

Jutta Koether "Massen - Malerei und Versammlung"
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Interview by Diedrich Diederichsen

When did you become an artist?

When I stopped being interested in archaeology: from one romanticism to another. In archaeology, one confronts ancient history through buildings, pots and artefacts. And I so thought: why shouldn't I deal with today's pots?

But why romanticism? Did your romantic interest in archaeology become a romantic artistic attitude?

Yes, that's how it is, you start down a path, when you're 13 years old, have yet to understand your own gender, and you're stopped from going to the boys' school where you'd been learning ancient Greek, interrupting a process that you wanted to pursue before you were able really to live out your fantasy of it. To compensate for this, I focused, instead, on histories, films and accounts of the lives of adventurers, heroes (and outlaws), old as well as new, and became an unserious scholar of such things.

Today someone your age would almost certainly not view art as such a romantic pursuit. What was that little romantic territory that you wanted to conquer then?

It didn't really exist. Nothing had been marked out. I had to plot the map myself. It was all about a theoretical resolution: as of today you want to know what modern art is really about. That's when I first thought about where I could establish something myself. Apart from that I only knew what everyone else knew about art: I only had a rather normal petit-bourgeois education, not even a privileged one, but there were all sorts of things motivating me, in the absence of any yardstick, to become active myself. Except for early visits to the Isenheim Altarpiece in Colmar, which were an intense experience of art – an amazing pictorial experience. Simultaneously a form of seeing without expectation, but also directly linked to my mother's accounts of the nightmares that she had after seeing the same piece when she was a child. So a double sensitization took place: on the one hand, to shock effects of pure color and masses of form, but on the other, to "second-hand" feelings close to fear that were passed onto me, the doubling of final gestures, feelings, and illustrations. Such a freeing thing! One death leads to another. That is what art conveyed to me. And it stimulated the discovery of new techniques, which I call the Techniques of Discovery! It became very important to scratch, so to speak, at the art that I encountered, on quite a number of levels, and this activity was flanked by the reproductions that hung in our living room (father with a preference for van Gogh and Turner, mother for Runge and Monet). So I felt that there could be a path between craft, drawing, and color exercises – what one generally did in art classes – and scholarship – which was archaeology in my case. An activity that resulted in binding testimonies or propositions about the time in which I live.

Then does art also mean going immediately into production, as an inspired genius would, without first passing through the lengthy process of education?

No.

But the step from being interested in art to being an artist...

That was clear from the beginning. I was an artist from the moment when I said to myself that I was an artist. I already knew at school that that would be my profession. And then I looked around to see what other artists were doing. As a teenager, in the early to mid-seventies in Cologne, there were many

performances, videos, activities, and things happening in the bars: from Jürgen Klauke, to Ulrike Rosenbach, to Mike Hentz.

And did they convince you?

No, not really. They did, if anything, clarify for me the necessity of really going further. What actually convinced me was a book on the history of Happenings and Fluxus that I discovered while on map duty at school, since the map room was also the art library. This book stood out against the other books which focused mainly on pictures/masterpieces. I think it was one of the newest books there.

Did you already have a boyfriend then?

Nope.

Can the reasons for your decision to pursue art be traced back to the fact that, shortly after this, you did have a boyfriend?

Of course, my decision to pursue art was a decision to pursue a certain kind of life, a step out into a social context. My first boyfriend was also an artist, but of the kind, so I thought, that one shouldn't be – what later proved to be the case. But my decision to become an artist came before the hormone blast. To say if one influenced the other would be speculation. For me, then, art meant an entry into another, less regulated, and highly social field. At first it was also a kind of test of courage, like wearing a parka and hanging around at the edge of a demonstration without any idea what was going on... Looking at it chronologically, after the visual arts came my involvement with music. Although I never considered devoting my entire life to music.

But, unlike today, art then was a pretty open field. Now, access is being restricted again in all directions, whether in the form of dictates of taste, or a quasi-scientific experimental order...

Yes, but even then there were hindrances, at least in my environment...

What was special about the 80s – good as well as bad – was that in Cologne, New York and other places, people who would, under other circumstances, have become rockers or journalists, became artists. Do you feel that you belong to this force within art that was against art?

Those are two separate issues. My resolution to become an artist had nothing to do with encouragement or invitation from others, but from my own preoccupation with archaeology and a certain understanding of it, which had to do with how historical forms become symptomatic of their time. The euphoria which set in slightly later – anybody can do it if they want to – certainly helped my self-confidence, but it belongs to a different set of circumstances.

But before the "Neue Wilde" artists came along, didn't you make of a sort of magazine art? Those crazy lyrical layout-art fanzines with Thomas Giörtz?

Yes, those were independent productions that had nothing to do with the art market. They fell into people's hands in record shops or in the general cultural environment, at concerts, etc.... and served to broaden the senses, consciousness, etc. It was like dancing. Tracing the movements... What was good about the "Neue Wilde" at that point – and here one can also draw a parallel to music – was that people who only really made (or wanted to make) covers and quotations suddenly reconstructed a genre in such a way that it also functioned for itself. That definitely encouraged me as a painter. The process whereby difference emerges through imitation – and not just difference, of course, but often tautology as well. And that helped me to get more involved with painting. And because of this same process, people who actually just preceded the "Neue Wilde" became central (for example, Jörg Immendorff).

There is a historical photograph in a 1981 edition of "Art" magazine, which shows a studio of the "Mühlheimer Freiheit" group, with all the artists standing in the foreground. You are somewhere in the back, sitting against a wall, flipping through a book. This is the primeval slime out of which you emerged.

Yes, but it's just like you said, I am sitting somewhere in the back, flipping through a book. It expresses very well both the proximity and the distance from these artists.

Now, with very few exceptions, you reject the artists of that period, yet you have stuck with painting. What does that mean?

That I realized that rushing into painting, punk rock style, doesn't work in the long run. But that doesn't mean that punk rock cannot continue to exist. It just develops along different lines, distancing itself from its primary impulse.

But you would say that your painting is not just painting as such, but one example of painting from that time?

No, that was just a phase when I encouraged my basic inclination toward the simplest, most obvious, and most classic means, the eternal opposite of everything contrived, far-fetched, material fetishitic, etc. And that is painting, a brush with oil on canvas.

You have in fact always worn very simple and very classical headgear, things that people have always noticed and that one can recognize from a distance: berets, baseball caps, strange knots in your hair. Does that mean that you were always, on the one side, an observer and, on the other, one who wanted to be observed – one who could be seen observing? Although your other clothing was never so simple to categorize.

I have a predilection for certain starting points, to which I always return. I write with a fountain pen, although I also use a computer. Using certain trusted instruments is one method of establishing a basis from which I can repeatedly build. In the absence of teachers, in the absence of a style, and in the absence of particular working rituals, all I have are these simple instruments, which I can use regardless of where I am, what day it is, or in what situation I find myself. If it's necessary to make a certain statement, I also use other media, but these media must always be situated in relation to my medium of departure – painting – in a way which is particular to me. When you open an art book, what do you see? Despite all the developments, desperations, off-shoots and twists? You see pictures. Oil on canvas. Just as one still has the printed book, just as the printed t-shirt is still being produced, or there is still a range of headwear to choose from.

But there are lots of people who don't have anything on their heads.

There are also lots of people who do not fancy "arty hats". Sometimes I get cold: having something on your head is also a form of protection...it keeps your brain from flying away, or yourself from taking off too often. But for me, it's not meant to be a substitute for hair. The headwear is on my hair! Where are you going with this? What do you want to know?

I was just thinking that there was a connection with painting. But when you say that one still finds oil on canvas in every art book, it sounds like you are being defensive, whereas these painters' hats seem to be on the offensive. But they amount to the same thing, which is a constant in the notion of a bohemian lifestyle: the notion that, to put a bit ironically, the person still counts.

That's right, and it isn't. I am on the offensive in that way, but on the other hand I don't drink (alcohol), for instance, although it has always had a strong connection with painting, like the béret. For me, it's about finding a connection to a world in which there are of course quite a lot of ghosts and, especially for women, empty places (in film, women in berets are used as images of "the Resistance" or "série noir," rather than of artists). And developing an approach using "straight" means, like William S. Burroughs did as a homosexual who dressed in very conservative suits in a context of bohemians/beatniks. He referred to his clothes as "Banker's Drag"; my interest in certain items of clothing derives, perhaps, from similar perversions. Casually making oneself known by using or adopting signs, and thereby manipulating them. Helping oneself to excessively obvious (and adapted) signs, in order to publicize your membership in a certain group, and distance yourself from it at the same time.

Are there other people who wear bérets besides you?

I don't wear one anymore. But, as you already noticed, I always wear some kind of well-known headwear. Sometimes it remains a quotation, but sometimes it acquires a new meaning.

Isn't spreading paint on canvas fundamentally linked with drinking yourself to the point of blackout?

Maybe before, but one doesn't have to destroy oneself in this way now. Anyway, this only applies to men who painted. The people that I think are good drank voluntarily and for experimental purposes. For example, Philip Guston or Barnett Newman.

But from what I heard, Guston liked to drink and Barnett Newman is a completely different kind of painter.

I'm not talking about the pictures either. But about the attitude and the definition of a painterly personality – or, better yet, an artistic personality that comes from painting. I can relate more to Newman than to Pollock.

I was thinking that one could compare you in this sense to Tim Booth from the band James. His personal gods were all the great self-destructive characters, but he used them in order to stabilize himself.

Maybe. I have, of course, never committed myself to self-destruction. It was more that I was attracted by certain fairly impressive attitudes in my youth, ones that have of course, in my case, produced different effects. But this hasn't precluded, and will never preclude, further experiments...

I was thinking along these lines: a traditionally weak position – feminine, youthful, outcast – fits well into the great self-destructive tradition of the painter. But it emerges stabilized, as if restored to health through a double negation.

One shouldn't fully identify personal despair with the development of artists and their art. And when one realizes how that functions....

Are you trying to say that you learned from your mistakes?

No, as I said, there are so many lives that one finds interesting, but not necessarily that one should copy. I've been amazed by various radiant and flickering lives, whose creations have impressed me. And I have most admired those people who have submerged themselves as deeply as possibly into that thing which they call their own. But intensity is not necessarily the same as self-destruction (look at Dali or Neil Young!). I have never been able to fully grasp this connection on a personal level. Maybe "double negation" comes close to it: one finds a way to oneself when, from an unclear position, one identifies oneself with a historical unclarity. One is in flux, in a motion linked to unclarity, which has nevertheless long been a historical genre. Its movement has therefore been arrested into a form, which has a certain clarity, and can explain its own foundations, but nothing more. Fundaments, foundations – how these foundations emerged through so many tragic fates is another question. Painting can only be constructive for me, because it is history. The people who have painted since 1980 have also been drinkers, but this fact didn't really stick to them, they were never truly self-destructive, and that was my situation too: we reached back to something, but as history, and only then, so to speak, did our own begin. And that new history had completely different rules. One can quote forms and develop something from that, one can make use of methods, but one cannot quote life.

With the classical artistic personalities, the stress was always on the communication of originality, especially with the painterly geniuses that we discussed before. The complement to their own originality was always the dull, amorphous masses. But the Western masses of today consist of nothing but unique and original individuals. The masses have disintegrated into nothing but artists, or they move in another way – as in Third World – away from politics, falling out of their roles within a system in which the artist is seen as the great individual. Instead, they drift through history, as in your new pictures, without anything left really to look for. Doesn't this threaten the position of the one who claims to portray them, that is, of the "unique" artist?

Sure, but I'm not claiming this old artistic position as my own. Since Warhol, nobody has seriously been able to do that. Instead, I operate on the leftovers, which still remain, but they are destroyed and recognizable only as fragments. These remains also have links to archaeology: the masses wandering disconnectedly through time, space, history and geography, stateless and without ideology, etc., fantasized, individualized, or apathetic. Like archaeological artefacts, they are silent witnesses. They stand for something, but are themselves unable to say what. You stand before them, or pictures of them, and ask yourself: how do they live, how do they think? As you would the Tyrolean Ice Man from the Bronze Age: what did he really believe, to whom or what did he pray before he died?

But how can you pull this off? The artist who says all of this is basically just another one of those being described. How can he know, then, what he feels, or where he belongs?

He simply dons a beret. No, but seriously, you can do it by scratching, peeling, analysing whatever (if anything) can be excavated, without claiming, at least in principle, a privileged position of knowledge. Of course, one can be observed oneself and, in this sense, one is not a component of the masses who strive toward amorphousness. Each of these individualized or somehow disconnected individuals can also, like an artist, provide information and work on something. As a component of the masses, he has fallen out of all the traditional political units like the people, class, but he can know anything he wants to know for himself. The only problem is that, until he makes himself observable with the assertion that "I am an artist, I wear a béret," nobody is going to say "I agree with you" or "you're crazy." Although one could also come to the conclusion that none of this works.

But if these political units no longer exist, who is the audience for what you have unearthed? Who is being addressed? Who could work on it further?

I try to get people to...

I thought your pictures were about the fact that there were no more people, or at least only people with whom one cannot reach a new level. It is clear that there are no longer people today who can influence fate. So who is the imaginary partner in the dialogue?

Whoever is prepared to think about just that.

But then they are just individuals again.

Yes, but the pictures are shown in a space designed for them, and a whole process is pulled off, so to speak, by exploiting the closure and constriction of the room, from which one cannot, only symbolically of course, escape. The viewer is locked into the site with extreme quantity of signs as well as people, who have some individual connection to these signs, but that viewer himself has no such connection to them, and this non-connectivity points toward a certain transcendence, a new starting point, an improvement, etc. Like a child, oppressed by the funny wallpaper in his room, feels that the world tends to fall apart. I also make use of things that one sees every day, on television or in newspapers, but I don't try to document them realistically; rather, I work with the leftovers that are still available to the artist. Of course, women can also profit from what is, at the end of the day, men's history. That is not to say that women could counter it with something else. If they could, maybe it wouldn't be an act of opposition anymore.

Does this object, the masses that we've been talking about, in any way determine the way in which it is shown?

Yes, it's not even an object anymore in that sense: the masses demand seriality, or I show them in a serial way. The only thing is that the concept of seriality is no longer a challenge on the strictly formal level, as it had been historically, and with Warhol too, but rather on the level of content. In these pictures, we see that what, before, had been inflicted on the work or claimed for the work, now applies to everything else: there is nothing left that is not serial. This has almost restored the work to a second-order version of its old status. Another point is that the whole mode of presentation stresses seriality. The more I work on these *Massen* pictures, the more interpretative possibilities I see. That is, of course, has to do with the act of painting, which is half-dumb and half-meditative.

Do these various interpretations have to do with the fact that the masses come from the Third World – that is to say, with their meaning – or just with the fact that they consist of so many tiny parts, which is a formal constant in your work going back to the early "knobby" pictures?

I go back and forth between the two. First of all, in a formal sense, the masses are a non-ordered series. This naturally poses the question: what happens when all the individuals merge into a non-ordered series? Which is exactly how it feels to be part of a mass. You become dumb, you go along with the crowd, you lose yourself, until you suddenly ask yourself where they're all going and whether they even want to go there. This situation can be both questioned and painted – even its tempo, the fluctuation between losing and finding yourself.

Do the migrant masses – which can be seen in pictures from the East or the Third World – have anything to do with the masses here that lose themselves in dance crazes? Especially considering that they, as opposed to the former, are enjoying their experience?

Both emerge at the same time. I suppose that one does so by choice, and the other not. But each, of course, has its determining factors and thus also correlates with the other. The masses at concerts or parties, the masses standing in front of pictures by Matisse, the masses mobilized primarily by economic misery or war – it's precisely these relationships that can be portrayed on canvas. They are all materials, arranged like products on a shelf. What fascinates and moves me – and this is the theme of the work – is the monstrosity of the whole. Whether we have 20,000 in a stadium listening to a band or a 100,000 Yugoslavians fleeing the war.

Do you take sides? Do you consider things like the fact that the latter are Croatians who fought with the Germans in the Second World War? Or, as masses, are they all just victims to you?

Victims. My approach is not political in the ordinary sense, in which each specific situation would have to be accounted for and could not express the generality of the phenomenon. In that case, the transparent forms that we see in the pictures would have to be occupied by something. But the fact that there is nothing in these transparent forms is, of course, highly political in another sense.

That is what I am offering, and it's in fact what painting offers. Like in my early work, it is not primarily a philosophical or political proposition, but a way of taking painting to the limits. The color red constituted precisely such an offer. Monochromes or blank pictures signify again and again that painting doesn't work anymore – but neither does much else. And the world was always decorative in pictures. Now I'm going further and showing a really drastic piece of the world as if it were decoration. Real masses become wallpaper, that is their fate, but anyhow history has already dealt with them. I'm only saying that they are already paintings before I start to paint them – but I still have to paint them in order to prove that. They are not the content of the picture, but a type of content that is outside of it. Painting is becoming, so to speak, the symbolic executor of the last will of world history, at least of the modern era. By showing these paintings in such a small room – inserting a cold statement into a constrained situation – this effect becomes stronger, more emotional or even psychotic. History cannot be stopped, and only through psychosis can one regain access to it. In the same way that the monochromes require a sequence, these pictures require a sequence plus a space that is like a box. (A box whose placement and reliability demand to be explored, like an overly large orgone box whose walls are covered in pictures instead of metal sheets). In everything I make you don't just simply look at a picture and take something from it; rather, you have to expose yourself to the context, to this flickering, to these relationships that are both maintained and that constantly change.