

Miriam Cahn „notre sud“

Exhibition opening May 13, 2020

torture pictures in may 2004

when i see the nonchalantly smoking female soldier who is walking a prisoner on a leash and looking at him with a disparaging smile i see after the first dismay caused by revulsion valie export walking a man on a leash through the streets of vienna. if in a film I see the world trade center in the background, i automatically switch my mind to attack and the collapse of the 2 towers and think at the same time of my own earlier works.

put valie exports pictures of her performances on display today: what would they show? a document of the 1970s? a private s/m thing? a feminist fable? a predictive anticipation and hence a confirmation of art as avantgarde? a primordial symbol (things were always like this, all human beings are like this)? at any event just looking at exports work would bring to mind the topical pictures of the woman soldier with the leash.

something similar happened to me when putting together an exhibition with earlier works: in the 1980s i naturally use the symbol of the world trade center as a political and feminist critique. and now this building, which had always been an icon, had been attacked in real life and destroyed. in the exhibition in madrid shortly before the outbreak of the 2nd gulf war my works on the world trade center took on an unintentionally topical and terrible significance: had i “foreseen” this? no. was it a primordial symbol? perhaps. buildings are primordial symbols, but high-rise buildings are historically linked to modernity. pleasure at producing these giant drawings and the portrayal of the skyscrapers? of course. and primarily. a feminist fable? yes, and tied to the then time (division into male and female worlds).

and now this “topicality” of the picture material, which with export and myself takes on by historical chance a significance that was never so intended, apart from the fact that interesting art always changes anyway in the eyes of its beholders. today we look at goyas “desastres” with modern war reporting in mind. but what does it mean when i myself have to look at my own art in a consciously historical way because the justified ideological critique of the 1970s and 1980s period has taken on such utterly perverse forms, since it has slipped from thought into action. because word/picture have suddenly become real in the sense of a copy, of the document of a genuine act like a snuff porn film that can immediately be broadcast all over the world. it is as if goya had prompted soldiers or even himself to commit atrocities so that he could reenact / simulate them later.

so i look helplessly at my warships, offshore oil rigs, world trade centers etc. their only valid statement is their beauty. if i exhibit them, then as a document of my helplessness.

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put valie exports pictures of her performances on display today: what would they show? a document of the 1970s? individual s/m behaviour? feminist critique of pornography? a predictive anticipation and hence a confirmation of art as avantgarde? a primordial symbol (things were always like this, all human beings are like this)? at any event anybody looking at exports work would recall the pictures of the woman soldier with the leash.

something similar happened to me when putting together an exhibition with earlier works: in the 1980s i naturally used the symbol of the world trade center as a political and feminist critique, as a symbol for capitalism run wild and USA hegemony. and now this icon has been attacked and destroyed. in the exhibition in madrid shortly before the 2nd gulf war my works the portrayals of the world trade center took on in the context an unintentionally topical significance: had i foreseen this and thus been a priestess of an avantgarde? was it a primordial symbol? was it personal pleasure at producing these giant drawings and the portrayal of the skyscrapers? a feminist critique of the "male world"?

and now this topicalization of images which for export and me myself gain by historical chance a devastatingly false significance-or perhaps not? what does it mean when i have to look at my own art in a consciously historical way because the justified ideological critique of the 1970s and 1980s period has slipped from fluxus-flowing thinking/feeling/testing/performing into final ultimate action/execution? because word/picture has suddenly become a real document of a genuine deed that is as final as dying? in an aesthetics of tame picture mobiles - "hi-mum-hi-dad-look-how-i-am-doing-well", from snuff porns or hollywood spectaculars that can immediately be broadcast all over the world in real time?

it is as if i would really have to hack off peoples limbs in order to be able to paint them like that. it is as if i would have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect on dying and death.

it is as if goya would have had to prompt soldiers or even himself to commit atrocities so that later he could produce his "desastres".

it is the complete rejection of any form of imagination.

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it is as if i would really have had to experience war, have had to hack off peoples limbs in order to be able to portray them like that. it is as if i would have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect on dying and death.

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in writing this text i hardly manage to capture the eeriness of what is going on here. if exports performance or my drawings seem today to be either an anticipation or a historical document, this could be one of the reasons for the recent development of art in the direction of docuphotography or commissioned art: the idea that only those things are true that have been "experienced", used, purchased, that are "reality" and naturalistically recognizable. everybody knows that torture is universal, but the picture of the woman soldier with her victim as a dog is supposed to be reality because produced by the perpetrator, is supposed to be truer than the picture of exports performance. our pictures are fiction/art, not documents, and hence implausible and useless, thank goodness. for the truth that speaks out of the woman soldiers holiday snap and the concomitant moral outrage worldwide are two sides of the same coin: the refusal to combine information and knowledge with imagination, the refusal to think in aesthetic terms. of course everone knows that even the justest war is cruel, that torture is always used. but why does this knowledge not become outrage when faced with the pictures of goya, of export and countless others? because they are art?

i call this "the aesthetic revenge of the proletariat", a concept that occurred to me when for the first time i watched stefan raab instead of harald schmidt. ballermann aesthetics - the woman soldier is now a star, even if a negative one. probably she will be able to capitalize on it.

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and now this topicalization of images which for export and me myself gain by historical chance a devastatingly false significance, perhaps even their destruction, destruction of the felt thought by action, because word/picture has suddenly become a document of a genuine ultimate deed in an aesthetics of tame private picture mobiles - "hi-mum-hi-dad-look-how-i-am-doing-well", from snuff porns or in the case of the twin towers of hollywood spectaculars that can immediately be broadcast all over the world in real time.

it is as if i would really have had to experience war, have had to hack off peoples limbs in order to be able subsequently to portray them like that. it is as if i would have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect on dying and death.

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of course the comparison of export with the holiday snaps of the woman soldier is false. the only parallel is the gesture: woman walks man on a leash like a dog. exports walking of the dog man through the streets of vienna was in its time a voluntary revolutionary manifesto, the mobile phone greeting of the woman soldier was a record of her job as a demonstration of power. yet anyone who does not have this information to make a distinction will not distinguish, because the final image is identical - woman walks man on a leash like a dog.

it could just as well be a recording of a performance today, which however instantly transmitted worldwide and received actually only by the art-loving public would not lead to a moral outcry like the picture of the woman soldier. thank goodness or what a pity? weakness of art or weakness of so-called "reality"?

when i saw the first holiday snaps of torture i could have bet that the first thing mister rumsfeld would do would be to ban mobile phones with cameras. and thats what happened. today pictures are the strongest medium of all, but only self-portraying docu-aesthetics. just as before modernism photography destroyed paintings function, so today art is changing its function, which does not mean that it itself is being destroyed, on the contrary: everything starts all over again, anew. beuys with his social sculpture, warhol with his 15-minute stars, fluxus with dissolution-and-zen aesthetics, zeitgeist performance and video with and for "everyone" have come to an end reaching their final point. all over again and anew is certainly not to limp along behind docu-aesthetics as in the annoying last documenta. anything but. all the image possibilities that are precisely not applicable and usable in the social or political or aesthetic spheres, that are actually in general and in themselves not applicable and usable.

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if the pictures of valie exports performance were put on display today, everybody would recall the holiday snaps of the woman soldier with the leash.

when the world trade centre was attacked i was reading "plateforme" by michel houellebecq. in this context the book unintentionally became wellnigh prophetic. so now this symbol of the economic hegemony of the USA much-used in the 1980s had been attacked and destroyed in reality. in my exhibition in madrid shortly before the 2nd gulf war the portrayals of the world trade center took on in that context an unintentionally topical significance.

and now this topicalization of images which in export/houellebecq/cahn (and others) gain by historical chance a devastatingly false significance. perhaps even their destruction. the destruction of the felt thought by action. because word/picture has suddenly become a document of a genuine ultimate deed in an aesthetics of tame private picture mobiles - "hi-mum-hi-dad-look-how-i-am-doing-well", of snuff porns or in the case of the twin towers of hollywood spectaculars that can immediately be broadcast all over the world in real time.

houellebecq was accused of racism and fascism because one of his characters in the novel talks himself into a hatred of islam. these critics failed to distinguish between a character in a book and the person who wrote it, what prevailed was the usual, popular, makes-good-television, vulgar psychological opinion that art is good only when it is "real", i.e. stemming from experience, i.e. autobiographical. the writer was thus denied any powers of observation, analysis, distance, description, imagination, and actually all that goes into the entire complex work of making art.

it is as if i would really have had to experience war, have had to hack off peoples limbs in order to be able subsequently to portray them like that. it is as if i would have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect on dying and death.

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exports performance, houellebecqs novel or my drawings seem today to be either an anticipation or a historical document and not a possibility and offer. this could be one of the reasons for the recent development of art in the direction of document: the idea that only those things are true that are "experienced", used, purchased, seen and above all naturalistically recognizable. everybody knows that torture is universal. but the picture of the woman soldier with her victim as a dog is supposed to be "more real" because it is produced by the perpetrator, is an "aesthetic revenge of the proletariat" against the complexity of interpretation via todays technology of instant global reproduction. perhaps benjamin is pleased, perhaps however he is turning in his grave.

of course the comparison of export with the holiday torture snaps of the woman soldier is just as false as the equation of houellebecq with his characters. the only parallel is the gesture: woman walks man on a leash like a dog. exports walking of the dog man through the streets of vienna was in its time a voluntary revolutionary manifesto, the mobile phone greeting of the woman soldier was a record of her job as a holiday greeting and a demonstration of power. yet anyone who does not have this information on the difference will not differentiate, because the final image is identical - woman walks man on a leash like a dog.

the most exciting thing of all today in art is differentiation through information. no: one picture is not like another. despite the vast quantity of pictorial material and the technology of its dissemination. i insist that one picture is not like another, i insist on differentiations, on re-flection, re-thinking after the first felt shock due to déjà-vu. things do not become "true" only when the individual experiences them as "real". i reject formulations such as: i cant judge that, i cant imagine that etc. and above all the expressions so popular over here in (swiss) german: "ich für mich" or "i for myself" (if somebody else is speaking) and the "wie" or "kinda" expressions especially popular among women: "ich bin wie krank" or "im kinda ill" (is she ill or not) "i see kinda nothing" (does she see something or not) and the heightened form: "i kinda cant judge that", "i kinda cant imagine that"...

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when the world trade centre was attacked i was reading "plateforme" by michel houellebecq. in this context the book became prophetic. so now this symbol much-used in the art of the 1980s had become an icon attacked and destroyed in reality. in the exhibition in madrid shortly before the 2nd gulf war my old world trade centers became in that context unintentionally topical.

the topicalization of images by historical chance destroys our work through the topical competition of documenting a genuine deed in an aesthetics of tame private picture mobiles, of snuff porns or in the case of the twin towers of hollywood spectaculars. pictorial documents that can immediately be broadcast all over the world in real time.

houellebecq was attacked because one of his characters in the novel talks full of hatred about islam. this criticism fails to distinguish between a character in a book and the person who wrote it. the usual, popular, makes-good-television, vulgar psychological opinion that art is good only when it is "real", i.e. stemming from experience, i.e. autobiographical, denies the writer any powers of observation, analysis, distance, description, imagination, actually all that goes into the entire complex work of making art.

it is as if i would really have had to experience war, have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect and work on dying and death.

it is as if goya would have had to prompt soldiers or himself to commit atrocities so that later he could produce his "desastres".

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yesterday i watched a film about being blind. a girl, a professor, an athlete, a social worker and a voice

specialist talked about their perception techniques. The girl painted pictures for another blind person who could still see shadows. The professor described exactly the way to his university, the athlete was a model for the voice specialist, who makes sculptures. the social worker creates perception programmes with his visually impaired clients and in his free time goes jogging with his dog on a short leash. the athlete trains with a colleague to whom he is tied by a short cord attached to his hand.

the professor, who became blind through an illness and so knew what seeing is like, described the difference like this: when he feels around something with his hand or his stick this can happen only one thing after another. in his mind he then fits this felt information together to form a space, which takes time because of the technique of feeling around. seeing, he said, is the grasping of surroundings "at a glance", very fast, which makes the grasping of surroundings through the other senses to a certain extent superfluous. feeling faces on the other hand, he said, was superfluous because in contrast to voice and smell it offered no information and was moreover too intimate.

the social worker described his stick as a part of his body, something like a car for car-drivers, who could feel exactly the length and the breadth, the spatiality of their car in motion like their own body, e.g. when parking. he said it was similar for him as a blind person when moving around with his stick. if he went jogging with his dog beside the river, he preferred to do so alone because friends who could see would describe to him things he didnt want to know about at all e.g. a garbage bag floating in the river. in contrast to sighted people he didnt want to know about the garbage bag in the river because he couldnt get it out of his mind again and it took on an importance and dimensions that impaired his enjoyment of jogging beside the river.

the girl painted bubble-shaped forms, above the blue sky, below the blue water and the brown earth, growing out of the earth green shapes, partly framed in black, and as with every child these were very precise things and stories: a fish, trees, particular flowers, waves in the water and so on. there was not a single difference, not even in the sureness and swiftness of painting, from other sighted children.

in the darwinist sense seeing is for human beings the swiftest technology of survival. thats all.

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it is as if i would really have had to experience war, have had to have seen dying and dead people in reality in order to be able to reflect and work on war, dying and death.

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of course the comparison of export with the holiday torture snaps of the woman soldier is just as false as the equation of houellebecq with his characters. the only parallel is the gesture: woman walks man on a leash like a dog. exports walking of the dog man through the streets of vienna was in its time an aggressive revolutionary manifesto. the woman soldier's recording a kind of holiday greeting, showing that she feels good in her job through the exercise of power. yet anyone who does not have this information to make the distinction will not distinguish, because the narrative is identical - woman walks man on a leash like a dog.

yesterday i watched a film about being blind. a girl, a professor, an athlete, a social worker and a voice specialist talked about their perception techniques. the girl paints pictures for the social worker, who can still see shadows. the professor describes the way to his university while walking. the athlete is a model for the sculptures of the artist/voice specialist, who teaches actors how to apprehend their body and space via the sound of their voices. the social worker creates perception programmes with his visually impaired clients and in his free time goes jogging along the river with his dog on a short leash. the athlete practises his sprints with a colleague to whom he is tied by a short cord attached to his hand.

the professor, who became blind through an illness, described the difference between seeing/not seeing like this: when he feels around something with his hand or his stick this can happen only one thing after another. in his mind he then fits this felt information together to form a space, which takes time because of the technique of feeling around. seeing "at a glance", he said, was a human beings swiftest and best technique of survival for apprehending space. he would, he said, have had to forget the process of seeing completely in order to be able to use the other senses in line with their qualities. feeling faces on the other hand, he said, was too intimate and in contrast to voice and smell offered no information.

the social worker described his stick as a part of his body used to apprehend space while walking something like the way car-drivers felt their car as a part of their body when driving. when jogging beside the river, he said, he preferred to be alone with his dog, whose movements were information for him just as the river gave him orientation through its sounds and smells. sighted people however would describe to him things he didn't want to know about at all. a garbage bag floating in the river would when described become so big in his mind that he couldn't get it out of his mind again and it impaired him when jogging. anyway, he said, the description mania of sighted people when faced with blind people was colonial.

the girl painted a light blue strip above, and below a greenish oval with dots on a dark blue background and a brown strip out of which green things were growing upwards, and in addition vertical and horizontal black strips. while painting the blind child described to the blind man what she was painting, and as with every child these were very precise things and long stories accompanying them. i saw no difference in the portrayal, the sureness, concentration and swiftness of painting from sighted children, whose pictures i do not understand without their interpretations of them. what i see are offers, possibilities, configurations.

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yesterday i watched a film about being blind. a girl, a professor, an athlete, a social worker and a voice specialist talked about their day-to-day lives and demonstrated their survival techniques for a life without sight.

the girl painted a picture for the social worker. the professor described the way to his university while walking. the social worker created perception programmes with his visually impaired clients and in his free time went jogging along the river with his dog on a short leash. the athlete practised his sprints and runs with a colleague to whom he was tied by a short cord attached to his hand.

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the social worker described his stick as a part of his body used to apprehend space while walking something like the way car-drivers feel their car as an elongated part of their body when driving and manoeuvring. when jogging beside the river, he said, he preferred to be alone with his dog, whose movements were information for him. the river gave him orientation through its sounds and smells. sighted people however would describe to him things he didnt want to know about at all. a garbage bag floating in the river would in their descriptions become so big in his mind that he couldnt get it out of his mind again and it impaired him when jogging. anyway, he said, the description mania of sighted people when faced with blind people was unpleasant.

the athlete spoke of his feet as tools for a liberating suspension of gravity. because when running they were for a short moment always both in the air. moreover through his movements he could apprehend the exact length of the dirt track and perhaps even the space of the arena. although he had won the bronze medal in the paralympics he was, he said, clear about the fact that he could never run faster than his partner, to whom he was attached by a short cord.

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translated by Richard Humphrey

