

Woodcut 2.0 or: The rebirth of the woodcut from the spirit of installation

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Christoph M. Loos; Eine (Wieder-)Erfindung des Holzschnitts in Resonanz mit Merleau-Pontys Chiasma/ A Woodcut (Re-)invention in Resonance with Merleau-Ponty's Chiasma (Artificium. Schriften zu Kunst und Kunstvermittlung 55); Oberhausen: Athena-Verlag 2017; 304 pp., numerous b/w a. col. ill.; ISBN 978-3-89896-658-0; € 58

Christoph M. Loos; Parusia. Die Idee in den Dingen/The Concept of Matter; Berlin: Distanz Verlag 2017; 304 pp., 139 ill.; ISBN 978-3-95476-129-6; € 58

1. The consolation of the trees: the project

“Who wants to live without the solace of the trees”, wrote Günter Eich in 1955: “How good that they participate in dying!”¹ But the solidarity of the tree with human concerns extends beyond death, since the vegetative consolation is strengthened by the fact that the trees not only comprehend the dying but also the regular return of life. However, even when the cyclical natural process has definitely been torn down, the Tree of Knowledge can function as a medium of knowledge.

On and with the tree, the artist Christoph M. Loos explained how it is possible to create a complete lifetime achievement on the ‘meaning system tree’, in which the traditional technique of reproducing woodcuts is not only used as a medium, but also as a theme of the artistic process of an expanded, completely new meaning.

His dissertation, presented at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2014 and published in German and English in 2017, circulates around an innovative relationship between print and printing block, with which nothing less than a reformatting of the classical medium of woodcut is intended. The scientific work of the ‘artist philosopher’ is accompanied and materially underpinned by a ‘book of works’, which further specifies the term woodcut – as presented in the dissertation –, by artistic groups of works of the last ten years.

2. Beyond the tree line: the dissertation

The finding is clear: If one believes artists, collectors, curators, and other protagonists of the art scene, the medium of woodcut reproduction (as well as other methods of mass artistic image production) has at present become almost meaningless in terms of a strategic approach to the art market. While the ruling exhibition business endea-



vours to enhance social reputation through concepts such as 'art as knowledge transfer', 'art as therapy', 'art as utopia' and similar functional assignments, or creates large-format experience areas with scenographic overwhelming strategies, it is little interested in more intimate ways of articulation – such as woodcuts. The sensitive messages with their technically conditioned format limitation can no longer compete with the effect stagings of an event-oriented art industry.

All the more significant are the few who are still – or again – concerned with the procedure: Franz Gertsch, Thomas Schütte and several others make use of the traditional craftsmanship in order to gain extended possibilities of impact. However, these exceptions confirm the rule of the general loss of relevance of this printing technique.

It therefore seems an ambitious undertaking for an artist to breathe new life into a marginalised genre. The starting point of this resuscitation measure is the re-evaluation of the relation between the two main parameters of the printing process. After Christoph M. Loos has developed an independent work in the field of woodblock printing for about 20 years, in his dissertation he now exemplifies the possibility of an "intimate connection between printing block and imprint" (Tobias Burg) in an art-process by which the printing element comes to the fore as a "coequal and integral role in a confrontational constellation" (6). He uses thin sheets, which have constantly been peeled off from a tree trunk used as the printing block, to support the prints. It is this "idea of a unity" (Einheitsidee), which is understood as a "nexus of nature" (Naturzusammenhang) that releases the medium from its traditional attachment to a before/after relationship into a cause/effect principle. This is because by now, in a circulating process, the end product of the printing process refers back to its origin. This "conditional relationship" (Bedingungsverhältnis) produces the "paradox of contact with the origin along with a simultaneous loss of the origin" (22). In it, the woodcut no longer depicts, but reflects and comments on itself and its terms and conditions. The artist philosopher explains how the art event becomes concrete in this dimension of an 'in-betweenness'. For him, "an authentic state lying in between as a force can be found in the tension between the polarity of print and printing block" (198).

In ten chapters Christoph M. Loos unfolds a "theoretical examination of the fundamental dimensions and contexts that are at play in my woodcuts and how they coalesce in the aspiration to make a truly innovative contribution a (re-)invention within the field of printmaking" (258). In the knowledge of this art-historical act of renewal, the artist/author may claim the status of a *poeta doctus*, in which aesthetic production and its reflection enter into an inseparable connection. Neither are the material works illustrations of theory; nor does theory describe artistic practice. Both are simultaneous processes from which the work is constituted. Selfconfidently, the artist formulates his self-conception of a singular position not only in contemporary art, but also in the history of artistic practices of reproduction: "In art history and its scholarly literature, there are no comparable examples in which the relationship between print and printing block is not just a subservient or aesthetically free interaction, but rather – *nolens volens* – a conditional relationship creating an integral-genealogical entangle-

ment with one another" (6). This redefinition of the printing process also involves, among other things, the refusal of an edition. The oldest printing technique no longer serves the purpose of reproduction, but of singularisation: Individualisation instead of multiplication is the intention. By refraining from demanding more from the tree than one-off statements, the duplication process, which is no longer one, is withdrawn from the commercial framework of mass production. At the same time, woodcut 2.0 leaves the limitations of the two-dimensional and expands into installations and site-specific stagings in its examination of the surrounding space. The redefinition thus makes the change of genre undeniable: only in the third dimension can the rebirth of the woodcut become artistic practice. Christoph M. Loos crosses the boundaries that are naturally set for the tree – and he crosses the boundaries that traditionally limit the genre of printmaking.

Since 2003, Christoph M. Loos has conceptualised his work by connecting it to philosophy, making the woodcut as the "redoubled unicum" a "medium of reflection on itself, its own conditional relations and implications" (232). The result is a kind of meta-woodcut, a sculptural-graphic meta-language that rejects the printed sheet as the goal of the artistic effort in order to thematise the graphic process itself as a component of the work. The rolling in of the printing result, its concealment through storage in frameworks, the process of burial and other strategies of withdrawal of perception are among the recurring procedures of this expanded woodcut concept.

The culmination of this understanding of the work is the large-scale installation *The Palace at 3 a.m. (Ordo Inversus)*. Realised in 2014 in the monastery cloister of Alpirsbach in Baden-Württemberg, which is oriented towards the Cluniac reform movement, there is the 'Opus Summum', which for Christoph M. Loos sums up the fusion of theory and practice, of philosophy and action, of mind and matter. As a 'silent bow' to Alberto Giacometti's work, the installation refers to a title of the artist whom Christoph M. Loos has considered since his days of study as decisive in terms of the intensity and identification of his work and to whom he repeatedly refers in the course of his own work: the surreal construction *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, created in 1932.

In the conviction that the issues addressed can only be mastered with linguistic discipline, the author makes use of a terminology that excludes fashionable conceptual accessories. Instead, his diction draws on an extensive traditional repertoire of concepts – in the most prominent place the figure of thought 'Chiasma', the philosophy of cross-shaped entanglement, in which the thesis follows the history of ideas and, in particular, makes it fruitful in the style of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In all this, Christoph M. Loos is well aware of the special character of a dissertation as a scientific achievement of a visual artist who reflects his own work in it in terms of media theory and philosophy. He justifies this novelty by pointing out that the academic qualification work is by no means aimed at the theoretical upgrading of one's own oeuvre, but at "a potentially relevant contribution to a potential renaissance" of the reproduction medium under extended auspices. He is concerned with the elaboration of that fluctuating process in which artistic work and reflection complement each other. The author/artist considers the discussion of this connection in

the form of a dissertation to be a necessary prerequisite for understanding his specific conception of the work.

With the rebirth of the woodcut from the spirit of installation, Christoph M. Loos interferes in the traditional controversy about the whole and its parts. For modernity has sufficient exhortations ready not to keep the whole in mind. It alternates between the rhetoric of the total and that of the particular. Philosophy and sociology formulate their contempt for a doctrine of wholeness elevated to ideology and a praise of detail that is equally fundamentalist. Truth is alternately located here and there. "The whole is the true", Hegel still found in the preface to his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Theodor W. Adorno held against this by decreeing "The whole is the untrue". The controversy branched out to Günter Grass, among others, who contributed the formula – referring to Theodor Fontane – "Breakage is better than the whole!"² In the middle, for example, Ludwig Hohl, who recommended "not always wanting to think [of] the whole", because "because we think the whole, it happens that we lose our strength"³.

Unimpressed by this tradition of contempt for wholeness, however, Christoph M. Loos draws his strength precisely from thinking – and artistic action – of the whole. But with his specific understanding of the relationship between the whole and its parts, Loos distances himself from the numerous curatorial efforts in the 20th and 21st centuries, which often seem arduous. In 1964 at the Kassel documenta 3 under the motto 'Image and Sculpture in Space', the woodcuts by HAP Grieshaber were staged in a monumental way for Arnold Bode's ideal 'Museum of 100 Days' in the half-rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum: "Why and how the material determines the form, the ten-part projection screen [...] shows us almost like a textbook in its alternation of woodblock and print. Here one believes to be in a wood-cutting workshop from the Assyrian era"⁴, art critics judge and sums up: "decorative gimmicks that are sufficient for a folding screen."⁵

Loos has no such scenographic decorations in mind when he takes the side of the whole in his traditional confrontation with the primacy of the whole or parts with his transmedial installations. When it comes to the whole, however, it is not to speak about a possibly outdated or postmodernly refreshed holistic ideology, but rather about a very concrete unity: about the abolition of the separation between the printing component and what is printed on, which was previously taken for granted (and thus hardly addressed). This discrepancy is the starting point for the intended reorganisation of the printing process. For such a reissue – not of a printed product, but of the printing process itself – the artist offers the complete tree trunk.

3. A conversation about trees: the book of works

Now the dissertation, as voluminous and serious as it appears, is only one side of a double publication in which Christoph M. Loos' artistic intentions intertwine reflectingly. A parallel volume of identical scope accompanies the scientific qualification work. This anthology, comprising texts and images, bilingual too, goes back to a cooperation of six exhibiting institutions in Germany, Ireland and Poland: Landesmuseum Mainz, Kloster Bentlage Rheine, Cork Institute of Technology CIT, Städti-

sche Galerie Iserlohn, Stiftung Schloss und Park Benrath Düsseldorf and Nicolaus Copernicus University Toruń have joined forces to present Christoph M. Loos' fundamental works from the years 2006 to 2016 in an individual selection of exhibits but as a joint publication.

This 'book of works' with the ambitious title *Parusia – The Concept of Matter* offers an overview of Christoph M. Loos' artistic worlds of ideas, visual strategies and media diversification, as they have systematically organised themselves over the last decade in work groups and cycles. The artist arranges this phase of life and work in seven chapters, which he convincingly illustrates with representative examples. For their part, they further elaborate and differentiate the conceptualisation of the work set out in the dissertation: the self-referential *Chiasma cycle*, the *Algonquin cycle* with an extension of the chiasmatic structure by archaic signs, four *site-specific installations* with their expansions of the woodcut concept into complex space-time structures, *Chiasma-Drawings* in the field of tension between preparatory sketches and independence, *Anonymous woodcuts*, which leave the connection with their origin unnoticed, *Album Nihilium* with prints using zinc oxide, which in the opinion of medieval alchemists stood for a 'white nothing' and *Autochthonous & Latent Woodcuts & Ideoscope-Cycle*, which evade perceptibility and tend to invisibility due to colourless prints.

In contrast to the dissertation, it is not the text/image author himself who speaks in the 'book of works', but contributions by eight renowned authors comment on individual thematic aspects from different perspectives. In ten chapters, the volume forms a compendium of both artistic work and scientific engagement with the artist and his production. Texts by Tobias Burg, Susan Tallman and Stefan Gronert reflect the specific understanding of printing from an individual perspective. Four contributions are dedicated to site-specific productions: Stefan Schweizer interprets the *Rosebud/Doppelgänger* installation in Essen's Schlosspark Borbeck (2011/12), Johannes Honeck the *Manresa/Blood Star* installation in Rastatt (2012), Astrid Reuter the *Alpirsbach The Palace at 3 a.m. (Ordo Inversus)* (2014/15), Markus Zink the installation in the Landesmuseum Mainz (2016/17), which was audibly expanded. And Lara Huber explains from her point of view 'Chiasma' as the central idea in Christoph M. Loos' work in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Christoph M. Loos' project is thus one that appears on several levels as a dual one: practice + theory, block + print, two volumes of two publishers united in one slipcase. Thus, this publishing double strategy with text and image represents the 'Chiasma' idea as the central approach to thinking in the art of Christoph M. Loos in the entanglement of its contents across two volumes. Voices from different directions unite to form a complex echo of a complex composition: a multi-perspective compendium of precisely the same oeuvre.

4. How to call into the forest: the production

Last but not least, the external form of the brilliant overall product is to be appreciated – not so much a publication as a book sculpture in which the theoretical presentation materializes through text and image in the form of an independent art object. The

opulent object is not only no lightweight in terms of content, but also as a physical presence: an extremely stable binding with thread stitching makes the two volumes, each 304 pages thick, a durable working tool, full-page illustrations of admirable print quality reproduce the works with optimum effect. And finally, the solid cassette not only reflects the care taken during production, but also ensures that the shape is preserved.

All in all, a double publication seems out of date, like an analogue counter-position to the current volatilities of the texts in the digital. The reflection on the relationship between spirit and matter, between sheet and sculpture, materialises in a book object, which in turn becomes sculpture: an object that triumphantly disproves the thesis of the end of the analogue book and, among other things, disproves Botho Strauss' prophecy "Nothing stops the disappearance of the sensual attraction, which books have to accept"⁶ with relish. Difficult to handle, bulky in every respect, it is an object for a scriptorium: to study standing at the desk – not only out of respect for its content, but also for the overwhelming presence of its external form.

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Günther Scharwath; Das große Künstlerlexikon der Saar-Region. Biografisches Verzeichnis von Bildenden Künstlerinnen und Künstlern der Saar-Region aus allen Fachrichtungen und Zeiten; Saarbrücken: Geistkirch-Verlag 2017; 1.184 Seiten; ISBN 978-3-946036-61-6; € 68

6.330 Einträge auf 1.184 Seiten. Was für ein Unterfangen, die künstlerischen Akteurinnen und Akteure jedweder Ausrichtung in der Kunstlandschaft der ‚Saar-Region‘ epochenübergreifend enzyklopädisch zusammenzustellen und mit den üblichen Kerninformationen zu Biografie und künstlerischem Werdegang sowie mit Literatur- und Ausstellungsverweisen aufzulisten. Das macht neugierig, nicht nur in Hinblick auf den Versuch, wie man eine vergleichsweise überschaubare Kunstlandschaft wie die ‚Saar-Region‘ mit ihren aktuell knapp 1 Million Einwohnern auf rund 2.570 km² mit Blick auf ihre Künstlerinnen und Künstler erschließen kann, sondern auch, ob es möglich ist, im 21. Jahrhundert ein Projekt wie die *Viten* Giorgio Vasaris, die am Anfang der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung stehen, mit modernen Mitteln und mit Blick auf ein höchst diverses Kulturschaffen fortzuführen?

Das vorliegende Lexikon ist das Lebenswerk des 1934 in Saarlouis geborenen und im April 2017 in Saarbrücken verstorbenen Historikers und Kunsthistorikers Günther Scharwath, das posthum durch seine Ehefrau Helga Scharwath abgeschlossen und für den Druck fertiggestellt wurde. Es spiegelt eine über Jahrzehnte ausge-