

Once to art and back again in 25 minutes Karin Pernegger

Groups of people arrive at the foot of historic buildings and museums, passing the time with their stories and the little picnics that they bring with them. They take advantage of the warm months and enrich life in public places with their frivolity and curiosity. In cities such as Paris, St. Petersburg, Prague, Moscow and Rome the noise of the colourful hubbub in intermingled with the offer to sell a most particularly relished form of art, the "portrait in 25 minutes", a souvenir of one's self for the wall at home. The artists settle themselves on low folding stools with the tools of their trade surrounded by pictures attesting to their artistry in painting and drawing. The small open-air studio is open to free inspection and is, at most, protected by a colourful sun shade. The smiles of Jennifer Lopez, Brad Pitt, Leonardo Di Caprio and other celebrities beam at curious passers-by and promise to banish the yearning for beauty in perpetuity. From out of all this emerge small islands which abduct the quietly sitting guests from everyday life for 25 minutes and let them concentrate on themselves.

According to the art-historical point of view, the drawn or painted portrait far transcends the reproduction of a mere likeness and aims for a vivid realisation of individuality so as to make the presence of a soul visible in bodily form.¹ Depiction of the face is preferred here since it is generally seen as the mirror of the soul and the most characteristic features of people appear in it in their most concentrated form. The looks on the faces of those sitting for portraits in Anna Jermolaeva's photographs are different: on the one hand spellbound in anticipation and posing but also absent or even embarrassed by burgeoning boredom. Their bodies sit heavily on the small low folding stools and perhaps they miss the moment to give their souls expression. The photographic eye documents this bizarre ensemble in all its absurdity. Over the sequence of pages Jermolaeva apparently always assembles the same scene that never comes to its conclusion: the production of a portrait that "gives an image of the interpretation of social and intellectual wisdom".²

At first glance this photo series appears unusual in comparison to the artist's video works. In her serial video loops she concentrates on very reduced cinematic resources for the depiction of a monologue-type situation which is rather self-referential. Here, for example, Jermolaeva uses various toys whose mechanisms she drives to endless repetitions until they completely wear themselves out. The senseless gyration of the nursery companions symbolises people in their often unoriented activities that do not protect them from falling out of line. The meaning of the work is reflected in the lunacy of life and in addition winks humorously at the sexuality that determines us all. She crossfades the God-given patriarchal world with banal activities by letting there be light by means of an erect penis which repeatedly pushes a light switch. Or she re-enacts the growth of flowers with the exemplary shooting up of stiff penises whose roots she had previously watered with a children's watering can. A symbolic, also religiously connoted act is casually and playfully transposed into the pornographic.

However, with this current work a dialogue situation is presented for the first time which reveals a biographical note from the artist in her specific choice of pictures. She herself appears twice in the book: sitting under one of the sunshade islands being caricatured herself and as a pupil in the socialist school apparatus of the 1980s with drawing board and pencil in a hall of nudes populated with Greek statues.

The artist consciously quotes the high art of the portrait but she shows it in its brusque tourist variant that oscillates between seriousness, idealisation and a subliminal fraudulent character. Each portrait reflects the wish also to claim the beauty of a media star for oneself.

¹ Wörterbuch der Kunst, 1995, p. 93-94

² Lexikon der Kunst, 1987, p. 558

What this often means in reality is that this genre of portrait is dominated by a very small selection of face types – a fact that should be taken with a sense of humour.

With Anna Jermolaeva's interest in the practice of art at tourist locations, the portrait artists become objects of contemporary art to which they previously had no access despite having often completed academic art training. The socially accredited art market is also closed to them. Their acceptance is based solely on their technical skill.

For the presentation of her artist's book Anna Jermolaeva has issued an invitation to portrait artists to ply their trade among the summer population of the Vienna Museumsquartier. In the bustle of the city-centre art mile, positioned between classical modernism and contemporary art, five Russian artists will draw portraits of passers-by for the usual fee for their profession. The artists invited are Halim Amirov, Alina Fyodorova and Andrej Romasjukov from St. Petersburg, and Alexander Frolov and Anna Frolova from Moscow.

If one thinks of the silence of the exhibition halls around, entered with quiet steps, in comparison to the giggling goings-on around the portrait painters sitting on the small stools in the "Monmarts" of this world, then the black and white pictures from the artist's school-leaving album at the end of the book lead the viewer somewhere completely different: namely to the beginning, where the theme of the book acquires its very personal message. The video artist portrays herself for the first time again after drawing a pre-determined number of interested people with the same technique, as she learned in her training in the former Soviet Union. An edition is appearing with the artist's book for which Anna Jermolaeva produces a portrait of the purchaser so as to close the circle of the portrait study in this way. "Another very typical field of unerring drawing is the caricature," writes Walter Koschatzky in his book "Kunst der Zeichnung" ("The Art of Drawing"). "As the word 'caricare' (= to load, to charge) already says, the characteristics are so exaggerated that there comes an accumulation point which suddenly causes something that psychology calls the 'aha effect'. The purpose of caricature was thus less to mock but rather to open our eyes to the not yet discovered."³

This text will have achieved its aim if it succeeds in animating readers to discover for themselves the sustainability of a portrait sitting in 25 minutes.

Bibliography

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³ Koschatzky (1991, 7. Aufl.), p. 320-321