The Apollo of Obersalzberg

Approaches

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Two artists, as different as they come, together in one exhibition. One is a painter and sculptor, the other a photographer. The painter grew up in the far West, where nothing is closer to Germany than the Netherlands. The photographer was born on the same latitude, albeit 600 kilometres to the East, in a city that changed its name from Karl-Marx-Stadt back to Chemnitz eleven years after he was born (it is not necessarily a contradiction that he was shaped by the wild, unruly Berlin of the 1990s). In this context it is worth mentioning that, mathematically speaking and with a bit of luck, the painter could be the photographer's father. As rector of the art academy Düsseldorf he was said to be a staunch opponent of photography, or at least doing little to counter the impression.

Thus two generations separate Markus Lüpertz and Andreas Mühe although that is but a vague description of their differing experiences. Nevertheless it is certainly not by accident that they enter into a conversation through their works. In general it takes a major force to separate two things, yet vastly greater is the force of commonalities. There are more of the latter in Markus Lüpertz and Andreas Mühe than a casual glance would lead us to believe. The search for common ground can be an expedition of thought, beginning with the superficial until eventually reaching the foundations of art. First of all it needs to be noted that both bodies of work are fundamentally about the same subject-matter: Andreas Mühe's photographs from the series *Obersalzberg* and the drawings Markus Lüpertz has made in response to Ludwig Münstermann's early 17th century sculpture of the Greek god Apollo, which today graces the Bode Museum in Berlin. Neither is about interpretation, about criticising, passing comment or judgement. Instead they deal with the illumination, appropriation and explication of the pre-existing. It is a peculiar thirst for knowledge that drives both works, each in its own specific way.

The Mad, the Raving and the Downright Odd

Artists chafe against art, against the world of images in general. In doing so they hit upon territories that are unknown to or ignored or neglected by the rest of the world. In Markus Lüpertz' words: it is the mad, the Frisian, the strange and raving – and it is

only the “Frisian” that does not also apply to the essence of Andreas Mühe’s works. In Greek mythology Apollo is the god whose power so terrified humans even before he was born that they refused hospitality to his pregnant mother, the goddess Leto. Only the inhabitants of the destitute, barren and rocky island of Delos welcomed her. The birth itself lasted “nine days and nine nights”, making Leto suffer, as classical scholar Karl Kerényi relays in the first volume of his *The Mythology of the Greeks,* “more excruciatingly than she had expected”. Apollo was the god of light, prophecy, spring and healing. Most of all, however, he was the god of music – and hence Ludwig Münstermann, of whom it is not certain whether he was born in Hamburg or Bremen, cut his figure into an organ.

The work of this idiosyncratic Baroque sculptor shows little of the power Kerényi attributed to Apollo. Münstermann’s *Apollo* actually *is* the crazy sculpture Markus Lüpertz, in one of his visits to the museum, considered it to be: slender and – even taking into account the perspectival distortion resulting from its placement high on the organ – grotesquely overlong, with twisted limbs and a face both bearded and haggard like an old man, which stands in stark contrast to the youthful body. This *Apollo* with his attributes and his opposites embodies the quality that has fascinated Markus Lüpertz throughout his career: pathos, or in this case Baroque pathos, and what it becomes when he transfers it into another, his own reality.

Circling and Encircling

The *Obersalzberg* series by Andreas Mühe – in its playful analysis of a very specific imagery – also has a lot to do with pathos. The difference is that Mühe artfully deconstructs the pathos of political propaganda, and here specifically Nazi propaganda before the viewer’s eyes. As Markus Lüpertz, in his nearly one hundred drawings overall (96 to be exact), addresses the Münstermann Apollo with eruptive energy, reinterpreting him in a painterly fashion, allowing himself to be carried away by him, turning him into a fragment, so does Andreas Mühe play around his subject. Comparisons with literature come to mind. The photographs of Obersalzberg exhibit a narrative structure complete with introduction, main body, retarding devices, a climax and a closing sequence. The parallel to the painter Lüpertz is evident: a circling and encircling, a fragmenting and recreation. The point of departure Andreas Mühe chooses for his photographs are the pictures of the same mountainous location taken by Hitler’s trusted court photographer Walter Frentz between 1939 and 1945.

Just like Lüpertz Mühe takes the original and modifies it radically, even if the radicalism of the new photographs is not immediately obvious. For not only does the artist show himself to be a master of staging. He also employs a feature specific to his medium. Photography was always said to be the most realistic of all artistic genres. And while it is experiencing mass dissemination today and we have become habituated to Facebook and Instagram, it has, amazingly, lost little of its evidential force. To this day a photographs tells us “how it was”, what happened and who was present where and when. Mühe turns this into the subjunctive. With subtlety and masterful ambivalence he formulates not a “that is how it was” in his pictures but rather a “that is how it might have been”. The potential his photographs are able to draw from this is enormous. Everything is possible. And everything is thrown into disarray. Until – and that is another parallel with Markus Lüpertz’ translation of Münstermann’s expressiveness into his brushwork and mental dynamic – the pathos of the originals is reduced to a husk, in which Mühe stages his own little play, free like a child.

The Theatre of Light – and Colour

The play, this piece of theatre – and again this is common to both artists presented here – is invigorated by a capacity and a skill for which the art of Andreas Mühe has often been praised. The majority of the published texts that discuss his work speak of his mastery in “sculpting with light”. Perhaps this should be defined more precisely because it almost sounds like a truism. According to Wolfgang Pfeifer’s etymological dictionary of the German language the concept “photography” was first used in the newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* of February 25, 1839. It consists of two words deriving from ancient Greek, “phos” (light) and “graphike” (draughtsmanship and painting). To sculpt with light is, therefore, not an exclusive skill of Andreas Mühe’s but applies to all photographers since it is inherent in the name “photography”. Instead it might be better to attempt to frame his pictures in another concept. Again, Markus Lüpertz has provided an apt template. What he values in Andreas Mühe’s photographs, as he is wont to say in private conversations, is the “peinture” in these images. Occasionally Lüpertz even employs the term “sfumato” to characterise Mühe’s art – a term dating back to the Renaissance that is perhaps best translated as a “veil of haze” and refers to the harmonic shading into each other of the tones used by Tuscan painters, mostly of landscape.

Indeed, the coloration of Andreas Mühe's photographs merits particular attention. It is a genuinely painterly tone that pervades his pictures. Everything else is subordinate to this basic tone: the images' composition as well as the proportions of nature and human figure and not least their statement, as complex and ambiguous as it is. Sculpting with light, which is so steadfastly ascribed to Andreas Mühe, is therefore more a sculpting with colour – a very important point, and another point of contact between the two artists. For what Markus Lüpertz calls "peinture" describes a universal, all-encompassing process: the creation of atmosphere, of mood. This marks an artful constitution that fundamentally distinguishes images, which possess peinture, from photojournalism and any kind of contemporary commercial photography. Aside from its stagecraft and aside from their respective subject-matter, Andreas Mühe's photographs always contain something of the old masters, something Venetian, something evoking Titian. The colour of things, landscapes, uniforms and physiognomies in his images do not just denote objects, nature and flesh. When Mühe employs colour his palette – another terms from the realm of painting – is the authoritative agency that holds the image together in the innermost sense.

To Whom the Laurel Wreath Is Due

Attempting to approach this purportedly unevenly matched couple, a basic comparison springs to mind. This comparison has fascinated artists and art theorists for so long as to generate a technical term centuries ago. In 1435 the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti published his treatise *De pictura.* In this book Alberti, who is counted among the most important polymaths of the Renaissance period, reignited a competition between painters and sculptors (that has been raging since antiquity) – which in the case of Lüpertz and Mühe can be transposed without difficulty into a competition of painting and photography. Alberti wanted to decide which art form was superior in mimicking nature. After much deliberation he came down on the side of painting. Grateful artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci seized on this, while a sculptors like Donatello or – two centuries later – Gian Lorenzo Bernini claimed the laurel wreath for their sculptures "which could be circumambulated like the living". In the meantime, of course, art has adopted other parameters for the mimicry of nature. Yet that was already an open question for Alberti. Hence today's viewers are well within their rights to develop their own views

on the matter. The significant point is that both artists are in competition with each other at all.

One last concept, which has been mentioned here repeatedly and which plays a special role in the approach to Lüpertz and Mühe, is the notion of a “game”. Both artists make conspicuously ample use of it in their conversations. Lüpertz “plays” with an original, the Apollo of Ludwig Münstermann, in his drawings as much as he has done in his paintings and sculptures for more than fifty years. To exaggerate, to escalate, to recreate in “godlike” sense – that is something of a game to Lüpertz. The same is true of Andreas Mühe. He, too, “plays”, or so he claims, when he is staging, suggesting situations, making viewers believe a truth that only exists within the image they are seeing. Yet “game”, here, does not mean “child’s play”, no exuberant, leisurely, light-hearted jaunt, no easy amusement. The game both play independently of each other is a serious, solemn matter. One might be tempted to say: deadly serious.

Play, Seriousness and War

The notion of a serious game has never again been described in a more grandiose and timeless fashion than by the Dutch anthropologist and art historian Johan Huizinga. Almost eighty years ago his *Homo Ludens* was published for the first time. In later editions his volume acquired the subtitle *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* a phrase that achieves the seemingly impossible: to distil an essay of several hundred pages in a half-sentence. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga, whose portrayal of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* won him worldwide renown, use an overwhelming multitude of material to describe how pre-historic family groups developed into functioning societies, how civilisations and cultures originated that have shaped us through millennia. It would be a hopeless endeavour to even attempt a précis of this epochal *Opus magnum* here. May a tiny section suffice. In one of his chapters Huizinga describes a ritual of the Native Americans, the so-called potlatch. It is a kind of gift-making competition, a game, as it were. However, the tribes along the East coast of North America understood this game as a direct precursor to war. The potlatch consisted in one chieftain giving a gift to the chieftain of another tribe – and the latter would well advised to give an adequate gift in return. This, in turn, necessitated a further present by the former, which, again, had to reciprocate appropriately. This “game” could last for days or even weeks. If one of the

presentees skipped a round or did not return the favour in sufficient measure, a feud between the tribes ensued.

One of the motivations for Huizinga to pen *Homo Ludens* was to explain that the meaning of a game lies in establishing rules and then following them. That is the game Markus Lüpertz and Andreas Mühe play together and independently of each other: they observe the rules of the game. They have mastery of composition; they weigh colour values to convert them into an elusive, yet heavily present harmony. When Markus Lüpertz was appointed rector of the art academy Düsseldorf one of his first official acts was to reintroduce the nude drawing class, one of the traditional basic skills each painter had to possess.

In preparing his photographs Andreas Mühe proceeds intuitively. Yet that is not the intuition of an artist, who can claim with more justification than most to have grown up on the stage. It is not for nothing that the French call intuition “the old intelligence”. Andreas Mühe could hardly stand when he first meddled with stage designs. Acting was for him and his siblings literally a daily routine. When he moved into the first flat all of his own as a teenager in Berlin he had already seen more productions than most people would manage, if they had seven lives. The rules of how to light a scene, what impressions certain postures or facial expressions convey, what a costume does to you – by the time he decided to be a photographer he was already intimately acquainted with them. The insight that there are such things as basics, tools and skills of a trade, that an artist should have at his or her disposal – that, too, is something that Lüpertz and Mühe have in common.

The search for common ground between two artists, who, at first glance, share very little, has taken us far afield: from antiquity to North German Baroque, from the alpine upland of Bavaria to the theatre of the imagination and positive deception. And we could spin these threads yet further, comparing the works of Andreas Mühe and Markus Lüpertz to each other again and again, recognising parallels without ignoring their differences. There would always be more common ground than that which separates them. Maybe that is why this convergence, this exhibition appears to be so contemporary and topical.