

Lucas Gehrman

“Far Across Mountains and Valleys”. Christiane Spatt’s Montages of Personal, Literary, and Tourist Alpine Views.*

“She could not see that the guide [...] raised his arm threateningly, and pointing her out to the stranger said: ‘That is certainly the Vulture-maiden standing up yonder; no other maid would trust herself on that narrow point, so near the edge of the precipice. See, one would think that the wind must blow her over, but she always does just the contrary to what other reasonable Christian folk do.’”¹

It was not exactly of her own free will that she roamed the far end of the Ötztal valley, this Vulture Maiden, who should properly be called Eagle Maiden because, after all, the daughter of a Lech Valley gunsmith (and later portrait and flower painter), Anna (Stainer-)Knittel, whose life story provided Wilhelmine v. Hillern with the historic story board for her 1873 novel *Geier-Wally*², one day (and a daredevil she was) plucked a fledgling bird from an eagle’s, not a vulture’s nest. Now, back then, these mountain people did call any large bird of prey that occasionally killed lambs a “Geier” (vulture) — but in this regard Christiane Spatt keeps more closely to the ornithological (and historic) facts as she has positioned an eagle in the middle picture of her Triptych, which is dedicated to Geierwally and titled “... *weit über Berg und Tal ...*” (“... far across mountains and valleys ...”). It is, by the way, not a majestic king of the skies behaving in some way that demands respect but apparently a rather harmless animal in the plastic toy format. In this respect, too, the artist largely stays true to the historic literary depiction of Wally, which shows her taking the raptor chick from its mother’s nest and raising it with loving care. Thus, it became a loyal friend and companion on the paths of destiny she would later walk. And it takes on the same role with Christiane Spatt as she climbs a steep rock face to the left of the eagle picture or when, to the right of the latter, she looks out from blooming alpine pastures to distant high peaks.³ It is at this point, at the latest, that several inconsistencies with the story of Wally begin to emerge: Ms. Spatt replaces the Lech i.e. Ötztal mountain scenery with the iconic landmark of the Valais Alps — despite the fact that the title of her triptych explicitly refers to Tyrol⁴ — and, what’s more, in all the various literatures there is never an indication that Anna Knittel a.k.a. “Walburga

Strommingerin” a.k.a. Geierwally ever went on climbing tours wearing red lipstick and drop earrings (as Christiane Spatt does in her role).

Quite a leap though it may seem, it is probably not far-fetched to see a “link” here to the Surrealistic practice of creating images as well as a connection between the central eagle and rock face motif and René Magritte’s famous painting *Le Domaine d’Arnheim*⁵. It is there that we also find the eagle’s nest, which Spatt has refrained from depicting. And indirectly this picture even provides us with an argument that lends legitimacy to the implantation of Switzerland’s Matterhorn into the Tyrolean mountain scenery: The title of Magritte’s painting is taken from a story by Edgar Allan Poe, which revolves around the (artistic) construction of a perfect landscape, one that is aesthetically superior to nature. Here, the narrator realizes that “no such combination of scenery exists in nature as the painter of genius may produce. [...] While the component parts [of natural landscapes] may defy, individually, the highest skill of the artist, the arrangement of these parts will always be susceptible of improvement.”⁶

While Christiane Spatt is certainly hardly concerned with the improvement of Tyrolean landscapes (by means of inserting the most iconic of all Alpine mountains ...) in the sense of such classic academic concepts, she has always followed a formal principle that is ultimately based on an “art of the combination” (that can be traced even further back in art history) — her personal variation of which she has called “Patch Work Living”.

Where and how the artist taps into the rich array of “patches” she draws on to create her combinations has been aptly described by Martha Bösch: “Christiane Spatt is a gatherer and hunter at the same time. She is a kind of buccaneer of public and private spaces, collecting all sorts of ,objets trouvés‘ [...]” Her collection, however, not only “comprises objects but also details she captures with her camera. Look up, look down — indoors and outdoors, across nature and architecture [...]”⁷ In doing so, she always focuses on her current and one-time “living” i.e. that of her environment: “The familiar patterns and accessories I have frequently used transport memories in the form of painting, collages, and installations and point to periods of my life, are charged with feelings and associations. Family photos establish direct references to my childhood or to me as a private person. My artistic examination centers on

the question of what political, social, and cultural systems we live in, through what inner images, formative influences, and patterns we act and interact.”⁸

Thus, many of the patches the artist used in assembling her contributions to the *emoNtion* exhibition have emotional connotations, in this case especially of memories of her childhood and youth in Innsbruck — within eyeshot, therefore, of that region “... *wo die Almröslein wachsen ...*” (“... *where the alpine roses grow ...*”), as one of her exhibits is titled.

“When we desire to recall what happened to us in the earliest period of youth, it often happens that we confound what we have heard from others with that which we really possess from our own direct experience,”⁹ thus Goethe noted in his autobiography, and it was not least on account of this dilemma that its subtitle begins with the words *Truth und Fiction*. As mnemonic devices, particularly for her twelve-page contribution to the *Familienalbum* exhibit and its catalog, Christiane Spatt did have at her disposal her parents’ stashes of old photos. However, such documents of the times per se are rarely more than an image of a former self as seen “by others.” What’s more, she mostly draws on “posed” photo documentation of special events — Christiane a.k.a. “Stani” at her confirmation ceremony; little Stani wearing a Shrovetide costume and on a group photo taken on the occasion of her grandparents’ golden wedding anniversary ...

How compatible are such depictions of the self as seen from the outside with our “own direct experience?” At least they reveal contexts of the past that played a role, if not a decisive one, in creating and shaping our identity. And these contexts, in turn, have their own story from which they have emerged. Thus, Christiane Spatt’s mother was born into a (mountain) farmer’s family and gave her a rather robust piece of traditional mountain life on her way into the urban valley. There, even though they have long vanished “in real life,” the daughter found and keeps on finding fragments of it. In archiving, documenting, and recombining these traces and remnants of the past, at last she herself carries them “far across mountains and valleys” — all the way to Vienna, a city to which she already felt attracted when her school years in Innsbruck had come to a close and where her own daughter was soon to grow up. And so in a photo montage from *Familienalbum* we find them all sitting on a bench in front of the farmhouse they had abandoned long ago, enjoying a view of the mountains that appeals to

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the imagination: Christiane's mother as a child on her grandmother's lap next to Christiane's daughter as a child on her own lap ...

Still, other patches better fit her "own direct experience" (gained as a child) and the artist discovers them through memorization: "The patterns of the curtains, the rug, the tiles, the wooden wainscoting, the cover of the photo album, the dirndl fabric [...], details from my mother's apartment."¹⁰ Probably all of us remember, more or less, how we sat at home when we were children and discovered fantasy figures in the patterns of the wallpaper or curtains. They came alive in our minds, and it is not uncommon for people to be able to look at these décors and ornaments with their inner eye later in life. In Ancient Greek, by the way, the basic meaning of "ornament" is "Order, fabric of the world; additionally, in its larger meaning it also denotes the endowment of the world with living beings."¹¹ Furthermore, in classical antiquity the ornament that had manifested itself in the language of imagery or signs was valued as being of extraordinary importance "because it [the ornament] is detached from the context of its use in the preservation of life but yet follows the course of individual lives — interrupting them — in a playful fashion. Its closeness *and* distance to life opens up an aesthetic latitude of its own, which does not give a place to self-preservation through action but to a sense of self. The perceptive encounter with oneself, in a highly enjoyable, appreciative gaze. [...]"¹²

If Christiane Spatt today is able to also elicit this potential from the derivatives of classical ornamentation, which in the age of industrial reproduction, at the latest, has spawned the run-of-the-mill décor that used to fill our (grand)parents living rooms with embroidered, rolled, and printed embellishments, this is not least due to her deliberately unbiased perspective on all the "fabrics" she collects for her artistic endeavors. In other words: Their selection "does not follow any hierarchical order but is consistently distinguished by equidistance."¹³

Thus, "... *im selben Augenblick* ..." ("...*at the same moment*...") shows a small Red Riding Hood tablecloth trimmed with a floral pattern and with two full-figure photo portraits sewed to red and white checked fabric (of blouses/curtains/pillows) — one shows grown-up Christiane, the other little Stani, both are wearing a (Red Riding Hood) dirndl complete with a small cardboard fly agaric at her feet — on a picture combination from her *Secret Lives* series,

in which “I depict myself as a fairy tale character, as an accordion player, opera singer, or a skier — I play with my identity, pushing the button on the camera makes dreams come true, as it were; I am left with a photo as an ostensible proof.”¹⁴

When the artist, from the vantage point of her self-chosen distance and, at the same time, with a remembering gaze (back) at her immediate environment, applies her visual creativity to the complex of themes of homeland-origin-identity-alienation ... she includes as many viewpoints and angles as possible. Therefore, the above mentioned triptych “... *weit über Berg and Tal* ...” can also be seen as a montage of set pieces from different (direct as well as “indirect” i.e. associated) sources: from history and its fictionalizing and romanticizing reception; from customs and the Alpine view clichés derived from them (for tourism marketing campaigns, for instance); from literary and artistic visual ideas on the subject of mountain/nature, as well as from personally memorized experiences and critically analyzed observations.

With the combination/montage of such fragments of sources that have been translated into visual material (and chosen in an “equidistant” manner) a further process of dissolution comes into effect, one generally characteristic of this artistic technique: Categories commonly based on “judgmental” differentiation are blurred — especially those between authenticity and fiction, between “appearance and reality”. In the process, the accustomed orders of time and space, too, become blurred; we reach a tipping point where “reality” becomes entirely unreal. Not least, the generally accepted claim to objectivity is, thus, confronted with the fact that it is unattainable, at least in the context of (documentary) photographs.

In an essay on the fundamentals of the technique and history of the montage as (*the*) artistic genre of modern art, Dietrich Diederichsen mentions two further characteristics of this principle of combination: “On the one hand, montage emerges as a factor of the irreconcilable, on the other hand as the communicating of differences with the aim of a dialectally synthetic closure by means of processing.”¹⁵ In Christiane Spatt’s *Patch Work Living*, the latter — mediatorial — element seems to take on more weight than the theme of the unbridgeable — time in the case of her *Familienalbum*. Nevertheless, it remains open whether this world is as “intact” as it appears to be at first sight, (because) after all here, too,

the (“historically” differentiated) figures are visibly separated within the setup of the picture, both spatially and by accessories. Making recourse to Walter Benjamin, the following passage by Dietrich Diederichsen’s on the dialectic of construction and destruction in the context of the montage adds a thought that takes us one step further: “As an extension to the character of the montage conceived of as only anti-illusionistic or as a reinforcing illusion [...] for Benjamin it is furthermore important that with each act of mounting, an act of demounting is performed; that everywhere a cut interrupts a continuum and is joined together with another one, a context, an image is also always lost — and rightly so: as a false idyll, false integrality.”¹⁶

It is not least for this reason that Christiane Spatt’s visual formulations of her *Patch Work Living* are clear of any suspicion of being kitsch — no matter how luxuriant the alpine roses and edelweiss may bloom. ... *wohl zwischen Schnee und Eis ...* (“... *there between ice and snow ...*) wearing a green skiing suit, the artist stands motionless on a black and white ice skating rink, turned towards and looking straight at us, as if she was saying: I am here and the place that I come from lies behind me ...

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1 Wilhelmine von Hillern, *The Vulture-Maiden* [Die Geier-Wally], General Books, 2010 (reprint of the 1876 English edition). Also available at www.archive.org/details/vulturemaidendie00hilluoft.

2 See for example: Astrid Kofler, “Anna Stainer-Knittel, österreichische Malerin aus Nordtirol, die ‘wahre’ Geierwally” (“Anna Stainer-Knittel, Austrian painter from northern Tyrol, the “true” Geierwally”), in:

FemBio, Frauen-Biographieforschung, www.fembio.org/biographie.php/frau/biographie/anna-stainer-knittel/
3 Cf. a (self) portrait attributed to Anna Stainer-Knittel, which shows the painter gazing from a high point into the distance; reproduced at www.tirolmultimedial.at/tmm/glossar/idx/idx_stainerknittel.html

4 The lines “weit über Berg und Tal / das Alphorn schallt” are taken from the first verse of the song *Tirol du bist mein Heimatland*; lyrics by A. Zweigle, music by J. P. Esteri (both created before 1914), see

www.volksliederarchiv.de/text4652.html. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA6Xhh6krkw&NR=1.

5 One of several versions from the period before 1962 is exhibited at the René Magritte Museum, Brussels; see, for example, www.flandern.at/layout/pics/PDF/InfoMagritteMuseum.pdf.

6 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Domain of Arnheim* (1847), Minden: BookSurge Classics, 2004; www.online-literature.com/poe/28/. Poe goes on to say: “The mathematics afford no more absolute demonstrations than the sentiments of his art yields the artist. He not only believes, but positively knows, that such and such apparently arbitrary arrangements of matter constitute and alone constitute the true beauty.”

7 Martha Bösch, “Alchemie der Zeichen — über die künstlerische Arbeit von Christiane Spatt,” available at www.eop.at/datenbank/personen/cspatt/texte/

8 Christiane Spatt, “Patch Work Living”, available at www.kunstnetztirol.at/knt/Kuenstler/christiane_spatt/Mappe/11174

9 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Autobiography: Truth and Fiction Relating to My Life* (1811), trans. John Oxenford, Hamburg: Classic Books Publishing, 2008, p. 36. Also available at www.gutenberg.org/etext/5733

10 Christiane Spatt on her *Collection* series (since 1998), at www.christianespatt.at/mainfoto.html

11 Günter Irmscher, *Kleine Kunstgeschichte des europäischen Ornaments seit der frühen Neuzeit (1400—1900)*, Darmstadt 1984, p. 1f.

12 Günter Oesterle, “Vorbegriffe zu einer Theorie der Ornamente. Kontroverse Formprobleme zwischen Aufklärung, Klassizismus und Romantik am Beispiel der Arabeske.” In: Herbert Beck, Peter C. Bol et al. (Ed.), *Ideal and Wirklichkeit der bildenden Kunst im späten 18. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag 1984, p. 128;

quoted from: Michaela Bauer: *Arabeske Organisationsstruktur für Bildfassungen*. Doctoral thesis, Bergische Univ. Wuppertal, 2004, p. 163.

13 Martha Bösch, see note no. 7

14 Christiane Spatt, "The way the cookie crumbles. Statement zu meiner künstlerischen Arbeit" (2008), at www.christianespatt.at/text/statement.pdf

15 Diedrich Diederichsen, "Montage/Sampling/Morphing", www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/image-sound_relations/montage_sampling_morphing/scroll/

16 loc. cit.