

Gazed and Confused **An Exhibition in Two Parts** **Work Descriptions**

Chapter 2: 18.03.22 – 07.05.22

Opening: 18.03.22 from 18:00

John Berger, Alina Frieske, Dieter Hall, Milva Stutz and Grégory Sugnaux

Exactly fifty years ago in January 1972 the BBC series *Ways of Seeing* was aired. In the second episode “Women and Art” author and artist John Berger examined the male gaze in western visual culture, be it traditional painting or advertising. Before its widespread use in feminist theory Berger used the term of the male gaze to critique how the gaze was inextricably linked to power. He spoke of women watching themselves being looked at. Soon after in 1975, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” spoke of to-be-looked-at-ness and Freud’s scopophilia addressing female sexual objectification in traditional cinema. Taking this as a starting point, *Gazed and Confused* is an exhibition in two chapters that tackles the complex, broad and challenging topic of the gaze. The exhibition reflectively combines older and newer positions that relate to earlier debates on the gaze as well as artists who recontextualize the topic within today’s context. It brings together a multifaceted look at the gaze and explores themes such as gaze agency, the imperial gaze, the homosexual gaze, the artist’s gaze, the digital gaze and voyeurism.

John Berger

John Berger is widely recognized for his art criticism and work as a novelist. Lesser well known is the fact that he was an artist himself, and not merely a “writer who drew.” Berger began his career as a painter and studied at the Chelsea School of Art and taught drawing at St Mary’s teacher training college. Two of the drawings on view are portraits of Berger’s second wife, Anya Berger. They married in the mid-1950s and despite their divorce in the 1970s they remained friends throughout. A Russian-British translator, intellectual, feminist, and writer, Anya Berger spoke six languages and translated works by Trotsky, Lenin and Marx. He dedicated his Booker-prize winning novel *G.* to her and her “sisters from the women’s movement” in 1972. Together they travelled across Europe by motorcycle.

The two drawings are of John *looking at* Anya. She also featured in the BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* wherein we see women discussing the act of being watched, the nude and women in traditional Western painting. We exhibited this very episode in Chapter 1 of *Gazed and Confused*. It is an intimate portrayal and sensual expression of Berger-the-artist’s own gaze.

Berger has written extensively on drawing, often combining personal stories. He examines the process and celebrates the unpredictability involved in the act of drawing: “... The lines on the paper are traces left behind by the artist’s gaze which is ceaselessly leaving, going out, interrogating the strangeness, the enigma, of what is before his eyes—however ordinary and everyday this may be... Then, quite soon, the drawing reached its point of crisis. Which is to say that what I had drawn began to interest me as much as what I could still discover. There is a stage in every drawing when this happens. And I call it a point of crisis because at that moment the success or failure of the drawing has really been decided. One now begins to draw according to the demands, the needs, of the drawing. If the drawing is already in some small way true, then these demands will probably correspond to what one might still discover by actual searching. If the drawing is basically false, they will accentuate its wrongness.”

Alina Frieske

"I'm very interested in self-presentation as a way of exposure. And also as a way to communicate. We need to produce pictures, almost on a daily basis, in order to show that we're still active." In this genuine statement Alina Frieske poignantly reflects upon the commanding impact of the internet and digital technologies on identity and our daily experience, as well as the potential psychological effects it has on us. In our current society, images have become omnipresent and social media is performative. We are surrounded by them in both physical and digital realms, and they inform and deform our perception of reality.

The series *Abglanz* by German artist Alina Frieske taps into this state of affair. The title of the work relates to an older German expression that alludes to a weak reflection or a distant echo. They are prismatically collaged with hundreds of images of photographic fragments sourced from social media. Starting with a blank page, Frieske sketches out a scene. She then works on the computer and inserts all the different fragments of photographs she has collected from social media onto the outlines she has drawn. A process of printing and rephotographing follows. When collaging the different fragments, Frieske plays with contrasts: she combines distant and close images, blurry and detailed, recognizable and unfamiliar elements, a visual language that might allude to the two-fold social media experience of feeling connected and isolated at the same time. She notes how "the approach developed out of a curiosity about image recognition. I like to work with reference to source material and try to see how much I can stretch the meaning of the image. The layered images invite us to see multiple things at once which is a primary interest in my work."

Frieske's works embody this feeling of slipperiness and unclear comprehensibility. Through their piecing-together and at times blurriness they retain all the textural seduction of painting. Frieske's still lifes, portraits and interiors all hark back to many art historical iconographies, be they Dutch golden age paintings or expressionists masterpieces. And yet these photographs, via a meticulous and time-consuming process, interrogate the uncanny nature of online images, their role in mediating our relationship to the world, as well as their enigmatic relationship to the real.

Dieter Hall

Dieter Hall has a long-held interest in portraiture. His portrait paintings are made from live sittings, often frontal and sometimes nude. They are later worked on from photographs taken during the sessions. These two bust-view portraits have a particular backstory. They are specially commissioned works for the exhibition. The sitters have close ties with the curators. To the curators the paintings evoke an affectionate gaze, a gaze on a loved one. The portraits are typical of Hall's style: flat, evoking simplicity and frankness, as well as purposely eschewing traditional painting techniques. The background patterns are complimentary perhaps a signaling the sitters' shared first-time model experience.

The commissioning of portraits has an interesting connection to what in psychoanalysis is called "transference." Transference occurs when a person redirects some of their feelings or desires for another person to an entirely different person. This oftentimes takes place in therapy sessions, when the patients transfer some of their repressed emotions onto the therapist. The act of commissioning an artwork, could be likened to the phenomenon of transference. It might be motivated by the subconscious and/or a playful desire. The artist becomes the entrusted beholder of both emotional and aesthetic expectations, translating intimate experiences into public ones. This transfer process develops out of an interest in the gaze by someone else. In this instance, the artist and the curators develop an alliance or mutual bond, they become engaged with one another and because of this circumstance the artist can then project his own gaze onto his subject.

Dieter Hall has been interested in homosexual subjectivity and therein lies a wish for the dissemination of the gay gaze socio-culturally. As artist friend and photographer Allen Frame has nicely expressed, Hall explores "the mystique of an underreported

subject, the behaviour of men with their guard down, and their sense of grace wide open.”

Milva Stutz

Curator Eva-Maria Knüsel has aptly described Milva Stutz's practice as a search for forms of representation of bodies and role models which question the male gaze. *Lapdog* (2021) is a free-spirited and queer rendition of a painting by Louis-Michel van Loo (1721–1793) of Princess Ekaterina Dmitrievna Golitsyna. The original painting is coded with class and nobility, the dog representing also social status. The symbolism of the lapdog in traditional portraiture is two-fold; it is at once a general symbol of fidelity and companionship but also more importantly a symbol of a woman's conjugal fidelity. There is a celebration of pomp in both the source image and the drawing, the latter echoing a camp attitude. In both portraits the contrast in proportions between dog and human is comical. In Stutz's drawing the textile surrounding the figure is empoweringly *too much*. The exaggeration of the hands and sleeves convey their strength. The long nails equip the figure with a “bad bitch armor.” The sitter takes center stage and the gaze is defiant and different from the dog, it is frontal and unapologetically not smiling. Another large-scale drawing *Zug* (2021) has two lovers gazing out of a window in a train perhaps evoking feelings of vulnerability, their gaze orientation fixed at something we as the viewer are unable to see.

Grégory Sugnaux

The subjects in Grégory Sugnaux's paintings are that of uncanny plush toys, arguably creepily cute. They are treated as a portrait of a human. Their gaze is varying: intense, static, ghostly, sad, a bit pathetic. One of the paintings is a portrait of a Harley Quinn ragdoll. Harley Quinn is considered one of the most popular characters in the American DC Comics universe. Harley Quinn was depicted as a frequent accomplice and lover of the Joker. The other is of Sylvester James Pussycat known from the Looney Tunes cartoons. Just like Harley Quinn he plays the antagonist role. He is known for his sloppy saliva-spraying lisp. Does the gaze of an inanimate object have as much value as a human? One point of view would be that it does. And this especially within the context of object-oriented ontology (“OOO” for short). Bogost.com defines OOO as bringing “attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis), and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much with ourselves.” One might therefore ask oneself: Who is looking at whom?

Sugnaux seems to have a fetish for images. He collects them from the street, from kids drawings, from books but most recently his craze has been the internet, for instance collecting silly or haunting photos of animals. He states: “The starting point for all my paintings is constituted by the stream of snapshots floating around the internet, (pirated) copies, stock photos and memes, some of which have developed a life of their own.” Take the meme as an example. What might seem like embodiments of strangeness and whimsicality, the meme one could argue provides some understanding of contemporary digital culture while also reflecting a culture based on the aesthetics of postmodernism (critique of elitist structures; highlighting cliché characteristics attributed to certain social groups etc.) Another category of images that is of interest to Sugnaux is the cursed image, a 2015 term for an image that has a strange aesthetic and is disturbing or a combination thereof. Sometimes derived from video games other times from found images on Tumblr they attract online attention because of their uneasy, gimmicky and sometimes lowfi quality. Sugnaux states: “The images I work with are not meant to be contemplated, but flicker at the edge of our attention span. They are the visual equivalent of elevator music rather than an image in the privileged sense. I try to create a temporary disruption of the image's circulation, an aesthetic moment of irritation, when the pictures suddenly populate the exhibition space on a canvas instead of on a screen.” Sugnaux aims for the viewer to reach a state of numbness. As the meme website cheezburger.com states: “Listen, we're not claiming these memes are full of intellectual humor. They're not. Sometimes we need a little dumb to dull the pain.” Instead of attaining the commonly aspirational sublime there's a desire for the “stublime” (combination of the words stupid/sublime).