

Rémy Markowitsch: *Schadenfreude*  
Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig 2009

Rummaging through an antique bookstore in Berlin, Rémy Markowitsch came across an auction catalogue published in 1962 by Fischer Gallery in Lucerne. It has since become a vital source of inspiration for a new suite of works. The artist's interest in the catalogue was fuelled by his knowledge of the turbulent and politically controversial story of one of Switzerland's oldest fine art auction houses. It was founded in 1907 by Theodor Fischer and, according to the Gallery, "events both during and after World War I yielded a number of important collections from Europe's nobility and their estates, to be auctioned in Switzerland. Likewise, a large number of fine paintings and antiquities was entrusted to Galerie Fischer for sale at auction following both the wave of emigration between the two World Wars and the need for reconstruction capital after World War II." Today, the gallery conducts auctions of old Master paintings, modern and contemporary art, furniture and crafts as well as vintage firearms and militaria.

The 1962 publication also attracted the bibliophile's attention because the front cover was in perfect condition in contrast to the back cover, which had been severely damaged, probably by water. The mildew that formed in the resulting hole had penetrated practically the entire book, resulting in flaws and missing sections in the middle of the pages. Because of the irregularly shaped holes in the damaged pages, the reproductions show patches of the pages underneath so that two and sometimes three reproductions merge into a new visual whole.

One of the highlights of the 1962 auction was a collection of works by the Hungarian-Austrian painter Isidor Kaufmann (1853-1921). Kaufmann's genre paintings are particularly important for their depiction of Jews, frequently Hasidic Jews, which he made while travelling through Eastern Europe. Along with artists like Moritz Daniel Oppenheim and Maurycy Gottlieb, Kaufmann devoted himself to studying the similarity of the Christian and Judaic worlds, particularly the way in which they developed under the influence of the Thora, religious symbols and beliefs. His paintings were also among the first to popularize these worlds. Data on key works by Kaufmann and other European Masters is complemented by black-and-white reproductions. For the hybrids created out of the large number of damaged pictures in the Fischer catalogue, Markowitsch chose motifs in which the fusion of the subject matter leads to a distinctive and often near-psychedelic dynamic. Hence, Kaufmann's paintings play a dominant role in the 12-part portrait series *Schadenfreude*. Their fusion with the Christian iconography of works by other European Masters leads to a collision between two extremely heterogeneous, parallel realities. Markowitsch uses the cutting-edge digital technique of documentary photography to copy the varied visual idioms and subject matters he wishes to combine. These are then given a life of their own through digital transfer to Baryt paper. In this way he singles out the "landscapes of catastrophe" caused by the ravages of the elements. Serendipity has led to new visual substance.

Markowitsch has linked the 12 portraits in the *Schadenfreude* series with another work, *Abraham*, which is based on the back cover of the auction catalogue. The printed word "Abraham", which we see through several layers of tattered pages, is part of the caption for plate number 58, a painting of a battle at sea by the Netherlands artist Abraham Storck (1635- c. 1710). Markowitsch had the picture

reproduced and framed on two strips of paper 180 cm tall -- the largest commercially available size -- making the overall measurements of the work 360 x 267 cm. This gives the parts of the catalogue, all the stained, torn, warped and differently printed scraps of paper, an extremely physical presence. When we gaze at these surfaces, it is like being a child again, lying on a blanket in a meadow or sitting in a baby seat in the car, and looking up at the sky. The visual associations that crowd in on us remind us of the figures, shapes and faces that we used to make out in the cloud formations. Within the context of Kaufmann's paintings, the name "Abraham" refers to the founding patriarch of the Israelites and the protagonist of the Tanakh, while the 12 portraits in the *Schadenfreude* series evoke the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Gradually our attention is drawn to an arrangement of three dots that resembles the face of a puppy, with our brains interpreting scraps of paper and fragments of printing as eyes, body and paws. Once the image has formed in our minds, we can no longer ignore it. Crucially, the figure cannot be reconstructed as such because the extent of the damage makes the catalogue extremely fragile. Its pages are in constant movement and the configuration of the three little scraps of paper that create the impression of a puppy is a fortuitous coincidence, if not divine providence. But the meticulously processed documentary photograph lends permanence to the chance impression: it is artistic proof of divinity. By deliberately sharing the puppy's existence with us, Markowitsch imparts an infantile tenor to the pathos of the word, the name and the oversized format, what he himself calls a "triadic composition of daffiness".

The third part of the exhibition is the installation *Black Swan. Twelve For One*, which consists of 12 commercially produced plastic models of lambs. Markowitsch had a taxidermist transform them into lifelike creatures by covering them with the fur of a Persian coat, inserting artificial eyes and adding hoofs. Coincidentally, it takes 12 lambs to make one Persian lamb coat. On one half of the lambs the fur is turned inside out, that is, with the leather side up, creating a herd of golems, exposing how the animals were made and revealing the furrier's skill. As is typical for Markowitsch, the title of these 12 lamb objects -- *Black Swan* -- comes as a surprise and could not be more apt.

In his book, *The Black Swan* of 2007, Nassim Nicholas Taleb advances the Black Swan Theory (not to be confounded with the "black swan problem"). The theory refers to utterly unanticipated, rare events, which are hard to predict and beyond the realm of ordinary expectations. According to Taleb, such events include major inventions and moments in history like the first world war, 9/11, the development of the computer and the rise of the Internet. Prior to the discovery of black swans in Australia in the 17th century, the term "black swan" was actually an oxymoron since all swans were assumed to be white. But the term underwent a change when reality caught up with it. In discussing how vulnerable our financial system is to Black Swan events, Taleb also anticipated aspects of our current economic reality. Significantly, he is not interested in finding out how to prevent such events but rather in modifying our view of the world since the positive or negative impact of an event lies in the eye of the beholder -- a premise that Black Swan events and life have in common.

The lambs in Markowitsch's work are subjected to two consecutive Black Swan events. To begin with, Persian lambs are actually Karakul sheep that live for a few hours or at most a few days before being slaughtered and converted into part of a fur coat. This is undoubtedly an extremely unpredictable event from the unborn sheep's point of view. Biologically speaking, normal events in its life would involve cavorting

about in Namibia and grazing in Bukhara, as well as the survival of the species in Russia and the gathering of hay in Afghanistan. But they would certainly not include induced premature birth, followed by slaughter and the processing of its pelt (along with that of 11 fellow sufferers) to make Persian coats for women, most of whom do not even live in exceptionally cold climates. After many years of existence as a fur coat, the Karakul foetus sustains its second Black Swan event, which is far more improbable and even rarer than the first, namely, Markowitsch's decision to transform the fur coat, i.e. to revert this object of culture back to its natural state -- almost.

Crucial to an understanding of "Black Swan" are works that address the question of nature versus culture, usually from an explicitly economic point of view. *Onion Options* (2008) and *Bullish on Bulbs* (2007) deal with the trade in options and the world of finance: the astronomical value of tulips in Persia, China and Europe provoked the world's first stock market crash in Holland in 1637; and the price of onions in India directly impacted the political opinion of the masses. There is also an unmistakable affinity between *Black Swan. Twelve For One* and the video piece *Miu Miu! Strip! Strip!* In tandem with the object *Miumiubull* (both 2008). For the latter Markowitsch had a shoemaker convert a pair of his own luxury brand Miu Miu shoes into the head of a bull. The incorporation of the value added aspect of our economy in this group of works makes it especially trenchant and incisive. Luxury items, like designer shoes and fur coats, have been culturally transformed and (almost) restored to their natural state, except that, by taking up residence in the sphere of high culture, they have now become the subject of new economic contracts. The lamb, however, is utterly mystified by being associated with the Black Swan event on the art market -- or "the bursting of the bubble", as it has been called.

The word "schadenfreude", which is the title not only of the 12-part series of portraits but also of the exhibition at Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig, now has economic implications as well. Having appeared in the English language as a loanword in 1852, it is now enjoying a renaissance, thanks to the current financial crisis. A delight in damage quite literally resonates in the exhibition: on one hand, a delight in the specific circumstances that enabled the artist to enhance the physical and haptic presence of the auction catalogue and to produce pictures in which the palimpsest of overlaid pages generates value-added content; and, on the other, a delight in the circumstances that caused the lamb's death, enabling it to become the protagonist of various value added processes. These multiple layers of meaning in a single work unravel into a great narrative that runs through the entire exhibition and, indeed, through Rémy Markowitsch's oeuvre as a whole. He decodes phenomenologies and psychologies of perception; he intertwines the (hi)stories of various visual traditions and their reception; he transforms value added processes; he explores the "politics of representation" and the media involvement of art; and, finally, he exposes the economic preconditions of art's very existence.

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