

Franz Wassermann

Lecture, held at the opening of an exhibition of works by the artist Franz Wassermann on August 23, 2002 in Salzburg, Austria

The artist Franz Wassermann has consistently attracted the public's attention with his spectacular occupations of public spaces, such as the Austrian-wide poster project "Barbie and Ken are HIV Positive", or with his very personal activities, such as the initiation ritual "Now I Belong To You", in which he bites off the heads of cockchafers (a type of beetle), leading us directly back to the threshold of his coming of age. You will have already noticed that the exhibition which you are viewing here goes beyond the confinements of a gallery and it is about this I will be speaking to you tonight.

The project MADE IN AUSTRIA - the title is to be understood literally- can be assigned to Abject Art. Abject Art deals with tendencies in art, making themes of sexual and social taboos and the use of so-called base materials such as dirt, feces, hair, dead animals, moldy food and so on.

You have certainly heard of Warhol's Piss Paintings, Al Hansen's Earwax Venus, Helen Chadwick's Piss Flowers or Mike Kelley's works with sperm.

Curators who support this type of art must possess a measure of confident self-criticism when confronting their respective institutions; they are desecrating their temples, as it were, allowing, within the purity of a gallery or museum, the use of foul language, the presentation of themes involving sexuality and the display of genitalia, thus putting an end to prudery. An exhibition of Abject Art at the Whitney Museum, New York in 1993, was directed against the culturally conservative climate in the USA, which, in turn, is itself against multiculturalism, women's rights, gays and lesbians or against artists such as Mapplethorpe, Serrano, Gober, etcetera.

The artistic theme is no longer the confirmed general concept of beauty, but rather the excreted and the suppressed. You see here a deviation from all common perception of the aesthetic, which speaks of natural versus artistic beauty.

In 1980, Julia Kristeva wrote about Abjection. Abjection (translated from the French meaning depravity, vileness, baseness, meanness) describes the process of the founding of identity through expulsion of the inherent, which is perceived as unclean and thus becomes excrement.

Adorno says of this: "Art must make the ugly and outlawed its cause, to no longer integrate, temper, or, by means of humor, which is more repugnant than all that which is repugnant, to reconcile us to its existence, but through the use of ugliness to denounce the world..."

Several of you will perhaps remember the work of Belgian artist Wim Dolvoe at the Documenta IX in 1992. The pattern of the tilework on the entrance hall floor, which one first perceived as decoration, revealed itself at second glance to be feces.

Wassermann also works with the shock effect of the "second glance". A photographic detail of his "relic" (the t-shirt full of bloody phlegm) is transformed into wall-covering, thus becoming part of the room's decoration. This rather directly illustrates an illness of the artist. The shirt, made by Palmers, certainly not perceived as a throw-away product, becomes a spittoon. Actually the shirt becomes the artist's canvas, documenting the late manifestation of a childhood illness in the adult artist, externalizing something which is internal, thus producing this metamorphosis.

The soiling of the shirt rebels against rules of physical hygiene, which control and make our orifices taboo and therefore establish social order. The depraved, the ambiguous and the diffused disturb this order and thus elude social rationality.

Just think of the slavish obedience in agents of executive power, who intervene with their so-called preventative measures where divergence from the norm in art is concerned. The most recent example was the police intervention during Wassermann's public performance "Everyone Has The Right to a Break" (Jeder hat das Recht auf eine Pause), where an ostensible threat to a commercial billboard was to be impeded.

The public representatives are always concerned with the re-establishment of the seemingly threatened social order, whereby social order is apparently the only existing criteria which is available to them.

Therefore, the photographs on the floor of the exhibition portray the artist in the position of a registered criminal, whereby the artist wears a pin-striped suit, the classical symbol of uniformity, social compatibility and non-individuality.

The t-shirt, however, which is worn under the suit, threatens to soil or infect it and helps the artist establish his identity, which incorporates and accepts all aspects of his being. The outward appearance, which accords with the designation of social roles, is undermined. Wassermann mixes various codes of identity - the offensive with the proper. Clothing, distinguished by Wassermann's use of brand names, can become a form of self-stigmatization or at least a self-confining stipulation signalling either the repression of or failure to find a personal identity.

As a result, it is not aesthetics, but ethics that are Wassermann's theme. Not an aesthetic of ugliness, but a persistence in friction between the private and public world. Art transports the irreducible, irrefutable experience of pain. The body carries, like a signature, the authorized print of pain as a form of artistic text.

The video project "I - (or One)" - the title remains undefined as to how it is written - functions as follows: The artist sits in front of a mirror, the camera looks over his shoulder and films the scene in real time. At the beginning, the artist observes himself over a period of time, the mirror thus showing him an image (the I, or one) which he recognizes in this non-identical reflection.

Jacques Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage is perhaps familiar to you. He registers the loss of self-being through the recognition of self in a mirror. This happens between the ages of six and eighteen months. The French psychoanalyst deconstructs the modern subject, which is only a product of an view from the outside. The self irretrievably disintegrates.

Now Wassermann executes an act of self-confirmation. This calls to mind the photography of Bernhard Johannes Blumes, in which he licks his body with his tongue. This work originates from a feeling of desperation in which reason and intellect cannot reach the places which the tongue can reach, indeed, where it already is.

Wassermann covers his face with tape, deforming, distorting, alienating it to the point of affixation. This act of emancipation, a painful procedure, which is followed by the covering of the mirror-image with the used strips of tape, is the renunciation of the image.

Vestiges of the body, traces of the I, One or Self remain as information imprisoned in the pieces of tape.

Essential to this self-portrait is the artist's recognition of his own mask, which unmasks the social role of confusing identity with external appearance.

Artists such as Juergen Klauke could have been models for the works of Franz Wassermann. With "I & I or The Human Face", Klauke examines practices of theatrical self-portrayal in the baroque, probing the possibilities which mime and masquerade offer, in the sense of a lustful acquirement of foreign identities.

With "I - (One)" Wassermann seemingly joins, in context, the Body Artists, who in the 60's discovered the body as material, but accords more to a variety of traditional Austrian solemnity of the Wiener Aktionisten Brus, Muehl, or Nitsch than he does to the playful lightness of the Happening.

But despite similarities in the form of his medium, Wassermann represents something else again, which includes issues such as gender, homosexuality and AIDS, going beyond self-experience and posing questions 1) concerning a constant culturally defined norm, an identity which is arbitrated by the media, and 2) as to the wherefore of the place and system in which the work finds itself situated. In this sense, his works refer to the present physical and social framework of art.

The third project shown is titled "Men Fuck God."

The fish which is presented deals iconographically with a symbol for God, as well as being a phallic symbol.

What we see in the exhibition is the relic (the remains of the fish have been preserved in synthetic resin) of a performance by the artist which has been documented on video. The tape first shows the removal of the fish's head. This results in a bloody opening. This bloody cavity is, in turn, penetrated and masturbated into by the artist. The act takes quite a long time, but is brought to conclusion through ejaculation. Thus the project is also brought to a conclusion.

The title "Men Fuck God" alludes to many things, one being the role of the artist as representative of all males, or even of all humans. The fish is the equivalent of God, and thus creation. The violent act of copulation, which in the first instance serves personal gratification, makes an object of the Other. In turn, the violent abuse of the Other is constantly portrayed and should be understood as a gesture of power or destruction.

Power, in that it degrades and usurps the qualities of the other. What appears to be a pagan ritual is a simple pattern of repression which takes place constantly.

Of course, in a patriarchal society the female is the repressed, but can represent any other minority. But where males begin to identify with females, the repressed or the exploited, roles shift, as this empathetic behavior obliterates the boundaries between the I and the Other. To convey this in an urgent manner, the sexual and procreative act is portrayed as a process of destruction, in which the bloody wound represents the castrated female - this brings us to Freud.

If one interprets the title differently, namely as linguistic aggression aimed at the European inheritance of a judeo-catholic animosity towards all that is physical, it is possible to understand the work as an act of emancipation and liberation.

The fish is the symbol which the artist has chosen for himself; thus the sexual act is one of autoeroticism and aims at a society which practices asexual reproduction, the clone society.

This video will not be shown in the exhibition. It employs drastic means which are strange to no one and yet taboo for all. Even though these means are portrayed electronically, we are moved. The monitor will remain facing the wall.

What is remarkable about works like "Men Fuck God" is the perception of the work by the viewer, who comprehends the sexual act, but not the complexity of and the statement made by the work.

The question which is posed by Franz Wassermann is not one of the style, but of the strategy which is reflected in his work in reference to context, situation and the ongoing process between the work's producer and its recipient.

Dr. Hannah Stegmayer

Lecture, held at the opening of an exhibition of works by the artist Franz Wassermann on August 23, 2002 in Salzburg, Austria

copyright Dr. Hannah Stegmayer

this work may only be published with consent of the author

Translation into English by Jack Poppell and Robin Lee