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The only words I spoke today:

“Beer!”
“Thank you!”
“Beer!”
“Thank you!”

et ad infinitum...

Bill Callahan
“The Sing”
Koinzidenz in Pracht
[Coincidence in Splendour]
2015
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm
Der Gesang der Insekten
[The Singing of the Insects]
2014
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm
Falsche Zeit, falscher Ort
[Wrong Time, Wrong Place]
2011
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm

Ein Stammbaum zum Bamen
[A Family Tree to Pity]
2011
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm
Dilemma Kid
[Dilemma Kid]
2014
oil on canvas, 190 × 150 cm
Kulturzene
(Culture Scene)
2014
oil on canvas, 190 × 150 cm
Blühender Rammler
(Blooming Buck Hare)
2011
oil on canvas,
190 × 190 cm
Die Markierung des Abgrunds
[The Marking of the Abyss]
2012
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm
Magerzüchtige, Enten Füttern...
(Anorexic, Feeding Ducks...)
2014
oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm
Die Tage rennen davon wie edle Rösser über den Hügel...
[The Days are Running Away Like Noble Steeds Over the Hills...]

2011
oil on canvas,
190 x 240 cm
LOVE
[LOVE]
2015
oil on canvas,
190 × 190 cm
Denn es geht dem Menschen wie dem Vieh — manchmal wird’s halt preisgekrönt...

[For that which Befalleth the Sons of Man Befalleth Beasts — Sometimes they are Prize-Winning...]

2013–15

Pictor print, 148 × 110 cm
Einsamkeit ist, verglichen mit allem, ein ziemlich bekömmlicher Zustand...
(Loneliness is, Compared to Everything, a Quite Digestible Condition...)
2013–15
Pictor print, 148 x 110 cm

Auch Biergarten in der Nähe...
[Even a Beer Garden Nearby...]
2013–15
Pictor print, 148 x 110 cm
Looking at the new paintings you have made for the exhibition, there are several elements that I think of as consistent in your work. There’s often an image that is familiar if not recognisable. Or recognisable if not familiar. And a title that may be helpful or playfully misleading—especially in a form of word play that resists translation from German. So what is the starting point for a new painting? Is it a pre-existing idea, a title or an image that sets it in motion?

Mostly it starts with a remarkable image which convinces me that it is worth getting painted. In the early days I collected, comme il faut, ideas for paintings by sketching them with pen and paper. For the past fourteen years I’ve been using my collages. The collage is a marvellous medium to get results that can shock yourself. You have a lot of cutout images and you slide them over and around until you have something where you have to say: “Wow, this is crazy, unseen, unbelievable, but has a certain soundness.” Then you glue it together and search for a correspondingly alien title. And if a collage has the quality, the charisma, the fitting destiny to become a painting, I’ll try. But sometimes reality perplexes me and I see a painting right through my window like the “Anorexic Feeding Ducks”—which spares me some glue. Reality is a surprisingly cheap stool-pigeon.

Collage is a medium that juxtaposes realities—bits and bobs from the real world forced into unlikely or unexpected relations. Even at its most complex, I think it remains readable as a medium because of the raw materials. But when you talk of producing something ‘unseen’, I remember you once quoted Magritte to me, “I only paint what I have not seen before.” I know you weren’t talking about yourself at the time, but do you think that is the job of painting?

Well, Magritte meant he wanted to paint what he has not seen painted before. The poor bastard had to defend himself his whole life against the silly imputation that he ‘painted dreams.’ So the job of the painter is at least to paint unseen paintings. Since painting has existed now for a mere 40,000 years it’s not too difficult a task. As James Ensor put it: “As long as the sun shines, you will live, beloved little panel painting.” It seems to me to mean that every generation paddles in the same pool of passions, but pictures its adventures differently. This is, of course, just an extremely foggy revelation of the job of the painter.

And yet this doesn’t quite explain the continued pull of painting as a useful medium. And ‘figurative’ painting at that...
All of your paintings make sure there is something to indicate it’s about the materiality of paint itself that is at work and important here, and not simply the business of image-making. I’m thinking, for example, of the splash of paint that is flicked onto the surface at (I presume) the end of your working on the canvas....

WB Oh dear, this is a delicate question. You are laying hands on my fragile empire of contradictions. In one respect I adore the magical qualities of oil colours, in another I detest its over-eagerness to serve fraud and cheap thrills. I have to mistrust its charms and allurements and make sure it submits to my arbitrary intentions. If it says, “I’m colour, I’m free, I represent just myself,” it enters the muck of meaninglessness. I’m not allowed to allow this. The splashes you mentioned have a handful of purposes. They are, of course, a distinguishing mark, a melody which helps the visitor to identify the author. Visitors love to identify immediately and precisely. The splashes also hide badly painted parts. I loved this immediately. They irritate eye and brain and construct an additional ‘phantom-plane’. And, you’re right, they are the last act after the mumbling of the signature. A gesture of contempt, justified by the power of contradictions.

AR And, dare I say it, a little bit of abstraction in a field of representation…? Which makes me ask about that. Resisting figuration, even in your early days, was never an option?

WB I satisfied my abstract desires when I made the series “The Problems of Mini Golf in European Painting.” The possibilities of abstract painting are hair-raisingly limited. You cannot mock or insult Creation, you cannot mock or insult contemporary art with it. You cannot praise your favourite phenomena with it. Nor is it of any help when you want to idolise or worship. You cannot picture adequately with it your pool of passions. Not to speak of your “Lebensgefühl”, which might be in English your “sentiment of life.” I know many colleagues who went into the desert of abstraction and have been suffering and mourning all of their lives. And secretly they all dream of painting a daffodil, a daisy or a steamy tit.

AR You mentioned that early series. I sense that what you and your contemporaries were trying to do at that time was precisely to mock and insult the legacy painting you inherited. Can you talk about that time? What was the art school / art world climate like?

WB Unfortunately one of my problems is the fact that I only remember important things that touched me. This might make the
romantic German landscape that might make Caspar David Friedrich proud. The dog cocking its leg into the valley is either monumental or pure bathos. And that leaf that on the tree that is so disrespectful of perspective... (I guess CDF would have liked that too!)

But instead of a tiny human being lost in wonder, while faced with the sublimity of a fading world, we have a miserable dog marking a miserable territory. Which clearly indicates that Caspar David Friedrich is not smelling funny, but is dead indeed. Time fulfilled its duty and bore changes in the way we picture our worlds. And the disrespectful leaf seems to be the proud flag of freedom in a ‘desert of freedom’, as Nietzsche uttered...

I like the fact that you say ‘seems’. That is, as much as this is formally composed, the meaning of the juxtaposition is not always clear from the beginning, I suppose... To take ‘Blooming Buck Hare’, for example. There’s a strong sense of “What if we juxtaposed x with y...” Not just what would it look like, but what associations would it invoke? Do you prepare yourself to be surprised? In this painting the surreal juxtaposition is clear — the hare and the flowers. But you reinforce this with the title actually painted into the painting. What makes you so explicit in this case (and in others, such as ‘The Days are Running Away...’) to embed the titles? Is it a double bluff?

I always hope I’ll have interesting and surprising accidents while I’m painting. To meet an abortive attempt which has to be warmly welcomed. To avoid routine, to avoid craftsmanship, to avoid virtuosity, to avoid seriality, to do as much wrong as to end in painting a good picture. And if you try to do everything wrong you can’t do no wrong. Clever take-off, isn’t it? In the case of the ‘Blooming Buck Hare’ everything was under control. I wanted to paint a blooming hare. Not a surreal juxtaposition of a hare and flowers. But a blooming hare to be identified on the first glimpse. A little sign with the title besides the painting would not have been sufficient. Same with ‘The days are running away like noble steeds over the hills...’. There had to be a clash on the canvas between these wretched creatures and the words ‘noble steeds’. There is a theory that every painting is a self-portrait. In the case of the blooming hare this theory is more than true. And to be honest, we are not talking about double bluffs, we are talking about overwhelming generosity...

Last year’s survey of your work brought together paintings from as early as 1980 until the present day, and of course there are definitely shared affinities that transcend shifts in style. You mentioned earlier that you have been reliant on the collages for the past 14 years. What prompted the shift in technique? And can you pin-point other stylistic changes? Was there some expressionist hurdle or debt to overcome? Those earliest paintings feel quite fast or raw...

The new collage-based paintings have ingredients (figures and things) that need a bit more accuracy to reproduce them in oil, and call up a closed little world of convincing meaning and feeling. Apart from time-consuming painterly accuracy in the newer paintings I see no stylistic change. I still try to be fast, raw and furious. Because I still think that there are a lot of better places to be than in front of an easel. And far and wide I see no-one who could save me and do the job in my stead. My style is still a child of my dear eye and brain — impatient and vengeful.

So talk me through a couple... ‘The Marking of the Abyss’, for example, which lends the show its title. It's an imponderable...
Der Mann der Elena Ceausescu tötete; ihren Mann natürlich auch…

[The Man who Killed Elena Ceausescu; her Husband, too, of Course…]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Interessantes Konzept…

[Interesting Concept…]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Das letzte heile Haus…

[Last House Standing…]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Doktor, wie geht es mir…?

[Doctor, How am I…?]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Profis betrachten einen Fanatiker…

[Professionals Look at a Fanatic…]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Die kurze Karriere der Femme Fatale

[The Short Career of the Femme Fatale]

2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm
Ratte mit Geweih
[Rat with Antlers]
2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Lost Exit — Warmes Wasser...
[Last Exit — Warm Water...]
2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Trauernder Afrikaner
[Mourning African]
2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm

Hausgemachte Tränen
[Homemade Tears]
2014
collage, 32 × 24 cm
Selected Solo Exhibitions

2014 Die Zeit verklaut uns mit Hoffnung, Galerie Figge von Rosen, Berlin

2012 Die Avantgarde von Hinten, Marian Meyer Contemporaries, Paris

2008 MMX Landerspiel-Kunst im Spiel, Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Lagenfurt

2005 Bad Painting — good art, MUMOK — Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna

2006 Vertrautes Terrain—Collectors’ Choice, ZKM | Karlsruhe

2003 Coleslaw Melene — Ein Rückblick auf die "Neuen Wilden", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Kassel

1991 What about having our mother back, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1982 Das Macht und Ohnmacht der Beziehungen, Maximilian Verlag Sabine Knust, Munich

1981 Home Sweet Home, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

Selected Group Exhibitions

2014 Zeichen gegen den Krieg, Kehrwieder, Berlin

2012 La nouvelle peinture allemande, Centre Pompidou, Paris

2011 Das Macht und Ohnmacht der Beziehungen, Maximilian Verlag Sabine Knust, Munich

2010 Des Selbstportraits, Staatliche Kunsthalle Darmstadt

1999 Zum Zentrale Europas, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1998 Die "Neuen Wilden", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Kassel

1997 Bad Painting — good art, MUMOK — Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna

1996 Die Macht der aktuellen Kunst, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1995 Armut, Armut, Armut — Künste der 80er Jahre, Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn

1994 Übermalerei, Villa Arson, Nice

1993 Der Hang zur Architektur in der Malerei der 1980er Jahre, Rheinisches Landesmuseum Düsseldorf

1992 Kippenberger, Oehlen und ein Werk von M. Kippenberger, Villa Arson, Nice

1991 Collage ou l’âge de la colle, Galerie Eva Herzog, Nantes

1989 Bad Painting — good art, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel

1988 Der Hang zur Architektur in der Malerei der 1980er Jahre, Rheinisches Landesmuseum Düsseldorf

1987 Galerie Max Hetzel, Cologne

1986 The BiNational-German Art of the late Eighties, The Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, Minneapolis

1985 What about having our mother back, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1984 Home Sweet Home, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1983 Das Macht und Ohnmacht der Beziehungen, Maximilian Verlag Sabine Knust, Munich

1981 Home Sweet Home, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1979 Zum Zentrale Europas, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1978 Die "Neuen Wilden", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Kassel

1977 Die "Neuen Wilden", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Kassel

1976 Die "Neuen Wilden", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Kassel

1975 Impressionen der Spätzeit, Deichtorhallen Hamburg

1974 Arbeiten aus der Sammlung Städtische Museen Jena

1973 Städtische Museen Jena

1971 Kunsthalle Kiel

1969 Kunsthalle Kiel

1968 Kunsthalle Kiel

1967 Kunsthalle Kiel

1966 Kunsthalle Kiel
Selected Publications


Werner Büttner, Die Probleme des Minigolfs in der europäischen Malerei, Galerie Max Hetzel, Köln, 1983.


Werner Büttner, Ratapharma, aber auch Herzmittel, und für die Augen eine bekümmliche Tinktur, Peter Pakesch und Johannes Schlebrügge (Hg.), Fama & Fortune Bulletin, Nr. 28, Wien, Mai 2002.


BÜTTNER & HEROLD

Duplicate Comrades —
Jailhouse Christmas 1989

nine double-printed linocuts by Werner Büttner
on offset and screen prints by Georg Herold
each portfolio is unique due to arbitrary changes of the background

In 1989 the GDR collapsed.
These are members of the communist nomenclatura
who spent Christmas ’89 in the jailhouse:

Erich Honecker
Erich Mielke
Willi Stoph
Hermann Axen
Günter Mittag
Günther Kleiber
Harry Tisch
Werner Krölikowski
Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski

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