

Katrin Plavčak: The Rattling and Gurgling of the Organs  
Jörg Heiser

On a hot summer day in 2016, I visit Katrin Plavčak in her studio. The walls are full of paintings and in the middle of the space stands a sewing machine on a table. Plavčak probes the machine with a stethoscope-like round metal object, a contact microphone that captures the noises of its inner workings – the rattling and throbbing and shuffling – and feeds them into a guitar loop pedal that plays them back and mixes them into rhythmic layers. With Ulrika Segerberg, Plavčak makes music as M.O.G. (Mothers of God), using sewing machines as their main instruments.

My first thought: Isn't this a bit passé? Haven't Rosemarie Trockel (machine-knitted pictures) and Michaela Melián (sewing-machine "drawings") dealt sufficiently with such artistic repurposing of means of production traditionally associated with women? Must women artists really keep going over it, again and again? But Plavčak explains that the duo began making music with sewing machines as part of a performance commission. They had been thinking about sweatshop labour, and how the sewing machine, just like the typewriter, historically offered progress to women who could now earn a living wage as seamstresses (or secretaries). My initial overly superficial response, then, is firmly rebutted. Firstly: no, it has not been "sufficiently dealt with" because the battle must be fought afresh by each generation, from decade to decade (from sweatshop to precarious self-employment, etc.), because, as with other struggles in feminism, any gains achieved are never permanent. And secondly, from the outset, Plavčak's sampling of the machine is distinct from what "sewing machine" usually stands for in functional terms – rather than using it for sewing, she lends an ear to the sounds it makes. And she does something comparable in her painting, using it as an instrument to scan the (visual) sounds of today's reality, lending an ear to its products, issues and objectives, listening to and through them.

Plavčak produces a seemingly inexhaustible stream of oil paintings in all manner of small, medium and large formats – a cornucopia of picture ideas ranging from the divinely indecent to the exuberant. These pictures *never* correspond to notions of sublimity or unassailability as seen in the work of, for example, Gerhard Richter, who uses conceptual framing (cropping source images from visual media; juxtaposing the profane and the sublime, thus ennobling the former) and painterly finish (squeegee, blurring, etc.) as distancing gestures. This allows even personal implications or concerns (his Nazi uncle, his own wife and child) to be transcended via painterly aura. But Plavčak's pictures *also* never correspond to cool distancing via the kind of conceptual framing (quotation, dissolution of authorship, dry/vulgar humour, etc.) used by Richard Prince (joke paintings), Christopher Wool ("Sell The House Sell The Car Sell The Kids") or the early Rosemarie Trockel (knitted pictures with Playboy logos, etc.).

Instead, Plavčak constantly pushes herself to attempt new pictures that remain open; to operate with motifs that appear obscurely quaint or boldly exaggerated, but without becoming unassailably cool and callous. Finally, after at least three decades of postmodern painting, this once again gives us something we have not seen before, something we *cannot* have seen before – precisely because the pictures remain open rather than lingering in the territory of what is considered somehow "serious". They are open because, although drawn from the media as is also the case with Richter, they are also unmistakably the product of the artist's imagination, pictures that cannot be equated with their found source. This opens up a lineage going back not to abstract expressionism or photorealism, but to a painterly idiom of the comic and the grotesque, interwoven with the vagaries of the mind. This line began, perhaps, with James Ensor (*Skeletons Fighting*

over a *Pickled Herring*, 1891) and Odilon Redon (*The Crying Spider*, 1881) – a sort of proto-Surrealism not yet engaged in the heightened, illustrative rendering of unconscious content, as later practiced by Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, nor in the kind of semiological puzzles devised by René Magritte. Instead, it deals in raw, absurd motifs – exaggerated visual jokes that speak of horror. In the early and mid-1960s, this line continues, for example, in the paintings of Lee Lozano that eschew finesse in favour of brutal humour, portraying workman’s utensils (hammers, screws) as mangy genitalia – sharp wedges to split the knotty timber of everyday sexist reality. In 1966, Philip Guston exchanged exhausted abstraction for a repertoire of shoe soles, cigarettes, Ku Klux Klan hoods and Nixon faces. It was these pioneering achievements that paved the way, from the 1980s onwards, for a postmodern opening up of painting to the crude and the cheap, the deliberately hackneyed and the ironically kitschy, with all the disadvantages this brought in the form of so-called neo-Expressionism. The main advantage, however, was the ingenuity of the unexpected. Bad Painting triumphed over the tradition of the manicured picture, with its abstraction or photo-realism fully refined – a tradition that had long since become academic, overfed, and constipated. The spectrum of Bad Painting ran from the “Hetzler boys” (Kippenberger, Büttner, Oehlen) via the Mülheimer Freiheit group (especially, concerning wordplay pictures, Walter Dahn and Jiří-Georg Dokoupil) through to American psycho-dudes like Jim Shaw.

The main downside of 1980s Bad Painting was that it largely represented a pretty blunt affirmation of old-boy networks. Plavčák picks up this legacy, but – together with many other women artists like Jana Euler or Amy Sillman – she ensures the genre is no longer subject to unquestioned male dominance. Rather than imposing any new gender-based specificity, it was a matter of clearly and confidently not so much rewriting history as correcting it, putting it right. One place where this happens is the website [thehistoryofpaintingrevisited.weebly.com](http://thehistoryofpaintingrevisited.weebly.com) that Plavčák runs with Caroline Bittermann and Claudia Zweifel, which probes the notoriously male-dominated orthodoxy of art history, especially concerning painting: the website offers short biographies and works by many long- and still-ignored female pioneers of painting from the Middle Ages to the present day. And if anyone finds it hard to believe there might be so much that needs rewriting and reemphasizing in an art history that traditionally seems to have been so totally dominated by men, they should take a look at the entry on the Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614) or, especially striking, on Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) who only really received recognition in the 2010s for her pioneering achievements in abstraction and the combination of abstraction and figuration – in works made a decade before Kandinsky or Mondrian.

In the studio, while the sewing machine keeps pattering along, I turn round and find myself facing *Men in Balance* (2016). The picture is structured like an ingenious acrobatic act by the Chinese State Circus. The lower two thirds are dominated by three male graces: On the left, in the style of Austrian drag diva Conchita Wurst, a bearded man in a pink-purple evening gown with a long thin ski-slope nose between tiny button eyes; his headgear recalls the conical hat of a medieval damsel, but on closer inspection it turns out to be a stockinged woman’s leg. The middle man wears a vermilion leotard, dangles a cigarette between frog-like lips, and also has a woman’s leg for a hat. The third is already drifting off into abstraction: though the leg-hat is still discernible, the face dissolves into a grey modernist picture puzzle, while the bright pink body cannot decide whether it is a female torso or a male phallus. Either way, the three heads (or woman’s legs) are balancing a large grey ball on the tips of their graciously extended feet – the way acrobats do. Strictly speaking this ball is the head of a worried-looking man with piggy eyes and snout above a moustache, vaguely recalling figures from the Weimar Republic – the statesman Gustav

Stresemann or the pastry chef in August Sander's portrait. But that's not all! On top the Stresemann-pastry-chef ball balances a more contemporary-looking man in a beige outfit with a quiff and black horn-rimmed glasses, his eyes hidden behind tinted lenses. To be quite precise, he is engaged in "planking", defying his apparently rather limp constitution to become a rigid board balancing like a seesaw on the (stone?) ball. Meanwhile, the upper section of the picture is dominated by a blue night sky with a few flashes of pale pink moon, while on the left-hand side a pastel pink cloud with a smiley face looks up at the planking man on the acrobatic pyramid: an amoebic presence in the picture, looking on in slightly amused wonderment at this great allegory of the obsolescence of traditional male role models, at the precise moment of its acrobatic grand finale.

I look a little further. A large horizontal-format picture protrudes into the room, as if slightly astonished to be dealing so overtly with current political reality. It shows a nocturnal scene with refugees in the Greek town of Idomeni, on the border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It recalls the terminal failure of European refugee policy, when the closure of the West Balkan route in the autumn of 2015 forced refugees to scramble over or under hastily erected razor wire fences. The coils of razor wire – rendered as coloured segments in various shades of green, like overlapping shards of smashed wine bottles – hold the refugees doubly captive, so to speak: in the wire and again in the media echo of these wires. In the leaden sky overhead, out of which black and brown tree trunks protrude like telegraph poles struck by lightning, float three white *Grenzmonde* (Border Moons, 2016) – looking like hot-air-filled balloons or lanterns – bearing the faces of Britain's prime minister David Cameron, Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel and France's president François Hollande. They look as if they are playing the role of border moon by accident. The inability or unwillingness of the three big EU nations (standing in for all the others) to face this historical challenge together is suspended above the scene as a triumvirate of hypocritical innocence.

As these two examples make clear, Plavčák has no time for slapstick or caricature when it comes to injecting new energy into the inevitably exhausted and hackneyed genre of figurative-allegorical portrayals of contemporary events, of history painting – be it large-scale state politics or the "lesser" politics of gender identity. And she is not driven by the kind of excessive seriousness or self-attributed importance that marked Jörg Immendorff's *Café Deutschland* series (1977–82): although painted in a light, almost comic-like style, not unlike Plavčák's today, Immendorff's work was imbued with a leaden era between West German intellectual fustiness and East German despair over an ossified regime. Be it Beuys, A. R. Penk, Brecht or the East German dissident Robert Havemann who walked through the picture, they always became cardboard cut-outs in Immendorff's Punch and Judy show of a specifically German sensibility, marked by the divided nation and its Nazi past – as if insights could be gained by merely evoking a constellation of supposedly key figures (almost exclusively men) in an allegorical café. Nonetheless, Immendorff's approach has a good side that is worth rediscovering. Crude reductions of complex contemporary historiography to more manageable farce can generate insights if the figures and scenes have life breathed into them by painting – when form (the colours, the lines, the pictorial space, but also the figurative motif itself) infiltrates content (the main narrative and the basic constellation of characters). In Immendorff's series, this works best when a welcome lightness (the peculiarities of painterly portrayal) is mixed in with the heaviness of historical symbolism (for example, when the official German eagle looks more like a vulture).

Plavčák and I unpack some large pictures and heft them into the courtyard outside the studio, not carelessly but also not with kid gloves. They are robust canvases, robustly

handled. Among them the picture of a sleeping man in bed (*Die Fernsehhand*, Television Hand, 2014). The bearded fellow slumbers peacefully on a blue checked pillow, in his left hand a remote control or a smartphone – clearly a modern equivalent of Goya's *Sleep of Reason* (1797–99). Here, the monsters are not bats, owls and cats but, along the bottom, three white Merlins in black wizard's hats – the internal logo for the NSA cell phone surveillance programme – and, at the top, a kind of bug-eyed spherical robot that watches over the scene. The picture's key element, however, consists of the thin blue lines that extend across it like rays of light from a television (positioned outside the frame) or like cracks in a smartphone display. In this way, the motif of a fragmented and medially convoluted, surveillance-ridden (dream) reality appears in the picture again – as a surface structure that frames and seals it.

Plavčak's pictures are figurative without avoiding the specifically painterly questions of non-figuration. They often feature grid or line structures that both subdivide the picture and cover it like a net, limiting it by imposing two spatial zones – in front of and behind the net – preventing it from merely offering illusory space. *Statler & Waldorf* (2009) shows the two cuddly old hecklers from the Muppet Show who, with a blend of mockery and fondness, shower Kermit, Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear with criticism from their balcony before exchanging a toothless laugh. In Plavčak's picture, they have been banished behind yellow prison bars, appearing muted, almost indifferent. And her picture of a young Chinese Maoist (*Woman Soldier*, 2012) is traversed by pink stripes, as if consumer capitalism with its promises had laid itself over the glorifying propaganda portrait like interference on a TV screen.

Among the pictures without such a striped overlay, there have recently been many portraits of brooding, droll masculinity. It is a visual world of chumps and dunderheads, of harmless dorks and menacing nuts, but also of male muses, mythical beasts and heroes, with grotesquely large or small heads or limbs, inserted into landscapes, interiors or abstract spaces full of present-day tribulations and trans-historical whimsy. Male protagonists who seem alarmed by their own identities.

One example is a double portrait of an elderly, grey-haired couple (*Extase*, Ecstasy, 2011). In the background, the insignia of petit-bourgeois domesticity: ironing board, bookshelf, sideboard. In the foreground, the wife is overcome by lust, her mouth half open, lifting up her top to bare her breasts, while her husband sits beside her displaying a mixture of disgust and boredom, his hands on his knees and his eyes closed in annoyance. The brutal physical comedy here consists in the reversal of the usual cliché of the randy old goat testing his spouse's patience with his belated cravings. This comic quality is further heightened by the uniform greyness of both hair and skin colour, and by the mundane household utensils stacked up in the background.

And then there are her portraits of Edward Snowden (*Whistleblower / Edward Snowden*, 2013) and Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning (*Whistleblower / Bradley Manning*, 2013). Snowden's face is strikingly shortened, his frameless glasses made especially prominent, as if Plavčak wanted to underline the plight of a courageous thirty-year-old in a very precarious situation: it was this childish-looking face that blew the whistle on one of the biggest surveillance scandals in recent history. For Manning's portrait, Plavčak uses a different kind of defamiliarization. Her picture is based on a photograph from 2013 showing the then twenty-five-year-old Bradley in U.S. Army uniform wearing a beret and black glasses, taken during his court-martial for treason for passing documents about the Iraq War to the disclosure platform Wikileaks – before he chose to become a woman known as Chelsea. In Plavčak's picture the face is narrowed, leaving just one eye, the right one, as if

the photograph has been folded vertically, hiding part of it. At the same time, this technique recalls a trick often used by Picasso, as in his portraits of Marie-Thérèse Walter or Dora Maar from the 1930s, in which the two halves of the face are offset or pushed into one another. In Plavčák's version, however, Picasso's ritual of painting the "muse" and lover, whose portrait is also meant to show desire and inner turmoil, is recoded into a picture of the whistleblower who went from soldier to prisoner and from man to woman.

But such media-based, self-deconstructing pictures of masculinity, testimonies to their times, form just a tiny fraction of Plavčák's pictorial universe. The bizarre and the strange spawn their own creations, including many animals with human heads: a spider's body with a moustachioed human face, recalling the Odilon Redon painting mentioned above, but with a falcon perched on its head, entitled *Wilhelms Treasures* (2010), a reference to Germany's last emperor William II and the country's colonial history in Namibia; a bird-like creature with Angela Merkel's head sitting in a forest of mushrooms (*In den deutschen Wäldern*, In the German Woods, 2011–2014); or a bearded man with a bulldog's body puffing on a cigar (*Schimäre*, Chimera, 2009).

Another subgenre in Plavčák's oeuvre are her imaginary group portraits in the style of classic genre painting (portraits of guilds and corporations by Rembrandt or Franz Hals, royal portraits by Velázquez or Goya) but which also connect with its later pop cultural manifestation in works like Peter Blake's collage for the cover of the Beatles album *Sgt Pepper's* (1967), where the heads of an array of famous people seem slightly too large for the bodies on which they sit. In *Hunting Glory* (2010), a peculiar crew is gathered round a hippopotamus corpse on the deck of a sailing ship, at their head Marlon Brando with his sabre drawn as the ringleader of the *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962; dir. Lewis Milestone). While a spider monkey holds the hippo's bulbous snout, a tiny-footed Brando points his grossly outsized sword at the hippo's nose like a bragging big game hunter. The way the other mutineers are lined up like a display of trophies in a collaged gallery of distinctive heads amplifies the resulting impression of pathetic masculinity sliding into ridicule. At the same time, however, the painting radiates a lightness that signals sympathy, as if to say: Were some totally misplaced, surreal object (in this case a hippopotamus) to be placed right in front of you, your heightened sense of self would automatically be relativized. (The picture is based on a chapter from Alexandre Dumas' 1839 novel *Captain Pamphile*: the painters Marcus Weber and Gunter Reski had invited artists to each paint a picture based on a specific scene from this book for an exhibition at Deichtorhallen Hamburg / Sammlung Falckenberg in 2011.)

The *Mittwoch-Männer* (Wednesday Men, 2016) are another example of a group of men stripped of their historiographic heroism by outsize heads and, in this case, a stoical reduction to black-and-white. The men in question are members of Sigmund Freud's Wednesday Psychological Society, seen here in the historical waiting room of Freud's practice that can still be seen today at the Freud Museum in Vienna. At the beginning of the century, this society consisted only of men (Alfred Adler, Max Kahane, Rudolf Reitler, Wilhelm Stekel, later also Otto Ranke etc.), with the first woman, Sabina Spielrein, not joining until 1911. In Plavčák's picture, as in life, Freud is at the centre, with the usual big, intense eyes and the usual cigar. He is surrounded by the other participants, all looking out at the viewer except for one who sits with his back to us. On the wall there are no pictures, just white gaps. Beyond the window no view, just blackness. As if frozen in time, Plavčák shows a historically significant scene while highlighting its fundamental, all-contaminating flaw – the notorious exclusion of women. And this is no exaggeration on Plavčák's part. Even Spielrein, whose pioneering paper on *Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being* (1912) is thought to have inspired Freud's concept of the death drive, was quite literally

banished to a footnote.

It is only logical, then, that Plavčak finally progresses from such male circles to their counterparts – the female pioneers who have achieved great things in the domain of art. *Is She a Lady?* (2015), named after the 1955 book of the same title by the Welsh painter, sculptor and writer Nina Hamnett, chooses The Cock Tavern in London as the venue for a gathering of women painters from different periods – from Maria Lassnig to Sophie Täuber-Arp to Hamnett herself. Here too, however, Plavčak is not dealing in unquestioned or unquestionable heroicizing (although she does, of course, view these women as heroines) – her rendering is too close to pop cultural naivety for that, too clearly related to “fan art”.

Especially viewed within the entirety of her sprawling oeuvre, Plavčak’s pictures elude the recurring urge to identify them as a mere working through of motifs. Just when you thought she was interested in carefully completing and correcting historiography, another totally crazy motif will crop up, one that has taken leave of its surrealistic senses. It might be *Humpty Dumpty im Aida* (Humpty Dumpty at Aida, 2016), in which the egghead from the English nursery rhyme has wandered into a branch of the Austrian café and bakery chain Aida, identifiable by the pink and black tiles. Or *Er nahm das Kopftuch* (He Took the Headscarf, 2016): like Martin Kippenberger in his 1988 Kreuzberg self-portrait as a woman with a headscarf and skirt posing beside a vase of flowers, a moustachioed character with a protruding left eye has donned a pink headscarf; in the background two other men with the same odd headgear, and beards, have a smoke. With this humoristic treatment, the heated topic of “headscarves and Islam”, so often harnessed to right-wing outrage and calculating realpolitik, is removed from the rabble-rousing zone. For all the fearless diversity of Plavčak’s imagination-based practice, however, this strategy reflects a decisive quality running through all of her work: just as she doesn’t use the sewing machine to sew (while making music), she doesn’t illustrate the present with her painting. Instead, she probes this reality for its optical-haptic sound, from in front and behind, above and below, inside and out, again and again, insistently – like a doctor who won’t be deterred by the chatter and explanations of her patients when listening to the rattling and gurgling of their organs.