Michael Fehr

Michael Badura's Concrete Realism[1]

Michael Badura was never interested in an art for art's sake. Far more, he was always preoccupied by the question of whether and to what degree art - or, to phrase it better, artistic activity - could be an appropriate means to attain universal perceptions or perceptions relevant for the general public and to make them visible. His formal developments and discoveries thus never remained an end in themselves but were used by him as research methods and instruments, and to that end repeatedly questioned as to whether they were suitable to make particular concepts, experiences and judgments comprehensible or were suitable to convey them.

Consequently, insights that Badura acquired in this way often led him to new themes and new formal approaches and thus brought about an oeuvre that is highly differentiated and difficult to appraise, behind which one might sooner guess at several authors rather than a single one.

In the process, Badura always went his own way and was - entirely up to date - often far ahead of the artistic mainstream. Thus, in the middle of the 1960's, he engaged himself intensively with ecological problems; at the beginning of the 1970's pursued in his own way avant la lettre "Spurensicherung" (preservation of traces) and the discussion about the conditions of the constitution and meaning of facts; at the end of the 1970's, in his concept of the "Farbmensch", a radicalized concept of Expressionism, he anticipated the discussion surrounding the gestural painting of the "New Fauves"; and he is, since the middle of the 1980's, one of the few artists to occupy himself seriously with the possibilities of the digital production of images.

This more or less conscious pioneer role, coming about through its own inner dynamic, has exposed Badura to numerous misunderstandings in the context of the art world and made him seem at times like an imitator of the concepts that he himself first advanced - in part, simply because he no longer pursued what was en vogue, but more often because through his versatility he relativized that thinking in particular styles and the resulting "trade-marks" promoted by commerce. Thus Badura was and has remained a solitary fighter with a due portion of scepticism and mistrust in the face of the art scene and increasingly developed himself - above all, since the acceptance of a professorship at the beginning of the 1980's made him independent of the art market - to an artist-explorer with distinctly experimental interests.

Michael Badura has composed texts about all the important phases of his development and many individual works, which as concept or explanation, as commentary or "enriddling" provide such extensive information about his intentions that the judicious viewer - if he wishes not only to understand but to maintain an independent position toward the work - is virtually compelled to seek a point of reference and to inquire after the inner coherence, the common invoice of these highly different works.

During my own attempt to find such a point of reference from which the work of Badura could be viewed without distortions, I soon stood outside the field in which creative artists normally work. I finally happened upon the work of Franz Kafka. His short story "A Crossbreed", written in 1913, seems to me in this context appropriate for sketching certain general principles that could also facilitate the access to Badura's work. The essential passages of this story read as follows:

"I have a curious animal, half kitten, half lamb. It is a legacy from my father. But it only developed in my time; formerly it was far more lamb than kitten. Now it is both in about equal

[1] Translated by David Galloway

parts. From the cat it takes its head and claws, from the lamb its size and shape; from both its eyes, which are wild and flickering, its hair, which is soft, lying close to its body, its movements, which partake both of skipping and slinking. (...) I feed it on milk; that seems to suit it best. In long draughts it sucks the milk in through its fanglike teeth. Naturally it is a great source of entertainment for children. Sunday morning is the visiting hour. I sit with the little beast on my knees, and the children of the whole neighborhood stand around me. - Than the strangest questions are asked, which no human being could answer: Why there is only one such animal, why I rather than anybody else should own it, whether there was ever an animal like it before and what would happen if it died, whether it feels lonely, why it has no children, what it is called, etc. - I never trouble to answer, but confine myself without further explanation to exhibiting my possession. (...) Perhaps the knife of the butcher would be a release for this animal; but as it is a legacy I must deny it that. So it must wait until the breath voluntarily leaves its body, even though it sometimes gaze at me with a look of human understanding, challenging me to do the thing of which both of us are thinking."[2]

Something quite improbable, the cross between lamb and kitten is not only described here in a tone of the greates matter-of-factness but, in addition, presented with the conviction of someone incapable of calling it into question: What the narrative "I" has, he has inherited from his father and does not have to justify. With the reference to the authority of the father and the inheritance - that is, with reference to an event that lies outside the frame of the narrative - Kafka plausibly establishes an order in which the improbable and downright impossible receive a simple, entirely normal place and can be treated accordingly. Admittedly, the pragmatic experience of the reader collides with this order which can integrate the improbable within itself. And in this way the normal and entirely possible that the "I" narrates to us - for example, the behavior of the animal or the questions of the children - thus begin to become improbable and inexplicable to that degree that the narrative "I" claims and demonstrates normality. More abstractly expressed: Within the frame that is established with the story, even commonplace facts and certainties crumble into questionable assertions precisely because of their affirmation, and lose their realistic character: The common "recognizing" perception of that which is narrated turns into a concrete, "seeing" cognition of individual words, turns of phrase and reported facts that, liberated in their function, not only break open the frame of the story but can also leave it to force their way like viruses into the practical experience of life based systems of the reader and infect them: "I never trouble to answer, but confine myself without further explanation to exhibiting my possession"[3], Kafka writes, and thereby explicitly designates the method through which he can set everyday certainties as well as philosophical structures reeling and sinking into inextricable entanglements.

If one remains on the level of that which is narrated, one runs up against the boundaries of the given order in another way, more or less from within. For Kafka permits us - here as in his other texts - to take part in the difficulties of the narrative "I" in overcoming the problems and contradictions that arise in the story, and thereby imposes his perspective on us. "Why there is only one such animal, why I rather than anybody else should own it, whether there was ever an animal like it before"[4], the children ask, for example, and thus force the narrator to explanations which we, the readers, know he cannot give: With the perspective of the narrator we internalize the conditions in which the narrative "I" exists, as unquestionable necessities and increasingly content ourselves with his naive attempts to widen his own horizon. In other words: Kafka's narrative is based on an artful interlocking of different frames. Corresponding to them are various perspectives and styles of argument that can skip about the functionally liberated meanings of words and narrated facts - and not merely the improbable ones - and permit a multi-perspective cubistic reality to develop.

And yet a third aspect of the story of the cross between lamb and kitten is of general significance. It is the fine irony with which Kafka signifies to us that here something was constructed by a human being and exists only as construction: In the last paragraph of the

[2] Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir; taken from: Franz Kafka, The Shorter Stories, New York 1962, p. 426-427.
[3] Ibid., p. 426.
[4] Ibid.

story, in which the narrator philosophizes about whether it would not be better for him to take the life of the peculiar animal but distances himself from the idea because it has come to him as tradition, this is openly addressed. Yet even here, where the narrator confronts the reader on a meta-level and addresses him as an understanding partner, the ironical distance continues to remain. For since Kafka places his story so precisely alongside our reality - so near that we can basically only assert differences on the basis of the curious animal - and thereby identifies his story more or less openly as a fictive reality, we who in opposition to such stories insist on the truth of our own constructed reality, are revealed as the true naifs.

Badura's main interest is, and always was, structure, that is the determined connection of particular details, no matter how these details are constituted. Badura's works are examinations of structures or, more precisely, the conditions of their evolution, their possibilities of change and their ability to organize determined details. This interest in structure is the basic motif that is to be found in all of Badura's work and is reflected in his texts as well: Whether Badura deals with ecological questions, the museums as an institution or the constituting of historical coherence, with stores of knowledge, with color or with the possibilities of computers - in the first place it is allways the question of the quality of the thinking processes that are able to constitute, change or destroy a determined order that interests him.

Thereby, at an early date Badura made that into an artistic theme which is reflected upon today by philosophers and scientists as "radical constructivism": The consequences of the insight that it cannot be decided whether that which we perceive corresponds to objective reality - indeed, that we cannot even be sure that which we recognize as an object is indeed something which stands out from the rest of the world.

Since these questions are unanswerable, the radical constructivist presumes that "recognition and knowledge cannot be the embodiment of a passive reception but come about as the result of the actions of an active subject" (Ernst von Glasersfeld)[5]. These actions, Glasersfeld continues, are not to be understood, however, as a practical dealing with artifacts that exist independently of the person acting. Far more, acting which leads to knowledge is an "operating" of that cognitive instance of which Jean Piaget says that it organizes the world by organizing itself. Epistemology in the sense of radical constructivism thus becomes an investigation of perception and its conditions and aims essentially at determining how those making the perceptions succeed "in constructing a more or less permanent, consistent world out of the stream of experience", as well as determining how the objects are created that are produced in this way (von Glasersfeld).

The creation of images was always a classical operation in the sense of radical constructivism, though admittedly only rarely in its sense a self-conscious and arbitrary operation: As a medium of experience and its visualization, the image is always a world-model, the attempt to wrest objects from the flow of experience. But only in the work of art does this operation become a conscious activity of the self, which organizes the world by organizing itself. For only in the work of art is the image the result of a reflective construction - and can thereby become an image of the world to that extent that underlying prerequisites of a world-cognition are brought to view.

It is true that it was only late that it occured to the reflexive picture-makers, too, that the image produced is not only a reproduction of that experienced or seen but a production of our Weltbild apparatus that obeys particular requirements. Even in Informel or Abstract Expressionist art, these conditions were not ascribed to the one acting but projected onto the process of production and understood as conditions for the objectification of the image. But this extreme position of a "naive" picture-maker was the very necessary step toward an art that thematizes perception as "making".

---

[5] Ernst von Glasersfeld, Einführung in den Radikalen Konstruktivismus (Introduction to Radical Constructivism), in: Paul Watzlawick (ed.), Die erfundene Wirklichkeit (The Invented Reality), Munich 1985_, pp. 22 f.

The conditions of perception are, naturally, an important theme in the visual arts, at least since the discovery of photography as a medium. But grappling with them always remained a grappling with the externale reality to which perception only seemed to react. Only with the emancipation of the image and its media from a representational function - that is, with Concrete Art - was the door flung open to an examination of perception as an independent operation and could the "fact" be understood as the result of this operation.

At this point, historically and theoretically, the work of Michael Badura commences. One of his first works is called "Der Organisator" (The Organizer, 1964) and is a conglomerate structure that, much as a neuron has axon and dendrites at its disposal, possesses "feelers" and "communications instruments" with whose help it can assume a particular place within different structures - for example, an "Organisation mit Schwerkraft" (Organization with Gravity), a "Klumpenvorhang" (Clump Curtain), a "Klumpenteppich" (Clump Carpet) or a "Klumpenhaus" (Clump House). Fundamental to this is that the clumps, in whatever form, themselves establish the structure and order in which they find themselves - that is, form a structurally self-evident system. This becomes explicitly clear in Badura's various "Klumpenmuseen" (Clump Museums, begun in 1970), in which the artist presents his amorphous shapes as though they were classified according to morphological factors, or designates different views of one and the same clump as "Clump Museum" and thereby not only ironizes scientific categorizing but casts fundamental doubt on taxonomy.

Here Badura's typical work process can already be grasped, whose particular characteristics were the occasion for the comparison with Kafka's narrative strategy: Like him, Badura accepts with apparent naivety the self-created setting - here, for example, the clumps - and earnestly plays out with them any and all imaginable possibilities - that is, creates within the self-imposed frame a reality all its own, which is not identical with our pragmatically or scientifically based one but so (homologously) constructed that we recognize in it an image of our world. It is true that Badura thus concretely occupies himself only with clumps and examines what all can be made with these simple, amorphous, more or less single-celled objects; yet the clumps stand for any number of artifacts, just as they do for the orders and structures that are constituted from them, for the world-image that those make who deal with more complex artifacts in the same way as Badura deals with clumps: On the basis of the clumps, Badura concretely visualizes what "operating" means in the sense of radical constructivism and at the same time develops a realistic picture of the aporia in our capacity to order the world.

What means were opened up to Badura with this approach is made clear by an early, major work, "Eingeweckte Welt" (The Jarred World) from 1964/67. In a structural extension of the "Clump" works, the "Jarred World" incorporates time, represented on the one hand as real time - as the reaction time of biochemical processes -, and on the other hand as fictional time, as narrative. Thus there comes about a complex, interlocking structure in which real and fictive processes comment on and interpret each other. For the "Jarred World" is, on the one hand, a laboratory that "should contain all the substances of this earth in all combinations as a collection of processes" (Badura); that is to say, a veritable experimental arrangement in which Badura initially lets fifty and later more than a hundred jars of different substances concretely react with each other - and thereby develops a realistic image of our relationship to nature that differs from our real method of operating only in scale. On the other hand, the "Jarred World" is a fiction: the story of someone born on the moon, whose curiosity impels him to visit the earth in order to study there the contaminating and poisoning because of which his ancestry left the earth: a fiction made realistic through the concrete biochemical reactions in the preserving jars; which however, on their own part are further fictionalized through descriptions and stories that Badura ascribes to the occurences in the individual jars.

As a cross between fiction and real event, the "Jarred World" is not only a particularly typical work for Badura but also a highly appropriate method for bringing to consciousness the conditions of thinking. For since in the "Jarred World" the real is elevated, on the one hand, through typically scientific argumentation, to a paradigmatic example, and on the other hand,

through the fictional narration endowed with the substrata of a general context, it functions as an "insane" attempt at structuring, as a highly realistic image of our irrational relationship to natural conditions. Thus the "Jarred World" of Badura becomes the classic example of "fiction" in the sense of Hans Vaihinger, who understood thinking in general as an organizational function and fiction as an artifice of thought: as a clever instrument for simplified orientation in reality - in short, as a means of recognition.[6]

If in the "Jarred World", as Margarethe Jochimsen noted,[7] language and real event were truly combined by Badura out of "necessity", in order to actualize imperceivable biochemical processes and to bridge the long time spans of their development, this work nonetheless became the point of departure for a large number of further works that very deliberately aim at the picture-text combination. From this group of works it is, above all, various versions of the "Bleilegende" (Lead Legend) and the "Kürbisgeschichte" (Pumpkin History) that stand out. For in these works Badura "confirms" textual assertions through correspondingly manipulated objects or pictures, and thus creates a plausible argumentation that can only be refuted by a viewer through external information.

Admittedly, it soon became clear to Badura that the plausibility of his stories was based above all on the course of the argumentation - that is, on the manner of associating particular facts and only secondarily on the objects that were drawn into the argumentation. With the insight "The story is the form", Badura began another large group of works in which he no longer examined actual processes but the forms of their representation. The principal work of this phase is unquestionably "Die Geschichte einer Kriminalgeschichte" (The Story of a Crime Story) (1972/73), which poses the problem of linking actual facts to reconstruct a particular progression of events. Here too, as earlier, Badura seems to surrender with apparent naivety to the necessity of regarding particular objects (produced or found, of course, by himself) as "circumstantial evidence", and to have to combine them into a causal chain. Yet he is only peripherically concerned with the "solution" of the case that has been accepted; he is far more interested in investigating, on the basis of the crime story, the methods by which particular facts are linked together to form complex declarations and to analyze those methods.

Badura thus chose the form of the crime story above all because he saw in it, as he wrote, a model "in which experiences of reality, so incomplete (and different) as they might be ... could be connected and correlated via the most various areas and fields of knowledge. In a criminal investigation realities collide with each other that otherwise, in the "clean" sciences, would never be brought into relationship, but as they are continuously related in reality."

If the "Story of a Crime Story" was the representation and analysis of the attempt, on the basis of particular facts and circumstances, to reconstruct the findings in a case, it was obvious to reverse this process and to demonstrate that already the smallest alterations in a chain of arguments can lead to totally divergent results. Badura's "Hypothesenbilder" (Hypothesis Pictures) (starting in 1973) and here, for example, the work "Banküberfall?" (Hypothesis A asserts that the accused had robbed a bank, Hypothesis B that they did not) make this drastically visible, in so far as the two pictures can only be differentiated with great difficulty, on the basis of a few minute details.

Finally Badura began - in its consequence not surprisingly - to turn toward existing stories and contextualizations, and to deconstruct them: Word for word, sentence for sentence, he wrote the found texts on small slips of paper that he then laid out in rows on a supporting surface, beside and below each other, and provisionally attached with pins, tape and paper-clips. If Badura could thus make the constructed character of the texts evident, according to his own statement it was an accident that helped him find an extremely appropriate form for his evaluation of the contents of these texts:

---

[6] Cf. Hans Vaihinger, Die Philosophie des Als-Ob (The Philosophy of As-If), Leipzig 1924_, pp. 12 ff.
[7] Margarethe Jochimsen, "Die Geschichte der Geschichten" ("The Story of Stories"), in: "Michael Badura", exhibition catalogue, Frankfurt Kunstverein, Frankfurt 1975, p. 7.

"As I had just laid out Hamann's Art History sentence for sentence on my work-table - it consists of a particularly large number of single slips of paper - my wife came into the room. Since the window was open, everything was whirled about by the draft. Only because I had a copy of the original text, Hamann's book, could I put everything together again with considerable effort. (For a course of events occurring in reality, however, there is no copy by which this could be reconstructed!) While gathering and collecting the many individual parts it occurred to me that through this occupational accident an "order" was realized that actually mirrored the visual consequence of my deliberations. I had to laugh. That sounds like a 'far too beautiful story', but it is true."[8]

Whether it is true or not: With the accidentally or purposely scattered paper-work, Badura has found an operation by which, through concrete action - writing down, ordering and scattering a text - he could express the arbitrary-logical-causal associative structure as a picture. It was therefore logical to examine other taxonomies.

"Rather unexpectedly and only emotionally explicable, I was overcome at the beginning of 1977 by the urge to smear pure, saturated colors together orto let them collide roughly. Finally I could not resist any longer, and in a supermarket bought six large cans of paint with comical and overblown, simplistic descriptions: 'real red', 'real yellow', 'real blue', etc. Parallel to this there more and more intensified in me an aggression against the seemingly unstoppable and ever more total advance of the bureaucratic epidemic that will not rest until every breath is registered... In my new works I then attempted to unite slowly the two suggested aspects. There emerged fictive personal files - 'Color Dossiers' that literally consist only of a quantity of paper and a quantity of paint: as an individual personal dossier or several, set in a row in various groups, families and societies."

This statement makes pointedly clear that the unexpected occupation with color by no means signified a break in Badura's production; far more, from the intention to take up a further element of reality there resulted, as before, the possibility to push forward to more complex expressions. To be sure, Badura was not content to arrange and analyze color-taxonomies but with the "Farbmensch" he developed a synthetic figure with whose help he could conduct his color arrangements ad absurdum. Here, too, we are confronted by Badura's capacity for concretely playing a particular setting through to the ultimate consequence and in this way developing an image of estrangement that manifests itself in the use of color as an organizing medium. Thus, "it is clear that the mechanics in the offices would not get particularly far with the 'Farbmensch'. Yes, secretely they regard him as a perverted anarchist. For his sole identity, his sole characteristic is, indeed, a permanent metamorphosis. All of the information about him is only a short time later superseded and a hopeless conglomeration of fleeting conditions... Even scientists of the most various disciplines have sought to demarcate his existence according to normative facts and congruences. Since they found nothing definite, they concealed their deficiencies behind megalomaniacal speculations or small-minded columns of figures they pretend to be frightfully logical..."

Badura's occupation with color culminated in the "Büro für George Orwell" (Office for George Orwell), a "wild" room-installation in which the "Farbmensch" dissolved and disappeared. This work nonetheless became the point of departure for that confrontation with the computer that Badura - rightly - understood as the most advanced and highly developed organizing instrument.

In concrete processes of disintegration and stamping, Badura first made clear to himself the basic principles of digital operations and their consequences for the organization of perception - his analyses were developed with black and white tiles or through breaking down found images into black and white grids - and then learned how to program. With the goal of being able to "draw" something with the computer independent of the matrix of a particular software, Badura began his experiments. As the first important result, he could present the

[8] Letter to Margarethe Jochimsen, publ. in: "Michael Badura", Frankfurt 1975, p. 15.

"Nadelwald" (Needle Forest) (1984-87): the first concrete piece of art done with the computer and as such an image of the requirements of this machine. For the "Needle Forest" is not built up from complex signs but calculated on the basis of points that can be represented by the single "needles" of a needle-printer: By advancing via the software to the machine-language (this one can almost literally be understood as a working process), Badura turned the computer and the periphery into an instrument with which he can truly draw. And if, with the "Needle Forest", the smallest unit of digital operations - on/off, black/white, yes/no - was reached and made accessible, Badura's subsequent interest was, consequentially, to depart from the given matrix and be able to define and present any point in space. With his group of works "Made-to-Measure People", Badura has succeeded at this, as well: His "dolls" bend, stretch and deform themselves not only as Badura wants, they execute their "movement", furthermore, over surfaces of whatever size, across webs of paper of whatever number. So far as I can see, it is thereby the first successful effort to develop an image as a purely mental-electronic operation - that is, an image which exist beyond the limitations of our perception and which thus can not be imagined but only called up out of the machine and printed.

To be sure, in these works, too, Badura is not concerned with an electronic l'art pour l'art. Far more, he sees his work on the computer within the framework of the general use of these machines and wants to demonstrate - as earlier, for example, with the "Jarred World" - that with these new means mental structures can become reality and the basis of decisions lacking in every human dimension.[9]

© 1992 Michael Fehr

[9] Michael Badura, "Werke 1968-1978", exhibition catalogue, Heidelberg Kunstverein and Museum Bochum, 1978.