

ONLY MEMORY REMAINS IN THE END – ONCE WE WERE HEROS

Siri Peyer

In an obvious manner this text starts with a quote from William S. Burroughs: 'The past is fiction'.¹ There are infinitely many different ways of interpreting history, but they are also always dependent on one's own viewpoint and the time one currently lives in. The past, related to by Dominik Stauch's work, is populated by illustrious personalities: heroes, machos and cowboys, who have entered the history of culture, art and music for their unwillingness to compromise or for their radical attitudes. The characters referred to in his work, be it the Beat writer William S. Burroughs, or Piet Mondrian, the hero of classic modernity, embody the desire to live life intensely without compromise in today's somewhat idealised reception and to push forward into new unexplored areas. A song line by Neil Young, which made international headlines in the 1990s by its use in the suicide note of the grunge singer Kurt Cobain, appears in Stauch's work time and again, summing up this desire thus: 'It's better to burn out than to fade away'.²

In the exhibition *Golden Days* at Kunstmuseum Thun, Stauch's sculptural works of the last six years as well as works created for the exhibition are assembled in the pastel green room. Each of the installations stands on its own, but together they form a dense network of links and references that comment on and complement each other. The potential, various, partially overlapping layers of meaning become evident through the dialogue between the works themselves. The largest sculpture *Big Boogie (Lux Lewis vs.*

Albert Ammons), 2005, is a three-dimensional geometric structure of rectangular wooden slats, which add together in squares of different sizes (p. 11). Stauch calculated the spacing of the slats by using the Fibonacci series of numbers. Visually, the work refers to Piet Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–1943, which the artist painted after he migrated to the States in the 1940s, inspired by the rectangular street canyons of Manhattan and the then popular boogie-woogie in the US. Mondrian explained the theoretical principle of his abstract art with the help of musical analogies; similar to sounds in a musical composition, different colours and surfaces are meant to be linked with each other and thereby break away from the naturalistic depiction. 'All the phenomena [of reality] show the same thing – the unchangeable. [...] [The immutable is] the display of the unchanging relationship, of the relationship between two straight lines at right angles to one another'.³ While Mondrian sought to depict the world abstractly in two-dimensional paintings, Stauch constructed a three-dimensional sculpture using mathematical principles. The work does not settle for this one allusion to the classic modern, rather references to a variety of sources condensed into a narrative. Another reference indicated by the title are the musicians from Chicago mentioned therein, who are today considered important protagonists of boogie-woogie. The common thing they shared was that both could not make a living with their music and drove a cab during the day to earn money. Thus the anecdotes cre-

ated in the work complement each other to form a tight narrative, in which the miscellaneous from the history of art and music is linked together non-hierarchically. While the urban canyons of Manhattan were an important inspiration for Mondrian, the musicians drove their taxis through the streets in order to be able to make their music. Furthermore, the music was in turn an important inspiration for abstract painting. And thus the various references condense into a supposedly stringent story.

Furniture has an important role in Stauch's sculptures. They are detached from their original use into newly defined objects. A carpet becomes a landscape; a cupboard turns into a mountain. Here, Stauch refers to his own memories of childhood, in which new narratives are made possible by the child's imagination. He interweaves them with cross references from (cultural) history. In this way, works are created with various levels of meaning and ambiguous interpretations. The work *Pow Wow*, 2009, for instance, consists of a sofa in the brown colour of cardboard, which has a back rest with a circular hole and a perpendicular piece of wood painted in yellow, also equipped with a hole which corresponds to that of the sofa (pp. 6–7). The title refers to a ritual by the Native Americans of North America, in which their tribal identity is demonstrated through dances and songs and their spirits are honoured. According to Stauch, tribute is paid to 'invisible things' in these spiritual meetings, which in turn refers to the two holes which become the object of consideration in the work. Nothingness becomes the focal point of contemplation and hence the potential space of projection.

Revolver, 2012, in turn consists of an overturned table, out of whose top six holes arranged in a circle are sawed (pp. 4–5). Also, thanks to the title, it immediately brings to mind a revolver magazine. With this minimal intervention it is modified into a new object. Although the original table already had an illustrious past, it was presented to the artist by Mrs Glaus, daughter of the painter Alfred Glaus, one of the founders of Kunstmuseum Thun. The word 'revolver' is etymologically related to the word 'revolving', which also

means 'rotating or regenerating'. This word-play forges a bridge from the displayed object to the provenance of the table and opens up more room for associations.

Next to *Revolver*, four chairs stand in a row at the Thun exhibition. A name is written on each chair: 'Wassily Kandinsky', 'František Kupka', 'Casimir Malevitch' und 'Piet Mondrian'. In *4 Chairs for a Requiem*, 2005, these art-historical heroes of abstract painting are set in relation with one another, even though their motives for turning to abstraction were partially quite different (pp. 8–9). With his Supremacist movement, Malevitch tried to create a tabula rasa for new things through the negation of any figurative depiction, 'the first step towards the pure creation of art'.⁴ For both Mondrian and Kandinsky, abstraction was rather a means to reach 'a conceptually higher spiritual realm, which was reflected in geometric shapes and primary colours'.⁵ And Kupka was indeed one of the first abstract painters, but in art-historical appreciation he is now often mainly associated with Art Nouveau. Stauch brings together these different protagonists of classic modernism and honours them with a death hymn. They are historical figures who advanced into new areas and thereby became 'immortal' in the art-historical reception. In Stauch's work, figures appear time and again, which have originated through their pioneering achievements. This is accompanied by the male connotated principle of competition, of vying with each other. The aspired 'winning', however, also implies a potential failure, two opposites that are mutually dependent.

The last words of the painter Giovanni Segantini who died in 1899, 'Voglio vedere le mie montagne' (I would like to see my mountains), inspired Joseph Beuys more than half a century later to create a room installation by the same title. Among others, it consists of a large wardrobe, which in turn prompted Stauch to make his sculpture *Black Mountain*, 2008 (p. 10). Once again we encounter the tradition of last words in Stauch's work. The last chance of a heroic gesture before the unavoidable exit. In Beuys's installation, the various pieces of furniture arranged all over the room are marked with chalk: the wardrobe as a glacier,

the chest as rocks and the bed as a valley. For Stauch, the wardrobe connotes the image of the mountain as a place of retreat, as a hideaway, as a place where something is suppressed, but also as a possibility to create something new. Deep inside these rocks, images of hidden mines arise where precious metals are mined. For that reason, Stauch provided his wardrobe with holes that enable a look into the interior of the piece of furniture. The title *Black Mountain* refers to the college of the same name, which was founded in North Carolina in the U.S. in 1933 and existed until 1956. Many Bauhaus artists met there after their emigration.

In comparison, Stauch's work *Untitled (after William S. Burroughs)*, 2009, is a military drum on a pedestal (pp. 1, 32). Both sides of the drum are embellished with an inscription, a quote by William S. Burroughs. One can read on one side 'Power is often very quiet', on the other, 'I don't know, let's see'. Both fragments derive from *Words of Advice*,⁶ a telephone conversation recorded in 1994. Here the written word interacts with the visual aspect of the drum, which broadcasts contrasting signals: the loud drum demonstrating power and the smart advice that draws attention to the authority of silence and patience.

When considering Stauch's sculptural work, variations of the same topics appear in a recurring fashion: protagonists and references from art, cultural and music history like Mondrian or Burroughs, the geometrical principle of the Fibonacci series of numbers and the circular form, to name a few. These are often placed side by side without hierarchy to open up a wide space for associations. Moreover, Stauch continuously refers to the tradition of abstract art, which created an autonomy of the pictorial without connection to the representational. In contrast, Stauch's sculptures are formal, not abstract. But he shifts the original meaning of the objects and charges them with a separate narrative. Stauch uses undogmatically set pieces from individual art-historical epochs and mixes them with anecdotes from the history of music and with autobiographical references. All these figures appearing in Stauch's work have a certain (uncompro-

ising) attitude in common. And perhaps, that is the reason Stauch asks time and again: How can such an attitude be adopted in a time of 'anything goes'.

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¹ Quote from an interview with William S. Burroughs by Bernhard Streit, in: *Tell*, no. 25, 13 December 1984.

² This sentence originates in the song 'Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)' by Neil Young, which was released in the 1979 album *Rust Never Sleeps*.

³ Piet Mondrian in 'Dialog über die neue Gestaltung', in: Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian und De Stijl*, Cologne, M. DuMont Schauberg, 1967, p. 112–121.

⁴ Mike O'Mahony in: 'Der Internationale Stil', in: Martin Kemp (ed.), *Geschichte der Kunst*, Cologne, DuMont Schauberg, 2003, p. 414.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ William Seward Burroughs, from: 'Words of Advice', 1994, taken from a live telephone conversation between his living room in Kansas and a Munich gallery, dated 10 June 1994, in: *The Best of William Burroughs: From the Giorni Poetry Systems*.