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### Claus Richter | Easy

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"Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest" Friedrich Schlegel wrote around 1800.<sup>1</sup> Since German Romanticism, the incomprehensible - fragmentary and contradictory, that refuses to be systematically defined - has been appreciated as an aesthetic paradigm in art.

For the solo exhibition "Easy", at the gallery Clages in Cologne, Claus Richter designs a whole fun fair full of non-binary, ambivalent and ambiguous elements. "Easy" sees itself as the manic counter-exhibition to "Nothing Is Easy", which took place with the theme of longing at the Leopold Hoesch Museum Düren in 2010. While a green slime of envy clung to the walls in Düren, in Cologne there is a cheerful, pre-Christmas tension.

Right at the entrance, a speeding carriage invites Benjaminian showcase flâneurs, to an escapist parcours, for them to fill their own inner emptiness through obsessive consumption. A mildly coloured, bucolic natural landscape, a Brueghelian seasonal cycle quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of nature, soon leads into the nucleus of the gallery. Here the key to the exhibition lies in the shape of a packet of cornflakes. As if in a commercial clip, the tearing open of the packet triggers a volcanic eruption of references. Like Disney's Tinkerbell, pink fairies escape into the gallery space and introduce visitors to the production processes and trade routes of the breakfast cereals. Here, one can find the shopping bags from the mall's boutiques, in which the cornflakes are transported home. There, the blades of a windmill turn by day and by night. It does this almost meditatively, similar to a headspace soundscape; that means, staying relaxed to stick with it; working until you drop. In a bragging tone, the elves whisper to the visitors about the countless hours of overtime work in the windmill. After all, the little sugar flakes have to be produced non-stop.

Upon brief reflection, the symbolic grain seems, to attentive visitors, somewhat misappropriated: in Schlegel's time, hunger was satisfied by a simple loaf of bread. Such a plain critique of capitalism is of course of little concern to the over-worked fantasy figures. They direct visitors up the gallery corridors and past many different pictorial motifs. At the end of Richter's fragmentary narrative, the mono-cultural grain makes a motivated reappearance to congratulate the visitors at the finish line. "Thumbs up, you made it!".

Only, the question is, what was actually achieved?

The everyday question of creating and not creating, of recognition, fail and failure in an over-capitalised present is also visible in the shapes of Richter's individual works. They are not industrially produced readymades, but made by hand, colourful and not quite perfect. Like the visitors, they strive to 'keep up' in an entirely commercialised and mediatised world and not get lost in a mass of uselessness.<sup>2</sup> With this goal, they also study instructions for desperate self-improvement that can easily be 'learned'

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, „Über die Unverständlichkeit [1800]“, in: ders., *Politische und Ästhetische Schriften. Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus, Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie, Über Lessing*, ebook 2018. (own translation).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis, „Einführung in den Mainstream der Minderheiten [1996]“, in: *Texte zur Theorie des Pop*, ed. Charis Goer, Stefan Geif and Christoph Jacke, Stuttgart 2013 (own translation).

from self-help books, meditation apps and a nasty 'toxic positivity' attitude. DIY at every stage of life. "Easy" wraps itself in a teeming, nervous aesthetic, saturated with fiddly tinkering and tiny figurines or with quick satisfaction appearing in the form of oversized cuteness. A cosmos of left-wing eco-education deliberately blossoms here (to forbid is forbidden!), one of Sesame Street and hyper-Western Americanisation, which Richter has internalised since childhood.

"Easy" sees itself as a self-referential amusement park that generates an associative surplus of meaning through its play with ambiguity. At the same time, Peter Pan's nostalgic promise of never really having to grow up is longingly upheld in its appearance, even though the impossible fulfillment of this idea- like the Christmas ritual that is only performed for reasons of expectation - has become conscious to all adults a long time ago. Richter's art can therefore also be understood as a form of resistance, as defiantly maintaining a childlike façade, by sometimes takes on ironic features. For Schlegel, irony is an effective form of incomprehensibility, a thought-provoking strategy, which in Richter's case, however, cannot be hijacked by the pose of an unproductively cynical cultural pessimism. In Richter's profoundly loving and, against all odds, optimistic world, there are no moral elevations, no exclusion and demarcation, and certainly no straight coolness that tries to cover its own insecurities. It is profound and at the same time banal, it is romantic and at the same time hyper real. It performs a flexible balancing act between affirmation and criticism.

Florentine Muhry