

### “HOUSE WALLS, BRIDGES AND DIRTY CORNERS”

These are the subjects of his works, Kurt Dornis told the author some time ago during a conversation about the selection of works for an exhibition.<sup>1</sup> His subjects have in fact remained unchanged for decades. They are to be found around the city of Leipzig in the suburbs, above all in Schleußig and Plagwitz. Still lifes are rarer, and there are scarcely any true works with figures - a few among the drawings until the seventies, but as paintings only really “Frau mit Kind”.<sup>2</sup> His art is based on drawing, and on the strict composition of the image. Details are precisely observed, but are not however addressed in a determining or superficial way; perspective plays a significant role. The dimension of depth in his works is based on it. Colour is applied rather two-dimensionally, filling in the drawn framework, rather than shaping physically or creating atmosphere. In the works from the seventies and eighties of the last century, it is hard like local colour and occasionally bright; after 1990 it is increasingly richer in tone and softer, more atmospheric. “Drawing has remained of primary importance for me. Initial thoughts and creations can here be controlled, and ideally the further development of the idea can be pursued. I regard the drawing as a kind of draft. I discover a lot with its help. It is possible to draw without painting, but I see no way for me the other way round,” said the artist during an exhibition of drawings.<sup>3</sup> Kurt Dornis’ preferred drawing material is pencil. With it, just like a draughtsman, he can sharply outline forms, but at the same time also shape details with hatching or in two dimensions. In this way, clarity of form and virtually diffusing, almost to say painterly components come together in harmony, supported occasionally by watercolour. His interest from his earliest works onwards lay much more strongly in the structural elements of buildings or technical constructions than in atmospheric effects. Different materials – natural stone, brick, pavement, iron or steel – essentially determine, clearly different from each other, the effect of the image. Sketches made directly “in situ” with graphite pencil have the character of manuscripts; studies worked out in the studio are developed with pictorial effect in mind, up to pasteboards for painting. In the last decade, predominantly large-format drawings have been created with

the use of soft drawing materials: charcoal and coloured chalk, and additionally also tempera and gouache. All the picture elements and subjects in his works are real, are studied and created anew in drawing in such a way that a distance to them develops, and they appear as though deprived of emotion, even when a self-portrait appears in a picture in the form of a passport photo, as in “Stilleben mit Briefwaage und Glühlampe” (1973), based on a drawing (without the photo at that stage) from 1972, repeated in 1976 in an etching.<sup>4</sup> The subject of the dried, sharp-edged leaves in a cup, left out of the 1973 work, and the letter scale, which is registering hardly any weight, formulate the question about the “weight” not just of the person of the artist, but much more of artistic activity at the time.

The proximity to the art of the “New Objectivity” of the 1920s, especially to those elements identifiable with verismo, is unmistakable. If this art is spoken of as “magic” realism, then it is in the sense “that the mystery does not enter the represented world, but holds itself back behind it”.<sup>5</sup> It is not nostalgia that determines Kurt Dornis’ view of his subject, it is much more the view of a documenter, who wants to show how he sees it and who discovers several attractions in this attitude which the observer of the pictures is also unable to elude. It seems to him that time stands still in the works, over which the peace and ease of a Sunday or a holiday spreads - even those rare people represented here display no haste. At the same time, they are anything but mere distance or decorative figures. As figures seen from behind, they lead the observer into the space of the pictures, are in the same space with him or her, isolated from the surroundings.<sup>6</sup> Where figures are depicted front on, then they emphasize not just the dimension of depth; they essentially close off the picture towards the front. Occasionally there are figures at the edges of paintings, who turn away from the observer and look sidelong into an undefined distance. The movements of his figures seem always just as fixedly captured as in a photograph.

“A picture is not only the representation of some object or other, but is also the attempt to make recognizable thoughts, ideas and other things in the object, to make them visible to others in the picture. Thus also to grapple with yellow and grey tones – with spaces, lines, points. Masses, planes, colours are compared, the smallest with

the biggest ... In the midst of this, there is hardly any mention of the thing or the object”, was how Kurt Dornis described his position as the artist.<sup>7</sup>

As “objects” for his art, the artist preferred urban situations, finding them in Leipzig’s suburbs, in the residential areas of the industrial age, his living environment: Streets, houses in courtyards, individual buildings (including “Lutherkirche”, 1985); railway stations (“Plagwitzer Bahnhof”, around 2000, an initial version around 1952/52; “Ausgang Plagwitzer Bahnhof”, 2009; “Wiederkehr” Bayrischer Bahnhof, 1979; “S-Bahn-Station Lützschena”, 2004; “Bushaltestelle am Güterbahnhof Wahren”, 2005); railway tracks (“Reichsbahngelände”, Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste as well as the related draft drawing “Abstellgleise”, both 1979); technical railway constructions, such as bridges (“Zwei Eisenbahnbrücken in Lützschena”, 2008), and maintenance works, as well as 19th-century industrial architecture (“Federwellen-Fabrik in Wahren”, 1973; repetition of the subject under the title “Alte Fabrik”, 1986, Kunstsammlung der Sparkasse Leipzig); abandoned factories (“Werkhalle der einstigen Brauerei Lützschena”, 2008) and bridges over rivers and canals.

Occasionally motifs are shown picture parallel, predominantly in earlier works, such as in the drawing and painting “Leipzig, Brandenburger Brücke” (1963)<sup>8</sup> or in the painting “Dächer” (1969).<sup>9</sup> Above all, he constructs the majority of his pictures and drawings of urban situations according to the rules of central perspective, well-nigh classically in “Wiederkehr” (1978/79) or “Abstellgleise” (1979), also “Ausgang Plagwitzer Bahnhof” (2009), often however skewed, seen “aslant” or plunging steeply into the depths, often from a low point of sight. Examples include the “Rote Kirche” (1958)<sup>10</sup> or the drawing “Plagwitz” (circa 1965),<sup>11</sup> above all however the picture “Frau mit Kind am Fenster” (1971).<sup>12</sup> The view from the raised position of the enlarged top floor in Könnneritzstraße captures the opposite side of the street down below, with tiny passers-by, and the group at the bus stop more or less directly below the roof gutter, dynamically shortening the distance to the Karl Heine villa and the Mey & Edlich factory. The high-rise building of the Karl-Marx-University, here under construction and famous as the “uni giant”, can however not be seen from the viewpoint in the picture. In this way, the artist

has placed a current event into his painting. The person moving away on the platform of the Bayrischer Bahnhof, which is still in use but seems abandoned, in the picture “Wiederkehr” (1978/79) or the figure seen from behind of a man peering around the corner in the picture with a Leipzig gasometer from the 19th century (1983/84)<sup>13</sup> are to be seen as a note in the margin, essentially a kind of commentary.

If Kurt Dornis’ drawing style hints at connections to the positions of artists of the 19th century, and Peter Cornelius (1793 – 1867), Bonaventura Genelli (1798 – 1868) or Philipp Otto Runge (1777 – 1810) are names that were not unknown to the artists of the “New Objectivity”, then the extreme shortening of depth is reminiscent of baroque forerunners such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720 – 1778). This can be seen especially in works such as “Maler auf der Straße mit Hochhaus” (1974)<sup>14</sup> or “Viadukt in Wahren” (1978).

Above all, bridges have commanded the artist’s interest for decades. Whether erected in stone, crossing the Karl-Heine-Kanal between Plagwitz and Lindenau or constructed from steel. These include the “Könnneritzbrücke” from 1899 across the Elster between Schleußig and Plagwitz, with the title “Brücke mit aufgehender Sonne” (1974),<sup>15</sup> probably his most famous work.<sup>16</sup> It is depicted as seen from the Nonnenstrasse, with a view of Karl Heine’s villa, the constructor of the canal that bears his name and which made possible the industrial development of Plagwitz. A railway bridge is set diagonally into the picture as a steel girder construction over a stretch of river between alluvial forest and a bleak mountain of rubble, which has a monumental effect because of the contrast, and is titled “Melancholie”. The pencil drawing of the same name was created in 1978, the painting later in 1982. The descriptive character of the drawing is made absolute in the painting with by means of slightly altered proportions, the discarding of the second figure on the opposite bank, and a heightened emphasis on the steel construction in its impression of smoothness and coldness; the rails trail off aimlessly, the girl turns away, looking out of the picture into emptiness, into nothingness - a situation is shown in the picture that symbolically reflects the reality of that time.<sup>17</sup> The gaze away out of the picture into an undefined distance also defines a painting from the year 1980, executed in

different versions. The determining subject in the picture is the "Schuldenkmal" memorial on the Dittrichring near the Thomaskirche. It was erected in 1894 as a donation by pupils to commemorate the centenary of the Ratsfreischule, and decorated with relief portraits of the first directors, Karl Gottlob Plato (d. 1833) and Johann Christian Dolz (d. 1843). But the painting is no veduta; it does not show the installation site, but transfers the monument to a no-man's-land of a bare, slightly hilly autumnal or wintry landscape (in one each of the versions of the picture) with bare or dead trees. A monument to commemorate those men who promoted education for all, transferred to a completely dead environment, into a scene of abandonment with bare trees, rendered empty and meaningless. The solitary figure in the picture, standing on the left at the edge of a pond, gazes aimlessly into uncertainty. Blocks of stone lie around, useless. A site fence, which protects nothing, bounds the picture on the right. By a hut secured with a padlock is the main switch of an electrical lead, whose adventurous route behind a construction plank ends in nothingness; insulators lie strewn around. As though plaintively, the boughs of the dead trees stretch diagonally through the picture behind the obelisk. A memorial, which celebrates general education deemed useless, a relic of bourgeois times that are supposed to be considered overcome - set apart in nothingness and soon cleared away with an explosion, probably just like the former monumental building whose stone lies around, roughly piled, having fallen victim to the rage for destruction of an age that suppressed and negated historical consciousness? One version is titled "Denkmal für die bürgerlichen Pädagogen Plato und Dolz"; another "Winterlandschaft mit Denkmal".<sup>18</sup> The chill of the winter landscape and the stiffness of the nature are used by the artist as symbols of a "leaden age".<sup>19</sup>

The proximity to "New Objectivity" is characteristic in contemporary Leipzig art not just of Kurt Dornis. His peers Günter Thiele and Günter Richter (b. 1933) are also to be included, and at a certain distance Arnd Schultheiß (b. 1930) as well. Their works in the Leipzig district art exhibitions gave them the appearance of representing a group of artists of new verismo. Dornis and Thiele, the former a stage painter, the latter a radio mechanic, did attend the Leipzig School of Applied Arts,

studying under Walter Münze, but Kurt Dornis worked freelance from 1952 onwards, while Günter Thiele abandoned his studies in Leipzig, continuing them later and graduating in West Berlin at the College of Fine Arts, as a student of Ernst Schumacher. Günter Richter, trained as an embosser at the Meissen porcelain factory, was a student of Bernhard Heisig; Arnd Schultheiß studied with Elisabeth Voigt and Max Schwimmer. In 1978 Lothar Lang described Dornis, Thiele and Richter as the "troika of neo-verist townscape painters," and pointed out that younger artists, such as Volker Stelzmann (b. 1940) or Ulrich Hachulla (b. 1943) were already following them as "epic artists of the objective tendency".<sup>20</sup> His claim that their works showed "the old proletarian houses on the other side of the Juste Milieu"<sup>21</sup> is not quite right, in that they did not seek out or observe their subjects in opposition to the residential areas of the upper classes. On the contrary, Kurt Dornis allegorically reflected, by means of those areas of the West of Leipzig that arose in the Industrial Age of the 19th century, his living environment as it existed between 1945 and 1989. In their vividness they became a chronicle, even if that was not their intended purpose. In the 8th art exhibition of the Leipzig district in 1972, the works shown by Dornis ("Frau mit Kind am Fenster"), Thiele ("Brücke in Plagwitz") and Richter ("Ballspieler") became the trigger for a curiously intellectualised controversy, "Objectivity versus Sensuality"<sup>22</sup>, in which the impersonal stance towards objects was labelled as lacking in emotion.<sup>23</sup>

The statement by Annelise Hübscher, on the other hand, is worthy of consideration: "In my conception of things, the first specification of the »Leipzig School« is bound... to [the] very detail-oriented painting, as... Dornis, Thiele or Richter represents it".<sup>24</sup>

Kurt Dornis, in a statement made in 1989, said that comparing everything leads to nothing, because "at the end nothing is right... the attempt is abandoned, and one observes the results with some detachment - it is unsatisfactory". But he continues: "Sometime later, there could be something in it at second glance... And so it continues to change in one. Is it worth beginning further attempts?"<sup>25</sup> His work, that grew over six decades, proves: It was worth it!

Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> During a studio visit in September 2005 in preparation for the exhibition „5“ at the Kunstverein Panitzsch e.V., 9/10. – 27/11/2005.
- <sup>2</sup> also titled “Mutter und Kind”; Kunstsammlung der Sparkasse Leipzig
- <sup>3</sup> quoted from: Galerie am Sachsenplatz Leipzig, Katalog Nr. 2 zur 38. Ausstellung “Ausgewählte Handzeichnungen von Künstlern der DDR” 1976, p.10, Nr. 9
- <sup>4</sup> Pencil drawing with watercolour, 1972. Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste; Gouache work from 1973, large light bulb and toy bird.
- <sup>5</sup> Roh, Franz. Nach-Expressionismus. Magischer Realismus. Leipzig 1925, foreword from March 1925.
- <sup>6</sup> As in the painting “Zweite Schicht” (1986). Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Galerie Neue Meister.
- <sup>7</sup> Statement by the artist from 1989, quoted from: Lust und Last. Leipziger Kunst seit 1945. Katalog zur Ausstellung 1997 in Nürnberg und Leipzig, p. 355. Franz Roh described a principle of the art of “New Objectivity” in 1925 in his book “Nach-Expressionismus”: “Not ... depiction, but a strict raising, construction of the objects, which ultimately are found in such a preliminary form in nature. The old Aristotelian term of imitation had already had an intellectual character”., p. 36 (see note 5)
- <sup>8</sup> Both Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste. In the painting (80 x 96cm) the artist altered the definite landscape format of the drawing (41,7 x 59 cm), created the stone bridge pier with a terrace-like protrusion next to it and placed the steel framework of the bridge at the centre of the picture, in contrast to the panoramic effect of the drawing.
- <sup>9</sup> Frankfurt an der Oder, Museum Junge Kunst. A related pictorial viewpoint is found around three decades later in the picture “Wollgarnfabrik”, 1995; the frame is filled by a part of the building of the former Saxon wool yarn factory Tittel & Krüger, later designated as a dyed yarn works.
- <sup>10</sup> Represented is the Heilandskirche in Plagwitz, built 1886 – 1888, on the corner of Weißenfelser Straße and Erich-Zeigner-Allee.
- <sup>11</sup> It depicts a location in the Zschocherschen Straße.
- <sup>12</sup> Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum
- <sup>13</sup> “Historisch wertvolles Bauwerk mit Wächter”, 1983/84; Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste
- <sup>14</sup> Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste
- <sup>15</sup> Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste. Different versions of the subject exist, also as an etching from 1976.
- <sup>16</sup> The Könnertitzbrücke served Leipzig artists as a subject several times in the 20th century. These include, among others, paintings by Karl Krug (1900 – 1983) “Könnertitzbrücke in Leipzig”, created circa 1965/70, Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum or Doris Ziegler (b.1949) “Brücke in Plagwitz mit Liebespaar” (“Plagwitzer Nacht”) , circa 1985/89.
- <sup>17</sup> The painting “Melancholie” (1982) is in the Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Galerie Neue Meister. Melancholy, in the Leipzig art of the 1970s and 1980s, is applied with respect to rail travel several times, as a possibility for escaping a location and opening up distance as a symbol of time, such as in the 1972 etching “Melancholie” by Baldwin Zettl featuring the concourse of Leipzig central station.
- <sup>18</sup> Schwerin, Staatliches Museum
- <sup>19</sup> The version known as “Winterlandschaft mit Denkmal” was created for the Interhotel “Merkur”, which opened in 1981, and appeared again in 2007, today as private property.
- <sup>20</sup> Lang, Lothar. Malerei und Graphik in der DDR. Leipzig 1978, pp. 109/110
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110
- <sup>22</sup> see also Meißener, Günter. Sachlichkeit kontra Sinnlichkeit? in: SONNTAG 13/1972
- <sup>23</sup> in a conversation from 1989 between Dr. Anneliese Hübscher and Prof. Arnd Schultheiß: “the latter remembered the »Leipzig beginnings«...” with the words: “the objective ones, the unemotional ones” (p. 333)
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 333
- <sup>25</sup> See note 7.

**AUSSTELLUNGEN / BETEILIGUNGEN / AUSWAHL**

- 2010            Studiogalerie, Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig (p)
- 2009            20/40/60 Kunst in Leipzig seit 1949  
Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig  
Kunsthalle der Sparkasse der Stadt Leipzig
- 2008            Galerie Koenitz, Leipzig (p)
- 2008            Aus den Sammlungen, Malerei, Graphik,  
Plastik des 20. Jahrhunderts, Lindenau-Museum Altenburg
- 2005            5 Leipziger Maler, Kunstverein Panitzsch
- 2002            Traktorist und Liebespaar, Malerei der DDR,  
Klagenfurt, Europahaus
- 1998            Weite und Vielfalt, Kunst des realistischen Aufbruchs  
Ausgewählte Werke seit 1945, Staatliche Museen zu  
Schwerin
- 1997            Lust und Last, Die Leipziger Schule  
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg  
Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig
- 1988            Biennale Venedig
- 1973            Galerie am Sachsenplatz, Leipzig
- seit 1972        Teilnahme an den DDR-Kunstaussstellungen
- 1955            Pergamonmuseum Berlin, Deutsche Grafik
- seit 1952        Teilnahme an den Bezirkskunstaussstellungen

(p) = Personalausstellung

## **BIOGRAFIE**

1930	geboren in Glogau, Schlesien
1944	Leipzig wird Wohnsitz
1946-49	Lehre als Dekorationsmaler
1949-52	Studium an der Kunstgewerbeschule Leipzig bei Walter Münze
seit 1952	freischaffend und Mitglied im Verband Bilden- der Künstler der DDR
ab 1990	Mitglied im Bund Bildender Künstler

## **WERKSTANDORTE**

Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum  
Chemnitz, Kunstsammlungen  
Cottbus, Kunstmuseum Dieselkraftwerk  
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Galerie Neue Meister  
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kupferstich-Kabinett  
Frankfurt/O., Museum Junge Kunst  
Gera, Kunstsammlung  
Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste  
Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste, Graphische Sammlung  
Leipzig, Stadtgeschichtliches Museum  
Leipzig, Kunstsammlung der Sparkasse  
Rostock, Kunsthalle  
Schwerin, Staatliches Museum, Gemäldesammlung

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Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig, Ausstellungskatalog, 1997

Martin Damus, Malerei der DDR, Rowohlt Enzyklopädie, 1992

Katalog zum Jubiläum der HGB Leipzig 1945-1989

Renate Hartleb - Über Malerei, 1989

Biennale Venedig 1988, Ausstellungskatalog, 1988

Kunst in der DDR, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985

Karin Thomas, Malerei in der DDR 1949 - 79, Dumont, 1980

Günter Meißner, Leipziger Künstler der Gegenwart,

Seemannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1977

Renate Hartleb, Künstler in Leipzig, Henschelverlag, 1976

„Sinnlichkeit kontra Sachlichkeit“ von Günter Meißner, Sonntag Nr. 13, 1972

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