

The Emancipation of the Alter Ego.

Observations on the works of Alexander Braun

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The scenes which Alexander Braun has had other artists capture on small votive panels come across as strange. Like stereotypical figures in the Comedia dell'arte, a female skeleton and a male felt doll appear in situations ranging from the everyday to the captious. The accompanying banner texts comment on the goings-on, and each time, following the tradition of the votive panel, they express gratitude for the success of an undertaking, for having survived a dangerous event, or even for a sorrowful interaction. Braun has had the panels executed in a folksy, from the point of view of the European painting tradition naive, pictorial language. The stage-like depictions make do with a small number of props in order to put across the core of the story as a succinct visual impact on the beholder. Braun is not the first artist to take this collective store of folk-motifs as his model. It was also done by Frida Kahlo. As a commuter between two cultures, the European-American industrial "high" culture on the one hand and the Mexican "folk" culture on the other, she "worked through" (in the psychological sense) the elements of friction that inexorably arise in the clash of opposite world-views. Alongside these obvious problem fields, Kahlo also "worked through" her personal situation, which bore the scars of an extremely serious accident. After numerous operations, she was still confined to her bed, and could not take much part in social life. Her private and public spheres were equally conflict-laden, a situation she thematized in her pictures by orienting her formal vocabulary to the votive panels of everyday Mexican culture, while developing a private iconography of motifs. Her works impress us through their immanent tension, which results not least from the encounter of the world of imagination with an archaic figurative pictorial language. A potential which Alexander Braun also exploits.

The importance of Braun's votive panels is revealed in no small measure in the totality of his oeuvre to date and more precisely in the re-appearance of the felt figure who has already established himself in various groups of works. The fictional nature of this figure, who imitates human actions without however developing any individuality, also comes across in the votive panels as a cheerful, confusing interplay of fiction and fact. For each votive panel refers to an action, an event, that could indeed have happened and is recapitulated in the picture stories in a stylized form. Braun places his Felt Man in the middle of assumed scenes which in this playful form point to the uniform and repeated aspects of actual events recalled

in the genre of Mexican votive panels. It is a constant manifestation of life, of hunger for experience, of running away from death, of living out one's physicality and urge for movement right to the point of sexuality. In the multitude of these and similar situations and their painterly reproduction, the individual event loses its succinctness for beholders, who instead are confronted with the central and sensitive issues of our present age.

Alongside this enlightenment effect, we see a further dimension which relates to the artist as individual. This "invention of the artist" has been established and developed in the "modern" culture of the 19th and 20th centuries in a whole variety of forms ranging from the self-appointed seer and prophet, the vicarious martyr, the self-staged "unrecognized genius" or prince of painters. In this "opposition" to society, which ranges from the aggressive to the smug, not only are actual living arrangements of bourgeois society reflected, but also collective hopes and longings are vicariously fulfilled whose satisfaction is not permitted by our normative regulations: the artist lives the life that respectable citizens are too timid to allow themselves – variety, extremes, breaches of taboo. This self-staging, which Braun for example in the figure of his Felt Man thrusts before our eyes in exemplary fashion, he now pushes to an extreme with his more recent works, the votive panels. For he subjects this unspoken yet practised "concept of the modern artist" to a self-critical interpretation. Braun does not stage himself as the *alter ego* of the mass society, and does not provide a projection surface for individual-collective desires and unacted-out fantasies. He conceives an *alter ego* of himself which implants itself in the stereotypes of society via pictures. In the process, the *alter ego*, the Felt Man, now – that is, relative to earlier works – appears as a subject acting confidently on his own behalf. The *alter ego* has seemingly thrown off the reins held by his creator and now pursues a merry game with reality or, as the case may be, its artistic representations. This impression is enhanced by the fact that the artist has also had himself depicted on the panels. He thus becomes the fictional eye-witness of key experiences which his backsliding felt figure experiences – no less fictively – with the skeleton woman, experiences which however for their part refer to actual actions.

Society evidently has no further need of the artist, because in the real retablos of Mexican society homosexuality, gender issues, drunkenness, domestic violence etc. are all subjects for depiction. The retablo is then ready as sublimation, to ease the conscience and to communicate with the beholder. In this self-satisfied and smoothly functioning system of key event and coming-to-terms therewith through painting, as purveyed by the faith-system

known as the Church, the artist, given his obvious appearance as a surrogate taboo-breaker, sometimes interferes self-critically. In the votive panels, the real events are portrayed fictively and in accordance with an established canon of depiction. They thus have a reference function, which uses inserted text to name the protagonists and comment on the event as far as it effects the hero of the picture. Reality and fiction enter into an interaction known to identity research as biography generators. For every provision (art, diary, confession etc.) designed to help come to terms with something also serves to iron out the lapses which have made the public and private image of the personality look contradictory.

Into the middle of this system the artist Alexander Braun appears, in a sense as an irritant, who names the mechanisms of social practice of reconciliation with oneself and others, and in the process puts himself across as one among many. He himself as a person does not vicariously breach any real taboos, but uses both a portrait of himself and his *alter ego* to implant himself into the fictional picture system. The Felt Man in his artificial existence is primarily convincing in the fictional aspect of art, but through the votive panels points to a conceivable real situation which, however, has never explicitly taken place. Braun among other things appropriates this reference system in order to lend the felt doll a higher degree of reality. If this doll then also seems to have taken on a life of its own, it is entirely in accord with the endeavour. Using this concept, Braun thus thematizes not only the pictures that society makes of itself for itself (= *retablos*), but also the fundamental interactions between an artist's life and industrial society in the modern age. For all the familiar irritation and confusion that modern art is able to trigger, artists and industrial society define each other more strongly than ever before, as Braun demonstrates here with his votive panels. If present-day society is clearly in a position to increasingly reflect on itself in pictorial media, then it is no longer the task of art to create exclusively "oppositional" pictures, but rather to jump on to existing systems and to reflect upon them from within itself. This is precisely what Alexander Braun is doing; and not only that: he mirrors the conditions of his artistic reflection on a meta-plane at the same time: artistic *alter ego* (= Felt Man) and real artist *alter ego* (= Alexander Braun in realistic depiction) work hand-in-hand as a team.