

Ohne Ende

Text by Dennis Knopf

Sebastian Haslauer is a dear friend, that's why I'm not a suitable writer for this catalogue text. I can't detach the work from his persona, his character and style, his preferences. I probably have more insights into his motivations than the general public, and so it is a true challenge to make sure everything I see in and write about the work is reproducible by the outsider.



What distinguishes Haslauer's work the most is an amusing type of cultural pessimism that lies beneath the pretty first impression his pieces make on you, and which connects cultural sophistication and intellectual poverty in a canny way. Haslauer's main focus lies on the aesthetics of contemporary (as well as scrupulously outdated) pop culture, and so many of his pieces happen to look as if they could as well appear in advertisement or life style magazines – while others in turn are purposely unfashionable, ordinary and mediocre. However, all of them feature a degree of cynicism which has become sort of a tradition for artists, film makers, musicians and entertainers in post-war Germany: the goal is to portray the unpleasant and ugly aspects of our culture and to cultivate ignorance and inelegance to the extent of ridicule (sometimes more sometimes less obviously) in order to deal with social decay in this country without wagging a finger. Since the second half of the 20th century our Erbschuld (meaning inherited debt, referring to our Nazi past) has been suggesting rather critical art making, and artists such as Martin Kippenberger along with other so-called "Junge Wilde", photographers like Peter Piller, musicians like Helge Schneider or guys like Stephan Remmler have included themselves as hopeless / proud elements of this portrait. To remain within the aesthetics of the subject is an important stylistic device, just as in satire.

fig.a



The result is a distinct language of humor which might sometimes only become evident in the title of a work but that celebrates our dull, lowbrow and vulgar habits while making use of the painful effect of vicarious embarrassment ("Fremdschämen"). Needless to say Haslauer's works seem to speak this language fluently. Whether you're looking at his odd photographs, his handicraft paintings made of uncooked pasta, his portrait on his "business card" or his homage to decorative art sold in department stores which wannabe-classy, Prosecco-drinking insurance brokers who love BMW would hang over their black duvet covered beds (entitled "Urlaub in

fig.b

Geberländern”); you can totally picture Sebastian laughing up his sleeve while producing all of them.

Don't get me wrong, most of his works are very pretty and appealing, especially the strong and lucid visual language of his paintings intends to first of all attract, not scare nor embarrass their viewers. Layers of collaged elements allow for an emotional and experiential perspective to articulate. However, the state of always being on the edge between visual appreciation and disgust is a steady leitmotif throughout his creation, the way lines of graffiti represent both color and dirt, beautiful whipped cream rosettes¹, (found on typical German Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte) become a symbol for the fragile ideal world our sick nation of krauts tries to hold on to.



fig.a

No, it's not just about hating, it's about loving to hate. It's this passion that makes the difference, that makes critique less anal and that gets Haslauer to produce his series of bright, screen-printed explosions. Blowing shit up is a more consequent form of critique than your ordinary depressing abstract painting. After all, that's what good critics do – tear everything to pieces, right? Sebastian always does it in a colorful and diverting way and makes sure it doesn't get boring, but at the same time limits the impact of his works making them what he himself dismisses as “flat shit”. Haslauer *loves* “flat shit”. The fact that he only uses acrylic paint and car finish for his paintings, which allow for no visual depth to develop, underlines this. Unlike stars like Takashi Murakami or Jeff Koons however, who stick to their slick and peachy style at all times, Haslauer isn't afraid of going into a less obvious direction and sometimes shaming the beholder with ailing, whack creations. Or: they never cross a certain line of what's considered “chic” whereas Haslauer dances the Macarena on it. Though as a child of the 1980s and 4-color printing process and comics and



fig.b

cartoons Haslauer also remains within the aesthetics of modern consumer culture and refers to the signs of pop culture (and even pop art in case of his Lichtenstein-esque explosions) threatening to be almost absorbed by them. In this context, his art *has* to be figurative eye-candy. To most people art isn't anything more than an investment, just like collecting special editions of Swatch watches back in the 1990s hoping they will one day increase in value. And since our economic system is expected to collapse yet once again it's buy or die; everyone is desperately searching to invest in real estate and other commercial assets. Haslauer's neon piece “Crisis” perfectly captures this thrilling / soothing moment by combining the classic symbol of advertisement, the neon sign, with what capitalism has resulted in, permanent crisis.

Or, as his piece “Hasenbau” puts it: we're flooded. The painting which appears as a still from the Warner Brothers' cartoon “Bugs Bunny” depicts what seems to be the inside of Bugs Bunny's den almost completely flooded with water, with only the tips of the bunny's ears sticking out. It's one of the few, if not the only piece where Haslauer, also known as “Hasi” (bunny) to his friends, attempts to express his personal feelings as a struggling visual artist towards both his own and the world's situation at large.

It's hard not to be beguiled by his cultural pessimism when it's so poetic, and when our civilization does feel so obviously pointless at times. We've come such a long way, millions of years of evolving from sea monkeys to culturally sophisticated humans developing incredible computing power and hi-tech devices capable of, well, displaying the glossy effect in HD or rapidly downloading a whoopee cushion app on the street. Dragan Espenschied's re-interpretation of that famous old Navajo saying keeps coming to my mind: “Only when the last pixel has been anti-aliased and the last security update has been installed will we realize that our Dolby Surround system doesn't beep.” (Where I believe “beep” can both refer to the typical 8-bit music from obsolete home computer sound chips and the monotone chirping of a bird in nature.)

Haslauer's series of tiny, deformed sculptures symbolizes the maze of hypermaterialism and infinite consumption that characterizes our generation by resembling the addictive nature of collectibles – which those apps, mp3s, movies, Pokémon cards, handbags, ringtones etc. all are. The miniatures are three-dimensional collages made of old, rearranged toys, parts of dollhouse furniture, and Kinder-egg models, and although bringing together different topics they always operate in an inter-

relation of reality and its plastic effigy. Their colorful ugliness proudly represents what's embodied in our glossy iPhones and limited edition sneakers: on one hand prestige and cultural significance, on the other hand cheap labor under terrible conditions, greedy pricing policy, and superabundance. The act of collecting has itself transformed from accumulating objects (stamps, butterflies, Kinder-egg models), where *getting* is equally important to the hobby as *having* them, into a form less occupied with *having* but instead almost completely centered around *getting*. As with another two phenomena of our consumer society, fast food and pornography, the promised and much anticipated moment of ultimate satisfaction often results in spiritual emptiness and even disgust. "You're all pizza and fairy tales!" as John Lennon reportedly yelled at Paul McCartney on the phone. Funnily enough desire and lust can be endlessly generated even if the disappointment has been experienced numerous times before. We need to continue consuming in order to define who we are regardless of the fact that the sheer state of physical saturation has quickly led to displeasure and nausea before. At least by now with over 25 billion downloads from Apple's app store our consumer culture has entered the next stage. I wonder how many of those apps are being deleted soon after their download to make room for new ones²...

I also see Haslauer's plastic sculptures series as an ironic commentary to the commercially dexterous strategy of producing endearing little creatures to sell cheap, "dumb" games for "smart" phones like the very successful "Angry Birds". In our interview following below, Sebastian gives further insights into his miniatures.



And again it's those binaries that can be found throughout Haslauer's work: addiction vs. saturation, excess vs. boredom, beauty vs. deformation, and so on. On one hand "Ohne Ende" (without end) reads as a tribute to the insatiable desires of our consumer society and the limitless way we retrieve infinite amounts of content anytime / anywhere; at the same time "Ohne Ende" also stands for artistic freedom ad infinitum, the impetuous pleasure of visual expression, the self-sufficient celebration of making. Disregarding the rules to success as an artist – namely consistency, seriousness, establishing trademarks, engaging in the contemporary art discourse, etc. – Haslauer rejects the conception of super cerebral smart art dressed in French theory playing hard-to-get, and openly questions his contemporaries' elitist oeuvre. The reactionary and aggressive attitude behind his work and its recurring themes such as childhood and apocalypse makes it so rewarding. Sebastian is a talented painter and

although the term "decorative" is regarded an insult to most artists it means an accomplishment to him. "Ohne Ende" equally stands for the open ending his works offer, the possibility to think them further and to develop our own sense of their right to exist. "Ohne Ende" also means unlimited capacity for love.

Footnotes:

1. I find it kind of a miracle Jeff Koons hasn't used them yet; imagine supersized whipped cream rosette sculptures and paintings...
2. Cultural bulimia as a new widespread disease...

Next is a brief interview Sebastian and I had in a public swimming pool in Suhl on March 17th, 2012.

DK

So, dude! Love that series of small sculptures of yours, they're so colorful and intriguing. What made you move away from painting?

SH

Well, I've been using enamel and acrylic color, so: car finish and plastic, in my paintings... and I wanted to try out making plastic sculptures out of old toys I've been collecting. Plastic is the material of the modern age: synthetic, glowing, multicolored, cheap in its production and applicable to unlimited possible fields. The planet suffocates on that plastic. The synthetic material we produced from the beginning of the plastic age would be enough to wrap our globe with plastic foil six times. Southeast of Hawaii, a clockwise rotating accumulation of waste twice the size of Texas is floating in the ocean current, pulverizing into tiny particles, sponging up dangerous environmental toxins. Plankton is eating it and so we eat it through the fish in our food. We even absorb the harmful, carcinogenic and mutagenic bisphenol A directly through our milk cans, our yoghurt cups and kids toys.

DK

That's terrible. But besides of it being cheap and the perfect material for all kinds of fields, besides all the waste we're creating with it what is it about plastic that fascinates you? It seems you've been hooked on it for quite some time before you started working on the sculptures?

SH

We grew up with He-Man, very pink panthers, Marvel heroes and perhaps Pokémons casted in that attractive material. Girls rebuild a perfect women's world in their dollhouses and dress up their Barbie dolls. Boys build little Revell stealth bombers and

try to own the fastest car or most terrifying creature in the sandbox. Without knowing, kids play with the symbols of capitalism, the glowing mascots of modern economy and the plastic they are made of seems to be the perfect emblematic material.

DK

I see.

[Senior citizen swimming by]

Regarding the amount of images we're confronted with daily and the infinite image databases available to us I must say the effort of producing a painting appears comparatively enormous while the significance of the individual, original painting is shifting towards zero. How do *you* feel about painting?

SH

I don't think painting is dead nor that it is unprogressive or behind our time because of other technical achievements. On the contrary, I believe that in a culture of endlessness and abundance the original, authentic artwork gains in value and importance. It's a visual world we live in and we're looking at screens all day long; it's like our eyes really wear off. Seeing an original painting in real life bears a moment of irritation to our eyes and our mind. Of course it's a bit different if you've been walking through galleries all day... But the scale is much smaller. You can probably look up every great painting ever made on the web, and you can find a thousand images of the same painting on Google's image search. And there are always billions of other images only a few clicks away... I'm too craven for competition that size! [giggles]

DK

At the same time you don't see anything wrong with copying from found footage and photos?

SH

I spend so many hours on each motive that I start to feel as if they're mine afterwards, as if there's some slow process of appropriation taking place. Also their meaning and origin is being transformed; they're no longer photos afterwards.

DK

In other words: other methods might be more timely / less time-consuming but paintings just sell for higher prices?

SH

In other words: painting is an act of consumption.