

FRAGMENTS AS A MICRO-UNIVERSE

Ruth Barabash's Pictorial Constellations Beyond Any Attempt at Legitimation

Lóránd Hegyi

The forms in Ruth Barabash's drawings and watercolours, which are juxtaposed almost mechanically, monotonously, without hierarchy or value judgements, and presented with sober quasi-objectiveness, are easily recognizable and legible representations – sometimes intentionally naïve, simple and emblematic – of the human body, of faces, hands and legs, or of objects with an immediate physical connection to the body, such as clothing or bags. Yet their positioning and the pictorial constellations also include something unexpectedly compact, coherent and enigmatic, or an entity that does not necessarily reveal itself as logical, predictable and necessary: a narrative nature. A peculiar, immanent narrative arises from the pictorial constellations, although no action is actually taking place. In these pictures, there is no story, no occurrence, no process of change with a clear beginning and end.

We are left waiting for something to happen, as the entire constellation of the picture suggests the imaginary possibility of some occurrence, or hints at some kind of event. The juxtaposition of the fragments leaves room for imagining the possibility of a series or a temporal sequence of events. However, these events do not claim legitimacy as the true story; instead, the possibility of a narrative sequence of some sort of story is generated by the mutual referentiality of the individual fragments. These fragments, depicted in sensual colours and structured by means of monotonous, mechanical and repetitive – yet irregular – juxtaposition, repeat the forms of the body with small differences and constant variations in their proportions, colours and perspectives. Sometimes they provide a closer look at a fragment of the body, sometimes they zoom out; they may be slightly larger or somewhat smaller, yet never leave any doubt as to their fundamental identity.

This permanent confusion, constant questioning and revocation of questions creates the peculiar illusion – which is not striking, strange or spectacular, but objective, so to speak – that something is actually happening here, that something is in fact occurring, that an actual story is being represented, or that there is at least the possibility that something is in fact happening. The fragments, the monotonous structure and the indifferent, irregular repetition of fragments hint at something possibly happening, even if it is not revealed. However, when observers try to specify

the beginning or end of this story, and seek to define the inner legitimacy of what is happening, they find themselves unable to reconstruct any stories that may be possible. The definite and irrevocable absence of an actual story, and the objective absence of the legitimation of a story, manifests in Ruth Barabash's subtle pictorial constellations.

The individual, very similar figures – defamiliarized and reified in some way – are repeated with small variations, and always remain vivacious, with a sensual presence, although they are not representations of real figures in real-life situations. The barely noticeable differences between the sections and proportions of the body, and the subtle differences in colour apparent in the figures and objects cause a constant confusion of perception. They serve to create the impression that we can immediately grasp and understand the entire constellation of the picture and the events it hints at, yet actually, nothing turns out to be logical, explicable or historical, nothing seems to unfold in time, and there is nothing that could be an understandable story playing out over time.

The impression that something is happening here, in the specific constellation of the picture, in this pictorial reality, that a story is being told, or a development or process is taking place, is negated by the visual and sculptural arrangement of the fragments in itself, or set apart from any logic or transparency. Instead, the pictures manifest the impossibility of an actual story or a true, comprehensible, logical and necessary process of development emerging, and actually pose the question of legitimation for any possible story, or the question of legitimation for the possibility of a story. The basic question is not about what is happening here, but if something is even happening, or if anything can even happen, that is, if the ephemeral, temporary constellation of fragments can be understood as a story.

“How could the grand narratives of legitimation still have credibility [...]? This is not to suggest that there are no longer any credible narratives at all. By metanarratives or grand narratives, I mean precisely narrations with a legitimating function. Their decline does not stop countless other stories (minor and not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life. [...] There is an uncriticized metaphysical element in general narratology that accords hegemony to one genre – the narrative – over all the others, a sort of sovereignty of minor narratives that allows them to escape the crisis of delegitimation. It is true that they escape, but only because they never had any legitimating value.”¹

The “sovereignty of minor narratives” with no claim to legitimation observed by Jean-François Lyotard is based on the perception of the poetic significance of subtle, immediate, seemingly insignificant and fragile micro-situations that reflect anthropological constellations without ideological abstraction, and are inherent to empathetic relationships between diverse contexts, different spheres of life and systems of expression. According to Lyotard, the minor narratives have no claim to any sort of general, legitimating value or universal, abstract recognition by a

community or a worldview. Instead, they remain in the realm of poetry, of all that is personal and singular, of directly, emotionally and imaginatively effective, sensitive and specific micro-realities.

Their sensitivity and specificity touch on subtle, hidden zones of anthropological constellations; their empathetic introspection refers to hidden, intimate and emotional aspects of human orientation; their poetic intimations open up paths to imaginative wanderings and connections. The quiet, seemingly uneventful, undemanding and fragile intimacy of minor narratives resists any attempt at generalization and any totalizing abstraction. Instead of hierarchy, totality, linearity and necessity, these micro-narratives are determined by fluidity, ambiguity and relativity, as well as by ephemeral, fragmentary constellations that are temporary, fleeting and singular.

In a crisis of grand, universal and totalizing narratives that can no longer offer credible perspectives of historically and ethically realistic generalization, artists find the poetic perspectives of empathetic, emotionally effective and still credible engagement in micro-narratives. This also involves a gentle, tolerant and empathic engagement with the complex and subtle human constellations in each case, in which poetic sensibility creates imagined areas, suggestive images and new connections without striving for abstract, totalizing, unilateral generalization.

The poetic effectiveness of these micro-narratives always remains within the individual responsibility of the artist; it is singular, specific, direct and personal, with no claim to generalization. "The unity of what is involved in each artistic proposition today is included in the proposition itself in its singularity; no one singularity is more 'subjective' than another, since none of them has the privilege of objectivity. These essays, like these phrases, are made 'within being' and not before its eyes. Each work presents a micro-universe; each time, being is nothing but each one of these presentations."²

With suggestive, poetic power, Ruth Barabash's paintings and drawings elicit the imagined realms of still relevant micro-universes, and as Lyotard observes, the privilege of objectivity can no longer be claimed. Aesthetic relevance includes metaphorical moments and involves metaphorical, pictorial narratives. Their suggestive singularity and radical imagination create connections between experiences and memories, connotations and perceptions, thus opening up imaginative perspectives without relying on abstract, universal, totalizing constructs of thought. The poetic, empathetic relevance of micro-narratives lies precisely in the fact that they are specific, limited and singular, in their fragmentary and subjective relativity.

Ruth Barabash's method of consistent – but irregular – repetition, reification and defamiliarization of individual motifs; the way she plays with small variations of what seems to be one and the same body; her technique of confusing – or even discriminating – the identities of sometimes clichéd figures mechanically juxtaposed

without hierarchy or logic; all these convey the relative relevance of ephemeral constellations that pretend to be a story, and the absence of any claim to legitimation in these micro-universes. The artist is seeking the possibility of a micro-narrative that is still credible and relevant, at least on a subjective, personal, singular and temporary level, and that reflects certain vivid, authentic experiences and anthropologically comprehensible conditions.

In this sense, it can be claimed that the subtle visual constellations that appear in drawings and paintings by Ruth Barabash are stories of a search for relevant, though fragmentary and temporary micro-narratives, for metaphorical, ironic narratives about the impossibility of narratives, or about the undiscoverability of reasonable, understandable events that can be reconstructed and are meant to lead us someplace, to show us a higher, more complex stage. The absence of such “development” with a temporal sequence, the ironic questioning of a possible “development” that is supposed to structure the material of the micro-narratives, evokes the impossibility and incredibility of stories with a claim to general legitimacy.

“Each work presents a micro-universe,” says Lyotard, emphasizing that the actual artistic relevance of each micro-narrative emerges within the anthropological specificity of unique, singular, fragmentary and temporary constellations, and does not require any abstract legitimacy constituted beyond the specific singularity of the micro-universe. By this, the question of the artist’s responsibility or capability is also posed in a different way than it is in the monolithic, hierarchic cultures of collective, mythological or scientific narratives of legitimation. The singular and ephemeral, temporary and fragile, subtle micro-universe emerging from the fragments makes no claim to universal legitimacy; to the contrary, it manifests a specific, temporary and ephemeral, anthropological reality beyond any abstract generalizations.

The micro-universe of “minor narratives”, constituted from fragments, does not refer to any universal, transcendental or ontological truth or abstract objectivity. In his essay “Pluralism, the Cosmopolitan and the Avant-Garde”, Andrew Benjamin analyzes contemporary artistic practice in the context of legitimacy and interpretation, and makes a fundamental observation about the absence of a sole, collectively relevant interpretation legitimized by conventions of artistic work: “[...] it is already clear that the conflict that marks the debate concerning the presence or absence of what Kristeva called ‘transcendent truth’, or what Lyotard calls ‘grand narratives’, can only be understood and accounted for in terms of a theory of dissensus; one which recognized the absence of a final resolution. In other words justice can only be done to dissensus within pluralism.”³

Ruth Barabash’s drawings and paintings convey anonymity, inconspicuousness, unintentionality, undramatic materiality and an apparent indifference towards the personal, anecdotal and psychological characteristics of the figures depicted. By the irony resulting from monotonous repetition, she seems to be casting doubt on the possible identity of the individual, fragmentary figures. In fact, it is not their identity,

but rather the meaning of their identity that is being questioned. When identity loses its significance, when identity no longer plays any role in an anthropological structure, not even a temporary one, it becomes impossible to create real, vivid and relevant relationships between the figures, and to perceive the generation and transformation of these relationships as relevant stories. By this, the figures and fragments, juxtaposed mechanically and seemingly unintentionally, are involved in a broader anthropological, socio-cultural and intellectual context of perception, hierarchy formation, semiotic generation and narrative creation.

Ruth Barabash emphasizes the defamiliarization of the figures through fragmentation, mechanical repetition and de-emotionalization, by questioning their identity and detaching them from any shared, symbolic context. By their repetitive positions and articulations, she gives the unintentionally juxtaposed figures and fragments the status of dolls, the status of material, mechanical objects with no will of their own. An irritating, disconcerting ambiguity is created by the fact that the seemingly neutral, material dolls with no will of their own – young girls or women, fragments of bodies or pieces of clothing – can nonetheless appear confusingly touching, personal, alive and active, intense and intrusive, even provocative and communicative. Nevertheless, their sensual entities, their material, sculptural presence, their eccentric intrusiveness and peculiar intensity do not emerge from their actual own, real personalities, decisions and efforts, their will or their choice, but instead from the constellations chosen by the artist, from the visual and sculptural, poetically structured arrangement that manifests the impossibility of the emergence of true stories, and the relative relevance of micro-narratives.

Although the mechanical bodies that seem like automata or objects exhibit certain psychological attitudes and sometimes startlingly direct, pathological traits, they still remain in the realm of the material world, which is actually defined and made concrete by our perception, and related to ourselves, our specificity, uniqueness and personal existence. In this process, Ruth Barabash's figures are given their own, specific meaning and poetic message, namely the loss of significance of a specific, singular, unique and irreplaceable identity. Ruth Barabash's mechanical bodies and fragments intrude into our world; they confront us with their material presence in our space, in our environment, thus gaining an ambivalent, compelling and alarming character, though without exhibiting any direct intention or general orientation.

Something fundamentally true, materially substantial, directly real and anthropologically specific is intimated here; it includes both elements of disintegration of our human entity, and perspectives of a new, empathetic participation in potential occurrences, and this empathy determines the awareness of the artist's specific capability. However, this artistic capability does not create any universal narratives of legitimation, canonized explanations or teleologically constructed justifications for universal hierarchies and models of behaviour. Instead, it contents itself with human immediacy and empathetic sensitivity. Paradoxically, it is precisely that absence of an active subject and its teleological story that requires some sort of effective energy

– imagination, creative work, the process of creation – to allow us to consider coincidence, fragmentation and temporary, ephemeral and variable constellations as relevant structures, as a comprehensible model.

Translation: Judith Wolframm, Vienna

Notes:

1. Jean-François Lyotard: *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 19f.
2. Jean-François Lyotard: *Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation*. In: *Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*. Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2012, p. 169.
3. Andrew Benjamin: *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde – Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference*. Routledge, London & New York, 1991, p. 18.