

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 1964

In Priapus's Garden – Vari Capricci

Some ideas and observations garnered from regarding Miron Schmückle's art

In a broad sense, Miron Schmückle's complete oeuvre refers to Baroque art. To name a few examples, among these one finds the series entitled *Hortus conclusus* that the artist has been working on since 1994, the series of still life photos from 2002-2005, the *Architecture Capricci* (2003-2004), the *Botanical Archives (out of my brain)* (1996-2007) and the exhibition "In Priapus's Garden" (2006). This justifies a few remarks on Baroque painting, particularly Baroque still lifes, as well as some comments on the ubiquitous ornament of the arabesque. This text, however, is not intended to be an argument for a new historicism, but rather for the modernity of Miron Schmückle's work.

Still lifes, as they are known to us from the past centuries, come in a variety of forms – extending from kitchen still lifes to still lifes of splendor and banquet still lifes – and depict a wide range of objects, for example, items from daily life, table ware, the trivial and the commonplace, but also rare and expensive flowers as well as precious china. Kitchen still lifes refer to the simple and rustic life. As such, they are a reaction to a life of splendor and careless squandering. They remain unimpressed by greatness, uniqueness and riches, by royal magnificence and by heroism. Well-balanced control mechanisms, however, compensate for this: the new riches of the Netherlands, the power of money, can be seen in the artificial and the simulation, in forms of luxury and sophistication (still lifes of splendor).

The Netherlands are considered the first European society confronted with affluence and an oversupply of products. Amsterdam shops were a cornucopia of Persian carpets, Chinese porcelain, Japanese lacquer, Venetian glass, Spanish taffeta, Italian majolica. "Inside, the houses are filled with priceless ornaments so that they resemble royal palaces rather than the houses of merchants. Many of them have marvelous marble and alabaster columns and floors with gold inlays. On the walls, there are refined gobelin tapestries and leather wall coverings imprinted with silver and gold, worth thousands of guilders. ...In these houses, there are also valuable pieces of furniture, paintings and oriental ornaments so that the value of all these objects is truly unimaginable..." (From: Melchior Fokkens, *Amsterdam Stadtführer*, 1996, quoted in: Norman Bryson, *Stilleben*, p. 119).

Baroque flower still lifes bear witness to the preference of the Dutch market for rare and extravagant objects, for exquisite varieties of colorful complexity and refinement. They represent nature as a human product. These canvasses are the culmination of luxury, and they represent sound financial investments. Often, individual flowers appear only once in the bouquets depicted: as lists of botanical portraits – achieved by cultivating anomalies – flower still lifes are diagrammatic tabulations of luxury and simulation, displays of imaginary perfection and artificial oversupply. Such vast abundance – carefully accumulated and administrated – leads to a kind of *horror vacui* in Dutch homes.

Regarding Baroque culture as a point of reference for Miron Schmückle's art works, it would follow that his devouring artificial plants – creations of increased sensuality and inventiveness – evoke an oversupply of contemporary consumer goods, in particular the

“lover’s glance” of the omnipresent, destructive accumulation of products, the *horror vacui* of our world.

In his art, however, Miron Schmückle makes aesthetic offers which go beyond this critical, consistently developed parallel.

Still lifes are representations of closeness and motionlessness and – on the surface – of the absence of human beings. In the artist’s case, however, they have been carefully ordered. The objects have been deliberately placed next to each other; the flowers in the vase are precisely arranged; a branch has been placed over the edge of a plate and so on. In his still lifes, Miron Schmückle arranges Chinese peonies next to shells, ribbons and skulls. A skinned ram skull is on display; a barn owl enters the stage: rarities converge on immaculate table linens. The world beyond these beautiful things remains invisible. It is a space structured by hands and arms. The upper body and the paces taken describe arches revolving around the assemblage. It is a space of proximity, of the gestures of the body, which has no depths, horizons or roaming views. Instead, it is a space that moves in our direction, towards the viewer.

Miron Schmückle’s larger drawings, gouaches and oil paintings are different. Leaves and flowers coil in on themselves: they turn, bow, and fold together; they spread, swell and stretch like curtains. As spectators, we are not allowed to enter this hidden interior world of vivisected and disassembled plants. We are kept at a distance, regarding perfectly crafted entities without being able to overlook them as a whole or being able to commit them to memory. A performance of immaculate autonomy moves towards us, while various levels collapse. The stage is set for simulation and aesthetic transfiguration.

In Miron Schmückle’s work, the ornament of the arabesque is central. Since the Middle Ages, the forms of artistic expression of the Arabic world have been widely known. The arabesque was handed down from Renaissance systems of decoration to Mannerism, Baroque art, the Rococo style and to 19th century art (the moresque, the grotesque, the auricular style, the rocaille,...). The arabesque can be considered the key category for the transition from classical mimesis to modern abstraction. The arabesque (intertwining plants) unfolds infinitely in simple reflection or refraction. From the tendrils buds grow, as well as flowers, leaves, vases, bird-like forms.... The stems and branches meander here and there exploring concave and convex shapes. At the points at which they take different directions, at the congested junctures, energy builds up, and at these turning points new leaves and flowers sprout – from the inside to the outside. Often, several systems of arabesques lie on top of each other.

Its close relationship to vector graphics attests to the modernity of the arabesque. Vector displays show the movements of birds, dancers, and artists’ hands. Computers, however, do not harbor any images. Rather, specific data create visual impressions that take many different forms.

As mentioned above, we are being kept at a distance from the pictures, which have been painted in a meticulously well-defined and hyper-realistic manner. They attract our attention and heighten our admiration. Satiated by the obsessive intensity of our observations, we run the risk of being overwhelmed and becoming locked into our own selves. Strangeness and familiarity – distance and pleasure: The display of sophisticated taste oscillates between connoisseurship and intimacy. Miron Schmückle’s works suggest

a milieu that seeks to combine aesthetic and social distance with social connectedness and to create intimacy through aesthetic pleasure.

In her essay “Now, more about Sex“ Bojana Pejic speaks about the erotic connotations of Miron Schmückle’s ‘botanical reveries,’ as she calls the works from his *Botanical Archives*. On the topic of sex, I should like to add a few remarks. In particular, I would like to point out the adventures of the eye that wanders across the exuberant, sensuous, and voluptuous surfaces of Miron Schmückle’s paintings. The sinful glance encounters a dimly-lit space full of veils and quick glimpses. Drawn by desire into the composition, the eye is constantly subject to being seduced. We become ensnared in a labyrinth which is difficult to escape. It is not without irony how this trap functions.

Current research about the movement of our eye muscles has shown that – no matter what we look at – our eyes follow entangled lines in abrupt jumps, repetitions, speculations, revisions (cross readings). The active freedom of our connoisseurship – the ability to unveil erotic innuendoes and fantasies – eventually succumbs to the passive freedom of our (desirous) eye movements. However, Miron Schmückle’s painting technique – old-masterly, focused, concise – steers into the opposite direction. It creates an aesthetic equilibrium from these endless erotic entanglements. What Schmückle depicts is exquisite, powerful and carefully composed and puts an end to the digressions of our (erotic) fantasies. Instead of painting in a fuzzy and foreshortened manner, Schmückle offers clarity and closeness. Our dark fantasies rebound off of the surface of his paintings.

Works of art, whose surfaces are so self-contained and clear, whose impulses are strong and whose language is direct, simply live their own lives. They need no interpretation. Their energy transfers to us through the interplay of movements and pauses, through the traces of the loving and destroying hand of the artist.

I would like to suggest that Miron Schmückle’s work might be read as a manifesto of camp aesthetics: “a playful form of art developed predominantly by homosexual men in the 20th century. Until Susan Sontag published her ‘Notes on Camp’ in the mid sixties, camp did very well without a theoretical framework. Sontag, however, was the first to point out the consciously artificial character of camp and the close relationship between idealistic representations and subtle irony.” (Reinhard Krause, *Schöner, besser, camp! taz mag.*, June 26/27, 1999)

A variety of aspects Susan Sontag attributes to camp can be related to Miron Schmückle’s art. I would like to mention some of these very briefly:

- Camp, according to Sontag’s thesis, came into existence in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a time characterized by a true appreciation of surfaces, symmetry, and a joy in the picturesque and the spectacle.
- Camp prefers the exaggeration of sexual features, androgyny and individual mannerisms.
- Camp distinguishes between the real thing and its aesthetic representation, theatricality.
- Camp is a method of seducing with ambiguous gestures and witty meanings for the well-informed.
- Camp speaks seriously about the frivolous and frivolously about the serious (a new and complex relationship to seriousness).
- Not all homosexuals appreciate camp, but homosexuals are at the forefront of camp. Social minorities are the dominant creative powers in contemporary culture.
- In camp, form wins over function, aestheticism over morality, and irony over tragedy.

- Camp refuses to accept the harmony of traditional seriousness as well as the risks of absolute identification.

Today, people have become more open to gay minorities. “Also, public attitude towards affirmative and positive kitschy representations has significantly changed. In the sixties and seventies, many things were inevitably labeled as kitsch unless they were unambiguously critical. In contrast, skepticism towards universal world models is no longer a characteristic of minorities.” (Reinhard Krause) It still remains to be investigated to which degree camp aesthetics had an influence on contemporary art.

The final words go to Susan Sontag:

Camp, she argues, is daring and witty hedonism. “It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion!”

For major ideas and thought experiments, I am indebted to Norman Bryson, *Stilleben. Das Übersehene in der Malerei*, Munich, 2003 (keine übersetzung)

Andreas Haus, Ornament und Stil. Die Krise des Historismus, in: Isabelle Frank, Freia Hartung (Eds.), *Die Rhetorik des Ornaments*, Munich, 2001

Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, in: *Against Interpretation*, New York, 1964

Georges Bataille, *The Language of Flowers*, in *Documents*, 1929

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