

Suddenly an Image – Other Points of Fascination

By Nataline Colonnello

Let's imagine a situation that everyone familiar with the art scene regularly sees or personally experiences: the puzzled expression on the face of a viewer when looking at a painting, his/her eyes surreptitiously shifting from the artwork to the blank wall, in search of a label with captions, or maybe even a salvaging explanation, as if those spare words could supply a hasty rescue from an awkward declaration, whether public or private: "I do not understand."

If this is the case when viewing Stefan Banz and Caroline Bachmann's joint works, their titles could provide you with tentative guidelines, or mislead you even more, since they are conceived just as a note, a written record of the attitude and the feelings of the artists in relation to the painted image. Often cunning quotes drawn from the most varied sources such as literature, cinema, music, art, news, daily life, to name a few, the titles (e.g. *Toteninsel* from the homonymous series of the five works by Arnold Böcklin, or *Man Of God*, from the name of a song by Neil Diamond) serve as keys to the varied and multi-layered visual references intrinsic to the paintings, which are built on both emotional and theoretical bases. Each work by Bachmann and Banz implies a stratified *ensemble* of stories having multiple and unfixed meanings open to further personal interpretations by the viewer. Sometimes funny and ironic, sometimes more serious or disquieting, Bachmann/Banz's stories dig into reality, history, culture, personal and collective memory, by taking back to the present a collection of politicians, movie and rock stars, criminals, writers, directors, artists, as well as landscapes and friends. Those half-forgotten experiences and questionable, mystifying events common to many who have the same socio-political and historical background as Bachmann and Banz—both Northern Europeans coming of age in the 1960s—are recalled and identified through recognizable symbols. Once combined in an unexpected pictorial and conceptual context, these signs engender a distortion of the predetermined visual memory, baffle the acknowl-

edged understanding of some specific facts, personalities, or of life in general, and prod new associative and critical approaches. "A painting never says the truth," comments Banz sardonically, and Bachmann adds "in our works the most important thing is not the image itself, but the topic we choose: most of our paintings are based on misunderstanding."¹

Somehow reminiscent of the tragicomic miscommunication of Cyclops Polyphemus, who explains to the Chorus how he was blinded by "Noman" (Ulysses), during their two months working in the artist residence studio of Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, Bachmann and Banz went through a small pun odyssey that resulted in the name of their first solo show: *Ting Bu Dong*, a title that could sound strange and mysterious to a non-Chinese speaking public. Referring to the story behind this amusing misunderstanding, which has its beginning in a session of traditional medical massage, Banz relates: "We were lying face down in the hole of the couch while having a massage, when we started talking to the masseur, who did not speak English, and the only thing the doctor was telling us over and over was '*Ting bu dong! Ting bu dong! Ting bu dong!* After fifteen minutes you have it in your mind, you learn this sound, '*Ting bu dong.*' When we asked somebody who is Chinese or can speak the language about the meaning, we were always helplessly told 'I do not understand.' We really thought that these people did not understand what we were saying, and only afterwards we discovered that 'ting bu dong' indeed means 'I do not understand!'"²

Literally translated as "I hear what you say, but I am not able to understand," '*ting bu dong*' is an expression connected to oral language. If we consider that Bachmann and Banz are dealing with visual art, perhaps '*kan bu dong*' (literally "I read it" or "I look at it, but I cannot get its meaning"), is a more suitable title for their exhibition. As Bachmann has pointed out, the *kernel* of the

artists' works is not the painting itself and its visual perception by the viewer, but the issues raised by the portrayed subjects. The images, in other words, are nothing but tools Bachmann and Banz employ in order to effectively catch the observer's attention and make him/her reflect upon the existential condition of mankind, as well as the invisible power games lying behind the cyclical recurrence of social and political events throughout history. In their works, Bachmann and Banz show, in a playful way (completely unlike Orson Welles' murky denunciation in *Citizen Kane*), obscure and paradoxical aspects related to the mass communication system, its bombastic voice, theatrical illusions and manipulations of the public.

Racial satire, abuse of power, suppression of rights, scientific experimentation, genocide: these are only a few of the subjects broached in the movie *Planet of The Apes* (1968), an apocalyptic science fiction/sociological analysis where the hierarchy man/animal is inverted, and mute, primitive human beings are ruled by an advanced civilization of apes (divided in the three classes: gorillas, orangutan and chimpanzees). The world-famous image of the farewell kiss of the human astronaut Taylor and chimpanzee Doctor Zira (Charlton Heston and Kim Hunter), which became a universal symbol of tolerance and respect toward the Other, induces an ambiguous sense of fascination/repulsion in the viewer. If Bachmann and Banz emphasize the pathos of the scene by enlarging this very same picture on a huge canvas (390 x 300 cm), they reduce the image's solemnity by painting it in bright, estranging colours. While standing in front of this large, cartoon-like painting (which is much taller the viewer), with the whole fund of knowledge about the image stored in mind, the viewer starts asking him/herself questions which, in a mental chain reaction, dismantle previous certainties. As he/she would be before a sacred icon speaking an unfathomable language, the observer is led to think *Ting Bu Dong*, which is the title of the work realized in 2006.

As the logical opposite to *Ting Bu Dong*, *Der Schrei* was painted right after it. Although showing once more the two figures of a man and an ape, the dissimilarities between the two works are consistent in terms of size (*Der Schrei* is 'only' 75 x 120 cm), technique, and content. *Der Schrei* is an almost completely black and white work named after Munch's painting *The Scream* (1893), and por-

trays both of the subjects frontally and in the same expression of rage – the man in the foreground and the ape in the background. For this painting, Bachmann and Banz resorted to two different illustrations borrowed from a book once used by Francis Bacon as source material. Putting the figures together on the same surface, they removed a small but essential detail—the man's moustache. The man, who is none other than Adolf Hitler, once deprived of his emblematic moustache, looks strangely like a grown-up, naughty boy; nothing in him suggests his xenophobic mania and his position as the dictator of Nazi Germany. Instead of the badge with the swastika, on his collar is placed—and this is the sole colourful element in the work—a brooch with the logo of the Rolling Stones designed by Warhol, cartoon lips with the tongue suggestively outstretched. In *Der Schrei* there is absolutely no contact between the figures, and the one who appears ridiculous and brutish is Hitler.

The image of Taylor's and Zira's kiss already appeared in an early work by Stefan Banz. While working mostly in photography and installation, in 1994 Banz was asked to make a project on the topic "Ars Futura" (art of the future). What Banz did was simply to take the original picture of the kiss and have it reprinted in a format as big as the photographic reproduction means allowed at that time (88 x 88 cm), arousing a series of controversies among those who claimed that it was not possible because of a question of copyright. After seeking legal advice, it turned out that the artist was free to use the image, as it was a public image that was released by the media many years before in order to advertise the movie. It is from this event that Banz started his creative considerations, afterwards developed together with Bachmann, that have extended to references from various fields including literature and cinema, challenging our received notions of authorship and auteurism (from the term "auteur" inaugurated in 1954 by Truffaut). The resulting works examine those mechanisms which are triggered by acts of appropriation and reinterpretation: this is the case of rock bands such as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, some of whose most famous songs are actually by Chuck Berry, or in another way, the Director's Guild of America, whose members fabricated a non-existent director *ad hoc* for those movies that were subject to too many manipulations by Hollywood, and therefore were left orphaned by their real directors, who no longer wanted to be associated with the resulting films.

The self-referential character of TV and Hollywood cinema, the narcissistic complacency of their piloted, narcotizing entertainment, resting on a lack of authentic content and context, and television's modulated spectacularity and jolly reoccurrence of the well-known are all topics of Thomas Pynchon's corrosive novel *Vineland* (1990).³ In an episode of the book, one of the characters, Zoyd, repeats his annual stunt—a stunning jump through a glass window—before the cameras in order to amuse a sluggish, tube-addicted audience. By the constant repetition of the feat over the years, any spontaneity is lost and it becomes only routine. As a result, it is Zoyd who has to follow the camera in slow motion, while simulating insane faces and wearing a gaudy costume chosen uniquely because it will “look good on TV.” While performing his trick once more, Zoyd discovers that, unbeknownst to him, even the glass windows of the Cucumber Lounge, the bar in which he was called to perform, have been replaced with Hollywood special effect “clear sheet candy” (Cucumber Lounge is also the origin of the title of the painting *Cucumber Lounge* (Nataline & Weiwei, 2006).

TV, the “preeminent machine of decontextualization” and human alienation that falsifies everything, turning it into a mere show, is something from which Thomas Pynchon, as a man who shuns publicity, avoids so much that for decades the only pictures available of him dated back to the early 1950s.⁴ It is one of these rare and often reproduced portraits, shot when the mysterious writer was still a young man, that Bachmann and Banz selected for their painting *Double (Thomas Pynchon)* (2006). Like many other works by Bachmann/Banz, such as *Race Records* (2004) or *The Last Smoker (John Ford)* (2005), the subject is painted in black and white in order to keep adherence to the source picture, and/or to give the feeling of the past.

Similarly to *Ting Bu Dong* and *Der Schrei*, this work, as it is plainly evidenced in the title, is centered on the theme of the double, although from another viewpoint. The very same picture of Thomas Pynchon, encircled in a round outline, appears twice as if seen through binoculars, therefore highlighting the frustrated lust of the mass-media and the audience for images of the writer on the one hand, the dual aspect—public and private—of Pynchon's life on the other.

Although Bachmann and Banz never work in series, a number of other paintings produced throughout their collaboration (which be-

gan in June 2004) deal with perspective and “different ways of looking at things.”⁵ If, in *Double (Thomas Pynchon)*, the view through the binoculars is misrepresented (what can be seen through the two lenses is the identical image viewed from the same angle), in *Les Jumelles* (2005) the eyes of the subjects (Ayatollah Khamenei and a General) are hidden behind the binoculars the figures hold in their hands. While a projector, a spyglass and cameras are optical instruments visible in *Projection* (2006), *La longue vue* (2006) and *Le plateau d'or* (2005/2006), optical effects are the focal point of works such as *Réflexion* (2006), which depicts a dark dish that reflects the backlit subject's head, or *Contre-jour* (2006), an almost black on black painting representing the profile of Fidel Castro.

Continuing their research on the meaning of images, their function and technical exploitation in art and the art system, and the mass-media (as well as in daily life), Bachmann/Banz believe that nowadays existence basically has a digital form. On this point Bachmann states: “Today almost anyone can own a camera and put his own picture on the web. In this way, everybody all over the world can see it. This gives a completely other dimension to our spirit and our body.”⁶

Besides artistic, documentary or advertising purposes, more and more often, images are regarded not only as a prosthetic memory, but also as a stage. Accustomed to posing in front of a camera or acting before a camcorder, people know that what counts and will eventually last is not content, but appearance; not what people are, but what they choose to present. Banz affirms: “We are all rock stars, Hollywood stars, famous politicians, acclaimed writers... an image, we exist through an image; maybe a moving image, but still flat, still bi-dimensional, and it is still a frame without context.”⁷

What happens with there is nobody before the objective lens? What happens when the camera films itself? What happens when the viewer, moved by pure curiosity, makes the effort to climb a ladder and unexpectedly finds himself face-to-face with his own reflection? These are some of the questions put forward by Bachmann and Banz's recent installations *Narziss* and *Echo*, both completed in 2006.

Narziss consists of a life-size 35 mm movie camera placed in the centre of a black-floored quadrangular basin filled with 5 cm of water. Like Narcissus, the protagonist of the Greek legend who, falling in love with himself, died and was transformed into a daffodil

after having seen his own image reflected on the water, the camera indulgently films itself. The only things that would change in the film frames, if the camera was working, are the mirrored shapes of the observers as they approach the basin. Whether the camera is really shooting or not, whether it is an authentic camera or not, is something to be discovered by the viewer.

In *Echo*, Bachmann/Banz continue to explore changes of perspective within a three-dimensional space. A ladder is mounted vertically on one of the sides of a 250 cm high black wooden cube (black is a recurrent colour both in the paintings and in the installations). Once on the top, the viewer will find a cubic basin of shallow water. If divinity would like to punish overly self-absorbed viewers in the same way as Narcissus, it could be that quite a number of flowers would grow next to the installation.

Based in Hollywood, Paramount Pictures is one of the most famous film distribution and production companies worldwide. Since 1914, a great number of movies—with their directors and film stars—have passed through the oldest motion pictures studio in the United States. Although the design of Paramount Pictures' world-famous logo—a mountain surrounded by a halo of stars—has been subject to small touch-ups over the years, the theories and the suppositions identifying the represented peak with this or that existing mountain has never stopped blossoming. Banz, who knows almost all the Swiss mountains by name, believes Paramount Pictures' image was not inspired by any American mountain, but by the renowned Swiss Finsteraarhorn. A screenshot of the opening Paramount Pictures logo, *Finsteraarhorn* (2006) is a painting depicting a string of white stars flying in the direction of the mountain. This work humorously hints at American national pride, as well as the political, historical and cultural relationships between the United States and Switzerland, two countries that are remarkably different in terms of land size.

Dealing with a similar topic, *Painting* (2006) plays with another national symbol: the flag. As with the general uncertainty about the real or fictional nature of the mountain in the Paramount Pictures logo, *Painting* illustrates a fictitious red and white flag. On it, the white cross characterizing the Swiss flag is multiplied by twenty, replacing the fifty stars of an inverted and reversed American flag. In the nearly completely black and white painting *Race Records* (2004), a white star that refers both to idea of celebrity and to American painter Frank Stella ('*stella*' in Italian means 'star') is

pinned on the garment of William Shakespeare. The portrait of Shakespeare, emerging from the striped background patterned in the style of Stella's minimalist black paintings (1958-60), looks familiar to the viewer, who may be unaware that the real features of the great poet and playwright are actually unknown. Of the numerous pictures of Shakespeare, all differing one another, the best-known portrait (called *Flower Painting* after the name of one of its owners, Sir Desmond Flower) once scientifically examined, turned out to be a work of the 1800s, probably a copy of Martin Droeshout's copper engraving picture published on the title page of the First Folio (1623). When Shakespeare died in 1616, Droeshout was only fifteen, and it is not sure whether he ever met the Bard, or if he made the portrait according to the descriptions offered by Shakespeare's fellow actors.

The black background of *The Republican* (Dennis Hopper) (2005) is also covered in white stars. This black and white work portrays a recent picture of Dennis Hopper, who brilliantly emerged as an actor in the cult movie *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and as a director in his counterculture classic *Easy Rider* (1969). After ups and downs in his career (and his work in the parallel profession of photography), Hopper stabilized his career as a character actor, and, in addition to appearing in films, started working extensively in TV drama. Dennis Hopper, formerly one of the symbols of the rebellious hippie generation who, over the years has become a registered Republican, is an example of a multi-faceted man, trapped lifelong in the role of the bad guy, both on the screen and in his private life.

Banz pointed out, "You can become a star by doing something positive, but you can be a star also by doing something negative."⁸ Celebrities, movie and rock stars, politicians and even common people have to deal with a role they play or are assigned, a sort of second skin that becomes more and more difficult to tear off and under which unpredicted identities can be concealed. This is the case with the main character of the Japanese motion picture *The Face of Another* (*Tanin no kao*, 1966) by Hiroshi Teshigahara, a disfigured man who succeeds in convincing his doctor to make him a lifelike mask modeled on the face of a stranger; once his wish is satisfied, he slowly realizes his existence to be forever influenced by the disguise. Similarly, the subjects of Bachmann/Banz's works are caught while acting and thus unmasked by means of the artists' interpretation.

Elisabeth (2005) is a satirical painting in which Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip, with their perplexed composure and western formal dress, stare uncomprehendingly at the gestures of an aborigine—a perfect image for an English popular weekly magazine. In *Kaktus (Nixon & Elvis)* (2006), Nixon shakes hands with Elvis Presley in front of the camera, and by doing this he takes advantage of the Rock star's charisma in order to try and win the favor of possible electors. Black clothed key members of the American administration thoughtfully look at the objective lens in *As I Opened Fire* (2004), a work in which the detail of Anne Frank's portrait in the background comes into sight only at a closer look, as well as an excerpt of a radio combat message (borrowed from one of Lichtenstein's works) written as a caption on the upper part of the painting.

Ambush (The Killers of Bonnie & Clyde) (2006) takes its name from the book *Ambush: The real story of Bonnie & Clyde*, written in 1979 by Deputy Ted Hinton, one of the six officers who shot the infamous outlaw couple to death on May 23, 1934. If in his book Hinton revised his position about the whole story, in the painting he is represented while smugly smirking with the other officers who, regarded as heroes by the media and common people, became guilty of the same kind of crime committed by their victims.

The work *Death Sentence (The Charles Manson Girls)* (2006) is connected to a spectacular murder trial that occurred in 1971—at that time one of the longest and most expensive in American history. According to the source picture, the painting represents Patricia Krenwinkel, Susan Atkins and Leslie Van Houten, who are happily laughing before the cameras, right after having been convicted of murder and sentenced to execution by gas chamber (the verdict was later commuted to life imprisonment) for the ferocious homicides of pregnant Sharon Tate (wife of Roman Polanski) and four other people at Cielo Drive, as well as for those of Mr. and Mrs. La Bianca in 1969. During the seven months of the trial, the three women, absolutely remorseless about their crimes, behaved like TV stars and, as members of the so-called Charles Manson Family, they became a worldwide symbol of evil.

Supported by producer Rick Rubin, the man behind many groundbreaking hip-hop and rap/metal bands (and who recently worked on an album by Neil Diamond), the band Slipknot specializes in trash metal and in the theatrical performances they stage during their concerts, invariably wearing Halloween-like masks. In the

painting *I Shot a Kennedy (Slipknot)*, 2004, the members of the band are portrayed in their costumes, looking like a medley of monsters raked up from a bunch of B-grade horror movies. Under their flamboyant outfits, Slipknot preserves their anonymity and builds an aura of mysterious comic terror that, enhanced by their stunts and the deconstructive texts of their songs, attracts great attention and the resonance of the media.

In the visual arts, Pablo Picasso is undoubtedly one of the most famous artists of the twentieth century, his face and his stripped T-shirt, probably as well known as his works. In the 290 x 250 cm sized painting *L'homme qui tire plus vite que se son ombre (Pablo Picasso)*, 2006, Bachmann and Banz represent him in the shoes of an improvised cowboy who examines his pistol with an arch smile; on his T-shirt, in the middle of his breast, is a small, colourful target. With this work, Bachmann and Banz explore once more the nature of success, the target of any artist. Where does success really reside? In the magnetic personality of the artist, or in the value of his artworks?

¹ Excerpts from an interview with Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz in their artist in residence studio of Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, November 16, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1990. ISBN: 0-316-72444-0

⁴ Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe" in Patricia Mellencamp, ed., *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 222-239. ISBN: 0-253-20582-4

⁵ Caroline Bachmann in an interview with Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz in their artist in residence studio in Beijing, November 16, 2006

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz in their artist in residence studio in Beijing, November 16, 2006

⁸ Ibid.

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