

Agnes Scherer Savoir Vivre

Duration: 27.5.-6.8.2023

Heidelberger Kunstverein, Hauptstraße 97, 69117 Heidelberg

Joust (justa)

The centre of the spacious hall is occupied by a group of medieval figures. This is the dramatic climax of a jousting tournament. One of the knights has been struck by his adversary's lance. Twelve court ladies in a row watch the spectacle from the stands: observing, commenting, gesticulating.

The life-and-death struggle is not real, of course. This is an art installation: Agnes Scherer's *Savoir Vivre*. The knights and ladies are just painted papier-mâché sculptures. There is a theatrical touch to the scene and the figures. Eternally frozen. No blood flows. The horses sport painted saddlecloths but are left incomplete. The platform upon which the ladies stand remains—like the defeated knight's cartoonishly burst breastplate—more gestural than realistic.

The time and place are kept deliberately vague. One of the ladies is handing over the traditional laurels—while another films the clash on her mobile phone. Yet another is enjoying a stick of candy floss. Plainly, *Savoir Vivre* is not intended to be an authentic reconstruction of a joust. We are not in a history museum here. This is a walk-in metaphor, in which the medieval motifs serve an as-yet enigmatic allegorical function—to which we will return below.

On closer examination, we discover that we can enter the mannequin-like figures from behind. So, we can view the spectacle of masculinity through their precisely aligned eye-holes. In other words, Scherer's construction allows us to view the events "through the ladies' eyes". Employing this manipulation to offer diverse perspectives, Scherer explores the discrepancy between the experience of the combatants and the role of the women on the stands. In fact, we know very little about how women actually experienced the tournaments that were supposedly held in their honour. In a sense, that means that the topic of the exhibition—the female perspective—is an impossible one. The hollow figures oscillate between attempted reconstruction and embodiment of absence.

Service of the Lady

One of Scherer's central sources is the thirteenth-century poetry collection *Frauendienst* (*Service of the Lady*), written by Ulrich von Liechtenstein. The title refers to the medieval concept of chivalry, and specifically tournament jousting to win the favour of a venerated lady of the court. This "service" was pursued, sometimes obsessively, by men of power and privilege.¹

¹ Liechtenstein's autofictional work describes his own life as an endless series of jousts, fought in honour of noble women he reveres from afar. Moments of real contact with these ladies are few and

Savoir Vivre shows us how veneration in the symbolic sphere was inevitably bound up with real-life degradation: the medieval court lady functioned as viewer and projection screen for the male theatre of violence.² The work reveals how their fictional exaltation in the culture of courtly love made women the object and reward of aggressive male rivalry. And it reminds us that this constellation serves as a blueprint for the heteronormative—and neurotic—bourgeois ideal of love.

The philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek also explores the persistence of the concept of courtly love in gender relations discourses. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment* he questions why desire is still treated as “spiritual” and women are turned into an “abstract ideal”. But is that really still the case in an age where sexuality can be experienced as a fleeting practice coordinated via social media—with no restriction to heteronormativity and no need for romance? Is it relevant to younger generations coming of age in the era of Tinder? Indeed, the very binarity upon which the concept of courtly love rests is itself challenged today.

If there is anything to this, then we are talking about a social system that may already be fading away. As such, the exhibition casts a refreshing new light as to the future of love and sexuality.

Scherer’s work is characterised by her specific use of paraphrasing. She plays with the appropriation and transformation of historical motifs and employs their symbolic meaning to address contemporary political conflicts in the context of their historical origins. In the process, she transforms entire exhibition spaces into stages to perform her—part surreal and parabolic, part grotesquely realistic—copies of reality.

Deforestation (Panorama)

The ten-metre acrylic painting *Savoir Vivre* imagines lance-making in a deforested landscape. Rafters transport tree trunks by river to the site, where they are turned into lances and painted. Identifiably modern businessmen are among the buyers. Alongside those images directly associated with the tournament motif, another scene in the painting concerns goose-fattening and specifically the production of foie gras, or goose-liver pâté. Foie gras reads as a metaphor, here, for the brutal exploitation of natural resources. The geese (or ducks) are force-fed through a tube, causing the liver to grow unnaturally large. Here, “traditional” cruelty to animals symbolises the eternal brutality of profit maximisation.

far between, at the margins of the narrative; they are informed of his victories by letter. The text is regarded as the first German-language novel written in the first person. The topic is plainly so central to European male subjectivity that “he” becomes “I” here.

² The medieval concept of courtly love played an important role in literature and everyday life. “Minnesang” or love poetry was an important genre of medieval literature and formed the basis of many chivalric romances and other such narratives. In this respect the concept of courtly love legitimises a “theatre of violence” by placing militaristic aggression in the service of love and chivalry. The knights were competing not just for fame and honour but also to prove their devotion and loyalty to their lady. This representation of fighting and violence as honourable and noble acts in the service of courtly love helped to promote the acceptance of violence in medieval society and consolidated its role in the cultural identity of the age.

Another smaller panorama shows a hunting scene. Par force hunting was conducted for entertainment. A large pack of dogs ran the prey down, accompanied by mounted hunters with horns and assistants with whips. Par force hunting was particularly popular among wealthy aristocrats during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These historical points of reference are also reflected in the way figures in the painting are dressed. Like the goose-fattening, this is another gruesome ritual. Although slower, the dogs have greater stamina and can pursue the prey until it is exhausted.

Savoir Vivre creates connections between the narratives of jousting, goose-fattening and hunting, conveying these in drastic images. All three pursuits represent aristocratic privileges; all rely on aggressive and frivolous consumption of natural resources.

The Currency of Chivalry and the Art of Conservation

As Scherer's artistic research reveals, the knights boasted about the number of lances broken in the joust, the waste of life and materials in pursuit of empty honour. The contemporary tournament literature contains long tallies of broken lances, documenting the destruction as a kind of invested "currency".

The lances used for jousting were very long. They often broke on impact with the adversary's armour, and had to be replaced frequently.

The winner was the knight who broke the most lances. The greater the wastage, the greater the worth. In one case, it was reported that an entire forest had been sacrificed for a single tournament.

The establishment of dedicated hunting grounds represented another needless squandering of nature. They caused immense environmental harm with their artificial deforested clearings, their monoculture, and their complex irrigation systems, for which entire rivers had to be diverted. The interventions required for hunting also endangered the livelihood of the peasantry. Here there is an obvious analogy to the ultimately cannibalistic consumption of natural resources in a capitalism damned to perpetual expansion at the expense of more sustainable societies. Think, for example, of the harm caused to indigenous peoples by state-backed forestry and agricultural corporations in Latin America.

In that sense, *Savoir Vivre* lays out a holistic social critique, a critique above all of Western ways of life, their relentless consumption of natural resources and their exploitation of people. For centuries, the "Christian West" has adhered to an anthropocentrism that treats man as the centre of the universe, apart from and superior to nature. Within that system the destruction of nature becomes a symbol of strength and potency. This belief, predicated on male domination and control, also expedites the exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of ecosystems.

Cultural studies investigate those contexts to develop a deeper understanding of the societal structures and processes that contribute to environmental destruction, exploitation, and inequality. The objective is to put forward alternative strategies for more sustainable and inclusive ways of life that are based on diversity, justice and cooperation. The ambiguity in Scherer's title, *Savoir Vivre*, provides a pointer. Alongside the conventional meaning—"the art

of fine living”—Scherer encourages us to consider the term’s more literal sense: “knowing how to live”, in the sense of developing an art of environmental conservation to survive.

Backlash

In many respects, *Savoir Vivre* can also be understood as place-specific in its city and region, the city of Heidelberg and the state of Baden-Württemberg. One need only think of the *Codex Manesse*, an immensely important illustrated medieval anthology of *Minnesang* poetry. This storied manuscript has been in the stewardship of Heidelberg’s university library since 1888, but was removed for safety during the Second World War. As if there had been nothing more important to attend to in the aftermath of thirteen years of fascism and war, local academics and dignitaries mounted a successful campaign for its return. Today its motifs decorate mugs, fridge magnets, and other souvenirs that are sold by the barrowload in Heidelberg’s medieval old town. Numerous medieval spectacles and tournament re-enactments are staged in the wider region. Foremost among these are the annual medieval market in Esslingen and the tournaments in Horb am Neckar and Schloss Kaltenberg, with “authentic” martial re-enactments. Some of Heidelberg’s student fraternities also regard medieval activities such as fencing and sword-fighting as “German traditions” that should be upheld.

Much more broadly, *Savoir Vivre* also touches on the modern fascination with stories of conflict and war in quasi-medieval worlds, featuring hypermasculine heroes—including knights—and their female counterparts. That is also reflected in the global popularity of series and films like *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Vikings* (2013–2020), *The Last Kingdom* (2015–2022), *Knightfall* (2017–2019), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) to name but few.

Within these cultural and political contexts, *Savoir Vivre* poses the question why so many people today yearn—at least in fantasy—for a world whose social life is structured by hypermasculinity and stereotypical gender roles, hand in hand with an almost impregnable class system. This contradiction points to the concept of the backlash, in the sense of social reaction. The term describes push-back against social change, seeking to restore, strengthen or—in extremist variants—absolutise traditional norms. Examples include the growth of populist political movements against globalisation and immigration. They demand a return to traditional values, in particular in the form of the conservative structures of heteronormative social orders, whose blueprint Agnes Scherer recognises in the medieval concept of “courtly love”.

It is important to stress, however, that these reactions do not automatically mean the end of social progress. Instead they can be understood—within a broader process of social negotiation—as the last gasp of resistance to progress. Ultimately, the extent to which such backlash movements—of which we currently witness so many—actually exert longer-term influence on social structures and institutions—as zombified revenants—will depend on the power relations within society. Perhaps they will transpire to be the last hurrah of a dying order.

In this respect, we should remember that the apex of medieval jousting culture fell in a period where the military and cultural significance of knights and chivalry was already waning. Even back then, there was already a belief that the “true” chivalry of the Round

Table was long lost, and that it could now only be emulated. In other words, then as now, chivalric culture was condemned to orbit endlessly around its own unachievable ideal.

Søren Grammel
Curator

About the artist

Agnes Scherer was born 1985 in Lohr am Main, Germany, and lives in Berlin. She studied painting at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Scherer's first operetta, *Cupid and the Animals*, won the 2015 Nigel Greenwood Art Prize and has been performed in venues including Museum Ludwig in Cologne (2017) and Tramps in New York (2018). Her works have been exhibited internationally in solo and group exhibitions including Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, Projektraum 1646 in The Hague (both 2020) and Kinderhook & Caracas in Berlin (2019). In 2019, she received the Berlin Art Prize. She is represented by the galleries CherdLüdde (Berlin) and sans titre (Paris).