

Markus Stegmann

A Cat – Wild and Mild

When it comes to the 'hero' of this photograph with the initially puzzling title, *Wilde Katze* (2002), there is little to be seen other than a tuft of fur, a tongue and some whiskers, but these few markers are quite enough for the viewer to read it as a cat. However, there is no way of conclusively verifying if it really is wild, as the title would have it. Although, it seems likely that a wild cat would probably be out and about, hunting for fresh meat rather than lapping milk in a domestic setting. Yet this is certainly not to deny that a wild cat might well drink milk, even out of a plate with a flower pattern that might perhaps be lying around in some overgrown plot of land. For there is no way of identifying the location of the scenario with the cat drinking milk. It could be in a familiar, cosy kitchen, but it could also be in some very different place. This could even be an especially staged scene: the soft, diffuse light could be taken to suggest this. But if everything that may look familiar is being questioned and examined, the nature of the white liquid might also arouse some misgivings. We only assume it to be milk, because the cat is lapping it up. In a nutshell: everything in this photograph looks so familiar and natural that the apparent banality of the scene almost develops a subversive subtext that makes us take a critical look at our own response. The sight of a cat drinking milk is an intensely familiar archetypal motif that goes right back to childhood and that has established itself both in individual people's minds and in our collective memory as a symbol for tranquil domesticity and a sense of oneness with all creatures. And as that symbol, it can be reactivated like a cipher that is highly meaningful to a great many people.

On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that it is not the cat but the milk that takes up by far the majority of the photograph. So why do we see the cat as the 'hero', although it occupies little more than a sixth of the picture and, cropped in such an extreme manner, looks astonishingly abstract, demonstratively reduced so that it now appears as an almost classic *pars pro toto* in the best art-historical tradition? In this photograph there is much more milk than cat to be seen, assuming it really is milk. The real 'hero' of the picture ought to be the milk. Is it just the picture title that has caused this paradoxical shift in our attention? Or has it more to do with the fact that our perceptive faculties are conditioned so that they instinctively direct the greatest level of attention above all and in the first instance towards any living elements? It seems that our primeval, perfectly developed ability to recognise within a fraction of a second if a person is friend or foe still works today, and is at the root of the unequal division of our attention between the milk and the cat. The cat, as the specially selected species, fits particularly well into this archaic picture; a dog might have done just as well, but dogs do not drink milk.

In keeping with its function, the plate with the flower pattern contains the milk and provides the cat with the practical possibility of drinking. So far so good, and extremely ordinary. But behind the banal surface of this scenario there lurks an interesting double meaning with far-reaching, art-historical implications: the plate with the flowery border frames the milk in such a way that it calls to mind the white, monochrome paintings of the early 1960s. The pale 'ground' of the plate shimmers

gently through the semi-transparent surface, through this soft, milky 'mirror', at the same time conveying a sense of the transcendental properties of the colour white. With a wink the superficially ordinary, symbolic image of a cat lapping milk takes on the air of a laconic commentary on a movement in international art that was defended not entirely without ideological verve. The mingling of this reference with a highly-charged image from so many people's childhoods is what gives this photograph its special intellectual appeal. Moreover the proximity of this photograph to painting casts it as a link between everyday life today and the art-historical past. Almost imperceptibly blurred edges – or one might say: the striking softness of the material appearance of the cat, the milk and the plate – imbue the image with these painterly qualities. And this in itself situates Daniela Keiser's work in the context of contemporary photography that has often been regarded as using its own characteristic means to continue in the traditions of painting.

As we contemplate this photograph, our thoughts may well turn to yet another epoch in the history of painting: the circular form of the plate recalls the *tondi* of Mannerism. But it is not only the unusual picture format – which is particularly accentuated by the floral border of the plate – that calls to mind the glittering period of the transition from Renaissance to Baroque, but also the milk as a translucent, liquid 'mirror', has echoes of the Mannerists' delight in presenting pictorial motifs as mirror images, so that reality would appear ambivalent, unstable, even uncertain. Of course this is not to say that the circular plane of milk necessarily becomes a mirror that we could recognise ourselves in, but the facticity of a liquid together with this particular perspective certainly plays with the idea of someone looking into a mirror, even if this is not really a mirror, but just a plate of milk.

The striking homogeneity of the colour values of the pictorial protagonists – milk, cat, plate and flowers – creates an alliance between them. In addition to this, all are cut into by the picture edge in such a way that their physical integrity is in some respects seriously compromised, although this simply means that we, as viewers, try to complete the picture in our own minds – not particularly difficult in the case of the plate, but incomparably more complicated and above all much less certain when it comes to the cat. However, faced with the question as to the location of this scene, the time of day or night or even the year when this photograph was made, we are in effect almost completely unable to ascertain any of these circumstance. The fact is that this photograph could as easily have been made in the 1950s as in the year 2002, as the date tells us. The scene could equally well have occurred on a bright, friendly sunny day or at night under fluorescent lighting. And as far as the location is concerned, it could be a kitchen, a basement, a child's bedroom or anywhere out in the open air. But it is not only their homogeneous colouration and the fact that all four are condemned to only partly appear in the photograph that connects the protagonists, it is also the fact that in the slightly off-centre, almost concentric composition they coalesce in an image that has its own inner strength and coherence. Although all the protagonists are in full colour, it is as if the colours had gently ebbed out of the photograph, as if they had started to dissolve as time and the processes of chemical decay took their toll. Or maybe it is only the homogeneity of the colours that creates this impression; whatever the case it is precisely this aspect of the picture that gives it its timeless dimension, which is skilfully reinforced by the complete absence of any period features. It can hardly be chance that, of all things, it is the cat's tongue that has the intensest colour in the photograph. As a sense organ it is much more than a mechanical device for lapping milk. Not only for cats but for us as

human beings, too, the tongue – the site of our sense of taste – is an important bridge to reality. In addition to this, the tongue is essential to speech, and in human terms, speech is not only crucial to our perception of the world, it has also been central to the progress of civilisation.

As a complex, ambivalent cipher, *Wilde Katze* has a certain affinity with the *Berberlöwe* (also made in 2002), a stuffed Barbary lion that was presented by the German Count of Thurn und Taxis to the Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen in 1850.<sup>1</sup> Daniela Keiser created this photograph as the centrepiece of her installation of the same name for the interdisciplinary exhibition *Die ewigen Jagdgründe – Erkundungen im Museum*.<sup>2</sup> As if it were flirting with the adjective ‘wild’, it is as though the ‘wild cat’ – a tranquil image from childhood, and not entirely without art-historical allusions – were faced with the truly wild Barbary lion. Despite their very different sizes and origins, each cat raises the question as to its relationship with human beings. The ‘wild cat’ is drinking from a man-made plate, filled with milk by a human being and, as such, is clearly not ‘wild’ so much as ‘mild’, even dependent on human care. Quite apart from that, the cat is in any case generally regarded as a fully tame pet. The Barbary lion, by contrast, is a species that lived in the wild until the last examples died out in Morocco in the early twentieth century. The very ordinary animal associated with so many people’s childhoods comes face to face with one of the most striking symbols of wildness, strength and loneliness. Paradoxically it was not the common, cosseted, omnipresent domestic cat but the feared and respected symbolic creature that was wiped out by human beings. Daniela Keiser leaves us electrifyingly unsure as to whether this is a photograph of a living or a stuffed lion. There is no real way of removing this doubt, which in turn raises important questions as to the identity of the lion and the threat it poses. Dead or alive, dangerous or harmless, about to pounce or rigidified in that position, these are the burning questions – crucial to our survival – that arise at the sight of this lion, that’s to say, this photograph. The dialectic of ‘wild’ and ‘mild’ is paralleled by a similar dialectic of ‘dead’ and ‘alive’. This uncommonly productive yet indistinguishable ‘in-between’, this dazzling not-only-but-also, this simultaneous Yes and No, which is at the heart of both of these works, signals – in both cases through comparable cat motifs – the pictorial and reflective potential that is at the root of Daniela Keiser’s artistic thinking.

This text is a translation of a slightly revised and enlarged version of a text that was previously published in *Sturzenegger-Stiftung Schaffhausen, Jahresbericht / Erwerbungen 2003*, Schaffhausen 2004, pp. 158 ff.

1 See Markus Stegmann, ‘Daniela Keiser – Berberlöwe’, in *Sturzenegger-Stiftung Schaffhausen. Jahresbericht / Erwerbungen 2002*, Schaffhausen 2003, pp. 92 ff.

The Barbary lion has been restored a number of times, on each occasion losing a little more of its wildness. Daniela Keiser took the stuffed animal from the museum’s repository where it had slumbered for decades and presented it in amongst contemporary art in the museum’s top-lit

exhibition space, alongside her photograph *Berberlöwe* and X-ray images of the lion that were made when it was last restored.

2 Markus Stegmann (ed.), *Die ewigen Jagdgründe – Erkundungen im Museum*, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Kunstverein Schaffhausen 2002, pp. 28 f.

Maya Bringolf, Lukas Buol and Marco Zünd (architects), Franziska Furter, Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo, Daniela Keiser, Fabian Neuhaus (musicians) and Michael Stauffer (writer) were invited to explore the various parts of the Museum zu Allerheiligen, to delve into its collections and to react to these with artistic interventions.