

WOLFGANG KLUGE: A PAINTER WHO PROFESSES COLOR AND SHOWS FORMAT

Wolfgang Kluge is a painter of format. Large, often church-window formats lend a festive and almost quite sacred imprint to his loft-like studio rooms in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg. Kluge's paintings are colorful eye-catchers. They are like windows, shedding light and leading to vision. The viewer looks not just at clever works, but looks into the panorama of an alien world. His paintings unfold a dual effect. First, they impress the viewer when he looks at them from afar, from a distance of five or ten meters. But at least the viewer is demanded to look intensely when he studies the paintings on a close distance. On closer examination, one discovers the finest -anywhere on the image- surface structures and recurring and constantly changing patterns. This fine structuralization makes each painting one of a kind that no one may copy and reproduce, not even the artist himself.

You need not look long for Wolfgang Kluge's secret. It is ready there in many sizes and varieties in his studio on a desk which resembles rather a work-bench. "WHAK", Wolfgang Hermann Albert Kluge – is the symbol with which he signs his works, created not only with brush, but also with a spatula, an artistic tool with which no other contemporary artist can make such a perfection. Sharp streaks applied consistently with a spatula, in a protracted and convoluted energetic way, characterize his picture surfaces not soft, mellifluous strokes. With all this choppiness, lines, shapes and forms just predominate.

Wolfgang Kluge goes about a possible close relationship between his work and his viewer. He is not content with the long-range effect of his vividly colored images, but would like the recipient to approach the canvas as closely as possible and delve into it to fathom independently how the painter has made every detail. It is not for nothing that the painter entitled one of his abstract works "Tiefe Einsicht" (Deep insight). The painting is composed of a black square to which everything seems to turn. It invites you to contemplate and it leads the viewer through the study of the painting to a consideration of what holds the world together.

Wolfgang Kluge's paintings show the traces of the work process in which they are originated. They are formed not on a specific schedule, but during the course of the artistic process. They attain completion only in the eye of the beholder. The recipient will be involved in the production of the artwork, giving the image meaning and significance. The artist reveals his working methods. He lets his viewers look over his shoulders and he keeps a close eye on them as well. That may have to do with his practical orientation and his experience outside art. Before art turned to be Wolfgang Kluge's final occupation, for years he has worked as a designer in a car factory and then as a management consultant. Artistic posturing and secrecy are, therefore, far from his intentions.

At the beginning of the artistic creation of Wolfgang Kluge, large-scale abstract paintings stand with monochrome color fields floating away into each other through which you can still detect the influence of his guide Mark Rothko. At the same time, the development of his signature can be seen in these works. They convince, by their clear shapes and colors, that they are different from the brooding works of Mark Rothko with their

expression of positive and activist living. A particularly nice, and bright abstract painting addresses me, recalling, viewed from a distance, a window frame. The cross elements are immersed in a bright yellow, while the background turns white. The artist almost lavishly handles the red in its various shades and nuances. For instance in a painting, the cross is used as a design element and it divides the scene into four roughly equal-sized square swatches. Besides, the main beam is distinct as the cross beam resembles a horizon line. So you could think of a tall, slender tower which is reflected in water.

In the course of his artistic maturity process, Wolfgang Kluge dissolves step by step from abstract painting and opens up his mind to social issues. However, an element of abstract painting remains the same: the strong sense of charm, the charisma and the magical effect of each color. Hardly any other contemporary painter in Germany does revel in colors like this. Red, yellow, green, blue, purple: Wolfgang Kluge can masterfully deal with all these color values. He seldom mixes and mingles his colors, but relies on the particular aspect of every color-tones which means something to the human eye and to the heart of the people.

Even from the gray the painter gains new stimuli and meanings. Dealing with the shades of gray may have been encouraged by his teacher Harald Duwe, from whom Wolfgang Kluge has surely learned more than the artistic tools. Duwe worked as a lecturer in spatial representation at the Engineering School of Automotive Engineering, as Kluge studied there. He was enthusiastic about technology like his student and sought a closer link between art, craft and industry. In the sixties Duwe's art was heavily politicized, as he alongside Günter Grass and Siegfried Lenz founded the SPD voter initiative. The paintings he made then such as "Konferenz" (Conference), "Soldat vor Schwarzrotgold" (Soldier in front of black-red-golden) and especially "Graue Wand" (Gray wall) became the embodiment of politically engaged art just like the posters of Klaus Staack. The gray color of Duwe's became the color-symbol of the "Leaden time" which the 68-ers wanted to dispel.

It is noticeable that Wolfgang Kluge can escape from this gray haze quickly. Drab gray is foreign to him. He mixes his gray with blue, purple and violet base tones, giving it much lively accents. His gray is not associated with dark clouds, but those through which shines the blue of the sky. Unlike Harald Duwe, Wolfgang Kluge waived striking agitation art. He is not committed to party politics, but to general politics and social criticism. With one exception: in 2003, at the beginning of Iraq war, he painted an anti-war picture, which he calls "Heckenschütze" (Sniper). The face of a soldier is almost compressed by his steel helmet. The rifle which he tried to hold protectively in front of himself makes his defenselessness only more visible. He himself became a prisoner of war on terror: a metaphor for the futility of war which will retain its day-to-day validity.

The current crises and conflicts in international politics are reflected in the work of Wolfgang Kluge variously. He avoids harsh and crude agitational effects and consequently chooses the way of aesthetic transformation and elevation. He tries to symbolically represent the European debt crisis. The resting pole of Europe in the middle of the painting is threatened by a plethora of conflicting forces and interests. But the artist does not give up the project of European unification. A surprising green joins

the dark and fiery colors. It is the iconic color that hope dies last. A large format picture turns to the theme of "Globalisierung" (globalization). In the center is a rectangle. It could be an internationally operating company, trying to get through its subsidiaries, branches and subsidiaries of the whole continents in control. Another recently made work deals with the "Bad banks". The Bad banker, who looks more like a shredder is literally two-faced. With one tongue he pleases the customer and with the other he flatters his bank. One eye is open, the other is pinched. He shuts himself off from the suffering of people. His nose like a tube sucks everything which comes near him. Among all, it says: "Bonds for sale".

But Wolfgang Kluge is wary of too fast accusations. He is using his time-critical designs to fathom that not just the bankers, the rich and the politicians are responsible for society's ills, but that almost all people have their share in the moral impoverishment. "You are what you eat!" The painting which puts a human face with the features of a pig's head deals with these findings. A big "Si", the Spanish word for "Yes," underlines the understanding of the painting that seems to be satirical.

However, there should be no false impression. Societal criticism far outweighs in context of the previous complete works of Wolfgang Kluge. Whoever looks around in his big studio spaces, marvels at the fullness of impressive paintings flooded with light providing dynamism, vitality and joy of life, all in one or another way. His variation on the Don Quixote motif is powerful and enthralling in the real sense of the word. The more the viewer approaches the painting, the stronger he is drawn into the spell of a colorful windmill whose four wings put the whole scene into a spinning and dancing motion. A whole row of other works are made also by a similar impulsiveness, including "Fliegenden Drehbücher" (Flying scripts), which are whirled violently as if a blower has fanned them.

The collage-like works of Kluge's "blue period", which are made in the Berlin art scene in Prenzlauer Berg, convey pulsating vitality. In a colorful, mostly ultramarine blue background, happy faces light up which enable their vicinity to vibrate and dance. Sexuality plays an important role in this context. For the painter, sexuality is a mirror image of the fragility of human relationships. "Lulu," the precocious protagonist of Frank Wedekind's play of the same name, is the large-scale painting dominated by high heels. Wolfgang Kluge's High Heel alternates between purple, pink and red, without lapsing into cliché and plush. The painter is driving the associations with his game, as if to say: Evil to him who evil thinks!

Thematically related is the satirical image of a dominatrix, riding on the back of her lover with the whip in her hand and a cylinder on her head. More sharply drawn, and more than that over-subscribed is the representation of two female voyeurists watching a man who seems to be self-satisfying. All three paintings on the topic of female sexuality have emerged as commissions for a Berlin shop that specializes in fetish items.

However, Wolfgang Kluge has not dealt only ironically or satirically with the inexhaustible motif of love. Very different, very personal and conciliatory signals come from his workshop as well. A work entitled "Balance" is something plausible for me. Two rectangles complement each other in a mirror image; they are in harmony with each

other and thus form an abstract, simple yet highly ambiguous symbol for a harmonious partnership which brings about satisfaction and happiness. Wolfgang Kluge ventures into the private and family life with his collage "Dreierbeziehung" (Triangular Relationship) which embraces three photos. A young woman, hidden behind the veil of her long hair, stands between two men. One looks back, the other looks forward uncertainly. Another work entitled "Trennung" (Separation) is connected to this picture. Turned towards each other, two faces are torn apart by a white dividing line. The vertical crack that runs through the whole painting corresponds to a narrower stroke. Thus, a cross is again referred to, as a symbol for death of love.

The thematic diversity in the work of the artist transcends all national and religious barriers and is open to encounter other cultures and fuse with them. Characteristic of this magnificent view is his representation of an Indian holy cow. The bright pink cow, symbol of life and the connection of human beings with the earth and the sky, dominates the center of the painting. It is surrounded by opening flowers and shining stars and comets. Far on the horizon, the reflection of paradise lights up.

Wolfgang Kluge still has set an enduring monument for another animal, a bear. His bear impresses the viewers simply because of its size. The grizzly bear appears in the original size, more than two and a half meters high and towers over its human observer by almost a third. Taking an upright stance and standing, he asks for respect from its animal relatives, the people. In contrast to most other artists, Kluge does not trivialize and humanize his wise bear. The mighty beast comes to the viewer as a distinct creature, alien to people. It seems to step out of its own shadow, has flapping ears and carries a little bear on its shoulders. Wolfgang Kluge has made this work completely by spatula. It was applied to an open-pored wood which deeply sucks the colors. Due to the rich yellow hues on the bearskin and the blue background image, a very expressive and suggestive pictorial effect is achieved. The picture of the bear remains long in the memory of the viewer, even though his mind might be occupied by other impressions. Since the Expressionists hardly has a German artist created such a congenial Animal.

Part of life is death. The two spheres are inextricably linked in the works of the painter. Wolfgang Kluge is not afraid of touching the theme of death. In the center of a large tribute to the Grim Reaper is an inexorable "U", the sign of the urn. The living light dies in the urn. The soul escapes into higher realms, the physical remains trickle away like an hourglass in the ground. Also drastically, he designs a cemetery for very important people who have been raised into heaven before they are crashed by the media. The scene is eerily illuminated by the flames of hell fire. A crocodile opens its mouth on the VIPs. It symbolizes the market which initially attracts celebrities, just to swallow them in the end. The work completed in May 2011, indicates vaguely the face of British pop diva Amy Winehouse, a few months before the singer was a victim of her own drug addiction. The death motif recurs in the painting "Paparazzo". In the center, there is the oversized lens of a camera whose outlines are painted with tar. It sucks in the artistic imagination which is represented verdantly and flourishingly and then deposits it as a dirty yellow in the sense of the "yellow press". You might want to see an allusion to the tragic end of the British Princess Diana, hounded to death by Paparazzi.

Wolfgang Kluge is a hard-working, in the good sense of the word, a prolific artist. He

works incessantly on himself, on his own artistic perfection. But that does not mean that he is working on the assembly line. As in the work of every master, each phase of unbridled creativity alternates with periods of doubt, the search and depression: psychological sensitivities which are also reflected in the titles and subjects of his works. In the course of the years 2010 and 2011, the painter has dealt repeatedly with the theme of death, but also with the question of suffering, separation, and natural disasters. But in the middle of cold winter 2011/2012, a whole new creative period begins for Wolfgang Kluge, readable in a rapid sequence of life-affirming, optimistic and forward-looking works.; or with an "Explosion", to call this process with the title of an exemplary work. With this painting, he has painted over an earlier work on purpose. The explosion is shown as a positive process, as a release of new ideas, inspirations and energies: the loose DIN-A-4 sheets are stirred and reorganized by the storm of artistic invention.

At first glance, the new works of Wolfgang Kluge appear to be brighter, and lighter and more shining than their predecessors. They are not the result of continuous use of spatula but they benefit from the funds of classical painting. Pastel tones are preferred for these works. On some image-ideas, the lightness seems to have been the model of Pop Art. At the beginning of the new cycle, a painting with a programmatic title "Walk" appears which is by no chance. It shows the outlines of two feet, although firmly on the ground, but they do not seem to know exactly in what direction they want to go. But three words clearly show the way like road signs: "WHAK", "WALK" and "this way", that is, "Wolfgang Hermann Albert Kluge" go! Walk the right path! Go your way! "This Way" appears consistently with a lipstick-pink color. This is without question a very optimistic program, a signal for a new beginning and, to put it with the old Goethe, to a "rejuvenation".

The artist has re-invented himself!

In the painting "WHAK ever WALK" he takes the motif of artistic quest for his path again. The letters WHAK do not just stand for the name of the artist, but also propose a bridge to the art of the comic. In the American comic book series "whak" is a designation for a successful hit and it aims at the activist "Message" of the work. Another painting tells the "WHAK Story" with abundant painting effects: on various slices that are reminiscent of gramophone records, CDs or annual rings of trees, different life stages and steps of the artist's experience are visualized. Out of the slices the dancing figures emerge as signs of the dreams and visions of the painter who wants to create his own world through his art. Another work belongs to the same context. Wolfgang Kluge called it "Evolution" with reference to Charles Darwin. He sees his own work as a tiny element in the universal cosmos of life on this earth.

"Architecture - insect I, II and III" is the name of three works of the artist which are about the utopian and visionary development of human civilization in Darwinian sense. The titles remind us of prominent city planners in the sixties. During the hippie era English architects planned mobile, nomadic, localized future cities which could settle down all over the world like insects. Wolfgang Kluge was inspired by the somnambulistic lightness of these projects to design his own simulation games with brush and spatula. They bring great joy to the viewer who has eyes to see, and give him the good news that another world is possible beyond our everyday reality. The beach lies under the

pavement stones! The tribute to the recently deceased Apple-inventor, Steve Jobs is also characterized by optimism about future. The Apple icon is variegated by the artist in a series of apple icons to indicate the inexhaustible potential of ideas and innovations. The white band at the bottom of the image is also seen as a sign of mourning, like a symbol of the immortality of the Apple Creator.

A highlight in this series, in my view, is the work titled "Hoffnung" (Hope) which Wolfgang Kluge has made for the Children's Cancer Fund. It is a work which does not talk nicely about the suffering of children and does not give a false consolation. The image consists of three layers. In the background a solid structure is outlined, it stands for the remaining healthy parts of the body. It pushes a zone of unrest and turmoil, but in the foreground there are five flowering white daisies pushing against the eye of the beholder. They are signs of hope and they symbolize the mental and spiritual forces of sick children and their families who are strong enough to defeat cancer cells in a battle of death and life.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Wolfgang Kluge rises again and again. He takes a new approach and is reinventing himself, as I said, literally over and over again. On the long march to artistic self-fulfillment, there is no support and no break for him. Each new work is for him one more step to complete:

"WALK WHAK!" Again and again he takes up this theme - almost as a leitmotif in a musical composition. The artist has completed a series of six bright, clear, cheerful, colorful oil paintings, showing him from a different side in the sense of form, and in the sense of meaning. The new works are not made with spatula but like old masters, he has painted carefully with a brush. Accordingly, the objects are no more angular, but are limited by the soft rounded contours. The paintings which are majorly squarish are plotted on a bright white background and are usually dominated by three abstract color fields. There are bright colors which radiate joy and optimism: yellow, lime green, red in various shades, pink, purple, and only now and then to contrast, a pair of dark shades. In the sense of Goethe's color theory, all colors correspond and harmonize with each other where each color is related to a different one. The appeal to Pop Art and especially to Flower Power movement cannot be overlooked. Vegetative, flowing lines that are reminiscent of insect legs or veins, connect the areas of color like streams of life. The artist cheers to himself again and again on the graffiti-like inscriptions: Walk easily, Walk permanent, Walk continual!

Nothing human is alien to the artist Wolfgang Kluge. His aesthetic universe includes all aspects of human life: life and death, love and hate, wealth and poverty. His style is unmistakable and wins more pronounced contours over the course of his artistic maturation process. His sizes are not large because of their size, but because the contexts are set in the right place on exuberant color fields. His paintings are like windows and open our eyes to a world far beyond our everyday perceptions.

Dr. Peter Schütt