

AN INTRODUCTION TO NEUE MALEREI: CULTURAL CUBISM

Constrained by the contrast between its own dimensions and those of the gallery, *Guernica* is exhibited for the first time in Romania by SUPRAINFINIT Gallery in Bucharest. The display's positioning in the centre of the room makes it an object the audience is able to circle around as if trying to restrain its content, grasping its considerable dimensions. The gallery, with its large shop windows — used as a grocery store during communist times — renders the piece visible from outside the space. The presence of the painting is tangible to the passerby, smothering both with its painted details (such as “the dark flesh”) and with the framework that resembles a visible rib cage. While not being the original *Guernica*, it stays true both to its real dimensions (349 x 777cm) and the subject of Picasso's well-known oeuvre.

Guernica, alongside the other lively-painted works, mark Christian Jankowski's second exhibition at SUPRAINFINIT, *Neue Malerei: Cultural Cubism*. This show brings together the artist's third series of conceptual paintings under the name *Neue Malerei*¹ (‘New Painting’), this time exploring and expanding upon Pablo Picasso's traits and visual worlds. The exhibition is well synchronised with the exhibition *The Picasso Effect* at the Museum of Recent Art in Bucharest, which takes place after a considerable period of time has passed since the first presentation of Picasso at the National Museum of Romanian Art in the then Socialist Republic of Romania in 1968.

Since 2015, Jankowski has been developing an archive consisting of digital found-photographs of people reenacting famous paintings by the employment of poses, costumes, props, sets, and makeup. The photographs delve into various milieus of both domestic and professional stage design, manifesting themselves as ultimately performative photos. Jankowski sends his selection of these paintings, with exact size specifications, to established painting reproducers from Dafen, China, who ship the exact replicas back to him, the only difference being the change in medium: from photography to painting. The dimensions of the canvas are maintained true to the size of the master-pieces, but the new painting almost always leaves a stripe on the bottom or the right side of the canvas untouched, depending on the proportion of the photograph. The blank sections of the canvas become visible in the transfer of outlines from the photograph to the painting. In this way, the blank space is not only the indicator of the dependencies of media, but can also be seen as an abstract realm open to imagination and speculation. The empty space remains as if some information was lost in the back-translation of the exchange from personal to cultural memory, altering the cropping of one perspective to the others.

¹ The first series of *Neue Malerei*, *Chinese Whisper - Neue Malerei (Van Gogh I-X)*, was made for the group exhibition *When I Give, I Give Myself* at Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in 2015, whereby 23 Dutch and international artists responded to the Van Gogh collection with newly commissioned works. The second series of *Neue Malerei* was made for the solo exhibition *Neue Malerei / New Painting* at the Grisebach exhibition space in Berlin in 2017. Following this show, the catalogue *Christian Jankowski: Neue Malerei*, edited by Florian Illies, was released by Koenig Books in 2018.

In the case of *Neue Malerei – Picasso I (Guernica)*, the surface covered by the painting is around 40% of the entirety of the canvas. 40% that capture the agony and despair which were resumed in the black and white photograph created by the American photographer Joel Witkin in 1987. This was possibly an attempt to fuse the atmosphere of sheer hopelessness left by the horrors of the Spanish Civil War with the confusion of the decades in his lifetime. The painting also disturbingly engulfs our countless contemporary crises, such as racism, gender imbalances, the war in Ukraine, border politics, and climate change, to name a few. Picasso's original travelled to the north-western regions of Europe (Spain, The Scandinavian Peninsula, etc.) and eventually to the US, from where after Franco's rule it returned to Spain — specifically to the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. This journey helps with the deconstruction of the ever-existing dialectics between the periphery and the centre, between oppression and privilege, exclusion and inclusion. Those contrasts become evident when comparing the main itinerary of the painting, which excluded the lands of Eastern Europe. Even if nowadays these dichotomies are visibly more protruding and openly more exposed in comparison to the way in which they were during '89, the unspoken post-communist trauma still haunts the infrastructure of countries such as Romania, sifting through their socio-cultural environments as well as through the cracks in the political system. Metaphorically speaking, such a positioning of *Guernica* inside a gallery devoid of suitable acclimatisation, lacking the exaggerated security normally necessitated by such masterpieces, comes as a countergesture towards Western cultural imperialism. Ultimately, a new *Guernica* could be repainted in China, thus sprouting as another chapter in art history.

The decision of a contemporary artist, such as Witkin, to quote Picasso is particularly interesting, as the visual language of the other *tableaux vivants* by amateur artists is more detached from the original composition. Thus, *Guernica* is also a stand-in for Witkin's personal adaptation of the socio-political struggles of those times. Equally captivating are nonetheless the different intentions behind each iteration — *tableaux vivants* posted on the internet as a form of comfort in creativity versus Witkin's careful reconstruction with intended commentary that furthers his artistic oeuvre.

The installation of Jankowski's *Neue Malerei – Picasso I (Guernica)* in the exhibition space migrates from mere painting to sculpture, while the painting itself already merges performance and photography. Jankowski's work can also be viewed as a social, performative process preceding the turning of art to mere object. Alongside the *Neue Malerei: Cultural Cubism* series of paintings, dissuaded from the corpus of colourful works, all of which contain personal, female poses — those women gazing back at both the author and the audience. Jankowski's multiple layers of media and technique posit questions beyond the medium of painting itself, slipping into Picasso's persona that proves to be a signaller for gender imbalances and power dynamics, and equally opening up new discussions on post-colonialism and the female gaze as reversal.

In many of Picasso's paintings, women are portrayed as objects of desire, of prolonged gazes, yet also factored by the stimulation of fear. The representations often contain elongated bodies, desirable expressions but also slightly depressing attitudes, deconstructing the socio-cultural background by expanding upon the sense of dread blooming amongst the post-war bourgeois society.

This patriarchal view is also reflected in the emerging film scene and mass media that impacted both Picasso and Braque in the early twentieth century. The expansion of cinema throughout modernism was still under the spell of a highly patriarchal society, so the representation of female identity was mostly instrumentalised by the male gaze. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey describes cinema as being ordered by sexual imbalance, since "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female".² Following up on her own perspective she explains that: "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness"³. The cinematic process was still under development, the technique was veering towards fragmentation and rapid switching between frames, all of it contributing to the build-up of Cubism and new usage of geometrical planes.

Jankowski also takes his inspiration from outside the already mapped domain of arts, whether we refer to mass-media or various renderings of videos or digital/analogue media. Through *Neue Malerei*, Jankowski manages to not only avoid reifying the idea of painting by capturing its preceding liveness and performative dimension, but also to show the traditional portrayal of a relationship that starts with the artist and ends with the artwork, posited to an uncontextualised viewer. This is similar to his first exhibition held at SUPRAINFINIT, where Jankowski invited his outcast brother to come together and work on what was called a family constellation (family tree), one that came to being by chainsaw-sculpting the *poiesis* of the bloodline. A considerable part of this process took place under the close supervision of a psychotherapist, and it led to the establishment of a bridge between the two estranged brothers. The dialogue is not only just traced by the space, but functions as a starting point for the follow-up that is *Neue Malerei*.

Jankowski's *Cultural Cubism* is a reversal of Picasso's artistic output. Instead of the latter's way of painting women as objects of desire, fear, and monstrosity, all the women that take part in *Neue Malerei* become protagonists of the paintings, reclaiming their female identity in a "new global agora for self-representation, political discussions and actions."⁴ There is a very specific chorus of voices underscored in the *Neue Malerei* concept. The *tableaux vivants* are vibrant, bizarre, beautiful, and uncanny. The subjectivities of the female characters emphasise an active process of communication — between their choice of

² Cited from Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York, 1989), p. 19.

³ Cited from Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York, 1989), p. 19.

⁴ Cited from Boris Groys, *Moscow Symposium: Conceptualism Revisited* (Berlin, 2012), p. 17.

paintings, their creative reinterpretations, and photo framings — over passive contemplation, as often outlined in Picasso's portraits.

As Jankowski expands the medium of painting in a cunning yet jestful way, he also contributes to the extension of the identities that are previously involved. In a sort of centrefold of the entire exhibition, all of the women found in the *tableaux vivants* become beacons of a reversed gaze. Jankowski moves the eye of the beholder in between the artist and the workers found inside the art(world).

Therefore, I believe that Jankowski's *Neue Malerei: Cultural Cubism* changes the dominant perspective of the 'master' in showing strong and empowering *tableaux vivants* of women. I also find it important to present such an exhibition in the socio-cultural context of Bucharest, as a place where criticism of the gendered structure of the gaze is slowly becoming more visible and acted upon, and the engrained idea of the "master" is diminished. This constellation of painting, performance, photography, and the tackling of image representation could enlarge the creativity of artistic production in a place like Bucharest, where artistic and non-artistic disciplines (namely: sociology, anthropology, cinema, philosophy, psychology) are still very much disjunct.

As the previous two projects developed by the artist in Bucharest, *Family Constellation*⁵(2020) at SUPRAINFINIT and *Defense Mechanism* (2021) at Goethe Institut, sparked exciting and personal conversations amongst the public, I hope that *Neue Malerei: Cultural Cubism* (2023) will further deepen curiosity and trigger a sense of reflection.

Alongside my introductory text to Christian Jankowski's overall practice and to the exhibition, Noura Dirani's essay *Unfolding Cubism. Transcultural Perspectives in the Work of Christian Jankowski* brings a transcultural perspective on the *Neue Malerei: Cultural Cubism* series. Thus, her contribution unpacks the process of colonisation coming from Europe's hegemony, focusing in this instance on the development of modern Chinese art as a non-Western culture. She analyses Jankowski's practice in view of the importance of multiple-cultural interconnectedness and highlights how it is situated in the midst of current global networks. Adopting a playful and inquisitive approach in analysing the *tableaux vivants*, the artist's perspective on each individual painting can also be found in the catalogue.

We would like to acknowledge the work of all the people involved in making the catalogue and exhibition happen, which is co-curated with the ever-inspiring Gallery Director and Founder, Suzana Vasilescu. Special thanks to Maria Persu's wonderful and meticulous support as Assistant Curator at SUPRAINFINIT Gallery, and to the outstanding work of Studio Christian Jankowski. We are deeply grateful for the artist's excitement to make new

⁵ The projects *Family Constellation* (2020) and *Defense Mechanism* (2021) were commissioned and curated by Quote—Unquote, an interdisciplinary platform that investigates the mechanisms, uses and effects of (public) speech in contemporary society through artistic practice and its intersection with other fields of activity. Quote—Unquote was founded in 2019 by Irina Radu, Cristina Vasilescu and Dan Angelescu and is currently run by Irina Radu and Cristina Vasilescu.

works and respond site-specifically to the context of Bucharest. Last but not least, we would like to thank our community of visitors and art lovers that visit our exhibitions and attend our public programming, and that together consolidate the artistic scene of Bucharest and of Romania at large.

Cristina Vasilescu,
Artistic Director and Curator of SUPRAINFINIT Gallery