Achievements in the Fog: Where it Takes Us When We Cannot See Clear

Anja Kampmann

Panel: Works in Progress
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Film: Chris Marker, Sans Soleil.

When we talk about work-in-progress, we see ourselves very soon confronted with topics of self-construction, so called stable centers of the “I”, the meaning of time, when it comes to pieces of art, and the process of memory-creating and reconstruction. As we deal with these terms we follow a long path to the very heart of literature, we ask for the possibilities of the written word, and although I am aware of the fact that there is only a short amount of time given, I would like to open a door which was, not for the first time, but with a new urgency, opened in 1933 by the painter Oskar Kokoshka, when he held the funeral oration for the architect Adolf Loos. He pointed out Loos’ assault on the aesthetic of the fin de siècle, his determination to build houses outwards from within, with a spatial plan instead of a fine façade. Thinking from the inside outwards, starting with the space and not with the carcass of the building: this was a radical reversal of the architects viewpoint.

As I do not intend to talk about details of Kokoschkas Oevre, I just want to point to what might be characteristic of turn-of-the-century arts: I would suggest that it is a new awareness of the process of dealing with the arts, the development of a form, and throughout this process the achievement, which is often discussed as something negative, of a discontinuous oevre.

What Chris Marker calls “lining” marks a certain awareness of how the self and memories are always constructed, put together, from various pieces. Although this idea might sound natural to us, I think it is worth having a look at its development, which became a central topic in the arts of the beginning of the last century. Due to the results of science and psychology, artists of all genres tried to challenge the boundaries of common forms and virtues in art. Also, the experience of World Wars I and II had a huge influence on the arts, and led to concepts like “verismo” and “expressionism” which perhaps for the first time, were strongly concerned with the outshape and “ugly” side of human, urban life. Also the surrealist trends deal with the idea of the subconscious. I think these developments are well known. What I want to point out, though, is a point of view that focuses rather on the process than on the “carcass“ of a piece of art and might be an achievement that was made in those days. One of the indicators for this process might be
a discontinuous oeuvre. As you follow Kokoschka, or, say, Braque, Brancusi, Bacon, Beckett, Giacometti, Schjerfbeck, throughout their work, you will find a process of constant doubting, of starting anew.

Work in progress here stands for the emptiness of carcasses, of fixed ideas. Colour itself, or space, or words in their very own interaction, settle in the place where beforehand you found ideas, symbols, shapes, and sentences, long enough to make sense, and at the same time losing any sense, without even being aware of it. In 1914 Ezra Pound, in his Vortizismus-Essay, points out that it should be obvious to everyone, that art that deals with symbols and a corresponding meaning can never become any better than undistinguished or mediocre. We could go on now and talk about Joyce’s new awareness of radical everyday-occurrence and go for a walk through the history of literature and art. We would find portraits that are no longer timeless, characters which are no longer to be seen as something stable; rather we would see them on the edge of changing, torn apart, as in the portraits of Francis Bacon. Art suddenly becomes an experience which is interruptive, a writer or a performing artist sets our prefixed ideas into question, and that is, from my point of view, because the element of time ceases to become a central element in the composition of paintings, literature and films. The reader will be involved in a process of constant doubting; speech and so-called representations suddenly become pale and blurred, a portrait will deal with the idea of a certain moment rather than with timeless aspirations. Cozy lifetales are no longer to be announced.

Work in progress then deals with a vital experience you can make in art. You will find unstable characters, ethereal, light, fragile, desolate and strong, and all of this at the same time. Here, I think, begins, what art can be, a slight confusion, a flippancy, which I would like to talk about as an essential element of literature. I disagree with the opinion I have heard of many writers so far, that they can trust in their settings of language just by evoking certain situations, as if they were able to construct a stable world. More or less, I think this is what a lot of people might expect when they get to read our books, but as I have hardly come across anyone who is not playing the old game of telling and retelling the same stories to himself and others, just to prove that his lifeline is something stable, or makes sense, I wonder, is it worth picking up these constructions, or is it not a bigger task, to play with them and get behind the contours of daily experience and get to the point where there is disjointedness, discouragement, empathy, longing, dragging, and no certainty of where all this exactly takes place? Who it is, and how the picture always splits up? Situations, which leave you behind with split, patches, no more?

There is something about the Western tradition of thought which deals strongly with the Christian idea of Alpha and Omega; life in between birth and death. In other
traditions of thinking which are for example discussed in the Kyoto-School there is to the contrary the idea of time in instants, or, as Beckett puts it, flying instants, which are only connected through our thoughts, hopes, and our longing for sense. To build the house outwards from within, or to be aware of the process of work, could mean to become aware of the construction-lines; to name them, to find a form for them. If we we build the house out of language we will need to deal with language first. In contrary to the building of a plotpoint-story we might face a construction which will be disturbed up to a point which may allow us to become aware of the possibilities of speech, of creating something vivid, new, challenging. It is, and also Kokoschka is, the opposite to Descartes cogito ergo sum and that is, I guess, just the icing of the cake. Even if a lot of the traces which lead to a “product“ of art will be deleted, and doubts and thoughts and uncertainty will be partly taken out of the final result, I argue that the process of questioning the basic ideas of how we see and construct our world around the “facts“ that let us float through daily life will have a huge influence on any text. Taking up the image of the portrait I would argue that as we become aware of the factor of time, we will also need to overthink our form, our language, the weight of the syntax we use. Work-in-progress becomes a chance; it opens possibilities of speech, it questions construction lines. As the subject is no longer clearly defined, we might need to find forms of language which shape certain instants sharply, and will then let the reader connect the missing patterns.

Of course everybody will find his own ways of dealing with such ideas through language, and I do not intend to say that everybody should be too concerned about rhythmic long speeches, cracked syntax, grammar and pictures, dropped on the paper like thick colour, pointing out now and then some bright images, images of loss or uncertainty or the very small encounters in life.

I am just hinting at something. I try to talk about poetics. Work in progress for me means to construct the house from the inside. I find a lot of difficulties in that. As Fritz Mauthner puts it, the most honest way of speaking is laughter or the moment of loss of words. As Merleau Ponty puts it, the search for expression will find languages of any style, not only in words, but also in the gaps inbetween. He also talks about the vital experience, the given boundaries which might be necessary to be crossed in search for expression. I do not talk about navel-gazing.

As we come to deal with language we will still need to search for a solution. To construct the house from the inside means, in my eyes, to find a balance. Switching might be a word for it. At times, you need to forget about the house in order to create something
vivid-- a tone, a certain style--to find the little spots, dirty corners, and the dried-out wood, which is probably going to break if you touch it. At times then, a which is what I consider to be difficult, you need to have a look at the house, and even if there is no house, there will still be the word “house,” as soon as you write it.

When it comes to talking about fiction, about a novel, about characters, for me, we need to deal with awareness. There are a lot of pretty easy ways you can construct a character, get him going, crash him against a wall if you feel like it. Work in progress for me means to deal with different tones, to develop different scenes out of which you might get to know something more about a character, despite his longing for pizza. I think that scenes, and how you arrange them, are - in their variations - endless. They gain power rather from the strength of language and the careful dealing with perspectives, than from the ”sense“ in the way of plotting or telling truth about the world. Scenes I have developed on ten to fifteen pages end up in one paragraph, they are no more then the end of a sentence.

Work in progress means to deal with resistors, to hear light music, and show some of the whirlwinds that dance underneath any construction-line. Therefore I claim it is necessary to work hard on language, and to get a certain musicality into the prose, which will then also let the reader become aware of the fact, that everything you have to offer him is contemporary, vanishing, just as the construction of the world you might want to offer to him, which might be fake, but may be no more fake than his own daily-life tale. Work in progress for me means to get my own little brain and the reader activated. If the sense is dancing, the words dance, too. Work in progress always reminds me that written scenes, although there is always something to be improved, should not be overcooked. The process of writing for me deals with the possibilities of a portrait, to become aware of the different ways of getting closer to a subject, to face it from different angles, and at the same time to realize, that it might be touched but never be reached through language, as it changes fast and vanishes, leaving words behind, mingled and full of meaning and empty at once. Like shadows on the street. I can see some beauty in that, from another angle one might get upset with these ideas; then again, they are more than ideas, and they follow you. Work in progress means to become aware of a process and its fragility.

Thank you.