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On Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill's Artistic Strategy

Beat Stutzer

With the radical break between the worldview of the Enlightenment and Romanticism which followed, the universal coherence was lost, and with it the concept of classical unity. The drastic overthrow of this paradigm allowed the abysmal, the infinite, and the utopian – towards which the individual reacts with feeling and sentiment - to take the place of the ideal cosmic landscape. The loss of classical unity resulted in a 'piecemeal aesthetics'¹. The fragmented view of the world led art 'into the forecourt of "modernism"'².

The artist duo Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill decidedly also work with fragments, or 'Denksteinen' (Clemens Brentano). A single, tall-stemmed tree, a ski-lift chair, a power mower, a garden fence in the snow, a sign post, or a power saw. With these and other motifs they have developed a simple vocabulary in order to evoke landscape by means of unspectacular 'pictures', and so to quasi insure themselves of certain aspects of landscape. In setting the scene to be photographed or filmed by video, as well as by assembling multiple picture sequences, they insinuate that these items isolated from a broader context are presumed to achieve an intentional effect. In a draft paper the artist duo writes that for them it was primarily the pleasure of making a survey and of creating order. This tendency for control is sought on the one hand by formally confining perception, on the other hand by rigorously isolating the objects.³ The analytical and questioning perception of Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill is understandably focused on their local landscape in the foothills of the Alps. Namely on 'woods, small industrial zones, the distant drone of the motorway, enclosed fruit and wine growing areas, agricultural machinery standing around, cloud-like swarms of starlings, and faint echoes of activities on military training grounds...'⁴.

With their work - which is sometimes ironical and partly dry but always profound - Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill are also concerned with the following question and difficulty. At the beginning of the 21st century, how can landscape be mastered artistically in its changeable

appearance and its constant transformation, but also in its subjectively shaped perception? What can actually still be reclaimed of the landscape image before a background of an incredibly long and diverse tradition, in which everything seems to have been said? Last but not least by taking into account ethical, economical and other aspects.

With such complex questions Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill seize on one of the oldest problems altogether in European culture: The concept and the understanding of nature and landscape. Nature was lost to man early on through civilisation and then even more drastically through industrialisation. No wonder that nature was approached with animosity and distrust and that Denis Diderot, as early as 1767, was able to argue that 'landscape paintings were hung on the walls of salons by city dwellers as compensation for the loss of nature'⁵. Thus, ever since Romanticism, nature was henceforth and increasingly changed into landscape in such a way that it was imagined with nostalgic longing for what was lost, and seen not only as bewilderment but also as something that could offer consolation.⁶ When Jakob Burckhardt 1845 named the genre of landscape painting the most progressive of all, he could not yet have anticipated, how this genre would soon react to the fundamental changes in the experience of nature and landscape with a radical and new perception of the picture. Gottfried Boehm has shown, 'how the slow demise of landscape painting infiltrates' a totally new picture of nature and how this 'under modern pictorial requirements became meaningful in a completely different way', whereby this was always concerned with 'a tension between the feasible and the veritable'.⁷ The cataclysmic new perception of landscape is represented in Claude Monet's innovative picture concept. Impressionism gave 'the picture the character of an *apparition*', because he 'did not see the factual in nature but the agent: the light, its density and transparency, in which things dissolve, colour without form value, which – in many layers – accomplishes the appearance of nature'.⁸ Monet cleared the way for the autonomous picture of landscape, which moved away more and more from mimesis in such a way that modern art eventually brought forth pure equivalents to nature. 'The open process of nature becomes an image of nature without the scheme of landscape and without being its copy'.⁹ The rapid development of avant-garde art, which always included dealing with landscape as well, at its end finally made an abrupt turn-about. In the second half of the 1960s, the 'earth' or 'land-art' artists decidedly turned away from landscape as part of civilisation, and consciously chose remote, untouched regions such as the Mojave desert, the Sahara, the dry flats in the USA or the high mountain ranges. Here again the yearning for the primordial rooted in Romanticism and the existential fear of loneliness

manifested itself, although under different artistic assumptions, by once more bringing up the theme of boundlessness, as manifested in the infiniteness of oceans, deserts, and high mountains.¹⁰

In postmodernist times as well, landscape is still about finding a pictorial equivalent for increasingly complex experiences. Despite the rejection of dogmas and the discarding of assorted labels, and despite the resulting casual attitude toward pictorial traditions, Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill dare to reach out. In the draft paper mentioned they declare their great preference for a sentence by the archaeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, which has become a favourite quotation: 'noble artlessness and quiet greatness'¹¹. This quote which alludes to Greek antiquity, however, is applied by the artist duo to an artistic activity which is concerned with unequivocal clarity. To be sure Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill carry out their dictum with a twinkle in their eyes and with full awareness, that the apparent obligation can only too easily and quickly change into its opposite in the eyes of the viewer and by a shift in context. Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill are quite familiar with this type of 'openness' in a work of art, and they accomplish it by a pictorial strategy of integrating or simply permitting the ambiguity of signs¹² to add to the possible effect of their work.

(Translated from German by Jane Gillespie-Casparis)

¹ 'Bruchstückästhetik', see Werner Hofmann, *Die gespaltene Moderne. Aufsätze zur Kunst*, München 2004.

² 'in den Vorhof der "Moderne"' Werner Hofmann, 'Die Romantik – eine Erfindung?', in exhibition catalogue *Caspar David Friedrich. Die Erfindung der Romantik*, Museum Folkwang Essen, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hirmer Verlag, München 2006, p. 31.

³ Gabriela Gerber und Lukas Bardill, *Kontrollierte Landschaftsbilder*, typescript, March 2006.

⁴ 'Wald, kleine Gewerbeazonen, das entfernte Rauschen der Autobahn, umfriedete Obst- und Weinbauflächen, herumstehende Landwirtschaftsgeräte, wolkenartige Starenschwärme, und schwacher Widerhall vom Treiben hinten auf dem Waffenplatz... Ibid.

⁵ 'Landschaftsbilder würden von den Städtern zur Kompensation des Naturverlustes an die Wände der Salons gehängt'. Oskar Bätschmann, *Entfernung der Natur. Landschaftsmalerei 1750-1920*, DuMont Buchverlag, Köln 1989, p. 8.

⁶ See Simon Schama, *Der Traum von der Wildnis. Natur als Imagination*, Kindler, München 1996.

⁷ 'wie das langsame Ende der Landschaftsmalerei einmündete' ... 'unter modernen Bildbedingungen auf eine ganz andere Weise bedeutsam' ... 'eine Spannung zwischen dem Möglichen und dem Wirklichen', Gottfried Boehm, *Das neue Bild der Natur. Nach dem Ende der Landschaftsmalerei*, in: 'Landschaft', ed. by Manfred Smuda, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 108.

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⁸ 'dem Bild den Charakter einer *Erscheinung*', ... 'in der Natur nicht das Faktische, sondern das Wirkende [sah]: das Licht, seine Dichte und Transparenz, in dem sich die Dinge lösen, die Farbe ohne Formwert, die – vielfach überlagert – die Erscheinung der Natur bewerkstelligt'. Ibid, p. 90

⁹ 'Der offene Prozess der Natur wird Bild der Natur ohne das Schema der Landschaft und ohne Abbildlichkeit.' Ibid, p. 104

¹⁰ See Beat Stutzer, *Alpenblicke: Zwischen Romantik, Pathos und Sentimentalität*, in: 'Der romantische Blick. Das Bild der Alpen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert', Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur 2001, pp. 13-26.

¹¹ 'Edle Einfalt und stille Grösse', Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*. Dresden 1755; zit. nach Wolfgang Ulrich, *Was war Kunst? Biografien eines Begriffes*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2005, p. 55.

¹² See Roland Barthes, *Das Reich der Zeichen*, transl. from the French by Michael Bischoff, Verlag Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1981.