

Give-and-Take

Maik Schlüter

In Sebastian Gögel's artworks, the world takes on the appearance of a confusing place full of permanent contradictions and conflicts. His particular artistic approach consists of portraying everywhere in his pictures subterranean traps, hiding-places and secrets, as well as fissures and hidden backgrounds, and of turning all dimensions topsy-turvy. A gloomy world is opened to view and shown to be inhabited by hermaphroditic beings situated somewhere between humans and animals, between both known and unknown stages of an ongoing evolution. The views presented by Gögel invert reality into its opposite: inner worlds are turned inside out, the skin is stripped away from bodies to reveal their fleshy and formless substance, extremities are twisted and elongated, heads are inflated, eyes shifted and noses stretched excessively. The spaces are confusing pitfalls in which may be found every imaginable fear and tension. Gögel creates an exaggerated pandemonium in which all sorts of inscrutable and incomprehensible fantasies attain their artistic form. He plays a game of distortion and mirroring right up to its very limits: in many of his pictures, the artist continuously multiplies various meanings and statements. This excessive degree of energy and expressiveness is offset again and again by works whose sobriety and purity stand in contrast to the grand pastose gesture, and in which Gögel depicts a spectrum of strained exertion on both the individual and social level, inasmuch he causes the protagonists to grow rigid within a strict hierarchy and a self-imposed discipline. He repeatedly paints and draws the embittered and contorted physiognomies of various personalities. These figures give expression to a degenerated social world in which everyone attempts to see through, to assess and to deceive everyone else. Beneath the sign of spurious respect and feigned interest, all esteem for others is surreptitiously discarded, and one's own advantage is single-mindedly sought after.

In his pictures, Gögel offers a commentary upon the all-pervasive, interiorized catalogue of social performance. With dynamic strokes he renders precisely the compulsion to self-representation and permanent competition which both rules humanity and results in widespread fear and destruction. Nonetheless, Gögel is neither a social critic nor a caricaturist. His commentary always possesses a surrealist powerfulness and stands at a remove from simple

social criticism and psychological analysis. Even though there are repeatedly moments in his pictures when a figure or some bodily detail appears in a familiar form, still his interpretations and impossible constellations are the opposite of realism. In these pictures, bodies subside into a dark and desolate world in which all wounds lie open and there exists no point from which to achieve a purified perspective. But in spite of their dramatic, even apocalyptic aspect, Gögel's pictures are filled with humor, with an anarchistic and boyish wittiness which in blithe arrogance annuls the philosophical depth and existential harshness of life. One senses clearly that he is concerned, not only with a commentary and interpretation with regard to supposed reality, but also with painting and drawing a private world whose events are determined by its own laws. Thus not only are the pictures focal points of cognition and criticism, but in like measure they function as perspectival points for the feelings and thoughts of the artist.

Just as in an autopsy, invisible organs and other components of the body emerge into view in many of his pictures. Even in the cleansed and sterile atmosphere of pathology, which cuts open the body under the sign of medical research, disgust and the fear of jelly and death are summoned up in the viewer. Gögel entirely renounces sterility. In his painting he smears one plane into another: the secretions and colors flow into each other; eyes become the slits of an executioner's mask, skin becomes fur and extremities senseless bulges, animals are transformed into human beings and humans into something or other. These pictures evince fear, disgust, absurdity and subtle humor. But before everything drifts into an intangible and unstructured pictorial world full of arbitrary assertions, Gögel succeeds again and again in bringing objectifiable facts to light. The reversal and twisting of forms and relations which he occasionally employs to excess is then led back in the pictures to genuine causes. Gögel follows simple and concrete tracks here and pursues the path from *outside* to *inside*. Many of his figures stuff some loathsome food or other into themselves, sit at a table and fill their mouths and stomachs with strings of sausages, scoop food from plates or troughs, slurp soups or devour mountains of noodles. The act of *stuffing oneself*, as a compensation for outer and inner emptiness, by means of an uncontrolled and often guilt-ridden intake of food, is a familiar psychological symptom. The loss of self-restraint and the compulsion to consume are not symbols of private malaise, however, but instead give expression to a social form which is

devoid of substance and concentrated exclusively upon consumption. But not only is food consumed in the pictures, but just as often words and gestures are swallowed and absorbed.

Giving and taking, grasping and grabbing, clutching and displacing: the bodies depicted in Gögel's pictures are enfolded one within another, not in an unfounded manner, but with a lack of consciousness. These ominous alliances, however, must not only be accessible on the material and corporeal level, but can also present themselves upon the mental plane as a psychological-social compulsion. The constellations portrayed by Gögel are in all likelihood those pictorial statements of the artist which are most able to bear an expressive load. Pictures such as *Feuer bitte* (2006), *Schuhe und Stiefel* (2006), *Frequenzer* (2005), *Komponist* (2006) or *Sauger* (2005) present a world which is full of dependencies, tensions and involuntary role-distributions. The simple gesture of offering a light among smokers is transformed into an act of expectation and projection and presents the striven-after advantage on the part of the giver and the aggressive smugness of the taker. The scene in the shoe-shop is more complex. The depersonalized salesman, whose face disappears behind a stack of shoeboxes, is obliged to show each and every shoe model to the vain dandy. Blind with regard to the hierarchical constellation, the buyer is attentive only to his own vanity and overlooks the fact that the entire collection of shoes consists of only one single style. The exaggeratedly large shoe in the window symbolizes the everything and nothing at the heart of the fetish: shoes, shoes, shoes! In capitalism even the most banal object is charged with energy, instrumentalized and made to express eroticized fashions and attitudes. In the picture *Komponist*, Gögel even goes a step further. All spruced up and full of tension, the pianist attempts to achieve as excellent a performance as possible, scrutinizes the keys of the grand piano with full concentration, taps his feet rhythmically, and has in front of him a miniature bust. But it is not Wagner or Beethoven who is portrayed, but the pianist himself. He alone represents the history of music and displays his inhibited struggle with art. The music remains inaudible; we see only the tensed body, the mannered figure of the musician who under no circumstances may be allowed to disappoint himself and his audience.

The thought of not achieving this standard and thereby making public his supposed failure embodies in a symbolical manner not only the perversion and bourgeois conventionality of the demands made by the artist upon his own work, but also the idea of the significance of his own person.

Finally, *Der Auftrag* (2006) gives evidence that the principle of give-and-take also means violence. In this case the instructions are quite clear: slaughter and murder. Gögel presents a soulless monster which recalls the mechanical bodies of Richard Lindner. In the case of Gögel, however, we do not see alienated inhabitants of a metropolis but rather a blood-smeared, hideous face sitting upon metallic body armor and aiming two revolvers at the viewer. The killer has duplicated himself, is quicker than his shadow, and is accompanied by a no less aggressive and murder-crazed miniature version of himself. The futuristic cyborg-cowboy sums up the latent violence which is depicted in many of Gögel's pictures: in case of doubt, self-defense always means attack and conducts the principle of give-and-take to deadly disaster.

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Translated from the German by George Frederick Takis