

FIGURATION CRITIQUE

On the Art of Günther Berlejung

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1.

In July 2007 Günther Berlejung and I accompanied a group of Landau art students to the *documenta 12* in Kassel (Germany). We always followed the same principle in exploring the individual exhibition spaces: the trip participants first had time to take a look around on their own; then we all reflected together as to which of the artworks we would like to analyze and delve into in a group discussion. In the Aue Pavilion we then chanced upon the work that was to become our favorite: Romuald Hazoumé's installation »Dream.« It consists of an almost 14-meter-long boat built from 421 canisters, a ca. 30-square-meter color photograph of an African river village, as well as several floor inscriptions in four different languages. Hazoumé thematizes Africans' desire for a better life in Europe and the fate of thousands of refugees; his installation is a decidedly political statement on Africa's current development. We all found the idea of the work and the visual aesthetics of its implementation both successful and original – and we were not alone in this estimation! »Dream« turned into one of the key works of the exhibition, it was acquired by the State of Hesse and the city of Kassel for the »Neue Galerie« (Hesse Kassel museum landscape), and the Benin-born artist was awarded the 2007 Arnold Bode Prize.

2.

In a formal sense, Romuald Hazoumé's installation »Dream« reminds one of Günther Berlejung's 1996 installation »Stranded Hope (Scene of the Fire II)« (Fig. p. 52): a sculpture of charred wood and iron resting on two blocks of wood, reminiscent of a dugout canoe from man's early history, stands in front of a series of computer-animated black-and-white photographs displaying wrecks at the historical ship graveyard of the Breton city of Lorient. »The archaic-looking sculpture, in

combination with the photographs, induces associations of destruction and decay, which have accompanied history since time immemorial.«¹ This work contains essential characteristics of the art of Günther Berlejung: work in and with various media; the inclusion of – actually or ostensibly – found pieces; critical engagement with man and/or human traces; and, finally, intensifying a concrete event symbolically such that it becomes a statement of universal validity.

3.

»Figuration Critique« is the name of a French group of artists that was founded about 30 years ago. The artists, who mainly live in Paris, work figuratively and are especially committed to the idea of man. Günther Berlejung joined this group and has exhibited with them a number of times in the Paris Grand Palais. The works displayed in Paris include six, large-format drawings, created between 1986 and 1995 (Fig. pp. 26–31). The two earliest drawings »The last peregrine falcon over Wounded Knee Creek« (Fig. p. 26) and »Attempt to fly over stony masses« (Fig. p. 27), belong to a series in which Berlejung thematizes the destruction of man by man. In Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890, the U.S. Army perpetrated a massacre of Lakota Indians. »The last peregrine falcon over Wounded Knee Creek« is dominated by the motif of a bird falling from the sky, whose dark form gains dimension against the white background of the paper. The impression is created that you can practically grab the bird, a feeling strengthened by the minutely drawn details of its shadow. The form of the bird – modeled on that of a sparrow – is repeated in scaled-down form in a second bird at the top edge of the drawing. To its left, a round form with hinted-at crosshairs brings to mind the muzzle of a gun. The plummeting birds symbolize the death and destruction that man brings over the earth.

The four other drawings (Fig. pp. 28–31), also drawn with graphite pencil, colored pencil, and acrylic, come from the »Power and Impotence« series. Here the human figure is at the forefront. In »What can the dog do about it?« (Fig. p. 28) and »Petrifaction« (Fig. p. 30), it is the man in the suit, who for Berlejung represents anonymous power and male force. The steeled upper body of a faceless body-builder in briefs, cut off by the field's edge, appears in »Briefs, briefs, hurrah« (Fig. p. 29).

A second figure stands next to it in a typical body-builder pose, and a third shape is hinted at on the image's right edge. In these drawings, parts drawn photorealistically and true to detail are found next to sketchy, informally gestured passages in which the figures increasingly dissolve into blurry outlines. Thus in »Human Trace II« (Fig. p. 31) the animal skull at the bottom edge of the image is reproduced with just about photographic exactitude, whereas the figure at the left is only suggested by a few bold contours, and the figure at the right is no more than a dark silhouette. By use of these different modes and techniques of drawing on one and the same sheet, the artist succeeds not only in creating exceedingly attractive works in formal-aesthetic terms, but also in making certain substantive aspects clear – for instance, the process of »petrification« (Fig. p. 30) referred to in the work's title. Günther Berlejung masterfully combines figurative and nonrepresentational modes of presentation, even if his art never crosses the threshold to pure abstraction. On the contrary, the term widely used in French, »semi-figuratif,« strikes me as fitting.

Working in series is also typical for Berlejung. In 2003 he produced the series »Perpetrators or Victims« on canvases in the format of 150 x 100 cm (Fig. pp. 32–33). The artist employs acrylic and the black lead pencil »Pierre noire,« whose black is very intense, rich, and velvety matt. The conflict between the sexes is the theme here. The individual in mass society is also thematized, which Berlejung expresses by repeating the head and body motifs two and more times. The motif of the man in the suit, with which we are already acquainted, appears again. The reduced color scheme, with bright colors sparingly used as accents, is typical for Berlejung's drawings.

A series created in 2005 consists of a total of four drawings, drawn with watercolor brush, color, and oil on handmade paper. It carries as its title the famous quote from Albert Einstein: »Some people spend their whole lives trying to understand women; others take up much less difficult things, e.g., the theory of relativity« (Fig. pp. 34–35). The primary motif is a nude study of a woman that is set in a (color) landscape suggested by a horizontal line. The drawings alternate between nature-like object depiction in individual parts of the nude figures and completely free dispersion of abstract motifs in the landscapes of color and form surrounding them.

The color scheme is limited to yellow, ocher, black, and violet tones. The story of Icarus, passed down by Ovid, in which Icarus – in his escape from Crete – flew so high that the sun melted the wax of his wings and he fell into the sea, is considered the epitome of human hybris and has always fascinated artists. In 2006 Berlejung created a series of drawings on this topic, which, according to his own statements, mesmerized him, since Icarus stands equally for the desire for freedom and the chance to realize it as well as for the danger of failure and, ultimately, death. Berlejung subjects Icarus to a metamorphosis, transforming him into a bird and a woman (Fig. pp. 36–37).

»World on a Wire,« the two-part television film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder from 1973, in which people live in a simulated world without being aware of it, inspired Günther Berlejung in 2008 to the series »Puppet Show.« Here he drew with black crayon on tracing paper, and then put two such pieces of paper on top of each other (Fig. pp. 38–39). Fiercely whirling, dancing, running, standing and reclining women populate these dynamic compositions. The figures look in part like marionettes that are moved by an unseen hand. Space and time, up and down cease to exist. The subtle effect of the drawings is determined on the one hand by the dynamism of the scenes and on the other by the gray-black contrast that arises by placing the tracing papers on top of each other. Building on the topic and technique of »Puppet Show,« Berlejung created the »Skin« cycle in 2009 in a square format of 40 x 40 cm. Three layers drawn with acrylic and black crayon lie on top of one another and are embedded in lacquer, so that they actually feel like leather skin and have a haptic quality to them (Fig. pp. 40–41). Once again we encounter dynamically moving, female shapes, cut off by the picture's margins, in image spaces that seem virtual in character. Again there is no narrative context; the figures move in isolation, more next to each other than with each other. They are close to each other and literally overlap, but they remain very far apart.

4.

Since the middle of the 1990s, what has now become an extensive sculptural oeuvre has arisen beside the drawing and graphic works. Here Günther Berlejung

has developed an experimental technique and use of forms all his own. He neither moulds sculptures out of soft, formable material such as clay or plaster, in order to have it cast in metal, nor does he make sculptures from stone or wood by stripping away material. For this reason the designations of sculptor or wood carver would be totally inapplicable. In fact, Berlejung always puts his sculptures together out of found pieces of wood and iron, and supplements them with »objets trouvés« found in nature or in scrap yards, such as bones, animal skulls, leather, and feathers. The starting point of the artistic process is the fascination of materials that already have their own history, carry traces of this history on and in themselves, materials that others have thrown away and declared dead, materials that the artist brings back to life. In Berlejung's own words: »The fascination of materials, their beauty and haptic qualities, was apparently present, according to the statements of my mother, since earliest childhood. For this reason I don't limit myself to just one material in my sculptures. The material wood has much to do with my love of plants and of nature and with my long preoccupation with the myths and rituals of »primitive peoples,« in which wood is alive and consists of much more than simple matter.«²

Berlejung's working or creative process is a protracted and painstaking one, especially since he makes everything himself. The wooden pieces found are sawed, glued, pegged together, sanded, partially painted with acrylics, and sanded again. It is only at the end that the wood receives its characteristic, smooth, velvety soft surface, which sets it off from the surfaces of the other materials used, such as that of the hard, coarse, and cool iron. Usually Berlejung's sculptures are slender, upright, stele-like constructs, reminiscent of totems or other cultic objects, resting on iron plates, which, in turn, are occasionally equipped with wheels, so that they can be moved. Their anthropomorphic shape is underscored by the headlike form of the found pieces; in addition, titles such as »Also a Kind of Human« (Fig. p. 44), »Warrior« (Fig. pp. 48–49), »Watchman« (Fig. p. 50), and »Hero« (Fig. p. 51) make it plain that Berlejung sees his sculptures as symbolically signifying man. In formal terms, they are located on the border between abstraction and figuration.

Some of Günther Berlejung's sculptures are figure groups of two, three, or more individual sculptures. This holds, for instance, for the three-part work »Ubu

roi, sa femme et sa fille« of 2001/2002 (Fig. p. 43). The »heads« of King Ubu, his wife, and his daughter are formed from iron hooks. »Ubu Roi« is the title of a play by the French writer Alfred Jarry. The main figure is a cowardly, gluttonous officer who is incited by his wife to murder the king and ascend to the throne. The piece is interpreted as a parody of man's thirst for power and his tyrannous ways, and it is precisely this timeless aspect that interests Berlejung. »Hunter Latin« is a further three-piece figure group from 2005 (Fig. pp. 46–47). Here the »heads« consist of animal skulls or antler parts. Quite different is another three-piece sculpture group, dated 2002; »Human Tool« (Fig. p. 42) is made of stapled wood and its parts lie on the ground, calling to mind maimed human torsos, and thus fragmented bodies. As a young man, Berlejung was fascinated by Michelangelo's »David,« but even more so by »Non finito,« the unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo, for example, the two slaves of the tomb of Julius. Berlejung: »The incomplete, the traces of labor, how the implied figures wind their way out of the stone. Perhaps a part of my fondness for the beauty of material and the often fragmentary in my works result from this.«³

For example, »Angels« from 2002 (Fig. p. 45), »Warrior« (Fig. pp. 48–49), and »Watchman« (Fig. p. 50) are each formed from two individual sculptures, whereby in the last of these works, the iron pieces on top are African exchange currency from the 19th century. The most recent, two-piece sculpture is »Hero« from 2009 (Fig. p. 51), in which one element leans against the wall; in the other element the wooden corpus is completely covered with leather – an old flour scoop forms the »head.« A find of a special kind was worked into the single figure »Also a Kind of Human« (Fig. p. 44): a rifle butt. Berlejung »compresses« into his sculptures existential experiences such as threat, vulnerability, destruction, and death, but also the desire for beauty and sensuality.

5.

In a consistent further development of the spatial aspect of three-dimensional works, Günther Berlejung expands his sculptures and sculpture ensembles into installations that extend across and into space. In doing so, he also integrates photography

and video as media – as for example in the work already expounded upon above, »Stranded Hope (Scene of the Fire II)« from 1996 (Fig. p. 52).

»Seeing time« from 2003 (Fig. p. 53) came into being in the context of a project in which 11 artists were invited to select a chair from the collection of the Kurpfälzisches Museum der Stadt Heidelberg (Electoral Palatinate Museum of the City of Heidelberg) and to work artistically with it. Berlejung's contribution consisted of an old, unrestored chair with a tatty seat, three digital prints, a wooden object, and video film running on a monitor. The artist relates the (fictional) history of the chair in the digital prints and the video. Thus the chair reappears in the digital prints – which were drawn on the computer, given an alien cast, and printed out on handmade paper – occupied by female figures, who could have been involved in the history of the chair. The video also recounts a possible history of the chair: a dog prowls around, people come and go, the chair remains the center of attention. The monitor here is perched atop a wooden object made of used bits of wood. The theme of the installation are the traces of history that are deposited in the objects of daily use and which ultimately always recount human (hi)stories.

Berlejung handles contemporary history in an impressive installation from 2004 »And they came with ships and cannons,« which consists of two video cameras and nine sculptures made of wood, iron, and animal bones from Ireland (Fig. pp. 54–55). Let us quote Ulrike Lehmann's interpretation here: »Political reverberations with regard to the recent Iraq war are also found in the impressive, multipart and multimedial installation »And they came with ships and cannons: by Günther Berlejung. Steles of wood, bone, and steel symbolize soldiers and victims. Their vehicle, the boat, refers to »the coming there« (Berlejung), to the invasion of the Americans in Iraq. A hubbub can be heard on two video monitors, which is accompanied by ever-returning large-scale images of the mouth. Here and there short torture scenes from the Abu Ghraib prison are blended in. The widely opened mouth that follows almost seems to want to give expression to the inaudible screams and accusations of the victims. The partially animated and distorted images become traces of a real circumstance, of an historical event of the most recent time.«⁴ Some of the sculptures appear again later in other contexts, for instance, in »Hunter Latin.«

6.

In the field of printed graphics, Günther Berlejung favors gravure printing, whereby he likes to experiment by combining various techniques. In the two, large-format sheets »Means of Life (Food) I–II« from 2007 (Fig. pp. 56–57) he combines classic line etching with carborundum. In this complicated technique, synthetic resin granulate is applied to a previously etched plate and molded. The applied mass binds fast to the printing plate as it dries. Upon printing, the plates laminated in this way leave impressions in the paper, and this gives rise to a haptic effect. »Means of Life (Food) I–II« was printed in six colors from a plate. In terms of motifs and themes, the etchings are closely related to the drawing series »Puppet Show« (Fig. pp. 38–39) and »Skin« (Fig. pp. 40–41).

This also holds for the most recent cycle, entitled »Everyone trapped in himself, I–III« from 2008 (Fig. pp. 58–60). The sheets have a 80 x 60 cm format, and are thus relatively large-scale formatting for printed graphics. The first sheet of the series is in seven colors, the other two are in eight colors, printed from two plates each, whereby the color tone blue-red-brown predominates. The artist combines here the various gravure printing techniques: aquatint, carborundum, dry-point, and line etching. We are already acquainted with several of the motifs from the drawing series, namely the – partially duplicated – female figures, who stand and stretch their arms upwards, or sit and present the observer with opened thighs. These motifs are combined with images of duplicated (Sheet II) and »triplicated« (Sheet III) fettered and tortured prisoners, which the media disseminated from the Guantanamo U.S. military prison in Cuba. It is this confrontation of vibrant female bodies with humiliated and tormented male figures, robbed of their individuality, that shocks us, that gets under our skin. The drawings make reference to the most recent historical events and contain a decidedly political message.

7.

Günther Berlejung took up his studies of art education and art history precisely in 1968, and it is that phase of profound upheaval in the society and politics of the Federal Republic of Germany which also left a mark on his artistic approach. The

demand on art, that it should critically engage itself with society, that it should make its effect on society, was intensified at this time. Peter U. Schubert correctly pointed out in 1986 that the studies of art educator »promoted a responsible stance vis-à-vis others, which in my opinion has remained a constant in defining his work up until today. When I talk of Günther Berlejung as artist, I cannot disregard the teacher.«⁵ This continues to be the case in 2009, regardless of the fact that Berlejung has constantly expanded his artistic spectrum, and further developed and transformed his use of forms and modes of expression. Berlejung is an artist who critically reflects upon his time and its art, who takes up contemporary history in his works and takes a position, without agitating for a cause. On the contrary he turns – as his often polysemous titles also demonstrate – the concrete into the general, he seeks the existential within the seemingly everyday. His preoccupation with man and his image, caught as they are between the demands of individuality and society, is the focus of his work. Günther Berlejung's art cannot be pigeonholed; it is just as poetic as it is irritating and unsettling, permanently challenging its viewer. »Art is to change what you expect from it,« reads the motto of the American art dealer and author Seth Siegelau.⁶

¹ Theresia Kiefer, »Magische Welten,« in: Günther Berlejung, »Magische Welten.« Exhibition catalogue of the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 2000, pp. 3–5, here p. 4.

² Quoted from *ibid.*

³ Günther Berlejung, e-mail message of 28 November 2009 to the author.

⁴ Ulrike Lehmann, »Spüren – aufspüren, nachspüren. Ein Thema mit Blick nach vorn,« in: Künstlergruppe »Der Anker e.V.,« Ludwigshafen. Exhibition catalogue of the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 2005, pp. 8–15, here p. 10f.

⁵ Peter U. Schubert, in: Günther Berlejung, *Zeichnungen*. Exhibition catalogue, Scharpf-Galerie of the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 1986/1987, pp. 7–9, here p. 7.

⁶ Quoted from: Peter Herbstweuth, *Zur Kunst im öffentlichen Raum*. March 2003 (<http://www1.bpb.de/veranstaltungen/6BD7SV.html>; accessed on 25 November 2009).