

Marco Stanke »Well Done«

Laudation · Neue Galerie, Kunstverein Erlangen · 2023-01-11

Dear guests, dear members of the Kunstverein Erlangen,

my name is Martin Zanker and I'd like to confess, right at the outset, that I don't feel entirely at ease with the task of introducing you to the exhibition opening tonight. Why not? Because I am, in fact, a kindergarten and primary-school teacher; your long attention spans are inevitably suspect to me, and on average you all strike me as a little too tall.

But I am not only an educator — I may also call myself a friend of the painter Marco Stanke. And it was in this role of the friend — the best friend — that Marco asked me to deliver a small laudation today.

Dear all present,

I'd like to begin with a small anecdote that can, among other places, be read in the work of the historian Anna Schiener — an anecdote about Albrecht Dürer, the painter, graphic artist and Middle Franconian (see Schiener 2011, pp.60f):

In 1505, while the plague was eating its way through Nuremberg, Dürer set out on his second trip to Italy, bound for Venice. As the anecdote has it, he is invited in Bologna to a dinner at which, in his honour, several other artists are also present. Over the course of the evening, the host asks all present to give a sample of their skill. The Italian colleagues strive to impress their German visitor and paint, in mutual competition, the most elaborate motifs.

Tension peaks as Dürer himself takes his turn.

Dürer takes a piece of chalk, draws a circle on the table, and places a dot in the middle of the surface. Before anyone can say a word, Dürer demands: "Take a pair of compasses, measure it!"

The punchline: the circle is perfect, the dot is exactly in the middle; everyone celebrates Dürer.

And Dürer celebrates his own understanding of art: the quality of art lies in geometric — and thus technical — precision.

Of course, after half a millennium of debate and discourse, we now know many other positions regarding the quality of art and the quality of painting.

You will also occasionally discover a circle in Marco Stanke's works. Not, however, in the function of the exclamation mark, as Albrecht Dürer used it, but rather in the function of the question mark.

And the audience thanks Marco Stanke no less for it!

Take, for example, the year 2015 — exactly 510 years after Dürer's journey to Venice.

With his first-prize win at the Art Prize of the Nürnberger Nachrichten, Marco presents several of his works at the accompanying exhibition.

In the guestbook, some immortalise their raised eyebrows:

One guest writes, and I quote: "The prize-winner [Preis-Träger] ought to be renamed the crap-carrier [Scheiß-Träger]!"

Another: "My child can do that too!"

Dear audience,

under the title »Well Done« Marco Stanke shows us today, here, in the Neue Galerie of the Kunstverein Erlangen, many of his so-called »Parts«. Briefly put, a »Part« is a stretched canvas that, often painted monochromatically, gains individuality through shape and colour.

To call a Part into being, Marco spends strictly timed workdays in his studio, planning, building, stretching, priming and painting with an almost anachronistic love of the craft. Watching him at work, one is tempted to say that there is a kind of affection, a form of parental self-surrender that Marco brings to his Parts and that leaves behind in them an autonomously alive, organic, materially high-grade quality.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the Parts do not hang or stand before us as individual works; rather, many Parts together shape what Marco calls a »Collective«. Such a »Collective« often constitutes the actual work or piece proper, and, moreover, always communicates with the particular place in which it finds itself.

In relation to one another, in their compositional arrangement — in the correspondences, in the contrasts within such a Collective — the Parts acquire most of their singularities or, in another word, their respective identities.

Formally this means that the large Parts appear large because the small Parts exist; the complicated Parts appear complicated because the simple Parts exist; the

colourful Parts appear colourful because the monochrome and unpainted Parts exist, and so on.

These purely formal differences can, of course, also be translated in interpretation — for example into sociological or psychological vocabularies. Opposing pairs of various continua — light / dark, large / small, above / below, many / few, flat / spatial — can be read in categories of difference such as subject / object, action / reaction, majority and minority, old and young, hard and tender, immanent / transcendent.

From an art-historical perspective, for example, the Nuremberg professor Lars Blunck discerns in Marco's Parts a contribution to our collective understanding of the image, which he describes under the term »Radical Picturing« (see Blunck 2019, pp.4ff).

Marco's pictures, according to Blunck, belong to the rare painterly contributions that do not devote themselves to dissolving the boundaries of what is depicted, but to dissolving the boundaries of the image-carrier itself.

From this point of view, the works thus raise the question of what precisely makes a picture a picture.

The art critic Clement Greenberg answered this question, in the middle of the last century, short and sharp.

Two properties make a picture a picture:

Flatness and its delimitation.

For Greenberg it was clear: a canvas stretched on a wedged frame already exists as a picture.

Through Mondrian and Rothko, among others, he saw the question of what art actually is replaced by the question of what, ultimately, makes good art. The answer he worked out is:

No longer technical skill, as was still of importance for Dürer, for example — for the necessary competencies could, by now, be acquired by anyone.

Good art, he held, is grounded in conception and inspiration.

The quality of the respective work is thus grounded in the precise choice of colour, medium, size, proportion — and thus explicitly in the choice of the size and form of the image-carrier.

Greenberg writes: "A viewer who thinks that his child too could paint a Newman may well be right, but then Newman would have to stand next to the child and tell it exactly what to do" (Greenberg 2009, p.333).

Whether this now means that the works shown here are well done or not, I cannot answer for you.

That always depends, too, on your own reception or on your inner openness to structure.

But since Marco asked me to give a laudation today, may I tell you why I, personally, value Marco's works so highly.

And that is, among other reasons, because of their pre-reflective quality.

Before any interpretation — which comes so easily — before any conscious registration, something vibrates in Marco's Parts — or rather between them — that can only secondarily, or sometimes not at all, be put into words.

And precisely because the works thereby, to a certain extent, always seem to remain questions, because they dwell in the vague, because they remain precisely imprecise, because they — as the curator Katharina Mayer puts it — refuse an "absolute pictorial statement" (Mayer 2021, p.23), I have been recognising in the same works, for years, things of everyday relevance and of basic humanness, again and again anew.

Marco himself may primarily address his questions to art and to painting.

But by consciously deciding for every unevenness, every asymmetry, every deviation from the grid, by consciously deciding for every apparent flaw in the image-carrier, he also lays down signs within signs within signs.

And thereby his own system of rules becomes a kind of syntax — and thereby his Collective, to me personally, often enough becomes a kind of corrective.

Marco, once more I would like to thank you for all our conversations, for your humour and for your sincerity.

I thank you for your work, and in the context of today's exhibition I thank you for releasing your works into this public sphere, which so often can be so brutal. I think this exhibition, you have done well.

One thing still matters to me as an educator:

In the end there is, after all, a reconciliation between Marco's works and the children. At the Brucker Bahnhof, here in Erlangen, a children's centre run by Lebenshilfe Erlangen is to be built, and our Marco won the tender for public art on the building. The jury's decision reads:

Form and colour are considered particularly stimulating for the children.

We take this as a happy ending!

We may happily offer our congratulations again.

The form of the laudation calls for a closing praise of the community, and this praise — your praise — comes to me today very easily:

Civic engagement in Kunstvereine has been carried on for over 200 years; for the past couple of years the idea and practice of Kunstvereine have deservedly counted among UNESCO's cultural heritage.

As a Kunstverein you contribute to the diversity of the art landscape and enable cultural participation.

And because you, as a Kunstverein, have also committed yourselves to the aim of fostering the cultural education of the general public, I would like to say, as one member of that public:

Dear Kunstverein Erlangen, thank you for your efforts.

Dear guests, thank you for being here tonight.

Let Marco Stanke's Parts work on you, and, above all:

Do well.

References

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