

Robert Kudielka

*Speech on the opening of the exhibition of the work of Uta Göhring-Zumpe at the 'Rathausgalerie Tempelhof' on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2000*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I first saw the Uta Göhring-Zumpe exhibition here two days ago, I was reminded of a story that Julius Meier-Graefe once told. It is set in the Paris of the 1890s and is about the first and only major one-man exhibition of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1893). As young artists often are, the painter was always present while the exhibition was open, to see who came and how people reacted. But he had to wait a long time, namely until the very last day, for one particular visitor, the one who mattered to him above all. And just one hour before the exhibition closed, he actually came, with a walking stick and gloves: Edgar Degas, grandmaster of the art of drawing and aristocratic misanthrope. He inspected the exhibition without uttering a word, and as he left said one single sentence, which Toulouse-Lautrec talked about in the next few days in bars and taverns all over Paris, namely "Lautrec, vous êtes du métier!" (Lautrec, you understand your craft!).

'You understand your craft', 'du métier'; that is the attribute that came to mind when I saw Uta Göhring-Zumpe's exhibition. One thing is clear: these are not paintings that have revolutionised the history of art. Yet nor are these paintings academic in the pejorative sense that for a long time was associated with conventional figurative painting. 'Academic' in this sense has long ceased to exist. Today, academic refers to all sorts of things but not to painting. What are academic are the ever recurring 'last', usually monochrome pictures, the glossy photos in Cibachrome, the sampled videos, the conceptual friendship books, the installations with reinforcing bars, plastic sheeting and sawn-off chairs; in short: what is academic today is what any ambitious art student does after just two semesters, namely 'takes the concept of art a stage further'.

In comparison, the paintings of Uta Göhring-Zumpe are simple, 'crafted', or to put it better: 'built' for those who prefer the jargon of knowing how to do things in actual practice. They are examples of a specifically modern tradition, of a freely chosen tradition of the conventions of painting that, similar to the conventions of music practice for example, certainly may well survive the relatively short history of the concept of art.

A visitor to this exhibition will – after first marvelling at the vibrancy of colour – soon discover how much traditional visual intelligence, how much painting experience from the last 150 years has gone into these works. This is expressed by pronounced contrasting and combining of a decorative-ornamental style of painting with one that is three-dimensional and spatial, the vertical rhythmic structure of the surface which is juxtaposed by the arabesque of the figure or the reflection of pictures within the picture. And what is particularly striking is the inner logic of the colour of the painting that – as you probably noticed on the invitation – can call for a lemon on a yellow background appearing blue, the colour of a violin blending in with the white of the sheet music, or the red stockings becoming more important than the face of the model.

This consistent visual intelligence that is immediately striking does not, however, mean that the work of Uta Göhring-Zumpe is intellectual; anything but that. On the contrary, the temperament expressed in these paintings tends, despite the manifestly large number of bunches of flowers, to be anything but flowery but, in contrast, more abrupt and direct, and for my taste – at least in some of the early pictures – a bit audacious.

Probably that's how you have to be if more than forty years previously you had moved from Nieblum on the North Frisian island of Föhr to become a painter. Nieblum, a place that is clearly 'out in the sticks' and lies well north of the painting equator. On the subject of Föhr, the Brockhaus encyclopaedia records 'a large number of seafarer graves' and for more recent times: 'The mild bracing climate was the reason for building 18 centres where children could benefit from the fresh sea air.' Probably Uta Zumpe would never have come to Berlin and, as the exhibition documents, have made such an impact if she had not remained the precocious country girl with the untoward ability to roar with laughter.

As I went round the exhibition with her on Friday, I remarked by the way that none of her many models actually included a full-length male portrait. Her explanation was brief and dry, a terse piece of rural worldly wisdom: "The men are not able to sit still for long – the women, they sit and brood." And when I asked her why none of the paintings in the exhibition were dated as after all they spanned a period of ten years, she answered with that inimitable mixture of down-to-earth and shrewdness: "If I dated them, Nieblumers would start asking: 'Hey, haven't you sold that one yet?'" Uta Göhring-Zumpe entirely lives up to what Francis Bacon expected of an artist. According to him, one has to be 'square', thoroughly grounded, i.e. slow on the uptake, so as not to go with the flow at every little thing.

On the other hand, I have often wondered whether this robust disposition, this disregard for

etiquette and lack of deference may have prevented her from pursuing a different career. With her love of being with other people, of informal get-togethers and the diversity of her artistic interests – apart from painting, dance, music and theatre play, as the motifs of her paintings show, an important role in her life – she could easily have been a formidable Berlin society lady ... were it not for her blatant and refreshing lack of affectedness that makes her the person she is and not very well suited to life as a socialite.

So we have to content ourselves with only encountering the salon of 'Madam(e) Zumpe' in her paintings as this is where they are sometimes featured: her friends from the worlds of music, dance and theatre, whom she invites to her now legendary summer show on Föhr every year. But they do not define her paintings to such an extent that it could be said that Uta Göhring-Zumpe only painted a particular kind of milieu. Confining herself to painting only and the solitude of the studio do not limit her but open up a different, imaginary space. Thank God she did not become a society lady. By confining her craft to painting, she shows that this flamboyant woman is basically deep down an upright soul in the best sense, who can marvel at and has a sense of the standing and importance of artistic achievements. It is this singular mixture of natural forwardness and a quiet ability to marvel that has taken Uta Göhring-Zumpe far beyond Berlin – at least as far as art is concerned: namely to the Mediterranean region.

Now, having almost reached the end, I probably should confess that I have known Uta for a very long time and despite this, I only saw her work on this scale – 58 paintings – for the first time just two days ago. However, I don't know Uta in the way you know someone from the scene, through sporadically hearing something and occasional contacts. We have had one, no actually three, fixed weekly meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5pm to 7pm at my lectures and in the seminar on Wednesdays from 8pm to 10pm for the past twenty years. Uta kept these appointments over two decades at least as faithfully as I myself did. Usually she sits at the front on the right for my lecture – as she does now, but in the lecture hall it's the third row – and initiates and establishes contacts between newcomers of both sexes, reserves seats and knows my listeners – who for an art history teacher largely have to remain in darkness so that the slides can be seen – on the whole better than I do.

What's more, when I walked around this exhibition on Friday, I had a strange feeling. Not just that I quickly recognised a series of motifs and it became clear to me that I must have said and showed quite a lot about Matisse over the years and a little – not quite so successfully as in Uta's case – about Monet. No, not just that I encountered the odalisques and face masks that are far from being as impersonal as they appear at the first impression, the fans and even the model's stool from *Nasturtiums and the Dance* (1912), in Uta's work with a geranium – it is above all the

manner of painting, the impressive art of colour in these paintings that makes the references clear: the exquisite, skilfully abrupt contrasts, for example the almost white chromoxide green against the cadmium red of the pomegranates in the painting on the front wall outside the room; or the meticulous shading with which a figure in a blue dress on a blue background is differentiated in shades of blue; and, of course, above all the great art of the colourist, perhaps even the greatest art of all: creating light by using black among the colours. These are all things that can be taught, they can be demonstrated, but what is surprising about this exhibition is that they can be learnt. Can be learnt, acquired to the extent that the artist can put them into practice entirely freely and independently. This exhibition has astounded me by showing what an individual can achieve with a portion of courage and boldness and with healthy respect for the challenges of painting.

It was almost a feeling of emotion that overcame me in the underground on my way home. I told myself that if I one day am called to account before a final judge (preferably by an Egyptian one as I share Uta's proclivity towards Egypt if not particularly towards belly dancing) ..., so if I were to stand before Anubis, the jackal with the scales of death, and be asked: "What do you have to say for yourself apart from the fact that like every real teacher you learnt more from your lectures than all your students?" – then I will, following a moment of bafflement – be able to say: "Anubis, you old rascal, open your eyes. I still have a pair of red stockings, a blue lemon on a yellow background and a magnificent bunch of violets on a red background. I don't pretend that I did this, that's not the way spiritual things work, it always takes two. But this daughter of Hathor did not on any account get worse in the two decades that she attended my lectures, but better." And from off-stage in this imaginary scenario the voice of the 'bon dieu' of autonomous colour painting can be heard: "Evidemment du métier!"

*(Transcription of a speech revised by the author)*