Caroline Bachmann/Stefan Banz, Helter Skelter – Painting With The Beatles, Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, January 19–March 3, 2008. Part of the exhibition featuring the sculpture „Here Comes The Sun"

The Continuing Story of …

Stefan Banz, Gerda Steiner, Jörg Lenzlinger and Lori Hersberger all exhibited works at the *Freie Sicht* exhibition. We asked them what they are up to today.

bg: *Mr. Banz, in 1998, in the* Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer *exhibition, you installed "How Many Nights I Prayed For This." Is this piece of art still in line with your work today?*

Stefan Banz: Of course! This installation met many of the criteria that I feel are still important for me today. The lucid design and the gymnastics apparatus really give it a powerful aura, for example. And at the same time, it is graceful and fragile because of the use of glass, and yet, metaphorically speaking, even dangerous. On the other hand, it looks elegant, yet understates its self-confident appearance and because of its transparency, it can engage in a gentle relationship with its surrounding space. In other words, this work can function both autonomously within itself as well as in a connection with the exhibition room and the history of art and with the observer. The interaction of form and content present here works very well, in my opinion. It is an aesthetically impressive piece of work with a high degree of metaphorical potential.

In an interview with yourself, you revealed that all of your work basically revolves around a "double standpoint" of being inside and outside of something at the same time. How does this double standpoint materialize in your art?

Let me take the work we just described as an example, "How Many Nights I Prayed For This." There is a difference whether we enter the glass cubes as observers to "use" the gymnastics apparatus, or whether we look at the work from the outside as an aesthetic and metaphorical object. In the various versions of "Dive," too, for which I flooded entire exhibition rooms, it is different whether you stand at the entrance and watch the still water that looks like a mirror, or you wade into it, make waves and thereby cause the reflection to go away.

Where does this reflection lead you artistically?

I think it is a challenge to observe things and the world's phenomena from various perspectives. And as an artist, it is exciting to produce works that put the observer immediately into the position of the double standpoint. It unsettles and enriches at the same time. But this does not mean that the double standpoint has to be implemented in each work as a matter of principle. Art simply has too many possibilities and I would not want to reduce them to a handful of principles.

You dedicated quite a lot of reflection to pop artists. You even ended up "painting with the Beatles." How does Helter Skelter work for you?

Music has always been a challenge for me – film as well, and figures like Muhammad Ali, Jacques Derrida and Marcel Duchamp. I have always had a great fascination for personalities like Frank Zappa, John Lennon, Mick Jagger or Kurt Cobain, or bands like Led Zeppelin, Wishbone Ash, Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd or Metallica. In addition, ever since the mid-1990s, I have been grappling with the different ways to understand terminological pairs like "original" and "cover version," "original" and "imitation," "original" and "interpretation." In this sense, the connection with the Helter Skelter images is not such a distant one, where notes suddenly produce painting and originals become cover versions, which turn out not to be cover versions at all on closer inspection. This addresses issues such as reality warps, which in turn revives the topic of the double standpoint.

Do you go back to the slide when you get to the bottom? What role does sampling, remixing and repetition play in your art?

Repetition plays a role inasmuch as we would like to avoid it. We locate it somewhere between Duchamp, who tried to avoid repeating himself his entire life, and Led Zeppelin, who worked intensely with repetition within songs in order to resolutely create a new type of sound from one album to the next. But Frank Zappa is probably the best example: He continuously pushed music into very unusual directions by repeatedly linking it with different rhythmical and stylistic elements. And the result was the conjuring of unmistakably paradoxical sounds. These are timeless strategies, and they

Bachmann/Banz, Rocky Raccoon, from Helter Skelter

Bachmann/Banz, Narziss, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2006.
Photo: Sun Jianwei & Bachmann/Banz

might be less short term than, say, techno. So in this context I would say yes to "sampling" and "remixing" as a strategy of the "continuously in the process of change," and no to repetition as the reuse of the "same old, same old." For example, each of the "Helter Skelter Paintings" functions less as a slide and far more as a unique piece within a chaotic chaos. Each of the Beatles' songs does, after all, represent an individual world – from the standpoint of style and content. We tried to do this in pictures that make a point of medial perception in a cultural and societal sense, but without interpreting their songs through painting. While painting the works, we listened to the complete opus of the Beatles – over and over again: Helter Skelter.

Have the last ten years been an aesthetic standstill or have you noticed some significant progress in aesthetic approaches?

I feel you should ask that question to people who know my work well and have kept track of it during all those years. In any case, I am not taking any fewer risks today than I was in the days of *Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer.* And the decision I made three years ago to pursue my artistic career together with Caroline Bachmann under the Bachmann/Banz banner is a genuine sign for the ongoing and significant desire and curiosity about daring to explore new territory and take on new artistic and aesthetic challenges. My focus used to be especially on photography and installations, now, with Caroline, we do mainly painting and installations. This collaboration is also enlarging the conceptual and technical spectrum, because Caroline has introduced aspects and know-how into our work that were missing before or lacked attention, and I do the same. Our joint works most certainly have a more direct and political expression. They make an immediate point of the medial perception of society.

How much freedom does Switzerland offer you both culturally as well as socially?

The Swiss art scene is very rich and active, thus it is stimulating and a very good turf. On the other hand, it is also small, and the possibilities for growing are somewhat limited, partly because power and money are basically in the hands of just a few people who act as a kind of family and are trying to control what goes on and maintain clarity in the discussion about art. There is an invisible party system, which means that the same people are always pulling the strings. One shouldn't let oneself be distracted by that and certainly not believe that success, as in hype or getting the nod, is the most important thing when you are working artistically.

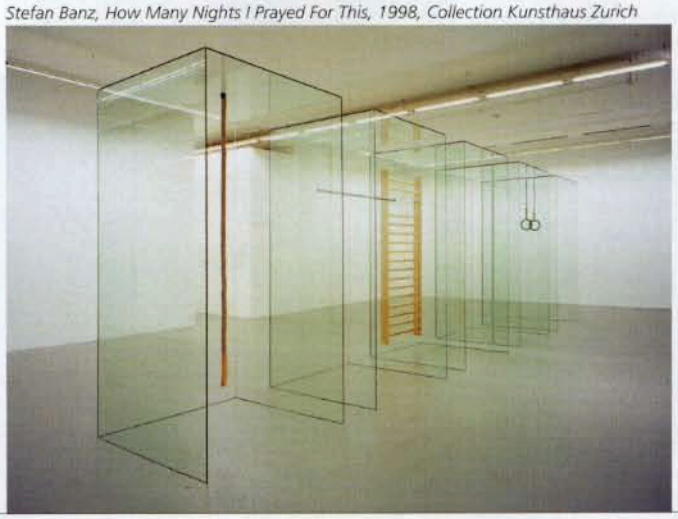
The art investment market has grown to immense proportions. How do you view this development?

It makes art spectacular and attractive for the media. But this development is also leading increasingly to shorter perception spans and in general to constraints on the artistic spectrum, because focus is only on a few artists, the so-called Blue Chips.

How does the market work for you?

The artist Stefan Banz and for some time now the artist duo Bachmann/Banz do not exist so far as a result of the commercial art market, but rather through exhibitions in public institutions or their work with the large-scale wall paintings that we recently did for the headquarters of Roche Diagnostics Ltd. in Rotkreuz. By the same token, we are represented by the Urs Meile Beijing-Lucerne gallery, which has performed pioneering work over the past ten years in the field of contemporary Chinese art and has thereby risen to the rank of leading gallery in the world. It is one of the largest in Switzerland as well, having around 20 employees. As the only westerners, Bachmann/Banz almost seem exotic in the gallery's program next to all the big Chinese stars like Ai Weiwei, Xie Nanxing or Li Songsong. But having the good fortune of working together with such a renowned gallery naturally stimulates us and opens certain perspectives and hopes with regards to the market. At any rate, Bachmann/Banz are Switzerland's youngest artist pair. ■

Stefan Banz, How Many Nights I Prayed For This, 1998, Collection Kunsthaus Zurich



Stefan Banz, Dive, 1996, Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz