Prime Object and Replica – Exhibiting Niklaus Manuel Deutsch

Roman Kurzmeyer, 2022

A myth from Homer's *Iliad*, the Judgment of Paris has been selected as the subject of many a European painting ever since the Middle Ages. The story tells of three goddesses vying for the golden apple bearing the inscription "The Fairest." Zeus appoints the Trojan prince Paris to judge which of the three should be awarded the apple: Athena, Aphrodite or Hera. While Hera promises to make him ruler of the whole world, Athena offers him wisdom and Aphrodite, whom he will ultimately choose, the love of the world's most beautiful woman, Helen. Among the many works that Hubert Damisch discusses in his 1992 book on the motif itself and its history in European painting is the *Judgement of Paris* (ca. 1519) by Niklaus Manuel.[1] Also interested in that work, specifically in the attributes and props that Manuel uses to identify the three goddesses, is the exhibition-maker Judith Clark, who in 2011 curated a mini-exhibition called *The Judgement of Paris* at the Fashion Space Gallery of the London College of Fashion. The previous year she had visited Kunstmuseum Basel, whose collection includes not just Manuel's painting, but also a somewhat later *Judgement of Paris* by Lucas Cranach. The three figures in the former work are identified as goddesses neither by their individual facial features nor by their bodies, but rather by their position and orientation within the painting and above all the attributes ascribed to them by mythology: namely their attire, their hair ornaments and the objects they are holding. Niklaus Manuel also names them using their Roman names: Minerva, Venus and Juno. Minerva, holding a sword in one hand and the head of a dragon in the other, has a shield slung over her shoulder and ostrich feathers pinned in her hair. Venus is accompanied by her winged son Cupid. Wearing a headdress that is likewise winged and a billowing diaphanous gown over her naked body, she stands before the seated Paris and locks eyes with him. Which brings us to Juno, whom Manuel depicts as a married woman clad in a long, luxurious robe trimmed with brocade and ermine and cut in the style of the times. As a curator who specializes in clothing and fashion, Clark is also concerned with the question of how the visual tropes of art might influence fashion, if indeed at all. The aforementioned exhibition in London comprised just three display cases of her own design. In one she showed replicas of the goddesses' attributes and requisites known to us from art history: a shield, cupid and peacock literally borrowed from prop houses; installed in the second were three life-size female torsos, all of them covered in conservation calico and differentiated – as noted by Damisch – by their orientation: Venus in profile, Minerva turning away and Juno facing forwards; while in the third she homed in on the coiffures and headdresses worn by the three figures. Clark thus singled out three crucial aspects of the painting for further scrutiny. Not by chance was the fashion exhibition-maker drawn to Manuel's painting. While the contemporary dress updates the ancient narrative and the risqué game of veiling and unveiling lends the work an erotic intensity, it is the hair, which unlike the bodies is flying in all directions, that activates the dark ground, opening it up to the viewers' gaze.

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[1] Hubert Damisch, Le Jugement de Pâris. Iconologie analytique I, Paris 1992, pp. 154–155.

I

The Judgement of Paris painted by the Bernese alderman, reformer, poet and painter Niklaus Manuel (ca. 1484–1530) comes from the *Kabinett* of the lawyer and art collector of Basel, Basilius Amerbach (1533–1591) and is listed in the inventories of his collection for the years 1577/78 to 1587.[2] Amerbach acquired it together with two other canvases – *Pyramus and Thisbe* (ca. 1515) and a votive painting of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (ca. 1517) – as well as several small panel paintings, drawings and woodcuts, probably from the artist's estate then still in family hands. In 1661 the Amerbach Kabinett was acquired by the City of Basel as the rootstock of its public art collection.

Very little is known about Manuel's origins. The family of his father, Emanuel Alleman, ran an apothecary in Bern. His maternal grandfather was Thüring Fricker, a town clerk and law clerk of Bern. In 1509 Niklaus Manuel married Katharina Frisching, whose father belonged to Bern's Governing Council. The alliance thus cemented his high social standing in the city as he now belonged to a family that was part of Bern's ruling elite, with all the attendant privileges and obligations.[3] He himself became a member of the Grand Council and in 1528 was appointed to the Governing Council. Starting in 1520, words increasingly took the place of pictures in Manuel's artistic output. Michael Egli, editor of the catalogue of works completed in 2016, believes that his gradual abandonment of painting was perhaps a result of the first stirrings of the Reformation and the fact that commissions from the church were no longer forthcoming.[4] It is certainly true that as an artist, Manuel was unable to attract a following beyond his native Bern during his own lifetime. The catalogue of his painted oeuvre comprises no more than nineteen works, all of which were painted within a relatively short period, between 1513 and 1520. Manuel was among the Swiss mercenaries fighting with Bernese brigades on the side of the French in the Battle of Bicocca in 1522 and having been appointed *Landvogt* (sheriff) of Erlach in 1523, he lived with his family at Schloss Erlach until 1528. That was the year when Bern elected to adopt the Reformation, a decision which Alderman Manuel supported. He owes his posthumous fame as a painter not least to the fact that the collection of his works amassed by Basilius Amerbach was not dispersed, but has survived intact to this day, preserved, studied, published and exhibited at Kunstmuseum Basel.

Niklaus Manuel, called "Deutsch" after his father, is rightly judged Bern's most important painter of the Early Modern Age. Writing in 1991 about Manuel's *Beheading of John the Baptist*, the exhibition-maker Harald Szeemann described – as only he knew how – his fascination with the painter's "personal myth-making through the emancipation of symbols and signs from their religious context."[5] Two versions of that painting have survived: one is an altarpiece now at Kunstmuseum Bern, the other a smaller, but artistically more daring and more distinctive panel painting originally from the Amerbach Kabinett and hence at Kunstmuseum Basel. Manifested in this one small work, writes Michael Egli, is "an apprehension of the image defined by the dialectic between the religious, cultish image on the one hand and the artistic image on the other, which is changing even as Manuel works."[6] Manuel, in other words, was at the cutting edge of the "age of art" that began with the Renaissance and that invested art with a new mission.[7] Prior to that time, works of art had been created not primarily for contemplation *as art*, but rather for religious edification or for the cult of the church housing them. From this period onwards, however, we can indeed talk of a history of art *as art* based on artists' own perception of themselves as artists and their right, which extends to every individual, to play a defining role as creators of works of art.

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[2] Michael Egli & Hans Christoph von Tavel (eds.), Niklaus Manuel. Catalogue raisonné, 2 vols., Basel 2017.

[3] Petra Barton Sigrist, "Biografie," ibid., pp. 80–81.

[4] Michael Egli, "Niklaus Manuel – sein Œuvre im Wandel der Zeit," ibid, pp. 12–34.

[5] Harald Szeemann, "Visionäre Schweiz," Visionäre Schweiz, ed. Harald Szeemann, exh. cat. Kunsthaus Zürich; Städtische Kunsthalle and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Aarau 1991, p. 9.

[6] Michael Egli, "Enthauptung Johannes des Täufers," Egli & von Tavel 2017 (see note 2), pp. 147–148.

II

Modernism taught us that the threads of history can be severed. Some images become incomprehensible when the programmes, methods and objectives underlying them are no longer relevant to the present, while others are excluded from the canon because they are no longer wanted, not even in an updated form, and therefore have to be deliberately suppressed. What meaning can images have once the culture that produced them has faded away or become alien to us? Is it ever possible for us to appreciate a work of art and to enter into a dialogue with it even without knowing – as is often the case these days – the circumstances of its creation, which in Richard Wollheim's opinion are what define its identity?[8] Can subsequent developments in art affect how we view the works that preceded them? Of course! Does that alter their identity? No, it does not. What sets a work of art apart from other objects is that as an artefact, it belongs to its own time, while at the same time enjoying an afterlife in posterity. An important role in the transmission of images from one generation to the next is that played by people, who "as givers and inheritors of images," writes art historian Hans Belting, "are involved in those dynamic processes by which images are transformed, forgotten, rediscovered and reinterpreted. Their transmission and afterlife resemble two sides of the same coin. The transmission is intentional and deliberate; it can turn official images into models for a new departure, which is what the Renaissance did with Antiquity. Yet images may also live on in hidden ways, even against the will of a culture that has already immersed itself in other images."[9] Images and art belong to different orders, even if they often convergent. Unlike the image, which can manifest as a visual idea inside the head of a single person while remaining invisible to everyone else, the work of art is at once a physical object *and* an aesthetic artefact. It is created by people to be perceived by other people. Only humans make art: "I have heard stories of painting elephants, drawing monkeys, and typing dogs," writes American author Siri Hustvedt, "but despite the complexities of pachyderm, simian, and canine cultures, visual art is not central to any of them. We are image makers. At some moment in the narrative of evolution, human societies began to draw and paint things, and it is safe to say that the art of picture making is only possible because we have the faculty of reflective self-consciousness – that is, we are able to represent ourselves to ourselves and muse about our own beings by becoming objects in our own eyes."[10]

III

Having grown up in Rome, Judith Clark studied architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture and the Architectural Association in London. She opened Judith Clark Costume, the first independent gallery to exhibit only apparel, in 1997 and began teaching at the London College of Fashion in

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[7] Arthur C. Danto, Das Fortleben der Kunst, Munich 2000 (= Bild und Text), esp. pp. 23–42.

[8] Richard Wollheim, "Sind die Identitätskriterien, die in den verschiedenen Künsten für ein Kunstwerk gelten, ästhetisch relevant?" in Reinold Schmücker (ed.), Identität und Existenz. Studien zur Ontologie der Kunst, Paderborn 2003, p. 81.

[9] Hans Belting, Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft, Munich 2001, p. 59.

[10] Siri Hustvedt, "Embodied Visions: What does it mean to look at a work of art?" The Yale Review, Vol. 98, No. 4, October 2010, p. 22.

2002.[11] Her decision to do an MA in Cultural and Intellectual History 1300–1650 at the Warburg Institute in London in 2014–15 was motivated in part by her growing interest in the props and attributes of Renaissance art that had become a theme of her exhibitions and in part by Warburg's method of teaching the cultural history as the migration of forms and ideas through time, which is still practised at the institute that bears his name. For Warburg, a work of art was more than just an expression of artistic talent and creative energy; it was also a medium in which images might appear like "phantoms" without any external prompting. Warburg was an image historian. He was interested in the processes of transformation to which not only are images subject, but which also have the effect of keeping them in circulation. The notion of the "pathos formula" brought to bear in this context was first espoused by Warburg in 1905 for what John M. Krois fittingly described as a perpetually self-renewing "pictorial form of representation of a heightened expression of feeling."[12] For all his fascination with the Judgement of Paris and its transformation through the centuries, Warburg, it seems, never concerned himself closely with Niklaus Manuel and his own version of the motif. One of the few texts he actually finished, however, was his 1929 discussion of the French painter Édouard Manet, whose *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), Warburg argued, pointing to panel 3 of his picture atlas, the ultimately unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*, draws on an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi after a no longer extant drawing of the Judgement of Paris by Raphael.[13]

Judith Clark and I have been in touch ever since 2016, when I attended a lecture of hers while doing research in the archive of the Warburg Institute for a project on Warburg the exhibition-maker. We have also co-curated an exhibition and in 2020 co-produced a film to be screened at the University of London symposium, "Fashion Interpretations: Dress, Medium & Meaning." *Exhibiting Niklaus Manuel Deutsch: The Judgement of Paris II* was presented at the Amden Atelier, an exhibition space in Amden on Lake Walen in the Swiss Alps, where I have been staging exhibitions since 1999. Most of the works shown there are created specifically for that particular exhibition space,[14] which incidentally can be accessed only on foot. The integration of the landscape setting, moreover, had been part of the concept right from the start. The exhibitions are installed in a barn that was originally used to keep cows through the winter months, but has long since stood empty. Having been neither sanitized nor converted, and hence never truly repurposed, it has become part of the natural landscape, as have countless others like it. *Exhibiting Niklaus Manuel Deutsch* was the first exhibition in the history of the Amden Atelier to be created by someone who is not an artist. When Clark returned to Manuel's famous painting and with this project in mind, began studying his work, especially the drawings, in even greater depth, including by consulting the literature available at the library of the Warburg Institute, her focus of interest shifted from the ancient subject matter to the question of how the figures are embedded in what is actually a natural setting and the kind of visual relationship that exists between the figures and their environs. She noticed above all the important role played by the goddesses' long tresses, which despite their hairdos and headdresses seem to take on a life of their own. Her intervention therefore consisted of twelve wrought-iron nails, the shape of which was modelled on Niklaus Manuel's silverpoint drawings of individual locks of hair. Since then, these "iron locks" have supplemented the nails, some of them very old, which for whatever reason and with no obvious function are still lodged in the beams of the old barn – an attribute typical of all old farm buildings. On the inside of the barn, moreover, Clark branded the wood with a mark that consists of a bear washing itself, copied after a drawing by Manuel from one of his pattern books. The only other element in this very sparing installation was a colour poster showing a detail from Manuel's *chef d'œuvre*. What Clark exhibited in Amden, therefore, was not an autonomous work of art, but the abandoned barn itself, both as a sculpture in its own right – an "assisted" ready-made, to use Duchamp's term for it – and as what it had always been: a crudely cobbled-together shelter for animals, gods and unbridled energies.

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[11] Judith Clark & Amy de la Haye, Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971, New Haven/London 2014.

[12] John M. Krois, "Die Universalität der Pathosformeln. Der Leib als Symbolmedium," in Horst Bredekamp & Marion Lauschke (eds.), Bildkörper und Körperschema. Schriften zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen, Berlin 2011, p. 76.

[13] Aby Warburg, "Manet," Aby Warburg. Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen, ed. Uwe Fleckner & Isabella Woldt, Berlin 2012, pp. 367–386.

[14] Roman Kurzmeyer, Atelier Amden: 1999–2015, Zurich 2015.

IV

In an interview reflecting on his life's work, the American sculptor Richard Serra, who claimed his sculptures in the public space had opened a new chapter of art history, recalled the art historian George Kubler and his apprehension of time and history, as laid out in *The Shape of Time* (1962).[15] Cleaving closely to Kubler's theories, the artist localizes works of his own making as what Kubler calls "prime objects" and goes on to explain how these differ from, and "disrupt," the sequence of replicas that make up the canon of art history – as also the bulk of contemporary art production.[16] Prime objects fascinate Serra because they rejuvenate art in a surprising way, without necessarily establishing a new tradition. They "resemble the prime numbers of mathematics," writes Kubler, "because no conclusive rule is known to govern the appearance of either, although such a rule may someday be found. The two phenomena now escape regulation. Prime numbers have no divisors other than themselves and unity; prime objects likewise resist decomposition in being original entities. Their character as primes is not explained by their antecedents, and their order in history is enigmatic."[17] In his introduction to the first German edition of Kubler's work, Gottfried Boehm noted that what made the publication so vital was not least an approach that enabled art history "to talk of art (the history of things), to take its phenomena seriously and perhaps even to accord them a history of their *own* that is not identical with history generally."[18]

Niklaus Manuel's *Judgement of Paris* is discussed in Damisch's book along with various other treatments of the same motif, some of which Warburg included in his picture atlas and can be said to form an art-historical sequence of their own extending from Greek vase painting all the way to Manet on the threshold of modernism. Yet this seems not to be true of Judith Clark's second interpretation of the theme. For while her installation references Niklaus Manuel's *Judgement of Paris* and hence a work from the canon, the aspects of that work that she emphasizes are not those that would be necessary to its legibility within the sequence –in other words the attributes and requisites that are indispensable to our identification of the three goddesses, which were the subject of her 2011 presentation at the London College of Fashion. On the contrary, *Exhibiting Niklaus Manuel Deutsch: The Judgement of Paris II* in Amden disrupts the sequence. By focusing on the depiction of the world of nature and how the brightly illuminated foreground figures interact with the nocturnal gloom surrounding them and not, as the iconographic tradition dictates, on the relationship between the figures themselves, she opens the door to a completely new experience of the painting as an aesthetic object in its own right. In other words, it is Clark's perception of painting as a visual event, and not her reading of its subject matter, that results in the creation of a work of art that possesses all the key properties of a prime object.

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[15] George Kubler, The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things, New Haven/London, 1962.

[16] Richard Serra & Hal Foster, Conversations about Sculpture, New Haven/London 2018, pp. 91–111.

[17] Kubler 1962 (see note 15), p. 39.

[18] Gottfried Boehm, "Kunst versus Geschichte: ein unerledigtes Problem. Zur Einleitung in George Kublers 'Die Form der Zeit'," in George Kubler, Die Form der Zeit. Anmerkungen zur Geschichte der Dinge, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, p. 20.

(Translation from the German: Bronwen Saunders)