

THE POMPEIAN CABINET

Heinz Knobeloch

When a painter decides to present his latest works in the form of a »Museum«, he certainly has none of the usual picture-shows in mind. Whether he is aware of it or not, he moves into the vicinity of that so-called »context-reflexive« art which, since the 1970s, has a major share in the vanguard art production. After all, the critique of the museum as a place of staging and ennobling artworks is one of the most important issues of this genre. Such diverse artists as Marcel Broodthaers, Louise Lawler, or Guillaume Bijl have made it their subject and have examined the phenomenon from very different viewpoints. But in nearly all these cases one thing became clear: that the museum not only functions as an instrument of selection and order but also as an authority which produces the auratic, as a context which transforms artifacts into objects of cult. That is to say: They have shown us that it belongs to the economy of desire, to that psycho-social metabolism, in which the particular separates itself from the ordinary.

This process of transformation, this transition from the aesthetic to the auratic is also the subject of Norbert Fleischmann's works. His contribution, however, is at once more general and more specific than the museological inquiries of the context-artists: More general, because it includes the analysis of this art location - thereby offering a kind of second order observation - more specific, because it is about a particular form of museum. For those who walk into Fleischmann's »Museum« will at once recognize that not the institution as such is meant, but a model of staging which belongs to the archetypes of art exhibition: It is that decorative »salon-style« presentation of paintings which was so common in the 19th century museum, the roots of which are, however, to be found in the cabinets of the aristocratic art lovers (Not without reason »salon« was also the name of the

one is tempted to say: masterly - execution of the paintings. All are done in the same refined technique of layer-painting, all demonstrate the same precision in the treatment of the details. In this way, Fleischmann's »Museum« almost gains something »mannerist«: Painting presents itself self-confidently as an artistic skill by showing the public its iconographic and technical repertoire. For the same reason, however, the whole presentation assumes that kind of melancholy overtone which is often part of such a retrovision, and which is already present in Vasari's *Vitae*, the first document of mannerism. That is to say: For the painter who presents his craft in this manner, its development, in a way, is already completed. It may continue to serve him as a means of producing pictures, it may even help him to find unseen forms and compositions, but something fundamentally new can no longer be expected from it. Thus, the museum of possibilities is at the same time a document of closure - if not of an emerging decay. It therefore suggests itself to fashion it as a »Pompeian Cabinet«, that »style-room« in which the art lovers of the 19th century lost themselves in their dreams of a sunken classical beauty.

One nevertheless has to dwell a bit longer on the paintings, if they are to be more than the museum's inventory. Because what is so remarkable about them, is not only their openly displayed preciousness but also the strange intensity they radiate. If one turns to the pictures individually, one is not just in front of a beautiful object or a luxuriously framed vista, but feels to be in the presence of a strangely animated object. It is one of these experiences Walter Benjamin describes in many of his texts and which in his essay on Baudelaire he links to the concept of »aura«. In doing so, he also wants to enrich his former auradefinition, which mainly referred to the singularity and authenticity of the artwork. In particular, he tries

to put in concrete terms the aesthetic and psychological conditions of the auratic experience which he had neglected in the »artwork-essay«. Because Benjamin has realised that an inner participation - one could almost say: an animistic attitude - is necessary to feel the auratic appeal of an object. Literally he writes: »To experience the aura of a phenomenon means, to endow it with the capability to open the eyes«. What makes up the auratic experience, then, is the feeling of being seen or of being recognized, as it happens to us in our daily encounters with other people. It is based therefore, as the text goes on to say, »on the projection of a form of reaction common to human society to man's relationship with nature and with inanimate objects«. This almost personal relationship, however - and this is the point of this essay - has its origin in the mysterious »depth« which characterises certain phenomena, their ability to draw us into distant times, in particular: to bring us into contact with the images of the past.

The works Norbert Fleischmann has assembled in his »Museum« have something of this depth, this aesthetic and semantic surplus which draws us away. Not only, because they have something historical about them or because they are the result of a painterly condensation, but because they themselves are »seen« or »recognized« images. That is to say: What the artist has elaborated in these pictures are forms and motifs which he has discovered in his day to day observations, which have *opened their eyes to him* because they are connected with his personal world of images (This, among other things, explains the uneven distribution of the image-forms, the preponderance of abstract and geometric motifs). The attitude Fleischmann's »Museum« conveys is therefore not that of a sovereign *bricoleur* who willfully mixes historical styles, but rather that of a seeker and discoverer. That means: In this case

the painter appears as someone who is »affected«, who finds something of himself in certain motifs – yes, who for that reason is virtually looking for them.

In bringing the suggestive power of the painted image to bear Fleischmann touches the sore spot of the usual context reflection, or rather: he reveals its blind spot, its prejudices and self-imposed taboos. Because, as the logic of this truly »modern« art practice wants it: What proceeds as reflection or critique must not work with the means of seduction; concept or sensory pleasure, truth or appearance, *tertium non datur*. This explains the strange coyness, the subliminal puritanism of so many works of context-art. One considers the sensual appeal of art as a disturbing element, just as one mistrusts her tendency to incorporate herself in tangible objects (commodities). On the other hand, one does not object if the own revelations - Allan McCollum's »Surrogates« are the best example - find their way into the art system's commodity circulation.

Fleischmann meets these inconsistencies with a double perspective: He offers the viewer pictures which he can relish in a naive and thoughtless manner as beautiful artifacts, but which may also become the starting point of a thought process. Or, as a third possibility which is even more likely: which first impress him by their beauty and skillful execution, before they make him wonder about their seductive power. But, however this process may go off in the respective case, as a dialectical to and fro or as a temporal succession, the »message« of these pictures is always the same: Decide for yourself what is important for you, choose, what kind of relationship you want to have with us.

Apart from the fact that such an »as well as« is far more generous than the lessons we get from the orthodox forms of context-reflection, it raises a number of fundamental questions we should ask ourselves from time to time: What kind of

interest do we actually have in artworks? Which of their qualities are important for us? What do we expect from painting as a particular form of image production? And, regarding the present trend towards the conceptual: Is it necessary that painting opens its borders, that it mixes with discourse or with the other media to be a legitimate, contemporary art practice? And, even more concrete: Is it capable at all to create convincing mixtures of the sensual and the cognitive, that is, a synthesis which is more than second rate philosophy?

Norbert Fleischmann apparently answers these questions in a conventional manner, by affirming such traditional values as manual skill or artistic autonomy. His »Museum« indeed speaks in favor of a form of painting which dedicates itself to the production of the beautiful and the refined. One should not miss, however, that he dons his »mannerist tableau« with a considerable dose of irony and self-distance, in other words, that he knows what he is doing. Because, as a museum of beautiful artifacts, it simply is too beautiful to be meant literally, too true to style to address nothing but our sense of beauty. We realise, that the red walls, the golden frames and the refined techniques of painting are obsolete forms, and at the same time we become aware of the fact, that we are beholding something which is essential to our concept of art.

Perhaps Fleischmann's strategy can be further clarified by a concept which is also part of the mannerist tradition: Like a *capriccio*, one could say, his »Museum« carries the auratic staging of the artwork to extremes, thereby revealing what is effective in all activities of the artworld, but what due to habit (or camouflage) escapes our notice: that for us art is a form of creating the particular, that we virtually expect her to present us something which is different from the rest of society, different from our ordinary life - different also from what she has produced so far. Most of all, however, we expect her to stimu-

late our sensory capacities, for example: our ability to develop new visions out of our visual impressions. Where she doesn't meet these expectations, she is in risk of losing her identity – and as a result of that: her impact. That means: Where she tries to revoke the distinctions she has drawn herself, she is about to change into something else.

Notes

1. PETER SLOTERDIJK: Die Kunst faltet sich ein, *Kunstforum International* No. 104 (1989), p. 181.
2. The »pompeian cabinet« is one of the the architectural common places of 18th and 19th century and in that respect may be compared to the »japanese« or the »venetian cabinet«. That is to say: In many castles and country houses of the time, but also in some mansions of the upper middle classes, there are rooms designed to evoke a particular style and the atmosphere corresponding to it. The pompeian cabinet normally is painted in red or clad with a red wallpaper. The actual decoration of the walls mainly consists of animal and floral motifs, thereby imitating the style of the late roman murals which are so typical of Pompeji.
3. WALTER BENJAMIN: Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire, reprinted in: *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt 1977, p. 223.
4. Ibid.

