



Horst Gläsker. Bird of paradise and holy fool

The Spirit of Beauty is stirring again. Aesthetics seemed for years to have been relegated to the sidelines of Western theory of art. Deviationists were censured with the verdict of Theodor W. Adorno, in whose view art after Auschwitz could only be gloomy, dark and ugly. Where art took its bearings from the traditional values of truth, beauty and goodness, so the theory, it would turn out to be the accomplice of an ideology that deludes, that seeks reconciliation where none is possible. Since the 1960s, this approach has gone hand in hand with scientifically oriented attempts, under the heading 'linguistic turn', to replace the beautiful arts by structuralistic and contextualistic models. Now the tide has turned, and art is again opening to the picture. The 'pictorial turn' is called for. Not without reason.

In these postcolonial days, the cultures of minorities have become a focal point of worldwide interest. They have a common denominator: ornamental pictures and emblems with meaningful signs which are rooted in cultural origins. Language, in particular the English language - the tool and expression of colonial hegemony – is incapable of conveying and networking such cultures in a global setting.

Ornamental and decorative tokens, right through to tattooing and kitsch, are being increasingly used to identify individuals and groups. Sociology sees them as an appropriate object of cultural studies and fine art in its wider sense. A typical example was the summer 2003 exhibition in the Kunsthalle in Kiel entitled 'Accessoire-maximalismus'. It was devoted to young Turkish people who, as the foldout text put it, were developing their hybrid identity on the margins of German society, and it centred on the phenomena of accessories, fetishes and kitsch. The accessory was important to artists who concern themselves critically with society and the processes whereby it establishes its taste. Viewers, the explanation went on, were included in this grappling process, and so artists and non-artists appeared as culture-accomplices. Shades of Jeff Koons (and many others).

One thing is sure; the exhibition is in tune with the international trend. Besides what Boris Groys terms new realism, i.e. documentary art like that which dominated the *Dokumenta X*, neo-symbolistic and neo-surrealistic currents have established themselves firmly on the art scene in recent years. This auratic, luxuriating art charged with dream images and hallucinations is linked with names like Peter Doig, Daniele Boetti or Corinne Wasmuth, to name but a few. At this year's Biennial, too, considerable space and attention was devoted to a revived concern for longings and aesthetics. Striking examples are the contributions from Jean-Marc Bustamante (France), Chris Ofili (Great Britain), Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lensinger (Switzerland) und Fred Wilson (United States of America).

Has Horst Gläser's time come round again? Gläser has been creating works in the border area between ornament, decoration and kitsch since the mid-70s. The beauty and pathos of the banal characterise his work. He paints over carpets, wallpaper and wood finds, creates sculptures, small, large and oversized, and designs rooms, sacred church spaces and secular public buildings, with ingenious light effects, pipes, bellows, and even, as required, coffee tins and children's toys. And creates actions and performances, again and again, with music and dance.

Born in Herford, Westphalia, in 1949, Horst Gläser learned window dressing – not without its significance for his art. Music was his first love, as clarinettist and saxophonist in different bands with his brothers, ready to play anywhere and any time, until – following his own individual path – he decided in favour of art.

His oeuvre, arising from the ecstasy of the senses, is extensive and sweeping. Critics have linked him to Joseph Beuys and his model of the *gesamtkunstwerk*. Gläser: the shaman, meditative and committed to the mystical; later included in the controversial 'individual mythology' category as coined by Harald Szeeman; set in comparison with Michael Buthe and his 'Hommage an die Sonne' (1971) and seen as the Rhineland's outstanding example of this group of artists with no common denominator. Nor was it long before Gläser was also being grouped with the 'young Fauves', having taken part in several of this group's exhibitions.

So there are several aspects to Gläser's art, starting from the 70s and 80s right through to the 'pictorial turn' quoted above, his latest development. Considered more closely, however, these links are only points of contact, references, and not really organic relationships. Gläser is a loner, one who has always gone his own way unswervingly, without any discernible intellectual or theoretical academic conflict, maintaining his position even now free of any fixation with the artistic direction of the day.

His art on the verges of art is rooted in the ancient tradition of the grotesque. The word itself is a portmanteau word combining 'grotta' and 'fresco' and it was first used in the late 15th century to describe a genre of ornamental wall painting. Within only a few decades, it took on significance for other spheres of art such as satire, caricature, and later commedia dell'arte in their expression of the monstrous and chimera-fantastic. Its roots, *avant la lettre*, lie in the myths and rites of prehistoric times, in the theatre and dance of classical antiquity, and the centuries-old popular tradition, which was particularly strong in the Middle Ages, of All Fools' days and carnival. The Grotesque forms the counter-world to the civilised forms of the True, the Beautiful and the Good and stands for the Archaic, the Strange, the Other, coming from its home beyond all identity logic and cumulating in a *gesamtkunst* portrayal of the 'topsy-turvy world'.

Horst Gläser has inscribed the walls of his studio, as if in constant reminder or exhortation, with terms from the 'topsy turvy world'. 'Form' is set against 'Chaos', 'System' against 'Ecstasy', 'Order' against 'Freedom', 'Division' against 'Love', 'Common sense' against 'Madness'. There is 'Beat' and 'Dance', 'Counterpoint' and 'Explosion', 'Contemplation' and 'Dissipation', 'Surface area' and 'Course', the 'Straight' path and the 'Straying', the 'Circle' and the 'Wilderness', the 'Vertical' and the 'Spin Fall', the 'Prayerful' and the 'Bewildered', there is 'Precision' and 'Chance'. 'Space, Rhythm and Time' held fast on Gläser's walls with their antitheses.

Gläser's artistic grappling with the 'topsy turvy world' is serious, and is undertaken with utmost conscientiousness. It would be completely mistaken, however, to conclude that some typically German philosophical discourse underlies it all. Horst Gläser is a happy person; he takes the world as it comes, i.e. in its topsy-turviness. His stationery – and I have had the pleasure of several of his letters – is embellished

by his portrait: his face painted blue and tattooed, crowned by a headdress of red, yellow and black feathers on his otherwise shaven (*glattrasierten?? wenn nicht, dann sculpted statt shaven*) head. Where are the seriousness and the dignity here? In contrast, the title under the picture, 'Horst Gläser, Professor at the Kunsthochschule Kassel' appears almost blasphemous. Not quite the packaging, Horst, for the German university system!

Gläser as the urban Indian or the last of the Mohicans? No, his self-portrayal points to a figure which is central to the grotesque, that of the fool: the court jester, by permanent appointment, as it were, preferably depicted with the hourglass as a symbol of the fleetingness of time and life, and the travelling fool, roaming mostly in groups, companies, a restless nomad relating to the world, in the image of the 'Ship of Fools' painted in 1490 by Hieronymus Bosch, only when the ship comes in to port. A predecessor of the fool, familiar from the legends of ancient cultures and the subject of much discussion in current ethnological studies, is the trickster, roving cunningly, unrestrainedly, and heedless of boundaries, between social systems and exploiting their advantages yet in the end – himself the object of exploitation – usually turning out to be the loser after all.

This figure of the trickster would appear especially apt for Horst Gläser. Through a kind of mimicry, he has cleverly adapted to postmodern society, a society delivered of its convictions and visions and given over to the spectacular, yet he has never let himself be taken in or taken over by it. Asserting and defending freedom calls for circumspection and no small measure of cunning and deceit in these difficult times. The grotesque moved long ago from its marginalising position on the periphery right into the centre of society where it was taken over, and now it has become the victim of obscure hierarchies and exploitation processes. We can only wish Horst Gläser that he maintains his autonomous status and continues to hold a mirror up to society so that it may recognise its vanity and transience. Fools are irreplaceable detergent agents, unchained Mr Muscles, as Werner Büttner put it so well in an obituary for his friend Martin Kippenberger – another ex-window decorator, by the way. Then he went on, 'Kippenberger was such a treasured fool, not exactly a mournful figure but a bustling hygienist with a huge mop in his coat of arms'.

Gläser rejects the label urban Indian. He sees himself as a bird of paradise, flitting from blossom to blossom in order to suck nectar from as many different sources as possible, making a beguiling impression as he does so. Bird of paradise and holy fool, he can have the mop of honour in his coat of arms, but where does all this tie in with art? That, I believe, is not ours to decide. The famous dictum from that master of parody, Marcel Duchamp, holds good for Horst Gläser – and for whom if not for him? -: 'There is no such thing as art, there are only artists.' Who would deny Horst Gläser that predicate?

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