

People

The way we look at a portrait is different from the way we regard other tableaux like landscapes or a still lives. I am thinking of portraits with psychological depth, predominant in the Renaissance, a period in which the idea of the 'individual' was discovered. One of Albrecht Dürer's self-portraits is a striking full frontal of his face, a daring break with convention at the time. This pose had traditionally been reserved for the "vera icon", the effigy of Christ. The portrait, however, immortalises the human individual.

These portraits penetrate the depth of personality; their eyes stare back at the observer. Sometimes they look sideways in a pensive, determined or devious manner, inviting us to consider the unique individuality of the face. A wide inner space behind the portrait is hinted at, a present absence, suggesting character, moral constitution or psyche. In another of Dürer's self-portraits from 1498, a lateral landscape is depicted in the background, as was common in many paintings of the era. The landscape itself not the primal element here, though, rather the artist's face. In Dürer's later portraits the face stands out even more against a plain background. Objects and environments serve as irrelevant facts and mainly serve as a shorthand to explain the social status of the depicted individual.

What impact do the portraits of human beings have upon us? This is articulated best by children. Sometimes children run up and down in front of a portrait in a museum. They let themselves be pursued by the gaze of the portrait. To the observer the gaze from the portrait seems like an approach: a personality which demands recognition. Even when the gaze is directed sideways it invokes intimacy.

In this exhibition the portrait presents itself in a completely different form. I cannot see the "people" depicted here as human beings that meet us as individuals. One does not see the portrait of a human being but a representation, a type; a "Kevin" or a "Jens". These people are in their prime, taking an active part in working life. How do I know that? They do not loiter, and neither despair nor spite is written in their faces. When they are aboard a train they do not waste their precious time on chatting, flirting or procrastination. They use the train journey to regenerate their energy for labour. They stare into space. In the pictures they show us how the length of the regulated working day turns their free time into passive exhaustion and time regenerate energy for work (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros an Civilization*).

Desire, which is repressed in favour of the hard work, could re-emerge during this free time, but it does not stir into anything active. These productive people have adopted reason and rationality as their second nature. Rationality does not contradict their own wishes. In their pictured

isolation the individual display no desire. They never look at other individuals. Neither are we, as observers, met with a gaze. For “Kevin”, “Jens” or Ama other people have become so irrelevant that they partly turn into blurred figures in the background, like the shape reflected in a cabin window.

That the people remain by themselves avoiding the risk of contact with someone else may be the reason for their serenity.

The woman in the café can be sure of spending her break in peace and without being approached. Even though her carefully chosen clothes really should be inviting, just like the fur collar or a little goatie in two other pictures. But eroticism has left these signs. They rather seem to be the well-earned fruits of paid labour; and the same goes for the tasteful accommodation or the flat screen. These “people” are a product of their working lives and goods they consume. The figure in the picture “Pause” is at one with her immediate surroundings: tables, chairs and glasses. She belongs to them and is not separable from them. She is as dependant upon them as an animal on its surroundings. Like a cow in the meadow and the birds in the tree the people live in their city habitats.

In the picture “Anna” Anna herself is only visible through her apartment. It is unclear whether the arrangement of rocking chair, lamp and desk is Anna or whether she is absorbed by these things. Does Anna exist outside of these things?

The people do not refer to themselves or to the psyche as an inner space. They refer to something exterior to themselves. They refer to their surroundings: the interior room of an apartment, a café or a train. They are part of the inner room with their faces, their beards or fur collars. The photo-realism of the city, which is often visible in the background (“Pause”, “Kevin”), appears organic in comparison to the people which belong to the comic-genre. The city is the



biotropical matrix, the native soil for all; a place where different biotopes for different people develop. These biotopes are distinct but similar as they grow on the same matrix.

If one wants to trace the longing or the suffering of the people it is most likely found in the city itself. One must seek it outside, in the city, beyond the window pane, where something is hidden underneath a bridge arch.

I think the suffering of the city is laid open in the picture “Klageslied”. It seems as if the square remembers its own past as a bomb crater.

Among the portraits shown here there is one exception: the vieille femme. She does not belong to the people or to the artificial illumination of the urban inner room. She gazes out from the dark and suffering is written in her face. We would probably find it hard to integrate her into our city society as a functioning individual. She seems unqualified, anachronistic and worn-out. Strangely, she also appears to be more alive at the same time. The stark juxtaposition of the old woman and the people make the reality of today's city even more glaringly clear.

The pictures show a facet of social reality. The pictures are significant. And this arouses my respect.

The significance of the pictures are independent of my interpretation and may evoke many other – maybe more competent analyses. What is important is that the exhibition provokes thought and movement.

Susanne Hermeling, Hannover, Oktober 2010