



Stadt Zürich
Helmhaus

BLACK MAGIC
A.C. KUPPER
CAT TUONG NGUYEN
CHRISTIAN VETTER

Helmhaus Zürich

27 September to 17 November 2013

Is pink the new black? It may come as a surprise that an exhibition titled BLACK MAGIC should start with a work that is blatantly pink. It is the colour with which artist Cat Tuong Nguyen has painted the four load-bearing columns in the lobby of the Helmhaus Zürich. While pink now has primarily positive connotations from being a typical girl's colour to the gay movement, it also has a dark past. During the Vietnam War – Nguyen was born when it was at its worst – pink was the colour the US Army used to mark villages on the map that were thought to be Vietcong hideouts. In some cases, villages were mistakenly marked as enemy territory, as so-called "Pinkville", which contributed to a catastrophic massacre of Vietnamese civilians by US troops in 1968. Cat Tuong Nguyen's painted columns at the Helmhaus signal the black side of pink.

Nguyen's new work, *Pinkville*, sets the tone: black is not the only colour that is pitch-black. Besides, contemporary art does not need to engage with this non-colour in order to engage in black magic. The three contributors to BLACK MAGIC – middle-generation artists based in Zurich, who have already taken part in numerous exhibition projects – enlist entirely different artistic strategies to implement similar goals. They do not aim to illuminate reality in their art but rather to represent, expose and denounce it in all its darkness. Their means are sculpture into which photography is integrated; photography that shows the tools of painting; and paintings that lie on photographs and become sculptures.

In his photographs, A.C. Kupper directs his high-resolution lens at the increasingly illuminated, ever-brighter surfaces of consumerism – and, in the process, reveals the darkest of obsessions underneath. History erupts once again in Cat Tuong Nguyen's traumata, the Vietnam War, for instance, or all the other traumas that we keep provoking in Iraq, in Afghanistan and now in Syria. Christian Vetter wonders what, if anything, can still be achieved by *Painting in the Age of Capitalism*, as he calls his largest installation to date, or more concretely, whether the only way art can counter the poor distribution of material surfeit is by creating its own surfeit of pitch-black paint.

In the work of all three artists personal biographies mesh with current events; the past is entwined with the present; and a critical, fragile image of our age is created, interspersed with breaks and cracks, where questions are answered by posing others that are even more precise and incisive. Our feel-good society, lulled, intoxicated, overindulged, is mirrored in heightened imagery that shows the fractures and abysses of beautiful appearances. The artists take an approach that does not seek to escape but rather to confront the pain suffered from within and without. Hardness can heal, confrontation can mitigate, conflict can integrate. The three artists pit the black magic of reality against the even blacker magic of art. Seeing that hurts, but it also helps – just like the seductive but devastating pink of Cat Tuong Nguyen's columns in the lobby of the Helmhaus Zürich.

A.C. KUPPER (*1962) – “ACTUALLY NOWADAYS EVERYTHING IS PORN”

Life and art have always been inseparable for A.C. Kupper. That inseparability has been extremely fruitful but it has also cost him a great deal. Single-minded and uncompromising, he is a character balanced on the edge of society, becoming its whore when there is no other way out, engaging it, lying down on it and laying into it at every opportunity: an excessive, risky life with a beauty of its own. In 2010 he culled these images from the virtual-real world of the Internet in *Revolutionäre Mittelklasse* (Revolutionary Middle Class), published by Edition Patrick Frey. Now, for the first time he is building his own universe in the tradition of the still life and staged photography. The pictures are surreal inasmuch as they shatter the superficial gloss of advertising by imitating it to perverse extremes. Marrying art and advertising has always been taboo. A.C. Kupper ignores that taboo – and demonstrates that much of what is happening in art today is nothing but advertising (oneself).

But art is not only used here to critique art; caustically and provocatively, it also critiques the workings of contemporary society. Brilliant and super sharp, Kupper's large-format photographic tableaux give voice to a deep-seated anger directed at the unbridled greed and hollow promises of advertising that is as mercantile as it is infantile and infamous. His anger is directed at its surface aesthetic, at a present that plays at war as if it were a computer game controlled by remotes and joysticks – in a field droning with drugs, seconded from the air by drones and then abandoned, left entirely to its own devices in a post-traumatic end-game. A.C. Kupper's shrill, black, inescapable imagery and sardonic humour underscore the obscenity of a society that generates ritual victims and walks frigidly smiling over (psycho-)bodies to indulge its intoxicated lust for sex and violence. He neatly sums it up: “Actually nowadays everything is porn.” His pictures are certainly no less aggressive than society itself. They unmask individual dreams that cumulate into collective catastrophes. We would dearly love to interpret them as visions of an Americanized world of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, but actually they are in fact much closer to reality than we would like to admit: on the precise line between grunge and haute couture, rock 'n' roll and elegance, love and ruin, war and art.

The protagonists of Kupper's monumental, framed, heavyweight tableaux come from his immediate vicinity. The figures play themselves in a setting with a few sparing but well-aimed attributes. Whether they are young or middle-aged is irrelevant: they have no pretences, nor does the photographer. He pictures them as they are. Period. The high-resolution camera sees more than any human eye: every single wrinkle, every single fibre in every yarn. As if the works were paintings – portraits as contemporary history paintings between Caravaggio and Cavalli – liquids keep making an appearance. In the most concrete reference to painting, namely, the collected paintbrushes of the Zurich artist Andreas Dobler, the paints are left-overs that bear witness to past pictures. Liquids are also excreted by bodies and remind us that our bodies are sensitive shells and that our body tanks are filled with a fuel that is of a seductive consumer lust, which admittedly also makes it susceptible to poisoning. Shrill green blood spurts out, a mother's milk mutates into a milkshake, Cola without a lubricant can be used in many ways, and fleeting scented waters give hard-boiled and yet sensitive fatalists of everyday life an aura of exclusive violability.

Gender relationships are fluid as well. Strength and vulnerability, victim and perpetrator are siblings of the same gender. “Sex” is not simply propagated as a binary phenomenon but as a richly varied and complex area of life and experimentation, whether playful and temporary or as a manifest, irreversible fact in the remodelling of the sexes. Saturated with emotion, this art acquires a new kind of sentimentality: it does not wallow in melancholy but rather fruitfully extracts from it both hardness and softness at once. A profound love of humankind that feeds on misogyny, it moves us to the core and – harsh as it is – acts like a natural remedy (minus package insert).

“Intelligence breeds on improvisation, not on calculation” – this declaration about the making of his works comes out as a matter-of-fact and highly condensed statement. Despite being extremely deliberate and technically perfect, Kupper’s art retains more than just the appearance of a hodgepodge and it does not succumb to the temptation to answer the gloss of advertising with excessive artistic gloss. Glamour is used to subvert glamour – but it is glamour of a different order: it comes from the living underground and resonates as a vital, voluminous, large-calibre, well-tuned cultural body, not a hollow economic body whose only productivity consists in shifting around lent and borrowed capital made productive by others. Kupper’s art is a serious high-risk game, just like his life. It is individual and collective and offers viewers neither false promises nor solutions: “I feel good and bad. That’s the way I feel best.” (A.C. Kupper)

CAT TUONG NGUYEN (*1969) – TRAUMA BY THE METER

We are familiar with home stories from tidy apartments. But what happens when an artist’s flash records undigested traumas? Ever since he started making art in the mid-1990s, Cat Tuong Nguyen has specialized in photographing the interior of the notoriously untidy global human psyche. For BLACK MAGIC, he has literally created a home story out of a trauma – seen in the first gallery as prints backlit in neon. With black humour, Nguyen calls his new sculpture on the second floor a “1-metre trauma”. Titled *Entwurf US Charity Hospital Son My/Charity oder seine eigenen Wunden lecken*, it is cast in the gypsum-like material Acrystal. In his studio at the Rote Fabrik, the artist kept shooting pictures while the sculpture was being poured. In them, one can faintly make out what gave the sculpture its shape: two crutches that each lay in the mould at the end of this metre. It is ordinarily a casualty of war that is propped up between two such crutches. In this case, however, it is a sculpted shape that could also serve as a monument to all the physical and mental casualties caused by our wars. Or – as the title suggests – as an architectural model for a hospital in the South Vietnamese town of Son My, where the devastating massacre by US troops took place in 1968, the year before Nguyen was born in Vietnam.

Like A.C. Kupper, Cat Tuong Nguyen – he has been living in Switzerland since 1981 – addresses the simultaneity of contradictory global events. And like Kupper, he has acquired a sensibility for brutality and justice, forcing himself to look, instead of looking away. The price he pays for this uncomfortable stance is torn feelings and a loss of orientation: how can I feel well when I know what is happening in the world? A commitment of that kind takes its toll but it also releases great amounts of energy. Cat Tuong Nguyen never stops seeking. He finds much that is horrific but also moments of transcendent beauty in the course of ceaselessly seeking and recalibrating his own place and position in a bewilderingly complex universe. Participating in that search, visitors to his exhibitions are, on one hand, deeply disturbed by the abandonment and futility that sometimes emanate from his works, and on the other, delighted by the devotion and commitment with which Nguyen explores the world – his own and that of others.

One thing Cat Tuong Nguyen has found in the course of his questing is fine art as an ideal means of expression. His flash is at work, relentlessly illuminating the black magic, inherent in our reality, that wreaks death and annihilation in hotspots all over the world. He has found an extremely distinctive artistic idiom through which individual works are interwoven like the lines of a dark poem. The double portrait in the lobby on the second floor includes metal ice containers made by the artist’s former neighbour, who is also depicted in the portrait. The neighbour’s work inspired Nguyen to make similar tin containers. In memory of his brother, who leapt to his death, Nguyen printed photographs of his family on the containers and also threw them down from a height of fifty metres. Now, painfully deformed, they are in the white gallery, floating on a raft made of pallets belonging to a wholesale fishmonger from Zurich. Behind them on the wall, there are two large-format photographs of the Vietnamese beach at night, where Cat Tuong Nguyen and two of his siblings suffered the drama of being

separated from their parents while escaping from Vietnam. They did not see them again until many years later – in Europe. He has pictured his mother in *Moonrise*, next to an improvised curtain. When the exhibition closes, she wants to use the textiles to sew clothing for her children. The speed of Nguyen's spiralling associations is not unlike the turbo-capitalistic acceleration of the world around us.

CHRISTIAN VETTER (*1970) – SUPERFLUOUS PAINT

The edges of banknotes may not make deep cuts but they can be used to buy violence. Security, too, by the way – e.g. off-roaders –, and, obviously, sex. That makes money the very last remaining handle of power in our world and that's the pretty gloomy conclusion to be drawn from Christian Vetter's profoundly disturbing video piece *Favela-Vorfall* (Favela Incident), to be seen on the first floor at Helmhaus Zürich. The three-part video draws from cell phone videos available on the Internet, which documented the evacuation of the square in front of the Art Basel trade fair on 14 June 2013. A group of artists and activists had added huts of their own to Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata's *Favela Café* and had gathered there. The videos show the police moving in with rubber pellets and pepper spray to disperse the group. That means that the favela erected spontaneously on this public square and without substantial financial underpinnings was demolished, while the version erected by a well-funded private organization, Art Basel, was defended with drastic police violence. Or are the authorities employing their clubs to protect the integrity of a work of art in public space that was, in this case, illegally extended by a set of different authors?

Politics are generally criticized for putting financial pressure on art and its institutions (the Kunsthalle Bern, for example, which the authorities want to close down to save money), but this time the state went so far as to enlist pepper spray in defence of art – although it was, of course, art promoted by the capitalist art market. Another interpretation: politics separates art that is faithful to the system from art that is critical of the system. Still another interpretation: free art is quite simply too loud for the free market. In any case art and politics – a notoriously problematic pair – have here entered into a most curious alliance. The alliance becomes even more complex through Vetter's artistic decision to show this extremely political video as the overture to his contribution to BLACK MAGIC, accompanied by a reader of collected media reports on the disturbing event.

Vetter has built his own version of an artistic wooden favela in the large gallery on the second floor. This, his largest installation to date, comprises a wall some 40 metres long, with works painted directly on the black primer, into which other works on paper behind Plexiglas are integrated and glued onto photographs. Vetter, long known primarily as a painter, patiently worked out the dimensions of his black background to this installation. Having grown up in St. Gallen, the artist was familiar with colour-intensive figurative painting. In the meantime he has added height to his medium and developed several space-filling works. Today his art is almost exclusively abstract and almost exclusively based on a non-colour – black. A studio grant in Beijing in 2007 – compounded by the experience of a certain isolation in linguistically alien climes – sealed this turn toward the radical negation of colour. In terms of physics, black absorbs the entire spectrum of light and therefore corresponds to the complete absence of colour.

The structure created for BLACK MAGIC straddles two poles: established art (the official favela) in which reproductions of paintings are integrated, and less acceptable strategies (the improvised huts) in which pictures of St. Hieronymus are covered with a layer of silver paint. Vetter uses the same colour to suggest the edges of paintings, thereby underscoring the absence of a marketable work. And although the wall construction resembles trade fair architecture of the kind used at Art Basel, it instantly gives itself away by presenting its supporting structure to visitors. However, the truly subversive act appears at the end of the installation where visitors discover a hidden room within a room, in which Vetter has besmirched the

institution itself by emptying out gallons of black paint on the pristine white floor – in a nod, moreover, to the drawings seen in the videos, painted by the activists on the square in front of the trade fair. If all the walls are plastered with advertising – or paintings –, then is the floor – in public space or a public art institution – the last remaining empty canvas? Christian Vetter calls this work *Painting in the Age of Capitalism*: instead of mindlessly exploiting the centuries-old, tried-and-tested effect of painting, he offers painting as an artistic medium. Considering that it is perhaps art's most marketable medium, can it even claim to have any meaning outside of a capitalist system of values? And what does it have to offer a world in which money, the ultimate instrument of power, can be arbitrarily multiplied and destroyed – as long as you are in possession of the right wand? Christian Vetter counters the black magic of gushing capital with superfluity: with overflowing – and possibly soon superfluous – black paint.