

Lucas Gehrmann

Christiane Spatt: *The Story of...* Finding Lines of Life in a Pictorial Language

“[...] overall, my room is my highland, all day I poke around this place with root fingers, chattering teeth, perched on the edge of my bed half the night, the little fire has died out. Lapis lazuli clouds in the branches of my apartment, on sepia-colored wonder, smoke trails, teeming ferns, heather, the eagle’s profile rediscovered in the shape of mountain ridges (Magritte), the saddles of mountains: already, I have mounted them at their bloody waist. [...] The blown out stumps of candles in hands, it’s windy up here, the windows shattered, proliferation of snapdragons, when hearts are derailed. I search to reclaim the innocence in a landscape, in the mossy grounds the human rats that I have come across in the course of my long life, but whose trail I have lost through some mistaken choice and word, [...]. Basically, nothing changes or, rather, a great deal does. It’s the same as with growing old, first we don’t feel anything, then, suddenly, it’s all over, many wonders... sackcloth, counterbuffered. When flame shoots from the canvas: unification of the disparate – the innermost essence of all art.”¹

Friederike Mayröcker’s art of thoughts and words (as it still shimmers through her writing in spite of all the quotation-style fragmentation) was characterized by Michael Lentz, a younger author who is himself a proven master of language, in the following way: “[...] kindling a delirium of excessive, effusive sensations, a state of indignation, Mayröcker mentally juxtaposes the disconnected, gives things a new appearance with sudden words, her words displayed as exhibits – and this poetry always serves as communicating tubes that make the reader speak. Language wants to hurry on ahead of things, that’s what emerges from this literature, which poeticizes the activity of consciousness and stands as a highly sensitive and delicate wonder of association.”² The subtitle of Lentz’ homage to the writer reads “Die Lebenszeilenfinderin” (“Finder of Lines of Life”).

Formulated in a pictorial language, Christiane Spatt’s art (of thought) at its core shows a kinship to this kind of “description“ of the “self” in the “world”. On the one hand, the artist’s gaze scans spaces, and within their presence she detects “lines of life“ that lead to the past; by perceiving and singling out specific visual cues which enable her to recall situations and sensations she once experienced and lived through or at least allow for attempts to reconstruct them from memory. Even though she uses “real“ artifacts such as wallpaper ornaments from the one-time children’s room that have survived or photographs from the family album, at the same time she is continually “giving things a new appearance.“ In the case of this artist, instead of “sudden words,“ this kindles surprising combinations of imagery. And this touches on “the other hand“ (of the above one): The “unification of the disparate“ (Mayröcker) i.e. the “juxtaposition of the disconnected“ (Lentz) are also immanent in Christiane Spatt’s artistic method. In her work, times, spaces, as well as emotions – a non-poetic mode of thought that strictly follows the logic of science would differentiate and break them apart – become entangled at their fringes. Thus, they form a continuum that mentally allows us to switch both between

a “here and now“ and “there and then“ as well as between “I“ and “we,“ i.e. also between subjectivity/emotionality and the said objectivity/rationality.

With “Patch Work Living,“ Christiane Spatt has found a name to describe her specific “philosophy“ of both work and life. In this context, she herself noted: “The familiar patterns and accessories I frequently use transport memories in the form of paintings, collages, and installations and refer to stages of life, are charged with feelings and associations. Family photos create direct references to my childhood or to me as a private person. My artistic engagement is inspired by the question of which political, social, and cultural systems we live in, which inner images, formative influences, and patterns we act and interact on.“³

Christiane Spatt’s “Patch Work Living“ saw its beginnings soon after she had completed her studies at Vienna’s University of Applied Arts under Oswald Oberhuber. Her then teacher advocated an art that does not submit to any style i.e. who held that artists needed to embark on new approaches again and again so as not to succumb to a toothless routine, and this could have played a role in Christiane Spatt’s early move away from painting into various other artistic media.

Her involvement with the issue of (cultural) identity dates back to around 1998 and *Collection*, which was still executed as a cycle of paintings. This series of small-sized pictures, which, on a formal painterly level, are reduced to geometric patterns, already drew on source material she had rediscovered in her mother’s apartment (in Innsbruck): Ornaments of curtains, rugs, tiling, or wooden paneling. A short time later, she began to integrate such potential memory agents by arranging objects (for instance rag dolls and squeaking toy animals from her childhood) into three-dimensional images. Subsequently, she either continued positioning them on walls or in rooms as objects or she photographed them and used the resulting images as source material in the “unification of the (as yet) disparate“. Around 2004, she began to incorporate for the first time older pictures she had not taken herself but had also found: Her wall installation *Entry System* consists of some 240 keys along with their fobs, behind the transparent film of which we see, in place of the door numbers we usually read there, miniature details of cherished photos. Thus, every key opens, as it were, a retrospective window into our own childhood.

In parallel to other arrangements, applications, montages, and collages that increasingly aim to stimulate viewers’ imaginations, Christiane Spatt has been working on a series of self portraits she calls *Secret Lives* since about since 2005. Here, the artist slips into various roles, which comprise figures from fairy tales à la Red Riding Hood or Rapunzel as well as the little brave girl in a dirndl dress, a werewolf, and a vampiresque femme fatale.

In her exhibition *The Story of...* we finally see ourselves confronted with a whole range of such *Secret Lives* of hers – against the backdrop of apparently precious fabrics and out from golden picture frames, she gazes at us in the guise of *Fürstin Olga (Princess Olga)*, *Fräulein Viola (Miss Viola)*, *Lady Rose*, *St Bianca*, *Luna*, or *La belle Irene*, often equipped with different attributes such as painted bones, votive gifts, or animals’ ears, with a Velasquez-style goatee, vampires’ teeth, or hundreds of color tattoos strewn across her back.

“I am particularly interested in collecting curiosities – what was shown in which context, and how,” thus the artist describes her intentions behind this “exhibition of oddities“. Even though she doesn’t provide us with a historically “correct“ answer to her question but, on the contrary, cheerfully takes apart and recombines collected (and, above all, also self-made) curiosities, her installation is reminiscent of a particular historical method of “contextualization,“ namely the Chamber of Art and Curiosities a.k.a. Wonder Room that was highly popular in the Late Renaissance. Situated right above Christiane Spatt’s home town of Innsbruck, Ambras Castle used to house (and in part, does so again today) the perhaps most famous collection of its kind. This Chamber of Art and Curiosities, which was founded by Archduke Ferdinand II, contained the most precious gold and silverwork as well as seemingly worthless curiosities. Thus, its exhibits included Benvenuto Cellini’s famous saltcellar (the “Saliera,“ a gift from King Charles IX of France) and Montezuma’s alleged featherwork crown, but also freak exhibits and preserved animals as well as pictures of giants and dwarves. Having pondered questions surrounding the “reason of nature“ for quite some time, French nobleman and philosopher Michel de Montaigne would have surely loved to visit the *Kunstkammer*, as it was also called, at Ambras Castle. Around 1580, he wrote: “Whatever falls out contrary to custom we say is contrary to nature, but nothing, whatever it be, is contrary to her. Let, therefore, this universal and natural reason expel the error and astonishment that novelty brings along with it.“⁴

Viewing and studying Christiane Spatt’s Wonder Room likely could provide us with fewer insights on nature and her reason but contribute more to our understanding of the reason of art. By representing herself through nearly every “item in the collection“ at her *Studiolo*, Christiane Spatt not only testifies to her authorship and the pleasure she takes in role and time play, not least she also points to the above mentioned part the subject plays in the perception, reproduction, and communication of “realities“. The language of art is capable of taking into account and articulating this, something the language of the logic of science has not been able to achieve as of yet.

Incidentally, the role play Christiane Spatt engages in as well as the “propensity for self-promotion“ that her works could perhaps be seen as reflecting is rooted in traditions that reach far back into the history of art and societies. When the artist slipped into the guise of *St Bianca* (as far as I know, there is no mention of a saint of this name in any history book), it could well be that she had in mind Bianca Maria Visconti (1425–1468), Duchess of Milan and ancestress of the Milanese Sforza dynasty. It was she who (most likely for primarily propagandistic reasons) commissioned the best painters of their time to create over 500 portraits of herself, her husband, and their eight children. They have survived to this day and mostly show biblical scenes, depicting her as Saint Luzia (the second most popular Milanese saint at the time) or as Holy Mary with her first son, Galeazzo Maria, as the infant Jesus, and later as Mary surrounded by angels, which bear the faces of her children.

However, it is safe to assume that in her self-metamorphoses, Christiane Spatt refers not so much to historical facts and persons than to her own imagination and the memories that nourish it, to (remembered) longings and dreams. In doing so, she evokes just that in the minds of those viewing her works, allows for free association, and finds a language that could well be described as “poeticizing

the activity of consciousness“ in its own artistic pictorial way. It therefore seems apt to quote Michael Lentz once more, not least in order to let more of his language unfold on these pages: “The incessant naming, concocting of words, making sense impressions literal; the poem as a photograph; landscapes, music, and art flowing through it all; things heard at the moment, recalled involuntarily from memory, broken up, placed into one another; quoted bits, seams of dreams, nerve figures; [...] scraps, litanies, odes, romances, conversations...“⁵

1 Friederike Mayröcker: *also, wem die Flamme aus der Leinwand schießt. Zu Arbeiten von Andreas Campostellato*, 1986. Written on the occasion of the *Österreichische Vegetationen* exhibition at Max Planck Institut Berlin, 1986. Quoted from: www.basis-wien.at/avdt/pdf/255/00062719.pdf

2 Michael Lentz: “Friederike Mayröcker. Die Lebenszeilenfinderin“ in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dec 20, 2004, No. 297, p. 33.

3 Christiane Spatt: “Patch Work Living” in www.kunstnetztirol.at/knt/Kuenstler/christiane_spatt/Mappe/11174

4 Michel de Montaigne: *Essays of Montaigne*, vol. 6, trans. Charles Cotton, revised by William Carew Hazlett (New York: Edwin C. Hill, 1910). Chapter: Of a Monstrous Child

5 Michael Lentz on Friederike Mayröcker, see note 2.