

DEATH ROW – Gerhard Glüher

Holger Schmidhuber's new work group is entitled "Death Row". The reference is to the highsecurity prison tract whose inmates have been condemned to death and await execution.

In its prosaic precision the term tells of an age-old human phenomenon, namely the inevitable finiteness of all life. Not only is the reader reminded of friends and family who have died but generally of the Christian "memento mori". He recalls the places of death, the cemeteries, plaques and all those canonical memorials. For the most part we living had them erected as a means of keeping their memory alive, a readable reference to the past. Even if people dear to us disappear at least the memory of them remains. If we are very lucky the stories of and about dead persons remain as memories in the present and future. On hearing the term "Death Row" in connection with the series of works displayed here you quickly fall into such channels of reflection.

The delinquents' criminal records are posted on the Web sites of the respective US-American states. In most cases, the information comprises photographs of the condemned persons, data referring to their life and death, their criminal record and sometimes even the last words they uttered before execution. The Web site creators are keen to present every case as objectively and clearly as possible. And it is precisely this general tone of objectivity, or let us say neutrality that also prevails in the images posted on the Web sites. We are familiar with such photographs or "mug shots". They are criminal surveys, intended to provide a reliable means of identification. In the art-historical sense the term portrait is not fitting since these photographs neither reveal anything of the subject's character nor are they a concentrated visual representation of the "persona". We have all seen such images at some time. In placing the camera and person opposite in this way the aim is to create conditions that will reduce to an absolute minimum all nature of influence or individual interpretation. It is however a photographic confrontation in the truest sense of the word, which is naturally always one-sided as regards the process of passing a guilty verdict. That means the person to be identified must not be allowed in their mimicry to betray the slightest emotion, which might influence a neutral observation. In other words, the criterion applied to the manner of being photographed is that the person in front of the camera is transformed from a subject to an object. Almost always the persons look directly at the camera; they look at me, but they cannot see me. Communicated by other media such as television, daily newspapers and magazines this kind of photograph has repeatedly etched itself into our memory as an imago that can be called up at will. What is fatal is the fact that it is only as a result of the style of depiction that we assign the persons depicted the attribute of "criminal".

Such detailed preliminary considerations on the reception of mug shots were necessary to better understand the complex process Holger Schmidhuber employs to address his cycle's difficult topic.

While the Death Row series fits into the genealogy of all historic paintings (like the famous Manet painting depicting the execution of Kaiser Maximilian, to name one artwork addressing a similar topic) it simultaneously attempts to question whether it is possible to portray the historic per se. This is an extremely difficult task and the approach the artist employs could be described as follows.

As a first step of this artistic procedure of appropriating images Holger Schmidhuber does not produce any new images. Having more closely analyzed the image-generation process it emerges that during this first stage the artist's action is largely reproductive in nature. The photo prints placed directly on aluminum backing sheets are a subjective selection of the above-mentioned photographs of people condemned to death – such as we find on Web pages. As Schmidhuber only employs digital image editing in order to optimize the portrayal and enlarges the original passport photo format to the monumental size of the final image we cannot argue that the images are subjected to a truly innovative revision by the artist or the printing method. Until this point Schmidhuber's work is a conscious reflection of existing images. Arguably the vocabulary of "de-contextualization" is a fairly accurate description of the conceptual core of the work describing which transformation processes take place here. But only after this appropriative selection do the actual intervention, the creative act and the transformation of the copy to the image take place.

Initially, the majority of all observers will not recognize anything beyond monochrome, glowing red rectangles of color on seeing the entire cycle in the exhibition room for the first time. And owing to their knowledge of art history they will assign the work to the category of minimalist color field painting. This first assessment is not that far from the truth, but when after observing for a certain time human faces arise it is time to rethink one's first assessment. The tension of the visual concept arises from precisely this ambivalence.

Let us now consider what happens in terms of technical methods and what perceptions

can be gained from exploring this cycle. In the figurative sense the artist increases the distance between us and the illustrations. By dusting the prints of the faces with several very fine layers of red pigment and glass dust he causes the means of identification to disappear into a diffuse and "thick" immaterial layer of time. The nature of the artistic action causes the details of the photographic facts to be moved into the far distance. As such, these images could be understood as visual synonyms for the nature of the human memory itself, as the memory is an equally mysterious and fragmentary phenomenon. The number of layers varies from one subject to another and there does not seem to be an identifiable, defining pattern. The artist works wholly intuitively, he immerses himself in a highly-concentrated and almost meditative manner in the act of applying pigment; the nature of the material employed means he has to act quickly, yet he also needs to make certain where he is in order to find the dividing line between what is visible and what has disappeared. Meanwhile, another question has long since arisen, namely whether his intention is indeed to create something identifiable? What do we recognize, after all? Or put differently: what is the reference to which these images might allude in the world? Schmidhuber's paintings are not painting-overs in the sense of Arnulf Rainer, nor are they "Vermalungen" the blurred painting technique Gerhard Richter employed in his "18. October 1977" cycle; rather, they were never touched by the artist's hand! The image is not created by the artist's hand, there is no raised relief on a surface, no individual brush style provides clues as to the artist's character. Instead, a pristine, untouched layer of paint dust evokes memories of freshly fallen snow, sandy areas and old books in the attic that led a quiet existence for many years under a thick, gray layer of dust. In Schmidhuber's images the existence of the romantic discoveries in the attic is transformed into an eerie presence of people: in the truest sense of the word they are sucked into the images, concealed, lost they drift below a surface, which seeks only to be itself. Indeed this surface would suffice, after all together with the painterly act it would already constitute a finished image. It does not actually need the second, underlying image that represents some world or other, which we cannot (any longer) understand anyhow. >>>>>>

>>>>>> At this point there is a meeting between the concept underlying the Death Row cycle and the previous cycle Schmidhuber painted. It was entitled "unsehbar" (invisible) and sought to portray the images of the retina seen behind closed eyes. The current cycle described here is an attempt to depict recollected images. In fact neither of these tasks can be achieved using the medium of painting since the formation or materialization of the recollected images assumes a real point of reference the artist can take as guidance and against which his images could be measured. We have nothing of the kind here in front of us since the photographs posted on the Internet are definitely not real anchor points, but at best symptoms of human behavior. Each attempt at recognition fails because the portrait has already become a farce, an index, which probably only refers to itself. This is the eerie, grotesque nature of those photographic references, which Schmidhuber mercilessly reminds us of with his subtle manner of color coding, since his images retain their eerie quality by virtue of their style. Since there are no objects as such an irreconcilable contradiction arises between a photographic reference and artistic autonomy. While some or other informative representational visual contents could trigger political and moral discussions, the aesthetic form Schmidhuber has selected raises the power of imagination and liberty of thought above the limitations and mindless determinants, which a mere historic painting would have achieved.

Given the lack of contour and impenetrable depth of the intangible surface we are given a glance into something, which might possibly be a human face, but could also equally be just the color itself. The image's title makes a reference to a real story of life and death. As such we already know that the image we are looking at depicts a dead person. It is a future completed in the past, a double-coded knowledge and an eternally arrested hovering between life and death. The artist translates this mentally unbearable state into a visual metaphor. He creates an unstable balance between the recollected image, the horror and the graphic artefact that can now be looked at without also supplying prejudices or interpretation criteria. The final certainty of human fate was translated into the visual uncertainty of the images. There is a two-part word for this form of concentration that makes fiction and reality identical: seem-ing.