

Kommentar



Regina Silveira: Gancho de Rede (Série Eclipses). (2003). Digitally printed backlit.

Friendly to grotesque.

Qualities of the Uncanny in the Art of Regina Silveira

The uncanny, which itself has been seen as the collision of two irreconcilable impressions¹, has connected two unusual partners: the psychology and skepticism of the 20th century. This implies that science and this way of thinking are elective in the way that they discover doubt, bottomlessness, and restlessness *in the highly familiar*. Despite existing differences between them, what they have in common is that they regard the uncanny as a comparatively *uniform* phenomenon. It's just that – *scary*. This lack of contours may be due to the fact that as the uncanny it seems to elude further determination or that it reveals the abysmal side of attempts to grasp it: »A difference in which everything and nothing differs is uncanny.«²

In the oeuvre of the Brazilian artist Regina Silveira we also encounter collisions in which differences fade away in their collision. Silveira deals again and again in her works with the »uncanniness of the ordinary« (Cavell) as, for example, the people walking across the abyss show in *Abyssal* (see p. 260 in this volume), the public squares and buildings that are walked on by giant insects in *Mundus Admirabilis* (p. 304), or the parking lots occupied by rockets, insects and helicopters as in *Phantasmata*.

But what distinguishes her works are the *manifold* forms in which the uncanny appears in everyday life. A first step would therefore be to distinguish between the absent, which should be present, and the present, which should be absent, as the philosopher Gordon C.F. Bearn proposes.³ The mirage in *Quimera* (p. 10) which shows a light bulb that radiates shadows plays with this reversal; although it resonates with Bearn's suggestion, his distinction still swallows up too much of the diversity of uncanny qualities that we experience in Silveira's work. Measured against the relative uniformity of the uncanny in psychology and skepticism of the 20th century, Silveira's works seem to me to open up the experience of different qualities of the uncanny.

1 See for example Bruno Gransche's contribution here in the volume.

2 Stanley Cavell: *The Uncanniness of the Ordinary*, Chicago/London 1988, p. 101.

3 Gordon C. F. Bearn: »Wittgenstein and the Uncanny«. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 76 (1993) 1, p. 29–58. Bearn describes the first as »eerie«, the second as »uncanny«. It should be emphasized that use of normative expressions for characterization of the uncanny. See also Gransche's contribution in the volume.

There are, for example, the cozy dining table and the inviting chairs that have fur (*Mutante I*); or the tea table that seems to grow a fur along with its porcelain service (*Mutante II*, p. 18). The chairs and the table are tempting, as they were *friendly uncanny*. But perhaps the mutation is to be understood in reverse – and the furry something turns into a table. Would this be less or more strange? In any case, as my thesis will be in the following, Silveira plays with the fact that *we believe that we have resolved an uncanny situation – whereby the supposed resolution proves to be a graduation*. The play with scales, which is important in Silveira's work in general, contributes to this in particular. Furthermore, Silveira's art-historical irony is following this strategy (here it is Meret Oppenheimer's *Breakfast in Fur*). The dissolution of historical irony is usually accompanied by intellectual satisfaction. In Silveira's oeuvre, it plunges us into uncertainty. We believe that we have recognized something uncanny as something trivial or that we have solved the historic allusion – before it happens to us that the trivial or the irony is in itself uncanny.

A multilayered example of this is offered by *Paradoxo do Santo* (p. 138). It presents us with something grotesquely uncanny. The installation shows the intimidating silhouette of a heroic knight, who seems to be projected by a small, seemingly harmless wooden figure. It seems strange that this poorly appearing rider is the origin of that disturbing knight. »Grotesque,« as Foucault points out, is »the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having.«⁴ The heroic horseman is grotesque in that sense.

However, this work by Silveira establishes manifold historical references. On the one hand, the heroic shadow cites a monument to the Duke of Caxias that stands in São Paulo. He is considered the greatest Brazilian military leader. On the other hand, the small horseman figure in the foreground alludes to the Apostle James the Great, whose importance in the Spanish military grew steadily over the centuries. According to legend, he appeared on a white horse in the war against the Moors and led the Christians to victory, which is why the Spanish battle cry later was: »¡Santiago, y cierra, España!« The military significance of James and this battle cry are not only discussed in Don Quixote of Cervantes, but Silveira's installation seems to show us Don Quixote's image of himself and how others perceived him. The grotesqueness of *O Paradoxo do Santo*, however, does not consist in simply showing us an erroneous error. *It is rather grotesque that the military power effect is real despite all this.*

Snake (p. 178, 202), on the other hand, demonstrates the uncanny of *the resolute*. From a distance, the graphic appears on the wall like a snake. However, as the viewer approaches it, he realizes that it is the tracks of a motorcyclist who has fiercely

4 Michel Foucault: *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France (1974–1975)*, London, New York 2003, p. 11.

resolutely gone into his self-created labyrinth. Again, the different scales play a decisive role for the collision that happens to us: It is again the miniature, namely the toy motorcyclist (as above the little poor James), that marks the turning point at which the terrible snake tilts into uncanny determination.

Silveira's works offer us even more experiences with figures of the uncanny. However, it always appears to her in a certain quality, whereby it remains a movement. A fright turns into something uncanny just when we think we have dissolved it. The same may apply to systems whose apparent autonomy we experience as uncannily ›autonomous‹. If there are malfunctions, this autonomy seems to collapse like a house of cards. Until we realize they are showing an autonomous eeriness in the slip.

The yearbook contains further works by Regina Silveira, whose movements we invite the readers of the yearbook to follow.

