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Touching the sublime

Historical points of reference in Cornelius Völker's paintings

"You can't control the way art history extends into the present. "1

It's easy for Jeff Wall, artist and a doctor of art history, to talk. His large-format photographs, at first sight often reminiscent of snapshots, only reveal their ingeniously arranged references to art tradition upon closer examination - and with the requisite background knowledge. It may be that Jeff Wall doesn't always consciously select these references and integrate them in his pictures; he may well have absorbed the stock of historical art motifs from the early modern age onwards, exploiting them intuitively in the composition of his pictures. At any rate, the history of art represents an important source of inspiration for his photographs presented in light boxes since 1978. To be precise, his resorting to exquisite models counterpoints sharply with the forms of image presentation derived from advertising. Jeff Wall's pictures gain a large part of their impact from the contrast between High and Low.

A critical and considered recourse to history, the productive treatment of the past, has always been a central feature of art. And this applies particularly to so-called Postmodernism and all the more so to Postmodernist painting. For instance, Martin Kippenberger declared in an interview: "In painting you have to see what's left of the windfalls to paint" 2. And by "windfalls" he meant the few motifs not yet exhausted in the history of painting - such as eggs or fried eggs that the ironic Kippenberger has consequently depicted at length in his works. The deliberate search for motifs à la Kippenberger, on the one hand, and the supposedly intuitive quoting of historical models by someone like Wall, on the other - both approaches express the knowledge of the impossibility of originality, innovation and singularity. The American painter John Currin, successful creator of paintings operating precariously on the borderline with kitsch, has recently spoken of the unavoidable burden of tradition. Each brushstroke you make, Currin claims, weighs so heavily with referentiality, and the trick is to let all these references through without bothering about them. In Currin's case, this attitude has given rise to a style that occasionally follows on seamlessly from the drawings of the Renaissance and Mannerism and frequently culminates in a style that is not far removed from the Helga pictures of the American kitsch artist Andrew Wyeth. 15 the artist - to return again to the opening quote by Jeff Wall - really unable to control the way art history extends into the present? When looking at pictures, it is indeed possible to detect different strategies of reference to art history and, by looking at and describing them and the underlying intention, one grasps an important aspect of art production. Because painting is impossible without the history of painting and it cannot survive without reflecting on the conditions affecting the medium.

As far as Cornelius Völker is concerned, his virtuosic and expressive brushwork may at first sight conceal the fact that his painting is indeed the result of a thoroughly considered and reflective attitude. Exceptionally well grounded in art history, Völker repeatedly resorts to different aspects of tradition without elevating them to the strategy of his work. Völker's recourse to the history of painting is highly

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individualistic. As one example of many, one can mention the Straw pictures, paintings of two or three red-and-white striped drinking straws laid in various arrangements on a neutral, monochromatic surface. Of course, these refer to a whole genealogy of stripe pictures, merely by painting an object that can be regarded, so to speak, as a readymade of stripe painting. With respect to the stripe paintings of the American artist Frank Stella, Carl Andre once said: "Frank Stella's painting is not symbolic. His stripes are paths of brush on the canvas. These paths lead solely to painting." Applied to Cornelius Völker, one could say that although the stripes lead from painting - towards everyday objects viewed with the painter's eye - they are nevertheless an exquisite demonstration of painting itself. This fundamental feature of equivalence between representation and the represented, of painting and the motif, reveals itself in Cornelius Völker's works as far back as the early Nineties. Starting with the motif of creamy gateaux, it extends from fleshy bodies spilling out of white underwear in his series Fine Rib to slices of bread spread with curd and the most recent Ash pictures.

Cornelius Völker's broad scope of historical interest covers painting methods of all epochs. He resorts to motif models of the 19th century, such as Millet's *The Gleaners*, in which the protagonists at the beginning of realistic painting - peasants engaged in honest labour - are converted in Völker's works into "Tall Ladies" bending over coquettishly in impudently short miniskirts. Another recourse to 19th century painting appears to remain closer to the original. Manet's depiction of the dancer Lola de Valence provides the model for numerous Ballerina figures. The latter, however, go well beyond mere graceful ornamentation and occasionally suggest physical violence and physical deformation beneath the surface.<sup>4</sup> Iconographically, numerous other points of contact with the history of painting can be found in Völker's works, often revealing a pronounced leaning towards the grotesque or absurd. The extensive series of *Legs* of 1997, for instance, contains an allusion to Rembrandt's picture of the bathing Hendrickje - depicted is the artist's wife standing with her lifted dress, knee-deep in the water, the pallor and fleshiness of her legs standing out in the skilfully managed light. Many other groups of motifs in Völker's works refer back to the untiringly formulated theme of bathing by such artistic greats as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and others in the 20th century. The luxury, tranquillity and lust - the title of a famous picture by Matisse - of the classic motif of Modern Art, are turned by Völker into

liquefaction and forlornness: for instance, in his early Swimmer pictures or in the rather small-format pictures of figures lying stretched out on coloured towels. A weary reaction to the bathers' theme is also expressed in his extensively treated Bathing Shoes series (1997), which satirically recalls Vincent van Gogh's picture of worn-out shoes and its existentialistic interpretation by Martin Heidegger, with the small-format paintings using the example of the multi-coloured plastic shoes to present the viewer with a varied pallet of brightly coloured painting.

Another focus of Völker's allusions to art history can be found in the post-war era. Painting became extremely important in many respects in about 1950. In connection with the world's new political order, in the course of the consolidation of the Western and Eastern Blocs, painting became strongly charged with ideology. The decision in favour of abstraction or figurative representation evolved - from the Western point of view - into a yardstick of freedom and unfreedom. American Abstract Expressionists such as Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and others confidently formulated their approach as a departure from the European tradition. Cornelius Völker refers in many respects to that "heroic" era of painting. In complete disregard for the political labels, he refers back to various milestones in painting of those years and quotes, paraphrases or parodies them in his pictures. In general, Völker's painting is quite obviously a reaction to the Modernist culture of superficiality that was alive in the post-war era and subsequently in Pop Art and that placed the fine arts in a broader framework attributable to the rise of mass society. In

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view of Völker's preference for thick paints, one can also speak of an elaborated presentation of surfaces, accompanied by a marked trend towards large formats. Many of his pictures, which can easily achieve a height of three metres or more, do indeed have wall-filling dimensions, a fact which is confidently paraded again and again.<sup>5</sup> In the Fifties, such easel-transcending formats presenting abstract expanses of colour were an expression of the noble, the sublime, as Barnett Newman called it, and the large-format picture was also declared to be a truly American invention that had developed out of the wall painting programme promoted by the US government in the Thirties. Völker takes up the aspect of sublime grandeur in a certain sense, but embeds it in a figurative visual language. The representational motifs of his pictures, the frequent rendition of details of the depicted object and the extreme close-ups shift the pictures, however, towards large canvas formats and thus into the proximity of the cinema picture whose historical predecessors can be found in the 19th century large-format paintings of historic scenes.

In other works, Cornelius Völker embraces Pollock's dripping technique and Tachism and thus a chapter of art history that elevated chance to the status of an artistic principle. In the extensive Swimmer series showing tiny figures in poisonously colourful waves, the moving surface of the water was produced by tipping and turning the canvas covered with liquid

paint.<sup>6</sup> The fact that a motif can be identical to its form of depiction and yet be something entirely other than the illustrated object was demonstrated by Jasper Johns with his picture of the Stars & Stripes back in the Fifties. In the early Nineties, Cornelius Völker painted large, landscape-format pictures of chocolate bars. Like Johns' Flag in its time, the motif consisting of a serial arrangement of identical fields fills the entire canvas and thus recalls the "shaped canvas" method also practised by Johns and other American artists. However, Völker only skims these historical points of reference, treating them ironically with such a banal subject as chocolate. The inflation of the object to the size of a full canvas and the modular and serial arrangement of the individual portions of chocolate also breaks in a subtle way with grid sequences and trueness to scale, i.e. with the laws of Minimal Art and their emphasis on elementary structures. Sheer size in Völker's works is not a sign of dignity and seriousness - on the contrary. A 1997 picture from the Legs series can be interpreted as an ironic allusion to the sublime. What we see is the three-metre tall figure of a woman up to her shoulders, who, dressed in black stockings, a short skirt and zip-fastened cardigan, stands facing the viewer. As a direct allusion to Barnett Newman's famous picture *Who's Afraid of Red, Blue and Yellow?*, the striped knitted cardigan is indeed red, yellow and blue, which suggests regarding the cardigan's zip as a reference to the vertical line that opens or divides the surface in Newman's work.

Völker's subtle reference to Barnett Newman seems disrespectful, but in fact stems from his sincere admiration for the American artist. It is neither a parody or pastiche, nor an intention to appropriate or merely imitate an outstanding model. Völker in fact refers to Newman in the sense of "preoccupation with nothing but the best models"<sup>7</sup> and transforms them into his own universe of colours and forms. In a certain sense, he touches on an important chapter in the history of painting and compares the results of his forays subtly with the contemporary standpoint. What remains of tradition is often no more than a striped drinking straw or a zip fastener. To declare painting to be a metaphysical act, as Barnett Newman did, is just as incompatible with the contemporary situation of art as expecting the viewing of pictures to fulfil the educational aspiration of freedom or self-perception. In his essay "The Sublime is Now!" dating from 1948, Newman proclaimed an original, autonomous art that existed without recourse to the traditions of civilization. In the specific situation of viewing a picture, Newman associated the sublimity of the picture's appearance with an overpowering experience<sup>8</sup> In the works of Cornelius Völker, the preoccupation with the sublime finds itself shifted into Postmodernism. While the idea of an original "back to basics" in art

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it is the object that it denotes and is thus reminiscent of the chocolate bars. What is presented here, attractively wrapped as a present, is the matt monochrome picture adorned with a figurative signature, the ribbon. And the series of Towel pictures, also from 2002, is marked by the toned-

down colouration, which in this case suits the commonplace motif. Again Völker uses an everyday object as a readymade, in this case a readymade of geometric abstract painting. Sigmar Polke once spread real drying-up cloths on his canvas and produced abstract compositions with them; Völker's towels, however, hang limply against a bright background, slumping together in folds as if abstract colour field painting has literally come to the end of the (washing) line. The towels also refer to a much more distant chapter in art history. When wood was abandoned in favour of canvas as the substrate for painting in the Renaissance, this new discipline was known as "cloth painting". The limp towels painted on the taut canvas again designate a picture-in-a-picture relationship of a special kind. And, finally, Völker's towels make it obvious that on the material level a picture is nothing other than a piece of cloth coated with paint.

1 Jeff Wall in an interview with Holger Liebs, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24th/25th May 2003

2 Martin Kippenberger, "Picasso vollenden. Gespräch mit Daniel Baumann«, in: Kippenberger leicht gemacht. Exhibition catalogue. Geneva 1997, p. 28

3 Carl Andre, "On Frank Stella's 'stripe paintings'« in: Sixteen Americans, Cat. The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1959, p. 76

4 See the memorable description by Stefan Lausch, in: Cornelius Völker. Catalogue, Freiburg, 2000

5 See the photographs of studio situations that are enclosed in most catalogues of Cornelius Völker and often highlight the leap in size, e.g. when the pictures of the »Tall Ladies« are leant against a flat-roofed building in the backyard of his first studio in Düsseldorf's Suitbertusstrasse to dry and are slightly higher than the building; or when the artist has his picture taken on a bike in front of his pictures, which is an ironic reference to the insufficient size of his first studio, but nevertheless stresses the pictures' large size.

6 See Hans-Jürgen Lechtreck, "Fest und flüssig«, in: Cornelius Völker, Cat. Düsseldorf und Greven, 1997, p. 55-56

7 The fact the selection of models worthy of imitation is in itself an art goes back to the imitatio teaching of ancient rhetoric, e.g. Quintilian

8 See Max Imdahl, Barnett Newman. Who's afraid of red, yellow and blue ? 111, Stuttgart 1971

9 See Christine Pries (Ed.), Das Erhabene. Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn. Weinheim 1989; See also Mike Kelley's approach to The Sublime, 1984

10 »The question of the undepictable □ is in my eyes □ the only thing that will be worth the effort of living and thinking in the coming

century.« Jean -Franc;ois Lyotard, quoted from: Pries 1989 (Iike Note 9),  
p. 1.

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