

MARCO HOMPES  
BETWEEN TWO STOOLS  
2017

In his *Curiosités Esthétiques* (Aesthetic curiosities) of 1868, Charles Baudelaire formulated a sentence which serves as an example for the general appreciation of art at that time: "Je me suis contenté de sentir".

To merely feel or to be content with the ephemeral notion of feeling is the romantic dream of an entirely pure appreciation of art, which discounts reason and favours emotion as the deciding factor of an aesthetic judgement. Baudelaire was not alone here. This desire for emotional liberty was prevalent at the time, and alongside academic developments in art history, there were a whole plethora of phrases that described moving experiences. Friedrich Theodor Vischer called it 'empathy', for Hegel it was, 'absolute subjectivity'. It came, as the art historian Frank Büttner suggested, to a downright psychological turn.

The results of a so-called personalisation of how we experience art would be fundamental. Ultimately the decision of whether something is art or not would no longer be (only) determined at a political or feudal level but instead be made purely through the power of an image and in its capacity to touch people. This romantic notion is virulent up to this day. In museums, we may occasionally hear that art is a matter of taste and indeed lies in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes museum visitors may exclaim how touched they are by an image in an exhibition; that it has moved or even blown them away. Responses such as these naturally please both the creators and owners as well as the exhibition makers of the works in question – and are difficult to top. What better justification for the relevance of art?

There is no doubt about the fundamental role that Baudelaire and his contemporaries played in influencing the emphasis upon emotional experience. Equally incontestable and indeed welcomed, is when an artwork leads to an emotional response. Despite changing attitudes towards art appreciation – away from the decision makers and towards a personalisation of emotional experience – it is still questionable whether it has become more democratic. In the end, the privilege of interpretation is where it has always been, not in the sole hands of the public, but rather with the art world heavies. In brief: art ought to move us, but please, only if the art world heavies have sanctioned it first. It also helps if the art is informed by and socially critical of current political events.

Eckart Hahn has repeatedly dealt with this duality during his career. Right at the outset, he was told that mastery; desire and emotions did not create an artist. He had applied to study art at two art schools. One of the professors at the time praised him for his work and recommended that he continue exploring this wonderful hobby, of painting. What happened? At the time, figurative painting was entirely unfashionable, and within the aesthetic horizon of the academy's professor, it was no sign

of artistic greatness. The idea of reproducing something so lifelike wouldn't have impressed him in the least. After all, such measures of value were only determined by laypeople, by primary school teachers and –educators, 'He paints really well' is not an adequate argument for the experts. Perhaps that professor didn't imagine that figurative painting could also go beyond the symbolic and inspire political discussions on current issues.

Eckart Hahn can also recall another, yet similar situation: a gallerist found it challenging to categorise Hahn's imagery and issued a rejection. He told him, his art was

too vague and sat 'between two stools'. Without knowing it, the gallerist hit the mark precisely with that comment: Hahn isn't a Realist, nor a Surrealist, no Photorealist, or Verist and no Animal Painter... Placing his paintings and sculptures in well known 'genres' does them no justice, which from the perspective of some commercially oriented gallerists may bring with it some difficulties. He is an oddball and difficult to pigeonhole. And as soon we have a handle on him, he extricates himself from the art historian's stranglehold with an elegant move.

Indeed what is so bad about that? Many of history's great artists have baulked at being categorised. In Hahn's case, it surely plays a role that he has devoted his art to figurative painting. This means that he paints objects from the world of nameable things. We can use language to name these things: black dog, Edeka plastic shopping bag, coffee pot, funny monkey... Such vocabulary makes it simple to describe the compositions of the artist's work. In the 2015 painting *Torch* (p. 169) we see, for example, a profile of a stork's head against a black background. We can see the white feathers, the jet-black eye, and the long neck's curvature. It's only the beak that we don't see because it's wrapped in a red rope; nonetheless, the shape of the beak is still surmisable. It's that simple to name the figurative elements: background + animal + rope + colours. But that's when it gets difficult. In spite of the major iconologies, the painting remains a mystery in pursuit of a description.

Perhaps a dictionary of art historical symbols and attributes may help? Here, we'd perhaps discover that the stork was seen as a 'soul bearer' during the Middle Ages. Storks also rear their young sacrificially and hence have been garnered with Marian symbols. The stork is the animal emblem for Alsace and can be viewed, carved in stone, in the Strasbourg cathedral. Stork nests are said to bring luck to the homes on which they sit because they are sources of protection against lightning and fire. Consequently, those houses in which storks don't return burn down.

These days we're also very familiar with the stork as a motive for newborns, which the stork brings to happy parents. Nevertheless, does all this information help us with the interpretation of a tied beak? Is the stork unable to carry any more souls?

Is the image perhaps blasphemous, because of the restriction imposed on the Marian symbol? Has the stork become a bad mother, because it can no longer feed its offspring? Are our houses burning and are we all to become childless? In this case, it's not as easy as the application of an existing theoretical premise. Such a conundrum leads precisely to a categorisation issue and defines an area betwixt and between two already occupied spaces, and leaves overly cerebral viewers, as well as the aforementioned gallerists and academics butting heads against robust walls. Perhaps it's easier to backtrack the previous

rendition: we see a bird, with a tied beak. This implies that the bird can neither feed themselves nor their offspring. The use of materials and tying precision leads us to believe that only a person could execute such handiwork. It remains open as to who and what their motive was. The painting does not answer these questions.

On the contrary, it grants the viewer room for interpretation, and at precisely that moment we are invited to fall upon ourselves. It is then that the bound animal becomes

a psychological projection for actual personal experiences, desires or fears, or symbolic of our impossibilities and ineptitude. To see ourselves in an image is a process that isn't natural for many of us. Without a prescription or instructions, we are forced to simulate Baudelaire and be content with entirely personal resolutions to the ambiguous interpretive possibilities. One thing becomes apparent: the titles – so often signposts to help us decipher an artwork – bring us no closer to understanding

Hahn's works. For example, the stork image is called Torch. In US English it is both a stick with a flame at one end as well as an arsonist, in British English, it is a portable light source. As a verb, it implies 'to set fire to' or 'ignite'. Is the word perhaps a play on the superstition that a house will burn down if the animals no longer return to it? Does a British person read the painting differently to an American or an Alsatian? It would, however, be a fallacy to believe that Eckart Hahn calculatingly creates perplexing motif combinations, just so that his fans feel something. He may just as well have dedicated his work to landscape painting. With his artfulness, Hahn also addresses current sociopolitical concerns.

However, this doesn't result in a belittling reprimand or as the impassive outcome of documentary research. Instead, the means is executed powerfully via the senses. In this context, there are recurring motifs in Hahn's paintings. One of these is the relationship between nature and culture, of authenticity and artificiality, such as in *Vogel und Flöte* (Bird and Flute) from 2014 (p. 161). Here two human hands hold a recorder, and the complex fingerings reveal that a specific tone is in the making. Nonetheless,

there are no lips at the mouthpiece to create this sound, and instead, we see a small red bird. The juxtaposition of these two figurative elements, bird and flute, merely clarifies the sophisticated

contrast of nature and culture. The sound of the musical instrument is civilisation's imitation of the real and natural chirping of birds, which is nonetheless only achievable

via difficult movements. This idea is usually not as cheerful as the colours of the painting elucidate: the instrument and hands are rendered in grey tones, and yet the bird is flamboyantly reproduced.

The ornithologically learned may well shake their heads at this rendition, given that such birds do not exist. Here the painter just created an entirely new animal, a combination of many birds.

The yellow feathers in the black wings, yes, these are known from the goldfinch, also known as 'Distelfink' (thistle finch). However the red-feathered body and the black outlined

eyes... they don't fit at all. Inspired, perhaps, by the Madagascan Red Fody?

Although, the eyes couldn't originate from the Madagascan Red Fody!

We may well wonder if the actual existence of such a bird is of any significance? On the one hand, this knowledge is not necessarily relevant to the image's interpretation,

however, knowing it contributes to two conclusions:

Firstly it becomes evident that nature is indeed not as natural as it often seems.

Crossbreeds and hybrids are perpetually born. If humankind desires a red bird with yellow feathers, then a process of breeding and domestication will be set in

motion. This was always the case; however, the questions around legitimacy have never been as pressing as they are today. How far are we able to imitate and influence natural processes and the nature of things? Given that science has reached

such a stage, to create new seeds, creatures or life forms, which are even better and efficacious than all pre-existing forms;

then this opens up a minefield of concerns for humankind. In this context, the flute is both a comprehensible and profound symbol for human hubris.

Secondly, upon viewing *Vogel und Flöte* the liberties of an artist to create their world as they see fit, become evident. Boundaries don't exist when an artist realises their mental pictures and makes the incomprehensible tangible. The fascination here is that logic can be thrown to the wind. Neither the laws of gravity nor those of anatomy or optics apply. These liberties are also exemplified in the painting *Disziplin* (Discipline) from 2017 (p. 37), whose protagonist is an adder. With the end of its tail, the snake hooks a

green ring, which it has also slung half of its body through. If the adder were slithering on the ground this would function without a problem; however, the shadow on the ground indicates that the snake only touches the ground with a small part of its body. The longer we contemplate this artwork, the more it becomes absurd.

Neither gravity nor the natural movement of snakes would permit such a scene. Its actuality is reminiscent of the tale of Baron Munchausen,

who apparently pulled himself out of a swamp with his hair. At first sight, Hahn's composition appears amusing. Through its title, it then earns a healthy portion of depth: discipline! With this title, Hahn alludes to contemporary society's desire for control. Doesn't advertising, politics and society fool us into believing that through disciplined behaviour we can achieve everything: the perfect body, the perfect flute playing, a perfectly and seemingly

simple work-life-balance? Are these all tall stories or can we realise the seemingly impossible through hard work? Snakes are principally disinterested in discipline or impossible positions, and they would instead leave that to the humans, whose desire for conditioning is a speciality. Animals only accomplish feats when they are forced to play out such roles, like in the circus, another title, which is demonstrable within Hahn's oeuvre.

The possibility of disobeying the laws of reality is what gives Eckart Hahn's paintings their appeal. The traditional principles of logic, reality and reason become options during the act of painting and Hahn uses these possibilities to create sensuously appealing scenarios. For the viewer, this sets off a three-part process: It begins with a visual irritation. This irritation leads – provided we let ourselves – to a personal, emotional reaction. At a third step, this response is placed in context to a political or sociocultural phenomenon and transferred to the current day. These actions are indicative of the fact that Eckart Hahn's paintings and sculptures do not sit between stools. Instead, they simultaneously sit on many.