

Remarks on the New Paintings by Angelika Margull

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translated from German by G. Charles Rump

The paintings most recently created by Angelika Margull are reminiscent, despite their being so different, of those forcefully true-to-life images for which the artist has become known. In those days she conducted an individual inquiry into bodily conditions, which – for their way of representation – also allowed assumptions on emotions, inner states and situations. Her drawings and paintings depicted precisely and in loving detail fragmentary visions of human faces, feet and hands, facial expressions and gestures from an unusual and surprising angle. The artful use of the rules of perspective made the dimensions of fragmentary parts of faces and limbs misalign and appear exaggerated, made them acquire plastic qualities and come across downright aggressively.

Today, too, perspective is Angelika Margull's device to design a unique view of the forms of the human body. But now this is less a central motif than a domination of the composition by explainable forms. The bodies are naked, but we should not understand them as traditional nudes. Like apparitions they move across the canvas, single, doubled and striding staggered in parallel, always seen from above, which means that planes leading into space are rendered with less foreshortening. Margull uses a form of the so-called "cavalier perspective", referring to the view of a rider on horseback, something we know from Signorelli and Grunewald. Margull works with the "vertigo"-phenomenon, which, medically can be diagnosed as a vestibular balance disorder leading to dizziness, but which is also used as a symbol for goldbrick, deceit and exaggeration, and for inebriation, too.

We know the effect of foreshortening Margull constantly makes use of from past epochs, like late mannerism and baroque, and there mainly from decoration painting. Preferably used in painted ceilings and frescoes it was deployed to blur boundaries of reality. The limbs of figures were radically compressed to make them appear real if seen from below, something that didn't only demand superior technical abilities but also innovative fantasy. The illusionist painted decoration of church ceilings with everything seen from below leads – mainly for reasons of program and propaganda – to seemingly endless heights and will take the spectator into metaphysical dimensions. Margull puts, in many ways, constructive sobriety against such baroque perturbation largely and not at last owed to radical effects of depth. The movements and effects of colours in her images are restrained; the spiritualised sways and floatation of her constellations of colours reveal her predilection for the magic visions of František Kupka and the wafting, occult and associative phantasmagorias of

Odilon Redon. Only geometric forms breaking out of the basically rather homogenous colour scheme every now and then, contrasting pendentives, accentuate the bendable conduct of line of the contours of the bodies or define empty spaces resulting from moving joints or spreading limbs. To use the title of an impressive Vienna exhibition of 1992, we are dealing with the “Beredsamkeit des Leibes”, the “eloquence of the body”, its forms and ornamentally effective motion sequences, dominating Margull’s stagings. Her canon of proportions, conditioned by rigorous top view, avoids all artificialness, which could give the impression of acrobatics. At the same time it conveys an idea of the figure and its mobility – the inclusion of suggestive simultaneity of motion sequences does indeed refer to the time factor – from a deviant angle and shows the human body like a silhouette and almost landscape-like objectification, as she renounces any description of its properties and conditions, if we disregard the small indications of gender. The spectator, temporarily irritated by the seeming state of floatation of the figurations and the play with the “above” and “below” knows about the real proportions and supplements what he sees by his mimetic abilities; the image, situated between illusion and simulation, becomes a projection screen for his imagination. Inside, fields not defined in detail, move across the canvas or paper as free forms. They are embedded in a plethora of small ciphers defining space or stand in for objects in their surroundings. Anything anecdotal stays outside. The visually conceived image of reality, as shown in a series of photographs showing plastic and functional conditions, deployed by Angelika Margull as the basis of her works, recedes into the background. Just the moment is captured.

In spite of a number of allusions there aren’t any narrative constructions. Everything is subordinated under the principles of pure painting, the inventive, calculated and fruitful interplay of arrangements of form and colour, space and bodies, which ignites the creative impulse. They interpenetrate and melt into an organic unity. This impression is heightened by the flowing tender transitions of colour, interrupted only now and then by black contour. Margull largely constricts herself to variations of green, mild tones of brownish red and all the variants of the scale of an iridescent scale of grey. The planar colouration, altogether clayey and juicy, must be seen as a specific accent preventing the domination parts inspired by the figure by their over-exactness of spatial organisation. It overrules the figurativeness of this kind of painting. Even the dark forms of the shadows attached to the silhouettes could be interpreted as freely formulated lagoons of colour, just like the slivers of space indicated by just a few brushstrokes, which, here and there, give an inkling of the character of the ambience.

The confrontation with the human body, for centuries the measure of all things and principle of higher harmony, has remained, despite all experiments and deformations since

the beginning of the last century, a relevant and central subject in the plastic arts. Especially today a large number of exhibitions of paintings and sculptures demonstrates, how obsessive the current examination of the artists of the body, be it as an organism or a machine, its dynamics and its functions, proves to be. Some do it soberly, others coolly, or – like it is happening here – with sensual interest in its dreamed-of or real erotic presence. The most recent paintings of the series exhibited here, do, in particular, tell of Margull's interest in a personification of her hitherto anonymous and sexually neutral portrayals, by making the figures more attractive through highlighting by means of "small but highly visible lights", as she says herself. It serves to indicate the androgynous seductive power. (1)

The alleged unreality of the isolated appearance of bodies as white background, mantle and hull points towards a spiritual level beyond the feeling of existence and environment so often discussed today. "Human trace and human shadow ask the age-old questions of the meaning of life" Doris Schmidt (2) once wrote referring to an exhibition which treated the subject of the image of man as shadow, stencil and empty form. It largely presented works which – as often in Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme – addressed the omitting of human beings in designed spaces or which showed them as a fragmented silhouette. But the white plaster figures of George Segal and the anthropometrics of Yves Klein were included, too. The latter ones, in relation to their cosmic attitude and transcendental claims are, somehow, albeit distantly, related to the works of Margull, were once described by Wieland Schmied as "poor copies of bodies scurrying by on the canvas, images of flattest naturalism and verbatim depiction." (3)

What they have at least in common is the principle of latent discomposure by the spectators' irritation, who may experience these transparent beings, which cast shadows nevertheless, as eldritch. This invokes something Freudian, as the uncanny can be interpreted as "hidden": "The presence of the uncanny in the middle of the familiar produces unrest, anxiety, split consciousness and disorientation and it is, at the same time, an expression of this divide. The present aesthetic discourse uses these expressions. They represent strong basic experiences of man, which request to speak in the uncanny [...] The images show the absent as emptiness, as a fragmented recollection, as a return of the suppressed or as a vision." (4)

The strange attraction of these paintings encourages reflections on appearance, the rhetoric of the body, and the energy of humans; and also on the power of the plastic arts to make them speak always in a new way, also, and especially when, we only deal with minimised indications to the images, intriguing by means of their relaxed quietude, like those of Angelika Margull. Francis Bacon, in an interview with David Sylvester, said that in today's painting he found the question mysterious "how one can represent apparitions [...] how one can manage to understand the mysteriousness of the apparition within the framework

of the mysteriousness of the creation of the image [...] one hopes to produce the object suddenly in a completely irrational way, but that it will be completely real [...]” (5) Angelika Margull may have had similar thoughts producing this series of paintings.

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(1) Angelika Margull, in a letter of November 13th, 2006

(2) Doris Schmidt, Der ausgesparte Mensch. Eine signifikante Ausstellung in der Mannheimer Kunsthalle, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, February 19th, 1976

(3) Wieland Schmied, Züge des Menschenbildes heute, in: Menschenbilder. Ausstellungskatalog. Kunsthalle Mannheim, Mannheim 1968, p. 34

(4) Barbara Alms, „unHEIMlich“ in der Bilderwelt, in: UnHEIMlich. Ausstellungskatalog. Städtische Galerie Delmenhorst, Delmenhorst 2003, s.p.

(5) Francis Bacon, in: David Sylvester, Gespräche mit Francis Bacon, München, New York 1992, p. 107

Quotes have been translated from the text, not taken from the English editions.

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