

Orientations - A few words about my work

Peter Panyoczki, New Zealand, 1998

"Doing away with distance is fatal" - René Char

What a difference it makes! Whether - as just a moment ago - I let my eyes roam over the wide horizon of the South Pacific, while sunk in thought; or whether I stand on the banks of the Danube in my native Budapest, of the Limmat in Zurich or even of the Seine in Paris, and lose myself perhaps in the contemplation of the autumn mist... fundamentally, in all those places, I stand alone and bear the whole burden of my own reality. But still - and the difference lies precisely here - a new relationship to this burden emerges; paradoxically, the more I distance myself from my accustomed sites, the closer I come to myself - as though an accelerating centrifugal force were matched by a centripetal one, with its vectors all converging on me. In this way, through distance, I gain a focused, telescopic perspective.

In these times of hectic mobility, every traveller has probably had similar experiences. Distance has a cathartic effect and clears our sights, perhaps, on what - it is we're seeking; permanent security, for instance? or refuge in an utopian Arcadia? I cannot say what it is we're seeking, but merely that we're seeking. Longing was branded into us in our very first hour. And always: everything we long for lies in the distance.

Time has overtaken space. Simultaneity does away with the sense of distance, but the longing for it remains. And thus the oppressive feeling grows on us that the "white spots" on the map are being lost forever. The four corners of the world have long since been measured.

The earth we walk on, the air we breathe, the water that surrounds us, the light that makes perception possible and is slowly burning us up: all these elements, together with ourselves, seem to be dissolving into mere miniature components of a laboratory experiment. What remains to us then other than the realm of imagination: not necessarily escapism, but rather a stubborn, clumsy and above all active opposition, even at the danger of becoming a laughing stock like Don Quixote? Our efforts to understand the world are laughable, no matter what methods we may use. They don't differ much from the game that children, full of curiosity and wonder.

And at least we should try to hold on to their laughter and unspoiled naturalness.

When I paint or sculpt I'm trying to orient myself. Artistic activities are ways of navigating in a relational field of space, time and psychic state by means of, for example, playful new arrangements of material on canvas. And these not only give information about my position at the moment; they also already hint at or anticipate new possibilities. Sand, earth, ashes and pigment, to name some of the materials, represent tangible realities to me and externalise my own state of being. They make certainty visible (or: they bring certainty to the surface), and in dealing with them, I am working with familiar partners.

But at the same time, in this activity one runs the risk of losing one's orientation again and again. The balancing act of art, moving on a tightwire high above the abyss of everything negated, toward the aspired to but unnameable, never wholly attainable goal: this is the aesthetic stimulus. Aesthetics thus nourishes itself from a deficit: from the insight into its incapacity and nonetheless from the bull-headed will to bridge the chasm between the here and now and the ideal lying in the distance. Similar to the rhythm of the tides of in- and exhalation, we drive onward between strength and helplessness, searching for brighter lights on firmer shores. It is only on the oceans of my canvas that I can still sight these lights.