

## Loops

A huge wasp in the cockpit of AH-2668. Nervous tentacles feeling their way, rhythmically flashing blue lights – a claustrophobic scene. Cut. A flight of stairs with tendrils potted plants and a white watering can. On the ground the AH-2668, a toy helicopter. Suddenly it takes off on a spiralling flight, dancing out of our line of vision with the wasp on board.

Peter Rösel's most recent video lasts scarcely more than a minute, a short story with rapid leaps and bizarre turns. What was monumental a moment ago shrinks to a miniature, what begins as a B-Movie à la "Tarantula", turns out to be a somewhat cranky amateur video about a flying insect in a flying object. Yet the long shot has scarcely thrown light on the circumstances when the film jumps back to the distortive close-up. Conceived as an infinite loop, the helicopter airshow takes a new turn every 75 seconds.

Peter Rösel intensifies the circling and whirring impression by showing three loops at offset intervals in three spatially offset televisions. The images of flight are trapped in three bulky bodies because Rösel has selected three consumer electronic dinosaurs to be the host animals for his wasp video: TV cabinets from the 50s and 60s, representatives of a lost era in which receivers still wanted to be communal and meaningful pieces of showy furniture. Accordingly they conceal their technical bowels behind dignified wooden facades and bear sonorous names such as "Tizian", "Rembrandt" or "Leonardo": Old Masters ennoble youthful media, painters guarantee best image reproduction, celebrities enhance the bourgeois home.

The accelerated innovation cycles of the electronics industry have long since catapulted the formerly successful furniture away from the action. However Peter Rösel thwarts the dictates of medial progress. In an almost touching way, he allows the discarded antiques to be of service once again, reanimating them with the latest video and projector technology. In this way, his installation *AH-2668* is also a nostalgic obeisance to the infancy of television – and to three renowned artists.

With its surprising combinatorial aspects, *AH-2668* is the most recent example of an art of collision, abeyance and shift of emphasis that gained Peter Rösel a reputation in the 1990s. Humorous and cunning, his works link stories of everyday life with those of humanity, mix the close at hand with the distant and blend the mundane with the exotic. Rösel's works also take pleasure in sabotaging worn-out patterns of thinking and seeing; usual materials in strange contexts offer the viewer tension-filled encounters. In the process Rösel programmatically avoids anything that seems loaded with too much meaning – his artistic gestures are equivalent to the will-o-wisp flight of AH-2668. Rösel uses his own body to demonstrate this ideal of keeping something poised and hovering: Videos such as

*Martin, Diego, Caspar* or *Yves* – the titles refer to Martin Kippenberger, Diego Velázquez, Caspar David Friedrich and Yves Klein – show how effortlessly he is able to defy gravity.

As an artist Peter Rösel is an equilibrist and deluder, a juggler and border-crosser. His works light-footedly set groundedness in motion; they fly loops in defiance of the predictability of what is linear, do pirouettes against the monotony of routines and regulations, a three-ring circus against the ideologies of faster, higher, further. This is also the case in the animation *I promise...* The film shows a sequence of 27 Dollar notes, on which Rösel has made small coloured pencil drawings. The series of notes spent in Zimbabwe in 2007 and 2008, which the animation repeats every four seconds, entices with a captivating play of colour, however it is in fact a whitewashed documentation of a crisis: Alarming dynamic, the declarations of value forge ahead at the rate of hyper-inflationary trillions. The striking craggy mountain that continues to decorate the front of the bank note alleges a stability that has been long since eroded in economics, society and politics.

Rösel transforms this cliff into a diving platform for two figures. They have been drawn into the scene in such a way that the animation creates an incessant series of ascents and leaping sequences. With their combination of smooth climbing and jumping techniques, Rösel's mountaineers are likewise reminiscent of gymnasts and the "traceurs" who made the extreme sport parkours well known in France some years ago, a breakneck artistic obstacle course in which both the pleasure taken in risk and the revolt against the concrete tristesse of the Paris suburbs is expressed.

If the goal of parkours is the efficient sprint from A to B, then Rösel's loop turns this linearity around to create a playful circuit without a beginning or an end. His untiring jump- and skipjacks perform one confident somersault after another while the digits on the horizon that increase to an illusory extent announce a free fall and dramatic crash-landing. The pledge printed on each banknote, which gave Rösel's animation *I promise...* its title, cannot change that: The value proposition proves to be a mantra from the unpredictable world of economics.

It is from here that Peter Rösel transferred a phenomenal 180.086.861.681.636 Zimbabwe dollars to the art market, which is itself no less incalculable. In addition to his animation, the 27 original bank notes that have been worked on with coloured pencil and mounted between two plates of glass are also up for sale. The worthless capital now has a new value – and a price.

It is hardly surprising that Peter Rösel is interested in the world of money as an illusory world – he has been partial to exploring the unreal for some time now. Thus he began his *Fata Morgana Painting Project* in 1999 with the goal of capturing mirages on canvas using paintbrush and oils. Rösel's Don Quixote-like intention of immortalizing fleeting vision and portraying delusions to be deceptively real, comes up against boundaries – those of our perception of reality and the potential of

painting. Even the act of painting itself becomes an experience of boundaries. At least this is what we are led to believe by the photographs showing Rösel at work in the Namib desert, an area of land that is particularly rich in mirages and which at the same time is one of the most hostile regions on earth. Like a fearless descendant of the plein air painters of the 19th century, Rösel betakes himself to this zone of death and commits the phantoms that reveal themselves to canvas.

The fata morgana paintings are indeed clearly declared portraits. The titles noted on the sides of the frames in a sober stencil font are GPS-coordinates that determine the exact location of the artist while painting. However this amount of precision can be misleading – it does not prove or explain anything. In the end the viewer becomes more and more involved in the search for the tangibility of the intangible that is at the core of Rösel's *Fata Morgana Painting Project*.

The concrete result of this complex research is some decidedly unspectacular painting. Rösel's Fata Morganas only materialize as quiet, vague apparitions, they are shimmering strips of light on the horizon, gently undulating bands or pale blotches of muted colours. Seemingly empty and monochrome, Rösel's pictures balance between the figurative and the abstract, between landscape and colourfield painting. Yet the sparseness of the canvasses in fact has a special abundance. It offers the eye of the beholder a wealth of nuances – and the imagination endless plains for projection.

Peter Rösel, the phantom hunter – who grew up in Morocco and Iraq, has lived in Berlin following student residencies in New York and has consistently travelled through Namibia – sympathises with the adventurers, travelling researchers and discoverers of world history. However it is not the colonial bragging conquerors he is interested in but the broken heroes who are obstructed by the foreign with a rich variety of obstacles and dangers. The series *Ships in Bottles* tells of such travellers, who moved away in order to overcome boundaries, extend their own horizons and learn how to fail.

In his *Ships in Bottles*, Rösel takes up the crowning discipline of the handyman, however he does not provide proud Windjammer parades en miniature, masterpieces of craftsmanship or technical mysteries. His works are unembellished shipwreck scenarios made of scraps of trash bags, splitters of waste and found objects arranged in PET-bottles. The impression, oscillating between drama and comedy, created by Rösel's remarkably suggestive minimalist recycling, is also communicated by texts that have been added to each of the scenes of demise. These reports, frequently of extreme adversities that global travellers were subject to in past decades, have themselves literally been wrecked because Rösel has had them translated into German by a computer programme. The result of this automated language manipulation is a clumsy, fragmentary and absurd prose that strangely tells of strangeness.

While Rösels art often sheds an unusual light on the familiar, the familiar can also reveal itself in the foreign – as in the small watercolours, the most recent part of the *Fata Morgana Painting Project*. Rösel had already superimposed views of mirages in some of his paintings with motifs drawn from civilisation, for example sport-utility vehicles or passers-by dressed in urban streetwear who cross the strips of desert as if they were streets. Now his new watercolours focus on such figures, zooming them in close to the viewer. The pictures show snapshots, very contemporary portraits of young Africans, whose fashionable urban appearance in camouflage suits, tracksuit tops, jeans and printed T-shirts, with baseball caps, flip-flops, mobile phones and plastic bags is very familiar to us from European inner cities. However that which is portrayed quickly frees itself of unambiguity, becomes open, cryptic and dubious. Isolated from sequences of action and social contexts, detached from space and time, the powerful figures change into ghostly apparitions. Their gestures remain indecipherable, their familiar garments no longer indicate familiar inner life. Dressed in the uniforms of the globalized clothing industry, these individuals maintain their foreignness.

Within this field of tension between uniformity and individuality, Rösel also unfolds his *Plants*, a group of works on which he has been working since 1997. With passion and cunning the artist transforms German police uniforms into idiosyncratic plants – from the delicate *Dandelion* to the gnarled *Moringa*, from the compact *Anthuria* to the space-filling *Water-lily Pond*, from the brittle *Yucca* to the lush proliferating *Barbed Hedge*. Besides wild tropical growth Rösel also sews cultivated green plants from uniforms; it is obviously not only the exotic that appeals to him but also the regular assortment of potted and container plants that can be found in numerous foyers, offices and shopping malls as “natural furnishing”.

Rösels transformation of the uniform foils its normative geometry and transforms it into something organic, turning the inside out and lending unexpected curves to something stiff. The enthusiasm with which the plants have been freed from the clothing corset and animated is visible in the plants themselves. However Rösel in no way strives towards a smooth transformation. Again and again the pattern of the buttons and seams breaks through the perfection of the mimicry and emphasises the artificial inherent in the natural.

Rösels *Plants* are fascinating hybrids, cumbersome and attractive. The artist often likes to give them erotic powers of seduction. Then glossy patent leather blossoms open out between the uniform leaves, and seed heads burst out of palm-trunk trouser flies. The *Barbed Hedge*, which Rösel has created for the Ernst Barlach Haus, combines this appeal with a particularly repulsive effect: Dazzling buds and blossoms made of underwear attract the viewers while snarled barbed wire keeps

them at a distance.

Rösel's uniform plants play with our perceptions of nature and naturalness in a perplexing manner. In doing so they never lay claim to naturalness but on the contrary show the extent to which our picture of nature, the wilderness or the foreign, is culturally influenced.

Peter Rösel has particularly occupied himself with such formative powers recently. The arsenal of civilisation phenomena, of cultural and technical developments, is generally present in his art. However, in a series of his most recent works – which the artist jokingly sums up with the working title *Heimatmuseum* (Heritage Museum) – he occupies himself emphatically (and not without irony) with the large and small accomplishments of humanity. In doing so, his poetic-anarchist art can be inspired in equal measure by handaxes or sweets, by light bulbs or bank notes – with the same degree of commitment, Rösel turns to prehistoric milestones and objects of personal significance. Even the balls of chewing gum, whose appeal the artist discovered at the beginning of the 70s, deserve to be immortalized in cast-bronze. Glazed in appetizing colours and spread out seductively, the balls entitled *1973* lay individual trails of recollection while at the same time asserting themselves as a collective inheritance.

The fact that the rift Peter Rösel opens up between the personal and the social, the everyday object and world affairs can also be an abyss is shown by the animation *I promise...* The recently created installation *Untitled* goes even further and deeper. Two Berlin telephone directories are lying on two telephone benches. The pieces of furniture are identical but the telephone books are not. One of them is a copy from the last edition printed in 1941 during the Second World War – an obese red folio with a swastika emblem, while the other is from the first post-war edition in 1945 – a small, thin, pale yellow volume. The extent of horror inherent in this difference reveals itself little by little. Rösel's ensemble speaks quietly and laconically of the connection between the bourgeois and the barbaric.

With this work, Rösel's *Heritage Museum* points to the dark spots in the German past; with the installation *100 y* into a brighter future. The light sculpture was created in 2009 as a comment on a decision concerning energy politics, which still provokes heated discussion in Germany: the abolition of the light bulb, initiated by a European Union expert committee. By 2012 the familiar illuminant will have died a bureaucratically prescribed death in installments; in the name of energy efficiency it will, after 130 years of service, wander into the technology storage closet where Tizian, Rembrandt and Leonardo are already waiting. However, since this commonplace item has become a limited article, resistance has begun to rear its head. Panic buyers are swarming out to hunt down

illuminants. They are being collected and hoarded.

The ban on light bulbs almost overshadowed a historic celebration in 2009: the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rösel responded both to the German-German freedom celebrations and to the ecologically correct compulsory measure: In an action of subversive sympathy he placed 900 GDR light bulbs of the brand Narva under artistic protection of species. He transformed them in the two-piece sculpture *100 y*, which consists of a single light bulb and a stacked “energy store” made up of nine original boxes. The light bulbs in this store will be employed one after another and outlive their abolition in 900 glowing loops. Clear light bulbs will be implemented for the first 800 cycles of light, the last 100 will be orange.

Illuminants as timekeepers: The bulbs, each with a burning time of 1000 hours, will defy the EU-ban for a total of 100 years. This period of time seems to be clear-cut but it cannot really be grasped as its potential options and hazards are far beyond the powers of our imagination. However, if one thinks of the moment in which *100 y* will extinguish, one’s mind will begin to buzz like a helicopter on a wasp-flight.

Karsten Müller