

## Encounters: René Wirths and the Portrait

The gravitational center of the exhibitions in Bremerhaven and Berlin is a new series of portraits, summarized by the title *Begegnungen* (Encounters). All of these portraits are executed in grisaille technique, on 20 x 20 cm plywood plates. The subjects are depicted in right-facing profile, their heads filling the space, all tending toward low-levels of expression. The result is an equalizing of difference. How many panels ultimately shown in the two exhibitions is at the time of this writing still unknown. This is a work-in-progress, to be continued in the coming months—and beyond.

With this portrait series, René Wirths resumes an earlier project. In 1999, the off-gallery Walden, in Berlin, exhibited his 70-part cycle of images, which obey the same formal constraints: square format, right-profile view, shades of gray.<sup>1</sup> In comparing the two series, one sees that Wirths' artistic skills have advanced. The new portraits are more detailed, more pointed, more varied. Their virtuosic access to the human face obeys categories of a factual, reality-oriented imitation and a high degree of individuality. But the formal concept, aimed at seriality, is an essential part of the images' overall aesthetic. Both series are based on the relationship between external uniformity (rules, order, finiteness) and internal variance. The production time required for the relatively small portraits is three to four hours, during which the artist and the model meet and converse. The concept of the new series includes Wirths' visiting his subjects in their homes or places of work, if so desired. The portrait is, in the final analysis, a memory of this encounter.<sup>2</sup> The people portrayed in both the earlier series and this new one stem from the artist's circle of family, friends, neighbors, and artist colleagues. They also include acquaintances met during travels and sports, partners of friends, and art-institution and gallery staff—all incorporated into this "sociocultural project."<sup>3</sup> The common denominator is the artist, who's reflected in this networked structure. In this sense, one could speak of a kind of self-portrait, which manifests itself—taking both series into consideration—at two different periods of time.

There are few contemporary artists who can be so clearly placed within the genre of classical painting as René Wirths. He has become known, above all, for his novel and peculiar paintings of objects, in the painterly tradition of the still life. This genre became autonomous during the course of the sixteenth century. It was then that

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<sup>1</sup> The project gallery Walden was named after Herwarth Walden (1878-1941), the founder of the gallery Sturm. It had three different locations between 1995 and 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In my case, the conversation was primarily about different aspects of the exhibition project. The artist permitted me to make telephone calls and the read or write emails during the sitting.

<sup>3</sup> René Wirths in conversation with the author during the portrait session, July 8, 2016.

objects were first accepted as independent, image-worthy subjects. The ways in which still life and portraits relate in René Wirths' oeuvre are addressed below.

A ranking of painting genres was formulated for the first time in the context of the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, founded in 1648. The representation of biblical and classical stories, so-called history painting, ranked highest. Second were representations of individual people, differentiated among real, posthumous, and fictional portraits, and, therein, among purely formal distinctions (frontal view, profile, quarter-profile, half-profile, full figure, three-quarter length portrait, half-figure, bust portrait, single, double, group or self-portrait). Third in the hierarchy is genre painting: representations of people of lower social classes shown, for example, at work in their occupations or sitting idly in pubs during their free time. Below this genre is landscape painting, which became autonomous at around the same time as still life and included both the natural and built environment. Finally, the lowest subject matter was the imitation of immobile—that is to say, quiet—or inanimate, things—commonly referred to as *nature morte*.

This ranking applied to European art theory and practice for nearly three hundred years. It was founded—and this is the main point of concern—with the ontological dignity of the depicted motifs. According to the architect André Félibien (1619-1695), who was secretary of the Royal Academy at the time, it was more “estimable” and “dignifying” to depict living motifs than “dead or immobile objects.” And as Man is the coronation of Creation, the artist would distinguish himself most by representing the human figure.<sup>4</sup> This scheme was explicitly linked to craftsmanship and artistic skills, whereby the hierarchy of genres had an influence upon, among other things, a painters' remuneration. But there are always exceptions to a rule: the Dutch still-life painter Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) was one of the highest paid artists of her time.

The submission of still life to portraiture lost all foundation after the Enlightenment, secularization, and the manifold distortions of modernism.<sup>5</sup> In the work of René Wirths, one sees the inversion of Félibien's argument, and yet a fundamental relationship between the subject and the artist remains perceptible. René Wirths'

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<sup>4</sup> “Ainsi celuy qui fait parfaitement des paysages est aus dessus d'un autre qui ne fait que des fruits, des fleurs ou des coquilles. Celuy qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceuy qui ne représentent que des choses mortes & sans mouvement. Et comme la figure de l'homme est le plus parfait ouvrage de Dieu sur la terre, il est certain aussi, que celuy qui se rend l'imitateur du Dieu en poignant des figures humaines, est beaucoup plus excellent que tous les autres.” André Félibien, Conférences de L'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667. Preface, Paris 1669.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Busch described the “emancipation of the lower genres” as an inevitable process of delimitation, which resulted in modernity. Werner Busch, *Das sentimentalische Bild. Die Krise der Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert und die Geburt der Moderne*, München, 1993.

creative process, which proceeds without the intermediary medium of photography, is characterized by interaction and social engagement. This applies as well to the object paintings created in the solitude of his studio.

René Wirths' still lifes are characterized by a strictly frontal or profile view of objects, an image-filling or frame-filling composition, a neutral "laboratory-cold background,"<sup>6</sup> sometimes enormously magnified and executed in astonishing detail, elevating the particular thing to a pictorial object seen at eye level. From the perspective of Wirths' portraits, two further features are essential: on the one hand, his self-portraits are discovered on the reflective surfaces of objects onto which the artist inscribes himself, as did Jan van Eyck, in *The Arnolfini Wedding* (1434)—caught in the act of observation. On the other hand, Wirths presents objects that differ from each other by various traces of their use: scratches, dents, spots, cracks, abrasions, or peeling paint from industrially produced products. Representative examples are several paintings of the artist's worn shoes. The creases in the shoes' leather-uppers appear to be structurally related to the wrinkles of Wirths' left palm, in an image he painted in 2008.<sup>7</sup>

Other motifs are also objects actually used by the artist, which distinguishes them from being simply anonymous objects (e.g. a knot of wool, a loaf of bread, a leaf of lettuce, a butterfly, toilet paper, eggs). Wirths does not paint the "thing-in-itself" in the typological or transcendental sense, as in Kant's concept.<sup>8</sup> He is mainly looking for objects that have become unique through their use. This sometimes very personal aspect—which also corresponds to his self-portraits—contains an aspect of time. The objects may be motionless and lifeless, but the traces of their use refer to their transient nature. Not as a symbol or a sign, as found in the classic still life as a *vanitas*—an hourglass or skull—but rather as a concrete object linked to the life of René Wirths himself. This object will sooner or later fall victim to entropy. But as a

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<sup>6</sup> Hanno Rauterberg, "Mit Klorollen auf Du und Du: Vom ungeheuren Reiz realistischer Malerei – zwei Ausstellungen in Zürich und Rotterdam zeigen die Künstler Franz Gertsch und René Wirths", *DIE ZEIT*, Nr. 30/201, July 21, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> René Wirths needed his right hand to paint. In the same year, he also created a portrait of his closed eyelid. In this case it is the right eyelid, which he sees when looking into a mirror with the left eye.

<sup>8</sup> *Das Ding an sich (The Thing Itself)* is the title of a catalog published in 2011 of Wirths' exhibition at the Kunsthalle Rotterdam, with the introduction by Emily Ansenk. Kant and the problem of so-called sensualism are concerned with the distinction between the pure substance of things and their perceptual contents (phenomena) transmitted by our senses. Only the latter are accessible to human imagination. As an example the following passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): "Wenn wir aber auch von Dingen an sich selbst etwas durch den reinen Verstand synthetisch sagen könnten (welches gleichwohl unmöglich ist), so würde dieses doch gar nicht auf Erscheinungen, welche nicht Dinge an sich selbst vorstellen, gezogen werden können. Ich werde also in diesem letzteren Falle in der transcendentalen Überlegung meine Begriffe jederzeit nur unter den Bedingungen der Sinnlichkeit vergleichen müssen, und so werden Raum und Zeit nicht Bestimmungen der Dinge an sich, sondern der Erscheinungen sein: was die Dinge an sich sein mögen, weiß ich nicht und brauche es auch nicht zu wissen, weil mir doch niemals ein Ding anders als in der Erscheinung vorkommen kann." Immanuel Kant, *Ausgabe der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Berlin, 1900 ff., AA IV, 178.

picture, it seems to “live on.” Taken from real life, Wirths’ objects, by their very individuality and temporality, fulfill the essential characteristics of a portrait.

In 2010, Wirths painted a large-format portrait of his mother. Shortly before, he had completed the portrait of a friend in a similar size and finish.<sup>9</sup> Together with a self-portrait of 2013—in half-profile (!)<sup>10</sup>—these three portraits differ essentially from his earlier, rather experimental, approaches in the portrait genre. During his university years, in the 1990s, Wirths’ was already experimenting with the alienating effects of using blurriness in portraiture. At the beginning of the millennium, he created paintings of famous artists, among them Andy Warhol, Frida Kahlo, and Salvador Dalí, based on memory. In 2003, he painted symbolically charged individual and group portraits, which concerned his family history and his partnership with the artist Nicole Wendel, the mother of his two children, Clara and Valentin.

René Wirths’ mother was already seriously ill at the time of her portrait session. He explains, “I had to paint my mother because I knew she would die soon, and that was my chance to see her regularly, to spend time with her.”<sup>11</sup> The work on this portrait resulted directly in an additional image, of a skull, for his solo exhibition at the gallery Michael Haas, which took up the subject of transience directly, under the title *jenseits und diesseits* (this world and beyond). The skull image was hung in direct relation to the portrait of Wirths’ mother and, as such, could not only be read as a *vanitas* symbol but also as a picture reflecting the genre-transfer between portrait and still life.

Gisela Wirths was able to attend the opening of her son’s show that included her portrait. In her obituary, published in the Berlin daily *Der Tagesspiegel*, the portrait was described as “unadorned—and it is a homage. The smallest skin patches are visible, tips of hair, and eye wrinkles, but it is not the detail that makes the picture so realistic. Its realism is somewhere in between, somewhere in it.”<sup>12</sup> The mourning process connected to the mother’s portrait—in strict profile view—resists detailed, comprehensible access. The picture is rather a testimony of a process rooted in life. In this sense, the title of the present publication and the exhibitions connected to it, *DAS WAS BLEIBT* (WHAT REMAINS), can be applied to Wirths’ portraits as well as to

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<sup>9</sup> *Johanna*, 2009/10, oil on canvas, 155 x 185 cm. Asked who Johanna was and why he painted her, Wirths replied: “A friend who was unemployed at the time and therefore had a lot of time.” Email to the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Wirths allows himself a formal exception: looking at the mirror, the artist cannot, of course, see himself in profile.

<sup>11</sup> Cat. Kunsthalle Rotterdam, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Unger, “Gisela Wirths (geb. 1949): Sie will Politik machen, nicht Karriere“, *Der Tagesspiegel*, March 24, 2011.

his paintings of objects. The realism of his works is not only based on the body as a medium to contemplate and represent, but also on a deeply, socially understood humanism, wherein the world of things can be experienced as a mirror of man.

Marc Wellmann, October 2016