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On Klaus Merkel

Shifting Scenes. Between **Base (Foundation, Ground, First Coat)**, Frame, Audience.

Re: Appropriation

In his own words it should have been „more a retrospective“ or „a collaged review“ in particular „about painting“ too. Back then. In 1991. Kippenberger in the Cologne Art Association. He shows a weighty pair: “Heavy Guy,” dumpster with destroyed paintings, coupled with framed photographs of those works and “Heavy Girl,” a series of drawings based on the photographs. As a set the two produce a short circuit of technical or mediumistic derivatives. The original is free game: actually by Merlin Carpenter (two years ago still Kippenberger's assistant as another “beloved painter” with a say in matters) done based on his own collages accurately put on canvas. The pictures are separated from their birth form, painting, robbed of aura through photographs, reunited with their aura through drawing but isolated as material. Material shredded in an archive of trash and placed on a pedestal to the sculptural storeroom.

At approximately the same time, more exactly between 1988 and 1992, a form of retrospective likewise arose in the studio of Klaus Merkel: paintings complete with a catalogue, like a storeroom, an exhibition and its production. Klaus Merkel (born in 1953, by the way, Martin Kippenberger too) is now working on the concept and painting of his (to begin with) five-part series¹ of “Catalog Pictures.” Pictures? Banal painting, with a glance at the medium, its material spoken like its production.

Over the course of the years panels emerge, relatively large pictures, unpretentious or rather traditional oil performed on canvas. However, for the observer difficult to grasp right away, describable only with effort. Apparently they all follow a certain order, obey the rules of a picture's structure that hardly seems to lean on a finished composition; the plates with their convoys of small structured surfaces, frugal in their form and colors, motifs on and in front of a white background, rather evoke text, a pattern of lines and columns, constructed with initially uninterpretable signs. The title, anyway, does move the observer beyond the mere visual toward a possible meaning. The “Catalog Pictures” are, as a matter of fact, based on the idea of a table of

¹ Cf., on the way things stood back then, Klaus Merkel: Catalog Pictures, published by the Morat Institute for Art and Aesthetics, Freiburg 1993 (German/English) with texts by Rudolf Bumiller and Doreet Levitte Harten.

illustrations or an index. Each of the small particles (reproduced on a scale of 1:10) refers to one of the artist's completed works. Merkel – with Newman at the back of his mind – takes a look back at his work, bundles it, revises it, and updates its strokes – en miniature – to/in a picture. However, while tradition and deconstructive skepticism collide in this, by the way mimetic, process of repainting, their collision results in affirmative devaluation: The artist lets go of the autonomy of his past works for the good of replicated import in the “Catalog” design. Just an aside: the panels first exhibited in 1993 in the Annette Gmeiner Gallery in Stuttgart, also invite viewers to “reread” an artistic development, constructing a sort of biographical model.

Stored: Guston (Kissing the Canvas)

Painting is back in the ring. Memories of its periodically recurring defeats pale in the face of manifold confirmations of reception. Its ability to speak and the strategies of its specificity, won through painstaking fights, seem to be perishing among the euphoric sounds of welcome. It is the classical virtues that seem to be popular: characteristic style, play on colors, composition, and all that is subsumed under technique, ability; if then content (as seen in photo presentation), theme (media exegesis) or position (talent, as just one example) float recognizably across the canvas...

In the Frankfurt overview of “deutschemalereizweitausenddreißig” (German Painting 2003), next to the nearly square work “02.11.01 (pill)” (1997/2002) are two excessively wide narrow works, canvas frieze that appear strangely brittle, “constructed” and at the same time very incomplete. Admittedly, Merkel's pictures intend to attract, but they deny the first glance that all too good impression: they stubbornly insist on sought-after colors, an artificially contrasting, reduced palette. Laconic gestures, brief interventions, wipes and paths eclipse inserts on the store of mini replicas, cut ups with sharp edges, partially diffusely articulated contours. In these cases, **“Machart” (the making)** is clearly transported into the picture, however, not as in the flow of storytelling about production decisions on base, surface, and gesture, brush strokes, schliere and painting over. The tracks are witness to the before and the during, the circumstances accompanying the painting. These two pictures “02.10.02 (ex-halle)” and “02.10.01 (exhalle)” (2002) are indeed aware of 25 years of “bad painting,” however, they “represent” the palette; they might

have served as a working surface for color tests and brush wipe-offs, sketches and painting debris. Their role in this situation could be summarized as follows: container playing to the gallery, memory of production conditions, techniques, custodian of the studio, so to speak. So that, in the space of the exhibit, sudden light is cast on the performance of “painting” in the form of “picture.”

With a clearly changed accent, Michael Krebber (born 1954) strove for similar memory work in his dual show **“Apothekerman”** (2000, simultaneously in the Art Association of Braunschweig and the Municipal Gallery of Wolfsburg). Floor panels with marked traces of work, studio patina of picture outlines, paint spatters and signs of wear and tear were declared pictures and installed on the walls. The transfer gesture was emphasized by the confrontation in the panels entitled “because of the Architect the building fell down”: across from a desk built of paintings.

Distanced from Krebber’s emphatic re-interpretation and contextual arrangements, the two palette panels by Klaus Merkel result completely from ruminations on the performance ability of a picture itself in the form of painting. In his own words that means, for instance, “painting the waste right in,” in order to at the same time shed light on the dark sides of production as necessary conditions for painting. Something like in Philip Guston’s “Painting Table” (1975).² The picture also shows, from a strained perspective of supervision, a panel with brushes, signs of mixing and strokes fitted with ease into the surface of the picture. If it weren’t for horizontal separation, if it weren’t for the outlines that distinguish the painting table from its rosy flesh-colored background, if it weren’t for a hint at supports or scant shadows, the picture and the palette would nearly fall into oneness. Sure, it sounds like support for Merkel’s ambiguous questioning of the integrity of a picture by revealing its **making** (**“Machart”**) when Guston, with an eye for the situation and status of abstract painting, polemicized several years earlier: “but painting is “impure”. It is the adjustment of impurities which forces painting’s continuity.”³ In no way does the artist withdraw into the fetish-like standpoint of a painter in regards to painting, or into a pragmatically inflated auto-expertise on the means and the making. Merkel circumvents the problem of reproductions merely generating more material by allowing his work to fall to the ground as art but showing he is able to set it upright

² Cf. Philip Guston. *Gemälde (Paintings) 1947-1979*, published by the Art Museum of Bonn, Ostfildern 1999, p.102.

³ *ibid*, p. 38

again. He installs his work like a commentary, transforms painting into (and about) visual discourse.

A staged production: painting modern once again

Not with all the will in the world could a dead end be found. One could say that in view of the current, youthfully fresh painting boom. At the time of the last euphoria over oil on canvas the scenery portrayed itself in a considerably different light. Back then many a painting hand smelled of decay, as with the newly proclaimed “Death of Painting,” in coming close to Douglas Crimp. At the same time a new, wild impetuosity, transatlantic pathos productions including considerable turnover met with the fundamental skepticism of commentators. Many a regional genius cult joined in (and just the same in theory circles).

Naturally, painting has to gain new contours against this backdrop. Once again, pictures are to pose the question as to their legitimacy, no longer only as to their quality. Autonomy, as a protective pedestal, had apparently lost its convincing power.

Since his first studio exhibit in Vienna in 1981, Klaus Merkel has operated within the realm of very specific displays. He creates determined arrangements in which individual pictures are organized in higher units – blocks, lines, tableaux, clusters. His arrangements increasingly aim to assume roles and functions in the structures of room and time, within the framework of exhibits. In the area of conflict between the still individual creations and the hanging ensemble, the artist, for the first time, clarifies the status of the pictures and the status of his staged production, the context “exhibit,” and with that the circumstances of mediation. Nonetheless, Merkel adheres to the medium of painting and does not switch to the levels of concept or commentary. He extremely consistently designs strategies of devaluation and drives them forward by systematically exploring the marginal leeway of his panels: reduction, stylization, or standardization, as well as repetition, mark the artist’s vocabulary on both a formal and a thematic level.⁴ A tendency toward systematization of his work is emerging hand in hand with exhibits like “Models,

⁴ In the end this continuous inquiry about conventions, means, and circumstance, accompanied by consistent supervision, criticism, and final checks of each attained position, can be, with rights and credits to Greenberg, defined as modern.

Motifs, Stencils” (once again at Annette Gmeiner, 1990)⁵ or with the earlier, extraordinary presentation at Massimo Audiello in New York, 1989. A tendency that, with his “Catalog Pictures,” Merkel steers toward its first peak with the aperture pointing to a visual, “painted discourse” (Markus Brüderlin), a textualization of painting, coupled with the affirmative devaluation of the individual picture.

With commentary in the arena

Respectively: The overlapping of genera among themselves, which is perhaps a trademark of modernity, creates a two-faced situation: on the one hand the commentary is considered a work in itself, given it is a valid quotation of a work (which it, of course, could be itself); on the other hand the work obtains its commentary as an aspect of its own pragmatic situation.”⁶ Firstly, as mentioned above, the “Catalog Pictures,” most recently called “Stacks,” compositions oriented towards stacks of pictures. The artist anticipates, encompasses preventatively: storing, archiving, initial media utilization of his pictures. He activates replicas so as not to be forgotten, at the same time giving rise to structure and meaning via recurrence. Through the networking of visual signs, even before they enter into units, hangings, and installations that bring about context, structures similar to language appear in the ruled All Over of canvas codes (these even authorize the hand of their maker). In the second step the institutionalized framework turns up on the stage, is performed for example in the critique of curators’ practices (“Group Exhibit Picture”) as well as in the anticipation of critical evaluation or art-historical registration. What makes Merkel’s approach exemplary is the very idea of establishing the level of commentary within the picture, to “paint it in” or even to have it develop from the possibilities of painting. He does not restrict himself, see Peter Halley, to, pardon me, the abstract illustration of preferred discourse. His painting **asserts itself / exposes itself** as a “theoretical model” (according to Yve-Alain Bois), that can, of course, perform every attempt at interpretation as an arena by and in itself.⁷

⁵ That was mirrored again in the Müllheim exhibit „Batteries,“ 2001, staged anew with pictures between 1988 and 1994.

⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard: Introductory Remarks On The Pragmatism Of Works (in particular on the works of Daniel Buren), (1978), in : Philosophy And Painting During The Era Of Experimentation, Berlin 1986, p.79-95, p.85

⁷ Nonetheless Klaus Merkel, highly communicative himself, seeks out critical confrontation, a shoulder-to-shoulder stance with the level “theory.” In Markus Brüderlin, Herbert M. Hurka, Doreet Levitte Harten, Hanne

However, the intense presentation of this potential only occurs outside of the studio zone, where it is cradled in a climate of knowledge as well as skill, at the site of conception and production. The potential is heightened at a meeting with the public eye, in the user interface and the temporary specifics of an exhibit. Because it is there that Merkel's work has to face its audience, create a new foundation together with the observer, *despite* all of the information fed into it against a backdrop of discursive conclusiveness, anticipated staging, and the artist's knowledge of the stability of retrospective contingency.

EXIT

On the one hand the systematic unity of "painted discourse," on the other, frayed edges, gaps, passages...doesn't the idea collapse, the idea of storage in the miniature complex of "Unpainted Pictures (With Edges)"? Doesn't the collapse of the idea render the transit from model to execution obsolete? Leaving only the simple question of relative size and corresponding transport costs?

At the same time the confidence of "Monograms" drips away in light of the satire on commissioned art, "Portraits": when Merkel apparently finally bears his artistic autonomy to its grave and obediently reproduces in oil the people from the portraits according to their own selections from the pattern book of miniatures. Testimony to the style and taste of others produced upon demand. "Oh, my dear painter!" etc. Every border seems to blur if it weren't for the tight hold of the compendium of rules within reach like Muenchhausen's Pigtail.

"Think pictures through to their edges," says the artist and means just as well the non-reproducible retina art (with seemingly imminent evaporation into the canvas ground)

of the obviously contrived Salat/Aprils group of works. Here Merkel lets out some rope, a true painter, talking briskly in paths and streaks, showing the production process by means of determined cuts and the autonomy of color. Abstraction? That had already been liquidated elsewhere, and pictures are and will always remain elements of other pictures.

Following the swing of the pendulum within the spectrum of ambivalence of a work's contingencies, a peak would be reached at this point. But built-in inserts, the cut and

Loreck, to name a few, he finds excellent commentators. Merkel's own Theory Re-Enactments would be worthy of an independent examination.

paste of constant inherent references, not only, but also from the “Catalog” repertoire, would reliably point the way back and, according to Herbert M. Hurka, lash into shape the emergent drifting of the groups of works in the network of significance.