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The Intimate Stranger ***On Thomas Kratz***

by Martin Germann

Normally as an author I tend not to begin with myself. But in the case of Thomas Kratz this is unavoidable. A confession: I completed the text markedly too late, for which I am ashamed. So late, in fact, that I have to ask myself how it could have happened. But before talking myself into some superfluous melodrama I'll make it simple: It is the fault of the artist and his art. For apparently there lurks within his work an aversion to the written word which defies all attempts at interpretation, just as a Teflon frying pan repels cooking oil.

Indeed I have striven in vain for one year to get a handle on the work of Thomas Kratz: for example, whilst jogging, when the oxygen-enriched blood courses through my veins invigorating my brain; when my thoughts begin racing to the rhythmic motion of my body; when jotting down notes, fragmentary impressions, and sketches. Such mental excursions are always triggered by his painting. For Thomas Kratz is essentially a painter, which is how he also perceives himself. Currently painting - despite persistent reports of its impending demise - seems to be in remarkably rude health, although it is not the untrammelled expressivity which holds sway. And for Kratz too the rather cautious, even hesitant quest for the image, for its permeabilities and boundaries appears essential - and when it does finally appear, there follows immediate and emphatic closure.

Thomas Kratz worked on Nudes from 2007 to 2011. This entailed him painting the front and reverse of the glass of a finished frame with acrylic paint whose tone should, according to the manufacturers, match that of human skin, thus explaining the choice of product names such as «Nude», «Portrait» or «Flesh Colour». Applied to the glass, the colours appear soft and delicate - an impression reinforced by the openings or rather pores, which lend the images an enigmatic translucence. The title of the paintings Apollo or Artemis, refers to the legend from Greek mythology of the eponymous twins, whereby the name to which Kratz is actually alluding, is missing: Marsyas, the satyr and player of the double flute, who challenged Apollo to a musical contest and was defeated. As punishment for such hubris, Apollo had him skinned alive, an event which was committed to the annals of art history in Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (ca. 1570–1576). In an interview for this catalogue, Kratz remarks that the brush could also have been a knife, the knife which slices through the skin.

The French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu coined the term «skin-ego», according to which the skin serves as an envelope through which the ego and the environment communicate. The skin as the final boundary, as a membrane, which separates the self from the other. Here in the second decade of the 21st century, in which the individual appears to have been seized by the post-Modern dictum of «anything goes», one could, of course, expound on the loss of corporeality. More than

ever we live astride innumerable roles and identities within a kind of third dimension, between a topographic here and a virtual there. Within this realm, the private sphere - one of Modernity's great accomplishments - evaporates, leaving only the skin, as the final physical bastion, capable of demarcating an «exterior» to the outside world. Although Thomas Kratz may be inspired by such themes, he is, of course, also aware that painting always portrays the medium itself. And by (psychological) extension, one could also suspect the existence of something resembling a «painterly ego», - the alter ego of the artist, as it were. On the Nudes, his external organ would be the skin which envelops his entire exterior and thus also the head.

During my first encounter with Thomas Kratz's Heads series (2007-) I was reminded of the Tachism-inflected work of Jean Fautrier from the 1950s in which everything is turned outward. Meandering head-like forms caught between abstraction and figuration thrust through the layers of crusted paint. Quite why this comparison springs to mind is unclear to me as Heads operates in exactly the opposite way: Nothing is thrusting or pushing. In fact the images appear hidden or «locked-in». And, as with the Nudes, the appeal here lies in the form of translucence which, however, is attributable to a different technique: As his painting ground Kratz uses coarsely-meshed sackcloth which allows the frame to shimmer through the image - a self-reflexive painting strategy. Due to the enormous tension impacting on the cloth, the Heads appear flattened, with rivulets of opulent colour migrating over the canvas, highlighting how each individual fibre has absorbed the paint and - echoing Marc Quinn's bloody heads in *Self* - become literally infused by it. The action in this time-consuming process is reduced to one of mere observation, of letting go, and the faces in the Heads, remain, if at all, only discernible as a standardised iconogram, around which Kratz in each work of the series experiments with various painterly idioms and above all styles. He appears to dedicate himself to painting and its history as an interlocutor, which like his own ego is concealed behind an array of masks, revealing himself only in rare moments - in the manner of an apparition. Against this background, his working method is quite similar to that of a sculptor, who incrementally chisels something from the raw material. And in the light of Kratz's most recent works this comparison with sculptural techniques is not so very far fetched: *Lick Gin* is the title of a work series - which to remain with the metaphor - penetrates even further beneath the skin. Rather than canvas he uses plywood here too as the ground, whose surface and edges he frequently maltreats before, during or after he has covered them with layers of acrylic paint. Thus the scratches, cuts and indentations remain clearly visible and form a sharp counterpoint to the delicate, at times even tender, character of the overall work. Although this recalls the violence inflicted on the canvas by a Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein or by the Nouveaux Réalistes, and their act of releasing pent-up energies after World War II - as a liberation of the medium of painting, it brooks no comparison with Kratz's strategy.

Kratz's position is more redolent of his teacher Günther Förg, who particularly in his abstract works speculated with the appeal of historic recognisability. At the same time, both artists are also capable of forging the impression of the «new» which, whilst revealing the «old» also liberates it almost magically from the baggage of history and the familiar. With Förg this may be attributable to the fact that innovation is driven less by a desire to «update» painting and more by the endeavour to place the medium in relation to other media, such as his photography. This brings to the fore a relational aspect since each work and every genre bleeds through into the other: photography into painting, painting into photography, painting into sculpture. With Kratz the situation is similar. In both their discretion and - I don't shy from using this word - their beauty, his paintings are no less

contemporary and present as they are for evincing an awareness of the problems of the past. For what viable avenues remain for painting to embark on today? No longer the path to the outside, the search for a representable «other». Instead the interior appears to be contracting and expanding as an increasingly violent matrix of images, ideas and strategies, now requiring mediation. Artists such as Cheyney Thompson or Wade Guyton, for example, are forging links to the social and economic peripheries of painting and eliminating the expressive artistic act. Brush and canvas are finally being laid down. Thomas Kratz's work also plays with the notion of the lost exterior as a Utopia. Inspired more by doubt rather than the urge to obliterate, he forensically interrogates the «in-between» zone in which we live. For him, the «other», as an art-philosophical category of the Utopian, is not concealed, but is always - albeit latently - present. It merely has to be discovered between the objects and liberated - perhaps even by simply trivialising what already exists.

One strategy deployed by Thomas Kratz for lending expression to this constructive doubt is the unpredictability with which he vitiates any suggestion of austerity. Kratz takes flight abruptly from tranquillity and contemplation into apprehensiveness, escaping from the dogma of the series, from the fragile structures of his paintings into performance or sculpture. The purported disconnect of these works with painting is the genuinely remarkable aspect here. For it is not immediately apparent why, for example, Kratz chooses an experimental new arrangement, comprising a dentist's chair and an ad for dental bleaching next to the certificate, now held in the collection of Cologne's Museum Ludwig, of Lee Byars's famous performance of *The Perfect Smile* (1994). Or why, now staged several times, he is seen explaining the pictures to a dead hare. Equally perplexing is the integration into his work of the racing bikes, a recurring theme with Kratz, which feature either as sculptures or props in his performances. Whereas the racing bikes recall the bodies and physical exercise, the re-enactment of Joseph Beuys's hare performance alludes above all to the belief that the magic of the original event still resonates in the world, and can be conjured up in the present.

Perhaps this specific form of dissociation within Kratz's oeuvre is a quality peculiar only to him, for he reinforces it through his leaps out of painting thus liberating it in the moment from itself. And consequently one is confronted with a series of artistic parallel universes which, whilst interdependent, do not interpenetrate. This gives rise to the very elusiveness, the preclusion of interpretations seeking logic and context. To some degree this also speaks to an intrinsic schizophrenia as a productive moment. And as a proposal for a multilayered, perhaps impossible translation, the work of Thomas Kratz is thoroughly contemporary by virtue of the fact that it exposes itself to the danger of consistent failure. For without failure, there is no love.