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The Homey and the Uncanny

Petra Sterry's Art of Defamiliarization

1. St. Aigenheim¹

The camera's shaky picture records a most familiar afternoon idyll: a patch of woods, a path, a field in the sunshine, two girls playing, a little dog too. *Summer Tale* is the title Petra Sterry has selected for her short film, and even though a thunderstorm seems to be brewing, the friendliness of everyday life has this summer tale fully under its sway. As is usual for the medium, there is a soundtrack, and its narrative is quite in accord with that of the images. That is, if it were not for the mention of a scene that remains off screen and involves a mother, a coat hanger, and a dog cowering in the corner with a bloody nose. This story within the story can only be followed acoustically, and yet it may have crept into the blurred sequence of images. Thus the message transmitted by the final sentence of the eight-minute minidrama very suddenly becomes plausible: "The afternoon had lost its innocence."

Ambiguity, such as that displayed by *Summer Tale*, is what makes Petra Sterry's work unmistakable. This is not a summer tale from Eric Rohmer, but from David Lynch. The surfaces of the artist's scenarios show dents and are marked by cracks and scratches, an inheritance that has injured the epidermis from below and from above, from within and without, psychically from the soul and physically from the surroundings. Nothing is as it is, these surfaces seem to be trying to articulate, and precisely this evidence has its cryptic significance and its underlying message. In one of her paintings the artist makes it clear that "St. Aigenheim" is a cold place; the one-family home is sacred, and yet under this St. Aigen one must reckon with sanctions at any time. Minute displacements, subtle fractures, a jumbled letter in a word or a shifted motif in the sequence of depicted objects is enough to expand homeyness (*das Heimelige*) into the dimension with which German etymology already has outfitted it, into *das Unheimliche*, i.e. the uncanny.

At the beginning of his classic work on the subject, the 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud places a long quotation from the dictionary. "What interests us most," Freud concludes, "is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* (homey) exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich* (uncanny)." His following remarks are devoted to this synonymity, and it seems that Petra Sterry knows these remarks very well. It is only a small step from trusted familiarity to ghastly horror. Terror is there on the *trottoir*, and the more carefully one isolates oneself in one's little world, the closer the demons are at one's heels.

During the last one and a half decades, the uncanny has been booming. *The Architectural Uncanny* was the title of Anthony Vidler's 1992 work on "Modern Architecture and Its Discontents", which pinned down the relationship perfectly in its subtitle: "Essays in the Modern Unhomely". Then in 2004 Mike Kelley organized a touring exhibition on the theme of "The Uncanny", making the split between the homey and the uncanny fit for the stage, as it were. And yet this was more or less a late bloomer. With a tip of the hat to Petra Sterry's penchant for creating inimitable Austro-Anglicisms, one could already long since have said: *An kenn i.*²

2. Our Nature Is a Dress Code of the Nada

Sheet sixty-nine of Francisco Goya's *Desastres de la guerra* has the motto "Nada. Ello dirá", "Nothing. We shall see". This image, which is unusual for the series of war depictions because it goes beyond the comprehensibility of the visible, shows an already mummified corpse, which in a sort of posthumous exertion points toward the meaninglessness of being, of war, of its own existence by reaching for a writing instrument. The living cadaver is scrawling a solitary, highly readable and capitalized "Nada" on a tablet that rests against his hip. Nothing, it is written there plain and clear. Here Goya brings into play the empty, naked evidence that everything is as it is, the pure sic, with nothing that can outstrip it. Nothing but the uncanny. It lives exclusively from suspicion, but it lives. A skeleton, like the one that Goya derives from the tradition of the Dance of Death, is to a certain extent the traditional form of depiction for it, familiar to every child and

bringing together the unspeakable with the irreversible, a personification that has long since left behind everything personal.

Petra Sterry also makes use of this tradition in the stick figures – zombie-like, undead, mummified – that she incorporates into her nine-part cycle of drawings *The So-called Nada*. Nothing, it is lurking everywhere, and it is the beacon of every terror that modernism has come to know: it is worse than hell, which used to be the most horrible thing there was. Worse than anything is now the fact that there is nothing. Nothing, not as a metaphysical concept but as a fact of everyday life, was to become the *maladie du siècle* of the nineteenth century. Worse than hell is boredom. The discovery of “ennui” found its future in the aesthetic of the sublime, as Goya had established it. Here the simultaneity of the homey and the uncanny had found its new locus, literally its home, since it was precisely within one’s own four walls that the abyss had opened.

Charles Baudelaire, the poet of ennui and translator of Edgar Allan Poe, was the programmaticist of this sort of complicity between the situated and the sinister. And from a culture-historical vantage point it rings true when Sterry combines the zombie-like figures of the *Nada* cycle with large-format letters written over the picture surface, which bring in their own layer of meaning and meaninglessness. The cycle functions as a palimpsest, as an overlapping of layers that are highly interrelated but nonetheless each maintain their own interpretive sovereignty. “Palimpsestes” was the title given by Baudelaire to a text that he included in his anthology of *Paradis artificiels*, of artificial paradises, which are all that remain for the individual in the Age of Boredom. Palimpsests, in their layering, their transparency and opaqueness, in their principle of sedimentation and of writing over, are, according to Baudelaire, nothing other than an analogue of one of the ways in which memory functions: the one in which the “unavoidable” occurs, since it is there that our “mind turns its attention to those parts of ourselves that we can only face with terror.” In the palimpsest the uncanny comes into its own, and this holds true in Petra Sterry’s work.

3. Poni om e Cent

In his *Grammatology* Jacques Derrida cites a characteristic passage from the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In it the modern founding father reminisces on an episode intended to illustrate his infatuation with his stepmother: “Once I cried out at the table, as she had just stuck a bite of food in her mouth, that I had seen a hair on it. Hardly had she returned the morsel to the plate, and I grabbed it and gulped it down.” The story is characteristic of the “close reading” of Derrida and his circle: taken literally, the little anecdote yields a special displacement of meaning. In French a *hair* is *un cheveu*, but for the psychoanalytically schooled method of deconstruction it is evident that it is just as much *un je veux*, an *I want* in which desire is making itself known. Derrida’s procedure is a school of the uncanny, and the abyss, as *abyme*, is one of its code words.

Petra Sterry’s approach to the displacement of meaning resembles this “close reading”. In the many wordplays for which, one could say, she is famous, there is more at issue than merely the auxiliary reservoir of readings that arise when one reads *Poni om e Cent* as an anagram of “omnipotence” or *TX Nano Is Ulli* as a palindrome of “illusion anxt” (*Angst*). Anagrams – one thinks of André Breton’s telling transformation of the name Salvador Dali into “Avida Dollars” – and palindromes – André Thomkins based his life’s work on them, dreaming up such gems as “Dogma I am God” and “Nie Reime, da kann Akademie rein” (Never rhymes, academy can get in there) – are nothing unusual in the art business. However, it is in the stretto of the uncanny that Petra Sterry’s oeuvre comes into its own, in the tunnel vision of the gaze in its orientation toward the dangers and endangerments that are lurking everywhere, regardless of how much care is taken in setting them in comfortably cushioned homeyness.

The uncanny has its effect because the familiar, as Freud formulates it in his essay, “has become alienated through the process of repression.” That is the way it is put by the psychologist, but in order to make an aesthetic out of it, a premise for creative work and an artistic method, one might do better to turn the statement around: not alienated through repression, but defamiliarized through the release the repressed. Petra Sterry’s artworks function through defamiliarization. This is possible because sexuality is no longer repressed, but is omnipresent as *libertinage* and obsession, as the purpose of life and as suspicion, as a ubiquitous avowal and as a vitality program. The uncanny, which Sterry especially entwines with sexuality, can only develop because sexuality as a mass phenomenon has lost all of its former secrecy,

mystery and aura.

The uncanny arises here, in the detour via art, through defamiliarization. "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." These sentences were written in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky, the influential theorist of Russian Constructivism. "Art as Technique" is the title of the text in which Shklovsky also proposes a strategy for creating an increased experience of a life that one sees and does not merely recognize. Shklovsky refers to this technique as *ostranenie* (defamiliarization). It should lead one to have a closer look, thus drawing things out from under the cloak of expectation that has caused them to serve nothing other than habit. Defamiliarization is a veristic technique: it seeks to unveil a truth hidden behind the haze of routine.

Petra Sterry's art is a work on defamiliarization. And yet it goes one step further, because it is concerned not only with revealing things, but also with magnifying their presence. In the present day routines have become powerful, overpowering. The uncanny is the countervailing power.

References:

Sigmund Freud, (1919) "The Uncanny" in "Standard Edition", trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 17, p. 219-256.

Baudelaire on the palimpsest in Charles Baudelaire, "Les paradis artificiels" in "Œuvres complètes" (Paris: 1928) p. 179.

Derrida's quotation of Rousseau in Jacques Derrida, "Grammatology", trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1997), p. 152. Regarding the homophony of *cheveu* and *je veux* see also Jonathan Culler, "Theory and Criticism after Structuralism" (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 105.

Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization is cited from Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (trans. L.T. Lemon and M.J. Reis) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) "Art in Theory": 1900–1990 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 277.

Translator's notes:

¹ Although it convincingly passes for a town name derived from an obscure Germanic saint of the Middle Ages, this invented name is a pun on *Eigenheim*, i.e. the one-family home with all of its implications of suburban dreams.

² This is dialect for "Eine kenne ich" (I know someone), implying "I know someone who's already been doing that for quite some time now" and being a pun on the English word *uncanny*.