

Art as Action

Barbara Heinisch and the Role of Tradition

By Gerhard Charles Rump

They most likely didn't have a theory of action, but sure they knew what they were doing. Introspection and watching their movements of arms, hands and brushes (or chisels) in a POV manner made the Old Masters understand that all they produced only existed because of their actions. No matter how intensively one thinks of something, it is only in science fiction and mythology that this will suffice to bring something about. Action is the name of the game. Michelangelo knew that (he even complained about the consequences, like being powdered by marble dust), Menzel knew it (he went as far as painting himself looking down along his arm at a small paint bowl he held in his hand). They all knew. But it took some time until the painterly (or sculptural) action became a subject of its own, because things always need an environment friendly to their development, a social field ready to accept the developments.

In the calligraphic arts of Asia, however, this was the case much earlier, when the calligraphy masters actively employed the aesthetics of the flowing inks and its diversified behavior in sinking into the paper to achieve autonomous effects. In Western art, characterized by a different focalization, this developed more slowly, the shift of focus away from the factual and stylistic to the aesthetic as such was a gradual one, cautiously proceeding step by small step. Nothing of that kind was around before the advent of oil painting and chiaroscuro. Then, in oils, the treatment of the colors became part of the aesthetic architecture, the traces of the brushwork, the make, the changing densities and thickness of the medium. Rembrandt was, of course, one of the first to delve into the realm of the painterly substructures, but it wasn't general practice to stress the ingenuity of the painterly gestures in his time. Somewhat earlier Raphael started it, in a cautious manner, in the landscape backgrounds of his paintings. Rubens practiced it, reticently, also in the main levels of his images, but all was still

meant to serve a purpose. Velázquez liked to show how brilliant he was with the brush, although he also stuck to the picturing character of his paintwork. With Vincent van Gogh, brushwork, the mesh of painterly gestures, started to claim aesthetic autonomy, at least a notable value of its own. In the 20th Century, then, a few or even a single brushstroke was able to make an image, and it was Miró who counted among the first artists to mark such a position, preeminent in works like the "Blue" series of 1961. One could also mention Franz Kline here.

All those examples also touch the subject of the act of painting, the physical process of transferring paint from a palette (or whatnot) through a painterly action (with or without brushes) to a canvas, constituting a describable part of the work of art as a whole. Picasso did it in a somewhat restrained manner, he advanced far, however, in his light drawings, moving a light in space to have its traces recorded using the photographic medium. A demonstration of the fact that the gesture is fleeting, but that its trace, just like in a drawing or painting, is durable.

The "action" bit in Keith Haring's work refers less to the painterly execution, rather it describes the guerilla street art tactics of his early work (like the subway paintings), focusing on the creation of art in unusual, public places where it is normally not just done, but formally placed through a long bureaucratic process, and usually in pretty different locations, too. But, indeed, action here also meant that as a guerilla artist (which he was in his early days) that he had to be fast and therefore limit his figures to a few bold but clearly readable strokes. In this he was formally successful, but not from the point of view of subject matter, as it has been shown that most museum visitors misinterpret his works. (1) Here we are confronted with two different poles, one concerning the work itself and its process of creation, the other the creative circumstances.

Artists like Jackson Pollock, K. O. Götz or Georges Mathieu even went further. They were dubbed "action painters", and quite

rightly so, as their method of creating aesthetic products relied heavily on the act of painting (and the creative process after the spiritual concept) which became a subject on equal footing with any possible others. In the case of Georges Mathieu this becomes unmistakably clear, as he created many of his works in public performances, attacking the canvas with his paint tubes like a madman (which he, of course, was not), demonstrating that artistic creation can also be seen as aggression transformed. That was a lot more than just staging a little show by the name of "A painter painting". It drew the attention of the public to the process of creation making this a subject in its own right. Watching a painter paint was, in Paris then (as it is now) not so unusual: Painting painters were even some kind of a tourist attraction at Montmartre. Mathieu's performances, on the other hand, were a cardinal and state affair, a carefully designed and publicized art performance.

Mathieu also incorporated speed, was called the "fastest painter of the world", and that was truly necessary, as a painting performance has to keep its pluck.

When one watches a painting performance of Barbara Heinisch, this is also very relevant, as it stretches only over a limited amount of time until an image is achieved. And it is finished then, there is no post-production. K. O. Götz is very similar to Mathieu in his method, especially in relation to speed, as the fastness of the creation, the energetic concentration plus explosion was of prime importance for him. And the figurations of the image in their dynamic formal character make this comprehensible.

The shooting performances of Niki de Saint Phalle (and, as it were, Ulrike Rosenbach) rode on similar tracks, too: No painting, no work of art without the performed action, but that also meant that the performance was an integrated part of a more comprehensive whole, as the elusive part; the remaining artwork speaking of it, conserving some of it in its make, serving "eternity".

And when we look at the "*anthropometries*" of Yves Klein, the intertwining of the performance action and the resulting work is

as close as it can get, bearing resemblances even to cave paintings some 30,000 years of age. That is truly tradition.

A special case is the work of the Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, as she, with her "Körpergefühlsbilder" (images of body feelings) was one of the first artists to reflect the social position of the female artist and the import of the female body on the biography of a female artist.

So when Barbara Heinisch celebrates a painting performance, all of that is also true for her. And she adds a little more to it, something decisive not to be seen anywhere before. What we see in a painting performance of Barbara Heinisch is a dialog. Action painting of even the most intensive kind like in Pollock, Niki, Mathieu or Yves Klein was constitutionally and conceptually monodirectional. A metaphorical "dialog" could be discerned in the more or less altercating dust-up with the artist and the canvas, but the core remains monological, a dramatic soliloquy.

Barbara Heinisch, however, in her painterly performances, is part of a dialog. We should take this seriously, just as Barbara Heinisch does. A dialog is too important an event to deal with it in a superficially colloquial manner. Most important to know is that a dialog has two authors. (2) Both take on, alternating, the role of emitter and receiver. In a spoken dialog, these roles are fundamentally reversible, and they need a code (a system of signs) mastered by both partners in dialog. Paintings are also manifestations of language, non-verbal in this case. (3) So there is a real dialog. We will come back to that just a little further on.

When Barbara Heinisch celebrates a painting performance, a second person (model) is behind a screen ("canvas"). The model presses her body against the canvas, and the artist traces, with paint and brush, the form of the model's body, gestures and all. As the model is (almost completely) free in her decisions, where and how to position her- / himself, the model truly becomes an author in the creative context. The image, the painting coming into existence, contains the traces of the will of both persons, with a slight

overbalance on the artist's side, as the artist is free to decide to leave out some answers to the expressions of the model.

This is the same as in spoken dialogs. But, and this is the difference between the dialog of the Heinisch type and any given spoken or written dialog, the role reversal is not possible. This is due to a lack of code sharing between artist and model: The model (even if the person should be a trained artist, too) cannot see what the artist is doing and feeling the moisture of the paint and sensing the brushstrokes leads to a new experience. Barbara Heinisch calls it "contact improvisation". Contact improvisation in this sense describes all that which bridges or replaces all that may be lacking in code concordance and supports the dialog. It is a dialog with special conditions of communication, at first somewhat reminiscent of the *cadavre exquis*.

The surrealistic *cadavre exquis* was a drawing one artist begun and others continued without having seen what the others had done. This dialog (or, rather, multilog) is more of a series of monologs. A Heinisch performance is more than that, as there is a preceding communication about the performance and its character, and also some environmental factors act on both sides, like, for instance, the music, which is an integral part of the performance. It is more than an Yves Klein performance (who also used accompanying music) with nude models in blue paint, as the models largely followed Klein's instructions and Klein himself did not directly react to their movements; they were called "human brushes" and that hits the nail on the head.

So the nature of the image is a different one, it is dialogical in nature, even though it is a largely irreversible form of dialogue. There are two sets of codes active, and the resulting image feeds on both. Barbara Heinisch stands in a tradition, but with her, the tradition has entered a completely new era.

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(1) Haring himself knew this as he said so in interviews with John Gruen; see http://www.haringkids.com/master_k_life.htm

(2) See Walter A. Koch: *Varia Semiotica*, Hildesheim, New York 1971 and Winfried Nöth, *Dialoganomalie und Nonsense in Alices Wonderland*, in: *Dialoge. Beiträge zur Interaktions- und Diskursanalyse*, hrsg. v. Wilfried Heindricks und Gerhard Charles Rump, Hildesheim: Gerstenberg 1979, p.134-160, here p. 135

(3) See Gerhard Charles Rump: *Dialogstrukturen in mittelalterlicher Plastik: Reims, innere Westfassade*, in: *Dialoge. Beiträge zur Interaktions- und Diskursanalyse*, hrsg. v. Wilfried Heindricks und Gerhard Charles Rump, Hildesheim: Gerstenberg 1979, p. 240-252, here p. 240 and note 1.

Translated from German by Mason Ellis Murray