

René Wirths  
Switching Off Silence

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What I have long cherished in Elias Canetti's writings, especially in his memoirs, is the description of Berlin between the two world wars, the Berlin of legend, the Berlin of cracked artists, the Berlin before the catastrophe, the Berlin whose very ruins I will never know, since in their turn they were razed to the ground; an artificial city of light, the subterranean and plebeian capital of Mittel Europa that had supplanted the aristocratic and cosmopolitan Vienna of his parents, the den of artistic experimentation and the most provocative avant-gardism.

I have often walked through the alleys of Berlin as a European of past centuries wandering around Italy, like Chateaubriand in Rome, in order to understand my history, the history that shapes a collective psyche no one can escape. I have examined the traces of barbarism, grandeur and submission, I have tracked down the details of monuments, facades and commemorative sculptures. I wanted to embrace the city by breathing in the fragrances of Tempelhof and the Tiergarten. My imagination tested its limits there. In the end, it was the contemporary Berlin that I discovered and loved, the Berlin of artists flocking from all over Europe to the deserted buildings of the former GDR, the Berlin of immense galleries without collectors, the Berlin of an architecture that was supposed to stitch together neighbourhoods and people and that has already aged so much. To love Berlin is not to be nostalgic, it is to love the very idea of nostalgia.

To fully grasp the painting of René Wirths, who was raised in the few acres of land that made up the enclave of West Berlin, one must remember those prodigious years of artistic freedom that ushered in the 21st century in this city. The political optimism of reunification was matched by the extraordinary vitality of the German scene, particularly in Berlin. While French institutions were harping on endlessly about the death of painting, we contemplated the joyous tangle of canvases, colours and materials with melancholy and hope. Our imagination seemed so corseted and conventional compared to theirs. With this "Made in Berlin" translated into the visual arts, and instrumentalised as a brand at certain international fairs, the city seemed to be getting its own back on history. Under the auspices of figures such as Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter, and following in the footsteps of Jörg Immendorff, who had fought so hard for an East-West alliance through art, the painters were finally to triumph. Like rock

icons who died too young, the heroes of this adventure, Martin Kippenberger and Michel Majerus, haunted the minds of a generation of iconoclastic artists. This revival of painting was driven by a double movement: that of the Berlin effervescence, and that of the Eastern schools – the Leipzig of Neo Rauch and Dresden. Around them, there were so many artists, who now have disappeared from the radar, that were then snapped up by collectors and galleries. Echoing the way the techno dance-floors of Berlin's night scene were uniting youth, German artists were inventing a new contemporary art in which performers, photographers, video artists, conceptualists and painters came together in exhibitions with mind-bending displays laid out in the most unlikely places. Today, the no man's land of the Wall has been built on and Berlin has settled down. The years pass and I have my doubts. Was it such a good idea to transform air raid shelters into nightclubs, and bunkers into art centres?

It was in the midst of this furious maelstrom that René Wirths decided to become a painter. Raised in the shadow of the Wall, an ex-teenage punk, Wirths grew up in this West Berlin that was both bourgeois and decadent, foreshadowing the agony of the Western world. His career path, however, bears no resemblance to that of his flamboyant contemporaries. As an attentive observer of the changes in this revival of German painting, he voluntarily chose to keep his distance and develop his own singular language. After many years devoted to more or less fruitful experiments, he chose, at the dawn of his thirties, to anchor himself in a *modus operandi* as virtuosic as it is hypnotic. For almost two decades now, painting after painting, he has been representing everyday objects with a disturbing meticulousness, stripped of all context, in unexpected positions and scales: a chair, a brush, a canvas turned against the wall. Wirths has progressively opened up his circle of possibilities at the crossroads of the intimate – a worn shoe, his own hand with its palm open – up to a few rare portraits of his loved ones, hieratic, as reified as his objects are humanised.

With him, there is no thunderous recognition or drumbeats, but a slowly constructed, rare body of work. It intrigues as much by the incongruity of its subjects as by their restraint, disarming in its humility. To enter the world of René Wirths is to enter a radical system. His work seems to stand cautiously apart from his contemporaries. No obsession with production, no theory, no megalomaniacal revenge, no “Diktatur der Kunst.” René Wirths is undeniably the product of this new confidence in the power of painting, of an unconditional love for its infinite plastic possibilities. Still, at times one can sense a certain reserve at the heart of the work. I remember that for a long time, to get to his studio, we would climb three flights of stairs in a narrow building of East Berlin. A lower floor was occupied by the studio of Anselm Reyle, then the darling of the international

market. His Plexiglas boxes containing crumpled, iridescent paper excited interest all over the most prestigious fairs, and the building was buzzing with eager assistants, all in the business of fabricating these semi-manufactured neo-paintings. The proximity of a successful artist can be noisy. The contrast was great with René Wirths' studio, its Cistercian nudity – a ladder, a bicycle in the corner, an easel, a chair, all soon to be transformed into subjects. The light in his paintings owed nothing to the mylar or mirrors used on the floor below. It came from layer upon layer of oil paint, from the Van Eyck brothers, from the long historical time of the hand, from the shadows passing through the large windows of the studio. If you looked closely at the surface of the works, you could see the reflection of the artist himself: his observant face distorted in the handle of a brush, his silhouette against the light in the reflection of an audio cassette, the large windows of the studio in the bowl of a small spoon. Ten years later, his studio still adjoins that of a successful artist, Chiharu Shiota, who is also passionate about boxes, boxes interwoven with thread. Are there secret connections between two studios so thoroughly separate on different sides of the same wall? Both artists share a tenderness for the object, the passage of time and a love of the human hand, precise and yet fragile, the working hand educated by “high craft” and repeated actions, the hand that philosophically plays with the accidents that catalyse beauty. Neither of them, no doubt, knows it, but they also share the same need to control experience. Perhaps this comes from the urgency of those who have cheated death too young?

René Wirths' conscious decision to focus on the object is ambiguous. It would be a flippant contradiction to classify his painting solely as realism or hyper-realism. Wirths prefers a broad spectrum of “likeness” to photographic precision. He combines the different levels of physical surface, the near and the far, in a dialectical approach that moves between painting and conceptual art. Faced with the serial aspect of his pictures and their simplicity, one is reminded of Joseph Kosuth's “Art as Idea as Idea,” with no doubt a form of humour (am I wrong to think so?) that conceptual artists have lacked (and so creating the conditions for their downfall). Passed through the complex filter of his pictorial process, Wirths' objects, the found object, the ready-made, chosen for and in its banality, becomes a kind of neutral and archetypal definition, as if extracted from an alphabet primer. But in the same movement, “his” chair, by its uncanny presence, ends up abolishing any other definition or representation of a chair. Emancipated from the sole force of reality and the limits of the concept, his works

are almost like noemes, as were the still lifes of Francesco de Zurbaran in his day. Wirths often justifies his practice by a reflection on the subjectivity, the hazards of his own perception, a very personal “phenomenology.” No doubt. It seems to me, however, that by articulating the universal and the particular, the figurative and the represented, the poetic and the real, Wirths achieves a form of beauty through simplicity that invariably reminds me of the master of Extremadura. In Wirths’ work, each object – the top of an apple, a thin leaf of lettuce – is bathed in an unreal exile, free of any context. The perimeter of the sensitive sometimes marries the simplicity of Grace.

*Nature Morte* was precisely the French title of one of the first exhibitions I saw of his work in Paris. This title – in French –paradoxically underlined the gulf between his practice and the codes of the genre. Despite appearances, the German’s painting refutes the very idea of composition: no basket, but a single fruit, in close-up. This disproportionate magnification offers not so much scientific observation as “awe” at the luminous simplicity of the mathematical laws of the universe. At the same time, Wirths refuses the temptation of symbolism, so dear to the masters of the Golden Age. Even his skulls – fox or cat skulls – keep a safe distance from the pathos of the *memento mori*. Rather, Wirths’ work returns to the very etymology of the *stilleven*s invented by the Flemish masters: he creates a mute life, *still leben*, the suspension of time, the moment that fades away with the very first breath. And Wirths builds up his own space-time, image after image. He creates his own lexicon of a world that is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither completely new nor completely gone. In a disturbing form of synaesthesia, his mastery of the art of textures articulates the senses of sight and touch. The true-false seriality of the work reinforces the contradiction of sensations. Are his paintings rich and deep or arid and superficial? Do they bear witness to the beauty of the world or to its tedium? Wirths thus questions our view of painting and its limits. Can a painted surface still bewilder our contemporaries, the same ones who are delighted with the radicalism of the ready-made, the triumph of conceptual art or performance art?

Puzzled, I am now facing the layout of his recent *Liquids* series. The transparent glasses, filled with coloured drinks – coffee, orange juice, milk, rosé wine – like the jars of gouache from childhood, line up like a giant palette. As a counterpoint, his enlarged light bulbs, reproduced in all the strangeness of their oviform structure, evoke light, the intrinsic element of painting. Here it is, light, suddenly diverted into an industrial object, extinguished and already obsolete. The jerky rhythm of the subjects and formats testifies to a present that repeats

itself, with no other use than the strange surface of beauty whose creation it has permitted.

Like Rembrandt hiding the silhouette of a maid behind his Flayed Ox, Wirths populates his “suspended moments” with a discreet and mysterious humanity. I mentioned the self-portraits camouflaged in the reflection of a metal object. Wirths always appears concentrated like a humble worker hunched over his task. Here and there an implicit self-portrait peeks out. We can sense the wise family man he has become through the disproportionate reproduction of his daughter Clara’s childish drawings. We can imagine the loving son, full of regrets, in the uncompromising portrait of his mother, painted after they found out she was doomed by cancer.

A childhood picture shows him in 1984, in Nina Hagen’s Berlin, posing as a young punk musician, which is not insignificant. For what haunts his work is the “no future” tune of a discouraged rock music. He sometimes half-hints at his father, who died too young after a life of excess, as well as at his majestic and beloved grandfather, despite his past as an SS officer. Both were devoured by the madness of their time. René Wirths is a child of Berlin and has grasped its troubled gloom. Like the amnesiac city, his paintings, whether they depict people or things, try to escape that darkness. His art pursues the ultimate attempt at memory, a memory held within the clear boundaries of the studio.

René Wirths’ paintings invite silence, but this silence is the one that follows a fading noise. Just as the cassettes, radios, boom boxes, records and turntables of which his paintings form disproportionate portraits are dying out, so are the people who still know how to use them. Whatever he says, René Wirths has remained a punk. A punk never dies. But he may sometimes switch off.