

Robert Estermann, an Introduction

Susanne Neubauer

Estermann, the draughtsman. Less obvious is his tendency towards performance. His work stretches between the action of the hand, drawing, and the power of his imagination. The result of his restless intellectual activity is the line, the image. In Robert Estermann's work everything seems to be in constant motion.

His archive of drawings and thoughts is vast. He treats it carefully, and is one of those who would sooner throw away a sketch than make it public. Nonetheless, every work remains "on site", in the studio and in the portfolio. Sketches are redrawn, photographs retaken, as the circumstances and urgency of work demand. Thus the performance of his act of draughtsmanship oscillates between swift, urgent sketches and precise handiwork.

Robert Estermann's exhibition in the Museum of Art Lucerne is a challenge to encounter his work directly, spontaneously and critically. With the "Kindergarten drawings" (Transparent Kindertagesstätten above Streets) (fig. p. 34) Estermann has attracted a great deal of attention. They form one of the better-known starting-points of the exhibition, and are a very good way of familiarising oneself with the language of his drawing. In these drawings like in other works of the artist the themes of limitation and delimitation and the various uncertainties of human existence are presented with great verve. They display his complex messages with stripped-down and stringent simplicity. Often accompanied by a text ("Since I was young, my desire was towards things getting round"), they lead the viewer into that intermediate zone which seems, on the one hand, to be characterised by the artist's personal sensitivity, while on the other it is subject to a certain detachment and universalisation that assigns general validity to the statement in question. Estermann thus balances German and (mostly) English titles and texts with a drawing sketched with such mastery that it is impossible to tell which statement comes more openly, more vaguely or – quite to the contrary – more intensely to the point. Emotions and associations are constantly and excitingly released, whether in the almost figurative, almost cartoonish transposition of an abstract concept (Wind) (fig. p. 26), in the confrontation of a title suggesting a portrait with a drawing of energetic lines and fields (Lucy) (fig. p. 26), or in the jotting-like, hand-written transposition of an expression heavily laden with sociological and political echoes [Viele Angestellte (Many Employees) (fig. p. 15)]. In his catalogue essay, Daniel Kurjakovic' will shed light on the important aspect of the political in Estermann's work, which has been relatively ignored

in the past.

The power of the artistic concept and the use of ambiguous titles of textual fragments can – as a strategic constant in Estermann’s work – also be observed in his photographic works. Here the performance, which is always also celebrated in the artist’s act of drawing, guarantees the ambiguity of the pictorial statement. Whether staged [Two Boys (figs. pp. 82/83), Two Boys (Rehearsal) (fig. p. 98)] or capturing the fleeting, documentary gaze [D (Desire for People and Unity) (figs. pp. 59, 60)] the image does communicate, but its statement renounces current norms. Estermann’s conceptual photography becomes so properly explosive in its juxtaposition, when, for example, the young woman horse-rider in Distant Riders (figs. pp. 89–103) finds herself in a carousel of youthful femininity. In her catalogue essay, Elisabeth Lebovici investigates Estermann’s affinity with the raw, high-contrast aesthetic of the image magazines of the 1970s, which the artist restages to reach that grey area (e.g. the “blue” area of the mediated eroticism) that is sexualised and in the process is made a taboo subject.

Estermann’s balancing act of unrestricted art that seeks to get as far as possible from social norms, finds other metaphorical transpositions as the almost melodramatic work Doors for Towelie (fig. p. 60). “Towelie” (a hybrid of human and towel, is a character from the American cartoon series South Park) symbolises the existence of a creature which manoeuvres its way through life with wit and cunning despite, or perhaps because of its “imperfection”. But the investigation of the phenomenon of belonging, of being different and strange, is only one of the urgent themes that Robert Estermann has pursued and developed in his previous artistic practice. Both the exhibition and the absorbing catalogue essays by Daniel Kurjakovic´, Elisabeth Lebovici and Adrian Lucas present the first opportunity to engage with this subtle, exceedingly complex and fascinating work.

Text published in:

Robert Estermann. Pleasure, Habeas Corpus, Motoricity. The Great Western Possible

Ed. Susanne Neubauer, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Museum of Art Lucerne, edition fink, Zurich, 2007, ISBN 978-3-03746-105-1 – editionfink.ch

© Susanne Neubauer / Kunstmuseum Luzern Museum of Art Lucerne