Ludwig Fischer Review

In legalese the distinction between the pornographic and the erotic is somewhat straightforward: the former depicts the genitals; the latter does not. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes suggested that the difference was central to the meaning of the photograph itself: the latter has a punctum; the former does not. For Barthes the erotic photograph gestures beyond itself, puts the viewer in a chain of signification, reflection, momentary comprehension. The pornographic photograph can do no more than amuse. It is stuck within itself, unable to generate meaning, or even the less personal reflective capacity Barthes called the studium. Pornography, in other words that which shows everything, ultimately shows nothing, since it can only show itself.

Although there is nothing that would classify as ‘pornographic’ in Ludwig Fischer’s intervention in the show Yes, yes I am happy aber glücklich ich bin nicht, this may still be the most fitting appellation for his work. Consider: (1) The reproduction of an Yves Saint-Laurent ad from Art Forum of a woman with split open blazer and no shirt or bra underneath (the image is itself of course erotic but it is suggestive of art as pornography for the market); (2) The Lorenzo-Lamas style photograph of Fischer with head cocked in such a position that he could be saying either ‘Fuck you’ or ‘I’m going to…’; (3) The photograph of a whiskey ad; (4) A piece entitled Pink Kant; (5) the positioning of the show itself. But these are rather inessential elements. If the show is pornographic, it is less for these references than for the meaning of pornography as such: that which shows everything. We could start to list the themes: self, production, self-production, markets, art markets, resistance, sexual resistance, the resistance of the survival of the environmental catastrophe, catastrophical markets, auto-immunity of resistance and markets, etc. We could name names: Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Adorno. We could dig in to the archive: Dada, Fluxus, appropriation art. With images ranging from an inverted Hegel to a glacier to mirrors, coins (embazoned with Fichte’s visage), and oxen (the only to survive the last ice age), it seems, indeed, as if Fischer wants to show everything, and, if this is the case, we are left with an essential question: does he wind up showing nothing?

Another way to pose the question of the relation between the erotic and the pornographic is as the relation between art and criticism. If the old adages prove true (creation is the ‘spontaneous overflow of emotion’; the function of criticism is to ‘see the object as in itself it really is’), then art is figured as erotic and criticism as pornographic. Art generates its allure in refusing to tell everything, while criticism seeks again and again to inscribe and control the erotic mystery.

With such a definition in mind, we could easily call Fischer’s work, which seems to impose so much of its own conditions of reception, pornographic in the worst sense. But if this were indeed the case, if criticism and art really had this relationship, I would not bother writing criticism, and I doubt that Ludwig Fischer would continue making art. Indeed, the question of this relationship is precisely what is posed by Fischer’s practice. The artist is no longer the creative genius unable to control his or her own meaning, nor is the critic left in a position of gaining that mastery and control. In refusing to believe that showing everything is showing nothing, pornography is trying to force its way back into the erotic domain. This, I would say, is the essential gamble of Fischer’s practice: to suggest that critically informed art can put its claims on the table without fleeing into the opacity of the symbol or the obviousness of the reference. If the practice remains a gamble it is because Fischer still seeks the appropriate medium of this concern, the condensed vision which would allow the critical practice to come through while at the same time eliciting the wonder of the viewer. It is an imprecise formulation on my part, for it is an imprecise practice to attempt, but allow me one example.

In his short story ‘Funes,’ Borges gives a vision of a man dreamt of by the philosophers: a man with exact perception and memory. There is nothing that he sees that he cannot recall instantaneously and from all angles. In almost Aesopian fashion, Borges gives us the moral near the end: “I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.” Then Borges concludes with his own detail, “Ireneo Funes died in 1888, of a pulmonary congestion.”

Such is the artistry of Borges: the moral does not close the story: it anticipates it. The end of the story returns to the body, to the necessity of life and death, and of the singularity of a named person who passes through the years. Add to this the pulmonary congestion: a blockage of the blood flow between the heart and the lungs, between that which takes in the outside world in the breath, and that which moves that world around the body to make life possible. The breath is timeless life; the blood puts it into circulation. When the world is only taken in, is only contained, there is congestion – cessation of life.

As if to add insult to injury, the Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, has recently signed a new law banning ethnic studies in public schools. President Obama’s reaction to Arizona’s reactionary attacks on immigrants has been rhetorically firm and practically status quo as he has decided to further militarize the border with Mexico. Along these lines, Janet Napolitano, the current Secretary of Homeland Security chief and former Governor of Arizona, has recently decided to send unmanned Predator drones to the Mexican border and launched a program to photograph every license plate of vehicles that cross the border.

In Europe, Belgium recently forbade the wearing of the veil in public places. Switzerland has banned the minaret and is debating the possibility of forbidding the burqa in public places. France signed a resolution reaffirming the ban on the burqa in public places. France is debating the possibility of forbidding the wearing of the veil in public spaces.

In short, immigration is, as the French say, à l’ordre du jour. The Euro-American world is preoccupied—if not obsessed—with the foreigners at its borders and within. In the current political imaginary, the former cold war polarization between ‘democracy’ and ‘communism’ has been replaced by the flexible, global opposition between ‘democracy’ and ‘terrorism’ in which any individual or group can make the film Children of Men look more like a work of social realism than science fiction.