



TILO  
SCHULZ

### THE SOCIAL FORMALIST by Peio Aguirre

“Anyone who saw me at work would think I was only interested in questions of form. I make these models because I wish to represent reality.”<sup>1</sup> The quote is from Bertolt Brecht and comes from a series of diatribes levelled against Georg Lukács in 1938 that sparked a debate over the divergence between an aesthetic of the avant-garde (spearheaded by Brecht himself) and one of realism (championed by Lukács). Brecht’s description of himself as a realist further highlighted the contradiction inherent in choosing between one option and the other. Soon after penning these lines, Brecht warned anyone wishing to write on the subject to exercise great caution, since the term “formalism” had already become a prickly issue. For him, the true *realist* formalist was Lukács, defender of the nineteenth-century historical novel.

More generally, those who choose to draw a distinction between form and content are branded as formalists. This separation—when the indivisibility of form and content is one of the most solid attributes of modernism in the arts; in other words, the idea of one conveys that of the other and vice versa—has been contested at length in art history, with the crux of the argument being the distinction between applied arts and fine arts. However, modernism and formalism also go hand in hand, and mean entirely opposite things depending on whether we are referring to the 1920s and 1930s or to the period of high modernism.

Tilo Schulz, among other artists, has recently disentangled this discursive legacy with precision in the series of works comprising his exhibition *FORMSCHÖN* shown at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig in 2007. In Schulz the echoes of that struggle have an almost biographical component: he was born and has spent much of his life in the formerly East German city of Leipzig. Following the global collapse of the post-war period, the polarisation between the official movement of figurative realism imposed by socialism and the abstract formalism of the capitalist world—in turn a mechanism of

defence against the threat from the East—dimmed any memory of the brilliant days of the Weimar Republic. With the Bauhaus at its head, “realism” referred simply to the harmonious synthesis between art and life.

This political history is etched upon the very forms themselves, carrying with it what is known as the ideology of form. In Schulz, this personal component of living with ideologies is hidden behind formal and aesthetic layers that produce meaning through procedures typical of the formalist tradition. There is an inversion of method that starts by obviating the psychological, the biographical and other subjective analyses, first absorbing them in form, technique and structure by drawing them, and then bringing them—together with the whole of life and the lived experience—into the art work itself. This includes a historical vision, an awareness of the change in social forms, of the history of media and modes of perception. Behind his work lies a social and political commentary of those same forms and media he uses: he calls this entire process “social formalism”.

The problem can be seen in the abstract works entitled *Intarsien* (marquetry) the artist has been making since 2005. The juxtaposition of fine surfaces of wood veneer allows us to see the joins between the different parts, with their grain forming an abstract composition. This technique goes back to the Renaissance panels of the *Studiolo* in the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, designed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, where the *trompe-l'oeil* of the quest for realism and illusionism is contained in a two-dimensional surface. Here Schulz is alluding to realism by way of abstraction, reminding us that techniques are never neutral, but are instead charged with connotations that describe specific modes of production from either the past or the present. In the *Studiolo* in Gubbio, the power of a man (with his contrivances and his object world) is at the mercy of a highly refined artisanal technique.

Tilo Schulz not only chooses a medium with which to communicate, but in his choice there is already an implicit appraisal of the medium (e.g., painting) that always involves a degree of self-awareness and meta-commentary, that is to say, a commentary on the conditions of existence of the problem studied; when brought to his aesthetic vocabulary this results in a tendency towards meta-design. This is hardly surprising, given that design, as a system for mediating concepts, as a form of communication, was the strategy from which the artist developed his role as an “art mediator”, a term he used to refer to his task as a curator in the 1990s, when this figure was still emerging and in the process of being defined. Perhaps, however, his art draws most from the relations that articulate the history of art in its intersections with the decorative arts, functional design and interior architecture. The question of style thus emerges as a system of interpretation and as an aesthetic paradigm, a variant of taste, but one that differs from fashion. Roland Barthes said that style had always been part of a binary system of two terms which have changed according to periods and schools, and which place form at one extreme and content at the other. Elsewhere, Barthes speaks of his concept of style, contrasting the idea of a fruit with a kernel, such as an apricot, whose flesh is form and whose stone is content,

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Brecht Against Lukács”, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London / New York, 2002, p. 71.

with the image of an onion, whose body contains no heart, no secret, "nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes, which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces"<sup>2</sup>.

In a pedagogy of style, typical of Schulz, hierarchy and the differences between male and female features are toned down and the blending of different genres (pop literature, home decoration, textiles, manga comics, formalist sculpture, country music, etc.) creates a tapestry in which the visitor can recognise patterns. For example, the incorporation of pieces by Ursula Fesca (a German ceramicist, 199-1975) in *FORMSCHÖN* plays the multiple function of acting as a critique of the generic distinction between "great art" on the one hand and applied arts and crafts on the other, while at the same time serving as an analysis of the utilitarianism of applied art as opposed to autonomous art. Schulz's interest in a wide variety of genres serves him as a pretext for deploying gendered "contents" around a questioning of the stereotypes of masculinity. Tilo Schulz defends a renewed perception of art to be found in the different versions of modern art and its aesthetic (not only in formalism), which is one of the first signs of the primacy of the new in itself. Concepts such as form, display, technique, structure, context and surface thus become inexhaustible sources of reinterpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "Style and its Image", in *The Rustle of Language*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989. pp. 90-99.