Tjebbe Beekman

The Image of the Capsular Society

There are painters for whom their profession is not enough. They emphasise that there is a difference between art and painting and place themselves on the side of art. Tjebbe Beekman is one such painter for whom it is important to be an artist – even though he has never worked with any materials other than paint and canvas and has no intention of departing from this medium. So what is behind this scepticism with regard to one's own profession? What is the underlying problem causing the painter to distance himself from painting? Lovers of painting may well find the entire issue dubious, but these are questions which Beekman's work deliberately provokes.

I. Unavoidable aestheticisation

This exhibition, organised by the GEM, museum of contemporary art, is Tjebbe Beekman's first comprehensive show. It comprises works from 2003 to 2008, the heart of which is formed by the picture cycle *The Capsular Society*. The project was developed over the last two years and makes a more offensive effort to assert painting's claim as art than did the earlier works. However, this motif is already discernible in the works completed between 2003 and 2006 that ultimately led to this thematic picture cycle.

Let us take two examples from the present works: *Ruine* (2005) and *Palast* (2005). The first impression created by these pictures is an atmosphere of decay. One sees a ruined building which has been left to its fate, and which nature is slowly reclaiming as her own. Trees and brambles are growing into the building, while greenish moss and lichen run rampant across the grey concrete. It is these signs of nature which show that this building is never going to be completed. They tell the viewer that no glass is ever going to be placed in the empty window frames; that the bare shell will never be plastered and that the cables hanging out of the building are no longer live. Ruined buildings are a symbol of bankruptcy. They neatly illustrate that the money has run out – in both directions: there is neither enough money to complete the building, nor enough to tear down the half-finished concrete hulk.

The picture with the ironic sounding name of *Palast*, which was modelled on the so-called Social Palace in Berlin, is like a pendant of *Ruine*. Here too, one is presented with a piece of architecture that is heavily marked by decay. The house façades appear to be dissolving, something which has nothing to do with the half-completed condition of the building, but rather with the painting which has left its trail of destruction on the façade. Beekman predominantly works with two techniques: firstly, this picture has not simply been painted from a photo, but his model is itself a collage, made up of various different pieces. The basic elements of this picture construct are then transferred to the canvas, so that, initially, a relatively realistic reproduction of the computer-generated façade is created. However, this is still not the final version, but only an intermediate product whose contours are then blurred again – by means of overpainting, the application of thick coats of paint, the placing of threads and the introduction of sand.

Thus two techniques of distortion are used, one photographic and one painterly, with the help of which Beekman creates this aesthetically impressive painting. The rows of windows form a repetitive square pattern that spreads across six or seven floors, interrupted sporadically by the circles of round satellite dishes, creating a concrete ornament, which moves between shades of pale blue and pink and which, because of the inbuilt deformities and irregularities, continues to hold the viewer's attention even when, on a large scale, the picture's structure seems to repeat itself infinitely. The photographic compilation of the façade elements increases the picture's internal orderliness, while the painterly distortion has the effect that when observed in detail, no element of the picture is identical to another. It is this aesthetic dual strategy, aiming for beauty and ambivalence, which lends Beekman's paintings a special, painterly quality. But it is precisely this power of aesthetic fascination which he seeks as an artist that proves a problem for him as an artist. The aestheticisation of ruined and precast concrete buildings is the furthest thing from his mind; on the contrary, his intention in connecting these motifs with his painting technique is social comment.

PALAST
2005
119 X 210 CM

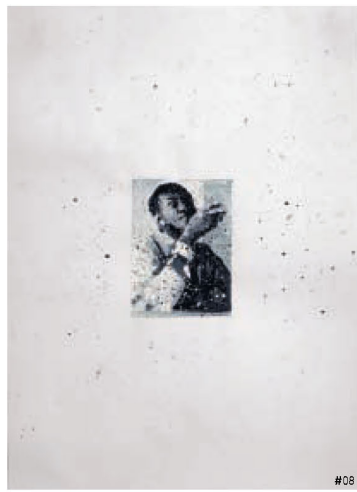
#03

#04

II. The picture atlas as a concept

The dilemma of contemporary painting is that according to the delimitations of this medium, any speck of colour on a canvas is an aesthetic feature. Irrespective of whether the painting's intention is naive, ironic or critical, the viewer always regards it as an aesthetic object. It was not least for this reason that Marcel Duchamp decided, almost a century ago, to give up painting of which, as a retinal art, he had become suspicious, because it addresses only the retina and not the intellect. But how should one behave if, like Beekman, one shares Duchamp's scepticism, but is not prepared to give up painting? What is to be done if one sees no point in turning to the new media when, after a certain period of familiarisation and some delay, one faces precisely the same dilemma? What can one do if the painter loves the materiality of paint and canvas as deeply as the artist distrusts their ability to seduce? The basic idea is that one must artistically limit the painting's scope of meaning and help to format how the picture is seen. In so doing, it is rarely adequate that a theme is approached or a picture given a title, but rather the picture's content must be indicated as a concept. Painting that wishes to maintain its artistic claim becomes conceptual.

#07



#08


#11


#12

At the heart of this exhibition is a body of work with the title *The Capsular Society*, comprising seventy sketches and five large-scale paintings. Unlike the previous works, here Beekman develops a concept which possesses both notional and visual momentum. On the one hand the painter refers to a book by Lieven de Cauter, bearing the title *The Capsular Civilisation*, picking up on the author's idea that because of its increasing mobility, modern society is becoming placeless, crumbling into a vast number of single, social capsules. On the other hand, he develops this seventy-part picture atlas, which brings together all possible kinds of capsules, both cross-referencing them against and placing them in opposition to each other.

As soon as one takes a closer look at these small works on paper, one is surprised at the extremely varied subjects found here which would appear to have absolutely nothing to do with the theme in question. Certainly, one can recognise a Dutch detached house (19), a New York bus (35), a high-speed train (41), a Japanese hotel box (47) or a gas silo (50) as having the form and function of capsules. One can even make the connection with the depiction of the Asian motorway system (49), which permits rapid movement on the one hand while rigor-


#15


#16

#19

#20

ously channelling this movement on the other. One can also see the protective suits, used by those fighting bird flu, as a type of wearable, stretchy rubber capsule which protects against a lethal viral infection (65). But what do the pictures of a Pope lying in state (34), a surveillance camera (36), Disneyland (13), a conference room (51), the Arctic (58), a Soviet cenotaph (56), the Tower of Babel (68) or the portrait of Kant (60) have to do with the subject?

It is important that in art the concept is not merely an idea or term, and the sketches do not simply visualise Cauter's theses. Rather Beekman is tracking down the image of the capsule on which this theory rests, in every area of life. It is not the capsule as a term, but rather as a metaphor in which the painter is interested. It is the linguistic image that, like a magnet, attracts these pictures of reality and gathers them around itself. So what does one think of when one hears the word? There are diving capsules, space capsules, joint capsules and seed capsules; what connects these entities is their protective function. The capsule encloses the diver, the astronaut, the joint or the seed; it creates an inner space and isolates someone or something from a destructive outside world. The sphere is the optimum

#23

#24

#27

#28

shape for withstanding too much or too little pressure using the minimum of material, so that the word capsule is often associated with a sphere. The secret and trick of all conceptual art may be that it orients itself on terms and makes reference to theories and then interprets these, not literally but rather metaphorically. This contradiction between term and image is where an artistic concept develops its own life, and points beyond the intellectual idea on which it is focused. Accordingly, one must consider the concept for the work, and not just the work itself, as something which needs to be interpreted.

Every capsule delineates a border which artificially divides a space into an inner and outer space. As such, the picture atlas contains several depictions of borders: there are images of the American-Mexican border (26), a flexible street fence (10), and the wall between Israel and Palestine (30). No capsule is a completely closed structure, but each has openings, entry and exit points, valves, hatches and doors. When the gate of a gated community (27) or the Gate of Jerusalem (39) are depicted, one should read this as an indication that gates too are part of a whole which has the function of regulating the interplay between inside and out. If one

#31

#32


#35


#36

pursues this line of thinking, one can also understand why there are three pictures dealing with border control in the collection. In picture (18), a border is created by a white policeman standing opposite a group of coloured people; in picture (26) one sees a police jeep on patrol and sketch (05) shows an armed border policeman standing in front of a fence.
Borders are not only erected, they have to be monitored as well, this being a further aspect which belongs to the capsule metaphor. One might object, saying that there have been guarded borders since time immemorial, and that this is not a particularly characteristic aspect of our present day. However, when one eventually discovers the two control rooms in the picture mosaic (16, 46), it will have become clear that we are talking here about control mechanisms that have no historical precedent. Here, one must ask the following questions: what borders are being controlled on this monitor? What social capsuling is being stabilised at the monitor? What is the surveillance camera shown in another picture (36) focusing on?
What becomes apparent from this sequential reading of the sketches is that this atlas has a pictorial logic which is validated by cross-references. Accordingly, these


#39


#40

#43

#44

sketches are not subject to the laws of logical consistency. Otherwise the Old City of Jerusalem (37) would hardly be side by side with an aerial photo of Auschwitz (48). Instead, the way in which they are arranged reveals the ambivalence inherent in every border drawn, in that it may delineate both a free space and an imprisoning space. It is precisely this point, where freedom becomes unfreedom, which leads to the term of capsular society. Every ecological niche that permits a special existence, protected from external influences, bears the germ of social isolation and exclusion within itself. Seen from this hidden angle, Beekman also includes a shopping mall (07), a commercial street (13), the shelves of a Lidl supermarket (22) and the mass of people surging to the opening of a new media superstore (06). Shopping centres are anonymous, capsular spaces, organised in an extremely purposeful way, but one might ask whether this is really worthy of criticism as a social phenomenon.

Two further sheets draw attention to the destruction of the climate: factory chimneys gush smoke into the sky on one (55), while the Arctic ice breaks up and melts on the other (58). This too is ultimately a consequence of drawing borders, in that society defines nature as the

#47

#48


#51


#52

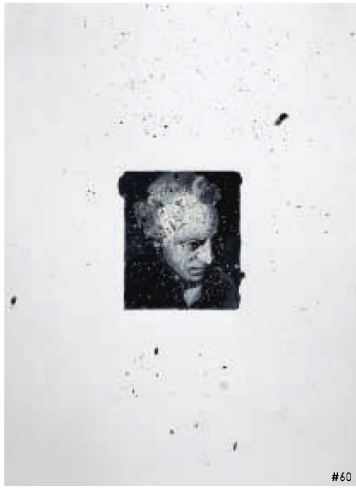
environment – not being part of its own world, meaning that society does not need to show it consideration. This exclusion of Nature can no longer be maintained, and this is now undermining this particular type of border drawing in society's consciousness. In light of its destruction, nature becomes a socially relevant phenomenon. A second example of how processes of social exclusion lead to the borders themselves coming under pressure is migration – in an entirely literal sense. One of the sketches (08) shows an African woman who died on the sixth occasion that she was forcibly expelled from Belgium. The collage also includes a refugee camp before the gates of Europe (17) and a flow of refugees during the war in Yugoslavia (40).

Social capsuling processes, which are part of the basic structure of modern society, can prove problematic in two regards. On the inside of the capsule, the individual faces the risk of social isolation, and there is also a danger of structural blindness to everything taking place outside the capsule. Where the social system and subsystem structures become problematic in this way, it is not only borders and exclusion which are relevant, but border crossings as well; the statue of a Russian soldier in Germany (56) may be seen as a symbol of just


#55


#56


#59


#60

such a historic border crossing. The act of death is also a type of border crossing, from life into death, to which the picture of the last deceased Pope makes reference (34). But here the corpse, solemnly lying in state, is helped to a symbolic inclusion in the cultural memory by means of a ceremony. In stark contrast, another picture shows a dead Taliban fighter surrounded by journalists (29), whose sole purpose is to document the man's death. His departure from the mortal coil is not marked by a ceremony, but confirmed as a fact. The same connection is made by the picture with the red AIDS ribbon (63), with which one of society's exclusion logics is deliberately breached. As healthy people also identify symbolically with the incurably ill, the border between the sick and the healthy is removed in the public sphere.

It is above all with regard to the final examples that one might assume that Beekman is taking a sociocritical position with his picture mosaic. In light of the complexity of the relationships that are addressed here, such a position can hardly be taken convincingly, given that the individual phenomena are not brought together in an argument but rather as a visual connection. With this conceptual piece, Beekman is primarily interested in


#63


#64

#67

#68

finding the right questions. In this sense, a series of sketches may also be understood as visual question marks. A person sitting at the heart of a maze (59) is symbolic of the need to find a way out. The Tower of Babel (68) reminds us of a confusion of languages which prevents us from even understanding the problem in question. The portrait of Kant (60) recalls his three great questions which Beekman once again poses in the light of the present: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?

untouched by the visible destruction, the inhabitants have reverted to 'business as usual'. Three thousand years after Homer's work, we once again see the ruins of Troy, which now stand on the east coast of America.
The painting *Root* too is based on Beekman's idea that fits in with the concept of *The Capsular Society* but is almost impossible to articulate in aesthetic terms. Now that the battle of the cultures has also made itself felt in western Europe, those liberally oriented western Europeans whose own convictions are characterised by aesthetics, suddenly find themselves located in a religious space. Confrontation with Islamic fundamentalism makes them involuntary brothers-in-arms with Christianity, which has learnt its democratic lesson. This too is a cultural inclusion phenomenon to which Beekman draws attention and from which he attempts to distance himself. But can one also represent this idea in painting? Can one perceive the intended distancing from religion? Captivatingly painted, the picture remains so inextricably bound up in its own aesthetic that it undermines its concept. But it is just this vulnerability to criticism which is conceptual painting's greatest advantage: it deliberately exposes itself to observation and thus intervenes in the circle of social communication. Only works that may be criticised can achieve this and still assert their content in a market which insists that art is purely a matter of taste, transfiguring paintings into the most expensive design products that one can buy.
Amongst the works of recent years, there are four paintings in total that explore the subject of the shopping mall, only the last one, *Mall IV*, being part of *The Capsular Society* project. One side effect is that the concept of a capsular society, once developed, also sheds light on the other three mall paintings. From this point of view, *Wishful Repetition* may be seen as the most powerful of the mall paintings. The particular aesthetic fascination of this painting may also owe something to the fact that, as with *Palast*, Beekman has used his over-painting technique coupled with collage. The piece is based on a photograph of the entrance area of a supermarket where, as usual, the checkouts and shopping trolleys are located. This motif was copied a number of times in the design, resulting in the unusual, stretched landscape format. The picture is defined by four structural elements. In the foreground, one can see the shopping trolleys pushed together, penetrating deep into the room; the ceiling and floor are connected by vertical columns white, in the background, the viewer sees a dense row of red sale signs, which divide the space horizontally. The room is thus divided in terms of height, width and depth, creating an extremely stable and grounded space. This static picture structure all the better accentuates the white fluorescent lighting strips on the ceiling, as a dynamic counter-element. They run from right and left to meet at a common vanishing point, which inexorably draws the eye to the bargain advertising. The picture is painted opaquely, the shopping trolleys at the entrance block access – one is looking in from outside at a self-contained system. Here too, as in *Control Room*, Beekman has found an impressive symbol of capsular civilisation.

Harry Lehmann

ROOT
2008
200 X 200 CM

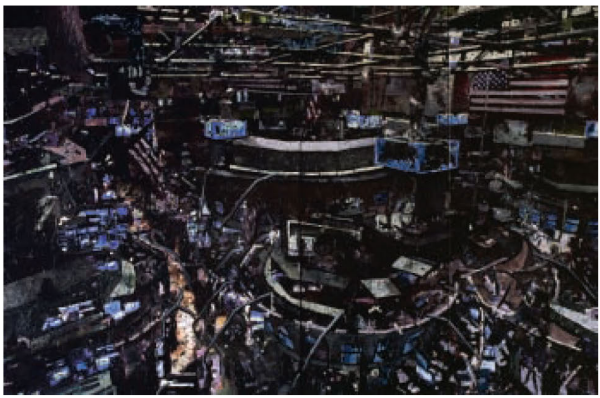
III. From control room to shopping mall

The seventy sketches shown here are more than just a material collection; together with the central question about the capsular society, they become a concept. The picture atlas attempts to construct a perspective within which the meanings of the large-scale paintings *Control Room, Stock Exchance, Root, Ilias* and *Mall IV* can unfold – and are not merely reduced to their visual aesthetic. There is a double difference between these paintings and their conception: on the one hand, this is a shortlist of the subject: of the seventy motifs, only five picture ideas now remain, which Beekman trusts will effectively represent the theme. On the other hand, the sketches, with their serial nature and their restrained black-and-white aesthetic deliberately suppress the painterly aspect. Their role is to find the relevant subjects; with the paintings, on the other hand, it is the special quality of the painting that provides the crucial visual information.

Beekman's painting on the one hand tries, like all conceptual art, to immunise itself against mere aesthetic appropriation with the help of a concept and, on the other hand, it hopes that this self-constructed conflict between conception and work will generate the content of the pictures. Let us examine in detail which subjects from the picture atlas are explored and how these motifs may be understood conceptually.

One of the project's most impressive paintings is *Control Room*. Here the idea is taken from the picture atlas that in the capsular society, the degree of internal control also increases. The more borders are erected, the greater the effort required to control them. What is added to this concept is an extremely striking aesthetic. One looks into an almost completely darkened room, from where countless blue monitors shed their sickly light; even in the further corners, one can still seen the light of a monitor. That people are sitting in front of these computers is barely discernible – only here and there does one vaguely see the outline of a human form. From the ceiling, an indefinable source of illumination sheds a white light on the desks, yet fails to make any detail thereof clearer. The strange atmosphere that this painting exudes has something chaotic about it. The countless monitors are no longer connected by any visible reality and flicker like marsh lights from the depths of this endless room. One looks into a control room that controls everything but is itself out of control – a bleak vision of our present, a 21st-century depiction of hell.

From the conceptual viewpoint of the sketch collection, the four-part *Stock Exchance* is recognisable as a place in which the most deep reaching social borders are drawn: the borders between rich and poor, between those who may share in prosperity and those who are excluded from it. The circular trading floor, dotted with monitors, is transformed into a robotic machine with grapplers, which regulates the inclusion and exclusion processes of global society under the American flag. Right at the bottom, on the second canvas from the left, one can discern the figure of a banker, wearing a tie, who seems to have lost his way within this machinery. This points up the fact that we are dealing here with social processes in which the actors themselves play only a marginal part. *Ilias*, on the other hand, may be seen as a complementary symbol of a catastrophic border crossing, as a sign of the vulnerability of a superpower which, until 11 September 2001, deemed itself invulnerable. One sees *Ground Zero* with its landmark steel girder cross, surrounded by an imaginary high-rise façade with exploded windows. It is particularly ironic that the upper floors are brightly lit, that here,



STOCK EXCHANCE
2008
282 X 405 CM

WISTFUL REPETITION
2006
123 X 360 CM