

**THOUGHTS ON THE EARLY
WORK AND FUNDAMENTAL
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OEUVRE OF URS LÜTHI**

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Obviously it is impossible to exhaust the critical potential of an œuvre that stretches over almost half a century. In Urs Lüthi's case, however, critics and interpreters have been remarkably stubborn in striving to find an answer to one particular problem: taken aback by the ease with which the artist moves from one creative phase to another, they seek to integrate each new project into his œuvre as a whole. Considering that the choice of content and genre in each phase of the artist's development is in itself full of multifaceted surprises, this is indeed a daunting task. The artist himself has aggravated the difficulty of appreciating his work by continuously trying out new things, thwarting the expectations of his public and even jeopardising his position in the art market. And yet, his main concerns have become quite clear: the recurring longing for a synthesis of the trivial with the sublime and the beautiful, and the ambivalence between powerful emotion and unavoidable failure, within a spectrum ranging from 'morbid lascivity to moribund amusement,'¹ – as the presence of the artist in his works was characterised in a recently written linguistic *trouvaille*, to cite just one of the various interpretations of Lüthi's work.

A major retrospective provides the right occasion for filling in the gaps in the reception of Lüthi's works. The first concerns the actual beginning of his creative output which, in literature up until now, has largely been dated to 1970. The catalogue of printed works starts for example with the 'Sketches' series of 1970, doubtlessly a signal set by the young Urs Lüthi but not the real start of his work with graphic techniques.² A second gap is related to an absolutely crucial aspect of his œuvre: few people writing about Lüthi acknowledge the importance of formal concerns. The switch from one medium to another has been met with greater interest than those subjects that art-historians otherwise tend to focus on: compositional structure, formal devices or art-historical references. Especially in interviews, Lüthi himself has tried to draw attention to the formal aspects of his work. He has been sanguine about the lack of interest in his early work, having long attached less value to his artistic beginnings despite the fact that formal concerns can be identified as a binding factor throughout his entire artistic career. This text presents both aspects in one context.

Pictorial tradition

With his phenomenal presence as the object of his art, the artist himself has always prevented straightforward reflection on the formal aspects of his work. His beguiling youth drew attention to the content of the work: fantasy, perplexity and imagination were stimulated with

full force. Lüthi adopted poses traditionally reserved for women. He showed emotions of which a man would ordinarily be ashamed. His photographs were seen in the contemporary context of gender roles and sexuality. In an interview of 1991, Lüthi expressed his concern about this interpretation of his early photographic self-portraits:

This subject had just become fashionable at that time and was one aspect of my work which was simply overrated. Personally, I saw these works more like classical paintings, half-length portraits, nudes, conventional *chiaroscuro* compositions, everything manipulated as little as possible. My main intention was to express the multiplicity of things. That was something which was simply not perceived in those days ...³

Let us consider the *chiaroscuro* that Lüthi employed in his photographic portraits. The late Renaissance technique refers to the play of light and shadow used to add clarity to the modelling of bodies and their outlines. Dramatic effects can be heightened or a mysterious mood created. *Lüthi also Weeps for You* is a work composed in the style of a classical painting with contrasting light and dark areas, typical of secular and religious portraits. It is no coincidence that the support material used is not photographic paper but canvas. This lends the work a matte surface and makes the transitions more fluid. The angle of the studio lighting creates the *chiaroscuro* effect: the lower section of the body rises out of the dark area, whereas the face is brightly illuminated. The dramaturgical effect is heightened by a slight upward glance and a minimal rotation of the body, revealing the tears in the artist's left eye as the actual subject of the picture. The artist is also crying for us; through the title he offers words of encouragement and through his weeping he provides empathic evidence. The half-figure portrait communicates the very consolation that the faithful find in depictions of saints in altar paintings. Lüthi uses our knowledge of pictorial tradition to direct our reception of his work. The *chiaroscuro* heightens the aura-like effect: only it is not a saint shown here, but a *mise en scène* of the artist himself – something that, in this manner, was utterly new in 1970. The attrition between pictorial tradition and pictorial invention is heightened by the artist presenting himself as the seducer in a snake-skin jacket.

The artist makes use of the qualities of traditional *topoi* elsewhere, too. In *Number Girl*, a work with many possible interpretations, the major compositional principles that play a role in Lüthi's oeuvre are brought together for the first time. The significance of sequencing (a series of picture in which Lüthi's changing external appearance dictates the order in which the works are to be viewed), serialisation (a repetition of poses and presentations), the picture-within-a-picture principle (with a juxtaposition of two levels of reality), the layering (two

images placed one on top of the other) or the image inventory (the presentation of a collection of pictures) are not of primary concern at this point but rather the *topos* of the figure shown in a picture. The famous source image on which *Number Girl* is based is also part of a picture cycle, namely the scene of Veronica with the sudarium used by Christ in the story of the Passion: after Christ had wiped the sweat from his brow on the way to Calvary his facial features became impregnated on the cloth.⁴ There are countless depictions of Veronica presenting the sudarium. Lüthi establishes a reference to this pictorial motif in the last of the twenty images in which, once again, he uses a pronounced light/dark contrast. The effigy is held by the bald artist himself who, with this motif, introduces the subject of death in the final picture of this series.

Pictorial typologies, classification

The references Lüthi draws on – especially with regard to formal aspects – are well-known devices in art history. Motifs such as the figure, the landscape or still-life are also thoroughly traditional, even if contextually bound to our times. The artist uses diptychs and triptychs for their aesthetic stringency. The diptych, originally a painting in two parts – sometimes as two folding panels – and predominantly used for devotional paintings or altarpieces, has been adopted by Lüthi since 1970 for his photographic work. It forms a central, fundamental principle of his compositions as it can display the content of two totally different pictures in immediate proximity to one another. The combination of two pictures (figure and space, figure and landscape, figure and figure) creates a juxtaposition of two levels of reality. These multi-part works are not to be seen as sequences of images, but much more as an ensemble of two pictures, as a simultaneity of different mental states. The ambience is therefore able to clarify the mood-related disposition of the figures. The juxtaposition of seascapes, rooms or skies with a single figure or a couple gives the works an irritating ambiguity and heightens that equivocality which is so typical of Lüthi's work. Similarly, the triptych that was originally devised for altarpieces with two hinged wing panels, has the same dichotomy in Lüthi's work as, for example, in *Champion*, in which the figure is flanked on both sides by a landscape and, therefore, moved into a central position.

In addition to these pictorial works in two and three parts, Lüthi values large series of pictures which all belong together. Although the artist has put these pictures in a particular sequence, there is no story line. The sole exception are biographic representations which are to be read sequentially from left to right, as in *Just another Story about Leaving*. This also has to be qualified slightly, as it is the artist's growing older that is shown here: the photographs,

however, were taken more or less at the same time. This moment of temporal divergence – we see a sequence in the order things happened, while experiencing the simultaneity of all parts – also applies to the retrospective compilation of the whole as undertaken by the artist himself. In *The Complete Life and Work, Seen through the Pink Glasses of Desire*, the pictures are hung in the correct sequence of Lüthi's artistic and personal biography, but the unifying factors of size and colour create such a powerful visual impact that the emotional context of each individual work merges into the background and we see everything – 'the complete life and work' – at the same time and on the same level. This is not a photo album to leaf through, but the propagation of a standardized pictorial inventory, an analogue picture memory created before digitalisation, which the artist has expanded upon and which serves him as a vocabulary of motifs for further works.⁵ The culmination of Lüthi's preoccupation with this prescribed order can be found in *Thousand or More Images*, in which he keeps superimposing now digitalised pictures until they are virtually unrecognizable. The works in this cycle show how the title, 'The Remains of Clarity', is to be understood as a euphemism. It is a huge 'hypertrophic archive'⁶ that has destroyed itself only to generate a new artwork of great painterly quality.

From as early as the mid 1970s, Lüthi tried to clarify this situation by classifying his pictures, giving the same title to individual, thematically related works. These classifications make the conceptual cohesion that much clearer in his paintings from the 1980s. The pictures form parts of cycles with exquisite headings. They are, of course, individual pictures despite being integrated in the 'Flower Picture' series, the 'Transposed Dreams' or the 'Great Emotions' series, and so on. Lüthi continues to divide his works into groups using these classifications. They have gained an increasingly emblematic character by evolving into maxims of their own, as can be seen for example in the case of 'Art for a Better Life' or 'The Remains of Clarity'.

The Art of Exhibiting

The very first works with a shared 'label' were on view in 1966 at the Beat Mäder Gallery in Bern.⁷ According to the review, published in the *Berner Tagwacht* at the time:

'Pinksized' is what the artist calls his show; at any rate 'Pinksized' sounds good. The predominant colour of the generally large-format pictures is a matte pink, applied evenly as a 'background'. On top of this there are rigid black rectangles and blocks of colour, the shape of which is reminiscent of temple façades, and a certain cult-like 'mood' within the works cannot be denied. Urs Lüthi, who obviously has a penchant

for the ornamental, decorates the otherwise generously structured areas with fine dotted lines, with spots of colour and stylised flowers, so that the viewer has to make a certain effort not to be reminded of cut-out dress patterns.⁸

Apart from this review, which concludes with a few tips for the nineteen-year-old, an accompanying publication produced by the joint organiser of the exhibition, Hans Heinrich Kunz, and the recollections of those who attended, such as Fritz Billeter who gave a speech at the preview, it was above all a Swiss television documentary by Walter Plüss that provided the best insight into the exhibition.⁹

The film shows the opening, a veritable happening. The visitors – Lüthi's friends and representatives of the art scene in Bern – are swinging on children's playground equipment more typically found outside department stores.¹⁰ In the middle of the gallery, there is a buffet with sandwiches, salads, fruit and biscuits that resembles the exhibits on the walls. The two jazz musicians, Mani Neumeier and Jelly Pastorini, are playing live; several people are dancing energetically. This exhibition is particularly telling for the artist's future work for a number of different reasons. There is, on the one hand, the formal rigour of the works. The pink, with which Lüthi would paint his 'glasses of desire' almost thirty years later when looking back on his life and work, is still perfectly fresh here, but introduced with surprising consistency. Billeter calls it 'not ingratiating and full of feeling, but ironically trite'.¹¹ It dominated the whole exhibition; even the buffet table was painted pink. From today's point of view, Lüthi's attempt to design the exhibition through and through as a single entity is striking. This is where formal criteria were laid down by an artist not twenty years of age, criteria that would play an increasingly important role later on. The exhibition united a complete cycle of works ('Pinksized'); the titles – even if they had been taken from existing figures, song titles and comics along the lines of Pop Art (such as *Sunshine Superman*, *Modesty Blaise*, *Sunrise Serenade*, *Highway 61* or *Sportin' Life*) – all employ that imaginative, powerful language which Lüthi has favoured throughout his creative life in the form of subtitles and headings; the playground equipment ensured participation and is to be seen as an aid to feeling good – something Lüthi also tried to supplement later with various words of guidance (cf. *Frisbees*, *Therapies* or *Exercises*); with the buffet Lüthi presented an installation which, by means of the performance/happening, transformed the event from a delightful painting into a chaotic picture, allowing central themes to be linked together (cf. *Trash and Roses* and *Broken Plates*); and, finally, the catalogue revealed a leitmotif of Lüthi's by having a photograph of the artist on the title page. Lüthi designed everything down to the

last detail, and it has since been shown that he saw the exhibition itself as an artistic means, as a 'visual vehicle'.¹²

Later on, Lüthi turned more into an exhibition artist whenever he assimilated new paintings within the old vehicle of the museum, as in the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 1986, which corresponded perfectly with traditional genres: nudes, seascapes, flower paintings, abstract or art-historical works. With 'Sehn-Sucht' [literally 'longing'; the hyphenation turning longing into 'an addiction to seeing' (ed.)], the title of the exhibition, the artist created a metaphor in a sequence of rooms of pictures full of a yearning for the beautiful and the sublime. The exhibition, however, also told of the artist's new (or rediscovered) longing for painting, to which he had returned after focusing on his photographic self-portraits. But even these melancholic pictures are – as Lüthi confirmed in the subtitle – all 'facets of a self-portrait'.

Lüthi vis-à-vis Lüthi

After an intensive formal and contextual search, Lüthi came upon his own self as a leitmotif. Following his first painterly phase which culminated in his skilled, abstract Pop Art of around 1968, he focused his attention in particular on conceptual work and installations, perfectly in keeping with the times. In the Palette Gallery in Zurich in 1969, for example, he exhibited an installation comprising a six-part grid of neon lights, with the spaces in between filled with insulation material, or a string of lights turned on and off by a metronome.¹³ That same year he was invited to participate in the exhibition 'Pläne und Projekte als Kunst' (Plans and Projects as Art) at the Kunsthalle Bern,¹⁴ where he presented three concepts, including his *Ballungszentren* (Built-up Areas) – black hemispheres made of soft plastic material to be set up in public spaces and, in a smaller version, at home, to help relieve pent up aggression – and *Urs Lüthi's Alterungsprozess* (Urs Lüthi's Ageing Process), an investigation with photographs, calculations and graphs that David Weiss drew up about the artist. Here, the person Urs Lüthi has been successively shifted to centre stage.

At this time he was working on objects whose shape was based on his person, as in *Labiles Objekt* (Instable Object) – a long piece of wood sawn into sections of equal length which were then screwed together with hinges so that it could only stand up on its own under very precise conditions. This minimalist sculpture is exactly the same height as Lüthi – 167 cm. At this time he also carried on with his photographic work, such as the pictures of him contemplating or mingling with the crowds in squares in Milan. In his series of drawings 'Selbstbildnisse nach grossen Meistern des 20. Jahrhunderts' (Self-portraits in the

Style of the Great Masters of the 20th Century) he examines the potential of self-portraiture by pretending to let the protagonists of Modernism execute this motif.

This process of measuring, describing, documenting and examining his own person was the prerequisite for Lüthi's surprising and now famous installation in the exhibition 'Visualisierte Denkprozesse' (Visualized Thought Processes) in the Lucerne Kunstmuseum in 1970. Lüthi presented all of his clothes and personal possessions on the walls and in showcases, while the scent of his favourite perfume hung in the air, diffused by a humidifier. The origin and material of the exhibited objects were documented on a flyer. Photographs of the artist, displayed on a postcard stand, indicated who the show was all about. Visitors to the exhibition must certainly have asked themselves how the artist managed to survive the duration of the show without his ID card, keys and clothes. While in this respect the imagination knows no bounds and, at first glance, the installation – even perhaps for the artist himself – seemed to be a synthesis of art and life, it was in actual fact just the opposite: since this presentation, which Max Wechsler very fittingly described as "the inauguration of Urs Lüthi the art figure",¹⁵ Lüthi has heeded the fundamental distinction between himself as an artist and the person who merely lends himself as a figure in his work. As part of the visualized thought process within the exhibition room, Lüthi became an art object, an 'invisible sculpture'.

Art is the better life

Throughout his artistic career, Lüthi has always shown a strong tendency towards the sculptural. This already shows in his early photographs in which the naked body is given plasticity by working with the *chiaroscuro* technique already mentioned. The artist's interest in the fundamentals of sculpture can be seen clearly in his paintings from the 1980s when, for example, he painted his *Wächterinnen* with the classical *contrapposto*. With the bronze heads that he had cast in 1989, Lüthi once again turned to the self-portrait, this time using a medium that, for some, had become rather unfashionable. For him, however, it was a logical step. Presenting the artist as a contemporary being and executing a portrait in the historical vestment of the bronze create a seemingly large cleft between content and form. But it is precisely this dichotomy that hits upon the very core of Lüthi's art as, in his opinion, the individual (in this case the personal expression) and the general (here, the portrait as a public monument), have always belonged together.

After his hyper-realistic figures at the turn of the new century, Lüthi's recent bronze figures occupy a thoroughly unusual position that reverts to the history of art from the last

century. Sculptures such as *I'd Like to be a Cubist Sculpture* certainly have a nostalgic touch to them. With such a positioning, the artist is making a subtle appeal for people to take a closer look at the question of aesthetics – something that is hardly a central issue in today's art world. For this reason I have called his bronzes nostalgic, as Lüthi – with a wistful smile devoid of irony – has dedicated them to the important questions in art. His little monuments call to mind the 'Problems of Form and Expression in Modern Art'¹⁶ which should also be addressed in the 21st century. They demonstrate the deeply-rooted and overwhelming 'artistic urge', which has been Lüthi's constant companion throughout his entire life.

Even as a ten or eleven-year-old, Urs Lüthi showed a strong interest in art. He devoured the biographies of the great artists and learnt their vitae by heart. He tracked down the art dealer Siegfried Rosengart in Lucerne who patiently showed him paintings and graphic works by Picasso. And together with a school friend – he didn't dare do it on his own – he visited artists in the area in their studios to see what they were painting. The young boy unconditionally engrossed himself in the world of art. Retrospectively, Lüthi once said in a discussion that it was clear, even back then, that he wanted to be an artist, given his pragmatic insight that 'Art is the better life.'¹⁷ Around 1959 the artist Hugo Bachmann of Lucerne painted the young Urs Lüthi when he visited him on one such occasion. The picture shows Lüthi with the serious and melancholic expression that was to influence his own art. It belongs to the outset of his preoccupation with himself as the object of his art that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

¹ Heiner Georgsdorf, 'Urs Lüthi in der Galerie Lelong Paris 2008', in: *Urs Lüthi*, exhib. cat., Galerie Lelong, Paris 2008, p. 28.

² Rainer Michael Mason, *Urs Lüthi. L'œuvre multiplié. 1970–1991*, Cabinet des Estampes, Geneva 1991; cf. the author's reasoning in his introduction to the catalogue, p. 137.

³ Patrick Frey, 'Tiefe zeigt sich oft am Besten an der Oberfläche' (Depth can often best be shown on the surface); excerpt from a discussion between Urs Lüthi and Patrick Frey of 12 February, 1991, in: *Urs Lüthi*, exhib. cat., Kunsthaus Glarus, Zurich 1991, p. 42.

⁴ Luke 23:33.

⁵ Anne Maier, 'Zwischen Utopie und Avantgarde', in: Helmut Friedel (ed.), *Urs Lüthi. Run For Your Life. Placebos & Surrogates*, exhib. cat., Lenbachhaus, Munich and the Swiss Institute, New York, Ostfildern-Ruit 2000, p. 259.

⁶ Georgsdorf 2008 (see note 1), p. 34.

- ⁷ *Pinksize. Urs Lüthi*, exhib. cat., Galerie Beat Mäder, Bern, in conjunction with Hans Heinrich Kunz, Bern 1966.
- ⁸ rw. [Rudolf Theodor Weiss], 'Aus Kunstsalons und Galerien. Galerie Beat Mäder: Urs Lüthi', in: *Berner Tagblatt*, 24.10.1966, no. 292, p. 6.
- ⁹ Walter Plüss, 'Neuartige Vernissage – Urs Lüthi in der Galerie Beat Mäder', in: *Rendez-vous*, 42, 29.10.1966, Swiss television DRS.
- ¹⁰ The gallery owner Toni Gerber and the artists Markus Raetz, Ueli Berger and Peter von Wattenwyl from Bern can be seen, as well as Urban Gwerder, Werner Sauber, Albert (Ahmed) Huber and Fritz Billeter.
- ¹¹ Fritz Billeter, 'Neue Tendenzen', in: Paul Nizon (ed.), *Zürcher Almanach*, Zurich/Cologne 1969, p. 45.
- ¹² Helmut Friedel, 'Art is the better life. A Vision by Urs Lüthi', in: *Urs Lüthi/Trash and Roses for Catania*, exhib. cat., Galleria Gianluca Collica, Lucerne, Poschiavo/Lucerne 2002, n.p.
- ¹³ Jean-Christophe Ammann, 'Urs Lüthi', in: *Visualisierte Denkprozesse*, exhib. cat., Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne 1970, n.p.; article reprinted for the exhib. at the Galerie Palette in Zurich taken from: *Art International*, vol. XIV, no. 1, 1970.
- ¹⁴ *Pläne und Projekte als Kunst*, exhib. cat., Kunsthalle Bern, Bern 1969. The exhibition was later shown in Hamburg in a different constellation. This is where Lüthi's work *Ballungszentren* is reproduced; cf. *Künstler machen Pläne, andere auch!*, exhib. cat., Kunsthaus Hamburg, Hamburg 1970, vol. B, n.p.
- ¹⁵ Max Wechsler, 'Urs Lüthi: Life is an Ambivalent Art Figure between Eccentricity and Normality', in: *Urs Lüthi. Art For a Better Life. From Placebos & Surrogates*, exhib. cat., Venice biennale, Bern, Bundesamt für Kultur; Lucerne, Poschiavo/Lucerne 2001, p. 26.
- ¹⁶ *Problems of Form and Expression in Modern Art. By Urs Lüthi 1994*, exhib. cat., Galleria Civica Modena, Modena 1994.
- ¹⁷ In a discussion with the author on 23.08.2007.