

Child and Death

Remarks on Petra Sterry's Art

The body is booming at the moment. It is continually celebrated. It is tattooed and pierced around with; it is subjected to diets and corrected through cosmetic surgery; it is enwrapped most refinedly and bared unambiguously. The body is the experimental field of the mentality that might well characterize postmodernism most fundamentally: the body is charged with theatricality. Appearance is everything, and the unconventional, transgressive and constructivistic is its medium. Celibacy is seen as the ultimate perversion, the sex change as a self-assured gesture of the free will. The body is theatricalized, and thus it is culturized. It is a sign and a carrier of signs, marked by signification down to the smallest pore.

The body is also booming in Petra Sterry's work. But in contrast to fashion, which pads the body in fitness activities and transgender roles, beauty cults and diverse fads of permanent exchangeability, Petra Sterry's oeuvre has an eye for inevitability. Fashion wants to make the body itself into a fun house for trends, to demonstrate that the body is mutable and multiple, from the length of the nose to the primary sexual organs: it is not necessarily so, although it used to seem that way. Everything is contingent. And yet in this great pool of assurances that "you can do it because you want it" there are matters against which contingency bounces off. They are dominated by strict necessity. One consists of the absolutely cogent and guaranteed certainty of death. The other becomes reciprocally effective and is grasped in the experience that one embodies necessity oneself. This experience comes to light when one has children. Petra Sterry's work is dedicated to the scandal of the unchangeable. That makes her treatment of differentness, and contingency's assertion of the ever-present possibility that things could just as well be different than they are, so different. The body is at the center of her artistic explorations, and in this respect her work is fashionable. And yet for Petra Sterry the body is not a vehicle for dispositions, but an entity travelling down a fixed track; in this respect her work is old-fashioned. There is, to cite one of her acrobatic uses of language, a goal, and this goal is addressed in a pun juxtaposing the German word Ziel (goal) and the French word ciel (heaven), anthropologically the end of all ends. Existence is being unto death.

Being unto death does not mean "morbus vivendi", but in an artistic position that lets modus vivendi become "Mortus Vivendi" this element can also be made to resonate. "Mortus Vivendi" points to mors and mortuus, to death and dead, to the naked consonance of the phenomena, which are unavoidable and become omnipresent in Sterry's work. "Mortus Vivendi" is to be read in one of her text works; it offers itself as the title above a fountain in the form of a coffin. It is the lowest common denominator for all the multiplicities in which this oeuvre articulates itself between publication and photography, painting and text image. Death as pars pro toto; it is mors pro toto.

"In the beginning was the pun," was how Samuel Beckett's put it. Petra Sterry's association-laden handling of text, her juggling of syllables and leaps from one language into the next, has been duly emphasized. And yet these works are anything but ambiguous; on the contrary, they all point toward the one great experience in which everything polyglot comes together. These works are not polysemic, but there is nonetheless a quality of desemanticizedness to them. The multiplicity of meanings steers toward the simplicity of the inevitable. "dianxtis profunde/lemendo vinie": fear (Angst) does in fact sit deep; it elicits lamentations and is truly laming. Death is being encircled. Death and its accomplices: violence, fear, the culprit/victim principle.

A perspective is needed here, and this is where the second instance for grasping necessity comes into play. If death is the ultima ratio, then the child is the persona gratissima. The oppressive subtext of Petra Sterry's work arises from the meeting of objective unavoidability and subjective hopelessness, even in situations where there seems to be nothing in the image that could be up to such mischief. It is the gaze of a child that is perceived and itself perceives what might be lurking there. Children have had fewer experiences with life and thus they have fewer alternatives for dealing with its vicissitudes. Those who have fewer alternatives see what is coming in the light of necessity.

Petra Sterry's fairy tales allow for such a perspective: that which is most horrifying becomes the norm when there is no normalcy upon which deviation can ignite. There is no norm, since everything seems completely self-evident. The adaptation of narrative perspectives to conform with notions of folksiness, which Romanticism was particularly fond of allowing itself, was in no small part a reaction to a world that was increasingly experienced as contingent. Fairy tales don't ask questions. What appears to be fantasy is taken at face value.

Death, the great clarifier, meets a disposition toward clarity that is innate in children. In this constellation there is a danger of falling into tautology, of prattling on about the End, and thus there is a need to employ counterstrategies to keep from bogging down in the cult of the victim. Petra Sterry has to date very well

understood how to avoid such flights of victimism.

Firstly, she has understood this through a penchant for irony. Wordplay is of course a perfect antidote for the allures of oversentimentalization. Absurd, surrealistic combinations of objects and motifs are also employed: an evening gown of plastic features a necklace in the form of a noose as an accessoire, an aquarium flaunts the shape of a coffin.

Secondly, her work is permeated by a unique lapidariness. Art has always understood how to use the argument of evidence in disarming the contingency that it itself is subject to. The suspicion that something could just as well be different is demoted in the self-assured presentation, in the confident demonstration of the "sic!". This is how Petra Sterry's paintings on canvas work. Only a few contours are offered, but a chain of associations about what they mean is involuntarily set off: these are empty pieces of clothing, and thus items that have been found, and thus something is missing, and thus persons are absent, and thus this absence has a cause, and thus violence and death. It would not do to use less in linking this chain of associations, but it would not do to use more either.

Finally, there is a quality to this work that is rather seldom encountered these days. One could call it narcissism resistance. Its counterpart is found in artists' truly ubiquitous and exuberant tendency, corresponding with the principle of theatricality, to associate everything with themselves. "The world is there for me" is their conviction, and it is of secondary importance whether one is more liberally aligned and perceives these conditions in the context of their voluntariness or whether one feels that one has been deprived and sees them as involuntary. Petra Sterry keeps a noteworthy distance in her explorations of those inevitabilities whose list is headed by death, inevitabilities that one should actually have to relate to oneself, because they quite literally cut to the quick.

When the art that has today become conventional overall and everywhere takes on the theme of death, it uses blood and balls, it uses vaginas et cetera. It uses things that are very specially our own. Petra Sterry, in contrast, uses things that are foreign. She utilizes forms of hermeticism, as in the recent film "I, Soldier"; she relies on narration; she is savvy about rituals and institutions. Death is a concern of humanity, and in the course of millennia, enough traditions have been developed for dealing with it. There are conventions for doing so, and it is to precisely these conventions that she returns. In an age of audacities and transgressions, this return is what guarantees Petra Sterry's unconventionality.