

Marco Stanke »Marcoland«

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

it is a very great honour for me to be allowed to open this evening, and with it this exhibition.

My name is Martin Zanker, and for a good half decade now I've been permitted to call myself a friend of Marco Stanke's. It is in the role of the friend that I am to give this speech today — that is what Marco asked me to do, and that is why you are about to spoon up ten minutes of colloquial plain speech.

But it was also this role of the friend that granted me, among other things, the privilege of being able to witness the making of this exhibition and the creation of all the works Marco is presenting here.

Marco Stanke invites us this evening into »Marcoland«. He shows us works that in some cases were made as many as four years ago; others, by contrast, are so young they may not even be properly dry yet.

Over the course of my little speech I will have come to speak of the subject of Japan a total of four times. That should be taken more as a coincidence of content — neither Marco nor I have any particular connection to Japan — but I mention it nonetheless to give you an overview of the next ten minutes.

I'd like to begin with a small anecdote.

The German-Jewish writer Leonhard Frank was forced to leave Nazi Germany and eventually found himself — after many detours — in California, in the United States. On one late evening, during a small gathering, he is said to have been standing on the veranda and gazing wistfully out over the moonlit ocean. Longingly he lamented, so the anecdote has it:

»Over there lies Germany.«

Well, the geographically inclined among you will already smell what's coming. But because Leonhard Frank was pining so pitifully after his old homeland, none of the other guests present dared to correct him. Nobody wanted to tell him, but the ocean before him was the Pacific. And »over there«, it was not Germany that lay, over there — you can guess — lay Japan.

Please keep this story of the uprooted Leonhard Frank in the back of your mind; I'll come back to it at the end.

But now I'd like to turn your attention — and there'll be time for it — I'd like to turn your attention to the rooms in which we find ourselves, and thus to Marco Stanke's works.

Marco shows us, here, many of his so-called »Parts«. Briefly put, a »Part« is a stretched canvas, usually painted monochromatically, which — and this is open to discussion — gains its individuality through the shape and colour that are specific to it.

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

It is important to stress 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, the piece proper.

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, to put it another way, their respective identities.

The large Parts are large because the small ones exist; the complicated Parts are complicated because the simple ones exist; the colourful ones colourful because the monochrome and unpainted Parts exist, and so on.

And now I come to Japan for the second time. Marco's Collectives, as they are found on walls, often display a peculiar order, a tidiness, even though they generally lack any symmetry — just like the widely known Japanese woodblock prints.

The individual Parts on their own sometimes show themselves as symmetrical, just as one can often discover faces, houses, lamps or bowls on Japanese woodblock prints. But not infrequently, within a Collective, the mere skill of composition produces the appearance of order where in fact disorder reigns.

One could, ultimately, read this as an image of our society — but anyone who knows Marco would say that the appearance of order where in fact disorder reigns, this character of his works, is more autobiographical.

The real reason I'm turning to the Japanese woodblock print, though:

Very similar to the way the woodcuts try to render space in a kind of »exaggerated flatness«, here in »Marcoland« Marco reverses the game: the Collectives, which one can otherwise mostly only consider on the wall, thus on the flat plane, here in »Marcoland« reclaim the room for themselves — quite like a theatre ensemble that has chosen the auditorium as its new stage. This play with plane and space, the play that turns space into wall, may perhaps count as one of the great attractions here in »Marcoland«.

I'd like to highlight in particular the play between the Parts and the surroundings, that is, the rooms in which we find ourselves. From exhibition to exhibition it appears to me as though the respective space is increasingly becoming an essential element in Marco's works. Sometimes it is the case that the Parts trace the niches and corners of the walls, and from the interplay between the size of the Parts, their number and the dimensions of the respective space, a kind of emergence arises, a »superadditive« quality. Just as a face is more than the sum of nose, mouth and eyes, so the Collective is more than the sum of the individual Parts — and so, too, the respective work is more than the sum of Collective and exhibition room.

Some time ago, Marco was a guest in a leisure park — a leisure park in Japan — in which one can admire architectural landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben in miniature. I think one fulfils the Japanese cliché there and strides through the spectacle as a kind of Godzilla on holiday.

The spectacle in such parks arises above all from the change in the size of the model relative to the original. It is important, though, that imitations always presuppose an original somewhere.

Here one can build a bridge to what is — for me personally — the greatest value in Marco's work. For me, the Parts in their Collectives are always engaged in a discourse about their identity, that is to say, a discourse about the exemplar and the copy, about the identical and the divergent, about what would count as normal and what as special.

One can watch some Parts refer to one another in form and colour, but also how they fit together seamlessly and peacefully, or wedge into one another brutally; how they often seem to carry themselves, how they seem to bear with — and often bear for — one another; how they mutually support one another and take too much on — from one another or from themselves.

Here, I think, a certain symbolism in Marco's works becomes apparent, and I'm afraid I can't spare it from my own interpretation: to me it is about self-stagings, the generating of self-worth, and a kind of examination of the I.

And with my interpretation of the works we land, for the fourth and final time, in Japan:

In Japanese society, the 1970s gave rise to the notion of »Kawaii«, which denotes a very particular kind of way of life. »Kawaii« means something like "cute," "sweet," "attractive" or "lovable," and by now manifests itself in extremely colourful, garish outfits, crazy hairstyles or piles of plush toys. Perhaps the term »Kawaii« isn't familiar to you, but you know immediately what I mean, because the term has become a cliché and as a cliché it has made its long way all the way to Germany — quite unlike Leonhard Frank's sense of direction, if you remember.

Kawaii has come to mean that one styles oneself as the most attractive spectacle possible. And in doing so, Kawaii represents a kind of plea for love, the wish to be liked at any price and to be spared any rejection.

This wish to be accepted expressed itself, for decades, above all in the habitus of young people. In precisely that life-span, that is, in which we, in a very particular way, don't know where we belong and who we are supposed to be.

Today the same need appears more and more often in adult people within our Western society too, and especially, for instance, in the self-revelations on social media: we are asking, above all, for positive feedback, for likes, for little hearts, for thumbs-ups, for praising comments.

We want, ideally, not to receive any negative criticism, and more and more we live in bubbles in which we can only read opinions that match our own.

We shoot selfies in front of such attractions and then show the pictures to friends or strangers with a pride one otherwise knows only from the end of a successful big-game hunt.

In order to be able to present ourselves as an attraction among attractions, we use the collective as a backdrop. And suddenly the play between space and plane turns into a symbolic relationship between superficiality and depth.

In order to do justice to those superficialities, one best places celebrities or certified art experts in one's backdrop, who then dutifully affirm one's self-worth, in the manner of improv theatre.

Marco offers us a little poem on the side:

Come, take my hand,

PhD'd artistic sense;

Where there's space, there's also wall —

so they say in Marcoland.

The doctorate in art and the diplomas of master-students are losing ever more of their use-value and will soon possess only exchange-value; one pins them as badges on the wall and uses them only as indicators of one's own social status. In that case they are comparable to the number of followers on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook.

In »Marcoland«, today, we are once again permitted to step behind the backdrop; that is, we can walk through the symbolic wall and devote ourselves once more to deeper structures.

And now we come at last back to poor Leonhard Frank, who has been patiently waiting for us on his Californian terrace. What Frank would have needed on that evening was one single person who would have been willing, benevolently, to point out his error to him. Someone who would have wanted to tell him where he actually found himself and where he would have had to locate himself.

The anchoring of the self, of one's own identity, sometimes only comes about through contradiction, through a hint, or through friction with other people. We need an advising collective as a corrective.

Marco, thank you for always contradicting me so honestly and kindly, and for helping me to locate myself. And thank you, too, for stepping with your works into the public space and exposing yourself to criticism.

Thank you for letting us partake in your — as you so beautifully put it — »failing forwards«.

To you, dear guests, I would like to wish a lot of fun, profitable insights, and a lovely evening in a hopefully talkative atmosphere:

Ladies and gentlemen, walk through space, walk through wall, step into »Marcoland«!