

**NOTHING`S EVER BEEN
CRYSTAL CLEAR**

Ursula Pia Jauch

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Urs Lüthi between Buddha and Socrates

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Herbarium

What if we could scroll through an artist's life as if through a herbarium? Revealing the separate phases of creation in constantly changing vegetative configurations. As if sprouting ramifications of existence and endless fresh shoots. Urs Lüthi has been around since the early 1970s, idiosyncratically, inimitably probing himself, posing one conundrum after the other, not for his own sake but for those who want to 'understand', meaning: to subsume him under a single, neat 'concept'. Early on, something like a Socratic slyness seems to have softly sidled into Lüthi's enterprise. Angelic and ethereal are the photographed autoritratti, the early self-portraits – and we helplessly fell for them. How could anybody forget the eyeing soulful images of somebody „weeping for us“ and then, on top of it all, gorgeously flaunting eccentric snake leather and giving us such a guilelessly androgynous and doleful look? We were deeply moved by these early self-stills. And we may well have been unable to forget them precisely because they suggest to us mute viewers that we would only have to be just a bit more energetic in order to shake off our own existential depression: never, ever again would we have to choose between free and fettered, between tears and joy, between realism and dreams, and even between man and woman. Besides: away with all these dualisms, spawned of the history of humankind reduced to obsessive-compulsive neuroticism, in order to conceal its congenital inability to be free behind the monotonous sameness of either-or scenarios.

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But then the stick figures came along, later painting, then more changes from one medium to another. We rubbed our eyes and had to rack our brains in order to make sense of the whole and see „continuities“ in it, where others saw only ruptures and were in fact disappointed that yet again another much fancied (and economically exploitable) style had been jettisoned. The artist himself roguishly incorporated in his new work the fact that he himself had become something of a registered trademark. Through the years, the earlier trademarks – the unforgettable Numbergirls or the artist who offered himself up to us as a 'mirroring surface' – have come to resemble those lovely devotional images in church hymnals, which refer to the past but are not of yesteryear. Anyone who has been canonised by the art trade like the early Lüthi will, of course, know how to cope with the existential skins that have supposedly already been shed so that the subject can keep going, keep moving, without indulging in the false idolatry inflamed by mental lethargy and the logic of the market.

So, is there a 'late' Lüthi in addition to the 'early' one? Are we still under the relentless thumb of Daddy Chronos who keeps whispering into our ears that nothing endures

besides time running out? And so we label things, count out swelling numbers of years and growing numbers of works, imposing the grand order of number on things that emerged in the flow of existence. Odd, this obsessive addiction to order. There is something mercilessly cheerless about it and, in hindsight, it implies a logical consequence in everything as long as it can be reduced to a cipher.

Moving Stillness

But a visual stroll through current events in the Urs Lüthi universe reveals that he is not prone to angular numerology and crystal-clear distinctions. Though we find the artist still in an attitude of self scrutiny, the presumed narcissus of yore has found sanctuary – for once thoroughly Hegelian after all – in the sculptural gesture which speaks of itself – possibly – and means anything but: is there clarity and objectivity? Hope and despair? Stasis and movement? Or isn't our insidious and stolidly unequivocal language faking things and conditions, which quieter contemplation proves to be quite different from the indoctrination of categorical speech? Back in the year 2000 – to name a number after all – Urs Lüthi took a nice and cheerful swipe at these compulsive dichotomies: wearing a black gym suit, the artist 'ran' for his life and ours. And even people, ordinarily interested in those ridiculous thousands of a second that make up the entire meaning of any late modern professional athlete's life, cannot help noting that the laborious movement of the figure on the conveyor belt is pure stand-still and therefore utter futility.

Still Images

I must admit: when I glance through these still images of recent times, I see the artist's life scrolling past before my eyes as in a lightly planted human herbarium, showing an existence that cultivates nonchalance and casually pursues the inner currents of a vegetative power. The outcome is not a compendium, however, but rather the rejection of everything that is exclusively cerebral, dominant and even vaguely reminiscent of Nietzsche's „will to power“. Far more appropriate, in this context, would be Schopenhauer's „quietism, the giving up of all willing“, and, hence, release from the rat race of civilisation's ceaselessly insistent addiction to renewal.

This erstwhile runner has become calm and cool, even though he continues to wear a gym suit as if it were his new „uniform“: the kneelength pants, the short-sleeved T-shirt and the cushioned running shoes, clunky monuments to accelerated senselessness. Seven times he has placed himself on a pedestal. In plaster, white and impeccable. Under the artist's hand, these sculptures cheerfully welcome the play of associations, starting perhaps with the seven dwarves, then leading away from this fairytale landscape and sauntering past a late Socrates. In any case, one of the

figures is practising the art of astonishment – the body leaning forward, the right hand screening the eyes the better to see in the distance: what's left to see when I've seen everything? Doesn't someone who has gone through so much, who has inspected the Placebos & Surrogates, Trash & Roses of the present, return to the original attitude of *que sais-je*?

What do we know with precision and certainty? In his *Discours de la Méthode* of 1637, René Descartes inscribed the battle cry for everything that is „clear and straightforward“ on the marching orders of a humanity addicted to knowledge. Some 370 years have passed since then and one might well say, not much is left of the clarity he targeted. We still stand here, knickknacks of the promise of a clarity that never materialised, our hands on our forehands and looking around. What do we see? Between dark and opaque patches, the occasional flash of knowledge that everything existential is shown only in fragments, but that this fragmentation frees us from the dictate of living in totality and for totality.

Art & Life

A summer afternoon in Dietramszell: the photographer in Lüthi's studio happens to see a forked country lane, which connects the artist's retreat to the almost equally secluded convent on the picture horizon. Seventeen Salesian nuns, all 75 and older, still work there. The spire of the convent church seems to be waving at us with the cheeriness and optimism that we late nonbelieving nomads have forfeited. Suddenly, over there, we perceive the clarity remaining in ordinary forms of civilisation. It's simply about seeing it, when it is revealed. Like the sensations of serenity, lightness and optimism that emanate from these „stills“ of Urs Lüthi's life between Lucerne, Paris, Toulouse, Vienna and Dietramszell. We do not even need to be particularly dogmatic anymore about the fact that „art is the better life“: it seems that art has seamlessly merged into the „good life“, the goal to which the Pre-Socratics already aspired five centuries before the birth of Christ: a life of enjoyment and relaxation; knowing to the extent that we are able to know; opposing being's forces of gravity with cheerful subversion.

„Imagine a Movietrailer about your own life“, Lüthi said in the late 1990s. And now, all these moving extracts from the life of the artist lie before us like pictures of an exhibition: an evening stroll against the theatrical backdrop of the Viennese skyline, still life with perishables that refer to the body and include the mind – veal knuckle, potato salad, the right beer –, in between fragments left over from installing an exhibition, then the artist as a satyr in the sun, enjoying holidays like everyone else. No distinction is made between high and low, sacred and profane, significant and insignificant.

Equilibrium

If you will, you can see in Urs Lüthi's seven self-sculptures flashes of a positively cloud-less Minimalmoral. Not the slightest, wispiest shades of Adorno; only the routinely minimalised meditation that may overcome us at the sight of a sculpture. Urs Lüthi is obviously playing an ‚equilibriumrun‘ game that arouses associations in our minds. Homo ludens and allusion everywhere: is he now a Buddha meditating for us? A late Socrates passing the poisoned cup on to us, tongue-in-cheek? A knickknack flouting our own ridiculous pettiness? A person who has progressed from running to standing and is still revolving around his own axis? – A strenuous task, indeed, since it looks so easy.

Arthur Schopenhauer compares organic life to „the stick which is balanced on the hand and must always be in motion.” Those are not Urs Lüthi's words, though he feels very much at home in the paradox between stasis and movement. What remains of clarity is the beauty of ambivalence. Living with it – and in it – is pretty good, no matter what Cassandra says. In any case, it's better than the solid cement of the unequivocal rising higher and higher, blocking whatever view we might have of things.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert