

JÜRGEN KLAUKE

The Gender-Pioneer

art - Das Kunstmagazin, March 2021, Interview by Sandra Danicke

The in-depth Jürgen Klauke portrait in ART has already been done, back in 1994. But in recent years the photo artist and draftsman has increasingly come to prominence. Once the enfant terrible of the art scene, he is meanwhile seen as having pioneered the burning issues of today. And so the time has come for a new interview with this great champion of self-determination and individuality. The conversation took place as a written exchange on account of the current situation.



Transformer, 1 out of 3, each 120x100 cm, 1973

ART: Herr Klauke, over the past few years many of us have had to learn a whole series of new terms: from genderqueer and non-binary through to genderfluid. In the 1970s, as you acted out poses and scenes with female attributes for a number of photo series, at the most one term was used for men who wore makeup or women's clothes, transvestite.

Jürgen Klauke: Yes, you can put it like that, and these wonderful or weird mestizos, as I caringly called them, mostly moved around in the subculture, where I also felt at home. The transsexual man or the transsexual women were overwhelmingly scorned by society. Everything that deviated from the social norm was classed as "sick".

Do you welcome the diversity that finds expression in the rather complex terms now being used? Or is the discussion about the distinctions marked by all these terms, for instance when the transman distinguishes himself from the demiboy, merely just a new kind of pigeonholing?

Of course I welcome diversity, however not the thicket of terms but rather through the way in which each person creates their own life. If those affected consider such descriptions and terms to be really necessary, then okay – in the last few years, once or twice I've had the sneaking suspicion that some of these refined differentiations in the language, and not to forget the debate on toilets that followed in their trail, unfurled a rather unique charm.

As you challenged gender identities in the 1970s, that was – unlike today – something utterly outrageous. Did you feel like an outsider?

The denouncing of social norms through my pictures, and moreover to do this with the medium of photography, was at the time as untoward as initiating my body into art, using it as a projection surface for multiple identities and genders. My way of doing things had a strong effect and polarized, but I didn't feel like an outsider because I knew exactly what I was doing. I was looked at in this way more from the outside.



Selbst, 2parts, each 30x45 cm, 1973

Where you attacked?

Verbal attacks, yes, of course – I knew how to deal with them, as I did with art critics who interpreted my visual worlds as personal obsessions and couldn't imagine, or didn't want to imagine, that this subversive strategy was actually guided by a cool-headed and simultaneously sensual idea. My outward appearance alone was enough to trigger tremendous irritation. Thanks to my friendly takeover of female stereotypes like makeup, jewelry, nail polish, etcetera, coupled with otherwise masculine attributes, my everyday presence left behind a whole cluster of question marks.

In most cases you use your own body, which serves as a projection surface, to extend the idea of the physical body and sexuality. Just how much self-portrait do you put in?

My distance to the Transformer works is too clear for a prolonged self-portrait. The human body is at the center of my work – serving as the working material –, it is the “idea carrier”, the “amplifier” or “proxy” for the respective idea of a person that I am about to set the scene for. As the author in the picture I underline in a very subtle way the authenticity of the possible visual statement or intention – at least I hope so.

You were also one of the first artists to establish staged photography as an artistic medium. What was the biggest shock back then, the motif or the medium?

Both sent out shockwaves! Sexuality and its background rustlings remained mostly in the dark. In art as well, one had lost sight of the body. The medium of photography was virgin territory and it was called into question well into the eighties. “Is photography art?” – this was a quite typical title given to discussion rounds. In summary: sexuality, my body as the picture subject and the photo as the picture carrier – all that was more than problematic! My work at this time was a thorn that, prompted by me, became lodged in the dulled consciousness of this milieu.

Could you tell us a bit about your upbringing? Did you have to extricate yourself out of the moldy staidness of a middle-class home?

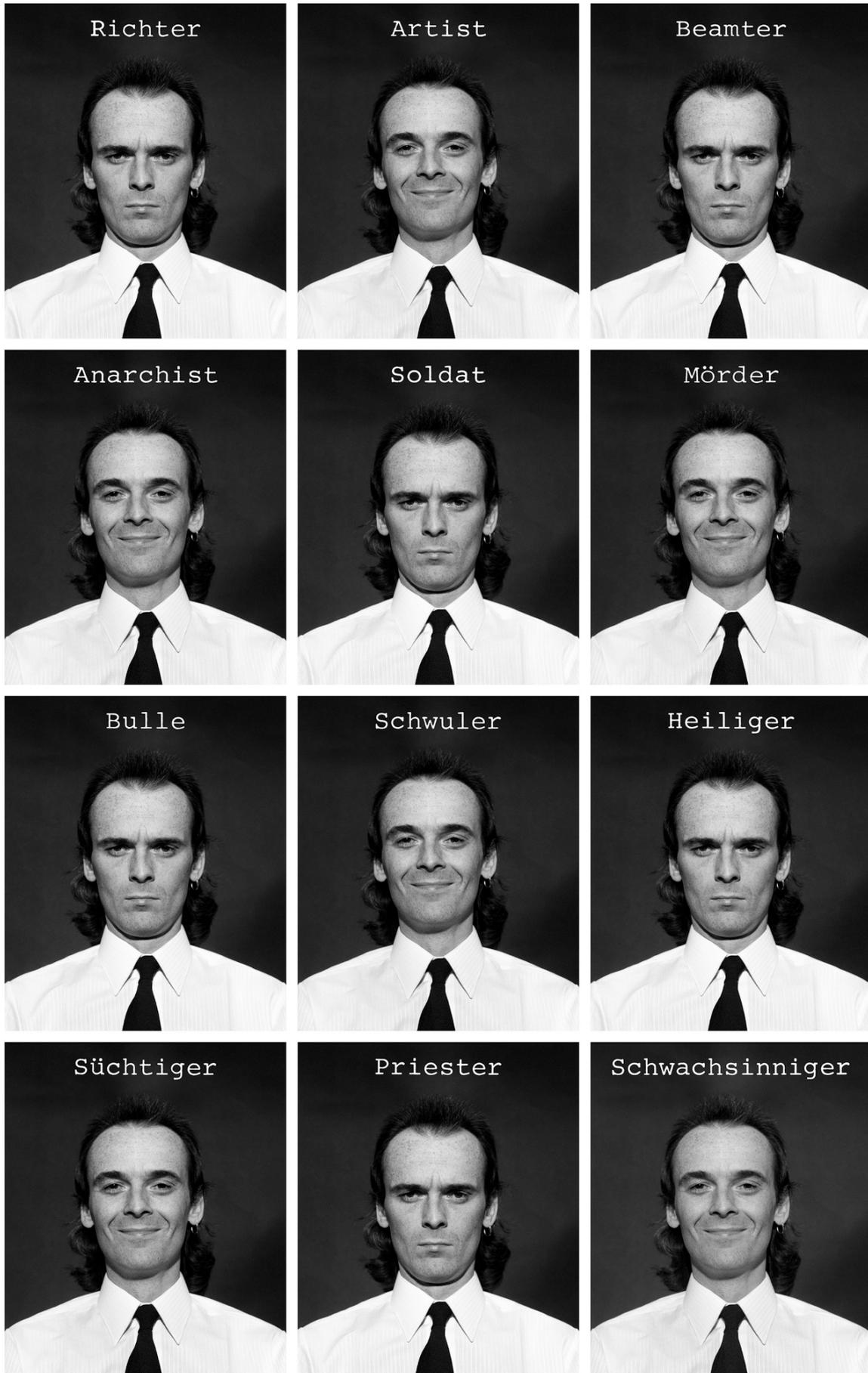
I had to extricate myself from the stuffy and uptight clutches of postwar society and shrug off the heaviness of those “leaden times”. In retrospect, I interpreted my parental home as a “literary suspicion”. Father teacher, mother innkeeper. The tension between the two poles ended for me in the episcopal boarding school, from which I then also succeeded in cutting free.

Since the eighties your works seem increasingly like experiments: downscaled, abstracter, often black-and-white. Did you want to come across as more serious?

I wouldn't know what it was about my earlier works that made them seem unserious. But the provocative idea to challenge gender identities and entrenched role codes was done. Already in the seventies, the transformation was not just limited to sexual typologies, but other social phenomena were also deconstructed. Here I'm thinking specifically of the tableau *Das menschliche Antlitz im Spiegel soziologisch-nervöser Prozesse* [The Human Visage in the Mirror of Sociological-Nervous Processes] ...

...a photo series that shows you with various facial expressions, each shot labeled with an attribution like “Imbecile”, “Civil Servant” or “Murderer”, and which strongly resembles a set of police mug shots.

My artistic thinking and action became increasingly dedicated to other unsolvable existential questions facing the individual and all the associated shortcomings. Other themes demand other pictorial languages. Subsequently, the motifs are shown in an undefined space that promises little stability. I call them reflection or resonance spaces. Most of the art positions which for me are to be taken seriously, work through our beginning and end, and the blink of an eye in-between. Over and over again life manifests as an illusion, and any meaning fails to reveal itself right up until the effrontery of the end.



Das menschliche Antlitz im Spiegel soziologisch-nervöser Prozesse , 12parts, each 60x50 cm, 1976/ 1977

In your series *Aesthetic Paranoia* you are overpowered by a veil out of long black hair. It is at once tragic and comic. How important is humor?

At the center of this set of works are two core aspects – the human individual alone in a spatial situation and the technological structures and systems which dominate us. The title was inspired by the ever-advancing aestheticizing of our lifeworld, which I countered with my “aestheticizing of the existential”. It is not in sync with the suggestions and promises of salvation populating our everyday life. The works aim to give a premonition of the collision between individual and system. And in-between a human being alone in a space, in an erotic limbo, like in the “hair works”. With my photographs I hope to contribute to visualizing – and thus bringing to mind – our paranoid existence. Humor, irony or a dash of sarcasm can relieve one or another of the pictures of their weightiness or allow the visual question posed to appear in a different light.



Zweisamkeitsimagination, 3parts, 180x240 cm, 1996/ 1997

Concurrent to your works of photography you have completed numerous drawings over the years.

I actually come from drawing, and from 1970 to 1980 I drew, amongst other works, ten day or night journals, which in part were also about softening the masculine and female dichotomy – and beyond the notion in general.

They are a kind of erotic journal, and you used extremely fine ink lines to draw body-like figurations, which are in the main made up of genitals. Very radical!

Poetry and secrecy contribute to how what's been inconceivable becoming an image. They are about sexual ambivalence and identity. It is a game with the equivocalness of the individual. Selfhood through a plurality of otherness.



Kreuz&Queer, Indian Ink on Paper, each 31,5x40.8 cm, 2019

What was the response to them?

The early, sexually-charged drawings met with the same disapproval as my photography works. Despite that, the drawings were always part of my exhibitions because they speak about the same things as the staged photos. Each of these two mediums has intrinsic specific qualities and languages, and so enable me to convey the same thoughts differently.

And yet, the photographs are far more well known.

As it has turned out, the drawings have remained in the shadow of the photo works down to the present day. Greater public attention and an overview of my drawing work, as I see it, are gradually shifting the perception and evoking increasingly positive responses.

For your new drawings you've developed a unique form of expression – binding the bodies into a black-and-white ornament.

They were preceded by *KoerperzeichenZeichenkoerper* [BodysignsSignBodies], sign systems which leave nothing superfluous in the pictorial space, it appears like it's been swept empty – in favor of a stripped-down cold region. My new series *Kreuz&Queer* [Cross&Queer] amplified the sound of these drawings, pushing them to new shores. An alternation between negative and positive arises, between

interior and exterior, between surfaces and lines. Convoluted high- and byways of my multiple, queer Drunter & Drüber Welten [Topsy-Turvy Worlds] let the image swell and subside. The bodies, torsos, fragments, prostheses, and manifestations of disintegration turn out to be erotic or sexual, and at times existentially in peril.

You are one of the few artists whose work seems to be becoming increasingly topical as the decades pass. Your work features in numerous important thematic exhibitions. What do you think about all the hype?

That my past work is becoming more and more topical is something you can judge better from the outside than I can. For my part, I've certainly noticed more public interest in the last two decades, and I'm tickled pick about it, not to forget that it really validates my work, which continues to polarize.

How has your view of the human body and human psyche changed over the last few decades?

In recent years there's been an enormous amount of talk about the virtual body or of its disappearance. Simultaneously, we are surrounded by a fetishized and globally standardized cult of the body. I trust one or two amongst us to still undertake a kind of a check to reassure themselves that it's still there. The rest plod along in step. Phenomena like these are naturally supported by the mass media and are coupled with fantasies and promises of salvation, like endless beauty, endless life, endlessly fulfilled sexuality, et cetera. Declarations of renunciation, driven by a hostility vis-à-vis lust, with respect to all "items of pleasure" top the addictive obsession with the wish-body in all its physical and psychical deformations – insatiable desiring.

As we know, hardly any of these projections will ever find fulfilment. Individuals are coopted into enforced conformity and cemented in their desires, their wishes – in parts of my pictures, for example Desaströses Ich [Disastrous Me], the fragmented body becomes an abstract form, a sign that divests it of any individuality. What remains is a heap of flesh – an empty husk – the body becomes a requisite of a heteronomous world.

Are the social constraints lesser today or possibly even greater than in the seventies?

With respect to art specifically, today interference and arrogance from the outside are once more on the rise. Tendencies have become established which are seeking to massively counter artistic freedom. Here I'd like to name offshoots of the "MeToo" debate, PC in general, and Cancel Culture as fueling such trends. Political Correctness damages art – Cancel Culture completes the job. Politically correct art would be what decoration or illustration in art always exuded – boredom! Neither morality nor rationality are categories for the arts. Neither are plebiscites. Nonconformance and subversion, in other words the breaching of rules and overstepping the mark, are important components in artistic action. The moral infuriation already had a name back in the sixties: the "clean cinema screens" campaign. But art acts contrary to the institutions and systems which are geared towards efficient action and quick-fire conformity. Art deviates and creates contradictions and conflicts. It deepens perception of the world. In this way, the useless "project" of art, liberated from the laws of logic, is useful. When it comes off, the Sisyphean toiling away in the experimental set-up of art is transformed into knowledge.

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