

Urs Lüthi at Gallery S O London

Text by Christoph Lichtin (Art Museum Lucerne)

A strange, beautiful object lies in a glass vitrine: it is a stylised representation of a human being. The head is recognisable as the portrait of the artist Urs Lüthi, the body is a construction made out of glass tubes of various sizes. It is an abstract sculpture, but for a moment the setting makes us think about connections outside of the context of art. Of sacred glass shrines, for example, into which whole skeletons of saints have been placed so that they can be looked at, admired and worshipped. And it's more or less impossible not to think of the image of a 'Sleeping Beauty' in a glass coffin, but the utilitarian aspect of this whole installation is immediately conspicuous. The glass object refers more to an instrument intended for a specific, if entirely unknown purpose. What might it be? 'Ex voto', the title of the work, again refers explicitly to a votive cult, to the tradition of making a gift to a higher power out of gratitude, by dedicating to it, for example, the simulated object of a healed organ.

Body, illness, death: whether one wishes or not, when one deals with oneself as the starting-point of one's art – and Urs Lüthi has been doing that for 40 years – these existential themes pose themselves with increasing urgency. And even though Lüthi stresses this entirely personal aspect by giving the glass body his own face, and the figure the length of his body, around 167 cm, he is aiming at something universal. 'The personal dissolves so easily in the typical,' he has said on another occasion, and even now his own ageing process is nothing less than the starting-point for a universal, radical artistic formulation. With the body made of glass he has found a convincing transposition for the human condition: a human being is a fragile thing, the connection between head and body is precarious, the body is a vessel to which essences must be added, and in the end nothing remains but the shell. Lüthi's sculpture is notable for its dialectic of form and content.

Lüthi came upon his own self as a leitmotif after an intensive formal and contextual search. Following his first painterly phase, which culminated in his skilled, abstract Pop Art of around 1968, he focused his attention in particular on conceptual work and installations, perfectly in keeping with the times. In 1969 he was invited by Harald Szeemann to participate in the exhibition 'Plans and Projects as Art' at the Kunsthalle Bern, where he presented several concepts, for example 'Urs Lüthi's Ageing Process', an investigation with photographs, calculations and graphs that his college David Weiss

drew up about the artist. Here, the person Urs Lüthi has been successively shifted to centre stage.

At this time he was working on objects whose shape was based on his person, as in 'Instable Object' – a long piece of wood sawn into sections of equal length which were then screwed together with hinges so that it could only stand up on its own under very precise conditions. This minimalist sculpture is exactly the same height as Lüthi – 167 cm. At this time he also carried on with his photographic work, such as the pictures of him contemplating or mingling with the crowds in squares in Milan. In his series of drawings 'Self-portraits in the Style of the Great Masters of the 20th Century' he examines the potential of self-portraiture by pretending to let the protagonists of Modernism execute this motif.

This process of measuring, describing, documenting and examining his own person was the prerequisite for Lüthi's famous installation in the exhibition 'Visualisierte Denkprozesse' (Visualized Thought Processes) in the Museum of Art Lucerne in 1970. Lüthi presented all of his clothes and personal possessions on the walls and in showcases, while the scent of his favourite perfume hung in the air, diffused by a humidifier. The origin and material of the exhibited objects were documented on a flyer. Photographs of the artist, displayed on a postcard stand, indicated who the show was all about. Visitors to the exhibition must certainly have asked themselves how the artist managed to survive the duration of the show without his ID card, keys and clothes. While in this respect the imagination knows no bounds and, at first glance, the installation – even perhaps for the artist himself – seemed to be a synthesis of art and life, it was in actual fact just the opposite: since this presentation, which can be described as "the inauguration of Urs Lüthi the art figure", Lüthi has heeded the fundamental distinction between himself as an artist and the person who merely lends himself as a figure in his work. As part of the visualized thought process within the exhibition room, Lüthi became an art object, an 'invisible sculpture'.

It is remarkable that the young Lüthi, in his preoccupation with this figure, came even then to take its ageing process as its theme. In the exhibition you will see an early work which belongs in this context: 'Just another story about leaving', in an arrangement of 9 images, shows how Lüthi at the time imagined the change to his outward appearance.

The addressed relationship between art and life is an interesting one, and deserves to be examined a few more times. Lüthi appears as an observer of his life, which he then transposes or stages as art. The starting-points can be the great moments in life, but also everyday failure. One might – to use a metaphor – say that Lüthi sees his life as a quarry,

from which he repeatedly carries things away and makes something out of them. Asked about that image he recently replied in conversation:

‘But ultimately I wouldn’t like to tell the story of my life. I only see myself as someone who doesn’t do things differently from others. We all do the same things, more or less. And our feelings are not that different either. But I can only mention mine. I’m the red thread that runs through the whole fragility of reality. I’ve experienced a lot of what can be done in one life, I think. So in this respect I think that my works are also a very general image of one life – of how a person can situate or represent himself.’

Lüthi directly integrates himself and his biography in his work, in a powerfully visual way. He returns repeatedly to individual themes and aspects, combines them in new arrangements and extends them through new picture solutions, which has always initially taken the public by surprise. Thus, for example, people were astonished when Lüthi apparently started painting out of nowhere, given that he had made his name with photographs that are now among the icons of the art of the 20th century. What had been forgotten was that Lüthi had started with painting. In retrospect his fascination with the diversity of media and his artistic determination to create works with an almost classical effect in a range of genres becomes apparent.

But let’s come back to the sculptures. Throughout his artistic career, Lüthi has always shown a strong tendency towards the sculptural. This already shows in his early photographs in which the naked body is given plasticity by working with the chiaroscuro technique. With the bronze heads that he had cast in the 1980s, Lüthi once again turned to the self-portrait, this time using a medium that, for some, had become rather unfashionable. For him, however, it was a logical step. Presenting the artist as a contemporary being and executing a portrait in the historical vestment of the bronze creates a seemingly large cleft between content and form. But it is precisely this dichotomy that hits upon the very core of Lüthi’s art as, in his opinion, the individual (in this case the personal expression) and the general (here, the portrait as a public monument), have always belonged together.

Lüthi’s recent bronze figures occupy a thoroughly unusual position that reverts to the history of art. Sculptures such as ‘Selfportrait with empty hands’, ‘I’d like to be a cubist sculpture’ or the ‘Spazio Umano’ series certainly have a nostalgic touch to them. With such a positioning, the artist is making a subtle appeal for people to take a closer look at a sort of art and aesthetics where he really feels at home. For this reason I would like to call his bronzes nostalgic, as Lüthi – with a wistful smile devoid of irony – has dedicated them

to his artistic forefathers. They contain a sort of atmosphere of 'paternity', although a sort of break is plainly apparent. These little monuments demonstrate the deeply rooted and overwhelming 'artistic urge', which has been Lüthi's constant companion throughout his entire life.

Lüthi's main concerns have become quite clear: the recurring longing for a synthesis of the trivial with the sublime and the beautiful, and the ambivalence between powerful emotion and unavoidable failure. Today we recognise Urs Lüthi also as the great aesthete who always connects his pictorial statements, however lofty or ironic they might seem, with an enthusiasm for artistic skill. Lüthi is also a gifted draughtsman, print-maker, painter and sculptor, as well as a storyteller and stager of big stories and small emotions. This dialectic of form and content, which leads the viewer to an experience both aesthetic and intellectual, marks his entire oeuvre.

Christoph Lichtin, 3.3.2011