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Being Here Is So Much Further Away Than Being Here

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N ofende

On a postcard, which was never posted, Nikolaus Utermöhlen sends „Herzliche Grüße von den Externsteinen im Teutoburger Wald“ (Very best wishes from the Externsteinen in the Teutoburg Wood). He himself is shown on the front of the card, as a drawing collaged into a black and white photograph of the landscape. He is crouching on a glowing green island, smiling in the middle of a lake. He is naked. His chin rests between his outstretched arms. By the water, surrounded by shade and by trees, the Extern Stones reach up into the sky. As though the twilight had turned to cloth the sky is spanned carmine-red across the background. A little scrap of paper with a message on it is stuck to the sky - on it in a haze of words of love and birdsong there is something, an ornament perhaps, or perhaps it is a word - something like 'N ofende' - although no-one can be sure of its meaning.¹ The intended recipient of this card is the author of what follows here. Nikolaus Utermöhlen made the card on 16 May 1996. The day after that he died. In the indecipherability of a word, which is perhaps not even a word, lies - as in all things invisible, unthought and unspoken - a secret, whose ultimate symbol is death.

1.

In the leaflet to accompany his record *Karlsbad* (1989) we see Utermöhlen sitting in front of the busy terrace of the Grand Hotel Pupp². Behind him one sees apparently quite naturally the life of the upper classes of a past era. The fashions are those of the late nineteenth century, the ladies at the tables have their parasols up, the gentlemen are wearing tails and top-hats. Utermöhlen is reclining casually yet elegantly in a chair, his black hair barely controlled by pomade, his narrow Menjou moustache and his suit marking him out as a Bohemian. In his hands he is demonstratively holding the insignia of his profession as a musician: a violin and bow. The whole scene is reminiscent of an operetta. Karlsbad with its stone colonnades, swans on its ponds, its glass cupolas and fountains seems like a Disneyland from the past, with people indulging in its architecture in a dreamlike manner. "None of our pictures could exist in the real world. There is nowhere you can go in the city and find scenes like you have seen in our pictures. They are artificial, they are not taken from life in that way, they are not everyday images ... we are not interested to reflect life in any way whatsoever..." This approach formulated by Gilbert & George describes a basic tenet that also runs through Utermöhlen's life and work like a red thread: the notion of artificiality, of a construct.³

Utermöhlen's studio was situated under the roof of a coach-house in the inner courtyard behind *Kumpelnest 3000*, a bar in the Berlin 'scene'.⁴ Its appearance had something in common with early

¹ When asked, many - although not all - German-speakers have said they might most readily associate this fragment with the idea of an 'open end'

² Nikolaus Utermöhlen, *Karlsbad*, LP, Die Tödliche Doris Schallplatten, 1989

³ Cited after Gilbert & George in *Künstlerinnen*, 50 Gespräche, 1997

⁴ Kumpelnest 3000 is in the Lützowstraße in Berlin. At times Utermöhlen worked there. His picture *Vor dem Tempel der Ungerechtigkeit* had its first public showing in the Kumpelnest in May 1991 in the group show *Zehn Tage im Leben*.

nineteenth century “studio pictures” by the painter Georg Friedrich Kersting⁵ which showed contemporaries of his, such as Friedrich von Kügelen or Reinhardt, working in their studios (illus. p. 2). The decor in Utermöhlen’s room, with a wooden floor that he had ‘sanded’ using a bit of broken glass, was simple in the extreme, and conveys a sense of order. He used to fetch water (that he needed for his work) from the front building in a plastic amphora that he himself had decorated with classical designs. It is clear that there was an aesthetic principle behind the simplicity of the interconnected, still life-like arrangements in this sparsely furnished room: groups of balls and spherical objects, antiquarian books and jars full of pigment and gold leaf. The studied artificiality with which Utermöhlen presented himself in the leaflet that went with his record is seen here again as an actually realised *mise en scène* with himself as the living subject, where pose and necessity can no longer to be distinguished from each other. If, in Romantic painting, the view out of the window was an internalised look into Nature, then here - in the centre of Berlin – one’s gaze was met by the firewall of the inner court yard. The coach-house where Utermöhlen worked is still called *Das Haus der Tödlichen Doris* (*The House of the Deadly Doris*). While Utermöhlen worked in the upper floor the ground floor served as office and storage space. Down there were the relics of almost a decade of collaboration: correspondence, paintings, films, photo-archives, costumes for shows, broken cups, burnt-out microphones. Utermöhlen was working above a room which held the evidence of his previous incarnation, in which he, along with Wolfgang Müller and Käthe Kruse co-founders together with Utermöhlen of the *Tödliche Doris* in 1979 - had propounded a multi-media concept of aesthetic openness and multiple meanings. Utermöhlen was radical, almost unscrupulous, in the ease with which he changed from one thing to the next. Dressed as a Bohemian painter he would produce pictures that in their model-like quality remind one of the fake books that particularly feature in furniture shops, or of films where paintings do not function as artworks but as part of a set. The coloration in Utermöhlen’s work has much in common with the garish colourfulness of Roger Corman’s⁶ legendary film-versions of Edgar Allan Poe stories in the early sixties, which were only loosely connected with their literary forebears by fragments of the framework of the action. Many of Utermöhlen’s works give the impression of being paintings on canvas. In fact, with only a few exceptions, Utermöhlen never painted on canvas. His pictures are on softened photocopies which he fixed to linen, with the help of a brush, before working on them with a clear acrylic binding-agent mixed with pigments. Utermöhlen’s use of a colour photocopier, with which he initially creates “painterly” effects by means of enlargement and distortion, demonstrates his interest in reproductions as his working material. A “bad”, i.e. obvious, reproduction is somehow suspect, somehow cheap. Utermöhlen’s pictures were often reproductions of reproduced materials. He used illustrations from art-books, newspapers and gay magazines. He photographed dogs’ toys, plastic balls, home-made models made from wooden sticks and polystyrene spheres. Utermöhlen archived this material, stuck it onto sheets of paper and hoarded it in chests. He used to find it in antique shops, junk shops, kiosks, toy-shops. Besides his studio the copy-shop was his workplace. Utermöhlen’s art was bound up in poverty, he himself had sewn the hem on his frock-coat made from remnants, he had bought his second-hand waistcoats by their weight. He has nothing to do with the painter-dandies of contemporary art. On the contrary, he resembles his own favourite character, Disney’s *Jiminy Cricket* - in tattered tail-coat - who accompanies the wooden Pinocchio on his way to becoming a human being.⁷ Utermöhlen’s ‘self-staging’ is matched by the reproductions that he made the subject of his pictures. As quotations they were easy to decipher, almost self-evident, yet strangely indecipherable when it came to their overall impression. The aesthetic reflected in Utermöhlen’s pictures is not that of past epochs, but the aesthetic of their reception by mass-culture. Utermöhlen

⁵ Georg Friedrich Kersting, painter, 1785-1847. See Hannelore Gärtner, Georg Friedrich Kersting, E. A. Seemann Verlag, Leipzig 1988

⁶ Roger Corman, American Director whose horror films, such as *The Mask of the Red Death* (1964), achieved cult status.

⁷ Jiminy Cricket is the grasshopper in Walt Disney’s *Pinocchio*.

invented himself as a reproduction of 'the author', and his art is the reproduction of art in the thrall of genres and categorisation.

2.

Utermöhlen's works are permeated by patterns and ornament. In *An Infinite Painting on "Vision of the Last Judgment" by William Blake*, which he created in 1992, motifs from Blake's view of the descent into Hell - in various colours - overlay each other, producing an overall pattern that is too much for the eye to take in, Utermöhlen's first solo exhibition, *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR DURCH DAS ZUERST GEGANGEN WURDE* (1989), consisted of a picture of the Baroque rood-screen of the Conventual Church in Ebrach in Franconia, divided up into a hundred separate panels, All one hundred pictures show sections of the Baroque design in different light and dark tones, In other series and individual works, sections of cloud-structures, lire, showers of ash, and physical movement are somehow reminiscent of trial-runs, pointing beyond themselves to the overall structure of a body of material. The people portrayed by Utermöhlen also form patterns and figures. The work, *Vor dem Tempel der Ungerechtigkeit* (1991), is constructed like a frieze, with a rhythmic relationship of humans and architecture which could be continued ad infinitum, The figures forced to the ground during a raid in *1/12/∞* (1991) form a circle, a kind of rosette, The title of this group of works indicates that its twelve constituent parts are simply examples, 'excerpts' chosen from an endless range of possibilities, All Utermöhlen's works are excerpts, whether as individual pictures or put together as a series or as a group of works, At times he emphasised this aspect by quartering his works, as for instance in his 1990 untitled series of pictures of swords, armour, and texts giving expression to themes such as grief, love and happiness, Quartering, or creating many rows of panels, produces crosses between the separate sections - and these run through Utermöhlen's work like the co-ordinates of a grid, Often Utermöhlen applied fluorescent paint or gold leaf to the inner edges of the panels with the result that in the light his pictures glow at the sides as though by their own strength, The colours of these 'auras' connect with the auras of other pictures, They illuminate the distance between the panels like interfaces which both separate and connect. One can imagine Utermöhlen's world as an infinite wall paper pattern-book, with his works as the different "samples".

Tapete (Wallpaper) was in fact the name of a Super 8 film made in 1984 by the Tödliche Doris, showing a regular sequence of exactly what the title promised: the surfaces and structures of wall papers from a pattern-book, The group's videos, records, films, pictures and performances constantly return to representations or descriptions of patterns and ornament as allegories of associative perception and structuralist thinking, What emerges in Utermöhlen's art as 'reproductive' painting has its roots in the post-conceptual art of the *Tödliche Doris*. Like a modern-day Esther Williams⁸ of the underground they choreographed water ballets⁹, joining hands as they swam, forming rosettes¹⁰, buds, flowers opening, and put these on stage as film-projections. They danced in a rectangle, in a square¹¹, formed symmetrical and asymmetrical figures, which they then pressed as song in their records.

A changing ornament was the motif of the 44 pictures which the group showed in 1987 with the title *Die Gesamtheit alles Lebens und alles Darüberhinausgehende*¹². Following on each other, these 44 easel paintings are equivalent to the same number of Super 8 images. Seen in projection the film-images produce a two-second shot of a prismically reflecting ornament in motion, changing as

⁸ Esther Williams was a swimmer who became famous through the Hollywood 'water revues' in the 1950s.

⁹ See *Die Tödliche Doris, Wasserballett*, 1984 (Super 8 film)

¹⁰ See *Die Tödliche Doris, Wir bilden eine Rosette aus Chöre und Soli*, box with miniphon discs and player, Gelbe MUSIK; Pure Freude, Berlin, Düsseldorf 1983

¹¹ See *Die Tödliche Doris, Tanz im Quadrat*, on a 12 inch maxisingle without a title, Zickzack, Hamburg 1980

¹² See *Die Tödliche Doris, Die Gesamtheit allen Lebens und alles Darüberhinausgehende*, cat. Verlag der Georg Büchner Buchhandlung, Darmstadt 1987

if a kaleidoscope were being turned, coming together from the edges, breaking into two separate shapes and ultimately disappearing (illus. p.12). The title of the work previously mentioned, Utermöhlen's *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR...* is a reference to these pictures: each of the 44 pictures has a one word title. In the "right" sequence, which also shows the object in motion, the titles of the pictures read like a sentence which, running parallel to the pictures, consists of 44 words: *SEHEN UNS LAUFEN IN GROSSTER EILE DIE STRASSE HERUNTER HABEN GLÜCK ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR DURCH DAS ZUERST GEGANGEN WURDE...* etc. The sentence is almost identical with the text of the track *Ungerechtigkeit II (20 Pfg. Finderlohn)*, on *Unser Debüt*, the *Tödliche Doris*' fourth LP.¹³

Both of these, the 44 "kaleidoscope pictures" and the rood-screen picture depict ornaments and both are divided up into segments, The ornament in the 44 easel paintings by the *Tödliche Doris* separates a filmic movement into individual pictures, Wolfgang Müller, in his collection of texts, *Die Tödliche Doris, Vol. I*, describes the 44 pictures as "frozen moments" and as "petrified cornerstones".¹⁴ "The movement that leads from picture to picture, linking one picture to the next, is basically the only movement there is."¹⁵ The movement that leads from picture to picture is only ever that of the eye. The movement that leads from word to word, allowing a sentence to form, is that of the eye. The movement that jumps from edge to edge in *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR ...* and allows a gateway to form is that of the eye. The optical experience is subjective, bound up with the human body. Both the 44 easel paintings by the *Tödliche Doris* and *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR ...* describe this experience, which in turn implies the impossibility of objective or collective perception. Utermöhlen compares the interplay of perception and consciousness with a kaleidoscope, which nourishes our consciousness with endless patterns: "These patterns and structures are only ever basic elements of apart or of parts of the whole."¹⁶ This "kaleidoscopic" perception which Utermöhlen uses symbolically is founded on reflections, the reflections of "parts", which undergo infinite variation as they rotate. "Through constant movement from within, forms are created and exist on the most diverse of levels."¹⁷ Thus Utermöhlen defines bodily perception as a useless instrument, for it is a little able to perceive the constantly changing pattern as a 'whole' as it is in a position to recognise what is reflecting within itself.

3.

When referring to the objects, the physical phenomena, the architecture and the people that he portrayed, Utermöhlen talked of "models". He meant this in both senses of the word, for he did not distinguish between its meaning as a prototype or as an illustration or a design. His last exhibition was realised in the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in winter 1995, and he called it *2 Freunde (2 Friends)*. It consists of male nudes arranged as pairs. They are juxtaposed like negative and positive reflections, with an overlay of coats of a transparent acrylic binding-agent plus glowing pigments, which in each case contain within them shades of the relevant complementary colours. In fact the series consists of a sequence of mirrored images of models lying and sitting in grass, although they are not assigned to their own mirror-image but to that of another image.

These reclining nudes of Utermöhlen's seem to be sunk in deep thought. Their gaze is broken up by the layers of varnish above them, in which the reflections of their contours flickeringly shift and move across each other. They become separated from themselves like Narcissus who saw his own reflected image in the water and lost himself in it. In their blatant nakedness they display a factual

¹³ *Die Tödliche Doris, Unser Debüt*, LP, ATATAK, Düsseldorf 1987

¹⁴ Cited after Wolfgang Müller, *Was neben der Gesamtheit allen Lebens und alles Darüberhinausgehendem noch geschah*, in: *Die Tödliche Doris, Vol.I*, ed. by Wolfgang Müller and Martin Schmitz, Verlag Martin Schmitz, Kassel 1991, p.63

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nikolaus Utermöhlen/*Die Tödliche Doris, Zum Thema*, in: *Das Berliner Designhandbuch*, ed. by Christian Borngräber, Melve Verlag, Berlin 1987, p.125

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

condition of humanity, our immutable corporeality. These nudes are at the mercy of their own corporeality. Their poses are not active, but speak instead of passive composure. Again and again in Utermöhlen's work we find similar images of the body at the mercy of something. The people in his pictorial world have sunk down or fallen, as though they have lost consciousness (*Das ohnmächtige Modell*, 1994), their arms behind their heads as a sign of helplessness and submission, or they lie overcome on the ground (*1/12/∞*, 1991, illus. p. 34). The series *An Infinite painting ...* (1992), with its reflections and superimpositions shows figures tumbling down into space. Utermöhlen himself suffered bodily. In the early eighties he tested positive. The period during which he made his easel paintings, from the first exhibition of *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR ...* (1989) until he made *2 Freunde* (1994/95), coincides exactly with an unbroken series of 'opportunistic' illnesses. What AIDS, with all its obscure side-effects, did to his body can scarcely be expressed. Periods of recuperation followed months of pain, operations and infusions. Utermöhlen never ever put his own bodily suffering into words. If one asked him about it face to face, he would smile archly like a silent idol in some wayward religion whose rules one had to divine without the help of words or explanations. An acceptance of corporeality and hence also of corporeal perception runs through all his works, as in the nudes in *2 Freunde*. They are not shown as suffering, they are composed. "Friendship" is a link that can take on a whole number of different forms of love. It is not founded in 'ratio', it has its roots in our souls, which feel an "affinity" or a "relationship" with that of the friend.

The "soul was every cell and each cell was a solar system in its own right, a microcosm, for in Creation achievement is not dependent on size. One step further and one would be alongside Fechner - once so derided - who attributed the sun, the Earth, the very stones and the inorganic with qualities of the soul. According to Fechner, the brain consisted of some billion of tiny stars in a mesh so fine that it would make a spider's web look like landing ropes; like precious grapes, there they hung and glowed as they sent fiery rays one to another; electric waves, beams of light went to and fro..." as Otto Flake¹⁸ wrote in his study of Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887). Fechner was a physicist turned philosopher, a 'Schwärmer'¹⁹ whose writings Utermöhlen collected and read. In his choice of the title *2 Freunde* one sees his proximity to Fechner's thinking, which attributes 'soul' to all material phenomena. In *Das unendliche Leben*²⁰ Fechner describes our bodily human existence as a transition from one "level of life" to another. Having started in the absolute darkness of life before birth, the human being moves through birth onto a level where he/she lives "socially but separately" with other human beings, "in a light that reflects the surface". The transition to the third level is called death, and this leads from an external to an internal view of the world. With this internal view the human being becomes part of the world, the spirit no longer brushes past different phenomena: instead it permeates them.

This inner looking, this vision, is reflected in William Blake's drawing from 1808, *A Vision of the Last Judgment* which Utermöhlen used in his series *An Infinite painting ...* He divided the motif lengthways into three. Having coloured these with the three primary colours red, yellow and blue, he then superimposed the three sections, with the result that each picture produced a different colour spectrum, played out in the series in all possible combinations. The superimposition of translucent sheets with different coloured motifs creates a flickering sensation in the viewer's eye, a pulsating effect which turns the representational image in Blake's *Last Judgment* into an apparently moving pattern. The Polish artist Henryk Berlewski created similar effects of movement by shifting

¹⁸ Cited after Otto Flake, *Die Stadt des Hirns*, Motto zu Theodor Fechner's *Das unendliche Leben*, Matthes & Seitz Verlag, Munich 1984, p.9

¹⁹ Translator's note: 'Schwärmer' is untranslatable but has a noble history in the German language with connotations that range from 'day-dreamer' and 'visionary' through 'enthusiast' to 'fanatic', and from 'flights of fancy' to 'passions' and 'raptures'. The realm referred to is in no sense simply emotional: it is much deeper and, importantly, also involves the intellect as well.

²⁰ Op. eil.

superimposed, transparent sheets across each other. His *Mechano-Figur* (1922) in fact provided the Constructivist foundations for Op Art.²¹ While the kinetic effects of Op Art use condensed abstraction to allow the human eye to participate directly in the process of movement, the impression of movement in *An Infinite painting ...* is the result of the melting of variants of a highly symbolic image, which loses its original meaning in this ornamental version. In an essay entitled *Schizophrenie und Kunst (Schizophrenia and Art)* written in 1978 when he was still a schoolboy, Utermöhlen describes the "heightened awareness of meaning, through which the treatment of a picture almost entirely loses its function."²² As a pictorial series *An Infinite painting ...* focuses on one of the most subjective forms of perception - vision - a phenomenon that is regarded with scorn by our enlightened, science-oriented society as evidence of mental instability. Fechner and Blake spent their lives as outsiders, oddities, ridiculed and mocked by institutions that only purveyed the dominant ideology.

Utermöhlen's work creates the impression of being scientific. His series extend across the walls according to the sequence of the colours of the spectrum. His painted wooden spars repeat this sequence in their coloration and they hang above his pictures like a kind of confirmation. He depicted model-like constructions, which he beveled into oval frames like portraits. His works display physical movement, light, geometric shapes. Just as his art reproduces art beholden to the notion of genres and categories, it contains reproductions of scientific models which rely on the existence of objectively measurable perception. Utermöhlen's pictures open up like stage sets, constructed so that the doors lead straight outside. They have no other purpose than to demonstrate the delusion that derives from the notion of an objectively perceptible world. And in so doing, they take a certain side. In them we see expressed the thinking of the visionary and 'Schwärmer' that Nikolaus Utermöhlen was throughout his life.

Translation: Fiona Elliott

²¹ Cited as in: Heinz Ohff, *Galerie der neuen Künste/Revolution ohne Programm*, Bertelsmann Kunstverlag, Gütersloh, Berlin, Munich, Vienna 1971, p.157

²² Utermöhlen wrote this for the Art Department of the Siebold Gymnasium in Würzburg.