

KATZ CONTEMPORARY

Exploring the Meanders of Lutz & Guggisberg

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Preliminaries

The temptation is great. The work of Andres Lutz and Anders Guggisberg is over-the-top. It explodes boundaries, ignores genres and combines categories. Rhizome-like configurations invade the terrain of contemporary art, pointing forward and backward with narrative glee. At their exhibitions, viewers find themselves reeling with delight. Which tentacles should they take up, which paths should they follow, where should they let themselves drift? It is extremely seductive and tempting to find that everything is related to everything else. Such cognitive super redundancy is obviously useless. What's left? Tout court, the need and the bid to isolate aspects of Lutz & Guggisberg's imagery, though only to render them again as a whole. Lutz & Guggisberg enjoy working as a duo. It's productive - and has been for over eleven years. The joint venture begins in 1996 with the Living Room (initially with more people involved). Lutz & Guggisberg have been tossing the ball to each other ever since. If the pass is good, they invariably score. Their approach is wide open; they channel other disciplines into their work: music, for instance, or words. They have developed an extraordinarily wide-ranging, positively neo-chemist ars combinatoria. They tackle their projects with a twinkle in the eye, a disarming tolerance and an encyclopaedic appetite. Obviously, Lutz & Guggisberg did not invent the artistically productive twosome, as shown by a remarkable roster of contemporaries. Think of Gilbert & George, Clegg & Gutman and Fischli/Weiss or Steiner/Lenzlinger. Lutz & Guggisberg brilliantly exploit the advantages of shared production. In contrast to the work of the lone warrior, their production is substantially shaped by a process of reflection and reception. Nothing they are working on is left without comment. An associative thought, spoken out loud, lends the gnarled root of a tree found in the woods, or a clay figurine, a spin that is reminiscent of the Madonna with the Protecting Mantle - or links a fool with the mythological minotaur, forming a two-headed creature. This is the advantage of productive detachment and the subversion of an exclusively subjective gaze. In the process of finding and implementing their imagery, Andres Lutz and Anders Guggisberg are always two things at once: they are both producers and critical onlookers, their own first recipients, so to speak.

For Instance, Dead Centre

Lutz & Guggisberg give us ample reward, as when they centrestage the good person in general: his courageous deeds, his historically relevant and even revolutionary inventions, his whimsical reveries or his desperate failures. These are all honoured with Cups, Prizes and Trophies - awarded for a life's work, for a merciful gesture to rescue victims of thirst or for the selflessness of a housekeeper, who "washed Mr. Schuetz's laundry for fifteen years and would be content with a steamboat ride". "Saw the truth but did not impose it on others" is as deserving of praise as its antithesis, "saw the truth and shared it with everyone". Honorary plaques identify found pieces mounted on small pedestals, alongside small sculptures, arrangements of gewgaws and commonplace kitsch arrayed with extreme sophistication and taste. Spiral-shaped, baroque, manneristically reaching for the skies, these Cups, Prizes and Trophies are flamboyantly arranged on a tiered, oversized cake-stand of acrylic glass and crowned with a small, globe-shaped balloon.

Enchanted by the lavish array, the ingeniously illuminated sampling of small sculptures and intriguing confidences, like "didn't tell Helmut, when Inge cheated on him with Volker", we willingly accept the invitation to stay awhile. The installation as a whole draws attention to space and its properties, while the small, inti-mate assemblages and sculptures within that whole call for a close-up view. A design principle emerg-es: from singular item to additive, editorialising collection, to the occasional cumulative effect of a piled-up installation - all in conjunction with substantial modifications of scale. This also applies to the Promised Landscape, on view in Nuremberg, where it was installed in a gallery about the size of a two-car garage, with a glass façade facing the inner courtyard. It makes perfect sense to pile everything up into layers - above-earth, subterranean and parallel worlds of architecture and model landscapes - and then to park them in the exhibition space as slanting cult-wagons or world-barrows. On taking a clos-er view, the gaze is drawn into a bewildering cornucopia of details. It gropes along passages and follows trails that must have been dug and laid out by gnomes, goblins or some other brand of curious creature. The opulence! - add to that the colouring that lends a clay-like, painterly aspect to the metic-ulously arranged whole. Here, too, astonishment can be interpreted as an invitation, for the artists have added a rather threadbare, albeit very comfortable couch: take a seat, stay awhile! Widespread and Convolut-ed. Almost unbounded growth and cryptically stooped gait, includ-ing cross-border gates to the farthest reaches of association and the constitution of meaning. This leads to shifts in substance and meaning that are almost contradictory. In the recent wooden sculptures as well. Assemblages of found pieces and booty, acquired by rummaging through junk shops and second-hand stores, not only in Switzerland but all over the world, discovered with a bit of luck thanks to indefatigable vigilance. And the result? Metamorphic, surreal growth: an intricate little handcarved animal pushing up out of a souvenir from a safari in the hinterlands of central Africa, a wooden, dime-a-dozen mask. Is it ivory? Dangling from it there is a small ornamental arabesque, a lacquered beak, then plates of rhinoceros skin. A motorcycle woven out of reeds whooshes past behind it, and so on, deep into the depths of inner connections - almost like Philemon and Baucis, who, Ovid tells us, turned into trees at the end of their lives. All of the finds, glued and screwed together as instructed by the artists, form a weighty and yet transparent globe. We cannot be sure whether or not all of that forcibly intertwined wooden bric-a-brac is a cluster on the verge of imploding.

Follow Me, a Brief Tour

The works of Lutz & Guggisberg weave an intricate web of references, of detours and devia-tions, of recurrence to detail, reflections and cheerfully subversive guile. Everything is meticulously balanced, attuned and pushed to jam-packed extremes with uninhibited playfulness. Moving from room to room in Lutz & Guggisberg's exhibitions, viewers find all of these qualities transposed into full-scale. At the beginning, one might come across a pile of potatoes intermittently singing a song: "Sometimes I feel like a king, sometimes I feel like singin'..." These root vegetables look as if they were about to begin dancing and, in the course of an exhibition, they undergo a curious metamorphosis: they start sprouting, their eyes reach out into the air forming a spidery web, a primordial organism. What if such growth cannot be kept in check? "Sometimes I feel like a king, ..."In formal response to the potatoes, a pile of dirt spills out of a filing cabinet in a tastefully furnished Bureau, forcing visitors to detour around it. Round the back! The entire length, past the table, an imposing status symbol piled up out of plywood and scrap wood. With objects on top of it that are a must: a laptop, say, or a sixties lamp with a permanent beam of light carved out of Ytong. It radiates; odd because it's such a grainy brightness!

Under the table, as usual, the computer proper. Or is it some fabulous creature with walrus whiskers? Mounted on the walls are not stock market graphs climbing up the fabled beanstalk but carefully executed oil paintings. Their subject matter: shamans, belled beings and images of such things as the birth of a dolphin or demonstrators at the G-8 Summit - the latter having a little run-in with security agents under the watchful eye of the media and clicking press photographers. Then there's the mandatory photograph of a missionary - the office owner's ancestor? With a footprint testifying to his virgin step on foreign territory, preserved in a display case worthy of a museum. And, of course, the absolutely indispensable office vegetation! Everything culminates - unadulterated ideological hodgepodge, as embodied in the executive lord-ing it in his office, a hero with a polyvalent identity. As he sees it, he is a thoroughly liberal contemporary of the post '68 generation, which has obviously parted ways with clearly delineated ideologies. A walnut and honey cake, a speciality of the Engadine, crops up nearby in an unexpected context. It is slightly dusty and desiccated, possibly an object of scientific concern and ethnographical dedication, tucked away in a tabletop vitrine along with other collectibles, ethnological finds from New Pomerania. And it has assaulted an oddly appressed male figure! The man is lying on the ground under the great round cake, as if struck down by a comet. An art historical leap, for the figure has been lifted from Pieter Brueghel's Land of Cockaigne and appears to have succumbed to Bacchanalian pleasures. Testimonial is provided by the high-gloss art book, lying open in the display. There are baked goods in the painting as well, laid out on top of the hut in the background - possibly to weigh down the roof. Indication of a possible connection is provided by an offscreen video commentary coming from the depths of the vitrine - or has it been filched from an older educational film on New Pomerania, one of the islands in the famed Bismarck Archipelago? In any case, the voice that is telling us about the mores, in particular about the eating habits of the natives, sounds quite plausible and, indeed, scientific. We learn about algae and sea cucumbers, ingredients of ex-otic recipes that call for a complex process of fermentation and ripening to make patties, eaten only on high feast days to commemorate such festive acts as circumcision and insemination. All of which is recounted on the "original beach". It almost seems as if the content of the New Pomeranian Vitrines were increasingly attracted to these locations, to the almost impenetrable, convoluted and tangled web, invoking fields of felted algae and seaweed cast ashore by the sea, in the midst of flotsam and jetsam and growth all about.

Origins and Flourishing

The vitrines, eloquent hybrid configurations that unite installation and painting, have long been a preoccupation of Lutz & Guggisberg. Made of glass or acrylic, they enjoy a three-dimensional, sculptural inner life and are usually coated in great detail with asphalt lacquer. Works such as Urpott, Nebelheim or Climatic Egg resemble terrariums, mounted on plinths or pedestals. Lutz & Guggisberg decline aspects of material; they question the culture of display; and they blithely nullify any distinction between physical and illusionist picture space. Occasional glimpses of things revealed, things layered and piled on top of each other, constant changes in perspective and point of view: the rigid criteria of genre have been pulverised. Here we see a group of the figures gazing into the distance; elsewhere the landscape opens up and architectural structures appear in a new perspective. We are familiar with pictures that show two vantage points, as in the 17th-century landscapes painted by Jacob van Ruisdael in the Netherlands. Through a change of perspective, Ruisdael interrupted the continuum of his composition, allowing him to refer to profane and divine worlds in one and the same picture! In Asian art, the technique is taken even further in the multiple perspectives of large tusche drawings. By comparison, Lutz & Guggisberg's vitrines are positively opulent, almost like the model of an entire gallery space.

In a brilliant assault on the horror vacui, the duo relentlessly reinforce the tendency of empty space to absorb gases, liquids and nature in general. Painting has recently been flourishing in the oeuvre of Lutz & Guggisberg, which may well be understood as a biographical reference to artistic origins. After all, Andres Lutz and Anders Guggisberg started out by studying painting. Many people might be surprised to find that they are now actively engaged in it again, painting together on canvas, on wood, on glass, or on top of C-prints. They launched their comeback in 2002 with *Laboratoire*, in which they pasted veneer and inkjet prints of rubbish on large white-coated panels, afterwards pouring lacquer and other paints on top. Painting treated as sampling, and then driven to extremes - though the titles do propose possible readings, as in the evocation of art historical forefathers in *Old Spirits* or the well-deserved reproof of monotheism in *Fuck Monotheisms!* The painting, *The Grand Library*, clearly refers to the library they have been accumulating. In other paintings, Lutz & Guggisberg render artefacts such as their clay *Mercenaries* or the cottage from the bird sculpture *Bird of the Alps*. They also produce newspaper pictures: embodiments of inventory management at its best. The artists hone and interpret the subject matter of these pictures by adding spolia and painted commentaries in the manner of a diary. Superb indeed is this demonstration of milking a well-fed inventory and turning the results into large-scale images.

Lastly, Conclusio

Nothing that has already been said, only this much: Lutz & Guggisberg offer something society cannot do without, an anarchic drive toward freedom. What's more, they question encrusted patterns of order. They excite an interest in productive detours and border crossings. Forever boisterous and ebullient, they show us what the world is really about.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert