

Nils Burwitz. Auf dem Hochseil/Walking the Tightrope

Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer

Das Bild des Seiltänzers, einer Erinnerung Victor Klemperers entlehnt, wählt der Künstler Nils Burwitz als Chiffre für die Haltung zur Bewahrung vor dem Absturz. Die Lebensreise dieses Künstlers ging über mehrere Wendekreise, aus der Geburtsstadt im heutigen Polen 1945 als fünfjähriger die Flucht nach Westdeutschland, dann mit der Familie 1958 Emigration nach Südafrika in das Land der Apartheid, wo er sich in jungen Jahren in verschiedenen Genres der Kunst engagierte, unter anderem auf der Bühne, und wo in den 60er Jahren bereits seine Kunst politisch wurde. Bald wieder die Reorientierung nach Deutschland, nach Europa, nach London, wohin er aus Johannesburg immer wieder aufbrach, dann nach Spanien, genauer nach Mallorca, wo die Familie seit 1976 in Valldemossa ansässig ist und wo neue Beziehungen entstanden. Hierdurch wurde das 1992 begonnene und 1999 abgeschlossene Projekt "Der Unsichtbare Miró. Zwanzig Visionen eines Hellsehers" angeregt, ein wahrhaft europäisches Projekt, in dem 20 Texte von Schriftstellern, Dichtern und Freunden von Joan Miró neben 20 graphischen Arbeiten von Nils Burwitz stehen. Mit diesem Werk kam Nils Burwitz über die Frankfurter Buchmesse in die Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel. Über Joan Miró, der in der Sammlung unserer Malerbücher prominent vertreten ist, und von dem wir jüngst im Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt am Main zentrale Werke wie *Ubu Roi* zeigen konnten, haben wir die Beziehung angeknüpft.

Aus dieser Begegnung nun ist eine Übersicht, eine Rückschau der künstlerischen Tätigkeit von Nils Burwitz im Lessinghaus geworden, die der Künstler selbst als "erste ernsthafte Rückkehr" in sein Geburtsland, seine "erste Heimat" betrachtet. Vielleicht bedarf es bei solcher Rückkehr in besonderem Maße der Balancierstange, zumal in einer Zeit, in der das Zusammenrücken der Völker und Staaten auf der Erde eher zu Ungleichgewicht als zu Ausgleich zu führen scheint mit all den zu befürchtenden Katastrophen.

Als Südafrika, wo sich Nils Burwitz jahrelang mit dem Regime und seinen menschenverachtenden Praktiken auseinandergesetzt hatte und wo ihm dann das Arbeiten doch zu schwierig geworden war, obwohl er hohe Anerkennung gefunden hatte, den Weg von der Apartheid zur Demokratie be-

schrift, war Nils Burwitz längst abgereist. An anderem Ort setzte er seine Begleitung der Zeitläufte fort, mit Humor und satirischer Spitze, immer aber auch mit einem gewinnenden Lachen. Distanzierung und zugleich Festhalten der Zeit durch Zeichnen und Aufschreiben gaben ihm vielleicht die Chance zum offenen Blick und einer freundlichen Haltung zur Welt. So wird ein Bild gegeben, subjektiv und gerade deswegen kontrollierend, kritisierend und Anstöße gebend.

Im Lessinghaus der Herzog August Bibliothek, der Wirkungsstätte Lessings in seinen letzten und wohl produktivsten Lebensjahren von 1770 bis 1781, wo er, der Zensur trotzend, die Bühne wieder zu seiner "Kanzel" machte, etwa mit *Nathan der Weise*, im Haus dieses Aufklärers und Kritikers zeigen wir eine Auswahl aus dem Schaffen von Nils Burwitz der letzten zwanzig Jahre. Die Werke sind Zeugnisse dafür, wie der Künstler immer wieder einen neuen Ort betritt, ohne seinen Standpunkt zu verlassen, der Künstler, dem einmal gewonnene Anerkennung nicht alles war, sondern der weiter schritt, Irritationen und Anfechtungen ausgesetzt und sich aussetzend, standfest, absturzgefährdet und doch im Gleichgewicht – auf dem Seil eben, dessen Ende wir nicht kennen.

Ich danke allen, die an dieser Ausstellung mitgewirkt haben, den Beiträgern und Herstellern dieses vorliegenden Katalogs und vor allem Nils Burwitz selbst, der mit dieser Ausstellung einen Schritt in eine neue Umgebung unternimmt, nämlich die des großen deutschen Dichters von europäischem Rang, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

Ich danke Edward Lucie-Smith, London, dass er es eingerichtet hat, zur Eröffnung hierher zu kommen, um zum Thema der Ausstellung *Walking the Tightrope* zu sprechen. Nicht zuletzt danke ich Herrn Oswald Schönberg und den Restauratoren, namentlich Heinrich Grau, sowie den Mitarbeitern der Zentralen Dienste unter Torsten Gottsmann für die Vorbereitungen zu dieser Ausstellung.

Besonders froh und dankbar bin ich, dass die Bleiglasdecke "Die Ringparabel" hier im Lessinghaus installiert werden konnte, gefördert von Hans-Dieter Rieder, Poko-Institut, Münster, ausgeführt in den Glasstudios Derix, Taunusstein. – Das Thema der Ringparabel wird auch als lithographische Edition in einer Auflage von 222

Exemplaren, nummeriert und vom Künstler signiert, heute Abend vorgestellt. Wie besser könnte die Verbundenheit mit Lessings Geist dokumentiert werden, jenem Geist, dessen Toleranzangebot zu recht immer wieder beschworen wird.

Und es ist mir ein Bedürfnis, an dieser Stelle zu bekräftigen, dass wir zwar von den Idealen der Aufklärung noch weit entfernt sind – und dies vielleicht auch bleiben werden –, aber es gibt auch viele Anzeichen der Hoffnung. Ich denke da nur an den Aussöhnungsprozess in Südafrika, wo Täter und Opfer aufeinander zugehen und um Verständigung ringen, entschlossen, den Kreislauf der Gewalt zu durchbrechen.

Wir kennen sie alle, die Geschichte, das Märchen, im *Nathan*, im dritten Aufzug, 7. Auftritt:

Vor grauen Jahren lebt' ein Mann im Osten,
Der einen Ring von unschätzbarem Wert'
Aus lieber Hand besaß. Der Stein war ein
Opal, der hundert schöne Farben spielte,
Und hatte die geheime Kraft, vor Gott
Und Menschen angenehm zu machen, wer
In dieser Zuversicht ihn trug. [...]

Und dann die Ermahnung des Richters an die streitenden Söhne, wer den echten Ring vom Vater erhalten habe:

Doch halt! Ich höre ja, der rechte Ring
Besitzt die Wunderkraft beliebt zu machen;
Vor Gott und Menschen angenehm. Das muß
Entscheiden! Denn die falschen Ringe werden
Doch das nicht können! – [...]

Und etwas später:

Geht nur! – Mein Rat ist aber der: ihr nehmt
Die Sache völlig wie sie liegt.
Hat von Euch jeder seinen Ring von seinem
Vater:
So glaube jeder sicher seinen Ring
Den echten. [...]

Und dann:

Es eifre jeder seiner unbestochnen
Von Vorurteilen freien Liebe nach!
Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette,
Die Kraft des Steins in seinem Ring' an Tag
Zu legen! komme dieser Kraft mit Sanftmut,
Mit herzlicher Verträglichkeit, mit Wohltun,
Mit innigster Ergebenheit in Gott,
Zu Hülff! Und wenn sich dann der Steine Kräfte
Bei euren Kindes-Kindeskindern äußern:
So lad' ich über tausend tausend Jahre,
Sie wiederum vor diesen Stuhl. da wird
Ein weiser Mann auf diesem Stuhle sitzen,
Als ich; und sprechen. [...]

Der Zusammenhang mit seinen Texten gegen die übermäßige Bibelgläubigkeit aus dem gleichen Jahr (1779) unter der Überschrift *Bibliolatrie* ist hier ebenso offenkundig (Werkausgabe Band 10, S. 165 ff.) wie er von seinem Großvater väterlicherseits her, der Kamenzer Bürgermeister gewesen war und seine Dissertation über die Duldung von Religionsgemeinschaften verfasst hatte, in der Tradition des Toleranzgedankens stand. Und die theologische Auseinandersetzung prägte seine Wolfenbütteler Zeit, wenn Lessing etwa in der Schrift *Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft* von 1777 (Werke 8, S. 439 – 445) betonte, dass Nachrichten von Wundern keine Wunder seien (S. 440), und dass er selbst in einer Zeit lebt, „in der es keine Wunder mehr gibt.“ – Es bleibt also die Ermahnung, wie sie der Richter den Brüdern gibt.

Soweit so gut! Aber was heißt das für uns? Es heißt, dass der Aufstieg der Moderne, repräsentiert auch in den Wissenschaften und Künsten, einen besonderen Wendepunkt an jenem Gleichnis nimmt, welches die Offenbarung nicht mehr kennt, sondern allenfalls das „Wer redlich strebend sich bemüht“. Eine für die Kunst unbefriedigende Lösung.

Wenn nun das Gehen auf dem Hochseil kein Ziel hat, also kein Ende findet, nirgends? – allenfalls in „tausend tausend Jahren“? Dann ist solche Praxis ein Teil des Lebens und der Praxis und der Geschichte und kennt kein Ende, keine Offenbarung oder Erlösung. Und dennoch liegt im Balanceakt ein Geheimnis, das Nils Burwitz unter Verwendung eines Textes von Victor Klemperer so umschreibt:

»Ich hab so oft an eine Altberliner Anekdote gedacht ...

„Vater“, fragte also ein Junge im Zirkus, „was macht denn der Mann auf dem Seil mit der Stange?“ – „Dummer Junge, das ist eine Balancierstange, an der hält er sich fest.“ – „Au, Vater, wenn er sie aber fallen lässt?“ – „Dummer Junge, er hält ihr ja fest!“

... Mein Tagebuch war in den 30er Jahren immer wieder meine Balancierstange, ohne die ich hundertmal abgestürzt wäre ...«¹.

In der Ausstellung wurde die Bleiglasdecke „Die Ringparabel“ installiert, gefördert von Hans-Dieter Rieder, Poko-Institut, Münster, ausgeführt in den Glasstudios Derix, Taunusstein.

1 Auszug aus der Einführung zu Victor Klemperers Buch „LTI“ (*lingua tercia imperii*), das 1946 veröffentlicht wurde, dann 1975 im Reclam Verlag Leipzig erschien.



Walking the Tightrope

Edward Lucie Smith

Where the talk is concerned, I think one might just say:

‘Walking the Tightrope’ presents the career of Nils Burwitz with special emphasis on the graphic work. It looks at Burwitz’s celebrated political images, prompted by his first-hand experience of Apartheid as a young artist in South Africa, and also looks at the work made since he moved to Vall-demossa in 1976.

Walking the Tightrope

In a certain sense, all artistic existences are a form of tightrope walking. The creative individual has to keep his – or her – balance in what is in effect a perpetually adverse situation, where any mis-step may be

fatal. And he or she can only do this by fixing attention on a single fixed point – the goal to be attained.

The difference between real tightrope walkers and true artists is, of course, that the artist hopes never to get there. The game is only worth it if the destination continually recedes. This is particularly true of the career and personality of Nils Burwitz. Burwitz has never pursued a safe or conventional course of action, either personally or artistically. The restlessly experimental nature of his art, and most particularly of his graphic work, which is the subject of this exhibition, is reflected in the story of his life – most obviously in the earlier part of it. His work intertwines universal themes with personal ones.

Burwitz was born in Swinemünde, Pomerania, on what was then the eastern border of Germany, in 1940. Today, the place where he was born is no longer German but Polish. During the war years, it was one of Germany's chief submarine bases. In 1943, it was almost obliterated by a massive air-raid. In 1945 his family fled to the West, and in 1958, thirteen restless years later, Burwitz went to South Africa. He was then 17. He studied Fine Art at Wits University, and at 23, held his first solo exhibition, which caused a sensation in his adopted country. What impressed people most was the tremendous power and sweep of his draughtsmanship, which had obvious affinities with the work of the great generation of Expressionist painters who flourished in Dresden before World War I.

Burwitz's early work is not purely Expressionist, however, it also has a Surrealist quality. This is visible in one of his earliest major achievements as a graphic artist, the 'Locust Variations' portfolio of 1966, based on a set of 9 original pencil drawings. This set of lithographs expresses both his love of African nature, but also his sense of nature's cruelty and his perception of the extreme quality of African life.

His marriage to Marina Schwezova in 1965 marked the beginning of an exceptionally close and happy relationship, and Marina's pregnancy, and the birth of their elder son Vadim, directed his attention to another range of subject-matter – the mysteries of the human organism. There are some exceptionally beautiful and touching notebook drawings from this time that deal with a theme which has seldom been tackled in Western art – the processes of human birth. These were made when Burwitz was in London on an 18-month scholarship awarded for travel in Europe. These drawings have a freshness and spontaneity which indicate that Burwitz is that very rare thing – a completely natural draughtsman, someone to whom the processes of drawing are as natural as breathing. Draughtsmen of this quality are, as the history of art demonstrates, much rarer than artists who are simply good painters.

The brilliance of Burwitz's draughtsmanship is also demonstrated in the portraits of friends – fellow artists, writers and musicians, which Burwitz has made throughout his career. In these portraits, drawn and painted, he resembles, not the Dresden-based artists of Die Brücke, but the great Austrian Secessionist Oskar Kokoschka.

Burwitz could not, however, remain absorbed in purely private themes. During his period in South Africa, there were other aspects of local life that increasingly impinged

on his consciousness. In 1948, ten years before he arrived there, racial discrimination had been institutionalised in the country by the first of the apartheid laws. These laws touched on every aspect of local life, including a prohibition of marriage between whites and nonwhites. In 1950, the Population Registration Act classified all South Africans into three groups – white, non-white and coloured, and in 1953 a Public Safety Act and a Criminal Law Amendment act were passed, which empowered the government to declare stringent states of emergency, and increased the penalties for any kind of protest.

In 1960, there was a major protest, when a large group of blacks in Sharpeville refused to carry the passes required by law. From this time onwards, the struggle against apartheid intensified – an intensification marked by increasingly draconian reprisals on the part of the Afrikaner government. In 1962, Nelson Mandela was arrested and sentenced to five years in jail. In 1963, after another trial, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Events of this sort could not pass a man of Burwitz's temperament by. He gradually evolved a new form of protest art, more fully represented in his graphic work than in his paintings. Interestingly enough these prints represented a complete shift of technique – into silkscreen, which he employed with consummate skill, and into the use of photographic imagery. The prints focussed on the absurdities of apartheid – especially on its niggling pedantry concerning racial matters – as much as they did on its cruelty. Often Burwitz used an intricate layering process to make his point. This is a conspicuous feature of the 'Tidal Zone' series, a set of nine prints made with Advanced Graphics in London, but at a time when Burwitz was still resident in South Africa.

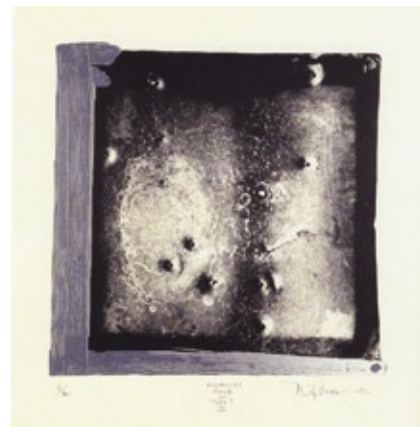
During his years in South Africa, Burwitz was very much involved with the theatre, and the 'Tidal Zone' series can be read

as a drama in nine scenes. Each successive print in the series takes the spectator a stage further in a dramatic narrative about the real meaning of apartheid.

It is sometimes now said that protest art in South Africa really only started in the 1980s, when, at least for those who were prescient, the inevitable end of apartheid was becoming clear. Burwitz's career makes it obvious that this was not in fact the case. His original protest pieces date from the end of the 1960s – just at the time when it was hardest for anyone, artist or writer, to raise his or her voice on the subject.

One problem with political art is, of course, that it tends to become dated when the immediate occasion has passed, though there are some exceptions to this rule. Goya's 'Disasters of War' series and Picasso's 'Guernica' are two examples that come to mind. Another example, in some ways even more telling, is Jacques-Louis David's 'Marat Assassinated', now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. It is telling not least because the political premise – that Marat was a good and worthy man – is in this case somewhat dubious. It nevertheless remains one of the most celebrated and influential of all political paintings. These works tend to survive for two reasons. One is, quite obviously, an exceptional degree of artistic skill, and great originality in the use of silkscreen and of photographic processes. The other is real depth of feeling. Works like the 'Tidal Zone' series are filled with irony, and a degree of black humour. They are also inspired by real outrage – outrage at pettiness, as well as at cruelty. Yet there is another aspect to them as well. The 1960s and 1970s, partly under the influence of American Pop Art, saw a huge expansion in the use of silk-screen for artistic purposes. Nevertheless, relatively few artists were able to penetrate its true nature as a process, and use it in an original way, producing images that could find expression in no other way. Andy Warhol was one of these.

Namibia: Kopf oder Zahl I und II, 84 x 71 cm, 1979





Trompe-l'oeil/Turning Point I und II, 84 x 71 cm, 1981

Burwitz, going in a very different direction, was another.

By the mid 1970s, Burwitz's situation was extremely ambiguous. He was now a celebrated figure in South African culture. In 1975 he was invited to teach at Wits University, where he himself had been trained, and which was one of the few moderately liberal institutions in the country. His second son, and third child, was born that year in Johannesburg. At the same time, he was increasingly aware that his position was increasingly untenable, both politically and personally.

In 1976, he made the decision to move again – this time to the idyllic mountain village of Valldemossa, on the Spanish island of Mallorca. The move did not stifle the political concerns that were now so much part of his artistic personality. He continued to make brilliantly original screen prints, often with political themes. The double-sided print 'Namibia: Heads or Tails? I', still for many people Burwitz's signature image, was not made until 1979. The idea is both extremely simple and extremely effective – the print is double-sided, and shows the two sides of the same warning sign – one tells the spectator he is entering a prohibited area. The other is blank, like a desolate desert landscape. And both sides are riddled with bullet holes.

Other prints make uneasy comments on how matters were going in South Africa. An example is 'Ignis Fatuus', which dates from 1987. This refers to the black township custom of 'necklacing' – a particularly horrible method of killing a suspected informer, or sometimes a suspected witch, by wiring the victim's hands behind his back, putting a gasoline-soaked tire around his neck, and then igniting it. In the run-up to the collapse of the apartheid regime, this punishment was increasingly used by members of the ANC [African National Congress] to terror-

ise dissidents and encourage black political solidarity. One leading figure who seemed to encourage the practice was Nelson Mandela's wife, Winnie. Here the print is once again very ingenious technically, since it is printed on two layers of paper, with part of the centre torn away and scorched to reveal a melting symbol below the lifesize frottage of a Firestone tire, – with the inscription IN SUID AFRIKA VERVAARDIG, MADE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

There is also a small series of prints – very large images on folded paper – which show the confronted profiles of the Mandelas, husband and wife, and comment on their deteriorating relationship after Mandela was set free at long last. The image, a nose-kiss, based on the couple's wedding photograph, was originally painted on a bed sheet during a visit to the Settler's Inn at Grahamstown, South Africa, before Mandela's release from prison in February 1990. What Burwitz did with it subsequently illustrates his artistic subtlety, and his ability to imply things without stating them. It also demonstrates his ability to absorb unwelcome facts – a gift not given to most artists who meddle in politics.

Some prints show Burwitz looking at the situation in Europe, and in particular at the division of Germany. The double-sided print 'Trompe l'Oeil/Turning Point' (1981) shows a figure standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. On one side, he faces us, like a tourist having his picture taken. On the other side, his back is to us, and we see him, much diminished, in a traffic mirror, with the words 'Im Wendebereich' – 'Turning Point Zone' on a sign beneath it. A reflection in the mirror, in the form of a large X, seems to bar his progress. At the time when the print was made, the gate stood in no man's land on the eastern side of the wall, visible but inaccessible to the inhabitants of West Berlin.

Burwitz's time in Mallorca has been marked by an increasing identification with the Mallorcan community and with Spanish and Mallorcan culture. He has, for example, made a small portfolio of prints devoted to the largely disastrous few months spent in Valldemossa by the French novelist George Sand and her then lover, the composer Frédéric Chopin during the winter of 1839 – 40. The text is by Robert Graves, the great British poet who lived for many years in neighbouring Deya. For Burwitz, Graves and the Catalan-born master Joan Miró are Mallorca's two great hero figures. His friendship with the Miró family has been a lodestar of his life on the island. There is also a portfolio devoted to the 'Invisible Miró', with twenty prints illustrating texts provided by twenty of Miró's friends.

One of the most impressive products of these years has, however, been an ongoing series of watercolour drawings entitled 'Terraces for Marina'. These, all in the same format, are based on the form of the terraces at Valldemossa, and are provided with long inscriptions in a choice of four languages – German, English, Spanish and Mallorcan – all commonly spoken in the Burwitz household. The images illustrate his love for the town itself, and for surrounding nature. They also offer a commentary on larger events. One drawing, for example, was inspired by the events of 11th September 2001, and is one of the very few viable works of art that I know of that have been inspired by that terrible event.

I love these drawings, not simply for their seamless combination of words and images, which reminds me in some curious way, though there is no resemblance of style, of the great English poet-painter William Blake, but because they are completely unpretentious. They are the product of a man using his gift – or in this case gifts in the plural might be more appropriate, since both words and images are involved, to get on terms with the world that surrounds him, to absorb it and make something of it.

Meanwhile, Burwitz, with incredible energy, is continually involving himself in new enterprises. He has now become a major artistic figure in the field of stained glass – a field which his admired mentor Miró ventured into once or twice, but only rather tentatively. Stained glass is essentially about a passion for light, and skill in the control of light. One can see why that might appeal to a man of his temperament. Illuminating things – places, persons, human psychology and political and social situations – has, after all, been the theme of his whole life as a maker of art.