

Exegesis, or: To Life!

'We all start with an egg.' (S. L.)

Eva Meyer-Hermann

The four gospels tell four versions of the Easter story, which could be summed up as follows: at the beginning of Easter week, on Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem; feet washing and Last Supper with the disciples is on Maundy Thursday; Jesus dies on Good Friday; deathly silence on Easter Saturday; the Resurrection and the birth of hope on Easter Sunday. At Easter 2017, in Berlin, Sarah Lucas added another story – the Action FunQroc. The plot: working in the garden after arriving in Berlin on Sunday. On Thursday there's an invitation – HAVE A HOLIDAY WITH US, an exhibition opening and a performance with foot washing; sustenance is provided by an Ayurveda cook. On Friday there's a CONCERT FOR THE PEOPLE, deafening rock music and dancing into a trance. Saturday: the Action ONE THOUSAND EGGS – women fling raw eggs at a wall. Sunday: BUNNY ACTION PAINTING – men are invited to splash paint onto Bunny objects.

In times and places where one cannot be sure whether the public is more familiar with the New Testament or with gender theories, it is advisable to avoid over-hasty – seemingly obvious – interpretations of facts and events. The problem is that art, 'the earthly sister of religion' (Adalbert Stifter, 1805–1868), is as polyvocal and in need of interpretation as any theology. In both realms exegesis gives rise to a fine, invisible web of interpretations. In one there are special forms of liturgy, rituals and practices; in the other there are artistic tropes, actions and traditions. The present foray into exegesis, approaching the subject from four different 'angles', is an attempt not to negate ambivalences but rather to retain them, possibly as a potency, which in turn may give rise to that which is new, unique and hitherto unprecedented. 'Ambiguity is pregnant. Like an egg.' (S. L.)

Report 1

An eyewitness account: 'On Easter Saturday in the year of our Lord 2017, at the Galerie Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin-Charlottenburg, at the behest of Sarah Lucas (55), an artist from Suffolk, England, female visitors (no men) threw 300 raw eggs at a gallery wall. On Easter Sunday, again at her behest, men and boys tipped dispersion paint onto an object installed in an adjoining room.' Others might add that, shortly after arriving in Germany's capital city, the artist dug holes in a verdant site, filled these with readymade concrete and then had the solidified concrete lifted out of the ground. On Maundy Thursday, before supper, she washed the feet of some of her fellow travellers in the gallery. No-one mentions Good Friday, but everyone says that the live act with multiple rock bands in a dark venue near the famous-infamous Kottbusser Tor in Berlin-Kreuzberg was barely reproducible or even describable because of its fleeting, sonic nature.

Report 2

I didn't get to the gallery until the afternoon on that Saturday. On the pavement outside building there were already loose groups of people, chatting, some with a beer and a cigarette. As I make my way up the wide staircase to the bel etage I'm met by an acrid haze – not just the result of the warm, humid air outside, but also a combination of stale alcohol, cigarette stubs and sharp curry spices. People are smoking and drinking in a small side room. There's some space on the sofa. Everywhere there are glasses, abandoned by visitors who have long since left. Crockery, with remnants of Indian food, is stacked here and there. In the main space I gaze at a dully gleaming, egg-yolk-coloured wall. A few puzzled visitors are still gazing at it. It seems the egg-throwing action is over, only then a little girl lets go of her father's hand because the gallerist has offered her an egg, which she takes, after some hesitation. Tentatively, the girl raises her arm and draws it back, preparing to throw. But she doesn't have the strength to throw far, high and hard enough to make the egg smash against the wall. As it is the fragile object lands just a little above the skirting board and although the shell does break, its contents barely leave a mark on the wall, only running out of the shell when the cracked egg comes to a halt on the grey, felt floor protector. There are already countless eggshells lying on the floor; the strip of felt by the wall protecting the parquet is completely sodden. Dribbles of sticky egg white and burst yolks have oozed down the wall and are now sinking into the grey fibres. The wall itself looks magnificent; it seems to be on a higher plane than its surroundings, one might almost say 'immaculate'. Nevertheless, the surface of the wall is also a document of its own origins, which one could describe as the targeted spoiling, by means of a basic foodstuff, of a large, open area. But my mind turns instead to egg tempera, which, for hundreds of years, has served painters as a binding agent for pigments or as a ground for oil paintings. Only this picture needs neither pigments nor anything else beyond its own existence. It is wholly pure and, tautologically, an 'egg painting' – albeit not a representation of an egg, nor a directly symbolical or iconographic allusion. And yet it is also more than egg or eggs: it is art. That it is in need of interpretation is all too apparent, but this is also what underpins the strength and the tangible impact of this painting so casually 'flung' at the wall.

Report 3

Julian Simmons was at the Actions with his camera. He has edited some of the footage into two videos, which are now available on Vimeo. Who will throw the first egg? Oh, you can also throw two at the same time – one in each hand! Suddenly several women in the audience all throw at once. Splat, splat! And there – another one that doesn't smash as it hits the wall, but – to groans from the onlookers – slides down to the floor. A good aim and arc are important. The finished result is to be nice and even. The artist doesn't want a 'mess'; she wants a 'beautiful egg-painting'. Slowly, slowly, watch again how an egg shatters. Watch it – in the film and in one's mind's eye – mesmerizingly in reverse and in slow motion. And in the background, wandering about in the space but always audible, a violinist plays elegiac melodies. The eggs are handed out by a female fan in decorator's overalls. Underneath the semi-translucent fabric she appears to be naked; we glimpse her body, her breasts, her pubic hair. Every now and then the artist takes a pen and draws on the young woman's white overalls: stylised breasts – two curves and two dots; then an erect male member on her back – an elongated form, rounded at the top, with a circle left and right on either side of its base. And then breasts drawn in red felt tip on her backside – like a cosmetic quack marking out guidelines directly on the patient's body before the nip and the tuck. Cut. The gallerist and white-clad assistants help to create a mould of the décolleté of artist Angela Bulloch – a friend of Sarah Lucas's – and cast it in plaster. Later a headless, white bust of Angel Bulloch will stand, strangely aloof, on a plinth in front of the yellow wall. Somewhere in the background there is a sudden swell of rhythmic foot-stamping interspersed with the contrapuntal clink of glasses and bottles. It's coming from the side room, where a small crowd – artists, staff, helpers or guests, who knows? – have made themselves comfortable on the couches and are enjoying one for the road, intermittently overcome by waves of energy left over from the day's Actions, performances, readings and music.

On Easter Sunday a wild mêlée of encouraging cries, laughter and applause from the public in the back exhibition space accompanies the paint ejaculations of 'gentle men' (S. L.). The artist has released Silver Hippy, one of the profane sister sculptures of the Bulloch angel, for a public Happening. On her invitation, one by one around a dozen male exhibition visitors soak, spray and spatter the corporeal composite of acrobatically intertwined, skin-coloured, fine-stocking limbs. The paint is thrown from buckets, it bubbles out of plastic tubes, some men even use their hands. They have to have internalised exactly the right trajectory to be sure of landing an eruptive spray of paint on the seductive, composite, fine-stocking-breasts-object suspended from the ceiling. But mostly they are not that accurate, with the result that the paint – tinted with everything in the white-to-black spectrum – either drips viscously from the edges of the object or just lands with a splash on the floor. In no time at all the parquet floor is as slippery as an ice rink. When all the buckets of paint are empty the artist brings the wild group activity to a halt with a quiet 'and now relax ...'; the moving image blurs behind a milky veil.

Report 4

The exhibition was still up for a few more weeks. The floor had been cleaned, the eggshells removed and the remnants of the convivial collective at the coffee table and sofa had dispersed. The ensemble of wall painting and bust became the pivot of the installation. But in terms of a representative pictorial programme, the bust could not properly be described as a portrait and there was a lack of gilding or any other colour on the wall. Instead there were strong arms and determined fists. And the placement of the bust on the plinth was very unusual, with the model's breasts lying flat on the top surface of the plinth, in order to stabilise the piece as a whole, with its far reaching extremities. The clenched fists could grasp something or hold onto it; they are powerfully closed with visible tension in the arm muscles. Yet these fists look neither aggressive nor provocative; if anything they seem to be coordinating and directing events. There is a similar potential in the process-based wall painting, with its powerfully expansive, pictorialised energy. The viewer has a clear sense of where a yolk burst, where a rivulet haltingly drew a line down the wall and where small fragments of brown eggshell have been left sticking to the wall.

In the two adjoining rooms the Bunny sculptures hold their own on a different pictorial level. These fantasy bodies – lovingly made from specially treated, fine-denier ladies' tights and used furniture – luxuriate on old wooden stools or combine to form surreal snake add-ons, with indeterminate anatomical functions. Some tentacles curl and intermingle into abstract lust knots; others strain demonstratively upwards. Nylon feet, stuffed to bursting with kapok, become luscious, round breasts, with twirly nipples made from the dark yarn of the reinforced toes. Two of these assemblages are streaked with paint (a gesture of thanks from the Easter Sunday Action), the rest are 'natural'. In contrast to the quiet, serious oneness of wall and bust, these creations behave like a throng of wayward fairies – a projection surface for earthly desires and ideas.

Distributed through all three rooms of the exhibition – like an array of analytic tools – there are nine Nob objects. Made from a relatively crude material, they initially seem like a cool echo of the undertone of spring and fertility that tangibly pervades this exhibition. The upright, solid concrete shapes are highly individual – short and squat, or elongated and straining upwards, with more or less mushroom-like tops. Desiccated

roots sprout from their untreated surfaces like stubborn hairs – they were torn out of the surrounding soil when the concrete Nobs were lifted out of the ground. Wrenched from their proper context these tremulous growths look like feelers, like arteries or antennae – reminders of what has been lost or points of contact with something new. Their composite names refer partly to the artist and people close to her and partly to Indian mythology. The phallic shape of the lingam – an attribute of the Hindu deity Shiva – symbolises both creation and destruction. In FunQroc the rough concrete casts can thus in a sense be read as spiritual place-holders for both destructive and constructive processes.

The number nine already played an important part in Sarah Lucas's concept for the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015. She responded to the invitation to represent the United Kingdom at the oldest, global art show, with a decidedly female theme. Hitherto she had particularly been known for her humorous provocations of gender roles – launched from a male stance. But there has always also been a tender, poetic streak under that punk demeanour, which meant that her decision to focus on the guardians of the fine arts – the nine Muses of Greek mythology – was in fact quite close to home. Sarah Lucas made plaster casts – one-offs – of her own lower body and of the lower bodies of eight female friends. That both rendered the sculptures individual and highlighted the idea of a collective, which always has been fundamental to Sarah Lucas' thinking. In the early 1990s, for instance, when the Young British Artists suddenly hit the headlines, she and Tracy Emin opened *The Shop* in East London, where they sold all kinds of art objects. In the sun-filled British pavilion in the Giardini those nine daughters of Mnemosyne – each reduced to just a lower body – lounged around like the members of an errant sisterhood. Their rotating, climbing, even splayed poses were supported on wooden chairs, on tables or on shiny toilet bowls; many had a cigarette casually popped into an orifice. These plaster casts personified a female, artistic process, which despite (or perhaps because of) their male bodyguards – two grotesquely enlarged, yellow, fibre-glass, tentacled beings at the entrance to the Pavilion – refuses to be constrained.

The walls of the Pavilion were painted a uniform yellow and the tome accompanying this exhibition was also yellow – as yellow as the banana on an early self-portrait by the artist, as yellow as the cover of the book of poetry by D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) that Sarah Lucas bought in the run-up to the exhibition, as yellow as the sweet, custard dessert with its 'floating islands', and, lastly, as yellow as the egg yolks running out in the foam-board, architectural model of the Padiglione Gran Bretagna. The photographs in the book speak volumes. They are not only prophecies of the event in Venice with its apocryphal roots in Greek mythology, they are also a prophetic matrix for the uplifting Easter message in Berlin in the spirit of Christian-heathen traditions: Sarah in rubber boots in a wild meadow, Sarah and others dancing outside around eggs laid out in a circle, Sarah carefully arranging eggs in the shape of phallus and the subsequent smashing of the eggs on the rocky ground, Sarah playing with the naked body of her beloved, whom she has embalmed from head to toe in yellow egg. Egg male – egg female. It's all the same. In the search for meaning the 'density of references' (Martin Prinzhorn) ultimately does not provide a solution, but that search is reconciled in the projects from 2015 and 2017. We are no longer thinking of the splatter paintings and the *Orgien-Mysterien-Theater* of Hermann Nitsch (*1938) or the neuroses given form by Franz West (1947–2012); we will also forget contemporary gender theories and biblical interpretations. Instead we look to the connection to nature, we recall Stifter's astoundingly sensitive depictions of the landscape and we remember epic nature poems by D. H. Lawrence. Sarah Lucas shows us that there is a chance, and hope, of no longer feeling alienated in that space between art, life and theory. 'I believe in beyond feminism.' (S. L.)

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott.

Literature

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