate this.

Maybe you know the strange situation of administering an estate, taking for an extreme example, an old aunt, loved and admired, but nevertheless a bit whimsical and in a lovely way old fashioned. Getting inside her world after her death is an emotionally difficult situation, of course, but we start intuitively to make a difference and this is the central moment of inheriting as well as of sense marking in a Spencer Brownian way. The 12th camel, "heritage", balances the abstract three sides of inheriting – the emotional one, the overwhelming moment, for example, of finding an old broken clock decorated with dried flowers; the rational one, questioning, for example, our personal use of the clock in relation to the

aunt's bank account; and the more abstracting spiritual one, keeping the picture of the aunt with her strange relation to time manifested by the clock and – if necessary – using the bank account to buy a new clock, filling the function in which we would need one.

At some very emotional points, overwhelmed by memorization, we reflect about keeping this or that (even if there was no value nor use for us) only because we, as inheritors, were responsible for preservation, but nevertheless we have to select only certain items to preserve. Otherwise, taking home all the ancient things, our lives would be overwhelmed by the past.

Cultural heritage may work somehow in a different way, but we in electroacoustics, more than other musicians, are in a quite comparable situation because our work since its beginning has been extremely related to innovation. In terms of private heritage, you can love your relatives, although you throwaway their Pentium P5 computer when they die. However, for us as researchers and musicians lefts the problem that performance and scientific reconstruction is related to the old machines. We all know the controversies very well, and I'm sure that the silver bullet of this is somewhere between the different positions. Thus, we should force ourselves not only to ask how to preserve this or that, but also why. This is the same procedure: consciously with the aunt's clock and often more unconsciously with a piece of music. To inherit means to select and this is also the way to develop a canon, a kind of repertory.

In some ways, people practising note-based music are in a position much easier on the one hand and much more difficult on the other hand. There are not many arguments on heritage in music more simple then the idea of reading scores somehow as the will.

However, it is not difficult also to see the problem in preserving music in this way as heritage: When is the moment to return the camel? Can it been given back?

Thus, we could say, 'What a chance for the study of electroacoustic music' But do we take it?

Germans – with their very long electroacoustic tradition and a very strong cultural belief in the concept of heritage – have known for quite a long time the different opinions on preservation of a so-called “electroacoustic heritage”, meaning first of all the machines. I only want to mention here the very intense conflict surrounding the closing of the legendary WDR studio in Cologne. The stoppage of the studio production did not provoke discussions as strong as those of the WDR approach to throwaway the machines. I am not able to close this point without becoming polemical, thus I will keep it open for discussion. Nevertheless, in some other points, Cologne starts to become a sort of symbol of a kind of clash of heritage. The photos of the destroyed city archive, unifying so many documents of value, so much heritage in a huge hole, say much more then verbal arguments.

6. When is the Moment to Give the Twelfth Camel Back?

Thus, we in electroacoustic culture – as anybody else doing cultural studies – have not only a heritage of some camels, but also a camel called “heritage”, which is in any case useful to organise our “belongings”. However, according to the philosophy of science, do we have to give it back and, if we have to, why and when?

We are not lawyers claiming the 12th camel as property of someone else, and even the ethical component of the deprivation is not in the centre of interest of the anthropologic part of us. Because our constructed camel could be taken by everybody else to organize their belongings, there would not be any external impulse to give the camel back. Nevertheless, there are enough logicians to advise us to return, not at least because of the dangerous new moment of imbalance.

Thus, the moment to give the camel back is the moment we have noticed the value of the other camels and we have identified our part of them and taken the property and thus the responsibility. Inheriting means to make something one's own. If we as social beings understand keeping efforts from the past as a special value, our culture reconstructs itself continuously by inheriting.

To give the camel back does not mean to kill it or even to stop the contact between the camels, but to balance this contact and to regulate the exchange processes. In keeping the camel, we would not only be unable to borrow it for further calculation, but we also could not be sure of how dominant this animal was. Applied to ideas, they would start quite early to circulate in a kind of incestuous way. Thus, we couldn't finally be sure whether it was more a heritage of culture we were in touch with or even a culture of heritage we were already living in. What we accept at all levels as heritage has to be appropriate to our lives, and that is the same for the inheritor as it is for the bequeather.

Thus, why could we not keep the camel for further hereditary processes and further calculations: By adopting a heritage, there has to be a transformation process continuously running, in order to keep a culture alive. In order to have a future, to inherit always means a circular flow of keeping and leaving. Thus, talking about heritage even in our innovation-oriented field does make sense, not first as a kind of saving a strongbox, but as a cultural process.

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