

Thomas Raab  
The Painter of  
Modern Experience

*Clarity kills the world by leaving nothing but relations. Where once was a thing, nothing remains except measurable patterns.*

– Paul Valéry, *Cahier Jupiter*

I wanted to call this essay *Katrin's Glasses*, but now I think *The Painter of Modern Experience* is better. Not only because of Baudelaire, of course.

Baudelaire's *Painter of Modern Life* from 1863, a eulogy to Constantin Guys, can be understood as the first "catalog text" in the history of literature. However, I am struck by how its author characterizes a successful picture by how "modern" it is—contemporary ideas, conventions, or things are dressed in an "ever valid" coat—or vice versa, "ever valid" ideas receive a modern shape.

Painting follows fashion and does not follow fashion at the same time. Fashion in the general sense of "zeitgeist"—not in the narrow sense of clothing. For sure, painting must breathe the zeitgeist through the economic, bureaucratic, material, and historic factors, entailed in the life quality of a time period. In my interpretation of Baudelaire the "great" painter finds a subject that is something anthropologically important, which is imbued with a new artistic form, based on the guidelines of art history and current trends—or vice versa. His distinguishing feature is curiosity, Baudelaire writes; he would not want to waste a second of his life not facing new impressions like with the eyes of a child: form becomes content, and content becomes form.

Well fenced, carpet knight!

In the rest of the essay, the author loses himself—whom I have to adore just for the sake of having been ostracized—in the traditional metaphysical spirit of high romanticism. In the services of Guys, he indulges the figure known as the dandy, who refines his desires and bodily impulses until he simultaneously is a creature of pure rationality, looking in the mirror, but also the subject of his paintings. The dandy becomes an artwork himself. The painter of modern life sees things in the mirror of the self, withdrawing from the inner form, the more exterior forms such as gestures of speech, clothing, perfume s/he cultivates.

I further interpret form as means and calculations sufficient to predict the behavior of things, of which science is the epitome, and which the dandy so passionately counteracts. Thus, Baudelaire emphasizes that Guys' depictions of women, for instance, are wearing full make-up, so their nature is made invisible; the natural, the non-ideal, the seeming imperfections of nature are covered up.

The artist as a dandy—I further interpret Baudelaire—creates a form for the natural-seeming things and content, usually defamiliarizing it, so that it also can be seen as *a form* by others. And this is the trick, thereby, they make the form *the content*, and this underlines an aristocratic attitude. He/she is always a step ahead. As the avant-garde of research, their curiosity *disenchants* the modern by attempting to depict the anthropological root as a form. Thereafter, this form can be researched by science, foremost by psychology and cultural anthropology, which attempt to be in favor of "human content" rather than what is understood as mechanistic. Implicitly, the artist thereby works on the disenchantment of the world through science as well.

The notion that modern art serves as the vanguard of scientific progress reconciles first person experience with rationality exists to this day, though few dare to stand up for these view in public. The project of enlightenment and science was lost on all those born after 1960, due to the complicatedness of the world, especially due to the dynamics behind technology and human desires. In 2008, I tried to depict this erosion in my book *Avantgarde-Routine* with one eye crying and one eye laughing.

Hm.

Maybe I generalize too strongly, but I noticed in my work as a writer that artists of *today's modernity*, of now, attempt to "enchant" rather than to "disenchant." The "eternal," of which Baudelaire spoke, no longer consists of rules or natural laws, which not only Thomas Kuhn but epistemology at large identified as forever changeable. In fact, it is the human intuition and the experience of emotion, which is irreducible, *forever in* defiance of all attempts of formalization. No perfect theory of first person experience can ever change first person experience. And even if it would be algorithmically formalized, a mechanistic theory of economy couldn't alleviate the disparity in wealth and the resulting conflicts. And a mechanistic psychological theory does not ease the psyche as we must bitterly acknowledge the pain, which is the core of our experience. There are rumors, that this insight or just the glimpse of it led Baudelaire, after he discovered Edgar Allen Poe's work to lay down his pen as a poet (and what led me, 150 years later, to pick mine up).

What I mean to say is that all of today's artists want to perform magic: to have and create experiences that are *not predictable* but are still coherent and conclusive *content-wise when it comes to biographic context*. The magic never derives alone from what we see but from what we feel through what is seen or reproduced. In other words: magic is a function of fantasy, our imagination.

And Katrin Plavčák certainly bewitches with her magical images, whose phantasms dreamily transmute and remix philosophical thoughts, contexts, icons from pop culture, landscape, political dilemma, still life, and new research and technological ideas.

The artists of today, depending on their attitude, are obviously still romantics, if one reduces romanticism to the minimal demand, that experience and introspection are taken seriously and are understood as causal for behavior. But he or she is fundamentally less "dark" than in Baudelaire's time, where the belief in science and technology was unquestioned. The era of "Gothic" romanticism promoted that everyone is capable of unseemly, hurtful, from a Christian point of view "evil" actions. You can breach the consensual and legal moral, without making science responsible for the "cause," for example, "I" want to cross the border to evil against *my own convictions*, like Poe captured so aptly in 1845 in his short story *The Imp of the Perverse*. This form of "Gothic," arguably a superorder to dandyism, strangely survives of all places today in the trendy tech-euphoria of "accelerationism," in "object-oriented ontology" and in "transhumanism," whose ideas Katrin Plavčák revisits repeatedly. I continue to assert, today's romanticism is about the gaps in formalism, about the unexplained and therefore, the magical that always remains. I have learned to be delighted by remaining a tribalist and proponent of enlightenment in this way. The artificial is no longer considered the beautiful—we all know it and who isn't a dandy today?—but rather natural subjective experience is beautiful. And we have learned that the magic we achieve through art is *objective*, because it is anthropologically irreducible. For art is never insane but sets up a problem for a science, whose normative criteria of "insane" forever fall short.

I pause here to take in Plavčák's paintings and image sculptures.

Is this why her repertoire of spatial combinations of objective and subjective forms absorbs us into her fantasy? What do we as humans project onto the world? And to what extent do we thereby surprise ourselves?

To surprise herself surely is a motor in Katrin Plavčák's art, not just in painting but also in her musical compositions. The enchantment with the self will and can also enchant others. She too tells me, the know-it-all of science, who here sits at the computer, "Look here, what is up with this?" But in contradiction to Poe, she says it with humor and exhilaration.

Is this why Katrin Plavčák does not wear her glasses when she does not paint? Because she wants to be free not just of the consensual meaning of things but from their defining limits? Is this why she often hears more original words than her counterpart expresses? Is this why she loves to laugh so thrillingly? Does her joy of objects and animals derives from this? From her liberty to view the world like this or like that?

Time and time again, the methodological difference between art and science is stressed, which in essence was produced by institutions and their vocational implementation of modern natural sciences and their offspring, i.e., technology. Therein, art was sidelined to the romantic, the subjective, an elusive and balancing act. Art is "free," while science is meant to adhere to *a method* (which one?), adhere to

social control via “peer review” and the parliament. However, must the modern artist follow the guidelines of art history to create not only a new but also an aesthetically effective work? And must the researcher not *invent* a hypothesis, before it is tested?

I think—to keep it short—the core of art and of science is the creativity to invent new forms and explore new content. Creativity is intelligence, intelligence *is not* education. Art and science differ only, what the control of consensus is concerned. Art is allowed to risk more, thereby, it is equally more aristocratic and draws different “social types” to it. But at its core, every artwork is a hypothesis, whose magical or not so magical properties of form are tested.

But what does that mean—form?

I tentatively conceive of form as regularities that either refer to *exterior* (natural) or *exteriorizable* stimuli (e.g., thoughts converted into a computer program). Content is for me connections between groups of thought, which from this formal understanding do not belong to the same problem domain and for the time being seem “incommensurable.” A *new*, that is to say, creative content would then be the postulate of a new “commensurability.” Again, form becomes content via a new perspective—or vice versa.

For, to revisit Valéry’s motto, a pattern is also content.

From the aspect of experience, one can also describe “form” as a mechanism, that allows the calculation for the specific domain, “generates” it quasi as a pattern. “Content” counteracts formalization and yields a “sense of feeling,” which we can only experience firsthand.

To give an example: I can formally describe a 12 bar blues form by harmony, scale, rhythm, and even some deviations, and even describe it as a computer program calculating random blues songs. But even with my formal knowledge about the frequency and acoustic variability of a “blue note” and even though I know how to pluck them on the guitar, the experience of blues form remains a strange mixture of emotional atmosphere: joy, sadness, strength, and relaxation, which are more dependent on my current mood than on the music itself. But this means, my blues form obviously does not formalize all content components. On the contrary, what is interesting is what time and time again sparks my curiosity and simultaneously determines the “groove,” is what I do not formally understand. From this point “modern aesthetics” have just begun.

Maybe the anthropomorphically painted guitars in some of Katrin Plavčák’s works, e.g., those two in an psychoanalytic “transmission situation” on one of the image sculptures, are allegories of this complex interplay between the subjective and the objective in art. Likewise the undulating guitar necks in other paintings could be seen as condensing semantically ambiguous bodily intuitions (“softening,” “melting for someone,” “become stiff with fear,” etc.). Of all instruments, the guitar is being “tuned” regularly, just as humans “attune” to new circumstances and needs.

Now, I dare to say it!

I firstly believe that this experience of contentual residue or of a new form creates the “magic” mentioned before. Secondly, contemporary artists seek to create or experience this “magic” and thirdly, science only differs in this way, and no other way from art, namely, that it seeks to demystify all magic. For, one should not forget, that the magic belongs to in the realm of the uncanny, the ambivalent, which can be seen as simultaneously beautiful and terrifying.

Just as science, magic is oriented towards *practice*, as Bronisław Malinowski wrote in 1925 in *Magic, Science, and Religion*. Any magical act wants to achieve something concrete in the exterior world, only that contrary to science it does not need proof nor social evidence, but is legitimized only by the magician’s charisma. The latter could best be conceived of as resulting from “unpredictability” which is why it is also often ascribed to the “scientific genius.” In any case, the magic must seem *objective* to the bewitched in order to be effective.

Paradoxically scientific demystification leads to exaggerated demands on scientists on the part of the majority of the population. During the current pandemic, for instance, the demos demanded from virologists and biologists to predict the complex epidemic situation on the spot. The scientists were expected to provide answers to everything just as priests.

In this sense, science has taken on the former social function of religion. Nonetheless, science will never provide those final theories of the world which religions are able to provide.

As an ex-scientist I am painfully aware that science—contrary to general opinion—does not stem from materialism or realism, as it is so often believed, but from the pragmatic craftsmanship and skepticism of the rational-oriented people. Since scientists are and will remain human after all, they do experience “demystification” just as melancholically as artists or anyone else. Thus, there are numerous anecdotes about scientists, which after years of hardship, crown their life’s work with a formalization, a formula, or an algorithm—and after a short euphoria, fall into melancholy. They are disenchanted by their own work, have fulfilled their purpose—and who wants that to be the case? More often than not, they report their surprise that, after years of arduous research and error, the formal solution of their problem seems banal in the end.

For despite its frugal beauty, its economy, each form remains prosaic and sober. However “fuzzy” or “satirical” it may be, it still has boundaries—as a describable form—you only have to look closely enough.

Is this the reason why Katrin Plavčák often takes off her glasses, when she looks at things? To perceive less clearly?

Surely, she is not searching for a natural or detail-oriented depiction. With all of its phantasmic motifs, her painting is the opposite of photorealism, her sculptures are the opposite of Rodin, her songs are the opposite of computer music. When I contemplate that all fantasies—however, simple they are—have to do with desire, the hunch is close, the artist tries to probe her own and others’ subconscious—a hypothesis supported by her spontaneous composition, image making, and painting method.

The object relations, which Katrin Plavčák allows by not putting on her glasses, obviously do not add up to forms of consensual objects. Colors bleed into each other, object parts connect to unaccustomed hinges, bodies flow into each other, planets become the skulls of politicians. The magic of experience cannot be pictures directly, but only as an atmosphere of newly experienced relations, which do not need to be true according to objective reconstruction. Two objects, their colors blend into each other, remain two objects, but the potential of becoming one is insinuated in Plavčák’s paintings and image sculptures.

Viewed from this angle, the painter’s subjects such as guitars, fictive group portraits, or animals are more than metaphors. They are *layerings*—when for example a musical atmosphere experientially bleeds into the everyday or the animal becomes human and therein, the human becomes animal (something we sometimes experience in intoxication).

Thus, due to the boundless fantasy of Katrin Plavčák’s paintings and sculptures makes it is doubly difficult to *identify objects in them*. On the one hand, we clearly notice that a concrete identification of objects is not enough, on the other, it is not our fantasies but hers that are on display. And so these images lead to the projection of *our* desires and motives. Though I am sometimes uneasy about using the terms slapstick or wordplay, it is precisely this that makes, I think, Katrin Plavčák’s paintings and sculptures so *humorous*.

At the same time, her humorously magic punchlines stand in stark contrast to the magic of science and technology we are accustomed to in enlightened societies. In premodern religious times, when society was based on the belief in the omnipotence of God or of destiny, individuals found meaning in fixed rituals, in fixed motifs, cult figures, and totems, on which all people compromised or were forced to compromise on. In this respect religion explained the world no less rational than science.

In scientific societies, rituals and subjects in images are only partially fixed. The exhibition’s ritual, for instance with its opening, the previews and pre-previews resemble old cultic ritual in many aspects. Yet, modifications are possible and even welcome. The subjects of images can be enigmatic or hermetic but its relation to the everyday or the zeitgeist guarantees the acceptance by the audience. One does not necessarily have to project meaning on these images, one can also simply enjoy them like Jazz derived from Blues, like a simple “groove” and a “pun.”

Therefore, I assume, that the fans of Plavčák’s art are drawn to a playful looseness and humor in difficult moral and political questions. Among them you will hardly find ideologists, for Katrin Plavčák asks more questions than answering them. Therein, she touches upon problems about our very existence.

Especially when I study Plavčák’s imaginations either using the human figure for a political or philosophical message or distorting it so that the beholder can physically feel it, I believe to realize that

their effect is not due to the defamiliarizing of the motif. The body—which appears in almost all of the artist's images, sometimes in human, sometimes in animal form—remains the entry point of physically evanescent and, therefore, of every sorrow and every joy. Even the most intellectual insight, whatever that may be, is marked by the euphoria of finding a form, not by the form in itself. One cannot conceive form without the experience of content and vice versa.

Generally I believe that the function of today's art magic lies in asking questions. The role of the artist thus seems to lie therein—to offer individual forms referring to yet unexplainable phenomena. In this sense Katrin Plavčak is a magician, but as a “shamanic medium” she does not declare the secret order but declares the secret disorder. She hints to those gaps in the technological and bureaucratic matrix, of which humankind is not yet or may never be master.

Fortunately.

For: how does knowing the neurophysiology of sadness help when we are sad? How does the safety factor of an airplane help us if we are scared of flying? How does “ecological technology” help us if we continue to waste resources because of our evermore exclusive needs? What does technical warfare help when we see the corpses before us, and we can all too well imagine their deaths' consequences for those left behind?

And what does visual aids such as glasses change if we can only see what we already know and want to believe? Where is the joy in that?

Therein, Katrin Plavčak seems to resemble Constantin Guys about whom Baudelaire wrote, “When Monsieur G. wakes up and opens his eyes to see the boisterous sun beating a tattoo upon his window-pane, he reproaches himself remorsefully and regretfully: ‘What a peremptory order! what a bugleblast of life! Already several hours of light-everywhere-lost by my sleep!’”