

Soft Fences

For his exhibition at the Secession in Vienna, Michael Krebber has ordered eight frames. At the time of writing, it is not yet clear what, if anything, there will be to see in these frames, or on the canvases stretched on them. Of course, there is always something to see, even if the canvases are empty, even if the frames are bare. At least there's that. It sounds very conceptual, but in this case it is not. Or not in the sense that we usually understand the term "conceptual," i.e., as an arrangement of elements based on an idea or intention, which can therefore not be deciphered solely by means of sensory perception. Here, the point is precisely the absence or postponement of such an idea: the idea is only revealed and activated under the pressure of events, and in a certain sense it actually *is* this pressure of events itself: the cultural and social form of the exhibition, of the catalogue, of the opening. I do not want to argue the case for any metaphysics of the „Formgelegenheit“ or context of appearance. This „is“ remains open, referring to the moment of the event, and is not to be understood in an essentialist way. It is merely meant to point out that instead of simply working *within* the system of exhibition, catalogue, and opening, Krebber works *with* it; but that at the same time, it is not a matter of showing or making transparent the conditions of exhibiting as such. Instead, the conditions of exhibiting are an occasion to create oneself as a subject, author, and artist: becoming a subject, author, or artist under the pressure of events, just for a moment, not as a profession, before disappearing again, at least partially. There seems to be no constant, continually evolving substance that could create a direct link between the inner and the outer beings, between that which belongs to the world of art and the lived world, between authorship and images, objects, or texts. Everything remains on the level of a first draft, including constant shifts and systematic misjudgments. But this is precisely what ensures that Krebber's subjectivity and authorship remain as visible forms of productive identity building, rather than as forms needing to be unmasked.

But how can the „Formgelegenheit“ be articulated as form; how can the frame be named and acknowledged only as a frame; how can signs be both presented and left undetermined? It certainly helps to conceive of aesthetic boundaries as malleable, flexible markings that suggest transitions, opening spaces up more than closing them in, as a way of rendering relationships or forms of relatedness imaginable. In other words: „soft fences“. ¹ They allow structure not only to define, but also to become manifest; they allow phenomena to be not only experienced, but also related; and they allow conventions and audacities to be exchanged. Instead of breaking down borders, it is a matter of using them in a different form than in the traditional machinery of money and desire.

In all of Krebber's works, attention is focused on forms of symbolic interrelatedness; on how figure and ground, form and format, surface and space, color and object, frame and wall, object and installation, light and place, material

and reference, title and context, original and found material can be related to one another. Instead of a unique break between form and content, whose resolution constitutes the classical idea of a „work,“ it is about circulating chains of reference, similar to those outlined by Bruno Latour in his theory of science. ² Aesthetic boundaries such as frame, space, or institution, then, do not mark a „break“ beyond which lies a reality of whatever kind; instead, they function as distances within these chains, thus performing the „translation“ of one category into the other. This also explains the mediated quality of the work, the mutual dependency of symbols, objects, and contexts.

One time, as in the exhibition hosted by Maureen Paley (Interim Art, London, 2001), it was the fundamental elements of figurative painting that were presented in a series of pictures. Lines became legible as faces, patches of color as heads or hair, simple constellations of signs as letters or shoes. But this legibility was deceptive; the focus was not on the „magic“ that allows painting to transform banal forms into sublime visions, but on a pausing or suspending of the designating process itself. Always on the fine line between form and formlessness, or between various possibilities for what is supposed to be recognized as form, Krebber made the signs vibrate, so to speak, in their indeterminacy, in turn revealing the conventionality to which any painterly mark is indebted. Some of these were quotations from pictures by Albert Oehlen or Martin Kippenberger, but very painterly and focusing with great subtlety on the relations between figure and ground, format, surface or color. Palermo comes to mind, figuratively. Then, in the first show at Greene Naftali (New York, 2002), woolen blankets printed with horse motifs were mounted on the stretchers and hung alongside grid-like wallpaper patterns in the same format. Here, the pictures, slightly larger this time, were simply lined up side by side, but with small gaps in between. The next show at the same gallery (in 2003) showed this mix of original and found material interlocking in the form of overpaintings. This time, they were leant against the wall, and over the top right-hand corner of each, Krebber laid the poster for the exhibition, whose motif, an advertisement, was also overpainted. A real challenge for any collector. What happens if the picture is hung on a wall or the poster removed? Do such interventions destroy the „work“ or bring out the best in it? Are these additions part of the work or do they articulate something different, something unrelated to the work, demanding different treatment? Is it acceptable to hang a picture by Baselitz on its head, i.e., with the motif the „right“ way up, if one is the owner? Where does the participative potential of ownership lie, and where does sacrilege begin? And finally, at Christian Nagel's gallery in Berlin (2003), there were no pictures at all, only wallpaper patterns, airmail stickers, newspaper cuttings with scientific illustrations of organic structures, and the Justus Köhncke LP/CD covers designed by Krebber. There were invitations featuring a Productivist motif and a critical text on the state of the music industry, and a handsome poster consisting of circles cut out of brightly colored paper.

This genealogy of exhibitions is in no way meant to suggest the idea of a dissolving or overcoming of painting. At most,

it can be read as a sign that Krebber orients the spectrum of his work more against than towards current trends: choosing to focus more on questions of painting during the heyday of institutional critique was fine, but only a fool would act like a “triumphant” star painter³ today.

What these exhibitions demonstrate is not the abolition of painterly representation. Instead they are about its integration into chains of reference between forms and symbols, between elements of everyday or pop culture, and between the cultural formations of the institutional exhibition business itself. “Art must hang”⁴—or maybe not? The installation of the objects and the photo of the installation in the catalogue, the painting and the poster, the found object and the catalogue as object (in terms of both material and design)—a wide range of links are always established, but without being necessarily understood as unique “Baselitz-like” artistic decisions in the sense of saying “like this and no other way.” The idea is to render this work of making links itself visible: like an “attitude” toward the objects and institutional conditions. Conversely, this enables the cultural formats and the social conventions expressed in them to not merely act as structuring functions and bearers of meaning, but to actually appear. But only as an option, thus rendering concrete the contingency of any given individual decision. Because in the end, everything could be quite different. Although this is not the case, as the decisions taken are anything but purely random, the very fact of opening up a horizon of possibility implies a refusal of the ideology of adopting an artistic position, according to which even the most discreet gesture and the most marginal trace of artistic work must take on the marketable form of a corporate identity. Which is why Krebber’s frames are never only frames, his surfaces never only surfaces, his symbols never only symbols. For such unambiguity is always a cover for the Minimalist-Modernist misunderstanding of literalness, the idea that something such as the identity of an object, ultimately the ontological explanation of an artwork, could, actually, exist.⁵ But: What you see is never what you see. It is always something slightly different. For all the directness of the materials that Krebber shows in his exhibitions, the work aims at escaping from literalness. Postponement is his methodical principle. It is about the literalness of the reference, about the phenomenology of intertextuality, about the sensuousness of concepts and the freedoms of convention. It is about the *post studio practice* of a *studio artist*.

Style Fear

Within bourgeois aesthetics, this kind of mediation is the meaning of taste: not letting the moral rigor of reason come into direct contact with the diffuse and sensual living world, but installing something akin to a buffer, something to help “refine” the senses and keep morals in check.⁶ Although this program of idealism has been deconstructed many times, there is often talk of the return of the aesthetic—in the sense of an increased appreciation of enjoyment, emotion, and sensuousness⁷ as the specifically aesthetic qualities that can be experienced directly by the body. And also quite definitely with regard to a materialist aesthetics that has yet to be established. However, it is also quite plain to see that Michael Krebber’s works have little to do with this,

although the category of taste and the “formal strength” of a work are important to him. But taste and form are conceived of not in terms of an aesthetic of reception, i.e., oriented towards the audience, but in terms of an aesthetic of production, in the “attitude” of the artist himself to his objects. As a result, Krebber’s thinking often returns to the dandy as the historical figure in whom distance to the bourgeois program of aesthetics became an aesthetic program in its own right. In the dandy, instead of reconciling the conflicts in the modern world concerning class, gender, or nation, aesthetics performs them, stating them in concise and shimmering form. As a gain in distinction to be flaunted in the face of those who gain distinction, the aestheticism of the dandy points to its opposite, not concealing it but making it obvious. Although this by no means overcomes the fractures in society, they do become sufficiently visible so that any identity can only appear as a fluid social construction ultimately based on antagonistic forces, and the transitions and interfaces become the proper territory of these identities.

The taste of the dandy, then, is different to the tasteless taste of the bourgeois public, his aestheticism is something different from aesthetics as a normative, educational program. He displays the anarchic aspects of romantic subjectivism, having more style than the stylish, more taste than the tasteful, more aesthetics than the aesthetes. Affirmation is the program here. In the context of the “return” of pure aesthetics of taste in the commercial art business, the dandy may still be a figure worthy of consideration. But in the face of the ubiquitous spread of style—pop culture’s unbroken neo-liberal will to and desire for style—the situation is different. Here, the focus is on precisely the aspects of one-upmanship and glamour which the dandy wished to embody in singular form.

Krebber’s interest in the dandy, then, is not to be confused with un-ironic dandyism. His strategies of withdrawal, of undercutting, and of venerating other artists are actually quite the opposite of the dandy’s pride. And yet, what does remain is the way the dandy turns against himself: in Krebber, the dandy could be said to meet “the power of negation.”⁸

This type of negation articulates itself not as a single opposition—as the central conflict between bourgeois and radical aesthetics or between art and life—but as a movement within historically distinct “bourgeois” categories: from taste to aestheticism through formalism. In the concept of “form strength,” for instance, it is easy to recognize Clive Bell’s modernist notion of a “significant form.” This was understood in explicitly architectural terms, against the processuality of appearances. This reference, too, can only be understood as a specific negation, formal strength as the negation of architectural and tectonic form. In *Pour la Forme*, Asger Jorn had already employed this approach against a reductive understanding of the Informel. In Krebber’s case, the method is transferred to elements of contingency in the decisions made and the forms of relatedness between signs in the institutional context. As an artist, he wishes to be recognizable neither by the style of his own manner nor by his objects, but solely on the basis

of his attitude to things, which is vague in any case and thus impossible to define in precise terms.

Where taste, aestheticism, and form are concerned, then, it is always a question of fracturing style without arriving at non-style—the idea being for style to show itself in the fracture: *When attitudes become form*, quite literally, in the sense of Harald Szeeman's elegant formulation, which is almost lost in current histories of Conceptualism. This process of becoming form can be understood neither as a purely conceptual arrangement nor as an "experiment" in the metaphorically scientific sense of modernism; it is more of an experimental set-up that positions the elements in such a way as to escape the tautological information death of most signature art. Precisely what is obviously tautological, the frame as the central code of representation, becomes the trigger for engaging with the work. What is portrayed within the frame of a picture is not a tiny excerpt of the world, but a code for a larger context and claim, sometimes for the whole thing. Only those who know and accept this code, i.e., having long since absorbed and internalized it, are capable, for example, of reading a picture by Mondrian: rather than representing the harmony of the world, it expresses the idea of the picture as a representative form that is expected to be capable of transporting such a claim.

So whatever there is to be seen inside the eight frames at the Secession, it will be about this representative form, about the picture as a constitutive medium of the art business. From this perspective, the debates for and against painting become legible as symptoms of the extent to which the art world clings to this central medium, even after 100 years of film, 50 years of digitization, and the repeated "abolition" of painting by the avant-garde. Even (especially) the categorical negation of the "end of painting" shows its importance. But a more specific negation makes it possible to work with this medium—either more for or more against it, depending on social situation and acute needs. The titles and arrangements, the approaches to space, catalogue, and documentation take this further still. They focus attention on the way these frames are used as representative forms, thus linking them into social contexts, but usually without naming them explicitly. And sometimes, although not too often, even allowing this not to become a style factor in its own right. For the truly dialectical politics of taste is only revealed in the balance of elements of style. What is visible and what is addressed in terms of concrete content points to the form of the work of linking itself, which is a genuinely aesthetic task. At the same time as situating itself within the art convention, it attempts to mirror the dynamics of the art world as those of a highly differentiated social wish machine. By naming the codes of representation used by this machine, it pushes the artist's own work to the limits of its representability.

- 4 *Kunst muß hängen* was the title of an inaugural speech given by Martin Kippenberger that was performed again by Andrea Fraser. Along these lines: Rainer Metzger, *Buchstäblichkeit. Bild und Kunst in der Moderne*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2003.
- 5 Cf. Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*, 1794.
- 6 For example as "pleasure, emotion, sensation" in Stephan Regan (ed.), *The Politics of Pleasure. Aesthetics and Cultural Theory*, Buckingham, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 4.
- 7 Diedrich Diederichsen, *Die Kraft der Negation*, event at Theater der Welt, Cologne and Volksbühne Berlin, 2002. The text with this title appeared as liner notes for the CD *Die Kraft der Negation* by Zeitkratzer in 2005.

- 1 *Weiche Zäune* (soft fences) is the title of a song by Justus Köhncke, itself borrowed from a work by Cosima von Bonin.
- 2 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, London, UK, 1999, pp. 24–79.
- 3 In the sense of the Saatchis' *Triumph of Painting* show and all the living artists it featured.