

Carsten Roth

***“...the image turned into space” – or vice versa***

Opening speech on the exhibition

**Thomas Bauer – “Bleib mir vom Leib”**

Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat

2nd May 2015 – 12th June 2015



series: Zeichen und Wunder, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat

Let us start with some thoughts about the exhibition title. Thomas Bauer has deliberately chosen the German imagery “Bleib mir vom Leib”, a way of telling somebody to physically keep away from the speaker. This colloquially common phrase implies a plain “Stay away – don't touch/bother me!”, the idea of getting somebody off one's back as well as demanding some kind of privacy. From a historico-cultural perspective, this clearly relates to the Bible. In the Gospel

according to St. John, Mary Magdalene wants to anoint the body of Jesus, but finds his tomb abandoned. Encountering the risen Christ, she mistakes him for a gardener. She recognises him only upon being called by her own name. Trying to embrace him, she is rejected by his words *noli me tangere* – “do not touch me” – and interprets his dictum as an indication that he has not yet ascended to the Father. This episode has turned into a leitmotif in Christian art and has experienced manifold illustrations since medieval times. The beholder is confronted with this rather intimate scene primarily through a “pathos formula.” Art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg coined this term to illustrate gestures and mimicry of emotional expression denoting universally accepted principles. The pathos formula *noli me tangere* reflects an indicative or even defensive act of raising one's hand to keep somebody at bay. Even if his painting “Personal Jesus” (2013) from the series “minus12Grad” (12 degrees below zero) actually shows Christ – an increasingly rare motif in the 21st century – the Crucified in Thomas Bauer's exhibition is rather a defective religious sculpture without arms, combined with a yellow cement bag and red sticky tape, “to put something else on there,” as the artist explains. With his title “Bleib mir vom Leib”, neither the originally iconographic theme “noli me tangere” nor any religious associations were on Thomas Bauer's mind. In February 2015 he wrote to me:

“[Here is] my exhibition's title: ‘Bleib mir vom Leib’. The exhibition comprises several series ... the word ‘Leib’ represents the figurative beginnings I am increasingly moving away from ... this is the most simple interpretation of my title ... I will, however, add more interpretations in due time ...”

Profound, ambiguous, humorous and unconventional – considering Thomas Bauer's way of thinking, this could even allude to the museum attendants' "Please do not touch." His main focus is thus not on the *corpus christi* motif taken from the New Testament, but on the physical body of living beings – humans, animals or even plants.

Why, then, does the artist use the German "Leib" – the subjective body in contrast to the objective body (German "Körper")? He makes this distinction because the common term "body" does not necessarily include the mind, and he wishes to avoid a merely material understanding of "body". In the latter understanding of "body," it can be subject to medical and empirical studies, a biological object; "Leib," on the other hand, cannot be expressed in numbers and figures. Theologically speaking, "Leib" raises the corporeal entity to a metaphysical level, to a unique union of physical body and immaterial soul. In philosophy, such conceptual thoughts about the body aim at the correlation of mind and soul, a reference of the subjective body back to the objective body – or simply the perception of one's own body.

This finally yields a connection to the graphic artist, as long as he works with representational objects, which still holds true for Thomas Bauer. The perception of one's own body – both "Körper" and "Leib" – can be a subject of graphic arts, e.g., in any self-portrait. However, it is mainly the perception and illustration of other bodies as they occur as humans, animals and plants in his works.



Personal Jesus – 120x100cm, acrylic paint, oil, tape and paper on canvas, series: minus12Grad, 2013

His oeuvre is technically and stylistically versatile. He paints, draws, creates objects and images of objects, works with installations. “Bleib mir vom Leib” should basically be called an exhibition of paintings, but due to the way Bauer experiences his spatial environment, it has turned into some kind of vast excessive synthesis. Consequently, as an adequate introduction to this exhibition I have chosen a quotation from the opera “Parsifal”. At a crucial point – when the plot's action seems to stagnate and there is an abrupt change felt in the surroundings – Richard Wagner makes the protagonist say, “I scarcely move, yet already it seems I have travelled far.” Gurnemanz: “You see, my son, here time becomes space.” Thus reads the title of my opening speech: “...the image turned into space” – or vice versa.

When you watch Thomas Bauer delivering his paintings, you notice many objects that seem irrelevant at first sight: bags filled with balloons and confetti, bubble packs

and tape, textiles and metal rails, piles of old newspapers and spray cans. Questions about their purpose would not be answered at that stage, as this is something that remains to be seen. The exhibition itself is then still under construction, developing gradually, spontaneously, experimentally, following the artist's intuition, frequently interrupted by himself sitting on a "chair of reflection" to observe and contemplate. Even if the term *homo faber* generally denotes both the artist and the manually working man on the one hand, it is a peculiarity in Thomas Bauer's work to be confronted with a Janus-faced figure which on the other hand shows the opposite – and maybe dominant – idea of *homo ludens*, the playing man, as well. Following that train of thought, man develops his skills in playing, game being a crucial way of finding his purpose in life.

The focal point of our exhibition is four different sequences of paintings, spread over four rooms. To understand the way Thomas Bauer works and the conceptual idea behind this exhibition, it is best to consider his own words:

"The exhibition unites my artistic range of paintings between 2010 and 2015: figurative, conceptual and abstract works. The separate series are each based on an experimental phase in the atelier. Haphazardly and without planning, different materials are put together, on a trial basis, leading to a condensed experimental arrangement which then initiates a new series. It thus all starts by coincidence, resulting in some kind of formulaic language governed by the initial arrangement and not necessarily in accordance with the preceding or following unit. This excludes predefined approaches and systematically denies any kind of determination from the

very beginning. The various and heterogeneous forms of representation preclude a clear categorization of the exhibition “Bleib mir vom Leib”.

The leitmotif of heterogeneity is mirrored in the art club's winding basement rooms, which offer the perfect stage to present the different pieces of art separately.

To get a deeper understanding of the exhibition's four series, let us take a closer look at each of them.



Echosounder – 220x100cm, acrylic paint on canvas, series: Um Kopf und Kragen, 2012

## “Um Kopf und Kragen” (2012)

The oldest one – exhibited on the corridor leading to the stage – was completed in 2012 and is entitled “Um Kopf und Kragen” ([Risking] Life and Limb). This series resembles a modular system consisting of eighteen canvases of the same height, but each of a different width. The images can be arranged in various ways. To guarantee fluid transitions between the series' works for each re-arrangement, they had to be painted carefully by considering their formal composition as well as motives and colours. By placing the single modules next to each other, a panoramic image of up to eleven meters can be created, with up to 100 variations of content. Depending on the width of the walls on which these arrangements are displayed, even smaller combinations of four, three or two elements can be installed. In his diploma thesis published in 2013 as a book entitled “Malerei im Kompatibilitätsmodus” (“Paintings in Compatibility Mode”), Thomas Bauer has analysed his experiment's influence on formal aspects of imagery, and also with regard to content and colour. In addition, he has examined the composition's narrative structure, and finally has questioned the dramaturgy and logic behind his open system.



Eifelschatz – 120x100cm, acrylic paint, oil, tape and paper on canvas, series: minus12Grad, 2013

“minus12Grad” (2013)

(12degreesBelowZero)

Works of the gloomy series “minus12Grad” fill the spacious basement. Some others – including the “Personal Jesus” mentioned above – are exhibited in the stairwell and the basement corridors. They are atmospheric scenarios, most of them showing only one figure painted realistically. The title “minus12Grad” marks a temperature which is clearly associated with the image of Christ as a tormented creature, just as the other figures obviously not living in the Land of Smiles, being extremely sad, with grotesque faces and expressions of agony. It is a depressing mixture of violence, isolation, monotony, exhaustion and decay; not even the garden gnome and the caravan breathe any chance of escaping for better. Thomas Bauer did not intend for an explicit explanation or set interpretation of his works – as with most of his oeuvre, they are open to association and contemplation. All these figures marked by life are

combined with a nearly contaminated environment. An overload of painted, graphic, abstract and informal layers, graffiti-like sprayed linear forms of lacquer, scratched colour surfaces, overpaintings and profane applications of various material evokes a feeling of utter chaos. Bauer integrates old newspapers, plastic foil with typography, recycled bubble packs, duct tape of various colours, gaffer tape, fragments of cartons and scraps of paper. Even the colourful tapes are part of his cleverly devised “Gesamtkunstwerk” – the synthesis of his art – working as a complex system of guiding lines accentuating contrary directions beyond the limit of the canvas. Thomas Bauer stresses that idea in his exhibition “Bleib mir vom Leib” by arranging his paintings as a 360-degree spatial experience and spontaneously filling the spaces between the canvasses with newspapers and plastic foil, sticking them to the wall and spraying them, decorating them further in one way or the other, adding crumpled paper as plastic ornaments to the corners and marking opposing directions with masking paper.



series: unverträglich, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat

“unverträglich” (2014)

(irreconcilable)

A completely different impression is conveyed in the series “unverträglich” of 2014, exhibited in the medium-sized basement room. In contrast to the dark series “minus12Grad” and due to the white canvas background shared by all the paintings, it literally comes to light as a bright and rather harmonious sequence. On ostensibly immaterial surfaces, red, turquoise and black lines sketching the fragmented shapes of the figures meet. Thomas Bauer explains the series and its title:

“Competing layers of lines turn into movement; physical shapes are filleted and merge with the surface. The pictorial means are reduced to the interaction of two colours, coal and the translucent white of the canvas. As a consequence, the stark contrast creating a high level of graphic abstraction opens various ways of

interpreting the scenarios presented. The expressiveness of my works is a result of quick painting, which contrasts the organically imperfect shapes with the clinical white of the canvas. The figurative elements remain cumbersome – they evade anatomical detail and explicitness. They remain irreconcilable.”

The lucid impression of the highly homogeneous sequence – considering content, form and colour – is deliberately turned into a new direction by the artist's spatial installation, adding new facets to both the series' title “unverträglich” and the exhibition's title “Bleib mir vom Leib”. In the middle of the room, he has placed the naked torso of a doll on a garbage bag rack. Somewhere on the floor, the doll's arm indicates that somebody did not follow the dictum “Bleib mir vom Leib”. In combination with the glaring neon lights, the room is radiant, the paintings on the walls appearing like anatomical wall charts or radiographs. This creates an atmosphere of sterility, reminding one of a surgery room or an abortion clinic, organ trafficking or the laboratory of Dr. Frankenstein.



series: Zeichen und Wunder, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat

“Zeichen und Wunder” (2015)

(Signs and Wonders)

Thomas Bauer's current series is called “Zeichen und Wunder” and a selection can be seen in the big gallery on the basement floor. The title is based on the fact that objects such as a traffic sign, a flower pot, a human set of teeth, a pig labelled with the butchery trade's classification or – taken from Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* – the Widow Bolte's chicken, insidiously entangled and doomed to death, are depicted but yet – with the exception of another pot plant – not in a plastic, three-dimensional way but rather as symbolic and schematic sketches reminiscent of those found in schoolbooks. These are then combined with informal colours, geometric zigzag lines and grid-like structures finding their precursors in constructivism and op-art.

According to Thomas Bauer, who admits to have an aversion towards an exaggerated (mis-)understanding of order, this series is about order and disorder or order vs. chaos, respectively. Thus, the geometrically well-structured order of a painted QR code is disrupted by haphazardly drawn pencil strokes and numbers. This series' subjects are actually irrelevant. Representational figures are in no way more important than the paintings' abstract elements, as the artist aims at their relationship and the tension between both. He has turned the single images into one huge installation filling the room. Paintings with similar patterns and substance melt into a stage-like complex scene. Even traces of *Arte Povera* can be found here: an “emergency exit” sign and another sign indicating the location of a fire extinguisher, a small kilim and an artificial ficus, tape, a dash of white confetti and the old chair found in the workshop of the *Bochumer Kulturrat* – of utmost importance for the artist to rest and contemplate in the single rooms while conceptualizing his art.

Not least of all, the aesthetics of the disconcertingly blurred edges of paintings and textiles remind one of the camouflage of World War I battleships. To protect the British merchant fleet from German submarine attacks, the painter Norman Wilkinson (1878–1971) had the idea of making the ships nearly invisible and thus confusing the enemy. By using different designs of various colours, haphazardly or geometrically drawn, often with zebra-like patterns, their shapes were blurred and broken like in an optical illusion. The British Admiralty Board embraced the artist's idea, made him head of a special naval camouflage unit which was set up in the Royal Academy of Arts' basement atelier and passed a bill to have all merchant ships, as well as those battleships, especially exposed in this way. Until the end of the war, about 4400 ships of the Royal Navy were given that camouflage paint. Consequently, Wilkinson, as the

inventor of “dazzle camouflage,” “dazzle painting” or “razzle dazzle” (mind the puns in here), went down in the history of art. Statistically speaking, even if there is no proof of advantage in applying these artistic ideas to warfare, it certainly did no harm either.



series: Bleifrei, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat

For the *Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat*, with a strong artistic imagination and a never-ending joy of experimentation, Thomas Bauer has created a multi-faceted, again and again surprising and delightfully invigorating exhibition in the truest sense of “Gesamtkunstwerk”. Among his unconventional works, there is also the series “Backstage” (2014) with framed paintings in the cabinet of the ground floor, which does not present their actual front views but their incidentally created rear sides with soaked paint, wipe-offs and other stains. And when an artist paints red bubbles and places many red balloons under that very painting, we can call this a visual poetry

arisen from a childlike joy in play and creation. In Bauer's oeuvre, improvised nonsense and sensual quality are fully reconcilable. Due to his roguish sense of humour and his quick-wittedness, setting up an exhibition with him is highly amusing. Any moment can be one of astonishment. If you get the idea of asking him whether you are currently talking about an *objet trouvé*, a *ready-made*, an *assemblage* or an *environment*, be prepared to get an answer like, "Nope, that's some rubbish I found in the DIY superstore." That being said, enjoy the show!

Translation: Marc Drosson



series: Zeichen und Wunder, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat



series: Invasion, installation view, Kunstverein Bochumer Kulturrat