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Shoot the Freak

Thoughts on an Exhibition

Canvas and Paper. In her exhibition, which makes reference to the display window space of the Kunstverein Ruhr, Sibylle Springer combines five exquisite paintings with a veritable cloud, measuring approximately three by four meters, consisting of countless images found in and cut out of our visual memory. This combination of acrylic painting on canvas with an overriding torrent of small, slip-like, photocopied or printed images is remarkable insofar as it concerns contexts embedded in cultural history that not only relate to the two different visual concepts being shown here but also bear on viewers themselves – which only becomes visible and can be experienced at second glance. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at this exhibition and its so very different components in order to understand the selection of motifs and thus what motivates this artist to take this particular approach.

Color as a Theme. What is striking about the pictures Sibylle Springer has painted is the use of glazily applied paint, in some places apparently freely poured and occasionally even washed out. In addition, she sporadically uses metallic pigments that lend some canvases a luster that alternates between silver, gold, or bronze. At first glance, these works seem to be bound to a painterly concept that has been able to develop and assert itself on both sides of the Atlantic since the sixties and which today considers itself to be pure color painting without any relation to an object. Indeed, it concerns color as the actual pictorial object and theme, its affinity with light, its transparency, and its interaction with other colors. Several very thin layers laid one above the other even create an imaginary innerpictorial space on the surface of the painting that can result in a wide variety of aesthetic experiences. However, for Sibylle Springer it is not just about color as a phenomenon but at the same time as a material whose freely flowing features, in part provocatively showered over the respective background and apparently at random, call the rules of composition into question. In this respect, the work by the painter who lives in both Bremen and Berlin is not only highly current but also capable of tying into what was previously possible in painting in a reflected and skillful way.

Alternating Images. That one can already arrive at such an assessment after a certain period of “examination” is due, among other things, to the fact that depending on the side or perspective from which one views it, this highly developed painting is capable of looking different time after time. If one moves back and forth in front of the paintings, they seem to change under the viewer’s eyes. The incidence of light through the south-facing display window of the exhibition space also plays a certain role, of course, as does the relatively cold light of the neon tubes that illuminates the space from above. However, it is above all the constantly changing angles of vision of the viewer moving in the space that play a constitutive role during this interplay of color. They lead to these initially very subtle and ultimately clearly noticeable color deviations and changes. Viewed purely physically, such phenomena can be explained by the reflection of the light through the lustrous surfaces, off which the light occasionally radiates metallically. Looked at from the side, such a painting looks different than from the front. Added to this, of course, is the densification of the pigments due to the oblique glance; we see some layers of paint and glazes more compactly, sometimes more intensely from up close. In the end, we perceive these paintings as alternating, in a coloristic sense as ambiguous – occasionally like shimmering silk fabric whose weft and warp were woven from threads that complement one another. So far, so good. However, it does not concern only purely optical color phenomena or even “effects,” as we will see by taking an in-depth look.

Objectification and Dissolution. Within these at first glance painterly free and informally applied spots, streaks, and cloud-like formations, on closer inspection we see surprising representational motifs, situations, or scenes that can be “re-recognized” in a twofold sense. From certain perspectives and when looked at more closely, one suddenly notices references to existing pictures or to what is definitely a “representational” visual concept in the undergrowth of the free, painterly texture that begin to contradict the reverence for the pure color field painting mentioned at the beginning. Most notably, these representational references seem to time and again involuntarily come out of the background. They are in a special way erratic; do not simply and recognizably stand still. Instead, they are able to repeatedly escape and apparently withdraw into the painterly texture that defines them and from they just came, only to disappear again. One wants to shout “Stay, you’re

so beautiful (or horrible)!" because what one believes to have just concretely discovered proves to be ambiguous in the best sense: The objects and figures in these paintings have the tendency to dissolve beyond recognition in the viewer's eye into the aggregate state of freely applied paint and become like the undergrowth of the painted textures and glazes. And that is already more than just remarkable.

These initially hidden depictions are in part well-known works from art history, but also photographs that feature something extraordinary, in part obscene, or truly frightening. And this is where the first connection develops in the viewer's mind to the paper pictures in the "cloud" on the wall and their motifs. In fact, the one begins to correspond with the other; the initially apparently bold combination of canvases and slips of paper proves to be absolutely reflected and motivated.

Pictorial Swarm and Visual Memory. But what is this collection of numerous small pictures from books, magazines, and the Internet all about? Is it a concrete store from which Sibylle Springer draws visual inspiration, from which she, so to speak, assumes or quotes the representational components of her painting? Or are these only images accidentally found in the World Wide Web that permanently circulate there? Is "cloud" perhaps the adequate designation for a host of imaginary visual data that is constantly available in the media? Let us take a closer look at this "cloud": Many of these images stem from earlier centuries. Paintings, drawings, prints. However, they also include contemporary photographs and press photos. One time and again discovers several well-known pictures from art history among them, definitely familiar motifs due to their cultural embeddedness and frequent use. And after a while, one notices that this recourse to existing images, which have in part been ennobled by art history, has occurred particularly with regard to specific scenes and motifs. They are frequently depictions of boundary transgressions in which eroticism as well as scenes of violence play a defining role. Looking at this swarm of images becomes like a walk through a world of excesses, breaking taboos, the repulsive, the unbearable. However, it often also has to do with beauty, erotic allure, passion, and at the same time with the surprisingly wide field of desire, pain, and death. These transgressions - what else can one expect - are repeatedly illustrated based on depictions of the human body. Be it a crucifixion scene, Jesus Christ standing naked before us as a Man of Sorrows, be it the illustration of a martyr tortured to death before the eyes of voyeurs who, as it were, has to vicariously once again accept the Passion of Christ and with respect to salvation augured in belief. In the sense of a boundary transgression, many of the images of executions and torture that have been handed down contain indications that agonies will at some point come to a redeeming end. Yet at the same time, the concurrently existing notion of hellish tortures that last eternally has a deeply disturbing effect on viewers.

Voyeurism - Taking a Look and Looking Away. In this context, what can be irritating are above all the extensively demonstrated mixture and superimposition of erotic and highly brutal scenes, as it opens up an area of what is largely blocked out and is occasionally profoundly obscene. The social sphere of such visual concepts definitely exists, yet at first glance it does not seem to be permitted to lay claim to a place within a serious aesthetic debate. In contrast, Sibylle Springer confronts us in a surprising way and without warning, as it were, with a cross-section of all of those visual concepts that (would) traditionally fall victim to the censor.

And that isn't everything yet. Because when looking at these images one realizes that besides the boundary transgressions that have been passed down and amassed here, we also have a frequent urge to see them. They trigger the viewer's curiosity and thus a rather contradictory attitude of constantly taking a look and looking away again. As a viewer attitude, this voyeurism seems to be a result of such accumulations of erotica and atrocities. In other words: Sibylle Springer quite consciously addresses a contradiction that seems to be firmly anchored in cultural history. The desire, the unavoidable urge, and the curiosity to take a look at what in most cases is nearly unbearable, which in the opinion of institutionalized or self-proclaimed upholders of moral standards should be edited out or even prohibited, touches a cultural constant that is part of our culture itself and which in the age of digital visual media seems to be expressing itself in a new and drastic way.

The Tears of Eros. Gert Mattenklott's phrase "Taking a look is a passion - looking away makes me its master"¹ denominates a dichotomy of excess and control, devotion and a renunciation of drive. And this contradiction, which can be called a dialectic relation, is simply part of our culture. A paradox so deeply embedded in society

naturally finds its terrain and its appropriate expression in the world of images, in their display, admiration, reverence, and finally in the attempt to regulate how they are dealt with or their tabooization.

In his "Story of the Eye"² and his "The Tears of Eros"³, Georges Bataille, who also devoted his historico-cultural and literary oeuvre to these relations, seriously suggests how one might deal with this inescapable entanglement of images, ideas, thoughts, and verbalizations. An initial thumb through *The Tears of Eros* shockingly confirms this theory: There is a culturally embedded connection between desire and pain, Eros and Thanatos, the death drive and active passion. "The Tears of Eros" allow submersing oneself in an art history of excesses, boundary transgressions, orgiastic frenzy, extreme lust, and hellish atrocity. For readers and viewers, what is at first glance definitely a shocking observation by the Frenchman is the constantly recurring facial expression of those being portrayed: ecstasy, rapture, exuberance. Eyes gazing devotedly upwards, mouths open and preparing to scream either in consummate lust or in extreme pain - how similar they are to one another! The gaze toward the sky finds its physiognomically apt expression both during orgasm as well as during the last gasp on the cross of torture: two extremes of going beyond oneself that have to be understood as integral parts of our culture. Far from any cynicism or any contempt for humankind, Bataille develops his theory of transgression as a fundamental option, indeed a necessity associated with human existence. And the illustrated part of this book provides a great deal of palpable evidence for the fact that this tension has existed for thousands of years and continues to exist to this day.

Eros and Thanatos. Bataille's initially very close connection with the Surrealists, who, within their literature and creative artistic method of "purely psychic automatism" (Breton), focused on the unconscious, irrational, on change, dream, sexuality, and death, played an important role in this observation and insight. After all, the death drive described by Sigmund Freud in 1920 and the violence unleashed by World War I as state-organized, wholesale murder several years earlier provided first-hand confirmation of his theories. Because the violence on the battlefields that emerged in the war machinery made palpable that what was acknowledged to be a survival instinct was accompanied by a previously underestimated death drive. Bataille also knew (as did Freud) that this consumptive energy could be directed toward others as well as toward oneself. Hence the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos affects not only individuals but entire societies, which can find their way into a position to wipe each other out. The atrocities and fantasies of murder and dismemberment that can be detected in our social memory no longer remain in the symbolic sphere of images, but are brutally carried over into the reality of the collective by state-regulated mass death at the beginning of modernity.

Transgression. In 1929, thus prior to the so-called seizure of power in Germany, Bataille was able to link the profitability principle of capitalistic rationality with modern disaster as experienced in World War I. He provocatively countered the deeply felt regimentation and enforced conformity of society with mysticism, art, excess, eroticism, defilement, and profuseness. One might see Bataille's special merit in the fact that his literary and research work represents an alternative to a profitability principle, which all needs, desires, drives, and dreams run the risk of being subjected to. The apologist of transgression proves to be a defender of the freedom of autonomous thought.

As put forward at the same time by Ernst Jünger, for instance, war was described as a society's cathartic purification ritual, elevated to a mythical level and thus justified in a fatal, ultimately cynical way. Bataille's "The Tears of Eros" and his "Story of the Eye" (and other essays) constitute an alternative that can be taken seriously. Because in the legacy of the French forward thinker and ponderer of profuseness, all of the boundary transgressions take place within the scope of a symbolic sphere: in literature, in art, and in philosophy. And these are sui generis alternatives, correctives, never confirmations or even instructions to be directly transferred to social reality. This is also where the foundation lies for understanding and confidently dealing with Bataille's transgressions. Comprehending them, rendering them visual in the sense of art and literature provide permanent, easily manageable arguments against slipping into a real catastrophe. The cultural conflict being described here achieves a different, definitely negotiable status through dealing with Bataille's literary and pictorial legacy.

Mnemosyne. But let us return once more to the culturally embedded role of images, which obviously plays an important role in the oeuvre of Sibylle Springer, to whom this essay is dedicated. For her, actively render-

ing visible the motifs described here also stands for the sustainability and power of some of the visual concepts that have deposited themselves in our cultural memory and assert themselves to this day. There are at once several striking pieces of evidence for this cultural embeddedness in the aforementioned “cloud” on the left wall of the exhibition space. They are always extraordinary and powerful images that have entered the collective imagination and have since belonged to our cultural substance and therefore to our social memory.

It would almost seem the thing to do to call to mind not only the immense volume of images in the media age with their myriads of virtual image files, but also the notion of the social memory as developed by the Hamburg-based art historian and independent scholar Aby Warburg with respect to the tradition of pictures. Warburg worked all of his life on the theory that certain images that repeatedly circulate are insolubly connected with the overall culture in which they originated and continue to be handed down.

In his *Mnemosyne*, an atlas of images that remained unfinished, Warburg was able to palpably prove that many of these visual concepts stand the test of time, continue to be handed down, and at the same time are subject to continuous conversions, are apparently forgotten or suppressed only to then reappear later in very different contexts. According to Warburg, these special images possess the potential to become symbols. However, symbols not only include several meanings simultaneously, but also a kind of energy surplus. Like an aggregate, they are capable of being recharged with power over and over again when the time has come to reactivate them.

The Power of Images. Sibylle Springer is evidently interested in (powerful) images that deal with borderline situations, extreme experiences of pain and desire. In both the collaged cloud and in her paintings on canvas, there are therefore numerous in part very old pictures in which the aforementioned boundaries are transgressed multilaterally and which have been passed down to this day despite, or precisely due to, their tabooization. Many of these pictures stem from the Occidental store of myths or directly from the world of Christian imagery. Martyrs, the crucified, the beheaded, the flayed, victims of the persecution of Christians cruelly tortured to death, or later images from the Inquisition, for which the Church itself was responsible. And yet all of what we see here is an integral part of our culture and has influenced us. To deny, block out, or combat it would be tantamount to an absurd iconoclasm in the age of torrents of digital images. Bataille’s and Warburg’s brilliant, pioneering achievements would have also remained meaningless. Through her artistic, proverbially painterly involvement with this constant part of our culture Sibylle Springer opens up a serious proposal and concrete opportunities to deal with this.

Female Murders. During her research, the artist repeatedly draws on the store of images and information on Wikipedia. For example, when she is searching for female serial murderers and surprisingly finds what she is looking for. We are amazed by women whose faces do not provide any indication of what they have done. Serial murderers who in part have the faces of angels and whose atrocities remain hidden behind their physiognomies. Sibylle Springer produced a deeply unsettling as well as convincing series of sixteen paintings, of which three are being presented in Essen. Painted based on images that the artist precisely researched. Each of these women has an individual history; however, its tragic course cannot be read in any way whatsoever in their physiognomy. And in the end, that is also what these portraits are about! Sibylle Springer operates as a painter for the “equality” of these women, which in terms of their actions it somewhat macabre though historically necessary. What is also meaningful here is the use of glazily applied paint with metallic pigments. Looked at from different directions, these colors therefore manifest differently each time. Form and content do justice to one another - which is not only a characteristic of this style of painting but also typical of the artist’s stance.

Aesthetic Experience. When one moves through the exhibition space as a viewer, depending on one’s perspective and the incidence of light, one is irritated by the fact that what one sees repeatedly seems different. In the end, these painterly highly developed pictures alternate between showing and concealing, between beauty and horror, between the visible and the uncertain. According to Sibylle Springer, it is this ambivalence, this vagueness, and the numerous shades that stimulate her. And we ultimately sense that most of what we are able to see in these pictures largely arises from our own fantasies, memories, fears, and doubts. Painting that addresses the senses and reason in equal measure, which the longer one contemplates and ponders

refers back to regions that are older than antiquity, Christianity, and Judaism. A walk through this exhibition generates aesthetic experiences in which vision and thinking are similarly called for and rewarded.

¹ Translated from Gerd Mattenklott, *Der übersinnliche Leib. Beiträge zur Metaphysik des Körpers*, (Reinbek, 1972), I

² Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London, 2013)

³ Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Üeter Connor (San Francisco, 2001)