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»FALLEN«

MAILAND / INNENHOF

The video work »fallen« was created as part of the group exhibition “Äxel wants to go with Sara” (2026), which explored the general absence of realism in contemporary art. Looking at the major exhibitions and biennials of recent years, a clear trend could be observed: there were hardly any attempts at realistic depictions of our present, but rather an accumulation of utopian, mystical, and even cultic-religious stylized works filled the stages of contemporary art. Whether it is an escape into the past, expressed in a fascination with myths of origin, or dreams of utopian futures in which everything is different.

Both forms aimed to stop looking at present reality, to no longer have to see it. Out of sight, out of mind. Where was this development leading? Was it an expression of a desperate flight from the world, a resignation in the face of a world that could no longer be mastered? Recently, the first signs of a return to this-worldly realms may be discernible in contemporary art. How does the individual fare when it opens its eyes again? Is the crash back down to earth a reality shock, or merely a cushioned half-truth?

The following conversation between Mailand / Innenhof and Steffen Andrae was included in the exhibition booklet for “Äxel wants to go with Sara.” It addresses the fundamental question of realism in art and reflects on it in light of the works on view in the exhibition at the time. We would also like to “recommend” this text to visitors of the exhibition »fallen«. Steffen Andrae is a theorist and philosopher; he recently earned his doctorate with a dissertation on realism in the works of Alexander Kluge and Siegfried Kracauer, and he lives and works in Leipzig.

What is realism in art?

A conversation between Mailand / Innenhof and Steffen Andrae

Günther Mailand (GM): Steffen, you are currently writing your doctorate on realism and experience in the works of Siegfried Kracauer and Alexander Kluge. That implies a very specific understanding of realism. Perhaps, as a starting point, you could outline what lies behind the concept of aesthetic realism in general—what does it actually encompass?

Steffen Andrae (SA): To get an initial overview, it might be helpful to distinguish between a conceptual definition and a period definition of realism—the former refers to the theoretical dimension, the latter to the historical one. Conceptually, realism refers to aesthetic or theoretical programs concerned with the relationship between objects (lat. res) and their medial representations. The assumption and subject of realism are the correspondences, correlations, and similarities between these two poles. Crucial to realistic perspectives, therefore, are questions about objects, the representation of these objects, and our relationship to them.

Hans Innenhof (HI): And how did this develop historically? If we try to get a rough overview.

SA: The history of realism as an art genre is relatively messy, partly because there were movements in various countries, bearing such additions as "poetic," "magical," and "bourgeois," often defined in opposition to Classicism, Romanticism, Idealism, and abstract art. Realism exists in painting, literature, theater, and philosophy, and even programs like Surrealism wanted to reveal something about reality. In actually existing socialism, there was a party-mandated art doctrine called "Socialist Realism," which, ironically, fell into crisis precisely because of its disregard for reality. Of course, regarding its origins, one could go back to the painting competitions of antiquity, which were essentially about the most lifelike depiction possible. However, I think the essence of the concept of realism as we know it consists, on the one hand, in its intrinsic relationship to modernity and, on the other, in the attempt to portray and capture reality.

GM: The inevitable question at this point would be: does this refer to concrete, physical things?

SA: Unfortunately, that's where it immediately gets complicated. You could say realism can concern nature—meaning apples, trees, rivers, physical reality. But it can also refer to so-called second nature—and that means society. In my view, this is the core of the matter when we speak of realism in the context of the arts. Here, realism always implies an engagement with social and historical reality. This engagement begins in the mid-19th century in the context of painting, for example with Courbet and Millet, but also in French literature. Suddenly, profane, unvarnished reality moves to the center of artistic efforts as the central reference point. On one hand, the subjects change: suddenly it was no longer about the noble and ideal, historical battles, great rulers, the absolute, or the religious, but about the low, the bottom, the everyday. With Courbet, for example, it's The Stone Breakers—a relatively well-known painting—or The Gleaners by Millet. In the German context, there is The Iron Rolling Mill by Adolph von Menzel, which shows the interior of a factory hall. In literature, one might think of the milieus and street scenes of Balzac or the weavers' uprising as portrayed in Hauptmann's The Weavers. But it is not just the subject that changes, but in a sense, the entire self-conception: Art seeks truth more than beauty or pleasingness. It wants to depict reality in a way that is, well, realistic. And that, of course, raises the question of how—meaning, by means of which techniques and constructions one actually achieves this.

GM: So, my understanding is that realism also implies a kind of attitude. Realistic art refers to the project of reflexively engaging with society. And that is something that didn't really exist in the pre-modern era. On the other hand, realism also describes a specific aesthetic. Is it too casual to say that we don't need realism as a description of a mimetic aesthetic at all, and can speak of Naturalism instead? Isn't that a duplication? Wouldn't it be sufficient to give realism exclusively the position you described—this quasi-sociological position?

SA: The boundaries between Realism and Naturalism are fluid and certainly cannot be pinned down once and for all. Sometimes Naturalism simply meant that it was plein air painting rather than studio painting. Or it designated the fact that the subjects were related more to "first nature" rather than "second nature"—i.e., society. An important distinction seems to me to

be that Naturalism is directed more toward the exterior, whereas Realism is concerned with the interior of things: That is why the guiding principle of Naturalism is often accuracy, while Realism is concerned with truth. Naturalist artists often refer to the exact sciences as their model. This is evident, for example, in Émile Zola, the main representative of a radically scientific understanding of literature, who believed that artists had to record physical, psychological, and social mechanisms with the precision of the scientific method. Such "scientistic" objectification actually requires that subjectivity be eliminated. This is reflected in the famous equation by Arno Holz, according to which naturalist art consisted of the representation of nature minus the subjective disturbance factor: "Art = Nature – x".

GM: Following on from that, one could ask whether art in the pre-modern era—which, as you described, predominantly depicted heroic battles, rule, the higher and absolute, and so on—did so because that was the experienced reality of its time and was, so to speak, realistic. It is only in the mid-19th century, as bourgeois society gradually established itself, that these factory realities slowly became the society-sustaining category. To what extent does 19th-century Realism then represent an art-historical rupture at all, or to what extent is it a continuation?

HI: But even in the pre-modern era, one could have painted "low" subjects like peasants.

GM: Yes, but they did not yet have that central position in society at the time. At least not in the way society was thought about.

SA: These are very complex questions. I think the first point is totally important. It is also emphasized by classics of realism research, for example by the art historian Linda Nochlin or by Erich Auerbach. Both argue that modern realism, as I outlined above, is itself a product of capitalist modernity. Before that, there is no realism in this sense. At the same time, this also implies a thematic reference: Realism stands in an inner connection with the great movements of modern times; they form its subject matter. Instead of "great movements," one could simply speak of "bourgeois society" or "capitalist relations of domination." This is also the historical and political context in which realism places its subjects. In realistic depictions, individuals are actually always "ensembles of social relations," as Marx puts it; they are always placed into a concrete political-social-economic total reality. The program of realism is therefore actually good Marx: It is not about dogmas, but about real premises: real individuals, their action, and their material conditions of life. And these are to be viewed soberly.

HI: Could one say that the concept of art changes fundamentally as a result? Because actually, one is dealing here with a kind of social art, with art that relates to the social world.

SA: Yes, this tendency places realism, as you correctly indicated, in a complicated relationship with sociology. Because the question arises: what role does aesthetics actually play? If one essentially shares the subject matter with sociology—namely modern society and the individuals within it—how is the relationship to sociology structured? For both, the concept of critique is extremely important. Critique (krínein) originally means to distinguish, to separate. And that was inscribed in both sociology and realism. Not only in the sense of the analytical penetration of their object but potentially also as intervening negation. The dual position vis-à-vis bourgeois society consists, therefore, in wanting to depict it as precisely as possible on the one hand, and to problematize it on the other. That is the constellation that ultimately leads to the entire question of representation in realistic aesthetics. How can I process things artistically so that they are simultaneously captured and problematized, depicted and negated? In the end, that is the whole question of form. And the various strands and manifestations of Realism or Naturalism are, in my view, all historical answers or attempts to cope with a specific problem of form given by this task.

GM: I find the thought quite beautiful that this new Marxist understanding of the world, which works along the lines of concrete reality and does not begin with abstract ideas, has a line of connection to realistic art, which reaches for a real, sensuously graspable present. And at the same time, it’s funny, because bourgeois society as an emerging form of domination—which Marx was reacting to—is one that introduces a "second nature" at almost the same moment. In his Aesthetic Theory, Adorno says that in the total exchange society, everything is only for something else. That really stuck in my head. I ask myself whether, in the moment realism arises and positions itself to solve a problem, a counter-development is brought to life that immediately blocks its path to its goal again.

SA: I perhaps wouldn’t say "blocks the path," but certainly makes the path very complicated. It is definitely an interesting reference. In the introduction text to Axël wants to go with Sara, there is talk of the "cunning of art" by Arnold Hauser, which he borrowed from Hegel. But Hegel speaks not only of the cunning of reason but also of the end of art. And the end of art for Hegel consists precisely in the fact that modern society becomes extremely complicated and mediated. In the Philosophy of Right, he calls this the "system of needs"; this correlates largely with Adorno’s talk of everything being only for something else. Here, one is dealing with such a complicated context of mediation that it makes it more or less impossible to read reality off the empirical actuality of things. This is the core problem that, I would say, a non-naive realism has to work through. This is simultaneously a reaction against Hegel: attempting to continue making art that does not drop the claim of bringing enigmatic society to representation. That is why Brecht says "reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional." "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions." Or at least not the essential things: nothing about relations of production, nothing about relations of exploitation, nothing about free wage labor, and so on and so forth. Brecht believes that in view of this problem, there is indeed "something to construct," something "artificial," "posed" (Gestelltes). There must be methods, artistic techniques, to get at these matters nonetheless—montage, syntactics, juxtapositions, overwriting, omissions, and so on.

HI: You say realism reacts. But this development of the opaque society and the mediated world was one that chronologically followed the emergence of realism, wasn’t it? The problem only clearly emerges a bit later, doesn't it? Does an interplay start there, or to what extent does realism "react"?

SA: I would say the more critical engagement of realism with the "realism problem"—in the sense of an increasingly mediated, capitalist reality that is, so to speak, systemically impenetrable if one remains merely in the empirical—is one that appears later. It is already announced in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, this system of needs, mediation, the expansion of chains of interdependence, as one might say sociologically. Only with Marx is capital grasped in its full scope and systemic nature. But of course, Marx also reacts to social and historical experiences and asks himself how these can be conceptualized. Beyond that, however, I would argue that already in the realism of Courbet in the 1850s, there are aesthetic reflections on certain classical principles of representation through which processes that Marx also describes are brought within sight of experience. Courbet is, of course, no Brecht; he is not a Marxist artist, even if he had socialist tendencies and was close friends with Proudhon. The explicit reflection on the pathologies of capitalism only emerges around the turn of the century, where society enters a further crisis, which is reflected in the increased turning away from the optimistic liberalism of the previous century. That is the moment when all the social problems already hinted at in the 19th century—increasing proletarianization, industrialization, rationalization, reification, and so on—come increasingly to consciousness and then appear in their full tragedy and excess. And that affects art as well.

GM: What attempts were there to capture this new reality? What did that actually trigger on an aesthetic level? That would be a sort of inventory taking.

SA: Artistic examples can naturally be found in abundance in the history of realism. Flaubert’s literature, for example, is characterized by an extremely factual and impartial mode of representation, at the end of which stands no "moral of the story." With Courbet, realism consists of the unconventional refusal of an overarching narrative or ideal unity, which had characterized established classical painting until then. Vertov and the Russian Kinoki directed themselves against the format of the feature film, which was rejected as bourgeois. It was to yield to a cinema oriented toward facts, which participates as a cognitive aesthetic actively in the organization of real life. Brecht’s concept of epic theater aims to irritate and challenge common dramatic perspectives, along with the fatalism inscribed in them, through alienation effects (Verfremdungseffekte); Kracauer’s strange talk of the "pink moral complexion of employees" leads through a kind of distortion of reality to its rectification; Kluge mixes fact and fiction in his films to break through the social reality principle and give wishes back their realistic significance.

GM: Those are all different procedures and methods attempting to bring social reality to representation. What do they have in common?

SA: I would say there are always two moments in realistic representations: The first moment consists in the fact that they initially let us recognize something. That we see something we know: a process, a situation, a specific occurrence, a specific city. That is the representational moment of realism. That is the "groundedness" (Bodenhaftung), as Kluge calls it. And then, in

realistic aesthetics, something happens that goes beyond that. The second moment. Because it is not exclusively a recognition that takes place, but always also a questioning or an expansion, through which what one sees is looked at differently than one saw it before. Realistic works therefore possess a double structure of reference: First, they bring an object to representation. But simultaneously, through their formal operations, they problematize the historical and socially prevailing systems through which this object is produced in its specific phenomenal form. In this way, the insight into certain social contradictions, certain antagonisms, conflicts, or relations of domination is, in a sense, provoked by the realistic representation. One could also say there is a material, documentary moment and a more formal, constructing one. Classically, realism thrives on being very close to empirical phenomena. But the question of social substance is one that can also be posed quite differently. Namely, by reading social substance from the form. For example, when someone weaves themselves into a cocoon, as in Bea Camacho's work in your exhibition. That is anything but realistic in the documentary sense. I rarely see people weaving themselves into a cocoon.

GM: Could one posit the thesis that wherever there is a strong tendency toward realism—however it expresses itself formally—there must dialectically always be the flip side, namely the leap away from reality, an escapist moment? An evasion? Or how do we explain that repeatedly in different moments of history, there was such a thing as art as an escape from society? Hauser says at one point, referring to a specific historical moment, that society "rests" in art.

SA: That has a long tradition, the frowning upon art as an escapist or even unreal world that one doesn't need. Even with Plato, art is only the third level of truth. You have the Ideas, that is the actual reality; then you have the empirical copies of these Ideas, i.e., the physical world—that is already the second level; and this is then depicted again by art. Why do we still need that, one might ask. My thesis would be that one cannot have reality without possibility. And that would actually be an argument for the leap away from reality, albeit not in the utopianist sense.

GM: Can you explain that again?

SA: In Robert Musil, it says the sense of reality is a sense for the "way things are," whereas the sense of possibility is one for their potential "being different." A critical look at reality always means viewing things from the standpoint of their possible change. This means that if I want to explore, interpret, and depict reality, I must simultaneously grasp which possibilities of transformation lie within it. And that concerns the objects just as much as our perception of them. Without a sense of possibility, I understand nothing of reality, but without a sense of reality, my conception of possibility remains either empty or abstract.

HI: That leads directly into the topic of utopia.

SA: Yes. The question of utopias in this context is also the question of the level to which these utopias refer. Many of the avant-garde realistic aesthetics formulate something like utopias of seeing or utopias of sensuality. This is, in a sense, about aesthetics in the broad sense: about the structure and change of our sensory cognitive faculties. Here, art would be responsible for measuring and exploring the possibility space of sensuality. How far can our sensory capacities, our aesthetic capacities, our faculty of imagination and distinction be pushed? Sketching utopian spaces as concrete social or technological future spaces would be a form of artistic engagement to be distinguished from that, I think. The question would be to what extent these utopias are informed and supported by a certain historical consciousness of our current situation. What are their sources, their understanding of the political, their understanding of society?

GM: I think those are also central points that our exhibition wants to pick up on. The question of whether the utopian tendency of contemporary art stands on the shoulders of reality—that is, has a connection back to the potential of the present—or whether it completely absolves itself of the world and its potentials—plays the essential role. Doesn't that decide whether a utopian practice becomes, so to speak, utopianist—i.e., should be viewed psychologically as escapism?

SA: I believe we haven't yet sufficiently illuminated one dimension of the whole realism problem. Kluge often speaks of the "antirealism of feelings." And of the fact that we are, so to speak, constantly re-writing reality. The whole problem of realism becomes much more complicated if one imagines that people in a reality that dishonors them and does not mean well by them are constantly busy avoiding this reality. They are therefore realistic by turning against a bad reality—by being anti-realistic.

However, the concept of realism also has an ideological side of domination. Mark Fisher speaks, for example, of Capitalist Realism. That is the realism that says, "This is reality, stick to it!" Walk around in it, but accept it, take it as it is. The whole TINA doctrine coined by Thatcher—"There is no alternative"—is actually exactly that. An apologetic, affirmative realism.

GM: A method of justification. "Just be realistic!"

SA: Exactly, be realistic! Is that feasible, is that implementable, what do the numbers say. Anyone who has ever discussed with a Realpolitiker knows how that works. And at the same time, there is also a social-psychological concept of realism, the antagonistic realism, which is actually an anti-realism. In a sense, a kind of inescapable escapism. This refers to the fact that people always work against what is imposed on them as reality. In my dissertation, I treated this using the example of the assembly line worker Lissi, whose job consists of filling boxes on a conveyor belt in a spice factory. She makes up stories the whole time about what she is doing there. These are self-consolations, reinterpretations, narratives that we invent. That is what I see in Camacho's work: We spin a cocoon around us to endure it in reality. And that is also something addressed in your exhibition in its own way, not only through the cocoon work but also through the work by Luise Schröder and Anna Baranowski, which accompanies this inauguration ceremony and has something very sacred about it.

HI: Yes, sure, it's about the largest Jesus statue in the world.

GM: Yes. But you never see it.

SA: Exactly, facing the scene! It is a play on perspective. We are actually only ever looking into the eyes of the spectators and never see what they see, but always only them themselves. How they stand there devoutly and the warmth shines on their faces. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, as Marx puts it. Or in the pastoral care work on the phone...

HI: The telephone fortune-telling.

SA: Yes, the telephone astrology, which actually takes on a rather pastoral form and tells the person, "you can do it," "it will be totally fine," and so on. Almost parental encouragement. A question for art in the context of realistic aesthetics and the question of escapism is certainly how one deals with the, well, necessarily false consciousness that is captured quite satirically in this work, but is also expressed in the cocoon work mentioned earlier. In a sense, this antagonism between subjectivity and objectivity is already found in Freud, namely as the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The conflict is one thing, and how we react to it is another. Freud calls these "auxiliary constructions" (Hilfskonstruktionen): distractions, substitute gratifications, and intoxicants as well as avoidance or flight. So all those strategies we apply to endure reality.

GM: I ask myself what this means for our exhibition and whether it makes any sense at all against this background? What does it trigger if we confront people with this reflection on realism or these questions head-on? Does that have any chance of success? Is this a topic that can be addressed via intellect? I mean, we aren't actually doing it intellectually, but sensually, because we are exhibiting art and approaching it via form. But still, if we need these auxiliary constructions to survive, hasn't the current blindness to the world already become a social necessity? How do you deal with that now? If we think critically about it, see problems with it, or wish it were different. How can the gesture of such an exhibition be read at all?

HI: May I append something to that? In our conversations leading up to this discussion today, we repeatedly came to speak of the Expressionism debate. Lukács says in that context, roughly speaking, that Expressionism was the beginning of the end because there the world was abstracted into the absurd and detached from historical contexts. Today we live in a world another hundred years later, and historical conditions have moved much further into the distance—and have, so to speak, moved even further away from our consciousness. And yet we still hold on to it, and realize, no matter what exhibition we make, strictly speaking, we are always talking about history, always somehow about freedom. But at the same time, we distance ourselves a little further every year from such a watershed moment. In that respect, too, I would ask Günther's question: Does this actually still make sense? Do we still get at anything... or what are we doing there anyway?

SA: I think the question that has run through our entire discussion is the question of historical consciousness. That also means an understanding of the social context in which we find ourselves. I do believe that your rather unconventional tendency to engage critically with these things is one that makes sense insofar as we are currently in a historical situation in which truly

epochal upheavals are happening. In a sense, we have arrived at the end of postmodernity, where the entire ideological apparatus and categorical context of postmodernism is increasingly dissolving. This can certainly also open up possibilities, especially when one is suddenly confronted with the fact that one lacks a founded historical and political understanding of the world at all. I think that we have lost something there is evident, among other things, in the fact that geopolitics is suddenly hitting home in a completely different way. That Trump has come to power again, despite all invocations of the democratic spirit and the like. That there is an absolute dissolution of boundaries in technological developments. I believe very uncomfortable times are coming our way. And against this background, it does make sense to ask such questions as you are doing. How that is received and what it triggers in detail is another question. In general, however, I am unfortunately not very optimistic. That said, an exhibition should not be played off against a thousand years of accumulated historical power. Art, especially realistic art, socially critical art, and art that engages with utopias and the flight from reality, does well to stick to its last. If it does its work well, much more is gained than if it believes it can start the revolution from scratch or perform consciousness-raising like the Social Democracy of 120 years ago. We are smaller than David against Goliath. I find it sensible to conceive of realism as an open problem, instead of introducing the term as a seal of quality for artworks and then producing exclusion. The lowest common denominator here would possibly be what Adorno calls the "preponderance of the object": To take social reality seriously as a central category, not to deal with it at will, but to unlock it from the inside, and thus to develop an eye for an order of the possible, "where people and things would be in their right place." The task of realism would thus be to do justice to its object. No more and no less. That would actually be achieving a great deal.