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Malte Zenses

Fetztage in der Villa

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Malte Zenses is a pleasure to listen to amplifying upon his art, talking about the beauty and poetry of the demise of the world as we know it. When he describes his lust in the gravity of dystopia, he manages to encourage us to look for new worlds being created. Plastic-eating and CO₂-emitting bacteria, for example. They're cool and important for the future, he explains. We humans are not able to let go. We can't let go of what used to be and is no longer. There will be no return to the world before Climate Change. The age of the Anthropocene has arrived, we must change our disillusioned outlook. Unlike Walter Benjamin's "angel of history"¹ with the knowledge of the past, we must take our personal archives and experiences to go ahead soberly and courageously.

In the magazine *Fetztage in der Villa*, published in 2014 by his friend Mario Hombeuel, whose life tragically was cut short, Malte Zenses finds an archival mission. *Fetztage in der Villa* originated from the magazine *Südost Express*, a left-wing alternative neighborhood initiative that saw itself as the mouthpiece of the residents of the squatted Kreuzberg SO 36 (the name for the old postal delivery center South-East-36) and published its first issue in 1977. In addition to numerous topics of urban development at the time, the magazine also dealt with the lives of first-generation immigrants (so called "Gastarbeiter") who had come to Berlin in the 1960s, attempts to integrate them and give them equal opportunities. Topics that have hardly lost any of their relevance today.

Mario Hombeuel's treatment of the text fragments and photographs of the Kreuzberg local newspaper was an archival reappraisal of its social themes, combined with a pure delight in the aesthetics of the contemporary document. Malte Zenses is now posthumously continuing Mario's work from 2014 and combining it with his own. For, as Zenses says, they two share a deep disappointment with human responsibility for the state of the earth – in the form of pandemics, wars and rising right-wing populism, resource scarcity, and global warming. Underlying this realization for the artist, however, is also an ambivalent fascination in which the inevitably catastrophic and the radiant coexist.

Thus, Zenses wonders whether the utopian depiction of the future in *Südost Express*, in form of multicultural coexistence, equal opportunities, and a future in unison with nature are still possible today?

Are we in a downward spiral, stagnation, or progress?

Are we awake enough today to keep the past in mind?

For the works shown in the exhibition, Malte Zenses processes notes and word fragments from the *Südost Express*, quotes from film culture, and object fragments – such as a bomber jacket or ice cream napkins – to go beyond the boundaries of Abstract

¹ Walter Benjamin discovered the "Angel of History" after the First World War in an acquired drawing by Paul Klee. It is a metaphor for the pessimistic look back into the past, seeing only catastrophes there instead of progress, and thereby being blind to the future.

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Painting and New Realism. The cross-media approach also allows him to view the works as set pieces of a conversation, which in their tense juxtaposition convey a multi-layered and ambivalent commentary on the zeitgeist.

The text fragments in Zenses' large-format paintings can be perceived so ambivalently that everyone can find an individual access to them and allow their own memories and associations to contribute: "It seems to me that the worst is over". Malte Zenses also uses the ambiguity of these slogans to code political themes, to make them not directly accessible.

In his exploration of the possibilities of abstraction, Malte Zenses found himself in dialogue with the art of Franz Erhard Walther, who was able to express so much from so little. He asks himself how one can create political art today that is not didactic and obvious but gives the viewer various starting points for his or her own deciphering.

His paintings appear above the slogans, which are sometimes blurred gestural areas of color, sometimes capture fleeting things in a sketchy formal invention or take up the graphically contoured formal language of comics. The canvas has something sacred and truthful for Malte Zenses. A place that offers no room for experimentation. In reverence of the blank canvas, the sketchbook instead becomes the heart of his artistic practice. Here he can sort out his thoughts, find forms and forget them again, and plan his paintings with precision. Drawing offers him room for error.

In addition to the two-dimensional works, textile works can also be found in the exhibition. The second-hand clothes collected from various places are often used as a painting background or sculptural material, representing the different layers and stories of the wearers. In *Fetztag in the Villa*, two long-sleeved gloves sewn together from different materials hang on the wall. The ends are dipped in shiny black epoxy; with drops on their fingers, they look as if they have just been pulled ashore from deep waters.

On another wall hangs the so called "Postapocalyptic Jacket", a bomber jacket sewn together from several fragments of fabric that Zenses acquired in a Friedrichshain neighborhood pub. Like some kind of cyberpunk patch, the back reads "Tell them I said No" – Who is this person turned to the wall? An outlaw standing in the darkness who "says no to this earthly world?" Are we seeing Benjamin's angel again here, with his back turned to the future? Is it a statement against sexual harassment? Or do we think of Agnes Martin's "I'm painting with the back to the world" – the artist who painted in seclusion in the desert and is one of the pillars of Malte Zenses artistic cosmos. Incidentally, references from art history, literature or music are as frequent in his work as the personal ones and testify to his deep knowledge of and passion for cultural history, but also for subcultures such as punk – from the depths of which Malte discovered not only his love for music and political activism, but later also for visual art.

Malte Zenses has transformed the references from the past, from partly personal memories, into an ambivalent commentary on our society today. He offers us space for our own reflection and asks what we have learned from the past? Can we transform our own archival fragments into something new and look resolutely forward? Find poetry and beauty in the scary yet inevitable future? We need, contrary to Benjamin's angel, one that gives us desire and strength to endure a time when collective self-preservation comes before individual self-realization. In which we are open to change. Let's remember the CO₂ emitting bacteria. They can also be beautiful, just not in the usual sense.

Luisa Seipp