

## Protest PK

about the artist Peter Kapeller

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Robber barons and Nazi henchmen, Jesus on the cross, psychiatrists, sex- and execution scenes, historic figures and anonymous, mask-like faces. Interspersed isolated snippets of architecture or whole cityscapes, technically detailed reproductions of machines, roughly contoured shreds of words, subtle inscriptions and whole bodies of text – held together in a mesh of minuscule particles, hooks, worms and everyday objects in micro-biotic density and diffusion.

Peter Kapeller's pictures take time – to compose as well as to view. Yet in order to approach his work properly the artist demands that the inclined onlooker disregard its pure opulence and the technical complexity as such. Indeed Kapeller's Indian ink drawings convey differentiated artistic qualities beyond mechanical skill, perseverance and a Horror Vacui.

He stages scenes. Kapeller says that while he draws he indulges in the illusion of having an audience. Thus his depictions are ruthless acts of navel-gazing, magnified in a refractory social universe and arranged for that audience he wants to stupefy. What moves him is the inadequacy of human nature, the depravity and bleakness of social systems. He defines his own "fucked-up life" as a minefield, embedded in global settings of social ignorance and blunders. When Kapeller draws, he configures everything he despises and everything that scares him beyond measure. He stages it graphically, never striving to be moderate or friendly, likable or even opportunistic. Kapeller creates an arena for his grievances. He is not afraid to record his outrage on paper with the epic force of a wailing chorus.

In view of this intensity, it is impressive to discover numerous nuances, very subtle at times, within his picture language. Kapeller consolidates and fragments his themes on different levels of representation. He creates contrasting plots and time zones, he sections his drawings into scenic events of varying proportions, distinguishing them sharply or letting them flow into one another. He accentuates some of his figures in a close-up, while others fade away into the picture's general viscid white noise. He varies the perspective and the spatiality of his illustration from one phase to the next; he likes to insinuate Gothic structures akin to stage designs and inserts text lines like billboards or comments from offstage.

Kapeller says he feels like he is directing when he structures his pictures; as if he were staging a world theatre that seeks to catenate itself further and further, solemn and real. And just like in his drawings, Kapeller imagines his perfect theatre implemented by real actors. In his imagination, the audience must be able to enter the theatre at any given time and immediately find themselves surrounded by a holistic dramatic event. Everything is to be theatre immediately and ubiquitously, "just like reality dictates it, without any introduction or conclusion".

But also without any claim to morality or catharsis. Kapeller does not express the intention to convey messages in order to bring about change. Despite his depictions of pain, depth and disaster Kapeller repudiates any suspicion that he might be an idealist or an artist-of-dismay. That would seem hypocritical to him and just as directive as the essence of the authorities he despises. He prefers to see himself as a fatalistic chronicler

of misguided human systems, always living on the edge. Indeed, his moral dissociation prevents his work from becoming overloaded with socio-romantic relays or narrative objectivity, favouring a poetic radical instead.

In his work Kapeller sees numerous cultural points of connection he can emotionally relate to. He sees correlations with the eerily-beautiful appearance of works by Alfred Kubin and James Ensor. Similarities with the abyssal texts of Thomas Bernhard and William S. Burroughs, the music of Pink Floyd as well as the tumultuous realities produced by David Lynch and the stark aesthetic contrasts created by Peter Greenaway. He also appreciates Da Vinci's graphical skills and Duchamp's bold ideas. Kapeller does not analyse, much less copy them; he makes use of their clarity on a step-by-step endeavour to gain self-confirmation - something society, in his eyes, has bilked him of completely.

Peter Kapeller's works result from an arduous auto-didactic process. All qualitative attributes and the many diverse artistic materials derive from his own effort and have been acquired without any academic or cooperative instruction. Kapeller experiments a lot, "abuses the material" as he puts it and adapts it to his needs. His preferred tools are an Indian-Ink-Pen and small objects converted into stamps. He uses them to create his subtle motifs and dense organic or repetitive textures. Unfilled areas are scarce.

He pointedly illustrates most of his works with pigmented speckles applied scarcely in the shape of transparent colourful clouds or by pasting white tempera and bulging layers of transparent varnish onto some areas. These days, he uses exclusively toned ink for tinting and shading in both techniques. Some of Kapeller's works are enhanced with cuts of typewritten texts or smallish drawings. The occasionally abrupt interplay of his reproduction techniques further sustains the impression that his pictures are divided into acts or plots.

His mixing techniques and formal capers do not just stand for themselves. Kapeller creates a rough thicket full of contradictions. Before the numerous contrasts even become perceptible in their entire range and their whole variability, they set the picture in motion. Kapeller creates turbulences. Kapeller says his pictures are meant to emotionalise, to simply show things as they are. That in itself is hard enough.

Kapeller was born in Vienna on November 29 1969. According to him, the circumstances he grew up in were extremely unloving and affected by a constant feeling of neglect. He spent a lot of time in the street.

At the age of twelve Kapeller ran away from a conflict with other youngsters and ended up in a cinema. He wanted to hide and stumbled into a screening of the film 'Xanadu'. The film tells the story of a modestly successful commission artist who strives for artistic self-realisation and – in a fateful round dance - finds his muse personified. Kapeller was deeply moved by the story and began to comb through art books in libraries. But only at the age of 16 could he afford studying artistic material in specialised trade and thus acquire techniques for himself. Having completed his compulsory education, he began training as a sanitary engineer. However, Kapeller fell seriously ill, and his first stay at a psychiatric clinic forced him to discontinue his training. A return to his abhorred childhood home was out of the question. He preferred asylums for homeless people and, due to his illness, also reverted to psychiatric institutions. But he continued to paint and draw during that period of his life, be it on his own or in therapy groups.

In 1995 Kapeller was assigned his own little flat in a Viennese council estate. Now he could use his living space as a studio as well. He could buy materials, thoroughly

experiment with techniques and also work on large formatted drawings over an extended period of time. Since Kapeller preferred to work at night, he now had the opportunity to move away from the diurnal rhythm followed by most people. Although he could never accept the scruffiness and the mistrustful environment of the council estate building, he persistently stayed true to his goal: to expand his artistic competence, to be acknowledged as an artist and to succeed.

Already during his apprenticeship Kapeller began to exhibit at the youth centre or the training school. But only in the course of his illness a doctor started to take an interest in his drawings and collected his works together with those by other patients to present them in various exhibitions from the mid 90s. Further presentations followed, often in a psychiatric context. He sold some of his works and got mentioned in the local press as a “condition-related” artist. But Kapeller pushed for a more differentiated appraisal of his artworks, a categorisation from an artistic perspective, but also a dissociation of his art from other artworks that, in his view, are less demanding. Kapeller also made an effort to achieve presentations and create contacts on his own. He produced prints, became a member of an artists’ association and drew the attention of collectors. A temporary highlight for him was to win an arts prize in 2010 involving a collaboration with a renowned gallery in Paris.

Peter Kapeller’s artistic development is certainly unusual. His biography contains very few happy moments, and his stays in psychiatric institutions define him as – carefully phrased – a rather unorthodox personality in a bourgeois Viennese environment, at the very least.

He is an eccentric insofar as he is sceptical and unruly. He doesn’t mind being perceived as a foreign body in the context of social peer pressure. He would rather withdraw than risk submitting to eloquent hypocrisy. Kapeller’s art reflects his being. His works doubtlessly stand out due to their impressive solitary character, the authenticity of their subject matters and their aesthetic dissonances. Furthermore his skills have developed far from any noteworthy exchange with other visual artists or schools.

And yet one should refrain from trying to typify his art as Outsider Art or Self Taught Art. In order to avoid the fuzzy nimbus of a Para-Art, characteristics such as hermetics and authenticity should not be regarded as decisive yardsticks, but as purely descriptive technical elements in the broadest sense. Thus it should be sufficient to let Kapeller’s art stand for itself – just like any other contemporary solitary art manages to exist extensively free from trends and academic prescriptions.