

Image and Desire

On the Concept of the Living Image in the Work of Marianne Vlaschits

In her performative, installational works, Marianne Vlaschits frequently confronts us with the possibilities of a living image. In doing so, she investigates the relationship between image and reality, with particular emphasis on the reciprocal action in social and individual images of desire. She combines this focus with a visual empathy forged, and destroyed, by the image. Examples for this mode of inquiry are her works *Cockaigne d'Or* (2010), *Bowerbirds* (2011; with Michael Bäckström), *Garden of Lust* (2012; with Fanni Futterknecht) and *Malibu Sunrise* (2012). Although Vlaschits establishes the idea of the living image in these works they are not indebted to the classical tableau vivant, but rather to a more comprehensive 'bringing to life of images'. Vlaschits employs specific, expansive methods and techniques: the three-dimensional extension of images to hybrid forms of set design, sculpture and stereogram, the integration of performance, dance and theatrical forms of expression, sound, light and intense color as well as everyday objects and food. The complexity of her arrangements, in which the different levels of her images interlock with the reality of objects as well as with social realities, points towards the ambiguity and diversity of the concept of an 'image'.

Vlaschits' notion of the living image differs fundamentally from that of contemporary theatre- and performance studies, which tend to still see the genre in its original sense of the tableau vivant, an art form which developed at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century.ⁱ The tableau vivant flourished across Europe after the popular enactments by Lady Hamilton, which had sociocultural reasons. Appreciation of historical artworks was widespread at the time, and Hamilton developed a method which wasn't based on the translation of paintings into detailed drawings, but rather into the bringing back to life of scenes depicted in paintings and sculptures through reenactment. She developed sequences with changing poses, facial expressions and requisites, in order to synopsise the character and significance of the portrayed antique figures. Apart from a few exceptions the tableau vivant has played only a marginal existence since. In the second half of the 20th century artists reactivated the genre: Timm Ulrichs, who displayed himself as a living artwork in his piece *Erstes lebendes Kunstwerk* in 1961, Gilbert & George with their *Living Sculptures* (1970 onwards), Stephen Taylor Woodrow's *Living Paintings* (1986) or Marina Abramović and Vanessa Beecroft's lengthy performances remaining motionless. The immobile poses were what gave these performances their pictorial quality. Vlaschits' interest, however, does not lie in quiescence and mortificationⁱⁱ, but in making images real by rendering their reality palpable and tactile.

The notion of a living image can then be coherently approached from a different direction, independent from the specific genre of the tableau vivant. Marianne Vlaschits' works advance from the question how the reality of an image can expand into our reality or how it can be transposed into it, how inner and outer images, images of the everyday as well as those born out of fantasies, can be made concrete and experiential.

In the concept for her dance film *Cockaigne d'Or* Vlaschits explicitly references the significant film sequence of the US-american Musical *An American in Paris* (1951) by Vincente Minelli. The protagonist, an unsuccessful painter in Paris played by Gene Kelly, falls in love with a woman who reciprocates his feelings but feels obligated towards another man. The futilely enamored couple meets at a masked ball, where they say their farewells in order to part for good. The hopes and wishes of the painter seem doomed to fail, but at this moment one of his drawings transforms into the stage backdrop; growing, gaining color and coming to life, consolidating with actual set pieces and décor in the room and being populated more and more with dancing people. The artist plunges into a daydream come to life, dancing through

Paris with his lover in a glittering costume gala. The film sequence in which the picture comes to life shows an opening in his reality for his dreams and fantasies. He drifts into a reality which is imagined but at the same time seems real in a fascinating way. The realities of the image, his fantasy and real life start to merge without entirely losing the connection to their respective origin.

The happening *Cockaigne d'Or* and the dance film resulting from it take this idea of a merging of reality and pictorial world further in their own way, by establishing multiple connections between the planes of realities involved. At the centre of *Cockaigne d'Or* stands the utopian vision of a land of endless abundance, where everything is driven by desire, an imaginary world in which there is enough food for everyone, all sexual appetites are fulfilled easily and conventions and hierarchies are topsy-turvy or dissolved. The venue of Vlaschits' happening was the auditorium of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, an arena of rambunctious student parties possessing a history of notorious masked balls and carnival festivities. The stage set for *Cockaigne d'Or* defined a specific space for the happening while at the same time melting into the existing architecture of the auditorium with its huge classicist pillars, marble floor, gilding and its opulent ceiling painting by Anselm Feuerbach, *Fall of the Giants* (1875-80). The set consisted of painted canvasses, several meters high, fixed between the pillars, as well as painted objects positioned in the space and marking the area of the stage. The paintings, which Vlaschits had created in her comic-affine neo-pop pictorial language, showed a carnivalesque-grotesque version of the land of cockaigne: milk and honey spouting from penises and breasts, pudding and caves in the shape of anuses, pink and green palm trees, ostriches, a huge mouth biting into the edible world and so forth. 14 invited dancers and two musicians playing keyboard and drums took part in the performance. The dancers' costumes – togas made from painted canvas – were extensions of the set. The performers were given characters such as Bacchus, the Jester Queen, Sausages and Faeces, but it was up to them to what extent they wanted to identify themselves as these. Following a festive meal, the happening developed more and more into a dionysian, satirical game, a dance of the organs, which were painted onto some of the togas. Turbulent scenes alternated with periods of rest, as the performance continued for several hours, with musicians and dancers reacting to each other, improvising. The film, which cuts the scenes to 35 minutes shows the unfolding of a partially planned, partially ad-lib dance, and the development of a non-verbal, physical, dancing communication between the participants. Starting with the image of the cockaigne, Vlaschits creates a happening that could be called a “temporary autonomous zone” after Hakim Beyⁱⁱⁱ, a plane of reality in which, for a certain amount of time, reality is reinterpreted – artistically, politically – by a group. In a text on the piece, Vlaschits describes this reality as a hallucinatory zone: “In *Cockaigne d'Or* the dancers become one with the painting of the set, the togas, the music; everything flows into each other, referencing a never ending, carnivalesque body^{iv}.”

While Vlaschits calls into life an imaginary picture in *Cockaigne d'Or* through the medium of happening and dance, using symbol-heavy sets and intense physicality, her works *Bowerbirds* and *Garden of Lust* – both collaborations with artist partners – are further investigations into bringing images to life. Both performance-based works are focussed directly on painterly processes spreading from surface into space. The multipartite, intensely colored room installations that developed during the two performances can be described as painting that has evolved into environment. The covering of bodies with paint, the immersion in intense colors, are reminiscent of the blurring of body- and space boundaries in artistic performances and actions of the 1960s and 1970s, but also of the hallucinatory intensity of color and the dissolving of genders, illusion and reality in the films of Hans Scheirl, for example his legendary *Dandy Dust* (1998).

The performance *Bowerbirds* (2011, Donaufestival, Krems) and its sequel *Bowerbirds II* (2011, STYX Projects, Berlin), which Marianne Vlaschits developed and carried out with the

Swedish artist Michael Bäckström, are inspired by a phenomenon in nature that can almost be described as artistic: the male Bowerbirds aim to attract females with architectonically astonishing, sometimes colorful nests, to make up for their own, rather unspectacular appearance. The instinct of the bowerbirds lends the metaphoric base to Vlaschits' and Bäckström's work: with the simplest means such as cardboard, wood, glue, clay, fruits, candles, found objects and paint they produce raw and wild, yet attractive dwellings and rooms during the performances over several days. Mysterious loci of attraction, furnished with symbols of longing, they manifest a libidinal passion for the visual. The visual lust of the bowerbirds – here: the artists and viewers – is caught in the intensity of the colors, the blue, pink and yellow in which walls, objects and performers are covered; becoming charged in the organic and erotic shapes, the materiality of the foodstuffs and the raw ornamentation of the sculptural arrangement.

A similarly bodily efficiency of the visual comes to play in the performative installation *Garden of Lust* (2012, Mo.ë, Vienna), conceived and realized by Vlaschits in collaboration with Austrian performance artist Fanni Futterknecht. *Garden of Lust* makes the most direct reference to the classic tableau vivant within Vlaschits' oeuvre, as it develops – in contrast to the pictorial stillness – further into the direction of a “permanent construction and deconstruction of forms and images”⁴. Futterknecht and Vlaschits engage with the painting *Le Chevalier aux fleurs* (1894) by the French history painter Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse. The painting refers to a scene from Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and is just as excruciatingly world-enraptured as the opera. It shows the young hero Parsifal in a magical garden in the midst of a group of beautiful flower girls who want to seduce him and steal his salvific naivety. The girls grow out of a lush flowering meadow and exhibit a lusty impulse that looks at the same time innocent and vegetative; they don't seem to possess any consciousness. Parsifal, on his quest for the holy grail, has to withstand this temptation. A reflective armor covers him like a futuristic shield, holding the girls back. The artificiality encasing his body separates him from the natural and the dirty, which the girls represent. At the same time the painting services the thing it demonizes: it generates lust and visual desire. Naked bodies, mirror effects, the colorful glimmering of the paradisaical surroundings, the desired man: all these provoke the gaze; while in the subtext the female is defined as vegetative, unconscious, uncontrollable and uncontrolled.

In their performance *Garden of Lust* Vlaschits and Futterknecht reinterpret the hierarchy inherent in the painting. They turn the flower meadow into artificial plants made from styrofoam, flexible tubes and latex. The artists as flowergirls are transformed into ambiguous sexual organs in skintight red ornamental latex costumes. In slow, controlled movements they cover the artificial plants and fruits with paint and latex-slime, they pierce and penetrate them and let them burst. The vegetative longing of Rochegrosse's painting is here brought to the boil while at the same time being made entirely artificial. *Garden of Lust* evokes a reality in which desire has become conscious of itself, not in order to turn itself off but to purposefully fulfill itself. The artificial no longer stands for the innocent but delivers proof that lust has found awareness. The performance sketches a sexuality that knows the possibilities of lust and transformation, and follows these mechanically and relentlessly.

In the installation and performance *Malibu Sunrise* (2012, Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck) Vlaschits breaks with the cold desire postulated in *Garden of Lust*. *Malibu Sunrise* is instead a pleasure-loving analysis of the image of the south and the longing connected to this image. The installation brings together palm trees, erotic-exotic flowers, pillars of old temples, fruits, phallic cocktail glasses and other beach stuff, an oversized Venus shell as well as a fizzy, bubbling whirlpool complete with young, luscious beach boys in a hybrid image of projection and reality. What the ‘Orient’ was in the 19th century – an image of the exotic other, at the same time erotic and menacing; a European fantasy – is now the image of the south, reshaped by leisure culture and tourism. It's a brittle image, oscillating between real life and

staging, between cheerfulness and economic needs; an image in which imagination and reality never manage completely to arrive on common ground.

Malibu Sunrise is conceived as a picture which, through an interplay of backdrop-like paintings and painted objects arranged in the room, captures the attention of the viewer from all sides at once. Greeted by a chirruping dawn chorus, the audience pushes aside a palm leaf and sets foot into shallow water. While the sun seems to be setting in the east, three young men pose at the pool with glances and gestures full of promise. In the background a huge foaming wave is building. The lascivious colors, the theatrical light and the sound build a sultry atmosphere which is at the same time put into question: the often decor-like space-painting-construction subverts the appeal to the senses, tripping up the already activated imagination.

On another level, the knowledge of the constructed nature of the simulated image is suppressed. Within the framework of the performance the scenery really is brought to life. The beach boys, previously only present as painted figures, loll around in front of their doubles while a little further away a young man watches the scene from under a palm tree. In the course of the performance the beach boys undress down to their swim trunks and get into the increasingly foaming whirlpool. The young man watching embodies the wishful thinking connected to the imagination of the permissive south. While watching the scene, in a central phase of the performance, he sings with great devotion *Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön* (*This image is enchantingly lovely*) from Mozart's *Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). The emotional piece is about Prince Tamino, who falls in love with a picture of Pamina, a princess he has never met.

Visual culture scholar Gernot Böhme emphasizes, in an analysis of the libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder which forms the textual basis for the aria, that it is not the real person but her image, from which the erotic impulse felt by Prince Tamino emanates.^{vi} The image has a direct, tangible charisma and potency for Tamino. He falls in love with the Pamina in the picture, and it is possible, as Böhme argues, that Tamino sees the picture which he is so touched by in her when he later meets her.

In Vlaschits' performance the meaning of the aria is transferred to the image of the south that the young man serenades while looking at it. In contrast to Mozart's *Magic Flute* the image in the performance is not a singular portrait but a complex of inner and outer images, wishful thinking, advertizing images, stagings and social reality. Transferring Böhme's analysis, we can conjecture that what we love most about the south is our own *image*-ination of it; that we appreciate the image we bring to it the most. The experiences we take from the south are drenched in the preconceptions with which we encounter its reality.

In this way – and with similar methods – Marianne Vlaschits analyses structures in her work that develop when the realities of images and things, people and societies merge. She uses the media and means of visual and performing arts in order to do so. The characteristic attributes of her concepts is a continuous oscillating between pictorial and realistic elements so that the boundaries between imagery, visuality and reality blur in a way that we know from subliminally experiencing it in our everyday life. Vlaschits specifically references those images from our society and our individual and societal subconscious that are connected to lust and desire: the south, the cockaigne, the garden of earthly delights and so forth. She questions how these images are formed and what it means to realize the fantasies and phantasms inherent in them. Her works don't create naïve fantasies and utopias of lust, but rather show the threatening and fragile in what we covet. They don't just give a few differentiated answers to the question of what we desire but also to what it means to turn our desires into realities.

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- [i](#) See also: Birgit Joos, "Die Erstarrung des Körpers zum Tableau. Lebende Bilder in Performances", in: Christian Janecke (Hg.), *Performance und Bild / Performance als Bild*, Berlin 2004, pp. 272-303.
- [ii](#) To this aspect, see also: Christian Janecke, "Performance und Bild / Performance als Bild", in: *ibid.*, pp. 11-113.
- [iii](#) Hakim Bey, *Temporäre Autonome Zone*, Berlin 1994.
- [iv](#) Marianne Vlaschits, concept for *Cockaigne d'Or*.
- [v](#) Fanni Futterknecht and Marianne Vlaschits, concept for *Garden of Lust*.
- [vi](#) Gernot Böhme, *Theorie des Bildes*, Munich 1999, pp. 77-93.