

## A save and unsold world

Claudia Emmert 2011

### The Still Life

*Two black long sleeved gloves make delving into the glass case seem possible: a hammer is lying inside. It could be used to crush glittering glass diamonds, some are already in shards. An option or a provocation?*

*Regardless of what viewers confronted with the object *The Longing* decide to do, in Eckart Hahn's pictures everything has always happened already: fires have been set, bags of paint have been thrown and objects have been covered with plastic bags. The pictures minutely record the outcome of these onslaughts. Not a single detail is missing, and everything is documented with the utmost clarity and precision. The place of action is a stage-like, empty room. It serves as the setting of a crime scene which has become frozen in a still life and relieved of any causal analysis and also of all temporality. Above all, these pictures emphasise the aspect of vanitas and transience – of all good, but also of all bad things.*

*Eckart Hahn's works follow the still life tradition. This genre is dedicated to so-called inanimate nature. It uses the sensual luxuriance of textures, surfaces, colours and shapes to repeatedly celebrate their transience. These pictures are determined by the insight that even the greatest material wealth is no protection against all-encompassing mortality. For this reason, 17th century painters represented the first signs of decay and rot on plump blossoms and ripe fruit with relish. The obsessive examination of the material nature of things was inevitably linked to the incisive scrutiny of their unavoidable ruin.*

*The composition of Eckart Hahn's pictures almost resembles a collage. With great attention to detail and zealous perfection, he combines the representation of different materials, colour nuances and surfaces. In these works deterioration is not a gradual process but forges ahead explosively. The bunch of flowers on the picture with the title *Bouquet* has long since turned into a black cloud of smoke, and in the painting with the title *Beauty* the promise of beauty was the first thing to explode. A reason to mourn? Probably, but that is not everything. After all, the carefully staged harmony in these pictures points to a possible reassessment of the new situation. Over the past two years, Hahn has increased his use of vibrant colours in order to emphasise this harmony.*

*Is something that must undoubtedly be seen as negative at the outset necessarily negative in conclusion? Of course, the rising pillars of smoke and fire in *Beauty* are initially reminiscent of terror and destruction. However, closer examination also shows that the white receptacles from which the fire and black smoke are escaping are completely intact. During our conversation about this work, one of the sources of inspiration that Hahn mentioned was the second book of Moses, according to which God led his people out of Egypt by appearing as a pillar of cloud during the day and as a pillar of fire at night. Consequently, the explosions themselves acquire a substantial status which includes all facets of life, both beauty and destruction, and both life and death.*

### The Still life and Symbolism

*In Baroque still lifes, all motifs contain further allusions. Apart from their ordinary meaning, they also have an allegorical and religious significance. "Still lifes featuring fruit such as grapes, pears and apples conveyed positive references to the blood of Christ, the sweet incarnation of Christ and Christ's love of the church", the art historian Norbert Schneider wrote. (Norbert Schneider: *Stilleben. Realität und die Symbolik der Dinge. Die Stillebenmalerei der frühen Neuzeit*, Cologne 1989, p. 17).*

At first glance, motifs of this kind in Eckart Hahn's work seem to have a completely different meaning: his fruit is pitch-black. In analogy to the markings at a crime scene, he placed a sign with the number five next to this ensemble. Apart from giving the picture its dispassionate title, this sign also refers to the number of pieces of fruit which are depicted. In Christian iconography, to which Eckart Hahn's work repeatedly alludes, the number five refers to Christ's stigmata: two on his feet, two on his hands and one in his side. When considering the depicted fruit – two bananas, two pears and an apple

– it becomes evident that Eckart Hahn is juxtaposing the fruit still life and its implication of salvation with the iconography of a crime scene: the still life has become evidence in an investigation file. And yet: although the fruit in the picture is black, the shapes are intact, and the surfaces are smooth and shiny. In traditional still life painting, not only objects but also animals have a lot of symbolic significance. The contrast between good and evil, for example, is expressed in the representation of canaries and mice. A mouse also features in Eckart Hahn's work *Kanari*, albeit only at the bottom of the painting. However, in front of a radiant blue backdrop, a big yellow canary perches on the mouse's back in a state of amicable harmony. In analogy to the parrot, the canary can be interpreted as a bird of paradise. However, the picture is even more complicated: the canary, which is actually the epitome of a sweet aviary dweller, also appears as a griffin due to its dimensions which stretch beyond the picture's boundaries. Perhaps it will claim the mouse as its prey. This leads to the reversal of all distinguishing interpretations.

*Zwei Vögel (Two Birds)* is the title of another work. In front of a red curtain a vulture picks at a dead pigeon while perched on a table which seems to date from the age of Historicism. There is no fraternisation here. Evil in the shape of the vulture has killed the dove, the symbol of peace. And yet: the scene's ceremonial setting seems like an anachronism. Are we to distance ourselves from old symbols and traditional evaluation criteria? Do bad and good, and black and white still matter today? At any rate, the blandly descriptive title of the work challenges all judgemental interpretations of the portrayal. In *Scarecrow* the symbol of crucified Christ is transferred to the figure of a scarecrow with a corona radiating from its black plastic bag head. To the left and the right, a falcon and a rooster sit on the figure's outstretched arms. An ironic comment: in the same way that Christ conquered death, the birds seem to have averted the threat of the scarecrow on a secular level. The picture's radiant colours and also the prominent letters

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### The Still life and the image of Society

In his analysis of historical still life painting, Norbert Schneider shows that these pictures not only give certain insights into the times in which they were made but also reveal what was important to their commissioners. In his art, Eckart Hahn also creates images of social ideals connected to family, home, children, kitchen and church. However, the cross in *Herrgottswinkel* (God's corner) burnt down long ago. In its charred state it hangs on a soot-blackened wall – as if it had been exposed to the force of a flamethrower.

The housewife in *Hausfrau* leaves the blazing house while her bourgeois little family barely manages to survive in these badly damaged conditions. While the black cook in *Schwarze Köchin* burns herself

*with her own cooking, in Meal thick juice drips onto the table from mushrooms hanging from the ceiling. Is the world forever getting worse? Our world is becoming more and more virtual. We claim to love nature while increasingly distancing ourselves from it in our daily lives. We are surrounded by synthetic materials. Once they have been produced, it is impossible to turn these materials back into an organic state. Nonetheless or maybe for that very reason, they are omnipresent. Can plastic function as a new indicator of contemporary identity?*

*In Hahn's pictures, gorillas, which symbolise archaism, strength and power, are either partly or completely made of plastic bags. Cats sit on plastic foil thrones and nightingales sing in scrawny plastic trees. Have animality and artificiality merged in a new kind of naturalness? At any rate, these works all deal with the human yearning for a clearly outlined and explicitly classifiable world which is cosy, pretty, honest and good. But how to do justice to this wish nowadays? How can this desire be satisfied without self-deception or an idealisation of the past?*

*The artist's answer is: by means of affirmation. By accepting artificiality and alienation, and fragility and transience. By elevating that which initially seems disparaging, by reconciling artificiality with animal nature*

*in disconcerting beauty and fractured dignity. Eckart*

*Hahn places his animals, which consist either partly or completely of plastic bags, on stages or on plastic foil mountains. He created a melancholy monument in honour of Ham, the famous monkey that was the first animal to be catapulted into outer space and that came back alive. Christmas trees grow out of blue rubbish bags and mountain ranges evolve from crumpled paper. But that is not all. The assault on artificial naturalness can be reinterpreted in a positive way, and white dripping paint can be defined as snow. An unsettling new iconography evolves in these works which turn the disorientated human quest for paradise into an aesthetic principle. In a world in which values have become brittle and which is defined by the fundamental realisation that suffering cannot be avoided, there is no pressure to decide – and consequently, no need for evaluation. The quest for likely causes is ignored, as it is no longer important.*

*Yearning and despair do not stand in contrast to reconciliation and acceptance. Melancholy retrospection*

*is instantly succeeded by the curiosity to know what lies ahead. The destruction of old symbols leads to the creation of new tokens for new times.*

## The Still life and humour

*The trompe-l'oeil effect is an integral part of still life painting and already gained popularity in antiquity. Motifs were depicted in such a convincing way that they fooled viewers who would try to draw aside painted curtains and to shoo away flies from paintings. Pliny the Elder mentioned the painter Zeuxis who was able to portray grapes in such a realistic way that even birds were fooled and tried to pick at the fruit. It was said of Lucas Cranach the Elder that his representations of stags were so naturalistic that even dogs would bark at them.*

*Still life painting was intended to admonish, instruct and edify but also to entertain. No other genre provided artists with so many possibilities for humorous representations – not only by means of the trompe-l'oeil effect. First and foremost, this kind of humour is based on an acceptance of the realities of the world, its imperfections, and above all, its transience.*

*Once again, there are parallels to Eckart Hahn's pictures and objects in which affirmative messages are often expressed by means of humorous motifs. In Feuerreiter, for instance, a paper "fire rider" jumps over matches. In another work, a pink plastic flamingo cools its broken legs in a yellow plastic bucket, and in Rex a black poodle, which answers to this name, tries to keep its balance on a giant violet mushroom. Eckart Hahn enthusiastically assembles different motifs, proportions and materials in vivid collages. Feathers and fur are combined with plastic or paper, fire with cardboard, wood with wax, liquids with solids, soft with hard things, humour with melancholy, and life with death.*

*These allusive works have a surreal effect. Their curious pictorial narrations are reminiscent of RenŽ Magritte's art. Like Magritte, Eckart Hahn also has an intellectual approach in his works. "Although he (...) does not paint dreams, he makes use of the dream mechanisms of transformation and combination. It is not his intention to invent something fantastic and implausible but rather to*

search for a visual articulation of that which has so far been unsaid in works that appeal to the unconscious to some extent but chiefly address the mind, and are basically more inclined to be problematical than harmonious." [1] This analysis of René Magritte's work by the cultural studies expert Uwe M. Schneede could also apply to Eckart Hahn's work.

Consequently it is not surprising that René Magritte's statement "I live in a very unpleasant world, and my work is intended as a counterattack" could also be attributed to Eckart Hahn. [2] After all, his pictures clearly lack any prettily arranged modern promises of salvation. Eckart Hahn turns pictures into crime scenes. A new world aggressively breaks ground – by means of assaults, littering or domestication. Very much in accordance with Magritte's approach, these works are counterattacks which are expressed in vivid colours, harmonious compositions and the most subtle realism, and unexpectedly touch the nerve of our times with theatrical presentations. They stage the nightmare of disintegrating appearances with fascinating beauty and show, with brutal clarity, that contemporary values and symbols might already be forgotten by tomorrow.

Eckart Hahn creates ephemeral monuments which are often in a state of decay – or are no longer visible.

This is the case in the picture with the title *Vorstellung* (idea) which shows a somewhat rundown storage area with a pedestal on which something previously stood that was monitored by two cameras. However, the object which was to be guarded has long since melted away. Nothing remains apart from a blue splotch of colour which now slowly trickles down the pedestal. However, this work also refers to the concept of an idea as imagination. After all, our contemporary perception of reality is crucially defined by the media. This raises the question of the value of the transmitted information. What is reality? Loosely based on Magritte: the idea of an idea? What remains? A proud and radiantly beautiful swan, for instance, which once featured as a complex-ridden protagonist in a fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen.

Through curtains of black plastic foil and over a red plastic mountain it majestically strides onto the stage almost as though a red carpet had been rolled out for it. Everything is in a state of flux, and ugliness might be transformed into beauty. A dubious comfort which Heiner Mülller once expressed as follows: (...) reality

must be made visible/ so that it can be changed / but reality must be changed / so that it can be made visible / and beauty means / a possible end to the horror."