

HOPELESS ROMANTICS

With Leda Bourgogne, Henrik Olai Kaarstein, Tobias Spichtig, Alex Turgeon, and Raphaela Vogel.

Curated by: Kristian Vistrup Madsen

Introduction:

Here, romanticism names a riposte to science, enlightenment and rationality; a privileging of depth and complexity over clarity and progress. This comes out of a frustration with the triumph of literalness in art; the demand that it should signify, like language, be useful, or moral. Against this literalness, I posit allegory: against identity, existentialism. In these artists' work we find thrownness – a battle with existence as a position of being outside, unsheltered – indulgence, longing, melancholy and power.

Pt. 1: Seduction to death: in aid of a romantic revival

If the youth obeys [these rules of sense and restraint] then a useful young person will be the result, and I would even advise any prince to make him a counsellor; however, it will be the end of his love and, if he is an artist, of his art.

(J.W. von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774)ⁱ

A useful young person! What would be the point? Since Aristotle, the charge against young people has been the disintegration of morality, their lack of responsibility, their recklessness. Now the youth are the most sensible of all. Consider Greta, wokeness, veganism – these new mutations of the old motifs of civic enlightenment and pietistic awakening would suggest the tables have turned. Jennifer Egan's 2010 novel *A Visit From the Goon Squad* finishes with a scene set in the future, some ten years from now, if we haven't already arrived, in a high-securitised Manhattan, helicopters circling overhead.ⁱⁱ One character, who was a child in the main story, is now a young woman: speed-talking, progressive, highly educated, entirely rational, and completely in control. In a way she is the diametric opposite of Goethe's Werther, chronically swooning. I listened to Egan's novel as an audiobook while on the

treadmill at my university's gym. I was busy optimising myself in every way to become this perfect individual, lit like a bulb, but a cold one: LED. For what of love? And art? Egan's empowered young woman has everything except a reason; an existential one, I mean; a profound relationship to herself, the continuity of time, other people. I'm so tired of running on electricity; I'm tired of being scared.

Romanticism, like existentialism, has long been deeply unfashionable. It is associated with nationalism, with the *Bürgerturn*, with turning one's back on the world and looking inwards; it is thought to add up to a kind of privileged surrender, a wilful obliviousness afforded only by those who do not truly suffer as a result of the state of the world. This could not be more wrong. Romanticism, as I will argue, is all about suffering, about struggle, though not of the kind that invites pity, or requires political intervention. Still, you go to the museum and look at these paintings and feel nothing. Botched by reception history, something doesn't parse; their idealism, like a thick layer of varnish, seems suffocating. Casper David Friedrich's florescent sunsets over gothic ruins are absurd, the picture of a picture. Only once you arrive at realism – street scenes, wrinkles, brushstrokes – do you begin to recognise the world again. And so romanticism is all but extinct from modern and contemporary visual art. Now and again it rears its head as a trace of vague spiritualism – the supposed sublime of abstraction – or as pastiche, critically accounted for by way of postmodernism as a kind of meta-kitsch. But this is only because it has become completely ubiquitous in every other cultural sphere. Its torch was passed on, not to painting and sculpture, but via Wagner's operas, and qua its fanciful and self-conscious relationship to history, to Hollywood, Disney, Netflix and the radio's Top 40. The surface of romanticism was skimmed for the cultural mainstream of the centuries that followed – and no wonder: it was the first aesthetic native to enlightened industrialising society; an aesthetic of escapism for an age of war and alienation.

And so, as crisis takes on ever new forms, some kind of new romanticism has naturally found a place in contemporary art anyway: behold the new figurative painting, comprised of this or that modern painting style – Picasso's blue period, Fauvism, Neue Sachlichkeit, Basquiat – but made *queer*, or in some other way legibly relevant, and *as directly as possible* indexical to some honourable and happening cause. As such, it is actually not so different from every other trend in contemporary art – the pseudo-scientific, the activist, the *inclusive* (read: spectacular) – in that institutions get to tick a box, press releases write themselves, and our consciences are appeased. The difference is we feel touched by a sense of recogni-

tion (bodies!), by the old-fashioned intimacy of oil on canvas, and in that touch lies the supposed romance. But what this narrow fixation with representation amounts to, as Dean Kistick has pointed out, is the 'triumph of literalness in society', and what, really, could be less romantic than that?ⁱⁱⁱ It understands visual culture by a basic notion of language in which the relationship between signifier and signified is given and essential; a logic that limits art to what we think it says, not what it *is*, or what it might amount to, in situ, reflexively. This kind of art is romantic only in the way that romanticism has been *received* and how it has lived its degraded afterlife: as sentimental, conservative, and formulaic. My intention here is to harness the romantic rather as it was *conceived*, and appeared in glimpses, say, in the hopeless Werther, in Schiller's portrayal of a die-hard Mary Queen of Scots, or the more sinister of Friedrich's paintings, *Monk by the Sea*, for instance, as unruly, intense, brave and subversive; as well as the thorny and unlikely foundation for irony, existentialism and the study of the subconscious.

The young woman in Egan's novel is, as the Germans would say, and like Elizabeth in Schiller's play, *Verkoppft*: the same *ver-* as in *verliebt* and *verzweifelt* – how Werther feels, poor thing – only applied to the cerebral. In a recent adaptation at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin Elizabeth wore a large hollow and balloon-like mask as illustration.^{iv} Out of sync with her spirit, and her mind gone into overdrive, she is trapped in a state of panic, so paranoid that her power and her freedom will be taken away from her, she unable to make decisions, and take responsibility for them. Sounds familiar? Mary, on the other hand, though physically imprisoned, feels like 'a wanderer in the mountains': at one with an expansive landscape, yet alone. She is close to her own humanity, and, as such, to Elizabeth's, too. In more recent popular interpretations of the relationship between the Virgin Queen and her catholic sister – BBC's docudramas, the two epic films starring Cate Blanchett – Elizabeth is the heroic conquerer of new worlds, the light that leads the way to modernity, and the Queen of Scots a mad and beastly remnant of the past, believing she is pregnant when really in her belly is a malicious tumour. It says a lot about a cultural moment how we interpret the stories handed down to us. To pass Mary off as deluded speaks of a child-like fear of the dark, of death, of what's inside us.

The great German writer Thomas Mann characterised the romantic as a thing of the nether-world; 'irrational and demonic, that is to say, close to the real sources of life.'^v The romantic, he said, represents the counterrevolution 'to the philosophical intellectualism and rationality of enlightenment; music's revolt against literature, mysticism's revolt against clarity.'

Romanticism is anything but weak and wistful, it is depth, which feels at the same time as strength, as substance, honesty's pessimism ... Goethe laconically defined the Classical as the healthy, the Romantic as the morbid. A painful definition to one who loves Romanticism down to its sins and vices. But it cannot be denied that even in its loveliest, most ethereal aspects where the popular mates with the sublime, it bears in its heart the germ of morbidity, as the rose bears the worm; its innermost character is seduction, seduction to death.

This lecture of Mann's, titled 'Germany and the Germans', was delivered in Washington D.C. in late May of 1945 – that is, at a point when the worm had very much overtaken the rose. Still, Mann's argument was for ambiguity; to see rot and death not as separate and vanquishable, but necessarily intrinsic. Goethe's definition need only be painful to the one who requires art to guide them towards health and morality. But Mann also said that the crimes of the German people were committed from a place of idealism, alien to reality and far removed from the world. This idealism is romanticism without sickness, without ruin – not the romanticism that Mann loved 'down to its sins and vices'; not the hopeless kind – not this kind.

Pt. 2: Irony, Ex-istence, Allegory

Irony is an important and difficult topic to confront when considering Tobias Spichtig's work, cool and aloof, as it may seem. But irony, in the romantic sense, has more severe underpinnings than flippantly saying one thing and meaning another. Building on the ideas of Socrates, Hegel and Schlegel, a key figure of German romanticism, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard defined the ironic as the individual torn loose from the traditional values of the collective: to find oneself as distinct from what is other.^{vi} Irony belongs to the historical turning-point at which 'subjectivity first stepped forward'; a point when the order of things was no longer given. In other words: modernity as rupture; a type of self-consciousness, and a sense of being on the outside. Irony, then, is an existentialist position – the first step in actively coming to terms with what it means to be in the world – and as such also a troubled one, a lonesome one. It is not possible to be ironic together.

Spichtig's fridges – a rank cluster nearly barring entry to the gallery – constitute the arm's length, or several, which protect a person from the turmoil of reckoning with existence. Kierkegaard spoke of finding god as feeling perfectly at peace though lost on a sea of 70,000 fathoms – a fathom being a unit of measurement based on the span of outstretched arms. The Ironic, or his close kin, the Aesthetic, may have found themselves as distinct from others, but they remain unsure of whether these 70,000 fathoms are really for them; whether peace can be found there, or, more to the point, whether peace is even worth having. Because there is something riveting in uncertainty, too, isn't there, in trembling on the threshold of the decision. The special allure of 'before', of 'not yet knowing', is something you can never get back. The poet Novalis wrote that 'Everything at a distance turns into poetry: distant mountains, distant people, distant events: all become Romantic.' And so the Ironic's attachment to detachment is also to do with preserving the distance required to get the better view; preserving beauty, in Spichtig's case, in the kind of wrecked guise adequate to our time, by the length of 24 defunct refrigerators.

Though Goethe's sorrowful protagonist is characterised by a wonderfully pathetic earnestness, one small but vital, or rather, fatal, detail attests to the profound place of irony in romantic thought. When, at the end of a party, Werther and his beloved, Lotte, look out of the window as the rainstorm finally abates, she exclaims 'Klopstock!' – a poet popular with the proto-romantic Sturm & Drang movement of which the young Goethe had been a part – upon which Werther is overcome with emotion and kisses her hand. With this one word the author installed that silver flash of irony, the disclosure of self-consciousness – some critics have even argued this moment marks the coming into self-consciousness of German literature as such. The young lovers do not feel spontaneously, genuinely part of a momentary totality with nature, as if it were an expression of their emotions, but read the change of weather through Klopstock and poetry's *longing* for that totality. This longing is part and parcel with the creeping awareness that, not only is such a totality made impossible by the relationship of language to being, poetry derives its beauty and its energy from the very absence of it. And so Spichtig's *Weinen* painting speaks not of crying-as-such, but crying-as-notion; crying and not crying, simultaneously. It is also not that Lotte and Werther are insincere in their response, it is merely that they do not feel completely and purely *one* thing – they feel conflicted: Already mourning the moment that has passed, and the loss that occurs between an instance and its imprint in language, and yet revelling in the artfulness of that death mask.

It might seem there is a great plunge from irony in Spichtig to the almost boundless, reckless profundity evident in Henrik Olai Kaarstein's works. But are both positions not motivated by the same grave awareness of impossibility on the one hand, and severe depth on the other? As in Goethe's Klopstock scene, in romantic painting, the window was used as a potent symbol for unfulfilled longing, standing on the threshold between interior and a mysterious, or idealised beyond. But Kaarstein's three window paintings on straw rugs point to no horizon. Rather, they have an intricate almost obsessive quality to them, as if wrung from a person's insides, or like a teenage fan-girl's most private infatuations given an at once tender and, in their fragility, defiant form. There's a special energy there – in the scratch marks on the windowpanes, in the colour-soakedness of the *découpage* – of the kind that stems from anger, or pain, and still Kaarstein's works brim with the light of wilfully delusional sentimentality: hope amidst a priori hopelessness; windows, but for looking in.

Writing about the structure of the romantic image, Paul de Man argues that 'nineteenth-century poetry re-experiences and represents the adventure of this failure' – the failure of art to 'be' rather than continuously 'originate–' 'in an infinite variety of forms and versions.'^{vii} To re-experience the adventure of failure infinitely; to tirelessly collide with the almost-ness of art's being in the world strikes me as very true of Kaarstein's *modus operandi*. Perhaps, like Spichtig's, his work is ironic in the sense that a rupture has occurred, which places him on the outside, only he responds to it differently: replacing the shattered window, naively, haphazardly, with a straw facsimile. A crack runs across a sheer surface, which Kaarstein sees it as his job, his duty, as an artist to repair by embellishment. His plexiglass keyholes are as if glued together with flowers and radiant rays of colour. 'There', he seems to say, 'it is fixed'. Meanwhile, from inside, everything trembles.

The adventure of continuously originating – a loopy postponement of release – also unfolds in Raphaela Vogel's video installation *Uterusland*. As always in her work, Vogel herself is at the centre of her own cosmology, absolutely distinct in her being from others. We find her tumbling down an endless waterslide like through an intestine, clutching a baby doll. She is, simultaneously, being born and giving birth; awaiting the commencement of life, while being metabolised in the process. Counter to Kaarstein's installation of window'ed separation between one's self and one's interior, Vogel stages total immersion; an interior so close you can't see it. And through this radical proximity, exacerbated by sound and scale, emerges a kind of compressed *Dasein*; a being 'over there', which is, at the same time, *right here*. Ac-

According to Heidegger, the word 'ex-istence' means 'standing out', but in *Uterusland* it is not the outside but the inside that constitutes the flesh of being. ^{viii}

With this unsteady oscillation – a kind of collapse, even – we near the heart of romanticism's critically oppressed potentials. Romanticism sits uncomfortably between Baroque and Classicism, with the victory of the latter pulling it in the direction of clarity, brevity, grace and beauty; in other words, with the symbol as its dominant structure. In classicist art theory, the symbol was king. But alongside 'this profane concept', as Walter Benjamin argues, developed a more sinister, stigmatised counterpart, 'so as to provide the dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out': the allegory.^{ix} And of course the dark background is far more interesting. In Benjamin, the symbol is defined 'as a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated and which steadfastly remains itself,' while the allegory is 'a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time.' Allegory is one text read through another, like the weather read through Klopstock read through Goethe. The basic characteristic of allegory is ambiguity, he writes, richness, extravagance: 'always the opposite of clarity and unity of meaning.' The intrusion of allegory could, therefore, 'be described as a harsh disturbance of the peace and a disruption of law and order in the arts' – it is the absolute antidote to the triumph of literalness.

The allegorical temperament flourishes in *Uterusland*, where Vogel appears at once on the cusp of life, and the giver of birth, both centred and outside: fluid, time-like, and dramatically mobile. This would have been bad news to Goethe who loathed the allegory for how it flies in the face of nature's balanced economy. He would also not have been thrilled to find in Leda Bourgogne's drawings, sculptures and fabric paintings so little of his theory of the morphology of plants: the idea that each developmental stage is the 'manifestation of something within'. In Bourgogne's work everything is at one time body, object, abstraction, decaying and sprung back to life. There is no teleology, no order. Each line is a hair, an artery, a suture. In *Spy*, a face inside an eye emits a cloud of smoke; in *Profusion*, two bodies emerge from behind a crumbling wall. Tattoos abound as a kind of ornament that is at once supplementary and elementary; where the skin is also, as in the fabric paintings, not naked, but its own disguise. Something unnatural is at work here, which feels, at the same time, deeply instinctive. There is certainly, as in Goethe, 'something within', but it manifests not as itself, so much as without a self, or the self as a series of questions – as Bourgogne writes in

her poem about two selves, woken up to late in the same bed, shedding their skins, flaking, dispersing: 'what a *barrage*'.

Thomas Mann described romanticism as having a 'peculiar and psychologically tremendously fruitful relationship to sickness.' 'In this regard,' he said, 'even psychoanalysis was an offshoot of romanticism.' And so Benjamin argues that 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head.' The death in question here is not an end, but, like origination in *Uterusland*, a continuous and rich process. Bourgoigne makes a landscape of petrified CD racks, like skeleton's writhing out of object-hood and into some form of ex-istence, testifying to death as the power of transformation. This, the great morbidity of romanticism, its falseness, writes Benjamin, lacks 'all classical proportion, all humanity,' but is, nevertheless, 'the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious.' To figure our subjection to nature not in the language of science, or wounded profundity, but through artifice and extravagance – allegories which confuse and disintegrate before our eyes – is perhaps what Mann meant by 'honesty's pessimism'.

Romantic sensibility joins pessimism to a string of other dark affects: nihilism, that scion of Kierkegaardian irony, and melancholy. The ruin – to go back to Friedrich's favourite motif, which I was so quick to dismiss as absurd, suffocated – is the architectural vision of melancholy. In his brilliant essay 'The Allegorical Impulse', Craig Owens writes of the allegory as less a technique than an attitude, and this attitude a melancholic one.^x Romantic ruin lust reads the landscape allegorically as a palimpsest, layered. Benjamin also said that allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things. And so it all comes together in a small, intense work by Alex Turgeon. Only from certain angles and up close do you see through the black coats of ink an etching by the famous Italian archeologist and artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778). With painstaking detail, Piranesi rendered the remains of antiquity in Rome, its crumbling columns and headless statues. In the mid-18th century, he was among the first to pay attention to them *as ruins*, prefiguring that very modern angst also embedded in Friedrich's gothic churches and the follies of romantic garden architecture. Like Piranesi's always somewhat chimerical originals, Turgeon's is a composite of several etchings, as well as a razor smuggled in from a Henrik Olesen work. He printed it over and over and again until it became nearly invisible.

A group of Turgeon's collage paintings lends further flesh to this thesis on beauty and its defacement, and love as an endless chain-gang, a train wreck, a state of dilapidation. In *Blue Eyes*, Turgeon has made of the upside down head of Ryan Philippe a *facies hippocratica*, only one part of a triptych, which figures masculinity as ruined; something always lost, yet longed for; embedded in history, yet entirely made up. It's a logic of disappearance by addition, and a way of finding in the disintegration of beauty also its recipe. *How to build a home in a house on fire?*, a text written by Turgeon in 2020, asked a set of questions that stuck in my head: 'What can result from this hopeless romance, which shepherds decay into beautiful submission? How can decay be an act of romantic aspiration?' Turgeon's openness towards decay, oddly hopeful in its hopelessness, is emblematic of the work of all of the above artists, and goes some way to account for the trashiness they share, the frayed edges, a willingness to fall apart. In that willingness there is also a will to power entirely contrary to that of Elizabeth in Schiller's play. In Vogel's *Prokon*, the muscle of an enormous hay fork, her witch-like command of the camera shows no panic, no fear. And this – outside of poetry, attitude, beauty – is what finally convinces me of this strand of romanticism: strength and courage. Truly, the most delicate, most unlikely things in the world.

Notes

- ⁱ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [1774] (trans. Bayard Quincy Morgan), London: Alma Classics, 2010.
- ⁱⁱ Egan, Jennifer, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kissick, Dean, 'The rise of bad figurative painting' in *The Spectator*, 30 January, 2021, <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-rise-of-bad-figurative-painting>>.
- ^{iv} A production of Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart* [1800] by Anne Lenk for the Deutsches Theater Berlin, 2021. Costumes by Sibylle Wallum.
- ^v Mann, Thomas, 'Germany and the Germans' [1945]. Here in my translation from Danish: 'Tyskland og Tyskerne' in *Mellem Kultur og Politik: Taler og Essays 1926-1953* (ed. Niels Barfoed), Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1965.
- ^{vi} See Kierkegaard, Søren, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* [1841]. My translations from Danish.
- ^{vii} de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- ^{viii} Thomas D. Trummer writes about the concept of ex-istence in Vogel's work in his essay 'Where Fear and Geometry Intersect' in *Raphaella Vogel: Bellend bin ich aufgewacht*, Kunsthau Bregenz, 2020.
- ^{ix} Benjamin, Walter, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1928] (trans. John Osborne), London: Verso, 2009.
- ^x Owens, Craig, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism' in *October*, Vol. 12 (Spring, 1980), pp. 67-86, MIT Press.