

Johnen Galerie

ARTFORUM

Mind's eye views

Feb 1995

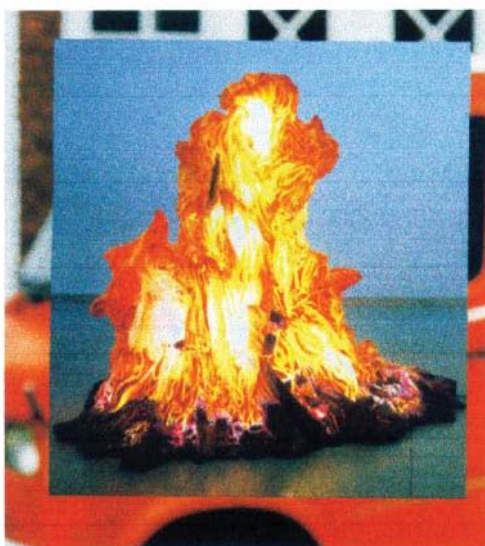


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BORIS GROYS: *Looking at your works, I have the feeling that these three-dimensional pictures so objectively quoting reality—they're like a photograph, or an illustration in a scientific journal—suggest also a certain feeling of danger, of being lost. Isn't that an allegory for the situation of the contemporary artist, who removes himself from the life context and puts himself instead in the institutional context of art?*

MARTIN HONERT: That's not the reason I do these works. I very much like the images in dictionaries, where, for example, under the word "fire" there's a little picture of a fire. That's actually an image in the clearest sense of the word: so, that's what a fire is! Those pictures always seem alone, isolated, removed from their context. And that's what interests me about them—this hermetic quality of being closed in on themselves.

BG: *But are those sorts of illustration dictated by the usual, pictorial understanding of the image? As you say, they fall under a certain linguistic logic: "house," "fire," "tree"—they function almost like ciphers, or Platonic ideas corresponding to particular concepts.*

MH: Certainly.

BG: *You ask, for example, What is a house for me? And you answer with an image.*

MH: Exactly. My works begin in an internal image. *Haus* [House, 1988] is like an image seen with one's eyes closed.

BG: *But there are so many linguistic concepts—why produce so few images? Why this severe selection?*

MH: I want to start small. It's a question of temperament: I'm scared of large, complex relationships. I need to begin with simple images, single images. I don't want to show other people what a house looks like; I want to show myself. And when I'm doing that, I try to purify the house, to show it as cleanly as possible.

BG: *Why this cleansing, this universalization?*

MH: I don't want my work to get too personal. I may begin with a personal image, but then I try to see how I can formulate a more general one. In the case of *Haus*, that building is completely a particular type. I've always known houses like this one; it has an ugly modesty that's absolutely commonplace where I come from. So this house is autobiographical, in that it's tied to my own biography, my own history. At the same time, it has nothing specific to do with me—my grandmother didn't live there, I wasn't born there, nothing like that. I don't want to tell stories, so I try to reduce the image to its purest state.

BG: *The region you come from is important to you?*

MH: Yes, it matters that I come from the Ruhr. A lot of the images I use are deeply connected to it.

BG: *I know a lot of artists who want to get away from those kinds of ties: they want something universal, something shared, something valid everywhere.*

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MH: That's certainly an interesting theme for many of my colleagues, but it doesn't interest me, and it would be dangerous for my work—the more universal I became, the more risk I'd run of getting flat and pathetic. That would be terrible for me. And art about art doesn't interest me, I don't think about it for a second. That's something I find really stupid, I have to say.

BG: Yet your work does have a relationship to the great purist, universalist canon of 20th-century art. It's not expressive, not surrealist, not sub-

jective, personally motivated though it is. Rather, its formal simplicity and purity suggest a certain universality. It seems to me you always try to balance a strong regional anchoring and a universalist, abstract, neutral component.

MH: Not consciously, probably—I don't approach artmaking that way. But I'd hope that would be the end result. Those kinds of contradictions really interest me, and one contradiction in particular: a personal theme but a very dry presentation.

I KNOW EXACTLY WHEN SOMETHING BECOMES KITSCH, AND WHAT I HAVE TO DO TO PREVENT THAT FROM HAPPENING. THIS IS EXACTLY THE BALANCING ACT THAT INTERESTS ME.

BG: You're reminding me of a notorious warning that used to be issued in the gulag before a march: one step to either the left or the right, and you'll be shot. That's how you describe your working process: one step to the left, in the sense of sinking into the personal, or one to the right, in the sense of abstraction and generalization—both are dangerous for you.

MH: Both are traps, yes. I'm aware of this brinksmanship. Something else I'm often accused of—kitsch—is also brinksmanship: I know exactly when something becomes kitsch, and what I have to do to prevent that from happening. This is exactly the balancing act that interests me.

BG: Your objects or three-dimensional images, I find, also have some scenic quality, a quality of theatrical representation: "I represent a house," "I represent a bird." Two works in which this is particularly clear are *Kinderkreuzzug* (Children's crusade, 1985–87) and *Foto* (1993). Do these too have to do with a certain brinksmanship, between reality and the representation of reality? Theater lives on that edge.



Martin Honert, *Starling*,
1992, painted polyester.
76 1/4 x 67 1/2 x 6 1/2".

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MH: I'm certainly interested in the tension between reality and spectacle, or between reality and reality's theatricalization. In *Kinderkreuzzug* I tried to create an intermediary stage: the figures quote toy figures, toy knights, but I made them life-sized. You still see, though, that they are representations not of people but of objects.

BG: *In the theater there is a tension between the concrete and the universal. The scene is a general frame for a concrete spectacle. This also relates to photography, which puts a concrete image into a general frame. Photography is deeply theatrical—it always looks "produced."*

MH: I agree. What interests me in photography is its frozen quality. This is very important in *Foto*, and even more so in *Feuer* [Fire, 1992]: we only know fire as something shapeless and motile. I always want to freeze things into an image, a "scene."

BG: *But why this attraction to the frozen? Is it that by freezing a memory, an internal image or idea, you can guarantee it in the outside world?*

MH: Fire has no need of stability, but the inner image of fire demands a stable, frozen sign.

BG: *You work with the abstract space of art, and with the personal experiences for which you create visual signs in this space. What do you think about the space of art as a social institution—the social space of the art world? Do you think about how to position yourself in art's social space? Or is this an irrelevant question for you?*

MH: I know a number of artists well, and we understand each other well, because we have the same interests—personal things from the past, from childhood. Other artists can't understand my interests, and I can't understand theirs, although their work may be interesting formally. Actually, I've never met someone where I both admired their work formally and shared their interests.

BG: *Since I've never met an artist who thought another artist handled the balance of form and content better than he did, that kind of meeting is perhaps impossible.*

MH: Perhaps.... I live as a lonely man among the lonely.

BG: *That's what your work suggests. But aren't there other artists with the same interests as you?*

MH: Elke Denda, Katharina.

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Fritsch and I had the same teacher. Those connections are really close, from the place where we both were born.

BG: *So we're back to the regional. And your work, actually, produces a kind of childhood: you produce your own origin out of a trove or archive of childhood memories, an archive that everyone has. But do you work with childhood as a fund of personal experience, or as something at a distance, a distance that prevents you from sinking into a certain feeling? Childhood is always in the past; one can only produce it. Actual experience of it is impossible.*

MH: I don't think I'm involved in the problems of my childhood—I am indirectly, of course, but I'm not directly stuck in that emotional world. That is an important point. Childhood is a theme for me not because I think my childhood was especially eventful, or bad, or good; my childhood was exactly as dull and boring as every other childhood. Childhood is a theme for me because I think it's important

to discover what's way past but still in the memory as an image. The farther back it is and the more I remember it anyway, the more important it is for me. This has nothing to do with psychoanalysis; there are certainly ugly and beautiful things in my childhood, things I want to overcome and things I want to or have to live with, but those things don't interest me as an artist. People have asked me whether my work has a therapeutic side, but I consciously distance myself from that side of art.

BG: *In time the child we were becomes an Other, a stranger, to whom we believe we have access inside. There's another kind of brinkmanship here, between familiarity and foreignness. Perhaps that's what produces the desire to make images of childhood?*

MH: That's true. Our childhood is absolutely our own history, what we know best. Yet at the same time it's very far away and hidden. I'm interested in the point where something radiates from the hidden, something I still feel clearly today. There's something meaningful in that.

I can tell you something anecdotal, for example—though I really don't like to—about *Kinderkreuzzug*. That was the first work where I consciously started with an inner image: a memory of sitting in history class when I was ten. We were talking about the crusades, and the teacher said, "There was once a children's crusade too." He mentioned this by-the-by, but as he said it, I got a clear image. It was as if—this is a little exaggerated, but it was as if the blackboard opened up and became a window, and I saw the child knights coming toward me. That image was sparked by a single word, *Kinderkreuzzug*. I can still remember it precisely today.

BG: *That's a good end to our conversation: the child approaching himself as an armed knight. □*

Boris Groys is currently the visiting professor of philosophy and esthetics at the Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe. He recently edited *Fluchtpunkt Moskau* (Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994), and his other books include *Utopia i Obmen* (Moscow: Znak, 1993), *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton: at the University Press, 1992), and *Über das Neue: Versuch einer Kulturokonomie* (Munich: Hansen-Verlag, 1992).

Translated from the German by Charles V. Miller.