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Max Ernst's Encounter with *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*

Max Ernst brought Prinzhorn's book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* to Paris already in 1922, the year of its publication.¹ It was a present for his host Paul Eluard, who had assisted him in entering France with his passport, enabling his illegal presence in the country. The publication then came to occupy many artists around Breton, but surely none as strongly as Ernst himself.

He was one of the few in Paris who could read German, and he had been fascinated by this area for quite some time. At the start of his studies in Bonn from 1910–1914, where he increasingly concentrated on philosophy, philology, and art history, he also attended psychiatric lectures held for students from all departments. They were held at the Königliche Universitätsklinik für Psychische und Nervenkrankte, which was founded in 1908 on the grounds of the Provinzial Heil- und Pflegeanstalt in northern Bonn.² The lecture series was probably intended to improve psychiatry's reputation;³ it was most likely for the same reason that some asylum directors at the time were beginning to invite artists to come and sketch their patients.⁴

In his autobiographical notes, Ernst writes that the students at the Bonn institution could also participate in "practical jobs."⁵ Perhaps he thus encountered in one of the buildings the "astounding collection of sculptures and paintings" by asylum inmates, which "strongly touched and troubled the young man," "especially some figures kneaded from bread."⁶ He tried to find "streaks of genius in them," and decided "to explore fully those vague and dangerous lands confined by madness." But only "much later" he "discovered certain processes which helped him venture into these no-man's lands."⁷

Ernst even wanted to write a book on the subject.⁸ Supposedly he only abandoned the plan with the appearance of Prinzhorn's study.⁹ That

Abb. | fig. 2 Max Ernst

L'Imbecille | Der Schwachsinnige | *The Imbecile*

1961, Gips,

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf



his fascination for "insane art" continued can be seen not least in the later acquisition of such books which he for example lent to the New York exhibitions *Art of this Century and First Papers of Surrealism* (both in 1942).¹⁰ They are no longer extant, like the Bonn collection.¹¹ Is it still possible to show with what works Ernst dared to enter this "no man's land", inspired by asylum art?¹²

"Miracle Shepherd" and "Demon"

That Prinzhorn's book had an influence on Ernst has been claimed since Werner Spies sought to establish this influence in two works by the surrealist: a collage from the year 1931 that Ernst reproduced in various contexts with the title *Oedipe* (fig. 1 and cat. 14), as well as the bronze sculpture *Der Schwachsinnige* (*The Imbecile*) from 1961 (fig. 2).

For to the collage, which combines parts of a reproduction of the ancient *Thorn Remover* with a winged woman's torso and a lion head, Werner Spies claimed "morphological relations" to the watercolour drawing *Miracle Shepherd* (cat. 1911–1913) by August Natterer, whom Prinzhorn called Neter (cat. 13). "The silhouette-like rigidity, sitting in mid air, the animal on the lap (?) of the figure, and the lion's head in the hand of the 'Oedipe', with strongly emphasized legs and feet."¹³ Stefanie Poley pointed out in 1980 that the two figures are both without bodies, "that the animal is brought to an close relationship to the figure," and that Ernst's figure of 1937 also appears before a dark (blue) backdrop. In her eyes, Ernst even created in Oedipe a "symbol" that is "just as 'schizophrenic' as the representation by the schizophrenic artist."¹⁴ The relationship to the *Miracle Shepherd* becomes all the more meaningful if, like Spies, we see the collage as an "encoded self-portrait",¹⁵ and declare it "programmatic for Max Ernst's entire oeuvre."¹⁶

Spies declares Ernst's sculpture *The Imbecile* "obviously [...] inspired" by the wood sculpture *Devil* (before 1920) by Karl Genzel (fig. 3), and reads the title of the former work as an allusion to the asylum inmate.¹⁷ Others have accepted this view, but Jürgen Pech has suggested that *The Imbecile* is "not a mentally ill person, but a priest," "possessed by two small figures who in their different postures could be seen as a devout and a free soul." The reference to Genzel's work, according to him, allows us to see a devil in the priest. He interprets the "paraphrase" (Poley)¹⁸ as part of an encoded message: "Max Ernst plays with formal similarity to indirectly create a system of explanations."¹⁹

Other authors have sought to find more motifs from the Prinzhorn collection in Ernst's

work. For example, Stephen Prokopoff found sculptures by Genzel to be models for the sculptures *Habakuk* (ca. 1934) and *Mondsüchtig* (1944).²⁰ And Roger Cardinal suggested that Ernst's collage novels reminded him of both the visual stories by Gustav Sievers²¹ and the "uncanny military scenes" by Oscar Voll (cat. 74 and 75). At the same time, he concluded Ernst's works reflected "in general the view of the outsider" and only rarely quoted literally.²²

But in fact, the "literal" links of *Oedipe* and *The Imbecile* to Natterer and Genzel could speak against the postulated profound influence of asylum art on Ernst. For the similarities focused on are so striking that they seem like arbitrary, coincidental quotations. They alone hardly justify the emphatic formulation of the artist that he "ventured into these no-man's lands" beyond the limits of madness. Where can the general "view of the outsider" be found in Ernst? His reference to the later discovery of "certain processes" provides a starting point. It has up until now been used to refer to certain techniques, like frottage and grattage, that enable the temporary suspension of conscious control in artistic creation.²³ But it also could refer to Prinzhorn's discussion of Natterer in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.

Prinzhorn's Confusion by Natterer

August Natterer has a special place in Prinzhorn's book (as "August Neter"). He is one of ten "schizophrenic masters" to each of whom the author dedicates an entire section. As always, a brief description of the patient's biography and pathology is followed by an extensive discussion of the works. Here, Prinzhorn allows the artist in a "significant body of text"²⁴

to speak for himself, quotes from his own writings and an interview. And while he otherwise emphasizes the works' aesthetic quality and makes parallels to high art, when it comes to Natterer he states that the "rational as well as aesthetic" path that normally would allow "us to find our way into schizophrenic imaginative complexes [...] are blocked." Thus the beholder is here forced "to confront the specifically schizophrenic emotion [...] helplessly".²⁵

The Natterer chapter leads to this admission of helplessness.²⁶ Prinzhorn presents ever more complex drawings, up to the *Miracle-Shepherd* (cat. 13), which is the only work by the asylum inmate illustrated across an entire page. Here especially, the author attempts to explore the quality of "strangeness and the supernatural" which in Natterer "agitates and fascinates us so inexplicably". He attributes this to the fact that "the characteristic quality lies in the organic form resulting from the partial drawings of organs, which however are not centred anywhere. The fake organisms are neatly drawn to completion and closed on all sides, but once again with the pointless logic which leads a rational man into an endless maze."²⁷

Why was Prinzhorn so shaken by this single drawing? He was "agitated" by the fact that in the case of the *Miracle Shepherd* his main instrument of art reception failed: empathy, or what he called *Wesensschau*, or "essential inspection".²⁸ As one of the key reasons for the failure of aesthetic acceptance, he mentions the difficulty of identifying with what is represented as a counterpart. Prinzhorn experienced this as a crisis, and projected this crisis onto the artist. Wilhelm Worringer had already used this problematic figure of argumentation in his influential dissertation *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908), when he diagnosed behind the abstract in art, which

he experienced as impossible to empathize with, the anxiety of the producer.²⁹

But Natterer's works not only refuse empathy. They break with everything that the beholder was accustomed to in terms of motifs and style. Natterer, a technician and electrical mechanic, drew in the sheets presented by Prinzhorn important moments of a hallucination that he had once seen in 1907 in the clouds above Stuttgart's Rotebühl barracks. Within half an hour, he saw 10,000 amazing, but ultimately puzzling images, which for Natterer were "manifestations of the last judgement."³⁰ A witch appeared as an evil world creator in constantly changing attire,³¹ a doubting Thomas whose head was first a 42 cm Grenade, then becoming a tiara and finally a pile of straw (cat. 15),³² and a rabbit that sprang from a cloud onto the "world axis" (cat. 76).³³ The most complex was the genesis of the *Miracle Shepherd* (cat. 13): "At first a cobra was in the air [...]. And then came the foot [...]. Then the other foot came. It was made from a turnip. [...] On this second foot appeared the face of my father-in-law in W.: the world miracle. The forehead was creased – and the seasons of the year came from it. Then it became a tree. The bark of the tree was broken off in front so that the gap formed the mouth of the face. The branches of the tree formed the hair. Then there appeared feminine genitals between the leg and the foot, those break off the man's foot, i.e., sin comes from the woman and makes the man fall. One foot is propped against the sky, that means the fall into hell. [...] Then came a Jew, a shepherd who had a sheepskin wrapped around him. There was wool on him, those were a lot of W's, i.e., much woe will come. [...] I am the shepherd – the Good Shepherd – God!"³⁴

To record these flowing visionary images, years later Natterer used what was familiar to

him, technical drawing with compass and ruler, to attempt to reconstruct and thus understand what he had seen.³⁵ This kind of analytic recreation of a human-animal-vegetable-technical metamorphosis was new in art. It surpassed the fantastical that had developed since symbolism and art nouveau. Even the original mechanistic metaphors of love and erotics that the New York Dadaists drew and painted in the First World War – most famously *Large Glass* (1915) by Marcel Duchamp (fig. 4) – used much less heterogeneous material.

Interestingly, Prinzhorn's violent reaction not only betrays a reaction against the unfamiliar. He was "agitated" by the Natterer drawings and "fascinated." Their demonization as something "strange" and "supernatural" is ambivalent. His including Natterer among the schizophrenic masters of his book also shows that the author had a high estimation for the artistic value of these drawings.

Like many committed artists of the post-war period, Prinzhorn sought for a new cultural beginning after the desolation of values in the madness of the battles of annihilation. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* propagates as such the "artistry" of asylum inmates, for it was claimed to be more "authentic," more "real" than contemporary professional art, and the author, true to his credo that art is essentially expression, was primarily referring to expressionism. Contemporary art strove for "inspired creation" as could be found in the asylum works, but only "ends up with intellectual substitutes",³⁶ that is, not creating purely from the unconscious, as did the asylum inmates, according to Prinzhorn.

The tenth "schizophrenic master", favoured by him, Franz Karl Bühler (Pohl), embodied for him such an "innocent" expressive artist (fig. 5); he saw in him a second Van Gogh.³⁷ Other "art-

istries" prominent in the book also show striking affinities to expressionism.³⁸ Natterer's drawings differ the most from these. Here, the pencil does not follow any inspiration of the moment, but careful planning. Instead of avoiding reason, in these drawings it is almost systematically kept in check – as in the works of surrealism.

It is difficult to understand Prinzhorn's strong reaction today, because we see the *Miracle Shepherd* through the eyes of surrealism, just as it was already appropriated for the movement in 1938 by the *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme* (fig. 6).³⁹ The drawing must have been created at some point between 1911 and 1913, years before the formation of the group around André Breton. And when Prinzhorn wrote *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1919–21, surrealism was still a purely literary movement, of which he presumably knew nothing.

In the confusion experienced by the art historian and doctor, we can see the impact of Natterer's strange visual inventions on an "innocent" beholder, who all the same sensed that the drawings of the electrical mechanic corresponded more to the times than images by the other asylum inmates, even if they were stylistically more familiar to him.

The Development of a Compositional Technique

Indeed, what Prinzhorn writes about the composition and the impact of the *Miracle Shepherd* reads like a description of one of the compositional principles of surrealism. Ernst called it "the phenomenon discovered by the surrealists" that "the convergence of two (or more) apparently alien elements on a plane that is foreign to their being provokes the strongest poetic sparks."⁴⁰

Prinzhorn grasps in Natterer the combination of the heterogeneous (on a ground that does not form a sensible context) as a “fake organism,” which “is drawn to completion and closed on all sides”, but not “centred”, and calls this “pointless logic”. But what the surrealists call a resultant “poetry” concerns Prinzhorn in its impact as a short circuit of traditional aesthetics and rationality with the result of deep – if for some fascinating – insecurity (“endless maze”).

Prinzhorn thus explains a technique of design that Ernst began to use at the same time as a Dadaist practice. He was surely inspired to do so also by illustrations from the journal *Valori plastici*, which he came to know in 1919.⁴¹ Perhaps impressions from the Bonn collection with pictures and sculptures by asylum inmates exerted some influence here.⁴² For the “unmediated juxtaposition” was, as Jörg Katerndahl has shown, since the end of the nineteenth century for many psychiatrists the most important characteristic of asylum art,⁴³ which is why corresponding examples surely could be found in Bonn. Or had Ernst actually, as MacGregor considers “highly likely,”⁴⁴ already then visited the Heidelberg collection, seen drawings by Natterer in the original and spoken with Prinzhorn about these impressions?

Whether or not this is the case, the play with the combination of heterogeneous visual material goes through various steps of development in Ernst, and only the pictures from the years 1922/23 show the greatest proximity to Natterer's drawings. The artist begins in 1919 with works that combine cliché prints with frottages of print blocks and other things, he then paints over prints and works on collages with details of plants and machines (fig. 7). These early, playful sheets are not only reminiscent of the *pittura metafisica* of De Chirico and Carlo Carrà,

but also of the aforementioned mechanisation of eroticism in the work of Duchamp and other New York artists beginning in 1915 (Fig. 4).

In 1920 and 1921, Ernst then combined people and animals from collage material of various provenances. To heighten the beholder's amazement, he photographed and reworked the results, increasingly veiling the process of creation. With the same intention in mind, in 1921 he returned to painting. The first painting was of the collage *La préparation de la colle d'os*. About this “very precise enlargement in oil paint on canvas,” the artist wrote at the time, “the image is highly colourful, and of course seems much more insane than the small reproduction.”⁴⁵

“Insane” for Ernst is surely not just the enlargement. Through the oil painting, the visual invention seems more than in the photographs of the collages as if made of one cast, the absurd appears more real. Increasingly now, human bodies penetrate Ernst's works, but at first usually in the sense of a collage cut as a fragment or headless. It is only in the next year that the artist begins a series of paintings in which human bodies are either amalgamated with machines or other bodies (fig. 8). This requires specifically painterly means, and therefore goes clearly beyond the more or less free depiction of collages. The free combination of objects reaches a new density that is also expressed in terms of content. While an ironic aspect remains, the images now seem more serious and more substantial.

The Fall of the Angel (1923, cat. 16) belongs to this group. It is not as obviously similar to Natterer's *Miracle Shepherd* as is the collage *Oedipe*, and yet it has just as much in common with the visual inventions of the electrical mechanic as the later work by Ernst. A male and a female



Abb. |fig. 8 Max Ernst

Es lebe die Liebe oder Pays charmant |

Long Live Love or Pays charmant, 1923

Öl auf Leinwand | Oil on canvas, 131,4 × 98,1 cm

Saint Louis Art Museum

nude float before a cloudy backdrop that is reminiscent of architecture or a piece of furniture. The bodies are interwoven, facing opposite directions. The head of the woman is replaced by an oversized nose. A longish box and a wheel in her armpit direct our gaze towards a wing-shaped shock of hair.

The intertwining of the bodies can be read as a sexual encounter, even if their position speaks against free will and genitality. Inexorably, the beholder draws the conclusion that the fall mentioned was caused by the act of sin. And with the oversized organ of smell, the emphasized armpits, and the shock of hair, which traditionally stand for sensuality, the woman is (once more) blamed for it.

The floating of the unclear jumble of limbs, the lack of a head, and the placement of the oversized nose are equally reminiscent of the construction of the *Miracle Shepherd* as the overall composition of the double nude. Thematically speaking, the works are also related, as Natterer recognizes in his work an allegory of sorts on man's fall into sin through woman ("the woman brings man to fall", "descent into hell").

The obvious inspiration of the painting by the drawing reproduced in Prinzhorn shows that Ernst was strongly affected by his reading of the relevant chapter in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. He probably first became clear through this text of the actual dimension of an artistic technique that he already circled around for several years

as a Dadaist through the combination of various copy and collage techniques. He understood how a corresponding combinatorics when the heterogeneous starting material was no longer so easy to recognize as in his works up to 1922. The translation of collages to painting in 1921 had made him surely more receptive for this realisation. Only now did he feel able to venture into "those vague and dangerous lands confined by madness." In 1922–1923, Ernst begins to explore the psychological depths by way of art with a new stringency. The step for example from the early collages to the later collage novels like *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) is unthinkable without the insights provided by *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.

Notes

- 1 Werner Spies was the first to write about Ernst and Prinzhorn in his book *Max Ernst: Collagen, Inventar und Widerspruch* [1974] (Cologne, 1988), 32.
- 2 Eduard Trier, "Was Max Ernst studiert hat" [1979], in *Max Ernst in Köln: Die rheinische Kunstszene bis 1922*, (Cologne, 1980); see also Klemens Dieckhöfer, "Max Ernst und seine Begegnung mit Medizin und Psychologie," *Max Ernst in Köln*, 69–73.
- 3 Dieckhöfer, "Max Ernst und seine Begegnung mit Medizin und Psychologie," 70.
- 4 Thomas Röske, "Expressionismus und Psychiatrie," *Expressionismus und Wahnsinn* (Munich, 2003), 13.
- 5 The following quotations are all drawn from Max Ernst, "An Informal Life of M.E. (as told by himself to a young friend)", *Max Ernst*, ed. William S. Liebermann (New York, 1961), 9, and Max Ernst, "Notes pour une biographie," *Écritures* (Paris, 1970), 20.
- 6 The encounter with the sculptures by the mentally ill "kneaded from bread" Ernst mentions for the time period 1909–1914 also in "Biographische Notizen (Wahrheiten und Lügengewebe)", *Max Ernst* (Cologne, 1963), 24.
- 7 In the French version of the text, Ernst places the terms "procédés" as well as "no man's land" in quotation marks, see Ernst, *Écritures*, 20.
- 8 Ernst, "An Informal Life of M.E.", 9.

- 9 Patrick Waldberg, Max Ernst (Paris, 1958), 64. See also Lothar Fischer, *Max Ernst in Selbstzeugnissen und Bild-dokumenten* (Reinbek, 1968), 19.
- 10 Jürgen Pech, "'Diese unbestimmten und gefährlichen Gebiete'. Max Ernsts Anmerkungen zum Wahn", *Kunst und Wahn* (Cologne, 1997), 333.
- 11 Trier, "Was Max Ernst studiert hat," 66. MacGregor speculates that they could have been given to Heidelberg around 1919–1920. See John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, 1989), 355, note 29. But there is no evidence of this.
- 12 I already have briefly presented the main argument of this essay in "Vorbild und Gegenbild. Oskar Schlemmer, Max Ernst und Jean Dubuffet reagieren auf Werke der Sammlung Prinzhorn", *Im Rausch der Kunst: Dubuffet und Art Brut* (Düsseldorf, 2005), 150–152.
- 13 Spies, *Max Ernst*, 183–184. MacGregor assumes that it was Ernst himself who pointed this out to Spies, see MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 356, note 44.
- 14 Stefanie Poley, "'... und nicht mehr lassen mich diese Dinge los'. Prinzhorns Buch 'Bildnerie der Geisteskranken' und seine Wirkung in der modernen Kunst", *Die Prinzhorn-Sammlung: Bilder, Skulpturen, Texte aus psychiatrischen Anstalten* (ca. 1890–1920) (Königstein am Taunus, 1980), 65; see also Poley, "Das Vorbild des Ver-rückten. Kunst in Deutschland zwischen 1910 und 1945", *Von Chaos und Ordnung der Seele. Ein interdisziplinärer Dialog über Psychiatrie und moderne Kunst*, eds. Otto Benkert and Peter Gorsen (Berlin, 1990), 80.
- 15 Spies, *Max Ernst*, 184.
- 16 Pech, "'Diese unbestimmten und gefährlichen Gebiete'", 340.
- 17 Spies, *Max Ernst*, 32.
- 18 Poley, "'... und nicht mehr lassen mich diese Dinge los'", 66.
- 19 Pech, "'Diese unbestimmten und gefährlichen Gebiete'", 340.
- 20 Stephen Prokopoff, "The Prinzhorn Collection and Modern Art", *The Prinzhorn Collection* (Urbana-Champaign, 1984), 18. MacGregor even argued that the influence of Brendel could be "traced in Ernst's sculpture," see MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 281.
- 21 On Siever's visual stories, see Monika Jagfeld, *Outside In: Zeitgeschehen in Werken der Sammlung Prinzhorn am Beispiel Rudolf Heinrichshofen* (Weimar, 2008), 62–68.
- 22 Roger Cardinal, "Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject", in *Parallel Visions. Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Princeton, 1992), 107.
- 23 Hal Foster, "'No Man's Land': On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Insane", in *The Prinzhorn Collection: Traces on the Wunderblock*, The Drawing Center (New York, 2000), 9–22, 14.
- 24 Marielène Weber, "August Natterer, ein schizophrener Künstler: Zur Rezeption", *August Natterer: Die Beweiskraft der Bilder, Leben und Werk: Deutungen*, eds. Inge Jádi and Bettina Brand-Claussen (Heidelberg 1999), 347. Weber was the first to provide an exact analysis of Prinzhorn's depiction of Natterer.
- 25 Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 171.
- 26 Weber, "August Natterer, ein schizophrener Künstler", 346.
- 27 Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 170 f.
- 28 For more on Prinzhorn's methodology, see Thomas Röske, *Der Arzt als Künstler. Ästhetik und Psychotherapie bei Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933)* (Bielefeld, 1995), 35–40.
- 29 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung. Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* [1908] (Munich, 1976), 49.
- 30 Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 160.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 163–165.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 On the interpretation of the images, see Ferenc Jádi, "Noblesse oblige: Unsichtbares und Unsagbares in Natterers Leben und Werk", *August Natterer*, ed. Jádi and Brand-Claussen, 215–322.
- 36 Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 272.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 286. See Monika Jagfeld, "Geistertänzer: Franz Karl Bühler – Ein 'Geisteskranker' als Expressionist", in: *Expressionismus und Wahnsinn*, 88–99.
- 38 Bettina Brand-Claussen, "Prinzhorns 'Bildnerie der Geisteskranken' – ein spätexpressionistisches Manifest", *Vision und Revision einer Entdeckung*, (Heidelberg 2001), 11–31.
- 39 André Breton/Paul Eluard, *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*, (Paris 1938), 73.
- 40 Max Ernst, "Was ist Surrealismus?" [1934], *Max Ernst Retrospektive 1979*, ed. Werner Spies, (Munich, 1979), 157.
- 41 Spies, *Max Ernst*, 35.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 31; see also Poley, "'... und nicht mehr lassen mich diese Dinge los'", 78.
- 43 Jörg Katerndahl, "Bildnerie von Schizophrenen": *Zur Problematik der Beziehungsetzung von Psyche und Kunst im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim, 2005), 68 and 91.
- 44 MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 279.
- 45 Letter from Max Ernst to Tristan Tzara, Cologne, 10 October 1921, quoted in: Spies, *Max Ernst*, 237.