Common Objects

Postmodernist discourse, naivety and the logic of consumption in the work of Donald Baechler.

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Fall 2006
BA-thesis (KOV303)
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Frontpage illustration: *Donald Baechler*. Courtesy of *Loco Fine Art Publishers*.

1. Introduction

My first encounter with Donald Baechler's work took place sometime in the late 1980ties at Anders Tornberg Gallery in Lund. At the time I was only a child and perhaps especially susceptible to the naïve aesthetic of his paintings. I saw something I could have made myself, but set in the serious – adult – context of the gallery space. Years later, during my first year at university, I would reencounter some of these paintings in the private collection of Anders Tornberg's widow. My original amazement reappeared, but this time I saw pictorial complexity, where first I had seen childish simplicity

This paper is an attempt to produce some coherent understanding of Donald Baechler's works in relation to late modern discourses on art in general and the painting medium in particular. Since Joseph Beuys declared painting to be dead in the early 60ties, the act of canvas painting has required either an embrace of the modernist understanding of high art, or a conceptual redefinition of the medium that allows it to engage in the ongoing deconstruction of artistic practice that is central to postmodernist concerns.

Sigmar Polke: *Plastic Tubs*. Oil on canvas. 1964. Courtesy of *Swirner & Wirth*.

Donald Baechler belongs to a generation of New York painters that emerged during the 80ties as pioneers of a full-scale revival of the up till then ostracized artistic medium. Though heterogeneous in style, they all shared common ground in their efforts to redefine the medium trough a critical approach to the modernist tradition. Peter Halley, for instance, worked consistently with geometric abstraction, while undermining the foundations of modernist abstraction set by Mondrian and Malevich. The same could be said of David Diao, who specifically took on the Russian suprematists. Other artists worth mentioning, who took part

of the redefinition of painting are Ross Bleckner, David Wojnarovicz and David Salle. In Europe we could mention Georg Bazelitz and, somewhat earlier, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, as front figures in this reclaiming of the easel. Certainly the two latter played a seminal part, when they as students of Beuys rebelled against the teacher's dogma by solely engaging in the nearly forbidden practice of applying paint on canvas. They are equally relevant for Baechler, who encountered their work during his time as an art student in Germany.

I hint here at some of the pervading art theoretical discourses concerning the medium of painting, a subject I intend to explore further in the following text. The work of Donald Baechler may seem grounded in outsider art, and even have an air of banality, but as I will show in the coming chapters, it is well in tune with postmodern discussions on the meaning and reason of art, as well as firmly set within the critical framework of contemporary painting.

My central supposition, on which I will build this investigation, is that the naive style so characteristic of Baechler, forms a strategy to take painting further and beyond the limits of modernist painting, and that Baechler uses the interplay between style and motif as a vehicle of conferring meaning of a linguistic kind. Each painting forms a verbal statement in a pictorial mode of expression, referring to social and art-historical discourse on consumer culture and modernism, while actively assuming a critical position towards cultural hegemony, inscribing marginalised voices into the picture. In sum, this is a study of contemporary painting as a discursive field.

1.2 Method and material

Conducting a work orientated study, my attention will lie on the particular art works, on their formal characteristics and their context, but above all on their relationship to dominating discourses in art and culture. In doing this I will propose a reading of Baechler's work through the lenses of critical theory, drawing from semiotics as well as Marxist-oriented cultural studies and other postmodernist positions.

My material will primarily consist of a number of works created by Baechler during the 80ties and early 90ties. These I divide in three categories: compositions of various elements, repetitive series of iconographic figures (cartoon-like faces, birds, flowers, art historical icons etc.) and images of objects (balls, ice cream cones, suitcases etc).

An important aspect of Baechler's paintings is the technique he employs. In itself, collage – as among others Rosalind Krauss has shown – is a medium that involves a number of referential activities on visual as well as verbal discourse. When I discuss Baechler's use of this method and his working process in general, it will be with the purpose of clarifying the content of the work rather than adding biographical notes on the artist. However, contextualising the work requires some comparative measures and I do find it relevant to discuss the artist's relation to other artists and their work, in particular Pop Artists and the German conceptual painters that paved the way for Baechler and his generation, as well as more peripheral artists dedicated to so called Outsider Art.

1.3 Theoretical approach

Any discussion on the medium of painting after Goya becomes ultimately a discussion on modernism and on the problems it poses. When we talk of a postmodern stance it necessarily implies an opposition to and a critique of the conceptions of art and the role of the artist fundamental to modernist ideals. The modernist view of art was utopian hegemonic in the sense that it held an inherent belief in the supremacy of art and its constant progression. When Clement Greenberg in his famed essay *On Modernist Painting* (1960) prescribed a course of development for the medium of painting, which seemed to culminate in the monochrome, it was easy to perceive it as a dead end once Yves Klein and later the American minimalists had done their entirely white canvases. If abstraction was the purification of the medium, which modernist art upheld, it could not become purer than an empty canvas.[1]

According to Thomas McEvilley this conclusion caused a crisis in art that brought forth an array of alternative modes of artistic expression from the 60ties and on, that may not have been as much a vogue of new media as a collective attempt to overcome the limitations of modernist art. Today, much of the art from this time can only be accessed as, often scarce, documentation, since a central concern of conceptualists, the Fluxus movement and performance artists – all leading tendencies in the 70ties – was to relieve art from objecthood.

In that perspective painting was naturally a prime enemy. Much more so since the major achievement of modernism was to reduce painting to its most basic material quality. The

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[1] McEvilley (1993), p 35f. Cf. Wallenstein, Sven-Olov (2003), "Det utvidgade fältet – Från högmodernism till konceptualism", p. 123.

practise of painting in a postmodern situation has been characterised by a fundamental doubt on its claims of representation, unity, neutrality and timelessness.[2] These doubts mirror a continuous critique not only of the act of painting itself, but also its relation to other art media and – in extension – art's relationship to culture and society.

Jonathan Harris points to different deconstructive strategies within contemporary painting to both re-evaluate the media and reassert it. One of these is *hybridisation*, referring to the plurality and inclusiveness of contemporary art. Hybridity in painting expresses itself as questioning the hierarchical structure of traditional art media by refusing to recognise the boundaries between art forms, different media, or between high art and popular culture. "Capitalism, technological innovation, and spectacular representation", writes Harris, "refigure fundamentally the capacity of people to know and understand the phenomenal world, a state of affairs that brings the very meaning of "reality" itself in question."[3]

This uncertainty of truth and reality, particular to postmodern culture, emphasises the temporal and heterogeneous in art, while the unwillingness to state claims of superiority causes contemporary art to place discourse within quotation marks.

It is important to clarify, however, that the postmodernist position does not signify a relativism of the kind "anything goes" and a neutral plurality that gives equal weight to all discourse. On the contrary, as Hal Foster remarks, "each position on or within postmodernism is marked by political 'affiliations'/…/ and political agendas."[4] He proposes we view postmodernism as a conflict between old and new cultural and economic modes. In reading contemporary art, then, one ought to identify this conflict, which is present even when the artist expressively does not engage in the theoretical discussion of his time.

When viewing the work of Donald Baechler, it seems to expose society as the spectacle Guy Debord described it to be in his philosophical manifest *Society as a Spectacle* (1967): "In those societies where the modern form of production rules, all life appears as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that once was experienced unmediated has been estranged to a reproduction." [5] The spectacle is a social relation between people, conveyed through images and is essentially a mechanism of an ongoing commodification of human life. The images this spectacle offers us are all goods designed to perpetuate the fetishism of other commodities. This is obviously a Marxist comprehension of economic structures in modern

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[2] Harris, Jonathan (2003), "Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism", p. 18.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Foster (1991), p. 11.

[5] Debord, Guy (2003), "The Society of the Spectacle.", p. 142.

society, and in my further analysis of Donald Baechler's works I will rely heavily on Fredric Jameson's understanding of postmodern society and consumer culture, which not only identifies the commodification of life, as Debord does, but also explores its aesthetic dimension.

2. Naïve resistance – Figure as discourse and ideology.

Georg Baselitz: *Clown*. Oil on canvas. 1981.

To initiate a discussion on style in painting is not without controversy. The activity of studying individual features in works of art appears to have little relevance in an era of mass-production, where art works more seldom than often are hand made by the author him/herself. Yet many of the artists emerging in the 80ties, especially painters, worked following conceptual methods bearing highly individual visual traits, resembling what could be described as style. A work by Georg Bazelitz, for instance, is unmistakable for anyone that has seen his upside-down painted figures. Any painter repeating the trick after Baselitz is either paying him reference or forging him. Likewise could be said of other gimmicky painters such as Robert Morris, Frank Stella or Lucio Fontana.

There is however a fundamental difference between artists following a conceptual recipe and those shaping their works with gestural marks. The objective is not the conveyance of personality, but rather a matter of communication through trademarks. I find the parallel to commercial logotypes particularly accurate in describing the logic behind the phenomenon: it is not merely a graphic image of a company name, but a message carrying information of what values the sender wants to associate with, of what distinguishes its goods from others.

Art is not that much different. It carries a name as a brand (the author) and a reputation as trademark (the works ranking in the art scene) – features that can be reduced to commodities. In the work of Jean Dubuffet, style is very much part of the message. His naïve, *brut*, style was a deliberate strategy to disassociate with the intellectual aestheticism of western art at the time. Dubuffet incorporated visual expressions gathered from Outsider Art– art produced by non-professional artists, often amateurs, mental patients or children – and handicraft. McEvilley writes that in general "figural representations of any age are hidden expressions of the dominant ideology of that time" and I believe this is the core of Dubuffet and other 'late-naivists' resistance to what is perceived as an elitist style of representation.

This concern is well articulated in Donald Baechler's painting *Balzac (After Rodin)*. Based on the monumental sculpture by Rodin, a work that by all accounts is an epitome of modernist ideals, it effectively deconstructs the ideological structure underlying the original and wipes clean all mythical connotations connected to the modernist discourse.

Donald Baechler: *Balzac (After Rodin)*.
Acrylic and collage on canvas. 1989.
Collection of Peter Brant.

If the original bronze cast by Rodin projects the figure of intellectual genius, conveying both tragedy and personality in dramatic plastic shapes, as well as breaking free from classical conceptions of sculptural depiction, the Balzac by Baechler projects nothing except a fat, big nosed man surrounded by beach balls. The flatness of the image is complete.

The childish aspect of the drawing does indeed highlight the image's flatness with its two-dimensional contour lines. Let me already state that this kindergarten-like way of drawing is

what characterises Baechler's style above all. He avoids foreshortening, perspective, and anatomical details in a way that resembles the perceptive and cognitive limitations of children. Thus figures appear in profile or full frontal, with strange anatomical proportions and added limbs. Just as a child might remember that people have ears and fingers at the last moment, Bachler has attached a nose to Balzac after drawing the head, making it look like a fake-nose of the kind you'd find in a novelty store.

So far we could describe this style as neo-naivist, or perhaps post-naivist since there are several generations of artists before Baechler that turned to a naïve style of painting. Between Dubuffet's *Dhotel nuance d'abricot* (1947) and Baselitz' *Clown* (1981) there is more than three decades, but the affinities run deeper than the mere visual expression. The naivety here narrows down to the full frontal figures, indicating a lack of perspective, exaggerated facial features – a crude technique based on forceful contour-drawing rather than subtle grading of colour –, and lastly, smeared layers of paint. All these calculated stylistic features invoke a sensation of primitive or immature depiction.

Jean Dubuffet: *Dhotel nuance d'abricot*.
Oil on canvas. 1947.

That the use of perspective follows the discourse of western rationality, in effect upholding a belief in the Cartesian subject, is a reasonable explanation to the necessity of some artists to liberate themselves from that legacy. Writing about the use of perspective, McEvilley states that it builds a subjective point of view into the picture and that the subject finds himself looking at the world, i.e. the picture, from the outside, taking part in it only by the act of seeing.[6] Laura Mulvey, reinterpreting Lacans concept of The Gaze, suggested that this act is an act of power and control. Perspective separates a spectator/subject (male, Mulvey argues)

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[6] McEvilley (1993), p. 92.

from the picture circumscribing an object (female) of consumption and desire, while allowing identification with an active role through the subjective point of view: "the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror-recognition in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of this imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape."[7]

Mulvey's argument is of course open to other aspects than the question of male patriarchy. Whether we identify the dominating discourse as being male, western, rationalistic or capitalistic, it all conforms to a common exercise of power and control through exclusion and domination.

Working within the tendency of the naïve, offers a method of resistance to the perpetuation of such discursive exertion of power. Historically, beginning with Henri Rousseau, it might have been a genuine expression of lacking formal artistic training, but that cannot explain the work of Donald Baechler.

Jens Fänge: *Utan titel (Without Title)*. Oil on canvas. 2003. Courtesy of *Galerie Leger*.

Returning to *Balzac (After Rodin)*, I want to note the obvious: it is a figurative work. We do see a man sitting on a rock and some beach balls hovering in front of him. The empty background, however, responds to the abstract image in its lack of horizontal line and spatial depth. The relation between figure and ground has been a central element in Western painting,

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[7] Mulvey, Laura: "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18.

"expressing the relation of the ego with the surrounding world."[8] McEvilley argues that much of the neo-figuration in contemporary painting (from the 70ties onward) explores the tension between figure and ground, often by disassociation of the figure from a three-dimensional space.[9] The effects vary in a broad spectrum.

In Jens Fänge's painting *Without Title* (2003) the background is flat, with an art-nouveau inspired pattern causing some movement in the picture plane, giving the figures an aspect of being cut out images glued on wall paper. They are separated from the background and the sensation of space is expressed in the way the figurative elements are organised in relationship to each other. Thus the illusion of three-dimensionality is fixed on the center of the canvas, where the man turns in an odd backward movement. The space here is something liberating that allows the figures to move in all directions, aided by the pattern stretching to the borders of the canvas.

Something quite the opposite in the case of *Balzac*. The ground here does not interact with the figures in any spatial organisation. Balzac, as well as the balls, seem drawn and pasted onto the very surface of the canvas, as if some mischievous child had vandalised an abstract painting by filling out the void he might have perceived in it.

I perceive the abstract modernist painting to be onthologically opposed to naïve figuration. Clement Greenberg viewed the abstract as necessary in the development of the medium of painting towards complete autonomy. Ridding itself of the demand to represent, painting became preoccupied with its own specificity – the particularities of the media, its delimitations and objecthood – or in Greenberg's words, "determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself."[10] Michael Fried elaborates on the importance of outward form, rather than subject, in modernist and late-modernist painting. Stressing the form implies a rejection of illusionism and calls for what Fried describes as 'literalness' in art, meaning that the art object coincides with its form and shape, not referring to anything beyond.[11]

The merging of figurative and abstract, as Baechler does in his Balzac, seems to be done in an act of irreverence, rather than in a spirit of reconciliation. Baechler's Balzac has strong features of caricature, and the exterior manner in which the figures have been added to the surface of the canvas accentuates the divide between background and foreground. On a

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[8] McEvilley, p. 92

[9] McEvilley (1993), p. 94

[10] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

[11] Fried, Michael: "Konst och objektalitet.", p. 100 Cf Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

discursive level Baechler appropriates the modernist Abstract, with all its connotations of high brow culture and aesthetic ideals, of self reflection and purity, as well as the modernist Sculpture (Rodin's original Balzac) – ultimately Art History in its stage of climax. This act is repeated with stronger emphasis in another painting, bluntly named *Abstract Painting With Spaceship* (1985), where a spaceship navigates through an abstract painting as if it were a landscape.

The use of parody as a means of critique is by now a prevalent, to say the least, strategy in art, but the childishly drawn Balzac alone is not satirical.

Donald Baechler: *Abstract Painting With Spaceship*. Acrylic and polyurethane on canvas. 1985. Courtesy of *Tony Shafrazi Gallery*.

On the contrary, naivety is in essence devoid of irony, being innocent and sincere. Reading *Balzac (After Rodin)* as parodic requires the beach balls.

The introduction of common place objects in the realm of high art refers unmistakably to postmodern forerunners such as Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, whose work generally is labelled Pop Art, and becomes in Bachler's work an appropriation of similar kind as the modernist abstract. This is not Pop Art, but it invokes Pop Art by means of allusion.

According to McEvilley, art – and specifically painting – during the 80ties distinguished itself by a high level of reference to other works of art and art history. These works were generally understood as "a visual strategy of deconstruction", in particular of modernist ideology, by then considered an undesirable heritage of art.[12] Hal Foster also points out that appropriation of art draws both on ideology critique and deconstruction, exposing "the reality

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[12] McEvilley (1993): p. 168.

underneath the representation."[13] But what does it then mean when Baechler quotes both modernist art and its antagonist in the same picture?

One explanation can be found within a postmodern discourse on style. The demise of the (artistic) subject makes it increasingly difficult to speak of individual style, and according to Jameson one of its consequences is the impossibility of artistic originality, in the sense that the modernists formulated it. Style becomes a set of dead languages, which artists may use, *re*-use in fact, without conviction. Style, then, is nothing more than pastiche, something artists may wear as a mask. But as such, Jameson notes, the pastiche differs from parody, lacking the latter's ironic impulses.[14]

I hinted earlier that the beach balls in *Balzac (After Rodin)* could be interpreted as parodic interventions in, what for the sake of argument, could be described as a critical statement on art history and modernist ideology. Juxtaposing these colourful balls with Rodin's Balzac and the modernist abstract, permits such an interpretation.

Donald Baechler: *Beachballs*. Acrylic on canvas. 1989.
Courtesy of *Maruani & Noirhomme Gallery.*

But if we look at other paintings by Baechler, it becomes obvious that the beach balls themselves do not constitute parody. They are only balls – generic objects connected to childhood play.

In *Beachballs* (1989), there is no tension between modernist icons and critical discourse on modernism of the kind we saw earlier. It seems much closer to Pop Art and its stacking of manufactured goods. Pop Art is essentially a "theatre of the commonplace object."[15] Andy

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[13] Foster (1996), p. 118.

[14] Jameson (1998), p. 130. Louis Althusser proposed that ideology precedes the subject, that the latter is an effect of the former. The idea of the subject is socially and historically bounded and in order for us to perceive ourselves subjectively we need an ideological construct conditioning us in that thought. Cf. Heartfield, James: "Postmodernism and 'The Death of the Subject.'" (2002). http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/en/heartfield-james.htm

[15] Maharaj (1991), p. 22.

Warhol's *100 Cans* (1962), is a significant point of reference. The treatment of consumer goods – in Baechler's case, toys – as icons may be what is most specific of Warhol and other Pop artists, but in *100 Cans* it is not iconicity that is at play, but rather the *means* of iconicity. An icon's status as such depends on the diffusion of its image, where complete recognition is a measure of importance. But however widespread the image, the icon still requires some level of uniqueness to be differentiated from other mass-produced goods. A hundred soup cans deteriorate the object's iconicity by exposing its generic quality as well as reducing each can to an ornament of a larger pattern. The image, basically figurative, becomes abstracted.

Meanwhile, repetition is in itself a rejection of the concept of originality, an idea so fundamental of modernist art, and its inherent discourse of the artist as individual.[16]

Andy Warhol: *100 Cans.* Oil on canvas. 1962.
Collection of *Albright-Knox Art Gallery.*

The same could be said of Baechler's beach balls. However realistic these depictions of balls are, together they form a semi-abstract geometric composition. What remains is the naïve non-ironic language of form, translatable if you like to style, that resists any traces of individual originality, while still retaining something of the crafts-man's touch in the finish, invoking commercial ad-sign painting of mid 20th century.

But the artist's hand is more pronounced in Baechler's early works of the 80ties. In *Victims of Emigrants* (1984-5) the composition of figures appropriate the naïve feel of children's drawings, simultaneously undermining the authenticity of such a pictorial manner. The bird

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[16] Cf. Krauss (1986), p. 160.

and the human figures head are two-dimensional, avoiding any illusion of extending into space, while both body and pots make use of perspective in an enough sophisticated way as to indicate that appropriation of naïve elements can be used to create displacements within the picture plane in terms of spatial organisation.

Several of Baechler's paintings in the mid 80ties use the shape of the sphere as a denominator of space, but also to convey movement. The flat bird in *Victims of Emigrants*, for instance, is fixed onto the surface of the canvas, while the human figure, at least his body, seems to be tilting out of the picture engaged in some sort of rolling dance. In spite of occupying the very surface of the canvas, the figures seem posited in different places in relation to each other: the male figure tilting one step ahead of the bird, while the pots hovering somewhere further back. As in Jens Fänge's painting discussed earlier, space is conveyed not through perspective but through relations between objects.

   Other paintings from this period highlight the flatness of the figure in accordance to the modernist break-down of a recognisable space which actual objects can inhabit.

Donald Baechler: *Victims of Emigrants*. Acrylic and rollerplex on canvas. 1984-85. Collection of the artist.

A painting such as *Fountain Head* (1984) lacks the motion and spatial ambiguities seen in *Victims of Emigrants*. It can also be argued that the character of the figure is less naïve than in the paintings I have discussed up till now. There is something not quite as convincing in the drawing, something too conscious and mature to be read as naivety, or even as pastiche.

   If the composition of *Victims of Emigrants* was too complicated to emulate persuasively a visual expression that could pass as unreflective naivism, what disqualifies *Fountain Head* is the fact that the figure is greatly reduced and carefully wrought. The level of abstraction is

simply too elevated. This impression is fortified by the over-worked collaged background, that by itself would make a convincing abstract painting, reminiscent of early works by Robert Ryman, for instance.

Is this abstract art struggling towards figuration, or is it the other way round? Donald Baechler himself admits of being "an abstract painter at heart". "But I just can't find it in myself to make an abstract painting. I need something to hook it onto", he comments in an interview.[17]

Donald Baechler: *Fountain Head*.
Acrylic and paper on canvas. 1984.
Courtesy of *Tony Shafrazi Gallery*.

I think of *Fountain Head* as an exponent of a hybrid moment where the figurative and the abstract coexist – co-mingle, actually – without entering a conflict. As Michael Ashbury notes, hybridity serves as "an interpretative tool which evades the polarisation between the figurative association to a specific cultural place and the purported universality of abstract language."[18] The cultural space to which the figure in *Fountain Head* refers is no less culturally charged that the Brazilian paintings Ashbury builds his arguments upon. It is the domain of crude comics, youthful scribbles, of Outsider Art – a cultural domain far from that of the elitist culture to which the abstract belongs. In the following chapter I will explore this topic further.

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[17] Interview with Donald Baechler. "London Calling" by Joe La Placa. *Artnet Magazine* 2003.

[18] Ashbury (2003), p. 141.

2.1 Baechler and the logic of consumption.

"[E]very position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatisation – is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today."[19]

In his account of postmodern culture, Fredric Jameson argues that in a spirit of aesthetic populism, the cultural production of postmodernity incorporates in its very substance the "'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature /.../ the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance."[20]

  However ardent the postmodern rebellion against modernist aesthetics might be, its own ability to subvert or shock is greatly diminished by having "become institutionalised and /.../ at one with the official or public culture of Western society."[21] The cause behind this, Jameson argues, is that aesthetic production has become incorporated within the general production of commodities.

Donald Baechler: *Bananas*. Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas. 1998.

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[19] Jameson (1984).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

To consume is literally to use up, to devour or even destroy. Consumer goods, on the other hand, might often be items devoured only by looks, or things of continuous use. With this in mind, it is easy to perceive the specific nature of the objects depicted by Baechler. Not only are they consumer goods, but more than often they are objects of instant consumption.

The bananas in *Banana* (1998) are displayed as icons of impermanence, already blackening, suggesting not only the general pictorial genre of still life, but in particular the sub-genre of *vanitas*. An old dutch vanitas still life would function as an allegory of the brevity of human life and vanity of earthly possessions, and so does *Bananas*, yet the vanity exposed here is more markedly the futility of western consumption.

A series of similar still lives depicting ice cream in cones or as popsicles reinforces the argument. Ice cream, by virtue of its melting capacity, stresses immediate consumption in an even more obvious way than the bananas.

Donald Baechler: *Creamsicle #1.* Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas. 1998.

In order to approach the meaning of this, we ought to consider Baechler in relation to strategies in Pop Art. Sarat Maharaj poses the question whether Pop Art's signs "simply replay the scene of consumerist desire" or if they actually "prise open a critical gap in it".[22] It is difficult to avoid feeling confused by the ambiguous use of popular and commercial references in Pop Art. Baechler's paintings of bananas and ice cream mimic the visual language of vintage commercial ads and wrappings, appropriating their delicious look, originally with the purpose of enticing prospective consumers to buy. The creamsicle even

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[22] Maharaj (1991), p. 22.

has a dent in it, suggesting someone already has had a bite, while in accordance to commercial convention declaring the product's creamy content. The act of consumption transfixed and displayed – but is it also endorsed?

Pop Art, Maharaj suggests, "appears as a subversive force emanating from within the very consumerist myths and representations that it calls into question".[23]

This strategy allows us to enter the paintings of Donald Baechler on a level of discourse, pointing towards a reading that discloses a social content beyond form and pictorial arrangement.

Yet the treatment of Pop Art, as inspiration or source of reference, is done in hindsight. Once again Baechler digs into art history, but now usurping the very space that Pop Art avant-garde conquered in its early days. Jameson distinguishes this approach from mere quoting, arguing that postmodern art incorporates its sources, making a whole even of contradictory components.[24]

Earlier I discussed this in terms of hybridity. However, the way in which the images in Baechler relate to other images and textual sources is also a key to recognising the logic of consumption in late capitalist society.

If we consider the genealogy of Baechler's Bananas it is impossible to pinpoint any true original to which they refers. We find a precedent in Andy Warhol's record cover for The Velvet Underground (1966).

Andy Warhol: Cover for *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. 1966

Of course, Warhol's banana lacks any individual qualities, it's simply a banana like any other, if somewhat blackened. It draws from commercial ads, but also from the more general concept of banana, which it serves to define. It is, after all, a simulacra of banana.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Jameson (1998), pp. 128.

Baudrillard's presumption that the post-industrial society is a world of images that simulate each other, being neither original, nor copies, but mere simulacra, seems adequate. This "is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real with the real itself."[25]

I see this process of simulation as being one primary aspect of the commodification of culture, heralded by Debord, by which all cultural production transforms into objects of consumption.

In *Bultaco*, another painting by Baechler, this logic is even more protruding. In his theory of consumption, Baudrillard talks of cultural recycling as a governing principle behind "mass-culture" (which incidentally, he doesn't equal to popular culture in the sense of being non-intellectual or artistic). "Culture is no longer made to last", he argues, but is produced in the same way as "the car of the year" or this seasons trendy shoes. The work of art, the television show or the music record, to name something, "is subject to the same pressure to be 'up-to-the-minute' as material goods." [26]
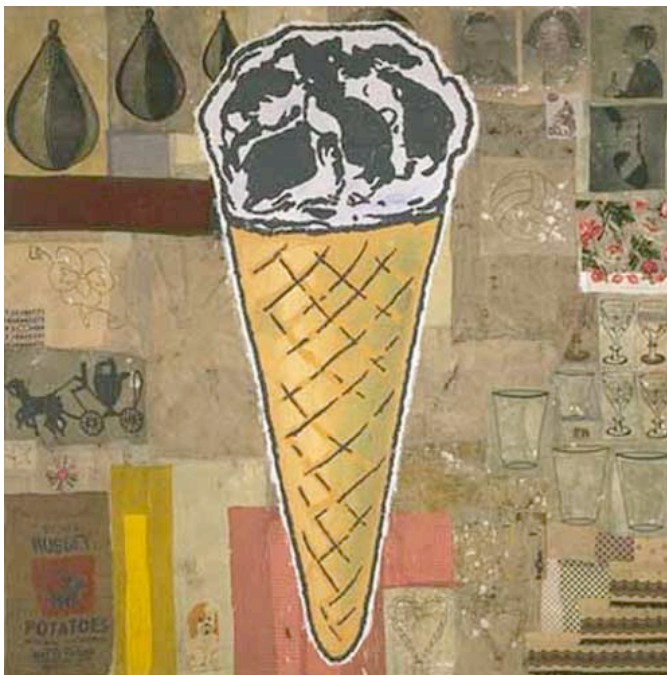
Donald Baechler: *Bultaco*. Acrylic and fabric collage on canvas. 1998. Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

If we look at *Bultaco* this equation seems displayed in a rather cynical fashion. Once again an ice cream constitutes the main element, this time a cone, yet the background consists of a collage of many images.

It has been suggested that the medium of collage carries a critical objective in itself, already in the early modernist collages by Braque and Picasso, operating linguistically by matter of

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[25] Baudrillard (2001), p. 146.
[26] Baudrillard (2004), p. 100.

signs. The fragments in a collage may be read as signs referring to objects, but also to properties or phenomena.[27]

In *Bultanco* it is once again mass-produced objects of consumption that are on display, stacked almost as if on shelves at a department store: catalogue illustrations of glassware, sports-goods – even potatoes. However it is not only modern consumption that is at play here: Valentine-hearts, a cute dog, roses and photographs of people also convey the sentimental needs met by consumption of goods. Desire and objects are interchangeable according to the logic of consumption, just as sentimentality is nothing more than a commodity in society's spectacle.

2.2 Inscribing The Other onto the canvas.

[T]he representational systems of the West admit only one vision – that of the constitutive male subject – or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centred, unitary, masculine."[28]

In my previous discussions, I touched the subject of outsider art, and childish naivety in relation to Donald Baechler's works. This feature is most prevalent in his paintings from the 80ties, but encompass all of his œvre. There is however a clear difference between the early naïve paintings and the later more stylised works. A work such as *Common Property* (1986) shares the same perspective displacements I found in *Victims of Emigrants*, yet here it appears to be expressed in the form of a statement. The female figure is drawn with the preadolescent child's limited spatial perception, employing a full frontal two-dimensional view and ignoring technical abilities of foreshortening. Once again, however, the illusion of artistic or intellectual limitation is being punctured by the insertion of objects that clearly oppose flatness: a ball and a suitcase drawn in perspective as to imply some depth of space.

Now, the ball is collaged onto the canvas and shows all the characteristics of realist depiction. It is smooth and conveys the reflections of light on a curved surface, as would a ball in real life. Confronted with the naïve perception of form and reality, it becomes a reminder of that adult pictorial world in which the child is a marginal figure, an outsider in fact. In *Common Property*, on the other hand, it is the rational and real, the signs of dominant

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[27] Ulmer (1998), pp. 98.
[28] Owen (1998), p. 67.

culture, that are marginalised. Returning to Laura Mulvey's argument on point of view as strategy of domination, I experience that Baechler shifts the balance of power, allowing the child, or the Other, to take the position of the viewer, thereby overriding a cultural hierarchy where the rationalistic western male holds the prerogative of interpretation.

Donald Baechler: *Common Property*.
Acryllic and collage on canvas. 1986.
Collection of Eli Broad.

I believe this strategy to be crucial in Baechlers rearticulation of the painting medium, through deconstruction of its symbolic values and the heavy burden of intrinsic agendas of race, class and gender.[29]

The marginalised Other is not exclusively female, non-western or proletarian, but above all excluded from the master narratives of history, power and progression. The Other is simply whomever is not the Subject or the norm.

Inscribing the presence of the Other is achieved through a series of strategies that by now we are familiar with in the work of Baechler: disassociation of figure and space, appropriation of naivety and rejection of male dominance. The latter however requires some explanation.

By adopting the perspective of the child, Baechler assumes a position opposed to the symbolic and discursive elements that constitute the male subject. The pre-pubertal child is not only emasculated, but is also undefined, amorphous in fact, in its gender status, its physical body and cognitive functions. Furthermore the child is ahistorical, not entirely taking

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[29] Rowley & Pollock (2003), p. 41.

part of discourse, but awaiting to be shaped by it. As such the child is subject to objectification by the dominant culture – always being represented, never representing. Yet the shift of point of view that occurs in many of Baechler's paintings appear to reverse the power of representation. In *Untitled* (1986) it is the adult man that is being interpreted by the viewing child. The man, a police it seems, is shown in profile, thereby passively subjected to the viewer's scrutiny. Several feminist critics have demonstrated how women historically have been depicted in profile or with subverted eyes, exhibited as objects of masculine desire and subdued to social constraint. Patricia Simons talks of the gaze as a metaphor of virility and patriarchal domination.[30] Luce Irigaray explains that "[m]ore than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets out a distance, maintains the distance."[31]

Analysing the work of female 19th painters, Griselda Pollock finds that the viewpoint in a painting by Mary Cassat is that of a small child, the image being composed in such angles and proportions that posits the viewer looking up from the floor, evoking "that child's sense of the space of the room." Elaborating on the meaning of space and perspective, and its social implications, Pollock affirms that "[t]his point of view is neither abstract nor exclusively personal, but ideologically and historically construed."[32]

Donald Baechler: *Untitled*. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 1986. Private collection.

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[30] Simons (2003), p. 41.
[31] Irigaray quoted in Ulmer (1998), p. 81.
[32] Pollock (1988), p. 65.

Thus, in the painting of the uniformed man – an image invested with the insignias of masculinity – we can perceive a strategy that contests the cultural hegemony of the Western male with its innate excluding discourses that dominate the social order.

4. Concluding Discussion

Up till now this essay has primarily explored three themes that in one way or another consist of strategies of representation. The struggle between figuration and abstraction is one of the central problems that artists have faced in the last century, as is artists willingness or reluctance to represent contemporary culture. In later decades, the question on whether art should represent marginalised subjects has been a major concern. So far I have placed Donald Baechler's works in relation to these theoretical discussions, without exhausting the discussions in any way.
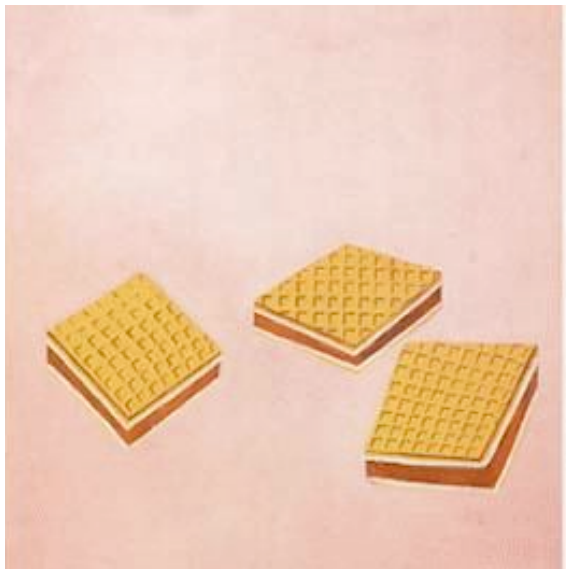
Sigmar Polke: *Biscuits (Kekse)*.
Oil on paper. 1964.

One area barely touched, the placing of Baechler in a specific artistic context, is of mostly historiographic interest, but still valuable for the comprehension of the work. I have already related Baechler to American Pop Art, however there are a number of indications that such an influence has been less direct than what might seem on the surface. Pop Art is not an exclusive American tendency; European artists produced the same kind of work simultaneously with Warhol, Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein. British artists such as Richard

Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi made some of the most emblematic Pop Art. Some critics have claimed that there were fundamental differences between the continents. For instance, Pierre Restany wrote in the catalogue of the first major Pop Art-exhibition in Europe 1961 that "[m]ore rigorous in their logic, simpler and more precise in their presentation, appropriating objects more directly, the Europeans mostly remain 'New Realists' in every sense of the term."[33]

What relevance this has for the work of Baechler requires further investigation, but that it is informed by European art is clear. Studying art in Germany he was impressed by Sigmar Polke, whose earlier works certainly dealt with Pop aesthetics.[34] Consider *Kekse (Biscuits),* a painting from 1964, for example. The similarities to the ice cream-paintings by Baechler are palpable.

I have a keen interest in intertextuality, applying it in this essay where necessary, however not penetrating the matter to greater depth. The fact that Baechler consistently appropriates images and references, while conducting over the years of his artistic trajectory several investigative series of still lives, self portraits and iconographic studies, opens up his work for semiological studies of far greater scope than I have ventured here. Though perhaps I have touched it indirectly.

One such instance is Baechler's representation of consumerist society, previously discussed. Rosalind Krauss has argued that indexical signs operate as traces of causes, referring to objects, rather than reality.[35] Such is the case with the bananas, creamsicles and other objects in Baechler's paintings: they can be read as index of consumerism, in the sense of cultural phenomenon, and signs of mass-production – in other words traces of its cause: capitalism.

The study of contemporary art necessarily becomes a study of contemporary culture, in as much as even the true original art relates to dominating discourses either by adherence or rejection. According to Baudrillard, "[i]f the consumer society is trapped in its own mythology, if it has no critical perspective on itself and if *that is precisely its definition*, there can be no contemporary art which is not, in its very existence and practice, compromised by and complicit with that opaquely self-evident state of affairs."[36] Perhaps too sweepingly, Baudrillard goes on to argue that Pop Art is "an art which does not contradict the world of

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[33] Quoted in *Pop Art. An International Perspective* (1991), p. 228.

[34] Baechler mentions studying in Germany during the 70ties and being exposed to Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz and Sigmar Polke, three artists at the time relatively unknown in America, yet already famous in Europe. See "Interview with Donald Baechler" by David Kapp, *Bomb Magazine*, n. d.

[35] Krauss (1985), p. 198.

[36] Baudrillard (2004), p. 116. Original italics.

objects, but explores its system, to make itself part of that system."[37] As we have seen in this essay there is not only an impulse of resistance to this system in Pop Art and its successors, but also an inherent critique. Yet it is marked by a profound ambivalence towards this society of objects and signs, a world so seductive and frightening at the same time.

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[37] Ibid.

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