

## Mutual Betrayal Society

The tragic in nature is manifested as corporeality-- and this is expressed plastically as form and natural color, as roundness, naturalistic plastic, the curvilinear, and capriciousness and irregularity of surface.

--Piet Mondriaan, 1917

### I

Critical reception of Fabian Marcaccio's painting has consistently emphasized its comic--or, even more partially, its satiric--spirit. (My own recent review in Artforum is no exception.) But this should not obscure the paradoxical seriousness of which this comicity is the peculiar result.

### II

As Mondriaan noted (in "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence," 1920), "Tragedy, comedy, epic, lyricism, romanticism are but diverse expressions of tragic plastic." In art, the comic pathos is an expression of the same deep disequilibrium that reveals itself in its fullest intensity as tragic.

### III

Fabian's paintings may be funny, but they are not fun. They bear an effect that is heavy, uningratiating, even though the disjunct elements that make up the paintings appear weightless, either farcical or merely inexpressive.

### IV

Fabian has given his new paintings for Amsterdam the collective title Mutual Betrayal. He cites Mondrian's use of the phrase "mutual equivalence," referring to that interaction of opposite values in such a way as to neutralize each other in the creation of an equilibrium. Conversely, in Fabian's paintings even elements that appear to be congruent with one another

turn out to contain internal contradictions that prevent them from coming to any repose. The elements betray each other because they betray themselves. That reminds me of a story...

### V

An impossible task: to briefly summarize a text which in itself is already the radical compression of a story of dizzyingly vast dimensions, containing intimations of "a secret form of time, a pattern of repeated lines." I am speaking of Borges "Theme of the Hero and the Traitor." Quite simply, the hero and the traitor are the same man. Having betrayed his patriotic cause, the Irish conspirator Kilpatrick agrees to redeem himself by allowing himself to be assassinated in such a way as to become the cause's most hallowed martyr. In the paranoid temporal structure of this tale, everything has always already been decided, accidents and coincidences are if anything the most carefully predetermined of all events. Our author never bothers to say why Kilpatrick became a traitor in the first place. We can imagine. Read the story's final words: "...this too, perhaps, was foreseen."

### VI

Yes, I know, it's a blunder to introduce the name of Jorge Luis Borges into the discussion of an artist of Argentine origin. Poor Borges! Poor Argentina! Will either one escape the harsh destiny of becoming the stereotype of the other?

### VII

The remedy for such temptations: switch continents. Recall instead the lapidary observation of Milan Kundera: "The novel speaks of a world without a future, but the world prefers to debate the future of the novel."

## VIII

And the future of painting? I thought I heard someone tell me the art is in shambles. But was it a neo-conservative moaning with imperfectly concealed Schadenfreude, or rather some armchair radical crowing over this imagined death-blow to the white male eurocentric bourgeoisie?

## IX

In Fabian's art, painting deliberately creates itself as the shambles its mockers claim it to be. Painting betrays itself, sacrifices its claims to purity, nobility, seriousness. Technical mastery places itself at the service of pictorial clumsiness, conceptual rigor dead-ends in a visual short-circuit, artistic ambition disperses itself in a kind of art-about-art commentary whose convolutions make nonsense of their ostensible subject.

## X

Of course, I've already tipped my hand with the citation of Borges. "This too, perhaps, was foreseen." Betrayal must be redeemed, indeed was perpetrated as an occasion for redemption.

## XI

What, let's say, if Fabian's art is not about art? What if it were making some kind of claim to truth about the way things are? What could that truth be? What if these paintings were utterly serious?

## XII

Then the shambles would be, first of all, in our previously held assumptions about what is serious. (But the world prefers to debate the future of painting,)

## XIII

What is serious must certainly include the prospect of what Kundera called "a world without a future." If I choose to see Fabian's paintings as art about art, then I am amused, intrigued, disturbed, but finally exhilarated by their protean self-mutations of their multiple challenges to my preconceptions. If I choose to see them as allegories for contemporary ("postmodern") society, a culture that no longer believes its great narratives, then I am frightened, because they show me that whatever changes, there is no way out; yet whatever appears stable and predictable is already consuming itself from the inside out.

## XIV

If curvilinearity, capriciousness, and irregularity are hallmarks of the painting of what Mondrian called "corporeality," then Fabian must be called a naturalist. If closed form and natural color are its indices, then his work clearly tends away from the corporeal, the natural, and the tragic. But if there can be bodiliness which is no longer given by nature, a pathos that floats freely, unable to contain itself in form, and if accident is another name for what has already been foreseen, then all these distinctions betray themselves, inconsequentially.

## XV

Anything consoling in these paintings? Perhaps their simple improbability.

Barry Schwabsky, 1993