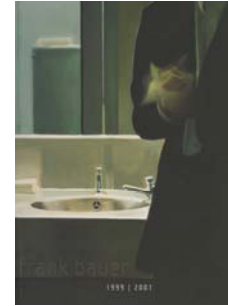


Frank Bauer 1999-2001

GENERATION 89+

About Frank Bauer's paintings



Frank Bauer's pictures are snapshots of situations which normally would not leave a lasting impression on you, in most cases several people meet in a social context'. He captures an instant in which the persons he depicts relate to one another and interact, they communicate verbally, through mimicry or gestures, above all through their posture, or rather their gestures. These are people in their late twenties to middle thirties who might best be described by the wonderful term 'generation 89'. Niels Ballhausen describes them as follows: "In the European context, the term 'generation 89' (unlike Douglas Coupland's term generation X) seems to be a more appropriate term, since this generation, by consciously and directly experiencing the political changes of 1989, has lost its faith in the durability of social coordinates.... It is only these children of 1989 who can claim for themselves a generational label as much to the point as the label coined for the former anti-aircraft gun assistants who are now in government and the generation of 1968 which is now calling the tune. Generation 89 will provide the first leading figures of the Berlin Republic - or else will fall into oblivion as a mere generational episode."²

Frank Bauer portrays representatives of this generation, and, in them, he stylizes this generation and records it for future generations. If we are to take Ballhausen's words seriously, it is this generation, of which he is a part and in which he lives, which determines his sujet or rather his genre. As a painter, Bauer becomes a contemporary witness. His pictures are painted and not shot; even if they focus on naturalistic, even photorealistic depictions, despite this endeavour, they are abstractions of the real, since they reduce perceptions to what is Visible. *

*Dear Mr Thiel!

...The first thing which struck me on page 1, line 10 were the words 'Despite this endeavour' which is to say that these paintings are aiming at something which they are unable to achieve, and this is, of course, not true. Of course, they arouse a

certain expectation or curiosity in the spectator which cannot be met, but which is really NOT INTENDED to be met. The charm of these pictures, and of all pictures in general, is in the secret which they conceal more or less, the story which they only tell in part and the resulting freedom for the spectator to form himself an opinion of the painting. All pictures are abstract in the theoretical sense of the word, and the discussion which has taken place over the last 100 years has only shown of how little use terms like 'realistic' or 'abstract' are, since they generate more misunderstandings than they clarify the issue. I do depict photos, but in the last analysis, this does not make my paintings neither more realistic nor more abstract than a painting by Pollock, I actually see parallels in the way we are using accidental constellations and in the intuitive selection of pictures (rather than composing them). Just like music, painting also has a number of elements that defy verbalisation, since they can only be perceived and understood unconsciously. In music, there is something like textures, surfaces of sounds, the sound of a violin, a piano, an orchestra, which goes beyond the notes of the tune, and in painting the way in which colours are applied (or in literature, you have a certain style) can be perceived, independent of the depicted sujet, but cannot really be apprehended consciously, Richter once called it the "glow", and although I know what he means I am unable to explain it properly; it is something which all paintings have, be it realistic or abstract paintings, like an undercurrent, which contributes towards understanding them, a language in it's own right. Tizian as well as Picasso and Pollock are using this language, although they express different things with it. Thus, the differences between the pictures cannot be put into words, just like I am against the (typically German) difference which is made between serious music and entertainment music, since it generates categories which do not exist in reality. I'm looking forward to your answer.

Yours sincerely, Frank Bauer

They neither depict tones nor sounds, neither conversations nor movements, they are only able to visually capture an ephemeral instant which normally vanishes right away. Frank Bauer is a disk jockey; this is probably the reason why so many of the scenes which the artist portrays are pictures that depict night life³. DJs make a living by not only selecting sound carriers to which people can dance but by also using technical means to change the music material at their disposal according to their own sound aestheticism. So they quite deliberately change existing materials, sounds, sound patterns or noises. This is where the first differences between Bauer, the painter, and Bauer, the DJ, show up; the painter captures and depicts things according to nature, the DJ changes and adapts things. While the DJs claim to

artistic fame is his modification or combination of different sources, which does not put him in a situation where he competes with the authors of these sources, Bauer's painting style is not a deliberate combination or modification of things, he rather sticks as closely as possible to the photo and the original situation and depicts it in a very terse and detailed way. He rejects authorship, at least to a large extent. The supervisor who watches over the party's ambience and style turns into a silent observer and precise, terse spectator who replaces the fast, loud and aggressive beat by a quiet, yet very exciting and highly fascinating genre picture. In general, a DJ entertains and manipulates larger crowds, he directs and stimulates. He is involved in staging productions of sound, light, movements, and ambience, in clubs and for clubs. In his glossary of club culture, Ballhausen mentions the term 'bricolage' which he borrowed from Claude Levi Strauss. "It is above all the seemingly senseless use of technological means and aids 'contrary' to instructions" which is so important for musical bricolage".⁴

So we are talking about productions that live on and are determined by the idea of bricolage. Generic notions and genres are important reference points. Most probably, hip-hoppers would never set foot in a techno club and vice versa, although both types of clubs appeal to younger audiences. While the beat vanishes fast and with a lot of noise, the picture takes shape in a quiet, lengthy and accurate process. But both as a DJ and as a painter, Bauer is interested in human beings, mostly people who are close to him, whom he observes while they interact, talk to each other, or dance. In both professions, the audience is similar, they are his actors. His friends constitute his audience, he dedicates his paintings to them. He pits his pictures against the speed and superficial character of these moments in social life; he himself is not in the picture. "It seems that right in the middle of pop culture's flood of pictures, DJ culture has imposed a ban on pictures on itself."⁴ His paintings are a tribute to joy, it is a gesture. The intricate capturing of a moment in which friends interact and relate to each other. A picture always captures visible things, gestures and postures in particular. But pictures also capture moods and sentiments which are expressed through gestures. Unlike conversations and movements, we can follow these gestures in Bauer's pictures. These gestures tell us the story of a moment, because the author is only a witness, he is only an author in that he has chosen this very moment and not any other one; this also applies when he changes the composition, because he makes these changes for pictorial and technical reasons and not because he wants to change the contents. He visualizes a cursory, ephemeral moment and a situation which seems of peripheral importance to the spectator.

Dear Frank Bauer,

You tell us the names of the persons whom you have depicted, but I do not know anything about their biographies. You depict them and tell us about them by portraying them very carefully and according to nature? The person is captured in what is usually a very ephemeral moment? It is the moment which counts and which tells me everything I can and should know as a spectator? Would like to know this, because normally I always try to analyse paintings immanently. Would you please either contradict or confirm my impression. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely, Wolf Guenter Thiel

Dear Mr. Thiel,

Thank you for asking me and I will think about a more detailed answer later. Here is my first reaction to your first question: We do not know the Man with the Golden Helmet, nor do we know Goya's 'Majo' or all those friends which are depicted in the impressionists' paintings, or to give you a contemporary example, the persons depicted by Larry Clark or Nan Goldin (who both had a great influence on me, by the way). In Nan Goldin's photos you can only tell who the person is, if you look at a whole cycle of pictures, e.g. her friend Cookie to whom she has dedicated a post mortem exhibition. Of course, this is something I cannot do, and so what matters for me is rather the interaction between disclosing something and hiding something at the same time, exposing persons while giving them a touch of inaccessibility. I will have to think a bit more about the other questions. You will hear from me.

Yours sincerely, Frank Bauer.

Dear Mr. Thiel,

In the meantime I am fit again and now would like to comment on your questions in somewhat greater detail. Of course, the first reason for painting pictures of my friends is related to the fact that I have always taken the motifs of my paintings from my own personal environment, and so the portraits are a logical continuation of my still lifes. Since they cannot afford these pictures, I wanted to let my friends at least participate in my work in this way (most of them are delighted that I

painted them). Hence my motivation is first and foremost a personal one, I always decide on my motifs by intuition. Of course, I tell something about the persons I depict, but the narrative aspect is rather of secondary importance, since the moments I depicted are, as you said, very ephemeral. I always try to find a synthesis between the depiction of a person and the composition of the picture, and so sometimes, the persons become accessories to the composition of the picture and are on an equal footing with the plates and cups in the still lifes. Then, it is rather a question of depicting the atmosphere rather than a single person. Of course, this varies from one picture to the other, and of course in the individual portraits, the person they depict is always the most important thing. I always find it very exciting to disclose something about a person, but at the same time also to hide something about a person, an effect which works best in Mona Lisa who is so fascinating, by the way, because no one knows exactly who she is. The same goes for Manet's 'Bar in the Folies Bergeres' (which was a direct source of inspiration for 'Dietmar, Sophie, and Celine'). I hope that the paintings are general enough so that they contain a story for each and every spectator; it does not matter that they all might see very different things, provided this does not give rise to gross misunderstandings. (The worst thing for me is if someone only sees the 'fun aspect' of the paintings and believes that I only depict exuberance and joyfulness). I hope I was able to answer your questions. It is always difficult for me to talk about my paintings, but if there are other things which you would like to know, do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely, Frank Bauer

Vilém Flusser has taken a very close look at the phenomenology of gestures⁴: "Gestures are a movement of the body or a tool attached to it for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation". Of course, causal explanations are indispensable for understanding gestures; but they are not sufficient in order to understand these specific movements of the body which we make and which we observe all around us, you have to know their 'meaning'. But in everyday life, because of the speed of the gesture sequences, our fellow-beings are in most cases unable to interpret them, let alone put them in words. That is why in such cases we often revert to automatic behavioural patterns which we know from heuristics, ie. the research into consequences and patterns of decision-making. For most of the time, our behaviour is controlled by the unconscious and only in rare cases by our consciousness. Bauer captures a moment in which people relate to each other and fixes their gestures. He thus facilitates an instantaneous understanding of behaviours.

According to Flusser, gestures are "sentiments" which, in turn, are symbolic representations of moods through gestures. This symbolic character of sentiments lends meaning to our (real or imaginary) moods. Sentiments "spiritualize moods by formalising them in symbolic gestures". Flusser talks of the symbolic character of gestures. A symbol is a sign or emblem which acts as a substitute for something we cannot perceive, i.e. in which the perceivable and the unperceivable meet. Things, actions, events, and hence also gestures can be symbols. Bauer uses photographs as a basis for his paintings. Thus, the painting becomes a reproduction of a photography, and the photography becomes a reproduction of the gestures of the people depicted in the painting, and his paintings themselves become artistic gestures. A gesture towards his friends, without pathos, since these situations, after all, are just too unspectacular and not staged. He takes pictures of these moments, i.e. he uses a contemporary method of storing images, but he knows that the individual picture is lost in the whole flood of snapshots and the photo is only of interest the very moment you press the button, because by pressing the button that moment is enabled and becomes a remarkable moment worth remembering and this is also suggested to the persons depicted in the photo in a striking way.

A single instant becomes a moment of a person's history and the people in the picture become our companions. By copying these photos in his paintings, Bauer lends them importance for a long period of time, because even if we, unlike the author, do not know the history of the picture and the persons in it, it nevertheless is an impressive documentation of a moment and a generation in its time, if we want to take the term 'generation 89' seriously. "That is how it was" one might say. Bauer construes something important by capturing a seemingly unimportant moment. Thus, the moment becomes the *pars pro toto* for what happened in that society. This type of representation bears a lot of resemblance to photorealism which was very common in the 1960's and 1970's. In 1979, in his introduction to the classical work on American photorealism by Louis K. Maisel⁵, Gregory Battcock wrote: "This style, which was first considered to be anti-intellectual and just a show, actually was the logical and necessary extension of aesthetic principles which had developed over half a century of abstract art and nonobjectivism"⁶.

Battcock rightly points to the middle of the 19th century and the rise of the school of Barbizon with Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot or Gustav Courbet as their protagonists. Their paintings were considered to be "extremely realistic". Extremely realistic not only because they tried to copy their subjects in a naturalistic fashion but also because they depicted those facets of life which were

not part of the representative glamour of a bourgeois society or of Bohemianism. They were an answer to the rise of photography, which, due to the quality of its medium, offered a particularly credible type of naturalism, even though only in black and white or in shades of grey, and began to take over the traditional realm of the portrait and genre painters. Jean Beaudrillard says that "imitating the universe" has been the leitmotif of art history and calls it "duplication". This leitmotif of art history only changed with the invention and introduction of photography. Black-and-white photography was regarded as the contemporary medium with the strongest stimulating effect. The motivation for abstraction in some of the impressionists was triggered by photography.

They missed the colours, and they noted that the depiction of light and hence of sentiments and moods was missing in the photographs of their contemporaries. They had a more holistic view and were against the curtailments and the lack of naturalness inherent in this new technology. Other painters, like Edgar Degas or August Renoir, used photography as a basis for their paintings. In these cases, they no longer copied nature, which was typical of impressionism, but nature was replaced by photos which they copied. The process of abstraction began on the basis of a photography, it began on the basis of an abstract representation of nature.

We can see two different currents in dealing with photography: one current accepts photography as a means, the other one rejects it. Keeping one's distance to photography, through abstraction, became one of the leitmotifs of the different currents in modern art.

Using Meisel as an example, Battcock makes an interesting observation in connection with the rise of photorealism in the 1960's and 1970's. He wrote about Meisel's motivation to advocate the rising new style: In this sense, their works, whether abstract, conceptual, or non-objective, were pictures nevertheless. They were a reproduction of reality, even if reality was non-objective. And so Meisel was able to recognize that so-called "realistic" works were neither more nor less "realistic" than most other abstract works. He knew already very early that all works had realistic qualities as opposed to illusionist characteristics. After that, it was but a step from non-objective to realistic. In a reproduction, in Meisel's understanding, a work becomes all the more abstract, the "more realistic" it is, since in a reproduction, even the most realistic work becomes an abstraction."⁶

There is one recurrent observation about photorealist paintings which holds true for all the different genres: Richard Estes again and again depicts facades of restaurants or shops with reflecting shop windows in New York City in the 1960's and 1970's, we see John Salt's breathtaking car wrecks, or Robert Bechtle's pictures of people in their cars in American suburbs. What unites all three is their interest in seemingly unspectacular things. These are pictures of everyday life which we tend to delete from our memories: We see two palm trees and three cars in front of a two-storey commercial building in Date Palm, a 1971 painting by Bechtle, corroding car wrecks by John Salt, and a completely interchangeable diner somewhere in New York City in 1970 by Nedick. Yet, they are of interest to people who look at them today because they preserve examples of contemporary history. The ultramodern car of the past becomes an oldtimer, Times Square in 1974 becomes a reminiscence.

What is interesting is the complete lack of authorship, which only consists in the choice of the sujet of the picture, like with Bauer, and the lack of any personal touch. All these pictures do not tell us a story, they do not have literary contents, at least none to which we can relate; they show us a genre of the 1960's and 1970's. Frank Bauer shows us scenes from one period of life, of his life, friends and acquaintances in places where they meet, where they spend a certain period of their life together. He shows us people in clothings they wear in public, an attire that fits the occasion. In most cases, these are modern outfits that are usually worn in clubs or at parties.

The clothing becomes an attribute, a key to understanding, an expression of a person's internal feelings and sentiments and the ones which he shows to the outside world. In the light of the experience gained with looking at the photorealists of the 1960's and 1970's we can say that with hindsight attributes change, both in terms of their meaning and ease of understanding. Robert Bechtle's big road cruiser, the 1967 Lincoln, becomes a metaphor for the period prior to the first oil crisis in 1973, a period prior to the environmentalist movement, a status symbol which has lost all its meaning in today's world. It becomes an interesting oldtimer. It is a different story with John Baeder's Empire Diner of 1976 which has hardly changed its outward appearance although Chelsea has changed a lot since 1976.

How will spectators like us, who were children during the 1970's, but unable to experience those paintings at the time when they were made, look at Frank Bauer's pictures in future? Will we know about the fashionable attributes of those

days, will we know about technoculture and clubs, or will spectators ask, like we do nowadays in front of Manet's paintings, who is the lady behind the counter and why did Manet paint her? Will it be of direct interest in the future whether we know that Frank Bauer was a DJ and that he painted his friends?

It will be very interesting and fascinating to see those pictures because their brilliancy is just fascinating. Just like today with Richard Estes' paintings, we will be amazed at how sharply defined they are, because our images of the past will be mostly blurred and vague, and most of the photos in our albums will be ill-focused and will be our own personal memorabilia. They mean something to us, but to no one else, unless he is interested in cultural history or our biography. In no case will they have the topical brilliancy of Bauer's pictures. But will spectators understand the genre or will we look at them from a phenomenology perspective?

Will we be able to decode Beat Streuli's, Wolfgang Tillmanns', Larry Clark's or Nan Goldin's genre pictures and the social and societal socialisation phenomena which they depict, or will we indulge in iconographic and iconological considerations regarding their art history precursors or their social and sociocultural background, just as we do nowadays with Renaissance paintings? So will we have to leave this to the experts or is there another key to facilitate our understanding of these pictures?

We already said that Bauer mainly depicts human beings. Human beings who communicate with each other through and by gestures, as we saw. We further noted that most gestures have a symbolic importance. The gestures of an individual person mean something but, and this is where we begin to speculate, what about the sum total of these gestures and the genre within which these gestures are common? A rhetorical figure which comes very close to symbols are allegories. The difference between an allegory and a symbol is that the former does not constitute a clear-cut statement, but is considered to be the pictorial representation of an abstract thought. It constitutes a metaphorisation of facts through one and the same pictorial sphere, e.g. representation of a genre like the club culture.

Unlike symbols, allegories preserve a substantive-linguistic, or at least a connotative connection between the primary and the figurative sensorial level. In other words, the club culture genre, or more precisely, the pictures in which Bauer depicts human beings in clubs or other circumstances, is an allegory for this kind of life, this lifestyle and feeling which they express by gestures and attributes, and which Frank Bauer captures in his paintings. An interpretation of this allegory and

of the importance which this lifestyle has for art and art history will be up to future spectators. But the depicted persons at least can claim that they were part of it and thus become directly involved in Frank Bauer's art. For them, it is a history in which they participate or appear. Even when there is nothing left which we know of them or about them, they will still be representatives of a period, a lifestyle, and will be able to provide important information about our times to future spectators.

¹ Ranging from intimate to private, semi-public and public scenes

² Nils Ballhausen: Intro, in Bauwelt 28, Berlin, July 23, 1999, p.1549

³ See "Night life" Catalogue

⁴ See Nils Ballhausen: intro, in Bauwelt 28, Berlin, July 23, 1999, p.1547

⁵ Louis K. Maisel: "Photorealism", 1980, New York

⁶ Gregory Battock: Introduction to Louis K. Maisel: Fotorealismus - Die Malerei des Augenblicks, German translation, 1989, Luzern, page 8

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