

## The Baby Animal of Art

I meet Jonathan Meese on a crisp October morning at an address which till recently housed his gallery, Contemporary Fine Arts. It's in the revitalised Berlin Mitte district, a focal point of the city's throbbing art scene. Meese greets me warmly and leads me to his living room one floor up within the same building. We make small talk for perhaps a minute before he plunges into the issue that concerns him most: the 'dictatorship of art'. Still fiddling with my recording gear, I attempt to impose some chronological order on the interview. He's more interested in putting across his view of art at large. He takes propaganda as seriously – and as playfully – as painting, sculpture and performance. To make sure his message gets across, he repeats it frequently, and returns to the same themes when we pick up the conversation the next day in a neighbourhood café, before strolling to his warehouselike studio a few blocks away. Like many Germans, Meese speaks excellent English. Also in the manner of many Germans, he believes he speaks it badly, and apologises more than once for this perceived shortcoming.

*You were born in Tokyo, I believe. How long did you spend there?*

I left as a young child. My father served in the British air force during the war, and moved to Japan afterwards. My mother's sister also lived in Japan and my mother went to visit her, that's how she met my father. But quite soon after marriage she grew homesick and brought us to Germany with her.

*I saw a video of one of your performances in which you were dressed like a samurai in a Kabuki play, with perhaps a touch of the geisha as well. So you've obviously retained some affinity for the land of your birth. That performance seemed very spontaneous to me. Do you rehearse much beforehand?*

Not at all. I take some stuff with me, some masks for instance, and toys, and then it just happens. But the art doesn't go through my body. There is a secret skin between me and the art. I never express anything of myself, the art is what it is. It is not a part of me, it is a part of itself. If you see a painting by me, it's impossible to say something about me by looking at it.

*So you reject the idea that art is an expression of personality...*

I think it leads to nothing. Art is something very normal. It's a function like blood flowing through your veins. Everybody can play, we don't need geniuses.

*But surely some art is more impressive than other art, surely there has to be some differentiation made, some judgment.*

True, but judgments are wrong because we cannot prove them. You can always say that Picasso is this or that, but you don't really know. It's always mysterious. If somebody says that he knows the way, then he's a liar, or else he should be the dictator of art. But there is no artist like that. Art itself is the dictatorship. Art is so strong, it is above

everything. I think it will take over power, real power. The next revolution will not come from the street, but from art itself. I believe we are in a very important situation now. The only alternative is art. Art will be the power of the future, even in parliament. Not as decoration but as a principle.

*And through that, what will humanity gain?*

It will be the first time in history that something will reign over us. We have always had kings and leaders. We should give power to an abstract entity, it will change everything, because then our ego will vanish. We have too much faith in human power. There are some who believe in religious power, but that is nostalgic. It's already happened and it didn't lead us to something new. We have to give something power that was never in power. Art will take the power anyway, but we can be humble and we can play and then it will come much quicker. And I as a human being want to see this revolution to come, I want to see that art takes over.

*This reminds me of what some Marxists believed, namely that the revolution will come anyway, but one has to act to ensure it comes quicker. So there's a role for free will within a larger deterministic structure.*

But what we can do is very unclear. Maybe just play. Play and be humble. Let the thing happen. Don't give your taste a chance. Don't nail your opinion to the gate. Just play like a baby animal. And what happens to you while playing is not that important. Maybe you produce art, maybe not, you don't know. The revolution is a logical consequence of such play, but we never allowed it in the past. We always wanted a group of people to be in charge, or a king, or a certain party. But art is the party. It's not desirable for artists to create a political party, because art is the party. It already has a name; you don't have to found it.

*Does art need to be political in order to bring about this dictatorship of art that you speak of?*

Not at all. Art is political, but in its own way, not in my way. The artwork is not interested in whether I'm happy, ill, right-wing, left-wing, bad, good. That is not its business. I cannot blackmail art by my ability or talent. Art has its own ability. It is its own fantasy, its own talent, its own politics, its own love, its own hate, its own strength. I can be weak, but the art made can be very strong. Moreover, it's not important that I make it, what's important is that it is made. Once it's made it is free, it does what it wants to do, develops its own consciousness. This also means that art cannot be taught. Art teaching is just something funny, a kind of game. Art professors are useless. It's OK they exist, but they should not have power.

*Did you reject art teaching while still in art school? Is that why you didn't complete your degree?*

Yes, I felt it was senseless to give me a degree, because the things I made wanted to be in the world anyway. Whether I'm an artist or not, I don't know, because art doesn't tell me. I just produce my toys and throw them out and people take them, or art takes them, and

says thank you.

*You entered art education quite late. What did you do before that?*

I was in art school between the ages of 23 and 28. Before that I did what my mother wanted me to do. She wanted me to be a banker so I started studies in that direction, but I was no good.

*Were you a misfit in art school? Did you have a lot of friends?*

I did, yes. I wasn't the arrogant type, so people liked me, but I enjoyed working alone. I thought of the school as a ghost castle. I went there very early in the morning or very late at night, even slept there, which was possible at the time.

*Did you do well academically?*

It was not an issue. At one point I refused to take an exam, but they said, "it's OK, it's not necessary for you anyway." At that time my art school in Hamburg was very good about such things.

*Joseph Beuys is obviously a big influence on you, and he taught for decades, so schools can't be that bad...*

I don't say they are, but I taught for a while, and I noticed students had so much fear, there were so many rules. I believe it's very important to say, "I don't know." We are all humans playing a game.

*I am intrigued by the way you combine the idea of the artist as instrument with the notion of art as a game. The belief that art speaks through the artist who does not have much volition is a romantic, mystical view. It goes with a valorisation of nature and instinct. On the other hand, those who speak of art as a game tend to be urbane, ironic, self-conscious, very unromantic and unmystical. In your art as well as your discourse, there is an unusual merging of the expressionist element with the pop attitude.*

In the game of art you cannot use a recipe book. There are no rules and there is no ritual. People often say that my performances have ritualistic bearings, but this is not a fact. Because in art there is no God, there is no way to address this god. You just play, your limbs work around, but you have no control. I am not a madman, I am not in a trance or on drugs. Of course, I drink a lot during some performances, but it's not about me, this whole game is not about me.

*You must be more pleased sometimes with the way things turn out than at other times. Is there a feeling within you that you now recognise which indicates that something good is going to emerge?*

That happens, it's in the nature of being human, but I always tell myself it is wrong. You feel, sometimes, that this is going to be a big thing. But you should just work like an animal. Do it for the thing. If I should say what I did twenty years ago is not as good as

what I do now, I'd be a liar. Because then I'd think that I am more important than the art.

*When we were walking up here we passed a collection of early works by you and you were rather dismissive of them. I thought they were powerful images, but you said there was too much Picasso in them.*

I should not have said that. I'm a human being and so I do such things, but to say something like that is not humble enough, it gives me too much importance. Art is important, the artist is not. When I die, there's still something there, which is beautiful. There are artists who destroy their early work. I consider that unfair, because how can you judge? You do what is necessary and then let somebody else judge. Animals don't think, "Wow, I just did something much better than what I managed yesterday." Maybe they do, but I like the idea that you just do your duty.

*One of the central ideas in Indian thought is somewhat similar to what you've expressed. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna advises Arjun, who is a warrior, to do his duty, which is to fight without distraction. Krishna says one must act without thinking of the fruits of one's actions. It's a sentiment often expressed in India but seldom truly acted upon.*

For me the idea comes from the Nibelungen. Do your duty whatever happens. It's the law of the thing itself. What you say tells me it's not particularly German. But it's true, we think too much of the fruit.

*Speaking of which, we live in a pragmatic world, with the art establishment and the market. You have to work within this framework and yet you have to tap into a different side of yourself in creating your art. In a performance for instance, you go out there and are one thing, then come out of it and are in a different world. Do you find the switching difficult to handle?*

What's difficult for me is the fact that the revolution is not here yet. But in the game I'm never really unhappy. The art market is just a side game. I think people should put all their money into art and nothing else. All the money of the whole world should be put into art. One drawing should cost 100 billion dollars, as much as the whole income of a state, to show how absurd money is. And that will lead us to the next stage. We still think art is decoration. But we humans are the decoration. We don't really believe in the power of art, that's why we make connections between art and politics.

*The last Documenta was interesting in this connection. Activists have fought for years to ensure certain groups – women, third world artists, sexual minorities and so on – are better represented in museums and prestigious shows. Documenta 12 was a great victory seen from the perspective of such representation. What was surprising was the framework within which political artworks were exhibited. Their placement, it seems to me, required us to view them as 'mere art'. I use the phrase in a nod to artists who connect their work with political movements as a way of validation or justification. When judged by the criteria of art, much of their work is found wanting, as Documenta 12 proved.*

At the moment I think art is very weak. It is just an illustration, a documentation or an

archive of what is happening. But it never provides utopian ideas. There are other people, teachers, say, or bureaucrats, who can illustrate what's happening. Artists should look into the future and think about the alternative.

*It's as if art is trying to catch up with history, history has overtaken art.*

I have opinions, everybody has them, but art should be more than opinions. Or else we should have 60 million Documentas. In Germany, many people talk about private mythologies or private obsessions of artists, I think that's a contradiction. Something private can never be mythological, and if something is mythology it means it is beyond your personal life. It is above you or underneath. It is something bigger or smaller. This concept about the private obsessions of artists, which I think was invented in Germany, just makes you want to weep.

*I am interested in art that contains social or political ideas, and I include your work in that category, but not art which proposes it be viewed on the basis of criteria other than those that belong to art.*

I ask myself why these artists don't enter the political scene. Because they are more politicians than artists. Or human rights people. It's great to be a human rights activist, but then be that rather than wear the uniform of 'artist'. If you really want to change something in reality you should do what's necessary for that. But not under the code-name 'art'.

*These developments in art that you speak of, how do you keep abreast of them? Do you enjoy visiting art fairs or biennales?*

I went to all of these things in the past but I'm not doing it any more. I try to keep myself informed in other ways, through magazines and things, but I cannot go to a fair, because I cannot go ten meters without meeting people I know.

*I visited Frieze just before coming to Berlin. It's amazing how art fairs have gained prominence in the past few years. Now they're at the same level as major biennales.*

They are potentially more interesting than biennales because biennales are often based on the personal tastes of one person or a few people, which can become very one dimensional. But artists should not go to fairs. Our work should be there, and we should go there once or twice for the experience, but then we should just do our work and let our gallery handle that. There are too many ways to keep one away from work. Too many parties, too many shows, too many fairs.

*Germany has a well known history of political extremism, and an equally deep but perhaps less well known tradition of what might be termed artistic extremism. In the aftermath of the second world war, the country programmatically eliminated all forms of extremism, and perhaps artistic extremism was a victim of this purge. Only a few artists, like Werner Herzog, for example, carried on the tradition. Since you express yourself in extreme terms, I see in your proposal of a total separation between art on the one side and life and politics on the other, the desire to sidestep a connection with German*

*political extremism.*

What you say is somewhat true. After 1945 it was required that every extreme thought should be rejected. Understandable, but now it's sixty years gone, and we are in this very weak situation. We should give power back to art, to literature, to cinema. We had Fassbinder, Beuys, Baselitz, a few people, but only a few. The conviction that you as a person are the most important thing, that if you feel good the world is good and if you personally feel bad the world is bad, this dominates our society at the moment. It's such individualism that makes our art so weak. We have standard art everywhere, which we never wanted.

*That's an interesting paradox, of how societies glorify individualism but become more generic. It brings me to a prominent feature of your persona, the uniform. You always wear dark tracksuits made by Adidas, a big German multinational, precisely the kind of corporation accused of spreading the uniformity you abhor. Is it an ironic gesture?*

No, a uniform allows me not to think about what I wear.

*But anything could become a uniform; the fact that you chose to make one from the product of a German multinational is surely significant.*

If everybody dressed the same, something would change. The fact that we all dress differently makes us even more the same than if we had a uniform. I really believe that. Personally speaking, I am afraid of reality, that's why I need security. And these stripes somehow define me, provide a limit to my body which I like.

*James Joyce spoke about how the German word 'Leib' has a sense of wholeness, while the English 'body' is broken into two...*

We have a skin to secure ourselves. It's our natural frontier. And it means something. We should keep to our possibilities. In certain ways we extend everything into total weakness, and forget to make the really good things strong. I'm here in Berlin and they say, "the art scene is boiling, everything is strange here," but nothing is strange. People are all the same, they produce the same stuff, they all behave the same. OK, then, why not accept that and start over. There is no difference in colour, there is no difference in behaviour, there is no difference in religion, it is all just simulation. We are all the same. Blood going through our bodies, we have to eat, digest and breathe, that's all. We are not the powerful element of things. The power is outside, not inside. I don't believe in soul. We put our soul somewhere else thousands of years ago. We took it out of our body because we felt so individualistic. And it never came back, it's somewhere else. This is important for the work in the sense that I want to create overkill. I have no problem doing drawings, sculpture, performances, stage design, I even did a theatre play on my own, I want to make films, I want to do everything.

*Your work is singular, and yet you have collaborated a fair amount with other artists. How did these collaborations come about?*

I love other artists, really respect them. If I work with Albert Oehlen or Daniel Richter or

Joerg Immendorff, it's like I'm meeting captains of other ships, and we do something together and then go our separate ways. I'm very open to collaboration. It's all about putting your own importance aside and doing things. Better to do things than to think about them. Too much theory is bad because theory always comes after the deed. Now in art school they say, "don't do this, don't do that, this is already done, you shouldn't paint, sculpture is not possible in this age, or don't do video, don't do film, it's not art." And I think, "How do you know? How do you know *so much*?" (Laughter)  
For me art is like children's birthdays. You celebrate birthdays with your friends, and those are the people I work with. We have a lot of good food, we do some strange things, then we separate and the next day something else happens. I like these people; they are their own rules, their own law.

*Have you faced a lot of criticism for your absolutist statements? There's an argument originating in Siegfried Kracauer's book From Caligari to Hitler, which sees a connection between art forms like Expressionism and authoritarianism. It sees expressionism as ready to embrace dictatorship. It's been a very influential thesis.*

I am criticised a lot for talking about the dictatorship of art. People always think that I am speaking about a human leader. Or they say it is not acceptable to use a Hitler salute in art, but I always say it belongs to art, it should not come to reality. It should be on stage or in books. We didn't do that 100 years ago, or 80 years ago, which was a big mistake. I always discuss these things with my mother, because she was born in 1929, and lived through the war. I ask her, "Why did this happen? Why were the artists not strong enough?" And she says, "That's not the point." (Laughs)

*What does she think about the dictatorship of art?*

She doesn't like the word. For her dictatorship is always negative. But the dictatorship of nature is not negative, it's something we accept as normal. If we go too close to the sun we will die; the sun is a dictator. Like water. Water will take us down, it is the dictator of the situation. It's not bad, it is just what it is. I think it's important to give these words a chance to develop into a new direction. A word cannot be bad, we only think it's bad. We have to give it a positive direction.

*There have been instances of words being reclaimed in the manner you suggest. African Americans did that with 'nigger', for example. There was a moment when it was an interesting political act and then it became banal. So in a way the process of reclamation is continuous. You reclaim a word, it becomes banal then you move to something else.*

I wait for the day when in the Bild Zeitung it says, 'DICTATORSHIP OF ART'. It has to be claimed, it has to be said, and then you can move on. But it has not reached the people yet, we have to wait till it reaches them and then we can open a new book. You just have to let words play with themselves. This is only interesting as long as it is not in everybody's mouth.

*To get back to Kracauer, for a minute, I think he and others were positing something fairly subtle. It wasn't a critique of artists who said they wanted a dictator but a critique of art which manifested a desire for a higher authority of some kind. Your statements*

*seem to fit that definition.*

The only authority that is useful is the authority of art. We always think we are the centre of the world, the main figure in the game but the game is the main figure itself. We are just side figures. I believe art existed before human beings and it will exist when we are gone. We are just in-between

*It's interesting you don't even consider the existence of humans necessary for the existence of art... It brings up the larger question of what you think art is. You were saying humans are like instruments, but without humans what is the instrument through which art is expressed and appreciated?*

I think nature is much more humble towards art than us. Like a river: it knows how to behave. Like animals: they know what has to be done. And the hills. Mount Everest is art in itself. Some crystals are art. Maybe some human beings are art, we don't know yet. When we are gone, art will live on. We always think that the fact that we look on something is so important. But for example in the sands of Egypt there are sculptures lost for 4000 years. Then we drag them out of the ground, but they were art even when they were in the sand. It's not so important that we look at them. The best time in a museum is when all men and women are gone, when the paintings can talk to each other, which is more beautiful because they have so much to say to each other. We are the weakest thing in the whole game.

*You're very interested in the medieval tradition, both the tradition of chivalry, of knights and also the religious and mystical side of it, the quest for the Holy Grail. Can you speak about that a bit?*

Art is like alchemy and the medieval age was the great age of alchemy. I think we have to go back to that, because art is something very simple, very geometrical. There are perhaps just four elements which you mix and art is produced. We always think it's more complicated, because we look into the mirror and see ourselves. We should not look into the mirror, let art look into its own mirror.

*Your paintings and sculpture, don't strike me as simple in the way you're describing. There's quite a lot happening there.*

I work very fast, faster than anybody I know. I'm the fastest person in sculpture, people tell me that in the foundry where the sculptures are cast. You go there, you do it, you finish it and then it's done. Not so much thinking involved.

*The sculptures of yours I saw in London at the Frieze art fair had the feel of some of Otto Dix's paintings. The ones he made about the first world war with the shattered soldiers.*

They are guardians of art, according to me, or children of art. It's all about these strong figures. Knights, children, vampires, animals. More and more we have to look at animals. We have to look at Scarlett Johansson, she should be the dictator of beauty.

*Not many people will object to looking at her. Why do you think she should be dictator of*

*beauty?*

For me she is a key figure at the moment. This baby animal is about volume. This body is filled with necessity. The skin is so thin it's like water. She has done with herself what is necessary. She's no human being anymore, but a standard, a good standard. Marquis de Sade, Ezra Pound, Picasso, Andy Warhol, Scarlett Johansson, this is the chain.

*That's your canon, the great tradition (Laughter). You've used a lot of references from film in your paintings and installations, even before you became fascinated with Johansson. You like horror flicks, obviously.*

I was always a big collector of films, magazines, books. I think I have about 5000 films, 20 to 30 thousand books and countless magazines. I might buy something because of the title, because of what the cover looks like. I buy it, sometimes watch it, I need it around me. I like radical things like pornography, military items, religious stuff, manifestos, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, all these major figures, I need them around me.

*Even when you use a figure from English literature, you pick Ezra Pound, who was well known for his fascist sympathies. Wagner, Nietzsche, all these controversial figures from cultural history aside from dictators. These are acts of provocation, right?*

But it's so childish! What I do is so exaggerated, I think it's difficult to see a provocation in it. People should understand it's just a game. I never want to provoke. Art can never harm you because it's another world. It is not reality. If you feel offended there's a problem in you. I'm saying come on play with me, play with Nietzsche, play with Wagner, because art is the only playground where you can do that. It was a mistake not to play with Wagner when he was alive. Nietzsche, of course, was like a baby animal himself, because he was so funny.

*Why not, for instance, use figures like Gandhi or Mandela?*  
(Long pause)

It's the belief that art is stronger than dictators, and that you can prevent Hitler from coming by building up the strongest art that is possible. Stalin on stage is good, Stalin in reality is not good. The strongest art piece possible is the dictatorship of art. If it would have been there in the 20s, 30s, 40s, Hitler would have had no chance. I absolutely believe that tyrants flourish because art is not strong enough. We have to write better manifestos than what these politicians said, stronger than what Lenin or Stalin said, Caligula said, Nero said. I have total respect for Mandela and all these others, but I don't need to fight them

*One of the canonical figures you mentioned was Andy Warhol. He said he'd have liked to be a machine, and called his studio a factory. But after his death his co-workers revealed that he would spend long hours closely supervising the work. He was very hands on and detailed in what he wanted and how he wanted it. So he had cultivated a persona, a mask of indifference which disguised his actual dedication. I'm interested in knowing how much of your work and your rhetoric is a mask.*

You're right, Warhol had the perfect mask. I also have a mask. I want to be the baby

animal of art. That is my role. But if you were to take this mask away there would be another one. If you took away one million masks then maybe my real face would come up, but then I'd be dead in every way. When I go out on the street I lose one hundred masks. When I go to an art meeting I lose a thousand. Because these things take so much strength away. I have to find new masks all the time and this I can do best when I'm alone.

*And the mask can be more interesting than what's behind it. The desire we have to strip away the mask to see the real person is pointless.*

Yes, the uniform is more interesting than the skin, it is protection that is needed, like animals have. Turtles have a shell. With the mask, with the uniform, one is alert, prepared, like a weapon. When you are playing you are always alert. What Warhol showed us is that it's not about egoism, it's not about the human. He said the machine was OK, and strangely the machine was very human. He positioned his work so cleverly. He didn't take art and put it under the ass of a politician, but made a political volcano, a political art volcano. Es war der Zentralorgan der Kunst, die Zentralmaschine der Kunst, die Machtzentrale, die Kommandozentrale, das Dynamo der Kunst, der Motor der Kunst. It was like a building, like architecture, like a U-boat, like a torpedo. When I think of Warhol, I never think about a human, I always think about stronger material. I think of metal, of light, of illness, of wigs, so many nice things!

*What about his counterpart in Germany, Beuys? You combine Beuys the Shaman and Warhol the Popmeister. So let's talk about Beuys.*

They are two sides of a coin. They were never human, they were just coins. If you toss this coin, Warhol will come face up more often than Beuys. The side of the coin which represents Warhol is lighter. Because I think Beuys weakened as he grew older, Warhol did not. Beuys thought too much of his own importance. It was a big mistake for him to go into politics, founding the Green party. Actually it's unfair for me to say this, because I don't know how deep he went into it. He's a giant, and it's all right when you're a giant to lose a finger, because you have thousands of them. If Beuys had a thousand fingers, he lost one, Warhol never lost a finger. I'm sorry, this is such a childish way of explaining things!

I love Beuys. I think he looked so beautiful. If you look at his face, there's something so special and wonderful in it, not in the manner of genius but in a normal way. When you are in the public eye so much you're bound to make mistakes. It's part of the beauty of an artist to talk rubbish to make mistakes. Nowadays many artists are afraid to say anything for fear it might harm their career. They are so under pressure to do the right thing. Beuys said such childish things, and that's beautiful.

*What are you working on right now?*

It's a group of paintings for a show in France. I'm working around the theme of the Count of Monte Cristo.

*That's very popular in India.*

(Surprised) Really?

*Yes, it has a rags to riches story, betrayal revenge, the works. 19<sup>th</sup> century novels make great soap operas, it's been adapted quite often. This show obviously has a French slant. Do you try and connect what you create with the place where you're showing?*

I always refer to the French revolution anyway, Robespierre, Saint-Just and others. But I will also use German words and English ones, it should not be purely French.

*You seem to work on numerous paintings side by side.*

Yes, in fact I was filmed while working on these.

*So you don't have a problem painting with somebody watching?*

Not at all. Because there's no secret behind it. It's very important to show how simple art is. Art is not about working long on something or trying to show you have certain skills. It is not about something that you learned, so you feel, "I am now able to do it". Because if you know how to do it, it is not necessary to do it any more. You might as well stop. This is why development in painting is not possible. The moment you notice, "Wow, I am developing," it is finished. Development can only mean stiffness.

*You spend a lot of your time in here?*

Yes, I'd like to just stay in here and play, and throw out whatever results, and my gallery people can come and take it away and throw me some food and alcohol in return.

*I study the paintings lying on the studio floor, flick through a book on Scarlett Johansson that he hands me. I think I have enough material, I tell him. "Are you sure?" he asks, doubtful, as if three hours of talking is far too little. I am certain, I say, thanks a lot, see you in Bombay. He wants me to pose for a photograph before I leave. Picking up an old instant camera, he begins clicking at a rapid pace. As I look on, bemused, he dances around the studio, taking pictures from all angles till the roll is exhausted. Even the act of photography is a performance, imbued with the childlike playfulness and excess in which he revels.*