

Stefan Banz

Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern / Galerie Bob Gysin, Zurich

By Hans Rudolf Reust

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“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” Muhammad Ali’s motto was an apt description of his boxing style. Stefan Banz belongs to the generation of TV kids who grew up with global, live media events like the transmission of Ali’s fights. Boxers and pop stars were way ahead of artists in the cult of stardom. For his part, Banz studied art history, worked as an art critic and theorist, and was curator at the Kunsthalle Luzern, which he founded. Now he presents himself as an artist, with photo series, videos, installations, paintings, and texts. Recently he brought the public two exhibitions, a novel, and a theater piece. His image production continually orbits around a legend of the American boxing champion. *Muhammad Ali—ein Stück in fünf Bildern* (Muhammad Ali—a play in five acts), 2001, tells the tale of the artist Maria Venom, who instigates the fourfold cloning of Ali as the ultimate readymade, which in the end she archives with the help of three female reproductive specialists, albeit producing an infantile and clownish version of the ideal.

The photo series *The Muhammad Ali’s*, 2000, exhibited in the Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern, encompasses 104 shots of women and men posing for a quick impression of the champion. Banz revisited these portraits of imitators for his exhibition in the Galerie Bob Gysin in Zurich, transposing them into painting only to alienate them digitally by scanning the painted portraits—turning them into *Ali’s Ghosts*, 2001. In some limbo between painting and photography, the ghosts wander aimlessly in the growing blurriness of successive image transfers. Banz’s various series can no longer be understood in the discourse of a single medium; on the contrary, he observes a rule of permanent transference. *I Read On Kawara*, 2000, on view at the Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern, is a series of small-format paintings, each of which copies a clipping from the newspapers that On Kawara used to line the cartons of his *Date Paintings*. Copying Kawara’s supplementary documents, Banz imitates the gesture of an artist who had already withdrawn himself as much as possible.

In his novel *Hell*, 2001, Banz tells an art-world crime story—similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. For an audio play, the character Erich Hell drafts a screenplay for an art murder—a murder in and of art—which soon becomes blood-drenched reality as Angie Noll, the moderator of a cultural affairs show, is felled with a pickax. A series of “shootings” appear in the novel as a photographic insert: snapshots of those countless shooting ranges that dot the Swiss landscape, numbering it abstractly with their target sheets. Banz’s work in various media have given rise to a self-mirroring *mise-en-abîme*, in which artistic praxis and its reflection are continually intertwined.

Hell, the artist, bears in his name the ambiguity between English and German meanings: between “inferno” and “lucid.” Lucifer can no longer be held accountable for murder in the endless regression of art’s self-reflections. Nonetheless, he cannot be absolved of the public’s suspicion. What remains is the play of clues.