

REST IN PIECES

On Ulrike Ottinger at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein



Ulrike Ottinger, "Hannah-Höch-Preis 2011", Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2011/2012, exhibition view

Ulrike Ottinger has become known primarily for her eccentric feature films such as "Portrait of a Female Drunkard" (1979) and "Freak Orlando" (1981). Yet her roots are actually in the fine arts: The director and photographer started her career as a painter. On the occasion of her receiving the Hannah Höch Award, Ottinger presented her early painterly oeuvre, which has rarely been on public display, in Berlin.

As the artist explains, she abandoned the brush and easel for the camera and filmstrip, the static for the moving image, because she had come to a breaking point in the mid-1960s. The Berlin exhibition sheds light on what may have been at the heart of that crisis.

On the occasion of winning the Hannah Höch Prize 2011, Ulrike Ottinger presented a selection of her paintings from the 1960s this winter at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. Although this work was heretofore virtually unknown, it is no secret that Ottinger came to filmmaking later in her career, after more than a decade of productivity in Munich and Paris as visual artist, and a transitional period in her hometown of Constance as organizer and director of cultural events including art exhibitions, film screenings, and poetry readings. Certainly many artists at that time got into genre trouble and entered the mixed-media fray. But Ottinger's switch is more dramatic than that; more comparable to Arthur Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry. To give up your art form and jump media is, certainly literally, a catastrophe.

For anyone who listened, Ottinger always said that she had reached a point of "crisis" in Paris that brought about a change of art. Then as now, Ottinger would say no more.

The paintings shown at the n.b.k. were selected from two consecutive work series in Paris, differentiated by Ottinger's turnaround in 1965 to a new compositional approach. In addition, a variety of documents like photographs, posters, flyers, and an early book of etchings were displayed in two cases and on a column and back wall, affording a more complete picture of the many aspects of the artist's pre-filmmaking line of production. That the photographs Ottinger later took in the context of "Freak Orlando" (1981) were intercut with evidence of her early interest in ethnographic cultural studies elucidated the turn to film as continuity shot.

In the earliest paintings on display, dating back to 1962, the viewer recognizes depictions of everyday life in mass media society in terms of notational systems extending through Jewish mysticism or folklore, structuralism, and cybernetics. The unstoppable, upbeat engagement with the symbols and theories of the world as signification system, which are as diverse as they are continuous, gives way to the paintings of the second phase, more recognizably Pop, which follow out the streamlining of medium or message inherent in the art and deco of American culture at the onset of globalization into the close quarters of horrific premonition. But how can we bring into focus this otherwise unidentified prospect of an intransitive threat?

Consider Ottinger's final painting, "Bol" (1968), a totemic trio of panels depicting three phases of one action (and in which another lineup of images as frames in film already beckons): A

somber-faced woman raises an oversized bowl to drink until, in the third panel, her face is eclipsed by the upended emptied vessel. The perfect exchange between containers, now full, now empty, highlights the fluid content passing between as vital: the blood is the life. Daniel Paul Schreber, the most celebrated paranoid schizophrenic in the annals of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, introduced in the document of his breakdown and recovery "Memoirs of My Nervous Illness" (1903), the term "soul murder". The designation named, as the breaking point of his own crisis, the heinous practice of extending one's own life by diminishing that of another. Schreber's literary example is Faust's pact with the Devil, which he interprets as act of cannibalism. Is it the horror of soul murder and human sacrifice that we glimpse in the parting shot Ottinger couldn't get past in the medium of painting?

In the transfer from photography to paint, the process characteristic of these works, Ottinger introduced two significant emendations into her "Allen Ginsberg" (1966), which is otherwise based on the iconic photograph of the Beat poet posing as Uncle Sam. The new Uncle Sam emits an empty thought or speech bubble like ectoplasia at a séance. The cartoon cartouche is a recurring motif in many of Ottinger's paintings, including "Bubblegum" (1966), which, by flipping through the act of blowing up and popping a wad of gum in its series of images, emits via the empty burst balloon the "pop" that was the new art trend's name. Other motifs found throughout the paintings – heads sticking out, tongues, and opened hands held up and out – commence as symbols of world signification and end up conveying warning shouts. Even as they are moved side to side Vaudeville-style (as in the artist's 1965 photo

portrait lined up with the Marx Brothers on the poster behind her), the hands reach through their emblematic history to signal, at the border between trust and suspicion, apotropaic defense. The abundance of such signs signifies at best standoff and more likely imminent doom, like all the crucifixes and bunches of garlic packed into the Transylvanian village at the foot of Dracula's Castle.

"Allen Ginsberg" shows the lines of a jigsaw puzzle cut through it. The ritual process of fragmentation and restoration has been caught in the act as one of its senses or directions: Ottinger gave those attending the opening at which the work was first presented its pieces to put together again. In psycho horror pictures, "Pieces" (1983) and "Saw" (2005) come to mind, the conceit of transposition of puzzle play to other media has been made flesh. As is the case with the mon-

strous assembly of bodies out of corpse parts central to the numerous film adaptations of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" (1818), the murderous puzzle appears in these films as an internal simulacrum of filmmaking. It doesn't stop there, however, but enters film's self-reflective interrogation of its media nature. While the literal is always the allegory of the literary, as Paul de Man advised in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969), the construction of film's essence out of the limits of material reality falls short of the greater syntax of cinema. This is raised as a question in "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" (1976): Must we be chained to what we saw? At the end of the film, the truck that makes possible the female protagonist's escape from the cannibal killers (who sculpt totemic installations out of the remains of their ongoing repast) bears the name Black Maria, which, also being the name Thomas



Ulrike Ottinger, "Allen Ginsberg", 1966



Edison gave his film studio, gives an answer on behalf of cinema that lies beyond the reach of the psycho horror internal to this film. For Ottinger, too, the film medium, like the truck *Black Maria*, intervened as rescue from and counter-testimony to the jigsaw puzzle of human sacrifice.

At the close of his lecture on the significance of the *Serpent Ritual*, presented to obtain release from the confined phase of his recovery from crisis, Aby Warburg identified Uncle Sam in a photo from his American trip years earlier, during which he first encountered the ritual dances of the Pueblo Indians he interpreted in the lecture.

It is safe to say that this reading of modernity through a relay of mythic interpretations is one of Ottinger's most prized references and inspirations. Uncle Sam appeared to Warburg on a San Francisco street bisected by electric wires as the American redeemer who had overcome the cult of the snake and the fear of lightning through technological innovation. Uncle Sam leads to Warburg's conclusion that mass-media society leaves no "room for thought" (*Denkraum*). This technophobic angle, unique in Warburg's work, most likely anticipated and gratified treating physician Ludwig Binswanger's prejudice that

Delusions immersed in technology broadcast only the dire news that the illness was chronic and untreatable. Going into his psychotic break during World War I, Warburg recognized what was coming soon, a forecast he deposited as stowaway in the optimism of American techno culture (as well as in Binswanger's anti-American technophobia). But the sense of doom that he cast into technologization in the Serpent Lecture began as Warburg's early positive discovery that a figure from antiquity was captioned in a Renaissance painting by the motility that an accessory reflected. Out of this detail, a piece of veil catching the wind as in a thought bubble, Warburg developed the paranoid view that technology supplanted mediation and released prehistory, a systematic view he exchanged for a phobic one in the lecture he gave to get out of the hospital. Warburg subsequently found room for his thought in the multi-perspectival Mnemosyne project, a format less constrained than the art history of painting itself.

In 1968 Ottinger was beset by a nightmare that post-traumatically revealed the recent past as a stowaway in contemporary political upheavals. In waking, everyday life, radical students had destroyed Ottinger's work in a group exhibition at the University of Constance for its bourgeois American decadence. The pounding sounds Ottinger was hearing every night in her Paris apartment across from the Sorbonne, which the French police made with their staffs while gathering in the streets below, were transposed to the soundtrack of the nightmare, which took place in her old atelier at home in Constance. When in her dream the atelier caught fire, she phoned her family and then her mentors. But even Althusser, Bourdieu, and Lévy-Strauss, the immediate influences Ottinger herself cites for

the early structuralist-cybernetic Paris paintings, couldn't help her. She called the fire company. When the firemen arrived, they immediately turned into hybrid SS agents (dark leather) and French police (the pounding clubs). They commenced to destroy what the fire hadn't yet wasted. But then, jump cut, Ottinger would wake up from the serial nightmare at the threshold to a *Denkraum* of her own. Ottinger's turn to film thus parallels Warburg's turn to the mediatic setting of his Mnemosyne project, in which he continued to contemplate his crisis-borne insights in a format of juxtaposition rather than opposition. The dream, which attended Ottinger's decision to find new conditions for her work, was later retold as a sequence in her first fiction film "Laokoon und Söhne" (1972/73). Here the artist who dies during the destruction of her atelier by the Furies, who emerged as firemen out of the water, loses her own loss through a series of metamorphoses. In the course of these, she finds an alternative to the atelier and its destruction in the circus Laocoon and Sons, as did Ottinger, perhaps, in her first art-cinema fiction film. The film medium would appear to have given Ottinger room to turn the traumatizing memories and identifications around into the outward bound encounter with the other, with reality, and the future as adventure and affirmation.

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