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Petra Maria Runge's "Television Pictures"

A Gestalt psychological view of art



'Television Pictures', polyptych, 20 umber ink brush drawings, each 30cm x 40cm

An unwieldy object - with a sensual promise?

What a strangely austere uniformity. Twenty equal-sized, umber ink paintings are arranged in four rows of 5 sheets in a massive glass case. This rigidity stands in stark contrast to the variety of constellations in which the people depicted find themselves: alone, in pairs or in threes. Initially, it is impossible to find any connection between the individual pictures. Each stands beside, but isolated from, the others, and is puzzling because the 'before' and 'after' have been excised. This is an unwieldy object. A clearly defined arrangement that is nonetheless hard to interpret and to which our immediate response must be confusion, helplessness and disorientation.

But then we get a hint. As our gaze sweeps across the pictures, several scenes of erotic activity catch our eye: a naked couple merge in a brushstroke for a sexual act. A woman with a sensuous mouth and protruding nipples raises her arms as if in a spontaneous dance; another lies topless on her stomach, her right hand tucked into her trousers as if she is masturbating. Yet another, her naked back to the viewer, rides her partner between his legs. A strongly accentuated phallus rises from the base of her spine, again suggesting sexual intercourse. The scene appears to be playing out in front of a mirror, as the masturbation scene could be, too.

Fractures

These strikingly sensual scenes seem like a promise. Could it be that the polyptych reveals its inner coherence in a sequence of erotic images? A story of desire, arousal and sexual satisfaction? Other pictures seem to support this idea. A figure sits with its legs drawn up and its crotch highlighted in colour. A pale naked female back appears in the background between a couple. A woman's head reminds us of Marilyn Monroe.

However, these latter three drawings make clear that, as in most of the other pictures depicting groups of two or three, the people in them do not really come together. Often the figures or heads are arranged next to or behind each other. Few of the forms suggest a

relationship. Indeed, in several sheets hatching emphasises the distance between the people. This impression is reinforced by faces that come across as sad, bulging and lacking clear contours. In the groups of three, at least one person is always cut off from the others. If two people happen to be face-to-face, they actually look past each other. Expressions of 'parting' are a key feature of the ensemble, both in the majority of individual pictures and in the work as a whole. Just as the scenes of sensuality stand out in their isolation from the others, so the figures predominantly convey a fragile intimacy.

Thus the initial intimation, that we might here be dealing with lustful variations of erotic or sexual fulfilment, turns into its opposite. As if in mockery, the effect of the torn and disconnected elements is taken to the extreme by a drawing depicting two skeletons. One of them raises its bony right arm in an absurd wave: a humorous grotesquerie. The other skeleton's left arm seems to want to make contact, and a third, obviously living person may be attempting a gesture of mediation. Yet this absurd body language comes to nothing. To want to make contact or mediate in death is a malicious and scornfully overdrawn comment on the complete lack of communication that prevails between the figures.

At least five of the drawings portray isolated individual figures. There's a Karl Lagerfeld head, the left lens of whose glasses is covered with a blot; a bright spot on the glass gives his right eye an air of suspicion. There's a Charles de Gaulle head, its eyes drifting apart, its mouth distorted and the nose so pronounced that it sharply divides the two halves of the face. One figure is asleep on its left side. The masturbator is absorbed in her activity. A lone driver's head behind the steering wheel, framed by the car's bodywork. Variations on being apart.

Ambiguity that finds its coherence in the painterly flow.

And at the same time, all the scenes in this work have a sense of challenge. They invite us to develop stories. Each situation can be the starting point of a narrative - or placed in any other position. Stories of wishfulness, desire and rejection, of fulfilment and separation, of lust and denial, of wanting to be included yet being excluded. This ambiguity and multivalence offers a richness and also confronts us with a challenge. What we have before us is a twofold provocation: too much (apparent ambivalence) and too little (coherent interaction).

The unifying element is not to be found in the subject, but reveals itself in the subtle yet very powerful execution. As she has impressively demonstrated with her "Self-Portraits 1987-1999" and the graphic works entitled "Innenraum" (1997/98) and "Blaubraun" (2008), Petra Maria Runge has an extraordinary mastery of the art of drawing. What is less pleasing and incompletely formulated in the thematic arrangement is transformed and resolved if we concentrate on the virtuosity of her drawing: The painterly strokes of the brushwork follow a rhythm alternating between emphasis and deemphasis, between centring and dispersion, between delicate and energetic, between soft transitions and abrupt delimitations; and this tremendous tempo can be felt in every drawing. These are lightning-fast, highly skilful works of the wrist that create a deliberate interplay between definiteness and indefiniteness, between the implied and the obvious, between the precise and the approximate. There are countless steps in the transitions between contrasts, so that every scene is composed of finely calibrated movements between lighter and darker masses. None of the drawings exudes any sense of the static, the geometrically fixed, in all of them we can perceive a vibration, sometimes more intense, sometimes less, a rhythm that simultaneously "turns us on" and leaves us disappointed.

Between straitjacket and freedom

The shimmering combination of complex object and viewing process gives rise to a peculiar experience of reality: the strict uniformity of the arrangement, the consistently monochrome amber presentation, the constantly varying change of creative means once they have been established, all these give this experience of art an unusually constrained form. On the other hand, there is the multiplicity of highly-charged stand-alone scenes, seedstock for an infinite number of fantasies, ideas and tales. This openness gives the work a random, arbitrary and fleeting character. But it also contains the freedom to choose. The work lives from the extreme tension between being *straitjacketed* by what is laid down in a determinedly formalised manner and the *freedom* offered by an extremely contradictory abundance of choices as to how to connect with it emotionally. The scenes depicted oscillate between the protagonists' poles of intimate fusion and peculiar alienation. The work thus entangles the viewer in ever new conflicts. It never allows a real calm to set in. We are dealing here with the concept of the "disturbing form" in art. (1) The emergence of meaning, structure and content (e.g. through the erotic scenes, the outer form or the rhythm of the arrangement) is constantly disturbed by the effects of the isolation, the separation, indeterminacy, randomness, interchangeability and ephemerality of these multivalent drawings.

Reflection

Is there a "more" and an "over and above this" in this rotating relationship between a disparate abundance and what is determined by the compelling and absolute *Gestalt* qualities of the presentation?

The artist produced these works in front of a running television, though the frame of the set itself is omitted from the drawings. The centring, the clearly defined shape with its agitated edges, the repeated dimensions of the drawings and the fluid materiality of the ink corroborate the idea that we are looking at images on a screen, a "motion flow" that the brush has captured for a moment without losing its narrative animation.

Only in one drawing is an actual television set to be seen. One half of the screen is covered by a dark diffuse mass, while on the lighter side the outline of a head and upper body is suggested. Taking what is indeterminate and arbitrary and a radically reduced meaning to the extreme in this way leads us to a surprising analogy. It is an analogy that shows how art renders the objects and structures of our everyday life transparent.

The painter brings together an ensemble of *seemingly arbitrary* snapshots that just happened to interest her, drawn while watching television. Viewing them, we are completely free to proceed from scene to scene or to jump back and forth at random. We are free to invent a connecting meaning or to refrain from doing so.

Something comparable happens in *zapping*. As television viewers, we exit the narrative context in the middle of watching it, arbitrarily switch to other scenes and repeatedly interrupt them, creating a collage of jagged images and fragments of speech. In doing so, we become aware of the "eternal recurrence" of the sameness offered by our TV channels, and yet by zapping we can also distance ourselves from it: from the constantly reheated sequences in news broadcasts, from the imitations of advertising illusions, from the interminable plot variations of drama series and the phrasemongering of talk shows. The longer we zap, the more the individual amputated fragments of meaning flow together into an undifferentiated background noise over which we viewers can indulge our fantasies, thoughts and memories.

Put at its most extreme, zapping gives us the freedom to decide for ourselves whether to be drawn in or not, whether to affirm or to reject.

Petra Maria Runge's *Television Pictures* reflect this dual experience. They seem (to quote Picasso) "more real than the reality" of the TV images. (2) On the one hand, the return of all that is standardised, arbitrary and interchangeable in the mass media (what Hans Magnus Enzensberger has called the "zero medium") is epitomised in an independent, individual object, and at the same time this work makes us aware of the compulsion inherent in freedom of choice. (3)

Being able to choose means having to decide what we want to become involved in and from what we want to derive our own personal added value. We can consume everyday fare or look for the pearl in the mass-produced goods. We are free to do this; but we can never prevent the meaningful contexts and the satisfaction they give us from dissolving and disappearing between the film footage and the never-ending talk. As in this "unwieldy object" in front of us, in which everything we think we have pinned down can always mean something else.



Television Pictures, watercolour polyptych, 20 sheets, each 20cm x 31cm

Taken to extremes - the set goes haywire

Here we see the same strict uniformity, the clearly structured juxtaposition but, within that, things taken on colour, become lively, disturbing and, in a specific way, dynamic. Each image is now framed by an ancient-looking television set. These box-like housings melt and melt away; they have dents and holes; they burst, disintegrate and merge into the background. They appear shocked by what they seem to be showing or announcing. In twelve of the pictures, the screens display individual figures, mostly heads and the suggestion of upper bodies, blurred and indeterminate; we are struck by only one particular detail: the pairs of eyes. Some are dark, piercing, wide-open or staring, others pale and melting or disappearing completely into the mass of the face, yet others are black lifeless stares.

These eyes speak of hardship, spectres, horror, ill-defined things, of being lost, of injury, dissolution and extinction. The movement of the paint on the paper emphasises the impression of a decaying order. Only the repetitive arrangement of the sheets of paper and their enclosure by the framed work give us something to hold on to. Even the expressive quality of the colours fails to reassure. A spreading red seems to eat away at a face, a dirty green appears to wrap itself around what might be an explosion. Two houses stand together - black, leaning and sad. These impressions are confirmed by those heads that look like skulls. Isolated runs of paint have something sucking and clenching about them, without direction or rhythm. Among all this stands a sensuous nude, isolated, unable to mitigate the horror around her with her charms. The figures and forms seem trapped in the shape of the screen. A succession of

oppressive moods, reminding us of news programmes with their standardised coverage of endless disaster sequences.

The drama and its alienation are to be found in the transparent, deliquescent style.

The pictures have no content and no narrative. It is only the expressiveness of the transitions, the choice and clash of the colours that create an ominous fluidity. The gloom, blur, pallor, deliquescence and the disturbing eyes give the images a visual dynamism in which a violent, threatening, terrifying ambience takes root. It is a mood reinforced by the unrelated juxtaposition, the semantic isolation of the individual paintings.

Yet taking advantage of the ethereal medium of watercolour, Petra Maria Runge simultaneously achieves a massive alienation effect and a refraction of the menace depicted. From being moved we can be zoomed out to a safe distance and another perspective.

Television pictures - artificial flowers: mundane, evil, poetic

Nam June Paik was one of the first to tackle the medium of television with radical forms of artistic language and to put it in contrasting settings. In his 'TV Garden' installation, for example, he placed flickering television sets in amongst an ensemble of tropical plants. This created a profoundly multivalent context in which nature, man, technology and art were forced to confront and come to terms with each other. Commenting on his work 'Robot Opera' in 1965, Nam June Paik said: "Television has attacked us all our lives, now we are fighting back. I want to make electronics more humanistic, more aware of the problems around the reality to be represented and to make the latter more visible." (4)

The destructive side of the chaos that is reality penetrates the aura of our personal environment through the way television news is put together. We know that it is arranged, filtered, mediated. We need this mediation. We do not want to be part of a threatening unmediated event. There is a safe distance between us and the object. But at the same time, it is this mediation which reduces everything that is broadcast to us to a single ceaseless torrent. A river of reality that we always perceive as artificial and facade-like and that regularly evokes feelings of alienation and passivity. By consciously applying its own alienation techniques, art manages to make these effects visible. Objects, people, actions and entire worlds become permeable to each other.

Petra Maria Runge chooses the language of watercolour painting to achieve this and the result is a daring metamorphosis. She transforms what is a highly technological medium into the delicate, fluid, transparent materiality of water-soluble pigments. There is something deeply artificial and ironic about this that ridicules its target. The undeniably ambivalent influence of television on our lives is skewered with a watercolour brush. In the process, small hybrid creatures have emerged: artificial and ephemeral, technical and ethereal, poetic and evil. These metamorphoses utter an invitation: Look closely! What is it that touches, attracts, bores or frightens you when you pursue the simple habit of watching television?

(1) Salber, W. Kunst-Psychologie-Behandlung. Bonn. 1977 S. 107

(2) Quoted from I. F. Walther. Picasso. Cologne. 1986. S. 61

(3) Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Das Nullmedium oder warum alle Klage gegen das Fernsehen gegenstandslos sind. In: Ders.: Mittelmaß und Wahn. Frankfurt. 1988.

(4) Quoted from Wulf Herzogenrath. Nam June Paik, Fluxus, Video. Munich. 1983