

If considering this year's historical moment, Stefan Brüggenmann's exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in St. Moritz is certainly part of a remarkable instance. It happened in a rather unstable and heroic season during which many galleries and museums and fairs were forced to close because of the pandemic.

It was, however for many artists around the world, in spite of all difficulties, one of the most creative years ever. Stefan Brüggenmann was one of the first artists, if not the first, to exhibit work produced in the beginning of the 2020 pandemic. His gold paintings are a mark in art history just like Franz Marc's *Blaue Pferd* in 1920's Germany.

Julietta Schildknecht: After the pandemic erupted how would you describe the confrontation you had as an artist?

Stefan Brüggenmann: It was a strange feeling but also a very familiar feeling because when this idea of isolation came that everybody has to go in a lockdown it is what artists will do. We are always isolated or at least myself. I work alone. I don't work with more people. I am spending hours in my studio. I think it's a very solitary journey. However when it's enforced that you have to be isolated somehow it feels different because it's enforced or imposed. When that started happening, I got this anxiety and fear of the actual uncertainty. We start

realising that nobody knows what they are talking about. I went into a state of saying I am alive, I have a great opportunity and I have to produce the body of work I need and it was feeling like maybe it will be the last chance of my last artwork. Normally I have that feeling but this time it was more accentuated because the social issue makes us very anxious. What we are hearing... obviously that is amplified. I wanted to amplify this in the sense that I wanted to concentrate on producing my work and it was my way of navigating this crisis. It is more or less like a survival mode.

JS: Why are you using leafs of gold? Are you navigating on a sea of gold? Why gold?

SB: First of all there is a formal decision and the formal decision is that the gold leaf is a very thin surface that I apply to another surface and when I apply it, it reveals what is behind. The leaf is so sensitive to light that any imperfection or crack or any thread of the canvas is amplified. That was formally speaking very interesting. Then poetically speaking, the idea of revealing something to the viewer is very interesting for me. The idea of having connotations of gold linked to a spiritual concept, to Life and to economic values is also important. At this precise time when I was producing the work and there was the first lockdown, those two moments were so uncertain, they were fluctuating so much... I

thought it makes sense to use these elements and really immerse on the idea of the gold metal.

JS: The gold has also to do with the balance of the world's economy, right? Do you agree that right now the economy is finding more support based on gold than on stocks or hedge funds or even bonds?

SB: Yes, I wanted to amplify that. You see my idea that gold reveals how fluctuating things are? Life is like that at the moment: there are ups and downs. If there is any change of light, these works look different more as if it would be just paintings. They are more sensitive and revealing. They are reacting very fast and provocative.

JS: Why are you using so many crosses?

SB: Because as mentioned before gold has a symbol and a cross has two lines and has a very powerful symbol. I use a cross directed to the notion of spirituality and to show how both symbols are connected to the economical powers. I don't want to talk about the economic value of gold and that's it. It is more like having the different connotations that this material (metal) carries. It is about the two aspects of what I am approaching which are affecting my existence: the spiritual and economical parts.

JS: Why spiritual?

SB: Spiritual I mean in the sense of faith but not faith as a catholic faith. There is also the poetic space which is not only a mass.

JS: Are you thinking of the meaning of the cross as a structure to crucify criminals?

SB: No, let's put it in this way: between text and abstraction, since the works are abstract but also have text, what texts can't say abstractions can. Likewise, what abstractions can't say texts can. In this way, what money or the economy can't provide faith can resolve and the other way around. I was trying to play with all these kinds of contradictions that are in my immediate future. For me, the most important thing is that the work is a generator of doubts. Is not a work that is preaching of what is wrong or right neither implying a must do this or that. It is throwing questions that create some doubt like what a cross or why gold and what is this text telling me. I appreciate when the viewers are having doubts. It means my work is successful because I am making them free. Once we are allowed to have doubts it means we are free to take choices. If something is dictated like the lockdown as an imposed finality it's an imposition. We should be open to questions and not have to deal with conclusions.

JS: Referring to a text you call hyper poem, doesn't it go in the opposite direction when you question the elements of power that are so overwhelming at the moment like the tracing app or the way to use QR codes to read menus... What happens to elder people who don't know how to deal with that because of lack of knowledge? Is there a new normal? Why do you speak about the unleashed speed and the non-existent views or the playback free speech? How about the journalists being victimised by the power of censorship?

SB: I wrote it for all the reasons you just mentioned. This was written before the pandemic but obviously it adapts into this moment.

JS: When did you write it?

SB: I wrote in 2019.

JS: A year later it is so actual...

SB: Yes and the context of the war we have now. Obviously all my writing is existential. It questions my individuality like the contradictions we live in contemporary and capitalist societies. This is what I am absorbing and it is about my immediate reality. I am just reflecting on that.

JS: But is this an actual reflecting process that is related to your generation?

SB: Well, I like to speak about my person and in this way that we can be connected to others or not. I try to write in a way it feels it is about this immediate present. When I start using “forget this device” “subscribe and comment” “on follow”, these expressions become all part of a new language all a part of a digital language that is enabled by our new technology. They have different signifiers as for instance “on follow”. Now on follow or on like is very connected to social media. Either there are new words or existing words that have new services.

JS: Our survival during the entire lockdown has been possible through those devices, no?

SB: I am not against them. I am just celebrating or using the language that is like OK you will understand OK maybe in a 100 years from now that in those times there were drones, internet, there was instagram, there was Facebook... maybe we will look back and say there was Telegraph and there was another type of language. I am celebrating the lingual that we have forget this device. That's when we try to connect via bluetooth to another phone and then you say “Forget this device” but it sounds very poetic like a romantic thing like forget.

JS: How does the poetic process you call geography of a narrative happen in your work? Are you conducting viewers into your own narrative? For instance disconnect connect now

SB: I think in terms of identity, these are for me a very political question or situation. I have a german name, born in Mexico and living in England. My work is written in english. I think I am a result not for good nor bad and I don't want to question it but it's how I feel it is. I am a result of all this neoliberalism project and at the end I belong to everywhere and to nowhere. That is very complicated. Sometimes Museums don't know where to put me. They don't know if I am a latin-american artist, european artist or an american artist.

JS: But you are a global citizen, right?

SB: Yes! and I enjoy that. I embrace that but it feels a little bit awkward and I like that there is no way of placing me in a niche. I think I am part of that what I have to live. I am not complaining that I am discontent or in favour, it is my reality. It is like as I would be a black person I would be living in other types of circumstances if I would be a black in America or in Africa.

JS: Do you relate this to connect and disconnect?

SB: Yes, I can relate it to that as well as to sometimes between what's the physical connection and the space where we are connected to. Sometimes I like to question that. Where is the real connection happening? I can be physically not connecting and I can be online and not connecting and otherwise. Basically that's when the more spiritual part happens when we are connecting. That I think is the most challenging part of Life. If you are a politician or if you are an artist, you are right at that moment of the cross – a sensitive momentary and fluctuating connection. Poetically speaking I would see it this way.

JS: How about the environment spinning and the wind? Is there any relation to that spiritual side of your work?

SB: I once made a sculpture that it was a door that was moving with the wind. It was trying to include the environment to activate the work. That I find fascinating. The gold leaves pieces are more subtle because the work has more texture. If you work towards them or afar you see ink and they move a little bit. The gold leaf is so fragile that with any movement it can vibrate. If you bring the work outside and it blows it will also sparkle. I think the important thing in terms of environment is that these golden works react to light and sunlight. They bring this consciousness of natural light and they activate more. That's why I like the space of the Hauser Wirth gallery in St. Moritz. It has more windows than a

White Cube situation. There is more activity of shadows, of clouds and in this part of Engadin the light is so pristine, so different and has other qualities.

JS: The crossing doors and the space time confrontation... can you bring them also into the light through your gold artwork?

SB: I think that all these concepts are intrinsic. They are embedded in the surface of the artwork. They are part of that narrative.

JS: And the rainbows?

SB: Yes, in a way it reveals layers like when you enter a rainbow.

JS: The revelation...

SB: Is very important, yes.

JS: Transparency as well, right?

SB: I see more revealing not so much transparency. The surfaces are so thin in between each other that instead of being transparent they are revealing. You

can see the topography of the surface. Any detail, any bit of dust will be revealed. In a way it may feel transparent but it's more revealing.

JS: Your actual work reminds me of rewriting our present. Can you comment on this theme in relation to the cultural disruption?

SB: Yes, I think one of our biggest traps that our society is in is the trap of chasing the immediate future. Basically everything is moving towards chasing the future. We are in a trap. That's why speculation is a thing that moves us a lot. That's why gold is also a speculative metal in the financial market. If you see it poetically, we never know what to expect. That's why I am fascinated to observe the unexpected because I am involved in this speculation.

JS: And Mexico is the land of gold, right?

SB: It's what they say but I think gold is everywhere. I mean, poetically speaking.

JS: Are you going back to your roots when you use gold on your work?

SB: Not really. I see gold as a universal symbol; everybody understands the connotation behind it. Everyone understands the value of gold. In Europe, gold

means economical power and in Mexico it means a decorative object. The best example is Donald Trump's twitter. In the morning he says something and 10 minutes later something different. A bit later he returns to his former affirmations... It is very exhausting because the present almost disappears. There is no time to understand the present. That's why this idea that it's been rewritten by a second. That's why I like to go back to abstraction. The accumulation of writing takes us to abstraction. What I like about abstraction is the static, it moves in a different time zone. It is like another way of measuring. There is no narrative, only abstraction. That's where my thoughts are: towards that time zone.

JS: Because of your work that is a generator of doubts and your punk process I see it as a mature and transcending work but you don't belong to the punk generation. How did you get in contact with them?

SB: As a teenager I was intuitively attracted to that movement. Later I became close friends with Malcolm McLaren. He was my mentor. It was like having my PhD with the Pope. I learned a lot and I observed much of his thinking. Punk is not just a guy with a shaved head and a mohawk for tourists. I still like this punk attitude that is morally into being disrupted to change a system or going against a system or how you can transform something that doesn't mean anything into something meaningful.

JS: Wasn't he (Malcolm McLaren) making use of music and art to become transcendental creating the new age punk?

SB: Yes and he was linking fashion to music, he was very focused into youth...

JS: But in a middle age time frame...

SB: But he was using music for video games, he was shifting towards technology. He was making music for the first Nintendo games. He saw that that was the future: new sound, production, digital algorithms... all that right now is very present.

JS: Where is the cultural disruption in your gold paintings and in your work in general? The digital age or more than the digital age?

SB: No, there are lots of elements. At least, I am looking for change. Maybe it is a good change or a bad change. I think the natural disruption we are having with the pandemic makes us shift how we think. Many people understood they can work in another way, that meetings are possible via Zoom and not necessarily face-to-face. That they don't have to constantly travel. Disruptions sometimes bring elements of new understanding.

JS: There is another discrete element that isn't mentioned but is so present in your work: fear. The overload of power by governments impose a fear which is related to isolation.

SB: Yes, fear provokes lots of positive and negative reactions.

JS: Is this why you are using stitches on your paintings?

SB: The stitches I was trying to provoke noise and transgress the surface.

JS: In a painful way?

SB: Yes, it is a discharge of emotion.

JS: And frustration?

SB: Yes.

JS: Fastword, the meaning of Art for you, is it more transcendental, or is it spiritual or transformation?

SB: I link it all together but I believe more in the power of transformation. Its power is very uplifting . If you are able to transform something you feel good. Art for me is that.

JS: Are we in the world to feel good?

SB: Of course. Yes! I think that's the goal. At least in my case it is to feel good as much as possible.

JS: However, if you use gold you have the pandora box in your hands. Just like what we are experiencing with the pandemic. The unexpected situation of the lockdown, the uncertainty of not knowing about tomorrow, is the moment when everyone is asking about the future perhaps?

SB: Yes, totally.

JS: Where is the act of liberty on your work?

SB: It is in the possibility of producing this work. When I transform something, I feel free. It is very liberating and I hope my works transmit that feeling.

JS: Would you say that because of the pandemic and the lack of pressure from art institutions, artists could be more productive?

SB: I think the only thing the crisis reveals is who was strong to survive the crisis. When everything is good and everybody is happy, everybody is allowed to produce anything. But when things come in opposite directions, that's when you see who has the strongest thought and the strongest will. Usually economically, politically, physically. One of our important survivals is our immune system. That's all we have. There are no vaccines, no medicine, the only thing we have to fight this war is our immune system.

JS: According to the experts nobody has a strong enough immune system to the Covid-19 virus.

SB: But if you are infected, and have a strong immune system, you will be able to survive. Whoever has a debilitated immune system will have more problems.

JS: Yes, but there will be a second and third waves. We don't know yet when but...

SB: The only thing we have right now is our immune system right now. Maybe the vaccine comes later and the advanced medicine and technology will be

helpful but this is all we have. If we talk about the history of Art, we see that many great artists appeared after World War II.

JS: Collaboration and solidarity played a difference then.

SB: I felt this a lot now. I am having more interesting conversations with other artists than previous to the pandemic. The amount of calls I made before were random. The quality of dialogues I have now during the pandemic are amazing. Even with curators I have been working with they have more time to focus. I hope this will remain when the pandemic is over. Artists have more time to share and our talks are more profound, supportive and related to more trivial subjects. The quality of the content is amazing. We have been talking about ideas and projects that before were competitive and also busy.

JS: When you write on columns or billboards, is it somehow connected to street art?

SB: It can be street art because it's on the street like a public sculptor. Is it street art or not? It is art in the street. Street art became a cliché of a specific art in the street. I don't want to be classified with all those street artists that have been labeled like that.

JS: You said it's more like a protest.

SB: Yes, I want to show you here a picture of a show I did at Hauser & Wirth in New York in 2017. When I did this installation called "*Headlines and Last lines in the Movies*" I was writing with spray paint the headlines of newspapers and the last lines of dramatic movies. It questions the reality or the present manipulated by information and by movie fiction in our Lives. It questions how we dress, how we live and how we behave.

JS: Are you trying to show how we feel when we are overwhelmed by thoughts and not able to "turn off"?

SB: Yes and in the end we are not able to distinguish between what is fiction and what is reality. It is like when there is so much sound that it becomes white noise or ecstatic. We see this in Mexico when there is an earthquake and everybody is calling their family or friends.

JS: But then the brain doesn't stop...

SB: No but it doesn't connect. Tries but there is no connection. This is aesthetic I feel more close to the demonstrations but at the end it has its own formal values. Its artistic values.

JS: This is very punk, right?

SB: Of course, it isn't writing with a pen or a typewriter. I also like the idea of spray paint that applies speed. The way you spray it, it's a lot of pressure and air. Particularly speaking, for me, this is very interesting. I have less control with a spray than with a pen or a typewriter.

JS: You repeat the letters on your latest because this is your handwriting.

SB: For the golden paintings I used spray to write OK and then I covered it with gold leaf.

JS: Are your gold leafs revealing or censoring? Is global wealth censoring us during the pandemic?

SB: It's a good question. I never felt it like censor but now that you are saying it, it can be also thought that way. It reveals it with light and it isn't blocking any black paint or trying to erase it. It looks more sharp.

JS: There is a popular outrage happening when the lockdowns happen. Since outrage can be expressed in different forms, is your actual work a form of expressing your outrage?

SB: The way I see it is not a censorship because it reveals it with light. Maybe when I use the spray can. When there is a lot of pressure the paint comes out with a lot of speed. Sometimes without control beyond my control. Maybe there is this element which I am not aware of.

JS: That is a good thing also, right? Many artists like you have this chaotic process and everybody has been somehow expressing themselves and the time speed is different and then comes the after mass.

SB: I also see it like this. It isn't like building a PR and marketing strategy to get where you are... no algorithms but an intuition. I feel I have to talk about a subject but in the process I understand other details or I realise I produced more. I understand the work when I see the result. It's like when you have a fight, maybe you say things that you didn't want to say or didn't expect that some words would affect as much as they did. It is like the after mass but it isn't like the recipe you know and you precisely repeat the ingredients all calculated. Speaking with you I am digesting my work because it isn't a work I painted 10 years ago. It is fresh and still in the archeological process. The meaning of an artwork doesn't happen when the artist finishes it. Its meaning lies beyond the death of the artist. This work can signify differently depending on the social economic context of where it is going to be exhibited or who has them or how

society reads it. This exhibition is just a beginning. Sometimes I think that I would not be able to see what transformation my work will have.

JS: Your answer reminds me of anthropophagy or better said, the cannibalism of an art work in parallel to the human perception of an artwork. How would you define both? Based on Merlau-Ponty: The human perception of the pandemic and the holocaust during WWII. Are we again experiencing a new holocaust?

SB: This is a very sociological subject. I am an artist interested in sociological observations. I celebrate my ideas and transform them into artworks and that's my avenue. But being more specific in a real sociological analysis is another discipline. I will feel very arrogant to make statements or critics. I can have my opinion and my intuition.

JS: Are you a political artist?

SB: Yes, of course. I will have to think more about that. It is good to think where everything is leading. For me regarding the human perception of today, I think we are living in a crisis of the individual and the collectivity. I think there is a space in between that I still don't know what it is or how it is, but I am sure both ends are not working properly.

JS: If approaching another facet which I see in your work, and Levy-Strauss's structuralism, very anthropological, can you elaborate making a parallel to leadership during the pandemic?

SB: I don't see a leader or the leadership is very chaotic. I don't understand very well who is manipulating. There is something being manipulated because that's human nature but we can't see it. It's like the virus that is "invisible". We are aware of its details but it's not like the whites against the black or two countries fighting for another country or a piece of land. This is something that is being manipulated and that is very invisible and it transforms and is very fluid and it isn't confrontational. It isn't in front of you, it's behind you, inside of you, you wear and then maybe that's helpful but maybe it's in the water, in your food, in a hug, or on the floor, in your sheets. I think that politically speaking I don't understand who is doing the manipulation. You feel it that it is there.

JS: Is this why you went into the spiritual side of the subject?

SB: Maybe! if you don't find answers or control, you transcend... or you detach – this is also a survival mode. That's also why the word OK. It's very relevant because the word is cryptic, caustic and laconic. It can be understood as a resignation, as a looking forward, as an optimism.

JS: What does *OK* mean?

SB: I think its use started in the war when the pilots were ready to take off and fly. It's very reduced but with a lot of meaning.

JS: *Les Temps Moderns* from Sartre and Charlie Chaplin in comparison to this time frame that plays a very important role in your work. Can you say something about it?

SB: I like that you are mentioning Charlie Chaplin because I think through irony we can send many messages... and make people think in a different way. I think irony is very powerful as well as in comedy. Sometimes if I cannot explain rationally or logically a problem this helps me to make the connection. In that sense I like comedy and irony.

JS: It's also a kind of critic. The irony is questioning, right?

SB: Of course, sometimes you can reduce a critical analysis into a joke. Sometimes it can be synthesising a lot of ideas in just one obviously good and effective joke.

JS: Where are the jokes in your work?

SB: The joke is that is not a joke. The uncertainty may make you laugh. “And now what?” When everything is so uncertain, it’s so ironic that it can make you laugh. The gold paintings however are about stepping back and trying to contemplate. Contemplate whatever it has to come. This work is trying to freeze time, to pause.

JS: Can you say that your work is meditative?

SB: I like the idea of contemplation more than meditation. To me, contemplation is free and enjoyable. Meditation is like a discipline. Contemplation doesn’t require entering a specific frequency. It’s like an exercise. Contemplation can take you hours or seconds.

JS: You say WOW

SB: See the mountains over there, you stop two seconds and feel recharged. Meditation is like a discipline just like reading or painting or exercising. Contemplation can become that but it’s like love it’s there and it’s not there.

JS: Love or Laugh?

SB: Love, it's sporadic.

JS: How can you include Love in your overwhelmingly powerful work? There is more Love in your gold paintings, right?

SB: Yes, exactly. You can see more on this work. Not on the other ones.

JS: So, is this a contradiction?

SB: All the time, yes. All these works are about tension, opposites and contradictions. You can see it as writing or you can see it as painting. Maybe for somebody it doesn't look like a painting and for a writer maybe doesn't look like a text. It is an image but for someone else is not an image. All about tension and contradiction. Like in the Barock, where chiaroscuro are required to paint, there is shadow and there are the opposites to build the painting. This is how I see it. I like to challenge it as an artist not as a writer or a painter.

JS: When you do this kind approach I come to Human Relations Architecture. This confrontation and the dichotomy and your constant questions towards human relations.

SB: This idea of contrast, contradiction and opposites... I think the magical moments happen when there is tension.

JS: Is architecture also an element for you?

SB: There is space to interact with my artwork. They are receptors allowing viewers to enter and exit.

JS: How do you connect from the perspective of your upbringing, archeology to your artwork?

SB: My parents are archeologists so as a kid, during vacation, I have been to excavations and ruins, cleaning bones... I think however archeology is focused in the past.

JS: Are you using the past in your work?

SB: No, I'm more interested in the present future but obviously there is this archeological attitude if you see it, in that every new excavation, it's a new quote. You discover something.

JS: You use quotes all the time. The viewer must come close to your artwork and be curious to discover what is hanging.

SB: Sometimes I use them. There is a meaning that the viewer discovers by being curious. I always like that. I couldn't use gold leaf now if I couldn't have used black slacking wood in my previous exhibition. I like to force the viewer to look and to look more, to discover and to dig in. I like Andy Warhol's quote when he used to say that He was deeply superficial. It sounds like he had a good day. I am not replicating it but it is important when the work tackles the individual, at a first glance you see the gold monochrome painting but if you dig into it and navigate into different perspectives of the artwork, the political, the social to the existential and to the individual and to its technique. It opens up to lots of fronts and I wish my work does that.

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