

THE SAVANNAH OF THE FAIRSCAPE.
MICHAEL KREBBER'S CHEETAH PICTURES
BY HELMUT DRAXLER

A Double(d) Truth

It's the done thing these days to despise artists who produce specially for art fairs. They seem to be oriented exclusively toward market requirements, consequently their works no longer appear in the context of gallery exhibitions at all but hang for a short while at fair stands in Basel, Cologne, London, Miami, Athens, Berlin, New York or wherever, and finally vanish into private collections. Every last vestige of a claim to publicity seems to have been abandoned and the cycle of exhibition, gossip, discussion, critique and finally sale interrupted once and for all. Not even a semblance of autonomy is preserved when art is treated as a commodity and nothing else.

Michael Krebber is such an artist who produces willingly for art fairs. On the one hand this is because he feels the need to be pressurized to do anything at all. That has to do with the rhetoric of failure and defeat for which his work in the meantime has become all but proverbial. On the other hand, it is so as to address the specific site. Art fairs may be awful events, and yet they are also extremely interesting. As pure market-places there is something simultaneously pre- and post-modern about them. The complex reciprocity of institutional and market-based "selection" typical of classical modernism is to a large extent absent today. Either institutions buy up collections unexamined or they keep their distance entirely. Consequently, the market is either experienced as total or as meaningless. Conversely, its exact role in the hegemonic logic of globalisation remains unclear.

I saw the cheetah pictures at the Art Forum Berlin last autumn and was instantly taken by them. Their colonial wares appeal and cosy promise of petit bourgeois satisfactions fascinated me. Krebber simply took a pillow and a duvet cover, spanning them on suitably large stretchers, and applied larger areas of white paint. The motif, for the most part two-dimensional, on a dark ground, is a female cheetah seated upright and three cubs. Krebber might just as well have painted himself. Important, however, is that we are dealing here with ready-mades as painting and/or the interrelations between ready-mades and painting. Not only are the cheetahs' black spots relatable to the white areas of Krebber's painting. It is as if the adult cheetah actually gazed out of the picture at Krebber's painting. Its gaze, however, roams at large, in this case out over the fairscape savannah. How inane, it seems to be thinking. At least there's no immediate threat of a collector considering it as prey. Over a sitting-room sofa its gaze would simply be pathetic.

It is the way the cheetah gazes out of the picture that quickly convinced me of the site-specificity of the two pictures. One might, with Claude Gintz, add that they are more site-reflexive than site-specific.¹ Meaning here that the post-conceptual works the term refers to are not just adapted to their venues but cause these to emerge in the first place by shifting them out of the phenomenological latency of imagi-

nary existence into the manifest light of critical perceptibility. What can this mean for an art fair? Typical here is the unconcealed and the all-too-obvious with which art is treated as a commodity. There is no idealizing framework (stands for "new talent" for example) that might raise questions. Nothing but the truth, no appearances to be unveiled. Just what sort of an art "mirror" must it be in order to reflect "nothing but the truth"? And what advantage might inhere in a straightforward doubling of the truth?

Elements constituting this double(d) truth are, however, nameable: the cheetah's gaze and customers' appraising looks, the material (ready-made) and the signs (spots and areas), the stretchers that are as light and provisional as the partition they hang on. Everything doubled up and conceived in the art fair/quick commodity exchange system, yet different: repetition and difference. An intermediary/inter-media space arises among these elements, and set in relation to that space addresses we can gauge what goes beyond the mere functioning in the art fair context. The most important indicator of what I am claiming for these pictures—namely their being object and reflection, discourse and painting, intervention and allegory, predator and prey in one—is, of course, that they are in no way quick-selling commodities. They make far too little noise for the boorish taste cultivated by so many collectors, such as are wooed by many museums today. They are icons neither of style nor painterly identity, but abstruse concepts and interventions in the mask of the "obsolete" object of painting. Yet how do the pictures do this?

Materials of Painting

Sartre² said painting produced forms, not symbols, and so could not be committed. However easily refutable this proposition is, expressed within it is a fundamental problem: to what extent can forms be symbols? Conversely, do symbols need forms at all? Apart from the narrower sense of the symbol as written character or signpost, in its broader sense, as is known, virtually anything can become a symbol. When the car is parked directly under the third window from the left this is a sign for you not to enter the flat. The symbol's form in this case has no bearing at all on its function.

Now, painting does indeed make symbols from its root elements of form, colour, light, shade, space, surface, appearance and materiality, transparency and opacity. With these symbols it constructs meaning and thus is always already discourse. What makes it painting at all is precisely the attempt to communicate via all its formal properties, i.e. to make these into signs that function not literally as pictorial text but as a modality, a particular form or system of relations among its elements. Crucial here is modality. It is that wherein painting articulates itself. What is at stake is not just a restriction of the range of options, Luhmann's concept of media in other words, but the realization of a set of interrelations. Thus painting itself is precisely that process of abstraction in pictures that was once made out to be the discourse that liberated painting from the figuration in images.

But painting itself can also become a symbol. A privileged symbol for art, for instance, but also quite directly a symbol

indicative of power and prestige—it seems to have acquired features of that mystical aura of power it once *represented*—or a wild card in the culture-critical debates in the art world's more academic quarters. Painting in all these functions is for the most part denied the possibility of critical engagement which, as an obsolete mode of pictorial production, it can no longer fulfil. And yet basically all “media” are obsolete from the very start, above all the newest. Their degree of engagement cannot be measured by their novelty. Just how far though can painting be spoken of as a medium? As a medium in terms of the picture's material properties; of painting as the history of its increasing constitution as a discourse; of the canvas and stretcher, hence the “easel paintings”; also perhaps a concept commensurate with this form of materiality, namely the picture's rectangular space. Ultimately, the very exhibition venue as “white cube” has become a medium, together with all the related debates surrounding the social site of art. Hence, painting cannot simply be “specific” in respect of its media character in the Modernist sense, because it produces and integrates different media. No. What is at stake here are the ways in which internal and external significance, modality and media character, can be brought into relation, and, of course, what at all is to be negotiated and claimed as art.

Krebber's pictures stand in the tradition of so-called fabric paintings as continuously produced above all by Sigmar Polke since the mid-Sixties. Polke's fabric paintings negotiate painting's relations to the textile, for instance everyday sitting-room kitsch as in the well-known flamingo motifs. For all their irony they remain masterly painting. Fabric and painting technique are synthetically and immediately related to each other. Rosemarie Trockel and Cosima von Bonin have not only added a “feminine” aspect to the fabric pictures by working with materials, and thus activated such conventional assignments, they have also reinterpreted the fabric/painting relation with a view to the object-like, at times sculptural side the manifestation. Krebber draws on this history, albeit more as an analytic relation between fabric and painting: the two elements remain clearly distinct, their interrelations being more thought than they are immediately visual or material. The materiality of pictures in general is being addressed here. For of course every canvas is also a material. Seen thus, most pictures are “fabric pictures.” “Material” is an altogether polysemic word. The “materials of world literature” for instance refers to the complex motifs, in other words to the thematic level in texts. The “materials of painting” by way of analogy might indicate how painting's internal and external sign-functions, modality and media character, and finally its functions as symbolic and strategic model³ interrelate.

Bed-linen and the cheetah's maternal vigilance are both “material.” The cuddliness of bed-linen and the animal-family kitsch converge at best as a symbolic model of painting. For though the pictures are not “painting,” they live entirely within the discursive figure of painting, integrating the ready-made as a motif and the attitude expressed in the applied areas of paint to an allegorical tissue. This in my view can only be interpreted contextually, in direct relation to the art fair, which makes it a strategic model. The kind of allegory generated here is altogether open to speculation. The chee-

tah, as is well known, is the fastest mammal. Who, correspondingly, is the fastest in the art world or the most vigilant at the post-Fordist self-projections funfair? Who is hunting whom? Bargain or masterpiece? And the young and the fit are up and coming. Is what is involved here nature's brutal logic of competition, refracted by an ironic temperament?

When the business weekly *Wirtschaftswoche* writes that artists personify capitalism and that industrialists could learn from them how to sell themselves,⁴ what is at stake is hinted at. After the crash of the electronics market, bio-political entrepreneurship buys itself into the art market, continuing to invest in nomad-ology and swirling identity concepts. But the cheetah pictures don't swirl. They establish modules that neither dissolve identity nor promote it. Enigmatic symbols, they address a possible stance vis-à-vis pure reality, and at the same time provide models of readability which, ultimately, turn upon the relation of how and what, of the means and ends of aesthetic economies. Nor will Krebber do as an exemplary painting star. In working himself out on models he has created a different production mode—that of appropriation, reinterpretation and differentiation. The pictures enable him to play along and participate as a condition of preserving distance, facilitating a kind of market-gear originality, as Walter Benjamin termed it, wherein the difference to market logic first becomes visible.

- 1 Claude Gintz, *From Site Specificity to Site Reflexiveness*, in: John Knight, *Une Vue Culturelle*, Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, Exhibition Catalogue, Saint-Etienne, 1988, unpaginated.
- 2 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is literature?*, Methuen, London, 1967.
- 3 In *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, pp. 250, Yve-Alain Bois distinguishes between four models of painting: the perceptive, the technical, the symbolic and the strategic, whereby the symbolic is in large part constituted by the perceptive and the technical.
- 4 *Wirtschaftswoche*, No. 25, May 2004.

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Shelve by
artist: K

MICHAEL KREBBER