

For man cannot be a dog

Novelle montage No 1

Maria Peters

“A successful journey develops of its own accord and never ends the way it was planned. My journey through Germany was intended as a study of Romanticism. However, all the stories about dogs I encountered during that time, and the painting *The Wreck of Hope or The Polar Sea* by Caspar David Friedrich, seen in Hamburg, led me first to Greenland, and onward via Iceland to Amsterdam, down into the peristaltic maw of Rotterdam, and further on to Northern Cyprus – and then a time came when I knew for certain how my tale would evolve.

And only then, when the final destination of this thought process was emerging, did I define the range of the story’s content and put all the pieces together in that sense. But neither the texts nor the images are fixed to a specific location in the story. The individual elements are concepts that I can reuse again and again.

In my exhibitions I continue to develop the story, varying it, allowing it to grow rampant, even to overflow, reacting spontaneously to the space and the surroundings. The arrangement has found only a temporary conclusion now in this **Novelle montage N° 1** – a very specific moment in my work is captured in the form of the book (and the web versions).” Maria Peters

In the exhibition *For man cannot be a dog Novelle montage N° 1* in the Kunstpavillon Maria Peters mounts paintings, drawings, printed graphic works, text- and video-works, and objects together with drawings and texts on the walls to create a spatial installation that functions as a physically accessible narrative and, supplemented by a reading area and the book *For man cannot be a dog Novelle montage N° 1*, expresses the artist’s very complex and simultaneously very sensual methods of working and thinking.

The artist has developed a way of working that is entirely her own for the image-text narrative method; it enables her to translate spatial collages into the medium of the book and, vice versa, to transfer content from the book back into the space. In a similar way to thought processes, which rarely progress in a linear fashion, the sampling of experiences gathered while traveling, in discussions, or while reading is a practice she has cultivated: it invites the recipient to skim read, or stimulates him/her – to use a term that Maria Peters has invented for this working method – to create his/her own personal **Novelle montage**. The possibility of the simultaneity of various levels also suggests a web version including a blog, on which the artist is working currently. It was, however, already conceived parallel to the book production and the development of the exhibition.

The route through the exhibition suggested here, therefore, is a variant, only one of many approaches to reading.

Hand-written below a painting entitled *Balto Dreams of the Polar Sea* hanging in the entrance area, we read the following: “This story begins in the Ottoneum, a small museum of natural history in Kassel, which still retains the charm of a curiosity cabinet with its creaking floorboards and labyrinthine rooms.” A sledge dog – in the book I read about its heroic deed – gazes down from the edge of the harbour onto the rippling waves below. The image is almost a seascape in the spirit of Romanticism, including a floundering ship; we see only its rigging still projecting from the water. At least, if there were not the silhouette of a modern city...

In the side room on the left I read the first text on the wall, which – I assume – was written by the artist herself while traveling: “Wishes creep up on us like wild cats. They seldom appear directly, but make themselves noticed quite gradually. They are expressed in symbols, changing our actions, drawing us as if led by a ghostly hand into situations or places, whose meaning often only emerges much later. And then – quite suddenly – they leap on us from behind.” I take this idea with me on a symbolic level, and later I discover that the same text is written on the back of the book and thus can be seen as a description of Maria Peters’s approach. On my tour, I now discover several things about the living conditions of the sledge dogs in Greenland, encounter curiosities from folklore, and am astonished by the way the relationship between man and dogs has changed across the centuries; quotations from old church regulations provide information in this respect. “Can St. Barnabas also heal the illiterate?”, stands beside the painted image *Dog in the Grave of St. Barnabas in Northern Cyprus*. The saint healed the sick by laying on, not his hands but a copy of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Is the lazy-mindedness of folk religion being mocked here? The video shown on an adjacent miniature screen, which shows a mechanical figure of a dog intended for a nativity scene, wagging its tail, appears to support that idea. Behind me on the suspended wall is the painting *Coyote by the North Sea*. The animal, tugging at a piece of cloth, does not remind me of Joseph Beuys by sheer chance, for Beuys had himself locked into a cage with a coyote for a week. Maria Peters saw that video work on her travels through Germany, in the Kunsthalle Hamburg, and in the book she describes how she was particularly touched by the way the coyote courted the favour of the strange creature wrapped in felt blankets.

In the meantime I have picked up the book to carry it with me on my path through the exhibition. I have developed a taste for it, and keep dipping in – all these components of things experienced and read, linked in unexpected ways! The epilogue by Maria Peters ends very informatively: “And every experience and every conversation helps to write the story. For nothing is lost when you are speaking to a collector.”

In the room at the back there is more work dealing with the themes of longing and loyalty. The artist combines the cynocephalus — a human being with a dog’s head, in which guise it was popular to represent converted heathens, i.e., tamed wild creatures like St. Christopher — with the Platonic myth of spherical man, who was divided into two halves, so creating an erotic longing for the missing half in each case. She explains the relationship between man and dog by suggesting that once they were all cynocephali, and separation into dogs and men was what had led these two halves to seek each other ever since. The oil painting *Dog in a Ruined New Building* and the text on the wall beside it make clear that the dog, if given a choice between the society of men and life in the wilds, will decide in favour of civilisation. “In his book ‘The Possibility of an Island’ Michel Houellebecq describes the dog as a machine for loving with reverse effect.” The painting *Trumpery, Trumpery is Shaped by the Hand of Man* shows the author with his dog on his shoulder in the park of Schönbrunn. Special frames are required for the gardens here, which are part of the overall work of Baroque art, so that the trees and bushes can be trimmed properly.

In the key point of the story in the exhibition, the brave sledge dog Balto reappears. Viewed again from the back – this time set in a sculptural work – he is looking at the central statement: “For man cannot be a dog.” Knowledge gained and the desire for culture outweigh a longing for the wild – at least in the artist’s imagination of paradise, which is described as the aim to reach “a proximity to perfection”. *The Undead Ancestors* stand guard over paradise, which— as a state of continual happiness — does not seem to Maria Peters altogether worth striving for: “We could no longer taste of the Tree of Life. The serpent was clever enough to have its fun with us: seducing us to knowledge but not to eternal life. But so be it. Knowledge of our death makes us productive.” So productive that she even enters into a pact with the Grim Reaper for the painting *Death and the Young Girl* and, together

with Gunter Bakay on New Year's Eve 2013/14, she retouched a globe by painting over all the names, places and other information: *The Second Attempt – Reset*.

The globe object has found a place in the small studio area beside the office, where a corner for reading has also been set up. There, with all its names and inscriptions removed, it stands in contrast to the extensive literary sources and some intarsia linoprints on paper, which are a kind of analogue “copy and paste” – a technique allowing her to embed components such as pomegranates or images of the Virgin Mary into a dystopic, primeval landscape.

Research on a universally comprehensible language leads – at least in our cultural sphere – to Genesis and the building of the Tower of Babel (Babel = confusion). When people began to build the tower, there was global union: “The people are one and they all have one language”. It was probably because these people presumed to build the tower until it reached heaven that God sent the confusion of languages upon them. Maria Peters, who dreams of a peaceful world union and wishes that people would see what strength lies in unity, makes a second attempt: her Tower of Babel is a rather unstable one – in colours oriented on Bruegel, she assembles modernist elements in scenes that do not remind us by chance of Ground Zero and the trauma of 9/11. By some means or another, the Kon-Tiki —a simple raft that was used in an experiment during the 1940s to prove that the settlement of Polynesia starting out from South America was conceivable — has wormed its way into the picture.

Motifs such as these occur often in Maria Peters's work: someone sets out to explore something, wants to paint a polar sea, to find paradise or Atlantis. That longing to improve the world makes people inventive and creative. Following this train of thought, to a lesser or greater extent we all carry a notion of paradise inside us – even if it is one in which we reject permanent rejoicing and exultation and prefer to take our turn pushing Sisyphus's boulder.

“The urge to create art is one of the positive side effects of the Fall of Man — for in a heavenly paradise there would be nothing to do.”

Ingeborg Erhart