

Reconstructing Deconstruction

Five Artists and their Analysis of the Relations Between Reality and Myth at Caprice Horn Gallery in Berlin, Germany

By *Gerhard Charles Rump*

Gallery exhibitions form part of the indispensable aesthetic discourse – no discourse, no art. Art galleries, therefore, contribute greatly to the cultural life of society. Nowadays this discourse has acquired global aspects. Art galleries, by way of their exhibition programmes and their placing their artists on the market, feed this discourse with new propositions. The world-wide credit crunch and financial crisis which has left most countries with shrinking economies (for instance Germany with 3.8 per cent, Hong Kong with 7.8 per cent) has had some impact on the international art market, too, although this market hasn't been hit as badly as initially feared. The economic crisis is definitively not a crisis of art as such, but art is, for propagation ad, as it were, for production, dependent on a functioning art market. It has been that way in the past and it always will be, whichever forms of organisation the market will show at any place any given time. If gallery exhibitions take place in an art metropolis like Berlin (with some 450 galleries and their artists, all trying to survive in the market), they constitute a globo-metropolitan statement, an important, a vital contribution to the ongoing aesthetic discourse. Art, in fact, "is great in proportion as it is universal"¹, and now more than ever in a globalized world.

Artists will always, some way or other, enter a dialogue with the social, political, aesthetic and human reality of their times. So when Caprice Horn Gallery in Berlin stages an exhibition like "Deconstructing Myths and Realities" involving five artists with relations to the Near and Middle East, the universality of art as a concept and the contemporary makeup of societies come under special scrutiny, through the works of the artist, through the perception of the viewer, through the feeding of the ideas into the current discourse. Especially the preoccupation with reality and its counterpart – or one of the counterparts – , myth, makes a show like that noteworthy on a global scale. One may, however, think that the counter-action between realities and myths is a mutual re-interpretation and the workings of myths constitute social and aesthetic, even political, realities, too.² Yet the truth will have to come out through examination of the artists' works, as it is they who interpret, design, make the statements. Being influenced by realities (or myths) is one thing, to make art is another, strictly to be differentiated. There isn't any thaumaturgical zeitgeist rampant in the galleries – the artists and their work is what has to be observed, analyzed and understood, accepted or rejected.

¹ John Dewey: Experience, Nature and Art, in: John Dewey et alii, Art and Education, Merion (Pa.), Barnes Foundation Press, 2nd ed. 1947, pp.2231-, here p. 31

² See: Realitätskonstruktionen in der zeitgenössischen Kultur. Beiträge zu Literatur, Kunst, Fotografie, Film und zum Alltagsleben, ed. by Susanne Knaller, Vienna, Böhlau 2008



Amal Kenawy, *You Will Be Killed*, 2006 (video installation), painting detail
Images courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Caprice Horn

The relation between myth and reality (in the singular or the plural) heavily influence our lives. This is reflected in aspects of postmodernism, the deconstruction of norms, moral, social, political, ideological, and aesthetic, in looking at the role of children, of women in society, the changes in corporate culture and so forth.

Not only that art is, for many, an ersatz religion, a not to be missed source of spirituality leading to some kind of mythical thinking, a mythical image of the world, we also live in a mesh of political myths, too. Artists may now go and “deconstruct” such concepts, and in doing so they will have to reconstruct complex arrays of thought. The path can be trod two ways, of course: An artist can, naturally, also deconstruct reality in order to achieve a more mytho-emotional, less banal attitude towards life in general. This is a public act, too, and also specifically aimed at a public. Whether it serves a purpose or is prone to “disinterested awareness”³ will have to be decided individually in each case.

Amal Kenawy is a female artist who masters a wide variety of artistic media. She was born in Cairo in 1974 and has participated in a number of biennials, among others, a show at the Zenobio Institute as part of the 52nd Venice Biennial, the 8th Sharjah Biennial, and the 1st Singapore Biennial. She has been featured at the Art Museum in Antwerp (Belgium) and the Vienna Kunsthall (Austria).

She is concerned with the creation of spaces in

which she can analyze her identity and its relations with others. The spaces, in the sense of pictorial spaces, are filled with large imagery, often designed in a deliberately undecided crossover between painting and drawing. There aren't any attempts at eye-deceiving illusions, rather a permeable, transparent system of semiotic elements, instances of pictorial language, which intertwine to form a dream-like, imaginary situation. Different semiotic types, images, indexes and downright symbols, both new and traditional, give a virtuoso concerto for the eyes and the mind.

When, for instance, a horizontally rendered female head, mouth half open, eyes half shut (“You will be killed”, 2006) is mixed together with a winged fairy the size of the woman's forehead, with a trumpet-like proboscis (trunk), sporting an eye at the tip, we relate to a depicted person, to a part of that persons “myth”, and to the “eye of God”-Symbol, which is placed almost in the middle of the woman's forehead, indicating the position of the both mythical and histologically real “third eye”.⁴

The imagery has invocative and associative powers, and it also relates to modern iconography in general. So the horizontal position of the woman's head echoes Brancusi's 1910 “Sleeping Muse” in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, D.C.) and Man Ray's photo “Noire et Blanche

³ See George Dickie: *Art and the Aesthetic, An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press 1974, p.113134-

⁴ The pineal gland; actually, the form of the trunk echoes that of the Spiraling Wheels or Cones of Energy in illustrations to the Sixth Chakra (see Keith (Alexander) Sherwood: *The Art of Spiritual Healing: Chakra & Energy Bodywork*, Woodbury (Mn) 2002; like shown in <http://www.crystalinks.com/thirdyepineal.html>



Mitra Tabrizian, *Untitled (Twins)*, from the series *Beyond the limits*, 2000-01, Kodak c-print, ed. of 5, 122 x 152 cm, copyright Mitra Tabrizian and Galerie Caprice Horn

(Kiki)" of 1926. So there are semantic pathways leading to the complex conceptions of the woman as the muse and the woman as the source of the power of life, associating the two in an interpretation of the structural similarities between natural and artistic creation.

But, as the title shows, there is also a sense of endangerment. Which is a bitter truth given the current situation in countries like Afghanistan or in many other places, also in the Western World, where, despite legal equality, women still are often made victims of violence, rape and suppression. What

⁵ Some artists choose their titles with care. The most famous example may be Paul Klee. In Klee's oeuvre the titles are, more often than not, integral part of the works

Kenawy deconstructs is a social reality, and in doing so she also reconstructs the relevant complex of conceptions. But the deconstruction leads to a new architecture of knowledge and insight.

Inci Eviner, born in Turkey in 1954, has exhibited internationally. Her work has been shown in exhibitions of the Deutsche Bank Collection (Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin), ISCP New York, and the Venice and Shanghai Biennials. She has developed a very unique pictorial language, in interaction with her techniques. Often she makes drawings in pen and ink on canvas. It has been said that she combines the visual heritage of Turkey with references to giants of Western art such as Sigmar Polke or Louise Bourgeois.

What's especially intriguing is her mixing of media and the concepts associated with them. So the canvas – and her canvases can be rather large – is, as a medium, connected with the “official”, representative work. It took a long time until an oil-sketch was regarded a “real”, fully-fledged work of art.⁶ The drawing, contrariwise, has always been – and is still now – regarded as a quiet, preparatory, direct and intimate medium.⁷

Eviner likes to juxtapose large structures and arrangements of small things. The small objects often contrast different drawing modes and quote surrealist forms and pictorial objects, sometimes reminiscent of both Dalí and Yves Tanguy. She deconstructs architecture, for instance, by letting large buildings, in two-some hover up in the air. An earthbound house is being re-interpreted as a castle in the sky. This may have, willingly or unwillingly, a connection to the work of Corrado Bonomi. His castles in the sky were flimsy constructions of paper. So the method of deconstructing is different, the result very similar.⁸ In other works (like “Circle I”), she alludes to the oriental tradition of ornament, which she deconstructs by fragmenting it. The fragment is a semiotic index pointing to the whole, but in the actual image it is an isolated element, holding its own against the other parts of the picture. The role of ornament is reversed and we learn what it was like, and what it is not any more.

There is a certain lightness about her work and an instance of playfulness, but her images are, after all, existentially melancholic. Where is safety and security, when your house is floating? The house can serve as a symbol for the head and its contents⁹, and if your mind flies, it might also fly by.¹⁰ A deconstruction of the mind? At least a new interpretation of how we see things beyond the workings of perception.

Mitra Tabrizian is an internationally acclaimed artist. Born



Inci Eviner, *The libido of Military School*, 2007
Acrylic on canvas/silk-screen, 220 x 230 cm
Copyright Inci Eviner and Galerie Caprice Horn

in Iran, she looks back on a very long list of exhibitions. She has shown her work in the Tate Britain, at the Folkwang Museum in Essen (Germany) and the Andy Warhol Museum (Pittsburgh, Pa.). She is deeply sceptical as to our development constituting progress. Rather she finds herself surrounded by a postmodernist society in which people are isolated¹¹, a society characterised by moral decay and alarmingly rising tides of psychopathic tendencies, also in corporate cultures and state organisations. She comments on coldness, especially the emotional variant. In one of her images from the “Beyond the limits”-series, twin children look on in cold-blooded indifference while their father is committing suicide.¹²

Mitra Tabrizian also uses acid irony. The title “White Nights” is loaded with romantic concepts. We think of St Petersburg (Russia), of feasting, eating, drinking and making merry. But what do we get from her? A young black man in the men’s

⁶ See: Werner Busch: *Das sentimentalische Bild. Die Krise der Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert und die Geburt der Moderne*, München 1993; Werner Busch: *Die notwendige Arabeske. Wirklichkeitsaneignung und Stilisierung in der deutschen Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1985; and especially the essay Werner Busch: *Die autonome Ölskizze in der Landschaftsmalerei. Der wahr- und für wahr genommene Ausschnitt aus Raum und Zeit*. In: *Pantheon* 41 (1983) 126133-

⁷ See Walter Koschatzky: *The Art of Drawing*, London, Academy Editions 1996; Bernard Chaet, *The Art of Drawing*. Andover, Thomson Learning, 1983

⁸ See Gerhard Charles Rump: *Wie bauen wir Wale oder Ameisen aus PET-Flaschen?*, in: *Die Welt*, 4.9.2004

⁹ In his work, „Harmlos“ (Harmless, 2004; Private Collection), Neo Rauch painted the figure of a man with a house as his head

¹⁰ *Rare Bird: As your mind flies by*, Rock album title and song title, Philips 1970

¹¹ This is a recurring subject in pop culture; an early highlight was “The Sound(s) of Silence” (album and song) by Simon & Garfunkel, Columbia Records, 1966

¹² The subject of indifference has shown a stronger presence since the art of the 1960’s. Indifference as a moral and aesthetic attitude is largely reflected in the oeuvre of Andy Warhol; see Leonhard Emmerling: *Indifference as a subversive strategy*, at: http://www.imageandtext.org.nz/leonhard_warhol_01.html



Khaled Hafez, *Temples of Gem*, 2008,
acrylic on canvas, 200 x 490 cm (diptych),
copyright Khaled Hafez and Galerie Caprice Horn

room, his white shirt partly hanging out of his trousers and finely matching the white porcelain of the sanitary ware. He is, “of course”, one is tempted to say, alone. But he seems to look at somebody coming in, maybe disturbing him in whatever he had been up to, maybe catching him red handed in whatever heinous act, although we don’t see which. We don’t know, and we are not allowed to. Even if we take on the part of the intruder. It’s the ironic, iconic lonely figure of the young man, in his somewhat lost in time situation, caught between the moon and New York City. In an instant of uncertainty and insecurity, made all the more impressive by a technically perfect and deliberately simple photographic rendering. The image seems to shout out loud, “This is the way it is!”

“Lost time” is the title of another series of works. In one of the photographs of the series an elderly man is lying on the naked floor, clad in a dark blue business suit. His repository is a thoroughly empty gazebo, darkly immersed in blue light. His face stands out in reddish incarnate, his mimic expressing

everything but happiness. This is a striking image of loneliness and social coldness, all the more so because the whole setting verges on the absurd. In some way the elderly man seems to commit a conscious bit of acting, of make believe, but then again no: He does not act, he is a symbol. An allegory. He is not a man, he is a sign in a pictorial context: situation and narrative deconstructed. Or: the conditions of situation and narrative reconstructed.

The image is slightly trashy. Trashy imagery gives the artist more freedom, much more than the classical, constrained categories of academically oriented art. The man is crouching, huddling up to himself, using his folded hands as a support for his head. There aren’t any pillows around. Not a soft bed, just the hard floor. He seems to be thrown back on to himself. This opens up a chasm, a great divide: The man is fully clothed, yet lies down to sleep. The man is a grown up man, but he cowers like a baby. The architectural space isolates him. No one there, the sounds of silence maybe. But he is not really a man, just a deconstructing symbol. Yet the photo-

graphic figurativeness furnishes an aspect of reality, a reality to be deconstructed immediately, like two elementary particles cancelling each other out. But elementary particles just spring into existence like that and disappear quickly. This image however stays, hovering in our mind like the image of the unlucky astronaut who has crossed the event horizon of a black hole.¹³

What time has been lost? Childhood? The time to care for the family so that, after all, he is alone? An archetypal situation of being left out in the cold and dark, as there isn't enough love to go 'round.¹⁴ At the same time it is a striking pictorial deconstruction of cocooning, of our wishes for and longing for security and comfort. Pursuit of happiness: This man pursued it but went the wrong way. A warning sign: It can happen to us.

Khaled Hafez was born in Cairo in 1963. He won the Dakar biennial, participated in those at Sharjah and Singapore, and he was a Fulbright Fellow at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in the United States. Having lived for many years both in France and the US, the latter, for him, is the epitome of a consumer society. Hafez paints and makes video art, always pursuing the constant reproduction of divergence within and between popular and high culture. In this he emphasizes his native Egypt, but also draws on sources from France and America. His preoccupation are contradictory, opposing pairs: East/West, sacred/profane, old/new, good/evil, male/female, and, as it were, myth/reality.

He probes into the dichotomies in order to find how they depend on the international system of commodities which create our ideas of cultural difference and similarity. Also the emotional attachment to history, identity and imagery (myth) is being questioned. In many of his works sometimes several figures of Anubis populate the picture. You recognize the jackal head, no need for the was-sceptre and the anch. Anubis, the ancient god of death rites, is the one who leads the souls into eternity. So when Anubis, onefold, twofold, manifold, appears in the paintings (or videos) of Hafez, we witness a current clash between reality and myth.

Hafez is not a follower of Old Master central perspective and homogeneous pictorial space¹⁵, rather his spaces are additive, each part reserving some kind of autonomy. They combine, separate and recombine to produce a multi-layered complex for viewing experience. What does it mean when Anubis walks the streets of Cairo, Paris, or New York City? First, the Anubis figures are more than twice the size of the human figures. Deities are larger than life. Sometimes the human figures blend with the abstracted city environment (which has autonomous painterly tendencies of its own), sometimes they separate from the rest of the image through an irregular, every once in a while more clear-cut, oblong, one-coloured background of their own, which, at the same time, acts as an independent pictorial element, a part of the narrative.

The narrative in Hafez's paintings is not linear, not chronological, just as his pictorial space is irregular. It also integrates quotes from Western art, from Michelangelo for instance, making his polyphonic narrative "world art". The multitude of elements not ordered by a supreme scheme like central perspective makes it necessary to deploy other means of creating pictorial order. One of these is, notably, recurrence.¹⁶ In "Temples of Gem", a rather large (200x490 cms) acrylic painting on canvas, there are several important recurrences, which we use to relate parts of the picture to others.

First, there are the recurrent figures of Anubis. Then we find the screen-like blue oblongs in the middle distance, above which (meaning: behind them) there are the other blue oblongs, this time with a row of reddish airplane windows. The figures of Anubis are bracing the pictorial content, the recurrent oblongs provide symmetry. It is, of course, not a "pure" symmetry, but a broken symmetry, which tends to be more dynamic.¹⁷ Thus we come, step by step, to an analysis of Hafez's pictorial strategies.

The message, though polyphonic, seems clear: Isolation in modern society leads to be led by Anubis to where he is wont to go. Luckily, we have art to appreciate all the way.

¹³ See, a. o., Dan Hooper: *Dark Cosmos. In Search of Our Universe's Missing Mass and Energy*. New York, Smithsonian/Harper Collins 2006, p. 31 f

¹⁴ From "Sympathy", a song by Rare Bird, album "Rare Bird", Philips 1969

¹⁵ See John White: *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*. London, Faber & Faber 1957

¹⁶ See Walter A. Koch: *Recurrence and a Three-modal Approach to Poetry*. The Hague, Mouton 1966

¹⁷ See Lisa Randall: *Warped Passages. Unravelling the Universe's Hidden Dimensions*. New York, London, Penguin Books 2006; p. 190 ff; Brian Greene: *The Fabric of the Cosmos. Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*. New York, Vintage books 2005; p. 219 ff; J. R. Leibovitz: *Hidden Harmony: The Connected Worlds of Physics and Art*. Baltimore (Md). Johns Hopkins University Press 2008

Steve Sabella, born in Jerusalem in 1975, is a Palestinian artist based in London. He is the holder of the Ellen Auerbach Award (2008) granted by the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts) in Berlin, shortlisted for the Terry O'Neil Award of Contemporary Photography in the UK (2008), and was a prize winner in the 2002 A.M. Qattan Foundation Young Artist Award in Palestine. His ongoing project *Jerusalem in Exile* explores the mental image Palestinians hold of Jerusalem and has gained international attention, leading to its production into a short documentary film. Currently, Sabella is giving a visual form through photomontage to the 'state of mind' of living in 'mental exile'. This new work, in exile, will be published by the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts) in Berlin as an art book in 2009.

Sabella serializes different single images to form a kind of overall structured image, a super-image. The function of the super-image is broader and bigger than that of the individual images it is composed of. His metaphor of the city (of Jerusalem) is that of windows or window-fronts or parts of house-facades. There is light coming from within, and the tilting and mirroring (in symmetries) adds dynamism to the super-image thus created. The characterisation of the lives of those in the houses are given indirectly by parts of architecture. The people stay out of the image. They may have it in their minds, they may love Jerusalem, but they don't show up. What kind of love is that? It verges on the myth. And Sabella has set out to deconstruct it. His imagery is serial and proliferates, but it is not redupzlicative. Dynamism is a driving force, transferable to socio-political change.

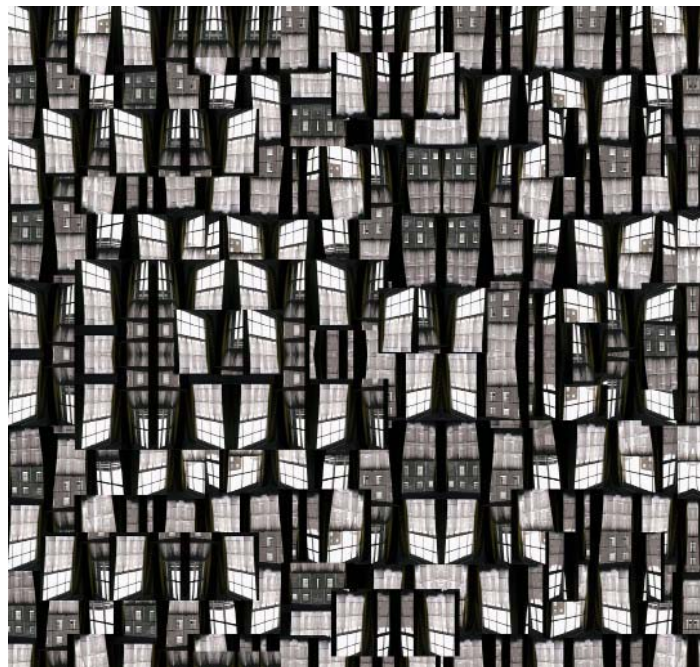
It seems noteworthy that this interpretation of Jerusalem has some similarity with traditions in the West. Western cathedrals are, indeed, symbols of the heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁸ So it seems a general structure to interpret a city, including the emotional side, its myth as well as its reality, by way of architecture. Because myth is largely a state of mind, not action. One's actions can be influenced by myths, but action reigns in the realm of reality.

Anything can be deconstructed. Deconstruction, however, is more than a method. Deconstruction is an attitude, a state of mind, a determination. Sometimes the deconstruction of an aesthetic complex results in a reconstruction of its original conditions: By learning how a certain state in society is by deconstructing it, we understand through a way of reconstruc-

tion how it came about in the first place. This show leads to deep insight into such complex conceptions. The show will end on July 3rd, 2009.

¹⁸ See Günter Bandmann: *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger*. Berlin, Gebr. Mann 1981.

Steve Sabella, *In Exile*, 2008
 36 / 125 (limited edition of 6)
 Lambda Print on Aluminum + 5 cm edge.
 copyright Steve Sabella and Galerie Caprice Horn



Gerhard Charles Rump, born 1947 in Bochum, Germany, graduated from Ruhr-University in Bochum (PhD) in 1972. Librarian, journalist, finance consultant, monument conservator at Wesel (Germany) and marketing director for then Mannesmann Tally computer printers, he is the current art market editor of the German nationwide daily quality newspaper DIE WELT in Berlin, teaches History of Art at the Technical University of Berlin (at professorial level), and a photo artist, represented by Samuelis Baumgarte Gallery in Bielefeld, Germany. His next show, "Fairy Trash" (together with Mandy Seifert) will be at Galerie Jens Hafenrichter in Nuremberg, Germany. The photographs deconstruct traditional fairy tales. Dr. Rump has published numerous books, among those a monograph on George Romney (1734-1802) and on George Stubbs and Sporting Art ("Pferde- und Jagdbilder in der Englischen Kunst"). His new book, "Rekonstruktionen" (Reconstructions) is due to appear later in 2009. HCP 54.