

**MARGIT ZUCKRIEGL**

### **Polytrophic Panoramas**

Banal interpretive models have outlived themselves in today's art production. A moralizing and explanatory approach belongs to the obsolete repertoire of an attitude that was especially prevalent in socially engaged art projects at the end of the last century. With a starting point in the experience of politics as overpowering and a development of society tending toward superficiality, it was up to art and the artists to outline and point to an opposition, a counterbalance. In this socially engaged art a sphere of irritation is felt; here art and the observer encounter each other directly; here art can become a disturbing element and a seedbed of unrest. Whoever would explain the world and its phenomena must first analyze and deconstruct it; afterwards a new process of fermentation begins. Only when everything is taken apart right down to the smallest elements of meaning, can a new conglomerate of meaning emerge. This was the intention that in the theatre led to martial interpretations of the classics, in the galleries to cartographies of horror, and in literature to the uncovering of convenient existential lies. Nevertheless it was in these years prior to the turn of the millennium that another attitude, besides the search for meaning, the desire for explanations and the perceived need for information gained ground in art. It was a sort of sanctioning of a signature that had been denigrated as "antiquated" – that of pure, straight-forward painting, a sort of iconic hedonism, characterized by an indulgence in the form of expression, carefree articulation, a retelling of anecdotal material, focusing on an aesthetic that appeared to be readily digestible, accessible, and unequivocally aimed at amusement and momentary stimulation of the eye. Does the unequivocal here stand alongside the equivocal, the simple across from the multi-layered, the surface before the abyss?

In all certainty it can be said that hedonistically inclined art employs imagery that appears easy to decipher. It rejects the crisp formulas of conceptual art, the terse ciphers of minimal art and the material density of *art povera* in favour of the possibility of a form of expression that since the baroque period has reappeared only in Surrealism and Pop art: here construction is meticulous; here the art-historical parameters of composition and colour still hold; here sensual illusion and calculated fiction reign. None the less, the intention goes beyond the outer layer of smoothly rendered epidermis: pitfalls and abysses open up underneath the lightly formulated as a disheartening premonition; like makeup, the smartly staged glamour scenarios conceal the impurities of the underlying substance. When Jeff Koons arranges bikini girls and paradise plants in sexy fantasy images, he is not castigating a degenerating society, nor is he declaring a new world order; he is staging a baroque-like ensemble of radiant erotic power and magic grandeur – an icon of hedonism, an emblem full of sensual praise, a simple pictorial model taken from the world of domesticated soft porn – but also an indicator of a view of life from a human perspective that just barely manages through indulgent dreamy fantasies to conceal the haunting uncertainty about one's own frailty under an erotic sugar-coating.

Asgar/Gabriel realize their artistic intentions in these fields of Elysian ambiguities. In the same way that the baroque period – which after the Counter-Reformation was coupled with a rigid Catholicism – cultivated an unrestrained sensual pleasure, but nevertheless brought about the most drastic inquisition, and just as 19th-century naturalism brought the set pieces of the real world unembellished into art, but still were subject to an unrestrained illusionism, so the artistic duo makes use of a seemingly simple, quickly decipherable imagery borrowed from popular culture, while at the

same time overheating the climate to the point of evaporation into complex wonder worlds of suggestiveness. When Rubens arranged his voluptuous female nudes as erotic signals for his clients and viewers, he had the decay of beauty and the all-pervading presence of death in view at the same time; when Gustave Courbet lets two seductive girls lie about idly in clouds of pink silk and white satin in the shade of dark trees, this natural scene likewise becomes a fictive, wishful thinking scenario; and when Asgar/Gabriel intend the *Anarchy of Art*, it inadvertently turns into a polymorphic panorama in which figures and content, attributes and fogs of colour, textual messages and film-like cuts come together in a dramatic displacement of the world. It is so to speak a synthesizing of the traditional “event” (history) painting that is going on in these panoramas. Since the Renaissance it has been considered an achievement to represent a specific event in art with adherence to the unities of time, place and action, thereby precisely marking the coming together of historical and contemporary time, of a conceived and a seen place, and the course and culmination of a single action. But Asgar/Gabriel’s unfolded pictorial panoramas are concerned with the synthesis of multiple periods of time, different places and several actions. One of the greatest “major synthetic events” in the (art) world of its time was the parade organized by Hans Makart in Vienna in 1879 on the occasion of the imperial couple’s silver wedding anniversary. Makart himself appeared in the role of Peter Paul Rubens, taken straight from Rubens’ *Self-portrait with Isabella Brant in the Honeysuckle Bower* of 1609. He had staged the floats, people and scenes in the parade in honour of the empire as a neobaroque spectacle with tableaux vivants, showing allegories with numerous figures and symbols, crafts and trades, towns and places – a variegated status report in the form of a monumental representation of an “event” in the public space. But what about the tableaux by Asgar/Gabriel, conceived as panoramas – do they represent a contribution to the history of the staging of pictorial art and a new, latent symbolism?

### **Toward a Subversive Symbolism**

Asgar/Gabriel do not just develop large pictorial scenarios with many figures. They create new spaces for baroque-hedonistic events where citations and original material, the suggestive and the fully formulated, colouristic furor and virtuosity in drawing come together in a machinery of illusion, the likes of which might be found in the late ceiling paintings of a Daniel Gran, or in the apotheosis-like pictorial programmes of a Paul Troger where “illusion” is broken down into a worldly transcendence. Never did such transparent yellow fogs exist, never such marble-white ciboria, such radiantly blue air, such slender-bodied constellations of people.

When Asgar/Gabriel use plundered art history as a fake cornucopia, so to speak, and even mention Tiepolo as a source of inspiration (along with Courbet, Delacroix, Goya and Rubens), they are quite explicitly returning to a transcendence resembling dematerialization and aiming at a new existence in the area of colour: the lemon-coloured capes in Tiepolo’s work are placed next to swelling robes modelled in blue, the whitish veils dominate dark brown shadings; in this cosmos human beings are the vehicle of their meaning, the figure is part of the allegorical or symbolic scenario – as opposed to Rubens, whose primary aim was the force and presence of the physical. Asgar/Gabriel weave their human figures into a symbolic network, the content of which for the most part can be deciphered only by means of the title.

It is not the symbolism of a Max Klinger – formally also seductive to Asgar/Gabriel – that enters into their considerations, nor is personification of the content in the form of a richly suggestive human figure decisive to them. Instead they make use of a sort of “subversive symbolism” in which content

is intensified, figures multiplied, action diversified, and in which citations from art-historical sources can be reduced to tying a little bow of bourgeois cultural education onto their own pictorial concept. The overused Delacroix paraphrase of *liberty leading the people* thus becomes a symbol-like image of the will and potential of youth to change the world. This is achieved by a stylization of the young revolutionaries ready for action as trendy icons of a cool youth-culture free of taboos, in tune with the contemporary zeitgeist. Does the present-day path from abolishing the establishment lead directly to the disco or the styling pages of trashy fashion magazines? At a time when revolt by a youth without hope has led to revolutions in North Africa and political debates in Spain, such forms of symbolism cannot simply be brushed aside – even if, as in Asgar/Gabriel’s pictorial cosmos, they touch on a sort of filmic pathos and in their hypertrophy seem to belong more to an apocalyptic vision than to a socially relevant debate.

### **Limbic Liquor**

The space in which the action unfolds in Asgar/Gabriel’s pictures is always a panoramic stage where simultaneous events take place. As in the theatre, the staging is part of the story, and the actors present the text, while the roles are interpreted by the protagonists. In the euphoric, abysmal scenarios of these paintings, the ones who lend the Caribbean pirate youths a hand are kissed-awake maenads and tough schoolgirls, modern muses in the service of Terpsichore. This hedonistic pictorial programme is governed by an atmosphere of not just clandestine, but very explicitly displayed eroticism. Sex and sentimentality constitute a mixture that in fantasy-driven imaginations “has always been there” (the title of a 2008 painting). When romanticisms from the buried realm of sentimentality make their way into it, these subtle emotions meet the hard-as-nails world of pictorialized sexuality – a limbic liquor pervades the depicted events, and Arcadia is instantly transformed back into a contemporary drinking bout on the beach, in a hectic backstage terrain, while a tearful Pierrot in the foreground plays guitar-like on a pink viola da gamba.

Asgar/Gabriel formulate their new legends of the ambiguity of the life of a young, searching generation in an un-ambiguous, powerful and striking imagery coming out of Pop art, out of the environment of a new concept of realism that uses slogans and drastic colours as nonchalantly as citation of revered models and manipulatory erasure of things that don’t fit, producing pictures as slick as record covers from the 1970s and as unsettling as the sensational news on the private TV channels. Here – within this wide area of ambiguity and the hybridization of paradise and Panopticon, of kaleidoscope and calamity – lies the meaning that this new type of painting can have today, and which in Asgar/Gabriel’s scenarios forces itself on the observer in a shrill, extroverted manner: loud, present, direct, shocking. Not until seeing these works together does it become clear that they are concerned not with explanations of the world and pseudo-engaged painting, but with emblems of a culture in which everything becomes a stage, and where theatre is not simply an all-encompassing staging, but a fundamental condition of life.