



Werner Büttner and the melodic tactics of subversive affirmation An introduction

John Slyce

*Der Tod muß abgeschafft werden, diese verdammte
Schweinerei muß aufhören. Wer ein Wort des Trostes
spricht, ist ein Verräter.*
Bazon Brock

In the calm beauty of the courtyard to Sophie-Gips-Höfe in Berlin-Mitte, there is this metal sign styled as if a high voltage warning. An English translation of Bazon Brock's text reads: "Death must be abolished, this damned mess must stop. He who speaks a word of consolation is a traitor." Brock first showed the metal plate carrying the above text in a 1968 exhibition. The words resounded then amidst other moments of danger, war and revolution. The caustic condemnation of stupidity contained in those lines seems to resonate in the art of Werner Büttner and his own acerbic refusals to either turn away from, or to submit flaccidly to, the sordidness of reality evidenced by his painting.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Büttner formed part of a politico-anarchic troika with Albert Oehlen and Kippenberger—while fellow travellers included Markus Oehlen and Georg Herold. They were the new, or younger, wild ones operating in a post-revolutionary punk-cum-post-punk-cum-no wave context. The neo's were in the ascendancy: neo-conceptualism, neo-geo, but so too a lugubrious neo-expressionist painting freighted with a Teutonic high-seriousness. Working through highly specific source material—from the banality of tabloid journalism and provincial television to distortions of cultural heritage—Oehlen, Kippenberger and Büttner followed a tactical approach under the dictum of "subversion through affirmation". Stepping out of the picture, they sought to deflate such pomposity through

irony, humour, sarcasm and caustic wit carried off with an intentionally punk aesthetic and attitude. And they meant it. Writing about their group efforts in the 1980s, Oehlen put it this way: "Our tactic, if you can call it that, is dive into what is there and allow yourself to be rubbed onto the canvas. Basically, we are barely involved in the whole thing. We read the newspaper in the morning and paint at lunchtime. It is the state authorities who are responsible for the results." Büttner had this to say at the time: "The artist is a sieve in which the environment is shaken. He retains environmental information that is of the precise size that he has asked for. Now he can work."² Diederich Diederichsen has chronicled—as participant/observer—the heady generation to emerge from such a strongly hedonistic confluence of punk culture and visual arts as they contribute to a restructuring of the art world in Germany of the 1980s.³ He holds all the cards, but pays the price with a hangover.

Büttner has described himself as a melodic, rather than a methodical thinker.⁴ A fierce intelligence shines through, burning brightly in his language and texts, which are liberated as mere supplement, or accessory to the picture as they take on a truth coequal with the art. Truth is work and a tactical weapon against cant. Strategy is the preserve of the powerful; tactics the province of the weak. Melodic tactics, as with thinking, are persistent—relentless even as a totality: a succession of notes one may perceive as a single entity in practice.

Büttner: "Irony is the technique for holding the world in all its sordidness at arm's length." In the deep seriousness of our troubled times, we can hardly think irony, let alone apprehend how it might be recast as political. Think subversion!

The power of the powerless. Imagine how mimesis might prove to be a tactical resource of resistance. By miming and over-emphasising prevailing ideologies one might simultaneously call such positions into question and open up a space of critique. Irony need not seamlessly play into the hands of power. In this role, Büttner may resemble an avant-gardist, but one who chooses to operate ‘from the rear’.

Writing “In Search of Terms”, something of an introduction to his new book, Hal Foster sketches out an apology for his continued belief in the currency of the concept as well as the limits of our understanding and usage of the term avant-garde:

Paradoxically perhaps, this is why I keep faith with the old idea of an avant-garde, a position that requires some explaining. Typically, the avant-garde is defined in two ways only—as vanguard, in a position of radical innovation, or as resistant, in a position of stern refusal to the status quo. Typically, too, the avant-garde is understood to be driven by two motives alone: the transgression of a given symbolic order (as with Surrealism) or the legislation of a new one (as with Russian Constructivism). However, the avant-garde that interests me here is neither avant nor rear in these senses; rather, it is immanent in a caustic way. Far from heroic, it does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; instead it seeks to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, even to activate them somehow. Far from defunct, this avant-garde is alive and well today.⁵

The above construes a situation not unlike the postmodern climate into which Büttner entered. That was one characterised by cleavages of a postmodernism of the left and that of a right. There are few things Büttner despises more than “the calculated seriousness so widely displayed in the art world. Seriousness is the mask of the frivolous. It wants to force its audience into virtual consternation or reverence. It’s not even a stylistic device, it’s bluff and fraud and, what’s more, it’s meaningless. Meaningless because it can only lead

to submission or a hasty retreat.”⁶ The role that Werner Büttner assumes here is one of a participant but also sharply critical of present artworld behaviour. Far from heroic, he does not pretend that he—let alone painting—can break absolutely with an older order or found a new one. His role is rather to seek in word and deed to trace fractures that already exist in a given symbolic order that structures painting, and to then pressure this order further. He welcomes that his work might even rub against the grain of the prevailing forces and against the ruling ideas that we too easily tolerate in our moment of culture and economy. The art world is not, after all, a world apart.

Echoing and still yet going one better than Kippenberger’s remark: “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important. Even spaghetti....”.⁷ Büttner offers: “Then as now, I took and I take painting as seriously as I take my cooking utensils or my car.” Painting is not a self-legitimizing activity, or an entity with a capital “P”. Such an endeavour requires all the care and attention one might, and in fact should, pay one’s tools or one’s chosen means of transportation—that is to say, a cheerful type of ‘tough love’ suggested by the position in the painting mentioned above, rather than a Biblical warning about sparing the rod. Seriousness, as Büttner mentioned earlier, is the mask of the frivolous. The artist is now allowed to continue his point: “Cheerfulness is a different kind of mask. It aims to seduce, not to inflict violence. It shows the tragic side of a phenomenon with a laugh, and without maliciously suggesting a solution. It is a leader that detests steering. It shows solidarity, resists ideology, reviles torture and is sustained by its inherent melancholy, or the exact opposite of frivolity, then.”⁸ There is another self-portrait Büttner has made—a linocut from 1989—where he situates himself not as Sisyphus, but as the rock.⁹ One has to imagine Büttner cheerful in his painterly labours as he struggles—as we each inevitably do—within the contours of this paradoxical and erratic world. In this way, he might be seen as a contemporary resource and a reminder of how one might make painting an art relevant to, and in the forever now of, an atemporal world.

1 The text is truncated from a longer poetic eulogy Brock wrote for the émigré German cultural critic and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer in 1966.

2 Diers, Michael, “Lokaltermin: Paradies mit Gleisanschluss”, Cologne: Taschen, 2003, p 124.

3 See Diederichsen, Diederich, “Before Globalization: Cologne and New York in the 1980s”, *No Problem, Cologne/New York, 1984–1989*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2015, pp 11–20.

4 “Melodic Thinking”, Werner Büttner interview with Jan Verwoert and Jörg Heiser, *Frieze d/e*, Issue 10, June–August, 2013, pp 122–131.

5 Foster, Hal, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, London: Verso, 2015, p 4.

6 “Melodic Thinking”, *Frieze d/e*, 2013, pp 122–131.

7 Koether, Jutta, “One has to be able to take it”, excerpts from an interview with Martin Kippenberger, November 1990–May 1991, in *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective*, Ann Goldstein ed, Los Angeles: the Museum of Contemporary Art/ Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, p 316 .

8 “Melodic Thinking”, *Frieze d/e*, 2013, pp 122–131.

9 *Sisyphus vice versa*, 1989. Linocut, 56 cm x 56 cm.