Desert Islands - Storytelling in Kim Nekarda's work
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At first, everything seems calm in Kim Nekarda's figurative paintings. They show mostly landscapes and interiors where time seems to standstill and takes a short rest, before it continues running and motion takes over the picture. To use a cinematographic term: the paintings look like "stills", mechanically suspended and thus momentarily isolated single frames of a visual narrative, whose past or future can be evoked at any time by either pressing the rewind or the forward button. The origin of the still, the spool of film or the videotape, guarantees the viewers' knowledge of a chronological order to the single framed image and its subject. A motionless painting showing the still's ability to indicate a whole narrative in a single cut must develop different strategies and methods of storytelling.

Storytelling is traditionally the role of the acting human figure. In *De Pictura*, a tract of early modern times, Leon Battista Alberti had declared the human figure not only the most important part of the *istoria*, the visual narrative, but even wanted to see it embodying the narrative itself: the activity, the gestures and the facial expressions of the human figures were to represent the chronology of real or fictitious events with a distinct beginning and end.[1] The viewers were understood as passive recipients, merely denoting the story according to its pictorial logics. Paintings without human figures were automatically ranked in other, lower genres like the landscape painting or the still life, and had no storytelling function.

Though Kim Nekarda's paintings are void of human figures, they have a narrative structure clearly distinguished from traditional representations of landscapes and interiors. The actual story, whether taking place in the "a priori" or in the "posterior" of the single image, is external to the picture frame. In the painting itself only traces, remnants of a bygone reality, loosely laid out side by side like circumstantial evidence at a crime scene, seem to indicate the course

of an event or narrative without, however, entirely disclosing its subject. These traces are not exclusively objects, but voids as well, tracks that seem to signal the recent presence of a person or animal. In the painting of a primeval forest (*Untitled*, 2001; Cover), as well as in *Nur das Leben bleibt* (2003; fig. pg. 50), it's merely flattened grass that connotes this kind of presence; in the latter painting, however, a red scarf on the branch of a tree, fluttering above the abyss of frothing, convulsive masses of water, increases the dramatic impression of the scene. *Prinzessin* (2003; fig. pg. 54) shows a deserted, somber room. Perhaps while on the run a mask has been left behind, now lying beside an untouched bed, in front of the only window. This incompleteness and the symbolic impetus of the individual objects arouse curiosity, invite the viewers to search for a solution to the puzzle, i.e. the (re)construction of the original event that decodes the objects and assigns meaningful relationships. By reconstructing the story within their own imagination, the viewers become protagonists of the painting.

In some paintings, however, like, e.g., *Das Meer der Gefahren* (2003; fig. pg. 46) and *Untitled* (2003; fig. pg. 47), even a track that could indicate a story is missing, and the paintings keep their narrative quality. This might result from the choice of a representational frame which puts the viewers "in the picture" and turns them into "agents" of the visual narration.

Engaging the viewer actively in the visual narration is a novelty that first unfold in the literature of the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. It was later adopted by the fine arts. James Joyce gave important momentum to this development in his literary oeuvre, in particular *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939).[2] He developed strategies that were to stimulate the readers' perception and urge the readers' active participation in the story. The narration was no longer subject to the schematic sender-recipient principle, but was transformed into a communicative act that could be influenced by the reader. James Joyce' complex narrating technique conceals an intention to re-develop reality, instead of just re-presenting it. The text repeatedly offers constellations, ambiguous meanings, uncertainties

and voids which allow a variety of combinations and thus promote a dynamic structure. Poststructuralism found the metaphor of the "rhizome" to describe this narrating technique: the rhizome "(can) take various shapes, from branching out and spreading to the surface to thickening in knots and nodules (...). Each point of a rhizome can and should be linked to any other point."[3] While the image of the thickly intertwined rhizome might be confusing in the context of Kim Nekarda's comparatively clearly structured compositions, the paintings show strategies of non-linear storytelling. Kim Nekarda, too, spreads uncertainties, leaves voids and impediments which "abandon" the viewers and challenge them to make up their own minds.

Kim Nekarda's paintings emerge as result of a "reversed collage"-technique: the individual elements are first arranged in Photoshop and then projected, monumentally enlarged by overhead projection, on the canvas. They then get copied using the traditional media of painting, paintbrush and paint. This technique first appears in the landscapes' scenery–like construction in different planes "stacked" one behind the other as in nineteenth-century landscape painting. For example, in the painting of the primeval forest (*Untitled,* 2001; Cover) three planes converge: the foreground, and likewise the painting, is defined by a tropic scene of gigantic leafs, lianas and palm trees encompassing the scene at both margins. In the middle ground the thicket opens to a glade with high grass displayed on two planes, generating a dark in-between space that cannot be overlooked. Behind the grass, confining the pictorial stage, the foliage of several bushes is appearing shadowy beneath a thick curtain of rain and dazzling light. The collage-technique is even more explicit in the planes' pronounced stylistic differences which sometimes show in a change of paint: in *Untitled* (2003; fig. pg. 49) the background and the middle ground are painted in (diluted) acrylic, whereas the foreground is painted in oil.

Representational and material differences originate from the alternating source material of each "layer": the visual patterns are from the "trivial" arts, the comic strip and the anime, as well as from "high art", especially painting of the last 200 years, and from

traditional Japanese wood-engraving. The characteristics of the different genres—following Heinrich Wölfflin's[4] terminology, they could be roughly described with the binary oppositions of linear/painterly and plane/recession—and the individual style of the artists are deliberately kept. By quoting almost "literally" the fragments of the original sources, Kim Nekarda generates with painterly means those fractures that the "interfaces" of the cropped paper fragments demarcate in a glued collage. Though these "interfaces" are thus preserved, the medium of painting is, paradoxically, the means of combining the different source material into a convincing, coherent composition; moreover, it allows the artist to adapt his original sources for his own work by merely copying them: the graphic-linear quality of the foreground in the painting of the primeval forest can be traced back to a comic strip by Hergé (*Tintin*), the carnal lushness of the middle ground to an oil painting by Henri Rousseau, and the delicate transparency of the background is owed to a woodcut by the Japanese artist Ando Hiroshige. *Untitled* (2003; fig. pg. 49) originates from Caspar David Friedrich's chalk cliffs in oils (foreground) and, once again, Hergé; *Prinzessin* goes hand in hand with Edward Hopper, John Wesley and the animation film *Princess Mononoke* by Hayao Myazaki.

As in pop art, "trivial" and "high art" materials and topics are appropriated indiscriminately; these days, however, in the age of digital image production and transmission technologies, combining them is no longer a provocation, but first and foremost a documentation of everyday perception. "Interferences" of different visual material have become a want for a long time; moreover, the increased superceding of the text by the image in the mass media and the likewise generated flood of images have changed the modalities of perception regarding speed and completeness: for the most part, only fragments of a larger whole are apprehended, often loosing their original meaning in the volatility of the gaze. More often than not only the key information of the visual data is communicated, which will eventually adopt an entirely new meaning when merging with

visual information of other interfering images—a principle that is also used in Kim Nekarda's narrating technique. By isolating a fragment or a single motif from the original visual context, the fragment or the single motif unfold a symbolic impetus: doing so, the objects, the mask or the untouched bed, keep their original references, their signifying function, however, has been concentrated into a sign of universal intelligibility, understandable regardless of temporal, cultural or educational differences. This almost archaic account of a symbol divests the symbol of any critical or moral interpretation, thus releasing it into the space of pure fiction.

The criteria for choosing a painting's visual material can, but not necessarily, have to, be conceived from the context of the original source. The idea for a composition can also be inspired by a piece of literature. The idea for the wall painting *I am the Island* (2002; fig. pg. 44), for example, originates from the novel *Concrete Island* by James Graham Ballard. Though, in this case, a concrete fiction is preceding the composition, the narrating technique remains the same: the starting point of a composition is once again a fragment of a larger whole, this time the novel, leaving the composition's content incomplete and open to further associations. The visual material, here lending the form to the fiction, is for the most part chosen at random and usually does not originate from a source already invested with meaning or narrativity. Since the casualness of the visual material hardly changes the painting's narrative potential, it might illustrate the secondary role of the source material and its background, and once more show the painting's main artistic concerns.

As will be shown in the following examples, Kim Nekarda also creates a narrative effect by his handling of space. The painting of the primeval forest will once again set a precedent. The painting at first sight seemingly cohesive spatial structure "looses ground" on closer examination, since the different planes lack a common vanishing point to conjoin them in a spatial continuum. Since the Renaissance, the perspectival projection is the painterly means to extend the three-dimensional reality into the two-dimensional surface of painting, which thus becomes a window between two spaces and realities of the

same kind. Since in Kim Nekarda's paintings this kind of unifying perspective is suspended, the pictorial reality can unfold independently from the viewers' reality in the imaginary space of pure fiction, far from the laws of rational-mathematical calculation.

The alternating forms of representation of the different layers, too, play an ironic game with the conventional perception of space: the foreground's splendid vegetation is demonstratively bound to the plane by its graphic harsh black contours and the absence of shadows, whereas the light-shadow modeling of the middle ground invests the tufts of grass with a comparatively juicy plasticity and a spatiality which the dark, hidden space between the two "layers" of grass seem to expand. Converging plane and space into an intelligible structure, which would guarantee the security of a spatial or temporal emplacement, seems impossible. This is even more so the case in the representation of a burning landscape (*Untitled*, 2003; fig. pg. 56) which, formally reduced, arises as a black shadow in the foreground, confining the image at its margins, and directing the gaze into the middle ground where a small foot-bridge, perspectivally foreshortened, leading into the depth of the image, seems to indicate "a way out". This tempting illusion is immediately negated by the painting's background which, although seemingly transparent, is confined to the realm of the plane by crisscrossing blue stripes. The viewers consequently see themselves "squeezed" into a narrow space between two planes, so that even the idea of an escape "forward", away from the fire, seems absurdly impossible. Even in paintings pretending to be "space", like, *Prinzessin*, paint running down on the surface of the canvas is leaving the viewers in doubt about the real nature of the place. This confusion of spatial perception reaches a climax in the interrupted connection between the middle ground and the foreground, the inside and the outside. In the window, the only opening to the outside, diffuse light is shining promisingly, unable to reach the inside. The pictorial space thus remains a visually open structure to which the viewers can only react with associations by creating their own order as a possible frame for the story.

With the above the "space" in which stories develop, has been fully discussed; the inevitable question concerning the content of the paintings, however, hasn't been answered, yet would also be pointless to pursue: for in the end, Kim Nekarda's subject and primary interest is the narration itself. Permanently changing, persistently taking a new shape and expanding into new areas. The most appropriate comparison to describe the paintings' content is the idea of a voyage through time and space without knowing its destination, in short: an adventure. The thrill of the unknown, the desire for the hidden treasure, the wish of finding an answer to the riddle, these are the motivating forces urging artist and viewers alike to keep on searching...

1. Leon Battista Alberti. 2002. *Über die Malkunst*. Ed. and translated by Oskar Bätschmann. Darmstadt.

2. Söke Dinkla. 2002. „The Art of Narrative". In: Stephanie Rosenthal (Ed.). *Stories. Erzählstrukturen in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*. Exhibition-catalogue, Haus der Kunst, München. München, Köln, pg. 105 ff.

3. Gilles Deleuze; Félix Guattari. 1977. *Rhizom*. Berlin, pg. 11.

4. Heinrich Wölfflin. 1948 (10. Imp.). *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*. Basel.