

On the Rationality of feelings

Notes on the paintings of Béatrice Dreux

Béatrice Dreux' new paintings depict seascapes and cloudscapes that make reference to the landscape paintings of the Romantic period as well as to the atmospheric landscape photography of the 19th century. In addition, the artist takes on a pictorial representation of the art "Actions" perpetrated by Joseph Beuys during the 60s and 70s. This series is hence characterized by a reception of chronologically separate phases in art history, whose common feature is that the relation between rationality and emotionality within them was experienced as precarious and opposed; and that art was utilized as an alternative concept of interpretation as well as a model-like guide to overcoming the conflict. Both the on-sided logical-rational utilitarian thought of the early Enlightenment as criticized by the Romantics, and the opposition practiced by Beuys against contemporary understandings of science and politics, were based on social-historically motivated experiences of alienation, and the same time became the point of departure for assessing art as a reservoir of alternative strategies. With her reception of Beuys and Romanticism Dreux updates this battery of questions and consciously positions the emotional in a historically reflexive framework.

By interpreting the Actions of Beuys through painting Dreux quotes an artist who, with his consideration of the mythic-ritual and intuitive-emotional, had already had in mind a historically reflexive approach. "I don't want to return to the magical or mythical world. Rather, I want to conduct historical analyses with these images, to make conscious an historical-analytical element." (Beuys)¹ In his attempt to render visible and simultaneously bridgeable the subjectively perceived loss of unity of nature and mind, of intuition and rationality, Beuys turned against solely utility-oriented thought and action by incorporating archetypical, mythical and magical-religious contiguities. Nordic mythology, non-European worldviews, natural sciences as well as anthroposophic and religious-philosophical enquiries mark his oeuvre from the beginning.

Dreux clarifies the historically oriented and mythical-reflexive dimensions of her paintings by referencing one of the heroes of this topical field, who, because he was proceeding critically against a one-sided rationalist-logo-centric concept of progress, had to answer back to suspicions of regressive escapism: "It's not about regression. The only thing to be considered is progression and the methodology with which one can advance progression. That's what it's about for me. (...) When I criticize through images both the concept of science in its necessarily reductionist character, and democracy as the present form of society, which developed parallel to each other, which according to their phenotypes appeared earlier and under other preconditions, I don't wish to reject modern achievements but to get through them. I want to expand and enlarge by attempting to create a greater basis of understanding."²

It is precisely these "images" of critique of the contemporary concept of science and its democratic-political context that Dreux takes up as a motif in her paintings. Hence she painted the Fat Corner, a piece paradigmatic to Beuys' concept of social sculpture, as well as some scenes from Actions in

¹Notes

Quoted in: Götz Adriani/Winfried Konnertz/Karin Thomas: Joseph Beuys – Leben und Werk, Dumont Verlag, Köln, 1981, p. 83

² Ibid. p. 84

which Beuys surrounded himself with animals or animal carcasses in order to treat the loss of erstwhile human connectedness to nature or to offer perspectives on overcoming this loss. One of these paintings shows the dead hares bound to thin wooden sticks, which Beuys handled in the René Block gallery in Berlin during his action “Eurasia, 32nd movement of the Siberian Symphony” in 1963. The artist was turning against polarizations and schematizing categorizations in society, specifically against the cliché of rationally determined “Westerners” and supposedly vitalistic intuitive-acting “Easterners.” By mobilizing the dead hare as a symbol of creature-like earthboundness and as an incarnation of human utopias, Beuys appealed for overcoming this polarizing demographic of mentalities.

Dreux also painted the action “I like America and America likes me” of May 1974 at the René Block gallery in New York, in which Beuys, swathed in felt and brandishing a staff, stayed in a gallery space for three days in order to establish a relationship with a coyote. For Beuys, the interaction with the animal “represents pre-Columbian America, which still knows the harmonic coexistence of man and nature in which the coyote and the Indian still live with each other, before they are both hunted by the colonizers.”³ With the choice of a herd animal that seeks the protection of the group when in danger, but otherwise leads the existence of a loner, Beuys alluded to the network of relations between the individual and society. Fifty copies of the Wall Street Journal scattered across the floor, on which the coyote urinated, rounded out the environment of this Action, which practiced in an intentionally archetypal way a critique of civilization with an alternatively accrued claim.

Dreux’ paintings portray these Actions, or some of their central sequences, in a painted choreography dominated by earthy dark colors. The dark, shrouded figure of Beuys appears as an apparition in the respective total scenarios of these pictures. With her reduction of color and the attempt to compositionally arrange clearly connected and cohesive scenes, Dreux refuses a talkative and expressive representational gesture and aims instead at a painted translation of Beuys’ intended search for lost unity and unification of rational and emotional components through conscious Actions reduced of deeds and events. Moreover, the monochrome coloration refers to a view of black and-white photographic and film sources on which the painter’s Beuys pictures center. Hence it becomes clear that the Actions that served as materials for the paintings had been already mediated and interpreted – whereby, last but not least, the artist alludes to the fact that every form of viewing and perceiving is an act of interpretation based on pre-given information.

Dreux’ reception of Romantic landscape painting is subject to pictorial concentration and clarification as well, whose historical filter, is again, photography. In black, brown or darkly restrained colors, these paintings allude to the atmospheric landscape motifs with their daybreaks and sunsets and mostly cloudy skies. Ephemeral dark fogs of color condense into dynamic cloudscapes; water and air seem to merge in dramatic sceneries of light. Occasionally, single birds or ships signal life amidst elemental forces of nature. These paintings show no detailed landscape surveys, but rather atmospheric sceneries in which endless vastness and immediate proximity appear in mysterious unity.

A ceaselessly repeated natural spectacle is thus comprehended through recourse to the landscape photography of Gustave Le Gray in particular, and the landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, as a representational motif brought to focus by specific societal and art-historical conditions – thereby referencing the fundamental difference between the timelessness of nature and temporality

³ Ibid. p. 331

of its pictorial representation. And yet, at the same time, these paintings show to what extent images themselves possess the power to seduce and emotionalize. Or, to put it another way, that one cannot avoid conferring the feelings experienced in the face of such atmospheric landscapes onto their images. Basically, the relation between landscapes and landscape depictions, between model and image, does not correspond to a distinct division, but rather to interplay. Strictly speaking, one does not perceive a landscape in unbroken authenticity, but rather as an already co-determined perceptual image. Hence, whether viewing landscapes or their images, there are no innocent eyes.

Let us briefly return to these medial representations as sources of inspiration for viewing landscapes: Because the fleetingness of passing clouds and surging waves made their depiction difficult, photographic-documentary renderings gained ever more importance as model studies for the painters of the 19th century. These natural motifs not only served as models for atmospheric paintings, but were also themselves the subjects of scientific investigation. The camera was seen along with the microscope and telescope as a guarantor of the increased objectivity and verifiability of visible things. "Actual observation experiences (...) a higher expansion. (...) It consist firstly in the use of an artificial apparatus to perfect the natural sense perceptions, above all the sense of sight. (...) Such apparatus help us toward a better assessment of a structure whose least perceptible details can, in various ways, attain the highest meaning."⁴

Along with her own landscape photographs, Dreux has drawn on the history of this profession as a working basis and thereby harked back to Gustave Le Gray. In 1850, he created a series of ocean scenes that, because of their dramatic lighting effects and impressive images of waves, are among the most spectacular photographs of the 19th century. Le Gray, himself a former painter, could draw on the Romantic tradition of painting as co-founded by C. D. Friedrich and at the same time present his photographs as scientific-empirical documents, which were in turn used as models by realist and impressionist painters.⁵ His words document the importance of photography for painting, as an objectifying aid and model for studies. Yet we should not overlook the fact that contemporaries were already recognizing and relativizing the objectivity of photography as relational to its technical pre-conditions. The monochromatism of photography, for example, was seen as a fundamental deficit, which clearly contradicted the experience of reality. Through intentional alienation via black-and-white contrasts, Dreux quotes this monochromatism in her paintings and refers directly to technical reproduction of the natural and the role of imaging technology in the production of emotionally charged image contents. By utilizing photographs of nature as models for painting in a freely improvising manner, she alludes to the already artificially emblematic structure of these photographs and to their genuine non-identity with their model i.e. nature.

The seascapes and cloudscapes of C. D. Friedrich, likewise motivational in Dreux' landscape paintings, stand for a Romantic understanding of nature, in whose scope the viewing of landscape as a projective motif of spiritual, religious and philosophical models of action and knowledge is always

⁴ Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*. Vol. 3, Paris: Schleicher Frères 1908, First publication 1830 in Paris, pg. 165 ff. (quoted in Carol Armstrong: "Der Mond als Fotografie," [The moon as Photography] in *Diskurse der Fotografie – Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters* [Discourses of Photography – Photocriticism at the End of the Photographic Age] (Ed.: Herta Wolf), Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1599, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, S. 359 – 383, S. 363

⁵ Ulrich Pohlmann: „*Wolken und Wellen*," [Clouds and Waves] in: *Eine neue Kunst? Eine andere Natur! – Fotografie und Malerei im 19. Jahrhundert* [A New Art? A New Nature! – Photography and Painting in the 19th Century] (Ed.: Ulrich Pohlmann / Johann Georg Prinz von Hohenzollern), Schirmer/Mosel, Kunsthalle der Hypo Kulturstiftung, München, 2004, pp. 172/173

attended by a reflexively broken relationship to nature. “Doubtlessly, the 18th century is full of enthusiasts who imagine realizing an immediate relationship to nature through emotional abandonment. Critical contemporaries such as Schiller recognize that the discovery of nature in an empathic sense, natural nature, forms only the flipside of the loss of every immediate relation to nature, and that devotion to nature bears the traces of alienation from it.”⁶

Cartographic surveys and the calculation of nature and its processes from the smallest detail to the cosmic, as one of the central scientific-historical enterprises of the 18th century, required an ability to distance oneself from a reflexion-less understanding of nature. In the eyes of the Romantics, a rapprochement to nature could therefore only take place with a consciousness of this distance – a kind of rapprochement that Schiller termed “sentimentalist”. This view of nature – nature irrevocably lost in its nativeness – indeed already entails a nostalgic transfiguration citing again and again the transition from an agrarian civilization to an urban one, in order to qualify the gains in reflective and disassociative ability as the simultaneous loss of a supposed erstwhile unbroken participation in nature. The alienation from nature sensed by the Romantics as a condition of its sentimental recovery is therefore not simply a historical fact, but itself a Romantic topos that stylized the past into a conflict-free zone in order to describe a contemporary crisis.

That the domination of nature, its colonization, domestication and regimentation, did not hinder or preclude the Romantic-sentimental rapprochement to nature, but on the contrary provoked and forwarded it, is a central indication of the historical conditionality of the Romantic-emotional and of the relationality of intellectuality and emotionality. “The disjunction, the dissolution of the immediate connection with nature, makes possible the domination of nature, and is at the same time the origin of its sentimental discovery. Nature is the alien, the Other of reason.”⁷

C.D. Friedrich, whose “Wanderer Above The Sea of Fog” Dreux interprets in black-and-white, was known as a figurehead of “sentimentalist” Romanticism. The history of his reception is loaded with the diametrical claims of both religious and ideological-political didacticism or a natural-mystic early-Romantic history of ideas.⁸ Yet, with its plurality of interpretations, it bespeaks within the work itself a potential of meaning with complex references to motifs and history that should prevent us from seeing in Friedrich merely a naively sentimental “feeling” painter. His sharp criticisms of Nazarene painting, of its depictions of Maria and Jesus, as “something contrarious, indeed sometimes disgusting”⁹, which he also denounced as false mimicry of bygone religiosity; his refusal to accept a tenured professorship at the Dresden art Academy; his friendship with Ernst Moritz Arndt and Friedrich Schleiermacher, who as “demagogues” stood under political surveillance; as well as his use of the demagogue costume as a motif in his paintings long after it had been banned: all attest to his standing as a critical coeval for whom the emotional was not an antipole to critical reason, but a part of it.¹⁰

⁶ Hartmut Böhme/Gernot Böhme: *Das Andere der Vernunft – Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants*, [Reasons’s Other – On the Development of Structures of Rationality in the Case of Kant] Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 542, Frankfurt am Main, 1983, S. 28

⁷ Ibid. S.32

⁸ Werner Busch: “Caspar David Friedrichs ästhetischer Protestantismus,” [C. D. Friedrich’s Aesthetic Protestantism] in: *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung [Dimensions of Aesthetic Experience]* (Hg.: Joachim Küpper, Christoph Menke) Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1640, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, pp. 113 – 137, pp. 114/115

⁹ Quoted in: *ibid.* p. 119

¹⁰ In his interpretation of Friedrich, Günter Busch located the mathematical-rational side and the religious intentions of the artist as correlative components in the tradition of Leibniz and Euler’s “transcendental

Yet Dreux' reception of Friedrich and Beuys also reveals the tradition of the romantic artist image, without itself lapsing into it: If for Friedrich, taking his cues from Schleiermacher, religion was not based on established church dogmas, but on the "views and feelings of the individual," then "everyone is a potential priest,"¹¹ and consequentially, the actual religious intermediaries are in particular artists who are able to portray these feelings. It is this tradition of Romantic self-empowerment of the individual as a knowledge- capable and knowledge- mediating being with priestly entitlement in which Beuys still stands in his role as apologist and harbinger of life as social sculpture – in the framework of which every creatively thing and acting person is also him/herself an artist.

The person and art of Friedrich also serves to remind us that the conception of nature as myth and as alternative field of projection in connection with the Romantic critique of rationality is not simply a sign of apolitical, quixotic escapism, but itself expression of a collective societal self-understanding. "Myth presupposes a specific receptiveness on the part of participants that has nothing to do with a 'childish' or 'natural' state of humanity, but everything to do with tacit societal consent. Its participants grant validity to a myth because and insofar as it is commensurate with their collectively defined interests."¹² Therefore, "the flourishing of mythical world-views in enlightened times (...) is never a simple regression or reaction: it points to the inability of the states to satisfy their citizens' demands for rationale."¹³

To account for the connotations of myth and its conceptual history as society-forming and -relevant phenomena means to not simply codify the relation between rationality and myth as opposite, but to consider it as a reciprocally illuminative, relational structure. "Mythical past and rationality have (...) not slipped into insurmountable opposition, but refer to each other. And the subject's work lies precisely in establishing this relationship."¹⁴ Writing about the Romantic Gottfried Herder, Peter Bürger was referring to a tradition of interpretation that can also be considered as sustainable perspective for the current handling of the myth- rationality relationship. "If it is true that the opposition of rationality and myth pertains to a central problem of modern (capitalist and socialist) societies, then we will not be able to expect to find a 'solution.' We should rather be looking for something else, which one could call a way of dealing with the problem."¹⁵

The works of Dreux find one way of dealing with this relational problem – without exhausting or sufficing themselves in it – by recalling the integration of mythical tradition in the respective contemporary discourses of Romantic landscape painting and the artistic practice of Beuys. Yet Dreux' art also differs from its models, precisely insofar as it makes reference to them. The religious

mathematics" and thus argued for an approach in which allegedly contrary elements prove to be mutually conditional: "Friedrich attempted to illustrate the interlacing of the finite and infinite by placing the real in form of a natural detail within the super-real in the form of an abstract, yet aesthetically effective, structural specification. This manner of structuring, which binds the aesthetically abstract and the concrete, theory and practice, idea and reality, could illustrate the Protestant paradox of bringing to light in the finite something of divine nature, in the knowledge that this does not suspend the finite." (G. Busch), *ibid.* pp. 136/137

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 136

¹² Bernd Hüppauf: „Mythisches Denken und Krisen der deutschen Literatur und Gesellschaft.“ [Mythical Thought and Crises of German Literature and Society] in: *Mythos und Moderne* [Myth and Modernity] (Ed.: Karl Heinz Bohrer) Edition Suhrkamp, Neue Folge Band 144, Frankfurt am Main, 1983, p. 511

¹³ Manfred Frank: „Die Dichtung als neue Mythologie,“ [Poetry as New Mythology] in: *ibid.* pp. 15-40, p. 25

¹⁴ Peter Bürger: „Über den Umgang mit dem anderen der Vernunft.“ [On Dealing with the Other of Reason] in *see 12*) pp. 41-51, p. 49

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 48

intentions of Friedrich and the social-utopian endeavors of Beuys belong to different bygone worlds. They are quoted as points of departure, but are not imitated or simply updated. The condition and consequence of every type of reception is not identity with models, but their interpretation with fundamentally unforeseeable results from an insurmountable distance. Similar to how concepts are not yet the conceived, the image of a landscape is not identical to the landscape itself, but is its very interpretation in the context of specific tradition or innovations enmeshed in complex relational way in its perception.

Dreux the painter investigates the mythical and emotional in a historically conscious approach by interpreting art whose emotion-related contents are also connected to a reflexion on the societal functions of art. It is painting that deals with the historicity and the conditions of representation of the emotional, thus also with the rationality of feelings – consequentially, without itself repressing emotionality of from the outset denying or stigmatizing it.

Rainer Fuchs

Translated by Travis Lehtonen

Painting Experiences

During the last few days of my function in Nantes I had one of those not easily forgotten experiences with painters. Khaled Benfred, around 50 years old, is one of the greatest talents of his whole generation (in the eighties he had shared the same Paris gallery with Siegfried Anzinger, Alois Mosbacher und Hubert Schmalix before he fell out with the owner and generally withdrew from exhibitions). And now I heard he was anxious to speak to me. Our conversation started off with the visits to ateliers where we had regarded his half-finished paintings. Then, all of the sudden, Khaled Benfred blurted out his reason for so badly wanting to see me. “Ces tableaux de Béatrice Dreux sont absolument phantastiques!” The paintings of Béatrice Dreux, which could be seen in a small exhibition at Art Academy of Nantes, were the most interesting he’d encountered in a long time. Many of them came across as almost underdeveloped, but in a positive sense, as these paintings were so exquisitely sure of themselves and brimming with insistent power that the painter could get away with virtually any topic. Khaled Benfred, surely one of the best painters of France and of his homeland Tunisia, was sitting there in front of me and simply couldn’t restrain himself: “No, really, this is great. This kind of painting is an experience for me. What talent! What power! Hopefully she’ll keep on like this. I think your bringing these paintings to Nantes was probably the best thing you’ve done in your six years here.” And then he added: “But you know, the professors at the academy look at these paintings and are appalled that you would show such work as model to students, while hey, in the tradition of French conceptual thinking, try so hard from day one to drive out every urge to just seemingly work away like that. The professors are appalled and they think now that you’re about to leave the school you’ve gone off the rails by exhibiting these paintings. That makes me even happier: they don’t understand anything...”

One is always speechless in such moments. When a painter whose work is as important as Khaled Benfred’s goes on such a tirade, you usually can’t get a word in edgewise. The statements come indirectly from their own work, are well considered, and are important to the artist’s own emotional

household. And this wasn't even primarily about the paintings of Béatrice Dreux, as Benfred had had a private dispute with the very narrow concept of art that is currently widespread in France and which dominates the academies. At the same time, it's always very interesting to hear what a painter has to say about his colleagues, whether they be from the same generation, a previous century, or of much younger age. In this respect, there are no generational barriers, because genuine painters often understand each other purely on the basis of mutual appraisal of their work. I still clearly recall when, after visiting an exhibition opening at Paris gallery where Khaled Benfred was exhibiting, Siegfried Anzinger, Alois Mosbacher, Huber Schmalix and I visited the church of Saint-Sulpice. It was there during the 1850s that Eugène Delacroix had painted three monumental murals depicting Jacob wrestling with the angel as the chief work of his final decade. The tree painters began a passionate dialogue out of which I caught the sentence about how extraordinary it was and what it actually takes to realize such a thing; to paint a life-sized mature tree in a church – “Nobody had done that before him – and look at how the leaves are painted!”

That's exactly how it was twenty years later during the conversation with Khaled Benfred, but this time it was about Béatrice Dreux. It's true what Benfred had seen. What makes these paintings convincing is their underlying sureness and dynamic streak that continues from picture to picture and derives from a basic gesture, not from a style or concept. This dynamic streak can be found in all her paintings, even in the unfinished or “failed” ones. Such painting functions through this energetic certitude, and Dreux seems to need “impossible” subjects in order to generate such tension in her working process. If it were to use formal approaches and subjects and participate quietly and politely in contemporary artistic discussion, such painting wouldn't even get off the ground. The Gypsy series, which also contained barely concealed approaches to self-portraits with an obsessiveness reminiscent of Cindy Sherman, already exhibited this combination of a seemingly unmanageable subject, an open, seemingly unfinished manner of painting, an occasional tightrope walk over kitsch in terms of coloration, and conspicuous sureness in total appearance. During a one-year stay in Paris this manner of painting became more relaxed and confident. Especially in her choices of subject, Béatrice Dreux overcame the hidden rules about what art is supposed to deal with today. Yet the subjects still border on the “impossible”. To base works on Beuys's Action with the coyote or to attempt landscapes appearing in Caspar David Friedrich's oeuvre - in any art academy this will lead to a professor's well-meant advice that one should drop such nonsense or risk going astray. But Béatrice Dreux doesn't go astray with these subjects. Starting precisely from this point of departure, a number of her recent paintings are a “success,” and as a result of her stay in Paris where she gained painting experience in the museums, she has entered a very personal discussion with important points of reference in the history of fine arts.

I remember one of Khaled Benfred's remarks in particular: Many of Béatrice Dreux' paintings are in a positive sense underdeveloped. She's right when she saves important things for later and doesn't try to force everything into her work now. For any artist it is of central importance not to exhaust oneself, but to conserve one's energy even while society permanently threatens to pull it out through positive or negative pressure. In every generation most artistic talents fall victim to this conflict and most become exhausted after fifteen or twenty years and end up taking posts falling under the fields of teaching, administration or graphics. In this respect the energy that emanates from the seemingly unfinished paintings of Béatrice Dreux follows a different principle, which Georges Bataille defined in his notion of expenditure: to uninhibitedly expend energy in order to conserve it, which is only possible when not adhering to norms. That is why these paintings are fresh.

Robert Fleck

Translated by Travis Lehtonen