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The Desire for Freedom

MAX BOOK
A second second

By Max Liljefors

Max Book's A second second presents the spectator with a majestic visual crescendo. The picture’s response to what it represents looks highly ambiguous. Does it show a bombastic sundown over a bay, which taints the world with dark-blue and black shadows and shades of glowing yellow and orange? The dark-blue diagonal line at its centre, which points to the sun at an odd angle, resembles the wing of an aeroplane. So, do we see a plane crash, exploding fuel and clouds of smoke?

The dark, horizontal stripes can easily be interpreted as a landscape. A dark foreground before a blank surface of water, a beach at another shore under a darkening sky. But is the yellow fireball really the setting sun, reflected in the water before disappearing behind the horizon? Or is it a plane crashing into a seething inferno before the same horizon, and thus closer to the spectator?

Answers to these questions determine the picture’s interpretation. Subdued colours, merging colour fields and thick layers of lacquer and paint make its empty surface look rough and furrowed. The soap solution applied to the drying lacquer with compressed air adds a vibrantly soft focus to the picture. Lines and contours merge in dark luminosity. Does this contrast of light and dark represent an approach to an intimate relationship with nature, like the one the Romantics were searching for, that subsumes the individual into a broader, and more deep-seated, form of consciousness? Or is the picture’s diffused quality – if it shows a plane crash – to be construed as the coarse resolution of a television picture, a snapshot taken from far away? In short: does Book’s picture spring from a dark, romantic expressionism or should it be placed in the context of our information society’s incessant stream of abrupt, fleeting images?

We would like to sidestep the question by replying with a double affirmative! Book’s painting depicts a plane exploding in the middle of a phenomenal sunset, captured by a video camera with dramatic front lighting and shown on television news. But this answer does not resolve the fundamental problem of the painting. It shows how a catastrophe is staged as a play, an accident, the visual arrangement of which produces a visual event. We don’t know which plane is crashing, or why. As a picture, the explosion seems as eternal and archetypal as the sunset with which it almost merges. But how should the spectator respond to such a picture?

The work’s title, A second second, does not allow for a simple answer to the question. There must be a first second – one would like to think –, which is the moment when the plane actually crashes and the photograph is taken. This event is spied in another, second moment, a second later. In principle, this ‘later’ can be stretched infinitely in time, hinting at a lag or gap between reality and its representation, between the moment of the event and the picture’s static persistence. The picture’s drama is played out with mesmeric elasticity in this temporal gap. It is a drama in which the spectator plays a greater role than the event depicted. As part of a series of works by Max Book, the picture has a second title, Deluminum. This is the name of a fictitious substance from Stephen King’s short story, Lucky Quarter, first published in 1995. However, in the reviews of Book’s work, it was interpreted as ‘de-lumination’, or as an allusion to the last glimmer of a glow, just before it dies. The picture has properties of both suddenness and pause: a bright flare of light in a descending twilight, a delayed lingering in a second flashing
Max Book became famous in Sweden in the 1980s. As one of the country’s most successful artists, he was a great influence on other artists of his generation. He belonged to the circle around the Stockholm philosophical magazine, Kris (Crisis), which rejected the 1970s expectation that art should make a political statement. Kris defended the autonomy of art, independently from politics, and the artist’s absolute right to the individual pursuit of his or her own vision and form of expression. This often meant a convergence with romantic aesthetics and a belief in the solitary artistic genius.

The Zeitgeist of the 1980s encouraged this attitude. The optimism of the 1960s was long gone. Any belief in the ability of committed art to foment political change and a better society had given way to disillusionment and individualism. In place of the clearly political messages and social engagement of the 1970s, the generation of 1980s artists displayed an introverted sense of bewilderment, combined with an extroverted moodiness and subjectivity; irony and play took on important roles. Book drew inspiration for the imaginary, post-apocalyptic scenery of his works from post-modern science fiction, such as Ridley Scott’s film, Blade Runner (1982), cyberpunk and movie thrillers. One critic described his art as follows: ‘Book meets Mad Max and Anselm Kiefer in the ashes of Las Vegas. The party is long over, but let the night-time celebrations begin!’

Book also shows an affiliation to media art, which was another important artistic tendency of those years and, in his case, often took the form of video, as a means of investigating images from the mass media (television, in particular) and integrating them into his work.

This is the moment for a few remarks on the dual significance of the icon of the aeroplane, for modernists fascinated with technology. At the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris, which was devoted to the craft of engineering, two legendary artistic presentations of flying were juxtaposed: the decoration of the great Palais de l’Air by Sonia and Robert Delaunay, praising the advancement of aviation technology, and Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, which was shown at the Spanish pavilion and was a protest against the bombing of civilian populations by the German Luftwaffe. The works by Delaunay and Picasso represented two diametrically opposed accounts of the reality of aviation. But both differ significantly from Book’s second second. Rather than an actual plane crash, Book presents the picture of a crash, the crash in its pictorial characteristics. This is what Book’s painting has in common with the famous piece of video art, Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, by the Belgian artist, Johan Grimonprez, which was created in 1997 and was thus almost contemporaneous with Book’s work.

Grimonprez’s video comprises a series of television images, all showing plane crashes. For around one hour, one exploding aeroplane follows another. This video says more about the presentation of hijackings and terrorism in the media than about actual acts of terror. In this respect, the works of Book and Grimonprez are both expressions of a late-modern, media-saturated age, in which a large part of people’s knowledge and information about the world stems from camera images. However, whilst Grimonprez’s film is a swirling vertigo of catastrophes – a hypercharged concentrate of material, taken from the daily stream of images on television – Book captures a single image of catastrophe in a melancholy freeze-frame, which nevertheless represents a protracted surrender to the fascination of the selfsame image.

Book’s paintings do not have a clear message, yet his work examines a problem of great political and cultural actuality: the question of what an ethics of seeing could comprise in an age that only produces visually experienced reality, and thus increasingly confines our perceptions of the world to images from the mass media.

Susan Sontag points to the specifically modern experience of looking at the suffering of others from a distance, via newspaper photographs and the television screen. Today, this development has reached a point where real violence is staged to suit the image, or even produced for the image, so that the pictorial element is an
integral part of the brutality in an act of violence, and the limits between image and violence are blurred. More than anything else, we are reminded of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, which occurred only two years after Book created his work. The enormous global resonance of the attacks stemmed, in part, from the fact that the attacks were more or less designed to be seen by the entire world. As horrific and extraordinary as it was, the scene was intended to produce terrifyingly fascinating images, which have since been reproduced over and over again on television screens across the world.

13 Book’s picture incites the spectator to reflect on the visual appeal of images of catastrophe and large-scale suffering. Media images, like those of September 11, the ‘shock-and-awe’ bombing of Baghdad in 2003, and large earthquakes and tsunamis, tend to evoke a shudder that is mixed with fascination and feeds on traditional pictorial motifs.

14 Kristoffer Arvidsson sees Book’s ‘Deluminum Series’ as marked by an aesthetics of the sublime, which arises from the enjoyment, mixed with horror, that we experience when looking at something outrageous from a safe distance, looking down into the yawning abyss from solid ground, or witnessing awesome manifestations of divine or natural power. The Romantics strove for this excitement, in contrast to the harmony of Classical beauty. 6 Book’s picture plays on our fascination with the Apocalypse, and visions of the twilight of the gods (ragnarök), and of global destruction, which offer both an awe-inspiring spectacle and an element of aesthetic enjoyment and can always, in the end, be traced back to fantasies of violence as a redemptive force.

7 In its melancholy combination of the sublime and sentimentality, this picture ultimately verges on kitsch. Its title, indeed, A second second, recalls Milan Kundera’s description, in his novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being, of the nature of kitsch, as passive gratification of its own affect – in other words, a retrospective emotional egotism. Kundera writes: ‘Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: “How nice to see children running on the grass!” The second tear says: “How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!” It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.’

8 In a typical bit of postmodernist ambiguity, Book’s work alludes to the tropes of the sublime, 9 apocalypse and kitsch, all of which require the spectator’s emotions to fill the gap between the virtual and the real. The tropes have a dark past in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, which knew how fully to exploit their appeal. Book’s work seems undecided about whether this attraction should be unconditionally affirmed or whether one should distance oneself from it. But his hesitation also hints at a double bind, characteristic of all apocalyptic scenarios. At the same time as drawing the spectator into the scene depicted, it also places him/her outside the frame, at a safe distance from the terrible forces, whose apparition is invoked.

16 Book creates this double bind through combining the effects of proximity and distance, with the support of familiar motifs from the stream of images in the mass media. In this way the work invites critical reflection on what it means to ‘stare fear in the face’, at a time when real catastrophe looks as if it has been painted onto the television screen, in a ceaseless repetition of images that merge almost seamlessly with the images from our collective consciousness. This poses the question of what an ethics of seeing could comprise, in an age of the mass media, and how an identical movement between reality and the spectator could possibly mediate between the proximity and distance evoked in the picture. Although Book’s work raises all these questions, it is up to the spectator to answer them.

17 Notes
1 Stephen King, ‘Luckey Quarter’, USA Weekend, 30 June/2 July 1995. back
4  www.medienkunstnetz.de/werke/dial-history/ (accessed 17 April 2012).  

