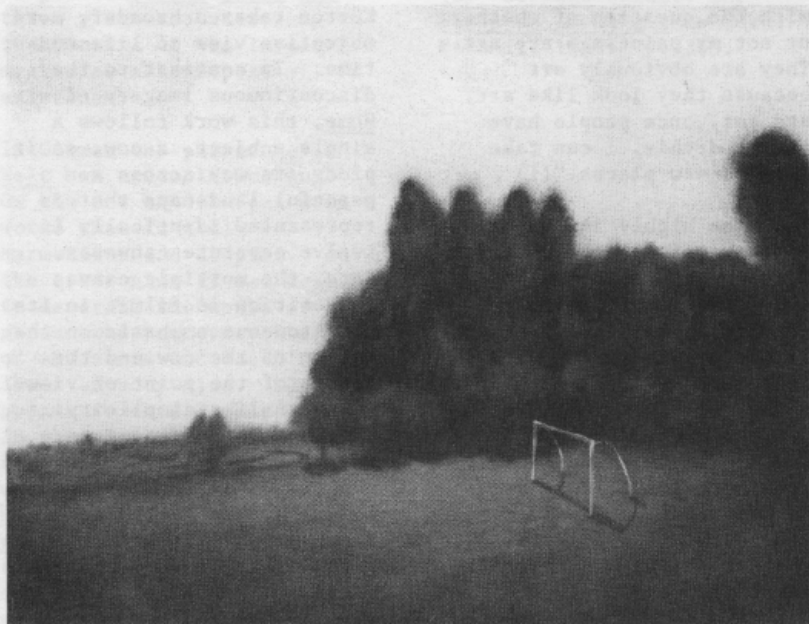


Stefan Kürten  
MATRIX/Berkeley 131

University Art Museum  
mid September - early  
November 1989

Home (lonesome goal), detail of  
Home (Studies for an Ideal Landscape), 1989



Stefan Kürten's art borrows from traditions that might be labeled Romantic, Folk, or even kitsch. His intention, however, is not so much to comment critically or ironically on the notion of historical progress in art as it is simply to keep the viewer from getting bogged down by an unfamiliar or excessively abstract sign system. "The average viewer," says Kürten, "will not first have to struggle with the question of whether or not my paintings are art. They are obviously art because they look like art, and yet, once people have accepted this, I can take them to new places."(1)

Like the highly influential German artist Gerhard Richter, Kürten utilizes everyday images to convey transcendental ideas. There is mystery in such mundane images because, in Richter's words, "every object [is] part of a world whose first and last causes are finally unfathomable."(2) In Home (Studies for an Ideal Landscape) (1989) Kürten depicts thirty-six virtually identical landscapes, distinguishable only by the presence in each of a different detail evoking some aspect of the feeling of home. In some of these, the references seem specific to Kürten's own experience: in one landscape he has placed a tiny German village while another has various words relating to his life in Düsseldorf scratched into the surface. In others, the references seem more loosely poetic, such as the image of the jet stream of a plane or a rabbit sitting in an open field. Kürten has also included a number of images--for example, a circle of dancing angels and a gigantic

egg looming on the horizon--that, while humorous or absurd, suggest that his yearning for home may be less a nostalgic or sentimental indulgence than a kind of spiritual quest. Kürten added the following text to a postcard version of this work: "Where is home? A feeling, a memory, a wish. Happiness and sadness, absolute and true."

In Das Leben (Life) (1989) Kürten takes a broader, more objective view of life and time. In contrast to the discontinuous imagery of Home, this work follows a single subject, a cow, as it plods its way across a peaceful landscape that is represented identically in twelve separate canvases. Here, the multiple canvas composition is filmic in its simultaneous emphasis on the motion of the cow and the stasis of the point of view. With Zen-like simplicity, Kürten's series seems to answer humorously the age-old question first asked in modern art by Paul Gauguin's celebrated painting, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? (1897).

The pair of paintings Heile Welt (The Good Life) (1988) and Kleine Heile Welt (Little Good Life) (1988) represents a somewhat more complex world-view. The larger canvas, Heile Welt, presents itself initially as an abstract composition, resembling a cloud of glowing inter-stellar gas. Woven across this amorphous, galactic background is a vast network of flowering vines painted in a naive, child-like manner. On close inspection, one notices that resting on the stems of these vines is a wide assortment of tiny images--peace signs,

planets, insects, hearts, airplanes, fruit, snakes--and words such as Mercedes, God, St. Tropez, sex, beer, IBM, Mama, Papa, Buddha, and San Francisco. In this everyman's Eden, Kürten juxtaposes the sacred and the profane to underscore the universality of the desire for a better life. Far from indicting the luxuries of the material world, Heile Welt seems to be simply an attempt to put these pleasures in their place and view them in the context of the larger mysteries and purpose of existence.

In German the phrase heile Welt has a double meaning. On the one hand it can mean a world that is truly harmonious and utopian. On the other hand it can be used to describe the world of a person who has everything he or she wants and doesn't care about anybody else. Kürten points to this double meaning in part by pairing the formidably scaled Heile Welt with the far smaller Kleine Heile Welt, or "little" Heile Welt. In spiritual terms, the pair of paintings corresponds to the two primary divisions of Buddhist teaching: Mahayana, or "Big Raft," which espouses the collective enlightenment of the world, and Hinayana, or "Little Raft," which supports individual transcendence. At the same time, however, Kürten envisions the small version of Heile Welt as a wry comment on Capitalist society, in which even enlightenment comes in an economy size.

Stefan Kürten was born in Düsseldorf, West Germany in 1963. He attended the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris. He is currently

living and working in San Francisco on a grant from the Annette Kade Endowment Fund. Kürten is the founding director of Gallery Stawi Gunzt, Düsseldorf.

Lawrence Rinder  
MATRIX Curator

(1) Unpublished interview with the author, 8 August 1989.

(2) Germano Celant, The European Iceberg (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), p. 365.

Works in MATRIX:

Home (Studies for an Ideal Landscape), 1989, 36 canvases, oil on canvas, 8 x 10" ea. Courtesy of the artist.

Das Leben (Life), 1989, 12 canvases, oil on canvas, 11 x 14" ea. Courtesy of the artist.

Heile Welt (The Good Life), 1988-89, oil on canvas, 7'7" x 9'9". Private collection.

Kleine Heile Welt (Little Good Life), 1989, oil on canvas, 8 x 10". Private collection.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Fun Gallery, San Francisco, CA '84; Ute Parduhn Gallery, Düsseldorf, W. Germany '88.

Selected group exhibitions:

Gu Gu Ernesto Gallery, Cologne, W. Germany, End Art '84, Treppen '85; Kunstverein Düsseldorf, W. Germany, Perspektiven 3 '85; Lorence Monk Gallery, NYC, Real Surreal '85; Die Anweisung, Berlin, W. Germany, G.K.S. in Berlin '87; Goethe Institute, Casablanca, Morocco '88.

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