Narrative Structures in Contemporary Art

Telling stories through pictures has been one of art’s most important tasks for centuries. Only since the early 1990s have artists again concentrated on the possibilities opened up by the use of narrative elements. This does not mean that the beholder is confronted by complete stories, with a beginning, a storyline, and an end. On the contrary, artists use narrative structures as a form of communication with the viewer, who has to produce chronological and causal structures himself and assemble the stories himself, thus finding himself in the role of the "author".

At the beginning of the 20th century, stories disappeared from art in parallel to the development of abstract painting. It was no longer concerned with creating an image of reality but rather a new reality. The link to recognizable reality was frequently broken, which removed the foundation of the narration. The Dadaists turned the current understanding of art and the world upside down, and the Surrealists portrayed in their works the world of the subconscious and of dreams. Their wish - to achieve liberation from logical reality, an irritation and shift of reality - was not pursued with narrative methods but rather, for example, by the use of lecriteure automatique (Automatic Writing.) It was not until the Pop Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, in his paintings that picked up the comic language again, that the narrative aspect of art was revived in the 1960s. However, the representatives of Concept Art such as Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and many others, continued to ban narration from their works. Finally, at the beginning of the 1970s, a small group of concept artists appeared, who for a short time placed storytelling at the center of interest again. Their works, which were collectively referred to as "Story Art" or "Narrative Art", had no notable successors in the 1980s.

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Multireality and multimateriality - avoided since Renaissance art - are used again as narrative methods. In medieval art too it was nothing unusual to present the protagonist of a story more than once in a picture in order to describe the chronological process. Renaissance artists such as Leone Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci were the first to declare it their highest aim to depict reality as accurately as possible. They subjected themselves to their own laws and gave up showing different scenes or one and the same person several times in the same picture. In their opinion, painting was not intended for representing more than a single moment. Today, artists are again treating time and space completely freely and permitting themselves to involve the viewer in heterogeneous experiences. The narrative methods are often not linear, not chronological, and often illogical.

The exhibition offers an insight into the faceted richness of narrative methods in contemporary art. Stories are told in all genres and media. The artists report on their own lives (Calle, Emin, Grigely, Kentridge, Scurti), the experiences of others (Harrison, Loktev, Mik, Siekmann, Taylor-Wood) or historical events (Green, Merkel, Ohanian); on fictitious events (Ahtila, Arrhenius, Brenner, Heisenberg, Henning, Hershman, M+M, Parreno, Tschape) or events inspired by film or literature (Gaskell, O'Brien, Pettibon, Weirich). It is thus possible to distinguish roughly between documentary, autobiographical - i.e., factual - events and fictitious, freely invented happenings. As for most art topics, there is also negation here: anti-narration, if it is only the illusion of a story that is being created. Artists achieve this by using classical narrative elements but only apparently creating a narrative (Mik, Taylor-Wood).

One can also differentiate between multi-scene single pictures (Merkel, Taylor-Wood) and mono-scene series of pictures (Arrhenius, Gaskell, Heisenberg, Henning, Tschape). Some artists use written text that dispenses with pictures altogether (Brenner, Grigely), or appears in combination with drawings or photos (Calle, Pettibon, Scurti). Video art especially is predestined for handling narrative structures due to the time dimension of the medium (Ahtila, Loktev, Mik, Ohanian) - as the so-called net.art which is usually strongly based on text (Hyperfiction) and uses the opportunity of interacting with the user (Berkenheger, Lialina). Other methods of art are the rejection of the picture and the exclusive use of sound (M+M) or light (Parreno) to report on an event or, as is the case with the artist duo M+M, make it possible to be experienced. A new kind of narration is made possible by the room installation, one of the main features of the exhibition, since it allows the viewer to experience a narrative space physically, and increases the immediacy of what is experienced (Green, Harrison, O'Brien, Siekmann). With an installation, the viewer, as "director", has the freer hand. Only the photos of the "cameraman" are fixed, but the "cuts" can be made by the viewer wherever he feels fit.

The form of viewer involvement varies. Besides the role of reader, the viewer is given the task of the person addressed, the director, the actor, the detective, the author, the shutter release. But the same applies to every work: without the recipient, there aren't any stories.