

“Wealth and speed are two things that the civilized world admires and strives for. People outdo each other in all sorts of communication facilities, such as railroads, express mail, steamships, etc. and thus they remain in mediocrity.“

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote this in 1825 in a letter to his friend, the musician Carl Friedrich Zelter, in which he pinpointed the predicament of the basic parameters of a modern society.

Charles Baudelaire, the „Poet of Modernism“, was somewhat more radical in his assessment. He called modernity „humanity’s extensive spinning around in a vicious circle that will sooner or later end in hell (...).“ For him, the „symptoms of modern civilization“ are mainly the general leveling of human egomania and the indispensable belief in progress, which mankind will pay for with the loss of identity.

Both poets recorded an extremely critical view of their era in which modernity had already cut deep. And today?

Today, we’re right in the middle in the so-called information age. The Production and industrial eras have passed, mankind has set foot on the moon, decrypted man’s DNA and is about to unravel the Big Bang Theory. You could say that humanity, through the achievements of a few, has soared to heights about which we hardly dared to dream a few decades ago.

But the fundamental driving forces – namely, the pursuit of „wealth and speed,“ to recall with the words of Goethe – remained the same and that expedites the dismantling of society and its values even faster.

In his multifaceted work, Christian Leitna addresses the conditions of modern existence. In particular his text-based works, in which he reproduces quotes, express attitudes about the world.

In **o.T. (Tribute to Dr. Dre)** for example, Christian Leitna takes a sentence fragment from a song of the producer and rapper: „it’s all the same shit around the globe, so I can sit back relax and watch the show“. Dr. Dre says that it would be futile to try changing the world. You can only distance yourself from the world in order to avoid being devoured by it. The excerpt from the song is not in printed form, but as metal type: three-dimensional, tactile, tangible. The words thus gain a strong presence. And since the letters are reversed - as if they were ready for printing – Leitna calls for a little more concentration from the viewer.

The work „...**wenn ich morgens aufstehe, möchte ich gleich wieder ins Bett**“ (Homage an Kierkegaard) („...when I get up in the morning, I immediately want to go back to bed“ (Tribute to Kierkegaard)) shows a very similar attitude. Here, Leitna cites Søren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, who in 1843 wrote in his diary: *”When I get up in the morning, I immediately go to bed again. The happiest moment for me is in the evening, when I turn off the light and pull the blanket over my head. Once again I sit up, look around my chamber with indescribable satisfaction and then – bedtime, down under the covers!”*

In fact, Kierkegaard lived for many years in absolute isolation. He retired from the world in order to preserve his moral and aesthetic values and standards.

But what if you cannot get away from the world ? What does it mean to people to be

part of a globalized information society ? Are individuality, subjectivity and originality still valid in a time in which digital and economic dominance are taking over more and more? Commercialization and regulation penetrate broadly all areas of life. Uniformity is conquering the world – the same brands, same labels, same coffee shops all around the world. Standardization and normalization determine our reality and result in decreasing standards. Quality was yesterday. Mass media do the rest. They convince through triviality, superficiality and channeled reporting.

In many of his screen and transfer prints, such as „*all inclusive*“, Christian Leitna uses images that he finds in newspapers and on the internet. He layers two, three, sometimes up to five press images, so that the individual motifs are virtually indistinguishable from each other in the final work. He is referring to the forcefully increasing flood of images that hardly allows for any kind of differentiation. By interweaving the images with one another so that they dissolve into total abstraction, he points out an even more far-reaching problem: the credibility of images.

The discussion about the trustworthiness of media images began in 1990, the year of the first Gulf War. The invasion of American troops in Iraq was presented very clinically – precise, clean and harmless, like a video game. The reality behind appeared different. The reports were a perfect performance, and the media had become an instrument of the system.

Whether photography is a true reflection of reality has been questioned since „*embedded journalism*“, and the digital age underlines this question: The fact that an image can be processed on the computer has turned the claim to truth brittle. Copy, cut, paste, recolor, etc. There is not even a negative any more that would be proof of the truth. In the late 80s, the Norwegian Press Association demanded that digitized images be marked with a „M“ – for montage – to remind the viewer that the images are only partially true. This request was never implemented.

Truth and fiction, reality and illusion – both go hand in hand today. The conditioned person is being told, he/she has unlimited possibilities and is free to do anything. Who is not familiar with slogans like „*We clear the way*“, „*Nothing is impossible*“, „*Are you still dwelling or are you living yet ?*“ People are made to believe that the fiction of autonomy and subjectivity is reality. The sociologist Jean Baudrillard had already written in the 1970s about the fact that reality and fiction merged into each other. He called our reality hyper-reality – everything in it is simulated, including freedom and individuality. The world of simulacra, as Baudrillard called it, has now been perfected through the WorldWideWeb. Everyone can stage everything.

On the other hand, Leitna also deals with the aspects of conditioning and standardization, as in the installation „*Schichtarbeit*“ (*shift work*). The perfect stack of stillets is a wry comment on the compulsion for standardization of a post-industrial society. The work „*Zartbitter*“ (*bittersweet*) sums up the processes which form mankind perhaps even more clearly. The artist piled black metal boxes on top of each other, then squeezed them until they adapted to the height of the ceiling. The most pointed statement about literal adaptation has been made in the limited edition

„**Haussegen**“ (*house blessing*), where the artist states: „*work and buy, pay taxes and die.*“ With this sarcastic statement the artist outlines the image of the good citizen: a person striving for security and order. Security is based upon employment, and employment is usually the base for consumption. Consumption is becoming a global imperative. But consumption only compensates for a dull job. Only the weekend offers a breather. And on Monday everything starts anew.

The series „**Blue Monday**“ can be seen as a commentary on this inevitable cycle. It holds a special place in Leitna's oeuvre. So far Leitna has created over 200 photos transfers from the daily media. The blue of the blurry images dissolving into abstraction is the result of a chemical process that the artist could neither control nor wanted to. In these works, the color is an important symbol of desire. Ever since Novalis and his “Blue Flower” the color blue has been the epitome of longing for the fulfillment of dreams. Even then, the romantic poet wrote of the necessary liberation from political patronage and social constraints.

However, desires are usually not tangible, as the work „**Cloud**“ symbolizes. The original which the work is based upon was an image of uprisings in the Middle East. Leitna specifically selected a photo that shows an explosion. He then isolated the resulting cloud of smoke. The cloud by itself is symbolic of volatilization and transience. It will dissipate, as do most revolutions, only to fall back into old patterns. One thinks of Samuel Beckett who thought it would be best to get rid of ambitious efforts, illusionary goals and fruitless desires. In his plays and writings he described the inevitability of triviality and confronted the ultimate futility of most human ambitions.

The large-scale works „**Panierstraße**“ and „**needles and razors**“ are reminiscent of Beckett's works. They are paradoxical, as they emanate a peacefulness and quietness yet at the same time convey a feeling of emptiness and coldness. The atmosphere here is one of empty, abandoned industrial spaces, where noisy productivity has stopped long ago. Only the hum of a fan can be perceived, or the swinging of neon tubes in a light breeze. These are spaces that inspire us to pause for a moment, to indulge in thoughts and reflections on the condition of the world, or maybe – despite Samuel Beckett – ponder the meaning of life.

Monty Python devoted an entire movie to this issue. In the end of his film, which is full of black humor, a news anchor cites the meaning of life : “Be nice to your neighbors, avoid fatty foods, read good books, go for walks and try to live in peace with everyone.”

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