

Paolo Bianchi

### **Dive – Die – Drive – Diva**

On the Show of Stefan Banz in Linz

**Everyone knows that a debauched artist is fascinating**, whereas, in comparison, a healthy genius is uninteresting. The notion can hardly be dispelled of a tormented and stranded “true artist” clinging half to the needle and half to the bottle, the outsider who creates something that is “unpredictable and extraordinary”.

Every age requires its geniuses to have a charismatic defect: blindness in Homer’s era, incest around 1800 in Lord Byron’s time, homosexuality in the Fin de siècle, drunkenness in the USA of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Malcolm Lowry, etc.; Hemingway once professed: “All good writers are drinkers”), drugs since the sixties (Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, etc.), Aids beginning in the eighties (Keith Haring, Paul Thek, Michel Foucault, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Derek Jarman and many others). And now in the age of Hip-Hop: the artist as gangster. However, now in the nineties, the antagonist of every kind of myth of artistry is emerging: the artist as an ordinary normal person.

Stefan Banz, 34, is an artist and lives the middle-class ideal of the nuclear family with his wife Sabine 34, and two children, Jonathan, 8, and Lena, 6. Banz has transformed this apparently benumbing ordinary life into a positive force: his family provides the motif and the motivation for his artistic work. He is an existentially solitary fighter, who reflects on “me and my art and my family”, even though that may sound old-fashioned.

**Contrary to the aesthetic avant-garde of this century**, the newest generation of artists does not demolish the bridge between art and life. Thus art flows directly into life and life into art.

If the connection between art and living is increasingly evident today, as it is in Stefan Banz’s photography, this does not indicate an attempt to equate art and life. Rather it is an attempt to comprehend life as art. A new proximity to reality is mentioned, or a new aesthetic attitude, which activates the distance between the sphere of art per se and the realms of experience in everyday life, and transforms the creative potential of the distance. What were once utopias in the free floating space of aesthetics begin to establish a foothold in the real world. When Banz photographs his wife and his two children, the beauty of the woman and the charm and even innocence of the children are naturally touching. In addition, the photographs themselves take on a child-like perspective, which replaces a distanced attitude of being above all that with an attitude of sinking into things. Perhaps this also describes Banz’s artistic intention. This attitude contradicts modern theories maintaining that the person who looks through the viewer of a camera is not directly a part of the world, but rather takes a stance at a distance and thus perceives his/her surroundings as a framed picture. And when people talk about how everyday happenings shift to become sensational, Banz goes against the current here, too: in contrast to the terror of generalities, he presents the rights of the particular, the love of detail, the cult of nuances. This is the approach cultivated by other photographic artists such as Fischli/Weiss as well.

Everyday life rewrites art’s system of coordinates – and vice versa: everyday observations in the real world are suddenly recognized as artistic phenomena.

However, rather than an aesthetic of everyday life, Banz is far more concerned with an aesthetic of existence. Even though his photographs depict everyday experiences, the focus is less on the everydayness and much more on the experience, although

without elevating experience to fetishism. Banz's work is a search for the apparently inconspicuous, for sensitivity in ordinary superficiality, and for unpainted faces in a pasted-up world.

**“Dive” no longer presents an installation by Stefan Banz**, but rather a Banz-Installation. Following installations in New York, Cologne and Lucerne, this one in Linz is the artist's fourth water installation. In this presentation he succeeds in developing a previously unattained, quiet radicality, which formulates the utopian strength of his working method. In spite of – or precisely because of – its audacious construction, “Dive” remains intimate and personal. The questions, things and ideas that Banz delineates with “Dive” do not emerge in a whirlpool of events, but rather in a state of poised calm allowing, that which is hidden and archaic to be sensed. The arrangement is not only beautiful, but in this it is alluring, rich in associations and, at the same time, poetic. In “Dive”, intimacy, connectivity and intensity are in effect – but not permanently. “Dive” leaves an impression of infinity, of unboundedness, of fluidity and of immateriality. “Dive” creates a space for the eye to become nomadic, a place for transience set into work.

Transience, escape, submergence and taking flight – since 1989, the state of the world is no longer stable; the East-West order has collapsed, terms and meanings are in a state of flux. Does “Dive”, like many other works by contemporary artists, show how we are passing from a solid to a fluctuating state of the world?

Does the dislocation of art contain a desire for new utopias? (The word “utopia” means – literally – “non-place”.)

**Kurt Cobain's death was not only a shock for Stefan Banz**, but also for millions of fans. Cobain, frontman of the Seattle grunge band Nirvana, had become an idol for a multitude of 15 to 35-year-olds, the so-called Generation X, and his suicide was blown up into a finale of hopelessness.

Representing many young people, Cobain embodied a self-destructive slacker philosophy: this is a bad world. It is a world without hope or morality, and it leaves no room even for illusions. Cynicism is all that left: have fun as long as it is still possible. A kind of cunning coolness that can find no meaning in the course of the world, is disseminated. When the CD “Nevermind” (1992) was released, MTV hoisted the provincial combo to a zenith of rock with weeklong power-playing.

On the cover of the CD, there is a picture of a baby under water, which is being baited by a dollar bill hanging on a fish hook (the US version of the cover shows a genderless baby, that is the little boy without a penis). The baby-dollar picture ultimately became a tragic presage: Cobain was unable to cope with the commercial marketing of his music, with the sudden appropriation of his hopelessness – and that of an entire generation. In 1994 he shot himself in the head with a shotgun, blowing his brain out and himself into the next world, leaving his wife and child behind in this one. Following the battle cry “die hard!”, he sold his life for far too little, rather than for too much.

In 1995, Stefan Banz called his book, which was a collection of photographs from 1989 to 1994, “Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld”. Banz took this line from the Cobain song “Pennyroyal Tea”, thus producing – since painful events in the Swiss interior do not only have an interior effect – his own personal homage to the musician. When hunting rifles are presented within the Banz installation “Dive” in the foyer, and grunge sound is played from a tape in the staircase, Cobain's suicide and Nirvana suddenly come in very close. There is the hard, sweat-producing drive of the song

“Dive”, that repeats the same words, like a children’s rhyme, over and over again almost endlessly: “Dive, dive, dive, dive in me.” The title of the installation in Linz is “Dive. Give the People what they want”; the “Give” line refers yet again to pop culture, namely the Kinks and their album of the same name from 1981. And yet the loud signals of pop are not pre-empted.

Rather than an art location, Stefan Banz understands the Offenes Kulturhaus (Ok. Centrum für Gegenwartskunst) as a location of work, a context for communication, as a realm of effects and actions for interaction. This cultural practice reflects the discursive, dialoguing and aesthetic contextual embedment of art. The visitors do not wade through the ankle-deep water as interpreting artists, but rather as people reacting. The artist asks: “How do we behave when we are in it? Do we stop before the photo, does it startle us or does it seem more alienating? As visitors, do we walk across the photo? If we do, does it seem to us that we are pushing the little by deeper into the water? How does the whole relate to reality, or to that which we perceive as reality?” Suspense and absurdity shake hands: “Could the child lie in the water shot, too? Shot by a water pistol?”

In addition, what is particularly marked in Stefan Banz’s work is that not only the state of conditions between production and reception count, but also the correlation, the linking and the interweaving of art with social contexts; this is the sense of the correlational process of interactions, the multifaceted relationship, which is often characterized by expulsion and banishment, to the Other.

In conversations, Banz frequently mentions the French intellectual Jacques Derrida, the philosopher of difference, and it is enlightening to think of Banz’s photographs in terms of difference: this means that it is not a case of identifying the motifs or of tracing the Other and that which is different back to that which is the same and of the same kind. And as Derrida sometimes uses the metaphor of sight to disclose the “blind spot” in an author’s view, Banz’s photos present precisely this point: we can see the blind spot, but there where it is in the eye, the eye sees nothing. Banz’s work points out just this ability or inability of the observer to see.

His photographs are not necessarily dedicated to the depicted person or the reality that appears in the photos, but rather the difference between the person and reality. With his work, Banz reflects the archeologist of unconscious perception and veiled inserts of consciousness than their fictional arranger. The diversity of both his internal and external family perception is hard to put into a transitional context of meaning.

**Variations on the word “Dive” do not lead directly to the word “Diva”,** but rather take a path of detours of theory and language. Diva does not only mean a female singer or an actress in the spotlight of publicity, spoiled by success and the adoration of the audience. Diva was originally the title of the Roman empress after her death. When the word “Diva” appears next to Sabine Banz’s name on the invitation to the exhibition, this may certainly be taken as an expression of honour and gratitude to the artist’s wife, who achieves superhuman feats as housewife, mother, model and lover. At the same time, the exchange of letters is also an homage to the highly respected Derrida: Derrida’s “Philosophy of Difference” ultimately concerns a single letter, which he introduced into spelling of the word “différence” by writing “différance”, which immediately evokes a collection of meanings. According to Derrida’s representation, this involves “a silent monument”, which when printed as a capital letter: A, has the shape of a pyramid. Pyramids are places of the preservation of signs, which are lifeless to a certain extent, which attain an existence that has an effect far

beyond the dimensions of space and time. Thus the exchange of letters is in itself lifeless and meaningless. It is only through the various interpretations that various meanings come to life.

Difference philosophy wants to stop at the diversity in which unities (in the plural) are possible. How can this be done? Difference philosophy – according to Derrida – supposes an origin that is not an origin (any longer). For visitors to the “Dive” exhibition, does this mean that Jonathan’s dive is not a dive at all, or that it is more than a mere dive?

Interaction among human beings can not be produced only with letters of the alphabet, and Stefan Banz is aware of this, too. It might be more possible to do so with weapons, but that would be a different story, a case for detectives. This is the threat with which Banz dismisses us.

Februar 1996

Translated from the German by Aileen Derieg

This text was published in: Stefan Banz, Dive, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz 1996, p. 71-75