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Werner Tübke and the end of the century

A few days ago an event took place in my country which is supposed to elucidate the cultural situation at the end of this century in a remarkable way: the inauguration of an interior cylindrical painting on the so-called Schlachtberg near Bad Frankenhausen, a canvas of 1,783 square metres by Werner Tübke. During eleven years (counting from the beginning of the 1:10 version) of hard physical and mental work the artist, now aged sixty, filled the panorama with about 3,000 figures. In a marvellous manner they perform the bewildering drama of the era, which opened the occidental modern age, the end of which we are now apparently approaching. This work, which was signed by Tübke and made accessible to foreign critics nearly two years ago, immediately became, and will probably again become the object of a controversial debate on aspects of art criticism and cultural policy. If at the end of the century pictures are made that ignore or negate the fact that this was the epoch of modern art - and Tübke by word and action is demonstrating this too - then this easily could be dismissed as outdated and ephemeral. Throughout the century the avant-gardes had at their disposal plenty of good and mediocre "traditional art" as a source of friction. If Tübke's work - the above-mentioned canvas is only one of his best-known and most spectacular ones - is classified as a post-modern painting, then this does not explain anything either; viz. post-modernism understood as a reflection of the loss of the vigour of avant-garde,

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of social deficits and all the other of modernism's late consequences; post-modernism as a phenomenon making use of this crisis - but in my view in no way a reasonable alternative.

The fact that one can hardly find any serious qualitative links or parallels between the paintings and drawings by Tübke and the neo-classicism presented by, say Charles Jencks, and that Tübke is a problem beyond post-modernism, presupposes a rather intensive occupation with realist art and relevant phenomena in art history: the pictures by Tübke are not merely or not at all a reaction to the art of the 20th century nor are they meant as an answer to the dilemma of avant-garde. They even appear to be autonomous with regard to the art market; although they evidently rank high there they are not dependent on market trends whatsoever.

The independence, freedom and recklessness displayed by Tübke towards today's predominant trends and rules, stylistic pressures and artistic customs in the field, apparently explainable by his basic psychosomatic disposition, are even more the equivalent of his intense ties to the great art of the past and to all it had to express in its times including fervent absorption and self-confident empathy and adaptation. The distrust and disapproval of such an attitude on the part of some critics, who are habitually preoccupied with admiring all current novelties and making them marketable and who call Tübke an eclectic and a "backward defender" and even a traitor and reactionary, are aggravated by the international recognition (which has been beyond question since long) at least of the artistic and formal brilliance of his works



which are of unrivalled uniqueness.

But the radical "traditionalism" of Tübke only becomes provocative by its convincing imaginative, sensual and sensitive power, by its enormous abundance of imagery and plastic ideas, figures and formal means, by the virtuosity and magnificence of painting and: because these qualities are suited not only to make legitimate the classical idea of painting and the immortality of the good old framed picture on the wall, but also to seductively praise the traditional self-understanding of art. Eduard Beaucamp unerringly described the way in which experienced and firm protagonists of the total freedom of the artist, of the boundlessness of form and ideas, in front of Tübke's work are wrestling with the question whether such things should be permitted at all.

All this might be ignored here, if it were only for the difficulties some critics have. The case of Tübke is a singular one, possibly on account of his artistic imagination and artistic perfection, his radical claim for educational and cultural standards, his persistency and thoroughness of historical interlacing and entanglement - and also in how far he ~~may~~ ignore the post-modern and the modern art as well. Otherwise he should rather be looked at as the tip of an iceberg. The claims of the "Zeitgeist" are in fact executed by his work. It leaves out of account especially accents which are predominant in the western scene and which make art so easily slip from great beginnings into glib commercialism.

Where Tübke lives and works, art, when getting involved with high standards - and as far as he is concerned, with the highest standards - is handled with extreme seriousness, often in a dogged and cranky way and with the German kind of thoroughness and systematic endeavour. This shows a total lack of what seems to make it a success: nostalgia, cheerful flippancy and unscrupulous thoughtlessness in handling history, casual decorative randomness, excessive eclecticism and - humour.

The characteristic western offer of academic, historicist and figurative imagery, more or less described by these qualities, is the result of the very historic finality which endows Tübke's work with significance, current relevance and historic importance, although he has never thought of painting as he does for the sake of that situation.

There is no need to quote the often excellent descriptions of the passing away of modern art, of the evaporation of its great utopian ideas, the withering of the promising revolutionary prophesies. We are familiar with the constellation in which, half a century after the total exhaustion of the creative possibilities, after the historically conditioned ebbing away of the magnificent tidal waves of modern art, the fly-wheel had to be set again into motion as required by history. This now inevitably brought about the pillage of the abundant wealth of modern art by helpless or unsuspecting heirs, resulting in depletion, emptiness, misunderstanding, alienation, altogether in a long-lasting dilemma, producing a maximum output of writings on art. By the time of



the bicentenary of the French Revolution at last we have become aware of the irrevocable end of the great creative upsurge, the exhaustion of its driving force for bourgeois culture.

The avant-garde developed its own historicism, following its overdue extension. The constantly repeated shaking of the kaleidoscope reproduced boredom and revealed loss of meaning. Since the sixties the doors have been open to all kinds of interpretations. I am not only speaking of a "hunger for paintings", of a longing for sensual visualization and the need for entertainment. The degradation of the social-utopian claim of modern art as an official ornament of bourgeois states to increase the sales of almost every branch of industry has caused a socio-psychological vacuum, a deficit of emotion, feeling and communication and thus a new market for new commodities. How should we complain about a situation in which the values offered by the new "picturism" are an obscure conglomerate of worn-out, misunderstood remnants of late conservative bourgeois culture - since in its last stage modern art is only used as a quarry as well - and for what trivialities!

Two apparently opposite but generalizable answers were given to the common misery of late modern and post-modern art: Beuys and Tübke. The works of both these artists make a renewed absolute and self-confident claim for history, for eternal values and, notwithstanding the sacralization of artifacts, for far-reaching human purposes. They appeared at the end of the century as "annunciators" of the meaning of life, of the destiny of the human being. It is of little

importance if one accepts this or that artist as a great one. Their contrasts of course are more conspicuous than the comparable roots and the historic character of their congenial motivations, which have been given so far little attention and have been little understood.

Beuys's impact was more closely linked with the aura of the beaming, acting personality. He drew reliance and relief, confirmation, explanation of the world and ideological power from especially dark archaic realms of history and nature. On the background of a rationally functioning, highly civilized, "first-world" society this exerted an entirely singular, perplexing, shocking and enigmatic effect, thus using a basic pattern of modern art. The mixture of mysticism and spiritualism with semi-scientific messianic enlightenment, pointed to a common need, is no less German than the Prussian mannerism of Werner Tübke: an incredible work discipline and management, precise craftsmanship and stylistic consistency - in this way he pictures the glamorous or monstrous creatures of his unrestrained, wild and powerful imagination, bewildering the senses, placed within the framework of his immense knowledge.

Tübke was able to transpose continuously and almost totally his personality into the painted image. He rises from that epoch to the present time, which seemed and occurred to him as enlightening and answering the questions of his days. Supremely well he invests the treasures of that epoch of art in his interpretation which, though inherent in him, presents itself with seductive splendour



to a century fatigued and exhausted by innovative art towards its end. Is it the kind of picture like his that is supposed to satisfy the fundamental desires for sensual opulence, solid values, mysterious but "confirmed" interpretations of the world? And finally, if he is the tip of an iceberg: is he reflecting the light of sunset or of sunrise?