

THE SUBVERSIVE POWER OF ART

Gottfried Helnwein - A Concept Artist before the Turn of the Millennium.

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In the light of a cultural criticism which believes that the world is on its way to a reality of total manipulation and simulation, promoted with all the force of an agenda by powerful media systems, the task falling to art is of central importance. It embodies, as it were, the human factor. Given the barrage of simulated and virtual images also to be found in art, the claim to show the world "as it is", an aspiration already pursued by emperor Frederick II of Staufen in his famous bird book, and equally important for seventeenth century Dutch painters and for empirical sociology two centuries later, seems fairly presumptuous. But art will only fulfil its task - should it still be willing to set itself any - if it is able to break the power of the systems and to lift the spell which their agendas are casting over people, causing their reactions to move in a perpetual cycle of virtual behaviour, as analysed by the media philosopher Vilém Flusser. Art must do without the means of physical violence, and the means of rhetoric are fuelling the imagery of the mass media. But artists are not left helpless. For they command the dangerous weapon of subversion. Handled with intelligence, it turns into the stone used by David, capable of bringing down the Goliath of the world of systems. It was not by accident that in the second half of the twentieth century Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol became key figures of art, forming a bridge between a gradually fading modernity and the emerging, as yet formless continent of the new. Beuys' universal world view, his missionary zeal, which did not shrink from the risks of life, the openness of his artistic works and his use of very simple materials were bound to challenge a world of systems with its one-dimensional models of explanation. Yet his artistic concept was motivated less by philosophy than by pragmatism. For he not only embraced traditional artistic techniques and disciplines like painting, sculpture and graphics, but included the whole spectrum of creative activity, no matter where it originated. There lived on in his oeuvre the idea of an artistic concept where a work of art cannot be pressed into specific criteria, categories or forms. Beuys confronted the superficial utilitarianism of a vision guided by systems with the image of a richly interwoven and intertwined world. Warhol, on the other hand, played the systems game quite deliberately. Rather than undermining them, he forced their mechanisms to breaking point. True to this principle, he reversed the status of appearance and reality in his work. Even the horrific attempt on his life by a radical feminist turned into a spectacular - albeit involuntary - staging for him and his "factory". Is it sheer coincidence that Gottfried Helnwein, the Austrian artist, created a portrait of both the German and the American? Coincidence, that he captured Warhol as a disturbing spectre on photograph, but painted Beuys? And that he then photographed the painted portrait of Beuys in the hands of Arno Breker, Adolf Hitler's favourite sculptor? There are weighty reasons for considering Helnwein the legitimate heir to Beuys and Warhol.

On the one hand, his artistic practice participates in ritual, employing ritual patterns, charging its batteries on it, as it were; this is true in the early works with their conceptual echoes of Viennese Actionism no less than in the almost manic concentration on a few thematic challenges taken up time and again. On the other hand, the artist plays with the entire range of artistic possibilities at his disposal with great virtuosity, using the modern palette they provide, from carefully honed pastels to the ubiquitous magazine title, from the stage set with its powerful effect

of spatial arrangements to the installation of photographic images, and it would hardly come as a surprise if one day he were also to turn to the cinema, the royal road of contemporary art. He is fascinated by film anyway, and a connoisseur. But in a time when artistic self-perception is still proclaiming the vanity of all artistic endeavours, Helnwein employs the available instruments not just for his aesthetic goals - he employs them in a very specific way. Beuys, too, was no modern shaman, nor was Warhol a mere media mogul. Helnwein uses these instruments in the spirit of subversion. He undermines the overwhelming magic of the world of images by building some sort of disturbance factor into the reciprocal process between a particular medium of artistic expression and the expectation which is, as it were, programmed by that medium. The disturbance factor consists in an imperceptible shift in the use of the medium's repertoire. His famous title pages for magazines like "Profil", "Stern" and "Time" do not consist of photographic masters as it might seem at a cursory glance, but of painted images which have been photographically reproduced for printing and are superior to the quality of photographic masters in their optical brilliance. On the other hand, these subtly operating pastels and the peculiar characteristics of their contents cut across the familiar relationship between the work of art and the viewer and break up the conventional automatism of perception with an aesthetic shock. But this only happens once the viewer is in the visual trap, has become entangled in the artist's intelligent play with the artistic media, with the perceptions they have created and with the expectations attached to them, because expectations often actually colour perception. In order to achieve this effect Gottfried Helnwein had to expand his concept of art beyond the narrow and almost academic postulate of artistic autonomy, to liberate art from its self-imposed prison of immanence, to render this concept more fluid and to understand it as a field of contradictory interests, forces, spheres of influence, experiences and powers. This is analogous with a magnetic field whose opposite poles are manifest at the close of the twentieth century in the artistic oeuvre of Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol. Just as these poles repel one another, they also attract each other.

In his artistic strategy, Helnwein mixes old and new, and some reflections reach back into a period when modernity was just beginning to establish itself. Others point ahead to the emerging instant world of cyberspace. Much is explained by the fact that he received his first artistic impressions in the Vienna of the sixties, and was deeply influenced by the atmosphere of the unique cultural mix of this south-east European metropolis where the clash of old and new occasionally brought about bizarre results, though always in the shadow of Vienna's avant-garde. Helnwein represents the type of artist who has left behind the notion of the artist's monadic existence as a visionary demiurge shut away in his studio. Even his earliest encounters with manifestations of art bore symptomatic features and could not have been more controversial. He became familiar with serious art in the shape of transfers of pious paintings, a reward for good behaviour as part of his catholic upbringing. To begin with, they did not leave an enduring impression. He received a much stronger impulse through contact with their trivial variant. One day, his father gave him a bundle of comics from the Walt Disney production. And Helnwein had his Damascus experience. "When I opened the first comic, I felt like someone who has been buried in a mining accident and emerges into the daylight again after days in the dark . . . I was back home in a reasonable world where one could be flattened by road-rollers or riddled with a hundred bullets without being harmed; I was in a world in which people looked decent once more, with yellow bills and a black knob for a nose. Here I met with a man who would

change my life, and who, according to the Austrian poet H. C. Artmann, is the only human who still has something to say to us today: Donald Duck." He introduced himself to the world of art with a relatively intense emotional act. However, it was he who prompted the mood. The scene was the "Höhere Graphische Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt" (Experimental Institute for Higher Graphic Education) in Vienna. A passionate draughtsman whose talent had emerged early on, he had gone there in the burning desire to continue his professional training without having to battle with mathematics, chemistry, Latin and similar pedagogical demands. "I had always drawn freely, but then I just had to grit my teeth and slave for more than a year until I was able to draw some stupid object so that it looked half-way realistic. And then I was graciously admitted." Soon, the daily routine of the classroom bored him. In protest against this situation, which he perceived as "unbearable" (Helnwein), and still far from expressing his anger in open rebellion, he cut open his hands with a razor blade. And while society does not hesitate to suppress behaviour outside its norms forcibly, sometimes even brutally, he quickly realised that it reacts in a strangely helpless manner to physical injuries and wounds. Of course, one cannot see the psychological ones. Helnwein had touched a taboo area. Instead of being punished, he was cared for in every way. ". . . someone with injuries was a kind of martyr." Intent and coincidence complement each other in his endeavour "to sabotage, to smash, to destroy", for on one occasion a wound resulted from his struggle with the technique of woodcutting or copperplate engraving, the tool had slipped and gone into his hand. But the crucial point was how he exploited the injury for his subversive aims, and therefore the real cause was unimportant. His first artistic action was taken in the same spirit. Tired of stupidly drawing from the nude, he decided in protest against the teaching to make a portrait of Adolf Hitler. The resonance caused by this aesthetic product was surprising. When his tutor saw it, he stormed from the classroom, returned with the school's entire professorial staff - "they looked like big white birds in their flowing coats" - and the director of the institute held a long-winded exculpatory speech, to the amazement of Helnwein's fellow-students, who had not even seen his drawing. Its tenor: Whosoever recalls the accursed times of National Socialism is ruining the reputation of the "Graphische Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt". There was general bewilderment, and the picture was confiscated. "This was the moment when I sensed for the first time: you can change something with aesthetics, you can get things moving in a very subtle way, you can get even the powerful and strong to slide and totter, anything actually if you know the weak points and tap at them ever so gently by aesthetic means" - that is the insight the supposed miscreant distilled from this spectacular episode, presumably still more by intuition at the time. The artist had merely rearranged the coordinates of his teachers' expectation; a deranged result. Helnwein had thrown a stumbling block into the still waters of art, and suddenly there were ripples on its surface. No doubt the young artist had chanced upon a potential of art which had been largely buried by the lengthy debate on the autonomy of works of art: the ability to mobilise intense feelings and with the aid of this power to blast free, as it were, human insights and perceptions. In theoretical discussions, the possible potency of art was at best considered as a means to alter individual or collective awareness. There was distrust of feelings; the memory of the devastating consequences of the aestheticisation of politics by the Nazis was still alive and was being repressed, and the most advanced version of contemporary art of the time appealed more to the intellect. Helnwein discovered that impassioned reactions were able to answer

the intentions of the artistic author if they disclosed certain connections, illuminating them like the lightning in a cathartic thunderstorm. However, the connections might not necessarily produce intellectual progress in those addressed; instead, the viewers served as catalysts and became more or less involuntary actors in his artistic concept. Having graduated from the "Graphische", he refined his artistic strategy at the Vienna Academy of Arts, where he found a sympathetic teacher in the painter Rudolf Hausner. Minor and major revolts were an everyday occurrence in Austrian universities as well, and Gottfried Helnwein participated in many an action though few of them went beyond the usual student pranks.

What was more remarkable was that he began to get involved in one of the motif cycles which were later to preoccupy him time and again. Children keep recurring in his pictures, he has drawn and photographed them, painted them and used their giant-size images in his artistic stage sets and installations. Sometimes there are also people of different ages, but mostly children, and with them the idols of the media world, live manifestations perhaps of the universe of comics, which has continued to fascinate him since his encounter with the world of Donald Duck, and which is very close to the universe of children. Children and colourful comics meet in some of his early pictures, but occasionally there are only a few selected ingredients of the cosmos of comics, ones which have become an integral part of the children's world. A pastel like "Embarrassing" (1971), drawn with great intensity and sensitivity, shows a terribly injured little girl with a gaping gash from nose to jaw, the index finger of her left and the whole right hand in bandages, with a comic under her arm on the pink dress, and the open page of the comic is about a botched-up love story. The subtle, exceptionally delicate painting technique of this pastel, masterly executed by the artist, creates an almost screaming tension between itself and the disfigured model of the picture. Her round eyes are staring into the void, scared and without comprehending, her face is distorted by a terrible grin, the result of her horrific injury.

While the artist had sorely disturbed the expectations of his professors at the "Höhere Graphische Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt", prompting a kaleidoscope of conflicting reactions and, through these reactions, a glimpse of some vaguely outlined model for the reception of artistic works, he developed an analogous model in his pastel "Painful" and in further pictures full of injured children, and occasionally adults; however, this was unlike the Hitler picture, which was solely restricted to the context of art. Subjects like those of ill-treated and bandaged children are nothing special in daily news shows on television, they are almost part and parcel of the medium. By portraying the maimed children and their bandaged heads and limbs in the subtle and delicate pastel technique, Helnwein caused the shock which the electronic pictures, their effect weakened by perpetual repetition, now only create subliminally, and brought horror back to art, making it visual once more. Thus he laid open the cynicism of a society which no longer sees "how things are", but whose seeing has long been blocked by pictures about things. And it is altogether revealing how the art world reacted to such images - with disgust, of course, though not, as one might at first assume, because of the cruel nature of the chosen topic or the artistically flawless realisation, but hiding behind the argument that pictures marked by such "realism" had long been overtaken by the history of art and simply failed the prevalent concept of art. Thus the artist touched on something elemental - while uncovering the secret complicity of "high" art and the general triviality of the media. Whilst art draws back from a reality which can be experienced in its everyday horrors and

contradictions, the electronic media prefer to "paint" the world beautiful and delight in its abominations. The genre of child images is a typical example. As a cute advertising medium in the idyll of the commercial it seems to fulfil its purpose to perfection and art unwittingly helped to bring it into being. The children of Pierre Renoir and Pablo Picasso are resurfacing in advertising. The mainstream of contemporary art is unconcerned; in its obsession with progress, it has long overcome such dilemmas by complete withdrawal. Gottfried Helnwein's child images have no place in this context.

Relatively early on, when he was still a student at the Academy of Art in Vienna, Helnwein began to break out of the hermetical area of museums and galleries to jump across - if not to bridge - the deep chasm between "art and life". Yet he was not entirely alone in his efforts, but at one with a few advanced trends of contemporary art such as Fluxus and Happening as well as Viennese Actionism but he did not have any in-depth knowledge of the artistic avant-garde. The publicist response to these aesthetic endeavours was still very limited, and, besides, the artists intuitively did not wish to confine themselves to a purely aesthetic revolt whose offshoots would not push out beyond the horizon of art. For an exhibition in the Künstlerhaus in Vienna in 1971, dedicated to Rudolf Hausner's class, he combined his pastels of disfigured children with the notorious Hitler picture; this time, though, it was a painted rather than a drawn version, enclosed in a bombastic frame from the thirties which he had acquired from an antique dealer. Of late, reactions to the "Führer picture" had been extremely controversial - ultimately appalling. Many a man revealed himself to be as fervent a Nazi as ever, one even fell on his knees before this creation. And none of the admirers of his picture minded the fact that the artist looked like the long-haired hippies of the time, whom many would have loved to eradicate. Gottfried Helnwein nonetheless did not despair of his aim to effect a change in people's minds and not just in elitist art circles. This was due to the historic situation of these restless years, rich in protests; and to the confidence of the young leftist intelligentsia in the readiness of the "masses" to risk a social revolution, and to Helnwein's unbroken aversion to art for art's sake. Bert Brecht and Walter Benjamin provided the relevant stimuli for aesthetic theoreticians, whilst Walt Disney and rock music with their enormous influence inspired Helnwein the artistic practitioner. Art had to be like rock music, he maintained in those days, and he had learnt more from Disney than from Leonardo da Vinci. The artist grasped intuitively that art was caught up in a fundamental process of change which left neither its material quality nor its spirit untouched. The emergence of mass media had induced this process, and thanks to the continuous expansion of its sphere of influence, its power over people's minds had deepened to an unimaginable extent. Therefore the sectarian affectations of contemporary artists were bound to appear to him as sure proof of the end of an epoch of art rather than the new beginning proudly announced by the avant-garde: Marcel Duchamp as the heir and executor of an art tradition which had begun with the Renaissance, not as the founder of a new chapter in art. If this were true, the avant-garde would have been misnamed, it would in fact be a rearguard. The consequences would be incalculable - both for art and its history and for its relationship with politics and society. From this perspective it is understandable that Gottfried Helnwein sees himself as a concept artist - not, though, in the sense of Concept Art, where theory says the idea of the autonomous work of art has been entirely fulfilled, but in connection with artistic practice, as an artist who, instead of producing trenchant trademarks, remains critical in the face of his social environment and its

convictions, flexible in dealing with the existing media and their possibilities and dangers.

It was only consistent that the artist took his next steps in the streets of Vienna. He created apparently spontaneous "actions", having them photographed or operating the camera himself, and he chose children as protagonists, the models of his water-colours. He provided them with bandages clipped together by surgical instruments. "The central theme of my art was children. And I found children, adults as well at times, with whom I staged actions in the street. For instance, I would wind bandages round a child, tie him up, affix surgical clips, and lay him on the floor. I always discussed it with the children beforehand, explaining what I intended to do. To them it was a game." The stagings were meant to place an unexpected lock into the calm river of everyday life, and he intended to provoke a reaction from chance passers-by. But people did not necessarily react, though this certainly did not devalue the result of the actions; taking no notice of an incident is also a form of reaction, and a revealing one at that. Although Helnwein and his actions were becoming increasingly noticed in Austria's capital, the direct encounter of his art with an institution of the mass media at first ended in disaster. Following the massive protest by the employees at the House of the Press, his exhibition in the gallery there was closed after three days, and the pictures were taken down. His response was astonished, but relaxed: "I wanted to spark off emotions, I wanted to learn something about others, I didn't really care what. I had no particular expectations. In this sense, protest and outrage were just as good as praise or any other reaction."

A number of years later, constantly varied self-portraits also harked back to the injury motif. A key picture is a water-colour from 1977 - the young artist with a bandaged head, his eyes behind the bars of spectacles made from two bent forks, dressed in a blazer and open-necked shirt and without a tie, turned to the viewer in three-quarter face, before a hued blue background which fades into a greyish white at the top and bottom of the picture, a somewhat elongated bust accurately positioned on the sheet in the golden section. Above his bandaged head, the picture extends by another half. The precise and sensitive execution presents a strangely ambivalent contrast to the apparently stoically borne injury. The longer one looks at the picture, the more it makes one's flesh creep. With stunning subtlety, Helnwein blends apparently incongruous elements. It is an image of shrill sensitivity. He had produced photographic self-portraits before; one of them shows him with his mouth wrenched open by two table forks, folding down his lower lip with a carving fork, thereby contriving a ghastly grin: "Self-Portrait with Smiling Aid" (1972). His hair and his forehead down to the eyebrows are swathed in gauze. In "Aktion Café Alt Wien" (Aktion Café Old Vienna - 1976) the muffled artist is sitting at a table next to an elderly man reading the newspaper, before him the usual café fare, gazing at the other's newspaper. In Delmer Daves's film noir "Dark Passage" (1947), Humphrey Bogart walks about in similar masquerade after having undergone a facial operation in order to escape his pursuers.

Subsequently, the artist has constantly modified the genre of the self-portrait in photographic and painted variants; the most famous was the screaming "Self-Portrait" (1990) in oil, acrylic and ink-jet on canvas, a graphic paradigm of the tormented human creature, which also exists as a photograph; a variant was a second version with cracking glass, the master for a record cover of the hard rock group "Scorpions" (1982) which has since become a cult image. A series of pictures in the eighties more or less obliterated the motif in several stages. Each was marked by a particular stylistic approach, adding up to a kind of express

history of art from expressive painting to expressionist, abstract and tachist painting, ending with the serious monochrome which merely preserves the self-portrait as a barely perceptible shadow. This is another facet which reflects both the typical and the Janus-faced quality of his artistic activity: The continuous dissolution of a person's physiognomic identity is an expression of the acute and at the same time unfathomable threat to mankind from the excesses of modern civilization; the artist, however, is able to free himself through this reduction in content and form from a motif or medium whose immense success not only gains a life of its own, but also threatens his artistic integrity.

The artist categorically denies there is any autobiographical character in his self-portraits; they are no more autobiographical than the works for which his own children were later to pose. "The reason why I took up the subject of self-portraits and why I have put myself on stage was to function as a kind of representative. There is nothing autobiographical, no therapy, and it says nothing about me personally. I am not talking about myself, I just use myself because I am always available as a model: What I am talking about is simply . . . a human being". If anything, it is the process of the "obliteration" of a motif which might be said to display autobiographical characteristics - or just a psychologically motivated reflex in the face of everyday horror and dread. Had not the late poet Heiner Müller asked: "How can an affable man like Helnwein bear to make his - excellent - painting the mirror of horrors?" In a novel by his Austrian compatriot Thomas Bernhard programmatically entitled "Obliteration", the first-person narrator erases both his cultural and - in effigy, as it were - his biographical origin through his writing. Though the author has remained in Austria, Helnwein, like the fictitious author in the novel, has fled for months, and then periodically, to the USA and Germany, restlessly alternating between town and country: no sooner established than ready to depart again. In the end, he also set up an aesthetic distance to the central theme of injuries in his work with a breathtaking set of photographic works, technically and electronically heavily treated, set behind glass and virtually entombed in a heavy lead frame. This happened with a daring artistic act. With the aid of computer technology and multiple reproductions he endowed the documentary photographs of horribly maimed faces with an alluring aesthetic gloss and a bewitching transparency of colours. Conjuring up true beauty in death alone, for all those pictured have died a violent death, he denounces as cynical and deeply inhuman the naturalistic exploitation of violence by the mass media. Simply leaving the authentic expression of the photographic masters would just have exposed the dead to voyeuristic curiosity. The artist uses his deliberately aestheticised images to undermine the "automatic programming" (Flusser) by the systems, and uses their own methods to wrest the pictures from that programme, giving them new informative power by appealing to the imagination and vision of the viewers, challenging people with suggestive force and thus restoring to them a measure of freedom within the universe of photographic and electronic images.

No doubt it was partly due to chance that Helnwein's second attempt at establishing himself within the bastions of the media was more successful than the previous one. His former school-friend Bernhard Paul, newly installed as art director with the Austrian news magazine "Profil", invited him to produce a so-called "inner title" over two pages for a story about "Suicide in Austria". The artist's condition: no text. Although the editors disliked the submitted drawing, Paul managed to publish it without their stamp of approval. The year was 1973, and the resonance exceeded all expectations in every respect.

Soon the artist's earlier wish "I want to be on all magazine covers of the world"¹⁴ was to become reality; the German news magazines "Der Spiegel" and "Der Stern", the American "Time Magazine", "L'Espresso" from Italy, the "Rolling Stone" magazine, and the German "Zeit-Magazin" all used work by the brilliant draughtsman. For a number of productions by the gifted theatre director Peter Zadek, he created sensational posters and each of them sparked off an abundance of fierce discussions. Quite unintentionally, the artist's memorable images, which spread his reputation like wildfire around the world, were developing into a trademark, and so at the height of his success, with radical determination, he broke off his publicistic-artistic activity. He had thoroughly irritated the art market and even so had achieved a public effect as an artist unlike any other contemporary apart, maybe, from Andy Warhol. His method was calculated subversion. "The general idea of the art market is, for example, that the more antiquated and elitist a printing technique is (etching, lithograph, etc.) - and the smaller the edition - the more valuable it is. But in my opinion, the more ordinary the printing technique (for instance, offset printing) and the larger the edition, the greater the artistic value is."¹⁵ Helnwein, the artistic anarchist out of principle, had shaken the clay walls of mercantile pretentiousness, and his paintings of local pop idols like Hans Krankl, the football player who had once shot the illustrious German football team out of the World Cup, Peter Alexander, the singer who moved most mothers to tears, and Niki Lauda, the triple Formula One champion of motorcar racing, an incurable fault-finder and a stigmatised but surviving martyr of his profession, did the rest. The artist had lived up to his motto of employing art "like a weapon, like a scalpel so that it touches the viewer."¹⁶ It is understandable that such artistic intentions are forestalled by the well-oiled system of art dissemination. Whilst its interest consists in selling or preserving works of art, which is inseparably tied to their quality as an object, Gottfried Helnwein's focus of aesthetic endeavours is not the artistic object, the work of art, but human perception. In this sense, the subversive use of pictorial media in his complex oeuvre, whose effectiveness he really puts to the test, often even against their "technical" spirit, is an essential aesthetic principle. He drives the effects of the various techniques, drawing, watercolour, painting and photography, beyond the limits of their (at least hitherto) exploited possibilities. With the striking result that his watercolours have the bright transparency of slides, together with the delicateness of watercolours; his naturalistic-realistic paintings have the brilliance of slide projections; and finally, his photographs have the structural variety of abstract landscapes. In drawing, painting and photography, his art constantly moves between the poles of over-definition and dissolution, each motif being the subject of a process of transformation within this movement. In a set of triptychs, the artist has made this process explicit, for instance in "God of Superman" (1986) and "The Silent Glow of the AvantGarde", an enlarged copy of Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Frustrated Hope" in cool-frosty blue, framed by two self-portrait busts of the artist apparently covered in blood, an ambiguous ironic reference to his position in the controversial history of art. In the sensational series of photographic portraits entitled "Faces", a collection of images of pop idols from Mick Jagger to Keith Richards and Andy Warhol, of literary authors from William S. Burroughs to Charles Bukowski, of artists from Roy Lichtenstein to Roland Topor and Arno Breker, of politicians like Willy Brandt and the Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal and of film directors from Billy Wilder to Leni Riefenstahl - in other words, images from a very personal cultural universe - the artist proves himself to be one of the eminent portrait artists at the close of the

twentieth century. His images speak of something which the American writer William S. Burroughs addresses in a text for Helnwein on "the function of the artist", namely "the experience of surprised recognition...": They are able to "show the viewer what he knows, but does not know that he knows. Helnwein is a master of this surprised recognition."¹⁷

In the end, even the international art scene could no longer ignore the successful nonconformist from Austria; important exhibitions in renowned museums and galleries in Europe, America, and the whole western and eastern hemisphere testify to the status bestowed on his art. And the artist is now using the exhibition system with aplomb as a specific communication system in order to visualise his concepts. "I think that the diversity of aspects - realistic images, abstract series, watercolours, crayon drawings and photographs - is also important in my work; if one follows and compares all the things I have made down to the monochrome pictures, one realises that in the end, in spite of the different styles, media or materials there is a connection, there is the same statement in all of them."¹⁸ Consequently, he plans his major exhibitions as carefully prepared installations. Gottfried Helnwein embodies a new type of artist, an artist who does not see himself as a specialist although his artistic work revolves exclusively around a very concrete conceptual world whose facets he makes visible in the multifaceted world of his multimedia images. The outer and inner world of his art are inextricably interwoven, self and world correspond in a reciprocal relationship, and in an amazing, but enlightening way, his pictures put into perspective the belief of emperor Frederick II that the world confronts the self as a closed system: an apparently understandable philosophical error arising from the time. For even Descartes is now hardly more than an important historical figure. Not least thanks to the artists, modern thought has left them behind.
Bonn, March/April 1996.

Notes:

- 1 Vilém Flusser, "Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie", Göttingen, 7th edition, 1997
- 2 op. cit., p. 48
- 3 "Malerei muss sein wie Rockmusik", Gottfried Helnwein im Gespräch mit Andreas Mäckler, München 1992, p. 12
- 4 op. cit., p. 23
- 5 op. cit., p. 24
- 6 ibid.
- 7 op. cit., p. 26
- 8 op. cit., p. 27
- 9 The Belgian-french art-historian Thierry de Duve presented a similar view at the Association of International Critics of Art international congress in Macao in October 1995.
- 10 Helnwein/Mäckler op. cit., p. 47
- 11 op. cit., p. 50
- 12 "Helnwein quotes Helnwein" (text by Andreas Mäckler), Köln 1992, p. 36
- 13 Heiner Müller, in Kat. "Gottfried Helnwein, Arbeiten auf Papier", Essen, Ludwigsburg, Bremen 1989, p. 22
- 14 quoted from Helnwein, op. cit., p. 81
- 15 "Malerei muss sein wie Rockmusik", op. cit., p. 51
- 16 in conversation with the author
- 17 William S. Burroughs, in "Helnwein, Faces", Schaffhausen 1992. The Text was originally written for the artist's self-portraits.
- 18 "Malerei muss sein wie Rockmusik", op. cit., p. 117

Gottfried Helnwein, Retrospective at the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
01. Jan. 1997
Helnwein Monograph, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg