Beauty, Fashion and Happiness

Beauty, fashion and happiness - Charles Baudelaire places these three graces at the very start of his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863). Although they might have been considered dirty words until a few years ago, I hope it might now again be considered permissible for me to use them as a starting point for my consideration of the works of Anselm Baumann.

According to Baudelaire, beauty has two elements even though it creates a uniform impression. On the one hand there is an eternal, immutable element that is excessively difficult to determine. On the other hand there is a relative, circumstantial element, which consists of the age, its fashions, its morals and its emotions. Baudelaire continues, "Without this second element, which might be described as the witty, enticing, appetising icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation." In its widest sense fashion represents the body, so to speak, in which alone beauty is visible.

Since then, the immutable element of beauty, and in particular beauty as the ideal of art, has been the subject of an acrimonious debate, which may not have destroyed it, but which has shaken it to its foundations. And if I come back to Baudelaire's model here, then because of the role that fashion plays in it. In fashion, beauty and taste have survived the icy times of the no-longer Beaux Arts. The witty, enticing element of beauty has found its way back into art via fashion.

Anselm Baumann's works are to do with fashion. And that is apparent to anyone who, with these textures and colours in mind, studies a window display or a catalogue from Prada, for example. Baumann derives the material for his work from these inexhaustible and constantly renewed sources. In ever new variations, the colours of fashion and current taste are cast in glossy rings and put together in variable ensembles. Constantly recombining the elements in ever larger and ever more splendid constructions is not simply a pleasure for the artist. The observer also experiences a sense of enjoyment that needs no lengthy explanations. The sensuousness of the material and the play of the colours are satisfying in a very direct way that draws on all the pleasures of taste.

"The enjoyment derived from the depiction of the present stems not only from the beauty of the representation, but to an equal extent from the intrinsic character of the present age", writes Baudelaire. However, in Baumann's works, the immediacy and the presence of the effect on our senses is deepened by means of explicit references to the history of art. This is another source of Baumann's forms, which enter into an elegant union with fashion. The fascinating combination and superimposition of the colours and shapes on the wall have painterly qualities that particularly resemble those seen in watercolours. In his latest works, Anselm Baumann manages to derive surprising insights from this venerable tradition by turning it into the present through the use of up-to-date materials. But what is both past and present is the shocking use of the hook.

In praise of the hook

The hook, an indispensable detail in the craft of art had, a servile, shamefully hidden role to play for centuries. Once concealed behind the objects whose weight it bore and still bears, condemned to invisibility, the hook now celebrates a triumphal appearance in Baumann's works. Big and wide and shiny, the hook is a powerful, almost brutal, intrusion into the delicate transparency of the rings. Suddenly thrust into the spotlight it presents itself from its most attractive side. How easily it bears the gentle burden of the rings; nothing seems to be too heavy for it.

The rings hanging from the hook now reveal their jaunty nature. Considered from the perspective of the original function of the hook they are to be understood as a frame, but together with the hook they are also the picture. A peculiar play of the inversion of frame and picture emerges. This sense of vagueness is heightened by a third factor: the hook is evidence of and a guarantee for the deliberate changeability of the works. By loosely hanging the rings over the hook, owners are free to create endless new variants from their stock of components. The artist no longer determines and sets all the details of the 'work', and there is space for one's own creativity.

And into this space returns the element of taste that had been banished from art, but which had always been loitering on its borders, touting its dubious services. Taste, so it is said, is in opposition to art's claim to truth. However, if taste is turned into a subject, if the works provoke the fear of appearing "tasteful", then the observer is on the horns of a dilemma - a position that has always proved to be very revealing! On one side there is the tempting abyss of empty prettiness, on the other side the seductive expanse of a demand for the removal of artistic borders. Since the beginning of modernity there has been a fierce battle to facilitate entry into the holy realm of art. Or, formulated in a negative manner: If all of this is supposed to be art, then the dam has finally been breached, and everything constitutes a work of art. Here, therefore, as in all really good works, one must ask oneself whether or not this is really art. Time ignores, and ultimately answers this question, and new art is always confronted with such doubts.

In recent times, art theorists have resigned themselves to the futility of constantly trying to define a picture of art that is constantly in flux. The attempt to give a definitive description of what art "is" is accepted as being unattainable, and only the idea of art as a complex social and cultural practice is seen as having a limited amount of validity. This practice applies to the activities of artists and their output, as well as to the efforts of the recipients. This approach is still open because it incorporates the history of this practice and the never ending debate about it. The definition of art therefore presupposes an agreement of the identification and interpretation of what does and does not belong. One criterion, although a somewhat dubious one, would be to award the honorary title of "art" to all those phenomena that allow the observer an aesthetic experience. With that we arrive back at the subject of happiness - the unique happiness that we can only experience through art.

If therefore, the confrontation with Anselm Baumann's works enables you to start reflecting on some of the topics I have mentioned (or completely different ones), but you are unable to reach a conclusion on account of the sheer endlessness of your reflections, then things are looking good for the artist, and we probably have a work of art on our hands.

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Translated by Gareth Rees