

HOLBEIN TO TILLMANS – AN ESSAY IN PICTURES

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(see cat. p. 9)

Our narrative begins with a large light box entitled *Allegory of Folly* (2005) by the Canadian artist Rodney Graham. Sitting on a mechanical horse once used to train jockeys is a man, the artist himself, dressed in an old-fashioned coat with fur trim and reading a thick book. The image recalls a portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger in the Basel Kunstmuseum that depicts the humanist scholar Erasmus as a half-length figure in profile. Graham's title, *Allegory of Folly*, alludes to *Praise of Folly*, written by Erasmus in 1509 and published in later editions in Basel. The book quickly became famous, partly because many were outraged by its satirical praise of folly as a great virtue. Graham takes up this inversion of values in his work: he is sitting backwards on the horse and reads not a scholarly treatise, but the phone book for Vancouver, the city in which he lives.

Allegory of Folly is an especially apt starting point for the journey described here. The reference to a sixteenth-century painting in a black and white photograph from 2005 indicates that 'old' is not necessarily synonymous with 'defunct': a contemporary view can reactivate the topicality of a work from the past. Moreover, the mounted figure facing in the 'wrong' direction is a reminder that looking forwards automatically entails looking backwards, that what is to come is connected to what has passed, that history and memory are the foundations of the future. We stand in the middle of all this, absorbed in the here-and-now in the way that Graham's rider is absorbed in his book. *Allegory of Folly* can thus stand as a metaphor of the approach we hope viewers will take to the works included here.

This year's exhibition at the Schaulager is exceptional. It unites some 180 works from the Kunstmuseum Basel – paintings, along with a few sculptures – with roughly forty items from the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, which maintains close relations with the Kunstmuseum, and from private collections.¹ All the works have left their surroundings for a few months, abandoning their accustomed places in the museum for an unfamiliar environment. Their temporary lodgings at the Schaulager have doubtless caused them many a surprise: not only have they made new acquaintances; they have also discovered unsuspected aspects of themselves.

No particular concept or ideas governed the selection of the works that have found a temporary home here. Guided initially by personal preferences, the search among the Kunstmuseum's extensive holdings involved both old friends and less familiar works that awakened a sudden interest, and it took note of items that promised to communicate something very special. There were only two requirements – that the works would not be on display at the Kunstmuseum for the duration of the Schaulager exhibition (the museum's Van Gogh show facilitated the loan of a number of important items) and that conservation issues did not prevent them from travelling.

Part I

(see cat. p. 10)

By the end of the search for exhibits a large number of works had come together, each chosen for its own individual qualities – because it was considered particularly beautiful, particularly striking, particularly mysterious and so forth. This was an exciting situation to be in. I had a sort of storehouse of raw material, an enticing agglomeration of items bursting with potential of one kind or another.

Some of the works I left this way, hanging them like unprocessed materials above, beside and beneath one another on a long wall (the large outer wall of Schaulager's lower floor). For example, *Brückenbau* (Bridge Building, 1932–35) by Rudolf Maeglin appears to the right of *Walzwerk im Gebirge* (Rolling Mill in the Mountains, 1982) by Anselm Stalder and above *Arbeitslose* (Unemployed, 1935) by Paul Camenisch; Hans Hug Kluber's *Bildnis der Familie des Basler Zunftmeisters Faesch* (Portrait of the Family of the Basel Guild Master Faesch, 1559) hangs near *Dorfschule von 1848* (Village School of 1848, 1895–96) by Albert Anker, *Ernte* (Harvest, 1859) by Robert Zünd and *Bauerngarten* (Cottage Garden, 1904) by Cuno Amiet; and Sam Francis's *Deep Orange and Black* (1954–55) towers over landscapes ranging from Caspar Wolf, via Ferdinand Hodler, to Monika Studer and Christoph van den Berg. Each painting stands for itself, perhaps awakening memories of earlier encounters or becoming the point of departure for a fresh journey. This wall functions as an exterior shield masking the interior spaces of the exhibition.

Part II

(see cat. pp. 30-31)

The 'interior spaces' of the exhibition house the larger part of the selected works, installed in a coherent fashion. This is not a classic museum display, however, arranged by period and/or artist. Instead, the works generate a new narrative – or rather, an essay in pictures. Liberated from chronological sequences, they can be seen in a fresh light. Occasionally, works from quite distinct eras or contexts suddenly evince unexpected points of contact. This happens, for example, in the juxtaposition of Jeff Wall's *Citizen* (1996) with Edgar Degas's *Jockey blessé* (Wounded Jockey, 1896–98) and of a seventeenth-century still life by Sebastian Stoskopff with a Cubist still life from 1908 by Pablo Picasso. On closer inspection such surprising and intriguing connections turn out to harbour differences that contradict the initial impression. How that impression comes about in the first place is a subject of endless fascination, with something of Proust's madeleine about it. This process is retraced and investigated in the form of an essay in pictures in the exhibition and this publication.

What would happen if not just two paintings were juxtaposed, but an entire group of, say, Dutch seventeenth-century still lifes and Cubist still lifes? And how would things look if early still lifes were brought together with *Warengestell mit Gehirnen* (Display Stand with Brains, 1989/97) by Katharina Fritsch or with polyurethane objects by Fischli and Weiss, and then the latter with Andreas Gursky's *Tokyo Stock Exchange* (1990)? Would expectations be fulfilled if Cubist still lifes were confronted with 'specific objects' by Donald Judd, themselves exposed to childlike philosophical questioning by Gary Hill's and Anri Sala's videos. Or again, how would Degas's *Jockey blessé* and Wall's *Citizen* react to Carl Andre's *Altstadt Square* (1967)

or to the depiction of a landscape near Haarlem by Jan van Kessel from the 1670s? And would a path really lead from Ferdinand Hodler's *Mutiges Weib* (Courageous Woman, 1886) by way of Alberto Giacometti's *Grande femme III* (Large Woman III, 1960) to *Nini's Painting* (1971) by Cy Twombly and *Storage Capsule for the Right Rear Quarter of My Body* (1966) by Bruce Nauman? In this way I proceeded by trial and error, one work joining the next to establish a variety of links, often unanticipated, sometimes fleeting, frequently taking the form of mini-dialogues between individual items. Eventually, the essay 'Holbein to Tillmans' was complete.

Do such unexpected points of contact occur between works of all types in all genres at all times?² Perhaps, in one way or another. But fact is, here only two basic themes became relevant. One is the perception of the outside world as revealed by representations of people and things, of objects that people use, have appropriated or produced themselves. Here, the starting point was the portrait and the still life. The other group of works revolves around orientation in the world as reflected in depictions of places, spaces and figures.³

The decision to concentrate on these two thematic areas was not taken arbitrarily. First, the collection of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel is notably strong in these two fields, while other areas, such as religious and secular history paintings, are less well represented. More importantly, the thematic focus resulted from an avowedly contemporary perspective, from concerns and issues that preoccupy us today. Chief among these is the desire and necessity to find our way in a reality that is becoming increasingly complex and unfathomable. Technology, especially communications technology, is devising ever more tools to aid us. But words and images still provide the principle means of orientation, calling on elementary human abilities available to everyone. The places and spaces in which we live, and the people and things around us, are the most obvious arenas for thought and fantasy. Although they have not rendered the questions 'Where do we come from?' and 'Where are we going?' superfluous, they have made them less pressing and have themselves acquired an at least comparable importance. The process started in the early modern era, its beginning possibly marked by the human self-exploration evident in sixteenth-century portraiture, and has never lost momentum, its topicality reanimated in ever new ways. This may well be reflected in the unexpected points of contact between paintings of different epochs and contexts that led to the essay in pictures embodied in the exhibition and this publication.

Translated from the German by Michael Foster, Munich

Notes

1 For the history of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, see Christian Geelhaar, *Kunstmuseum Basel: Die Geschichte der Gemäldesammlung und eine Auswahl von 250 Meisterwerken*, Zurich and Basel, 1992, and for that of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, idem, 'Bejahung der Gegenwart und Zuversicht auf die Zukunft: Zur Geschichte der Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung', in *Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung Basel*, Basel, 1991, pp. 8–33.

2 Several, very different systematic attempts have been made to describe relations between images from different contexts and periods. Perhaps the best known is the Mnemosyne Atlas, on which the art historian Aby Warburg worked from 1924 to his death, in 1929.

3 The two thematic areas outlined here determined the structure of the exhibition. This is reflected in the catalogue "Holbein to Tillmans" in the division of Part II into 'People and Things: Images of the Outside World' and 'Places, Spaces and Figures: Orientation in the World'.