



Berlin, den 9.5.2012

PRESSEMITTEILUNG

Kulturforum

Kunstabibliothek – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Öffnungszeiten der Ausstellung: Di - Fr 10 - 18, Sa + So 11 - 18 Uhr

Von mehr als einer Welt. Die Künste der Aufklärung
Seven wall plaques in the exhibition

Of the Inhabitants of the Stars

In his publication from 1755, the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, Immanuel Kant named one section "Of the inhabitants of the stars". Kant compared the existence of lice on the heads of people with those of human creatures on different planets. Inspired by telescope and microscope, the people of the 18th century dreamed of a journey through all dimensions – to other planets and into foreign universes, but also into the microscopic worlds that remained hidden to the eye heretofore. All these beings and forms of existence, that Kant and his contemporaries imagined, parade past the observer in this section. The human being doesn't stand in the limelight of creation anymore and has become one among many inhabitants of the stars; a creature in more than one world.

Art of Dissection

The enlightenment practiced an "Art of Dissection" that segmented the body anatomically. In the anatomical theater the body became the object of a relentless scrutiny, which united curiosity and voyeurism. The network of actors included all fields of knowledge: besides physicians, surgeons and anatomists, there were philosophers, artists and writers which partook in the modeling of the enlightened body worlds. In the area of tension between art and science, the merciless gaze into the exposed inner became the symbol of the 18th century. The visual strategies of the enlightenment penetrated into the people and brought new dimensions of physicality to light: the panorama stretches from the visible body to imaginary images of the body; from the inside of the body to forms of bodily intimacy; from the study of anatomy to the exploration of the character, the soul and sensitivity. The visual tour of the 18th century ends at the point, from which man, as a being of reason and emotion, disintegrates into separate parts, disappears and has to be resembled anew.

Correction of Manners

In the age of the cult of reason and the connected crisis of the Christian world view the visual arts advanced to a moral authority that nearly penetrated all aspects of life. Promoted by the development of new printing technologies and strategies of dissemination, art became a versatile medium of the enlightenment that served the purpose of conveying bourgeois virtues and ideals of life, as well as social criticism. Images became a mass medium. Just like in the media world of the 21st century the frontier between fiction and reality became often blurred. The fictional picture stories of William Hogarth are presented with the same realism as actual events, such as the famous "Calas case".

Pygmalion

The ancient myth of the artist Pygmalion, who created a living sculpture, was not considered a fairy-tale in the 18th century, but a vision of the future. The visual arts imagined themselves to be close on the heels of the

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secret of life. It was the time of the cult of genius, the automats and the speaking machines, the discovery of electricity and pseudoscientific procreation. The spectacular attempts of the Italian physician Luigi Galvani with dissected frog limbs, and the experiments of his nephew Giovanni Aldini with corpses fit into the same spectrum as “Kallipaedie”, a science that dealt with the aesthetic optimization of embryos. The enthusiasm of the 18th century for Pygmalion was borne by the conviction, that science and technology had advanced far enough, that sooner or later the Pygmalion-experiment could be repeated without divine help.

Free Beauty

In the 18th century a surprisingly large number of pictures can be found that are almost non-representational or shimmer from object to abstraction. Some artists consciously direct the view to abstract structures of surfaces and materials, to the diversity of natural forms and their picturesque appearances. Others experimented with abstract forms to construct landscape representations out of them. Crown witness to this development was Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) the philosopher recognized in those forms a “free beauty” that doesn’t present or depict anything, so that the freedom of the imagination isn’t being restricted. Kant was thinking about flowers, ornaments and wallpaper as well as “a whole lot of crustaceans from the sea”. Testimonies to this fascination can be found in very different contexts like zoology, mineralogy and microscopy; in theories of art, books on the art of writing, marbled paper and in landscape drawings of the time.

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters

The sleep of reason produces monster, No. 43 from the series *Los Caprichos* by Francisco de Goya directs the view to the dark phantasms and vision of the 18th century. In the age of enlightenment art played a decidedly ambiguous role. On the one hand, artists supplied the enlightened public with depictions from the media and with caricaturist side blows on sensation mongering, on the other they discovered in the growing need for supernatural mysteries a promising future market. Even the visual worlds of Goya by no means only appealed to the critical mind, but also to the morbid joy of monsters, witches, ghosts and vampires. New image ideas, artistic and technical tricks made the fantastic ever more realistic - and thereby even more fantastic. The visual culture presented itself in the 18th century in a double role: as a machine to create both enlightenment and illusions. It is a game that it still successfully practices today.

The Last Man

„The last man” is the closing chapter of the exhibition. At the end of the 18th century, the enlightened man stood at the threshold to a new era. Industrialization and rationalization transformed the old Europe into a foreign world. Nature, a philosophical key term and emblem of the epoch for a humanly and liberated existence was now also perceived in its restless and threatening form. The earthquake of Lisbon on 1. November 1755 caused apocalyptic fear throughout Europe, and the view of the excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum became a defining image: man imagines the future of civilization in ruins. Like a warning sign a novel written during the turmoil of the French Revolution appeared: *The Last Man*. With its description of a post-apocalyptic world it delivered the screenplay for the great cinematic doomsday visions of the 20th and 21st century like *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Omega Man* (1971) or *I am Legend* (2007).

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