Werner Büttner and the melodic tactics of subversive affirmation
An introduction

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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 ascendency: 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.”

Diedrich 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. He holds all the cards, but pays the price with a hangover. Büttner has described himself as a melodic, rather than a methodical thinker. 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 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 introduction to his new book, Hal Foster sketches out an apology for his continued belief in the currency of 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 stem refusal by cleavages of a postmodernism of the left and that of a right. There are few things Büttner despises more than “the introduction to his new book, Hal Foster sketches out an apology for his continued belief in the currency of 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 stem refusal by clearings 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.9

The above constitutes a situation not unlike the postmodern climate into which Büttner entered. That was one characterised by clearings of a postmodernism of the left and that of a right.10 There are few things Büttner despises more than “the introduction to his new book, Hal Foster sketches out an apology for his continued belief in the currency of 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 stem refusal by clearings 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.4

Echoing and stilts yet going one better than Kippenberger’s remarks: “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network of transportations—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 painting as seriously as he takes my cooking utensils or my car.” Painting is not a self-legitimating 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 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 behavious. 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.

1 The text is truncated from a longer poetics essay Brook HTML for the single format cultural site and the London galleryContact Press in 1966.

5 “Melodic Thinking”, Frieze d/e, 2015, pp 122–123.
7 “Melodic Thinking”, Frieze d/e, 2015, pp 122–123.
8 Sisyphus ruhe ewe, 1969. Linocut, 56 cm x 56 cm.