

## Timelessness

Opening speech of Dr. Hannelore Paflik-Huber, held on June 25, 2017 at Kunstverein Ellwangen, exhibition by Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb and Gerd Kanz

(translation Silke Schwab-Krüger)

The title of the exhibition is "timelessness"- what a wonderful word. The German is: "Zeitlosigkeit". With the annex and connex alone, it becomes a complicated and cumbersome word construction in our language, and one can immediately understand why the curator of the exhibition, Silke Schwab-Krüger, chose the English language. It is not without reason that the concept of *time* is much more difficult to grasp in German, since we completely lack the verb "to time", as in English. However, we Germans have an important book by Martin Heidegger from 1927 as a cultural asset on the aspect of time: "Sein und Zeit" – "Being and Time". The philosopher Rüdiger Safranski and Heidegger biographer summarizes the main thesis of "Being and Time", the standard reference on this philosophical topic still valid today, as follows: "When asked why people are so absorbed in what they do, they subliminally feel that their great antagonist is time: They aim for the durability of being because they cannot stand the challenge of time." <sup>1</sup>

Do we want to escape into timelessness because we cannot stand the challenge of time? Time is not an adversary, and this exhibition with works by Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb and Gerd Kanz provides wonderful visual evidence.

The works of the two artists show, according to Safranski, a durability of being. And this critically, aesthetically, with many questions and in very different visual manifestations. Both artists transfer their ideas, fantasies, conceptions and attitudes towards the world onto paper, wood or canvas and thus into a form of timelessness. The image isolates the flow of time and makes it permanent.

### **What is timelessness?**

In order to define the phenomenon of time, we use terms and metaphors in linguistic communication.

We wish for *timelessness*, the illusion that time should be stopped in order to escape the continuous tick tock. We desire to define our own rhythm of time, to escape the speed of everyday life with yoga or Thai Chi. We want to outline how long we can "steal" someone's time so that we can look at these works here in peace. But all the words, no matter how beautiful and inventive, only deceive us about

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Rüdiger Safranski, in: Religion without God. Between conceptual delirium and rosary prayer: The Heidegger biographer Rüdiger Safranski on Martin Heidegger as an anti-Semitic thinker in Hitler's wake, interview with Michael Stallknecht, Süddeutsche Zeitung, March 24, 2015, p.

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the fact that time flows incessantly. We have no influence on how fast or slow an hour goes by. It ticks and ticks, precisely measurable since the introduction of the atomic clock in 1949. What we can do is perceive time subjectively.

I would like to introduce to you some of the aspects of time that both artists deal with: These are memory, growth, eternity, history, past, decay, earth and *timelessness*. In his novel "Himmelsfarb", the author Michael Krüger makes his protagonist to regretfully realize that he is missing an hour every day. An hour that he could use for love or for work. Krüger thinks that this is a question of genetics.<sup>2</sup> If he knew that this was at the heart of our real ticking biological clock. Is it exactly this missing hour that we carry within us, so to speak, and which creates the feeling of timelessness every day, without us knowing why? And this brings us close to what the title of the exhibition wants to trigger in our thinking and to which the artist visually responds. As I can, both in language and in the visual arts, manipulate time, stop it, carve a moment of growth in wood, like Kanz, or superimpose many levels of time, like Karsch-Chaïeb. Art can provide a picture of eternity for eternity and it can turn time around, bring the past into the now, like Barbara or depict the future in a relief, like Gerd.

Basically it's easier for artists. They create works that are marked with a year of origin, i.e. they are integrated into a fixed chronological classification. On the other hand, each work, once fixed, is elevated to a timelessness, because it can be viewed at any time. In the best case they are also still visible for our great-great-great-grandchildren. And everyone wishes, as long as possible, to be represented with their works in this world far beyond their own death.

Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb's concept of art is based on a precise analysis of the respective theme. In her research she goes back into the past. She chooses materials that are extracted from so-called primary rock, to use a term again from the 18th century, i.e. a material that is millions and millions of years old. At first glance this is not visible. We perceive paint on canvas or paper. Only when we learn that the "white" in the multi-part work "Snowline", from 2017 in Room 1, was extracted from metamorphic marble rock and the basic color of the likewise metamorphic oil shale, can we imagine that a rock that has formed over an almost unimaginably long period of time is used by the artist as paint. Color for what: for snow. Layer upon layer, as real as in the mountains, the bound marble powder is formed into a multi-part panel painting as a critical positioning of the artist on the subject of "global warming". Marble is around 340 million years old, oil shale is even "a little" older, around 400 million years. The problem that Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb draws our attention to is contemporary, more current than ever. Both materials are metaphors of eternity. In the shortest time human intervention can and does destroy what has lasted millions of years. The snow line, for example, is receding which in turn has enormous effects. Karsch-Chaïeb emphasizes this with the other objects in

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Krüger in an interview with Wolfgang Heim, in: SWR Leute, broadcasted March 13, 2004

the room, the photographs of the grandfather who climbed Mont Blanc in 1953, the object made of Japanese paper, oil shale and mirrors on the floor, and the monotypes, the "color take-offs of the oil shale pigments".

Gerd Kanz gives us a second interpretation of the relationship between space and time. The "architectural constructions" in their reduction to the element of arching are so timeless that I think of architecture without any precise stylistic connection, as here for example of the Schloss Ellwangen the years 1460, 1802 and 1842, in order to fix only three construction phases in time. The works were not created for this place, nevertheless, they adapt congenially to the rooms and provide an aesthetic reference to the court design of the castle. A time bridge has been created between the reliefs and sculptures by Kanz and the architecture of the castle. The second special attraction may also be read as a metaphor for time, it is the design solution that Kanz has chosen. He layers arched elements, one behind the other. No matter how many layers Kanz or Karsch-Chaïeb lay behind and on top of each other, a few are enough to make us think of infinity.

Gerd Kanz provides us with a synonym for time, a metaphor we can all think of, the miracle of growing. In 2016 he formulated it as follows: "Painters are, so to speak, gardeners in the philosophical realm. Painters and gardeners alike dig up the soil and explore its composition before they plant something specific into it ... I paint and plant and marvel at the growth of things." He shows us the growing "The Essence of Growth" by means of the plants, which are symbolic and representative of each growth process. Using the plant as an example, the cyclical course of growth and decay is reduced to a symbolic unit. Something grows anew from the earth every year. We know this from our everyday experience and can imagine in every work that everything becomes soil again. The time span that Kanz shows us by means of plants and vegetables is - limited to one year - relatively manageable. This is why there are the so-called substitutes for transience, a contemporary still life, so to speak. Growth begins in the past, is visible in the present and points to the future.

Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb's time span is acyclic; in her work, the materials stand for the time processes that manifest themselves in the rocks and layers of earth. In Kanz's work, the time process is growing, the abstract representation of an onion, from which I can read that the process is only possible with the help of earth, water, air and light. The concept of time at Kanz is guided from the present into the future. With Barbara Karsch-Chaïeb, we are led from the present into the past: Oil shale and marble tell me that everything was created an infinite time ago. She brings it into the here and now. She has the rock ground in the only remaining mill for oil shale in Bad Boll. The unimaginable time span from the formation of the shale rock to its destruction, i.e. the grinding, is ground into the smallest particles. The logical conclusion from this is that I now have to become active regarding the

environmental problems. So let us be clear once again, she paints with rock that has been ground into small particles and has been transferred into the microworld of pigments. She chooses this process not only because of the aesthetic end product, but also to show us her attitude. It is interesting to note that these pigments are very difficult to bind and therefore very difficult to apply to an image carrier. In comparison, the soot from burnt materials, which is the basis for the colour black, is easy to bind. The marble has become fragile, the artist creates an unstable structure that can change into another state at any time. In the "original state", we think of marble as a block of marble, the visual effect is different, not entirely coincidental however, is, that the metaphor for something indestructible is "carved in stone".

Gerd Kanz goes the other way. He shows a permanently growing moment, a process that we can almost watch in life and which now literally becomes visible in a relief, in a picture or in a sculpture. He fixes the short moment... forever? Layer by layer. In his flat works, the layering is inscribed with the crowbar or chisel, into the handicraft and creative process, which then describes a content and thus also an attitude as a result.

These are some of the essential aspects of time which both artists visualize and which you can now perceive in their aesthetic experience.

Time is not a counterpart to life, as all the works here prove. I would like to end my speech by adding another riddle to "timelessness", with which Peter Handke paraphrases his philosophy of life: "But I live only from the spaces in between".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Handke talking to Herbert Gamper: "But I live only from the spaces in between" (Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen), Zurich, 1982