

Frans Boenders, o.T., in:
Max Uhlig, Hygieia Art Gallery, Tongeren, Belgien 1991.

New York had problems holding its monopoly as the hub of the visual art scene of the Eighties. All eyes were indeed set on a country on the other side of the Ocean: Germany, which largely dominated the decade. Funnily enough, the novelty in German art lay in its new approach of an old style that is commonly called expressionism and which, in a rethought and relived version, appealed strongly to the western art buff. German art from the Eighties miraculously refused all decorative use. Its fate, however, was different from that of minimal art and umpteen other modernisms. It became the object of dispute and controversy once again and tried, beyond aesthetics, to re-establish a link with ethics. In the Eighties German art actually stood for West-German art. Although some of its celebrities, such as George Baselitz, came from East Germany, they did owe their success to the West. When the Berlin Wall miraculously came down, art loving Western Europe discovered that the other, unknown and therefore despised Germany had not exactly produced Pleiads but at least a few artists who steered clear of the paralysing ideologization of the image and had laboured on in silence. The result was an oeuvre that was 100% theirs.

The “expressionist” Max Uhlig was not ostracized in the former GDR. Neither was he an underground painter: his work was distributed through the Staatlicher Kunsthandel, which should not come as a surprise. The revival of expressionist painting in East Germany began virtually immediately after World War II, partly as a reaction against the Nazi’s denunciation of the style, partly as a continuation of the Twenties – the heyday of socially committed art. Since East Germany was cut off completely from its western better half through the Sixties it could pretend – as opposed to its capitalist antipode – it had nothing to do with the national socialism of the past.

Uhlig started performing alongside East Germany’s most famous expressionist Werner Tübke, one of the show-cases of the communist regime, in 1969. Eight years his junior, Uhlig is also eight years away from the former’s realism. If expressionism is to be divided into a realistic and a abstract movement, Tübke coincides perfectly with the former and Uhlig partly with the latter. Uhlig’s works do seem abstract at first sight. On careful consideration, however, one can almost exactly reconstruct the reality, or at least the atmosphere behind the reality from which they have been distilled. What reality actually looks like – physiognomically in the case of the portraits, landscapewise in the other – may be one of Uhlig’s main worries, but it leaves us, the beholders, quite cold. For what we behold is his art and not what sparked it forms its source. Uhlig himself must, of course, concentrate very hard on the particular piece of nature he is depicting if he indeed wishes to archive the goal he seems to have set himself: that of establishing a formal harmony between the seen and the drawn/painted. Uhlig visualizes things in a very special way. He

returns what he has witnessed. If the world hadn't been misused so readily in the past, I would be inclined to speak of mysticism, a profound relationship between the self and the non-self. It would be wiser, and safer, though, to speak of a structural harmony in Uhlig's representation of the seen. The artist not only sees objects, a tree or a human being; what he sees most of all is an inner cohesion between the parts of the objects. That very network of relationships, the fruits of the creative eye, corresponds with the construction, structure or composition of Uhlig's work. Like the eye that constructs reality, Uhlig's representation is another construction or creation of it.

The harmony between both is formal one, in other words: Incidentally, the word form comes from the Latin word forma, itself related to formosus, which means pretty, beautiful. Considered from this angle, Uhlig's painted or drawn version of a reality he has seen is invariably aesthetic. But it offers more. Dieses der Nature und Arbeit gleichermaßen Ausgeliefertsein führte zu einer neuen Wahrnehmung von scheinbar Bekanntem, thus the artist about the new fashion in which he started approaching the seen and the visualized as of 1970. In my opinion this is to be taken literally. The painter abandons himself, to nature as well as to reality, to the work as well as to the art. It is his intuitive conviction that both are mysteriously linked that feeds his abandonment. On the deepest level it does seem that the partitions and categories will never be able to resist, that they are the intellectualistic scheme from which reality keeps gushing. If we wish to approach reality candidly – that is: without being trapped in our own conceptual nets – we must abandon ourselves and forget our own (alleged) cognitive excellence. That is devotion. Shedding familiar concepts by no means yields a loss, On the contrary, it incorporates into a (previously unsuspected) order of truth. Isn't that what perception is all about? Uhlig explains: Beim langen Anblick teilen sich rhythmische Spannungen mit, wird scheinbar Gewohntes neu entdeckbar, urtümlich, unbegrenzt fesselnd. In other words: Some sort of epiphany is rediscovered via the rhythmic tensions it releases. The roots become visible again. The observed objects lose its limits, sprawls and its confines turn out to be chained to the boundless. (Maybe the dangerous word mysticism does impose itself if we want to go where Uhlig's path leads?)

According to Uhlig, the mental journey beyond the limits cannot but refer to the objects itself. That is why Uhlig's work can never be classified as abstract art. Das anschauliche Gegenüber ist das Reale, ist der Ausgangspunkt.

Eye-to-eye-contact with the thing guarantees its degree of reality. The truth behind Uhlig's art is rooted in its starting point, i.e., the reality the artist traces, perceives and depicts. That is why his drawings and paintings are made up of the very traces that render the truth, but not necessarily the aspect of reality. This outward aspect is often misleading, while inside helps penetrate the mystery. Uhlig is by no means the pictorial antipode of Francis Ponge, who speaks on behalf of the thing in his Parti pri des choses. As a writer Ponge was ahead of his fellow

countryman/philosopher Michel Foucault in not regarding man but things as central. Things thus Ponge, are so different without man's way of beholding them. In contradistinction to Ponge's endeavor, Uhlig's work is nothing but our mind's eye. Uhlig looks at things in such a concentrated fashion that they are no longer indomitable: their soul starts dancing. The German critic Klaus Werner refers to the movement of Uhlig's eye as the *Tonus seiner Gesten* – the elasticity of the painterly gesture – the nucleus of this art. Things dance because of the rhythm of Uhlig's hand wants them to. At first they remind us of Alberto Giacometti's gaunt and lanky little men (1901-1966) – who, according to some, in their turn remind of Etruscan votive statuettes from the second century BC. Prior to becoming possible portraits, Uhlig's heads also function as metaphors for man in general. Giacometti tried to solve problems of space and depth, or perspective, in his drawings and paintings (as befits a sculptor) by placing drawn figures against transparent planes. Giacometti remained largely tributary to Cézanne and the cubists. The things and people he drew belong silently inside a space. They are introspective, immobile and impenetrable. Uhlig, however, does not frame his portraits. They do not take the beholder inside their space but claim all his attention for themselves. The beholder's field of vision coincides with the contours of their face, their body. Uhlig is clearly not interested in situating the space of things. In his opinion, everything goes back to the inner situation.

Max Uhlig's enigmatic landscapes and hallucinating heads perfectly fit the policy of gallery Hygieia has adopted right from the start. The gallery never opted for mere aesthetics, fashion and museum art but strives for authenticity, which, against all appearances, is still very much alive in contemporary art. At close quarters however, some technical aspects of Max Uhlig's deeply emotional and existentially inspired work may also illustrate the nature of emotion.

The structure of Uhlig's Chinese ink portraits under a screen of mainly vertical stripes – that occasionally seems like barbed wire – gives them something enclosed. Often a black hole can be seen instead of the two eyes, a circle full of ink. Using the word lonely for these portraits would not suffice to embrace the tragedy behind them. Yet the dark eye sockets above a disappointed, arched mouth and the suggestion of a forward leaning posture in some portraits might distract our attention from the strict serenity, the elegance (at times) and nobility (most times) of Uhlig's faces. Uhlig does not draw down-and-outs or indifferent characters. His are clearly drawings of western heads which – despite, or maybe thanks to? – their lost ego, remain monumental. It is exactly because Uhlig bars puffed-out chests from the centre of his portraits that their soul is able to fill that space. And what is more complex than the soul? Many portraits seem alert and expectant at the same time, both suspicious and all ears. All appear to be torn between action and contemplation. Which may well be why Uhlig does not always end his play of lines at the contours of the body. Some lines fade out, beyond the paper, towards the horizon.

Maybe this art is more romantic than it seems. One of Uhlig's faces, like a giant head planted on an imaginary Easter Island, stares past and above everyone. Another portrait, in colour, incarnates enormous bleakness with the sagging watercolour strokes under and alongside the chin. It keeps tragedy confined to its flesh. While its skull gives up a void between orange, yellow and green swaying lines. Like a fontanelle of light.

Frans Boenders (Translated from the Dutch by Nadine Malfait)" 1991