



Jörg Immendorff. The Task of the Painter

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**Cover:**

Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege? (Where Do You Stand With Your Art, Colleague?), 1973
Acrylic on canvas, 130 x 210 cm (in two parts). Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Für alle Lieben in der Welt (For All Beloved in the World), 1966. Oil on cardboard, 147 x 182 cm
Since 2008 Michael & Eleonore Stoffel Stiftung in Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich

On the Life and Death of a German Painter

Toward the Construction of the Biography of Jörg Immendorff

Ulrich Wilmes

Jörg Immendorff's work, which developed over an exceptionally prolific creative period of more than four decades, was the result of a vital calling by which the artist saw himself as part of a changing society. His goal was always clear: "I wanted to be an artist!" For Immendorff (Bleckede, Germany, 1945 – Düsseldorf, 2007), art was an open space that allowed for the autonomous handling of form and content, which is why he invariably rejected his painting and sculpture being reduced to an anecdotal objectivity. Even with respect to change that occurred during the last period of his life and work, he concluded that this had led to a "clearing" in his pictorial language in the sense of a painterly metamorphosis, a realignment, which he experienced as a "breakout into freedom":

The new pictures are a sort of breakout into freedom for me. I am delighted that, because of their radical concentration, they no longer provoke as self-evident the question about the fable. In them I have reduced step by step the narrative tinsel so that form and color are at the center. Yes, it is true that fundamentally I am a narrator with a superabundant urge to concoct stories, someone who perhaps comes right out of a fairy tale.¹

A retrospective consideration of his lifelong metamorphoses reinforces this impression of an increasing openness in which art and life mutually interpenetrate. Even though he considered that his role as an artist was to resist existing social conventions, Immendorff never regarded himself as a social outsider. The often asked question about the relationship between life and work cannot be ignored in Immendorff's case: he inevitably forces himself into the space between the viewer and the work.

Real-life experiences entangled within the biography of the artist Immendorff become in his works objects for interpreting his worldview. His pictures thus become sign carriers, narrative providers, and slogan propagators, but ultimately they are tableaux with theater spaces in which actors and public are moved back and forth between stage and stalls.

Within his narrative image-worlds and world-images, objects and figures remain hermetically enclosed and unattainably detached from their actual existence. Although his paintings might superficially seem to unfold as explicit narratives,

1 Jörg Immendorff, in conversation with Michael Stoeber, "Self-Portrait with Phrygian Cap," trans. George Frederick Takis, in *Jörg Immendorff. Bilder und Zeichnungen / Paintings and Drawings*, ed. Carl Haenlein, exh. cat. Kestner Gesellschaft (Hannover: Kestner Gesellschaft, 2000), 29.

they turn out to be the surreal *stages* of a self-proclaimed victim of destiny. The overcrowded scenarios become compressed into labyrinths without end and without center, let alone a way out that would permit escape. For Immendorff there is no way out of reality. It is all that he has. And in this reality he seeks the path to realization.

I

Immendorff's early artistic self-discovery occurred against the backdrop of the heated political climate of the 1960s, during which the Federal Republic of Germany would deeply and irreversibly change. In 1963, he began studying stage design with Teo Otto (1904–1968) at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, but in 1964 moved into the class of Joseph Beuys, who at that time defined the academy's art-theoretical and practical orientation. Immendorff rapidly formed a close and reciprocal personal relationship with Beuys. Their relationship was characterized by a mutual respect founded on their agreement over societal function.

Immendorff's approaches, however, were guided more by an untheoretical spontaneity and a pragmatic directness, leading him to his conviction of the formability of reality through artistic work. The concept of *work* is to be comprehended literally here, referring to the societal function of art and the direct incursion of art into reality.

After the ideological confrontation between abstraction and figuration and the domination of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, the waves of Minimal and Conceptual Art rolled over Europe during this decade of the 1960s and naturally found an echo in the major German art academies. Immendorff's early pictures indicate that he was interested in the ordinariness of everyday objects as well as in the manual aspects of painterly practice. *Hört auf zu malen* (Stop Painting, 1966) was never really a motto for Immendorff, even if he sometimes passed himself off as the young iconoclast uninterested in any far-reaching debate about the history of painting or the evolution of its central tradition. Under the compelling influence of the charismatic leader Beuys, he was more excited by the idea of dismantling the self-importance and conformity of the art business from the inside out.

The banalization and popularization of art were his form of revolt, which he sought to implement through alternative means. His paintings of plump, bloated *Babys* pay homage to an infantile naiveté that simultaneously manifested itself in the radical dilettantism of the *LIDL* works.

His relationship with Chris Reinecke was a decisive influence on the conceptual basis of this Actionism-based series of works. Immendorff met her as a fellow student in 1964, soon after his admission to the Kunstakademie, and married her shortly thereafter. Immendorff benefitted tremendously from



Hört auf zu malen (Stop Painting), 1966. Synthetic paint on canvas, 132 × 132 cm
Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

Detail: *Die Lidlstadt nimmt Gestalt an* (The Lidl-Town Takes Shape), 1968. Chalk on wood, Each 70 × 90 cm
Galerie Michael Werner Märkisch Wilmersdorf, Cologne and New York

her already solid artistic self-understanding. Above all, she counterbalanced his deficiency in theory, which was put to the test by the evolution of the *LIDL* project.

Reinecke was responsible for many of the manifesto-like texts and concepts that accompanied the actions. *Die Lidlstadt nimmt Gestalt an* (The Lidl-Town Takes Shape, 1968), whose plans were drawn up with white chalk on blackboard, was built from simple cardboard houses. They were intended as function-specific markers for utopian idea spaces.

Born after World War II, Immendorff belonged to the 1968er generation associated with the politicization of civil society. Resistance, above all from the left-wing student body, intensified from 1965 onward in opposition to the social encrustation of a restored postwar establishment that included countless former National Socialist party members. The initial catalyst for the protest movement was the call for the reappraisal of the past and the complete denazification of all social institutions; protests were subsequently directed against the adoption of emergency laws, against the Vietnam War, and against a capitalist-driven neocolonialism. The fatal shooting of Benno Ohnesorg on June 2, 1967, and the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke on April 11, 1968, led to a radicalization of the protest movement, divided by the foundation of the Marxist K-Gruppen with their authoritarian structures and the armed resistance of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF, Red Army Faction).

II

In 1969, Immendorff was expelled from the Kunstakademie as a result of his subversive activities, and in the ensuing period he intensified his role as a political agitator. His artistic practice was also influenced by his pedagogical work as an art teacher, with which he earned his living between 1968 and 1981, and by his political work as a member of the KPD/AO, a communist party that saw itself in the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong, and that turned away from the hegemonic leadership aspirations of the Soviet Union. In Immendorff's work, text and image stand side by side as signifiers of meaning. *Die Meinungssäule* (The Opinion Column, 1971), or *Beispiel Schülerkritik* (Student Criticism Sample, 1972) refer to the everyday didactic methods through which Immendorff co-created a project-oriented pedagogy with his students. The series *Rechenschaftsbericht* (Statement of Accounts, 1972) forms a comprehensive record of his activity in this sphere. The images depict typical everyday school situations, such as the discussion of a slide presentation, a meeting of the working group of the school newspaper, or practical work; each respective illustration is overwritten and annotated with a text. The image pattern of this group of works evokes the pictorial space of a Polaroid. The city pictures of *Frankfurt/Main* (1973) and *Köln* (1973), are also characterized by this pattern; presenting images of demonstrations against the Vietnam War, they bear the slogan *Alles für den Sieg des*



Te der Dumant-Lindemann Hauptschule

Aus: der Diskussion des Halbjahresprogramms 72
im Zeichen- und Werkunterricht

Die Meinungssäule

Isolierte Klassen haben viele Wünsche für Aufgaben zu Tage, wir müßten
den Umgang selbst darüber unterhalten, nach welchem Maßstab wir
diese Vorschläge beurteilen wollten. Als Maßstab wurde
festgelegt: Interessant und ist die Antwort auf die Frage:
Warum lohnt es sich für den einzelnen und für die
Klasse die Aufgabe zu bearbeiten? Was können wir
dabei lernen? Was können andere mit dem
Ergebnissen anfangen? Welchen Nutzen ziehen wir
aus der Aufgabe für die nahe Zukunft - welchen
für später? - usw. etc.

Das große Brett hängt in der Halle für die wir nicht, jedenfalls
nicht aufhalten laut Hausordnung - hier kommt, daß das große
Brett zu klein ist - ich finde die Schülerzeitung aber auch
gelegentlich haben ihre Meinungen ausnahmsweise Kritik und
Forderungen auch so bekannt gemacht - deshalb:
Wir könnten mit dem Schluß einer Säule aufstellen,
an die alle Schüler solche Anschläge anbringen
könnten - es wäre auch gut zusammen mit der
Schülerzeitung, weil die ja nur einmal im Monat
kommt. Auf die Säule kann immer das Aktuelle.

(Vorschlag und Begründung einer Schülerin 8a)

In der Besprechung dieses Vorschlags in der 7. Klasse
tauchte auch die Begründung auf, die Klasse könnte,
bevor sie die Schule verläßt, eine Aufgabe bearbeiten,
die auch noch von den nachrückenden Klassen
benutzt werden könnte.

Das Arbeitsergebnis wäre nützlich für alle Schüler.

Es gab folgenden Einwand: Eine Säule hat doch
nicht genug Platz für alle Schüler - da wird
alles zu klein und beschneit.

Das Gegenargument: Man stellt mehrere Säulen
auf - es gibt eine zeitliche Begrenzung für die
Anschläge - die Klasse macht ein Flusblatt
und begründet der Schülerschaft diesen
Vorschlag - hinzu kommt ein Fragebogen.
Wir prüfen diese Idee in der Praxis - so machen wir
Erfahrungen und können uns verbessern!



Besprechung eines Transparentes
Ergebnis: Nur wenn die Klasse gemeinsam die Kritik macht
kann der Lehrer nicht daran vorbei!

Die Meinungssäule (The Opinion Column), 1972. Dispersion paint on canvas, 75 x 92 cm
Birkelsche Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur, Cologne

Besprechung eines Transparentes (Talking About a Banner), 1972. Synthetic paint on wood, 50 x 60 cm
Birkelsche Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur, Cologne

kämpfenden vietnamesischen Volkes (Everything for the Victory of the Fighting Vietnamese People). Immendorff's agitprop pictures of the 1970s evince a conscious rejection of painterly virtuosity. The function of a picture was not the communication of an aesthetic message but the transmission of a rallying cry placed explicitly at the service of political propaganda. Immendorff's endorsement of KPD/AO party doctrine was motivated by his rejection of the commercial art establishment in which he nevertheless remained present and active. He did not perceive his work as a political activist to be in conflict with his ambitions within the art establishment. His 1973 exhibition *Hier und Jetzt* (Here and Now) at the Westfälischen Kunstverein in Münster proved to be a demonstration of this ostensible renunciation of the art establishment, a successful attempt to infiltrate the system from the inside out. The exhibition took place during a period when tensions over the so-called emergency laws and radicals decree, conceived in reaction to the student movement, were coming to a crisis point. The terrorism of the RAF was escalating. Meanwhile, the social-liberal coalition simultaneously sought political dialogue with the Warsaw Pact countries, a dialogue that took form in a series of treaties with Eastern Europe and, symbolically, in the chancellor of West Germany, Willy Brandt, kneeling at the memorial to the dead of the Warsaw Ghetto.

III

The year 1976 was a pivotal one for Immendorff. His painterly style grows more elaborate compared with his earlier propaganda paintings, as can be seen in the series of paintings *Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters* (Questions from a Worker Who Reads, 1976) in honor of Bertolt Brecht's eightieth birthday. Also during this period, the focus of his political engagement shifted. His flyer action at the Venice Biennale denounced the "unlawful imprisonments" in East Germany and demanded international artistic cooperation to help combat the situation.

He subsequently embarked upon the *Café Deutschland* cycle (1977–78). This turning point was characterized by an increasing expressivity in his painting and a simultaneous move away from his more ideologically tinged themes. Pictorial expression and chromatic vibrancy were as if liberated. In these paintings he brought contemporary history onto the stage of a fictional German-German theater, which nobody then could have suspected would be superseded by reality about ten years later.

His encounter with Renato Guttuso's *Caffè Greco* (1976) at a painting exhibition in the Cologne Kunsthalle was an important milestone for Immendorff in this respect. The moral stance that Guttuso conveyed in his realistic painting was coherent with his antifascist position and his social commitment, making him an important voice in the ideological struggle between abstraction and realism. In his representation of the *Caffè Greco*, Guttuso sought to capture the "spirit of events" present in the famous artists' cafés in Rome.



This concept became spontaneously consolidated in Immendorff's oeuvre. With the *Café Deutschland* cycle he found a contentual and formal orientation that transcended the antagonisms inherent in his ambivalent position at that time. He subsequently decided to put an end to his threefold existence as political activist, teacher, and painter, and to concentrate exclusively on painting. *Café Deutschland I* (1978) emancipated him from the impasse of artistic self-limitation through political activism. A twist of fate meant that A. R. Penck would play the role of liberator.

The years 1976 and 1977 proved to be historically decisive for Germany. In the GDR there were rumblings of resistance in art circles striving for artistic independence from the paternalism imposed by the system of official cultural policy. The expatriation of folk singer Wolf Biermann, on November 16, 1976, provoked an unexpected echo, with more than one hundred artists signing a letter of protest challenging the East German government's actions. The government's refusal to listen to any appeals incited numerous writers, actors, and artists to turn their backs on the GDR and emigrate. Certain signatories, moreover, were obliged to leave the country.

Shortly before this, Immendorff had traveled to the workers' and peasants' state for a first meeting with A. R. Penck with a view to initiating a collaboration.

The meeting had a touch of the absurd about it, as both artists were apparently moved by completely different intentions. Penck seemed blatantly matter-of-fact in his attitude toward the regime that restricted his artistic freedom, whereas Immendorff still indulged his romanticized illusions of art in the service of practical socialism. This is why their collaboration, frequently described as an action group, produced little in terms of concrete results. It gave rise to a book with a manifesto defining them as an artists' collective and to a joint exhibition in January and February 1977 at the Galerie Michael Werner in Cologne, burdened from the outset by the seizure, at the behest of the GDR authorities, of the paintings Penck had originally planned to show. The contrast between Penck's realpolitik dispassion and Immendorff's sense of mission, which in retrospect he readily presented as being motivated by irony, gave rise to an imbalanced artistic relationship that, however, never affected their personal friendship. The influence of this encounter is indirectly reflected in the bleak stage space in which *Café Deutschland* is set. In the first version, Immendorff stretches his hand through the wall in a pathetic gesture as the scenes of decadent excess continue in the bar in the background. Over the whole scene hovers Bertolt Brecht, looking down on the space as if from a brightly glowing UFO. The so-called *Café* resembles a bunker-like refuge shielding itself from the events of the outside world, a world in which shortly before RAF co-founder Ulrike Meinhof hung herself in her prison cell in Stammheim and the evangelical pastor Oskar Brüsewitz immolated himself by fire in Zeitz, Saxony. At the same time, repressive measures against artists striving for their independence were escalating. This would have a decisive influence upon the intellectual climate of the GDR.

The nineteen paintings in the series, all produced before 1982, depict contemporary figures from both German states in shifting configurations, with Immendorff frequently representing himself in the mediating position of a cross-border commuter. The border that divides the nation is a recurring motif, dominating the scenically complex and narratively diverse interconnections within the cycle. At this time, the prospect of reunification still seemed far from any political agenda. On the one hand, both German states were confronted with nascent and escalating domestic conflicts; and on the other, their efforts to diffuse tensions through foreign policy were only beginning to bear fruit.

From that point on, Immendorff's pictorial language evinced a painterly liberation in which the narrative moment is compressed into an extraordinarily succinct form. *Selbstbildnis* (Self-Portrait, 1980) exemplifies this process of painterly self-discovery, or emergence of artistic identity. The figure of the artist, clad in a vest with a question mark on it, stands slightly off-center, holding a cigarette in one hand and raising the other to his forehead to shield his gaze, which is directed outside of the pictorial space, and to protect it from the eagle that is flying by. The liberal, energetic application of paint has an obliterating effect, barricading the pictorial space in an abstract gesture. The expressive negation of representation refers back to the early rallying cry to stop painting:



Hört auf zu malen. This self-portrait stands out among Immendorff's numerous self-portraits as a moment of doubt even as he was reaching the culmination of his artistic aspirations with *Café Deutschland*.

IV

The national theater of *Café Deutschland* condenses the lurid hustle and bustle into a chaotic revue in which the painter Immendorff continues to play a central role. His waning political sentiments were once more projected onto the vast artistic stage of Documenta 7 in Kassel, where the German-German question was now embodied in the monumental sculpture *Weltfrage Brandenburger Tor* (Brandenburg Gate Universal Question, 1982). He used this emblematic monument of the divided city of Berlin to thematize the frontiers between the power blocs as a scar that remained visibly engraved in the history of postwar Germany. The inner-German mentality had resigned itself to the existence of two German states.

The objective idea that a rapprochement could take place that would give momentum to a process of reunification contradicted the day-to-day political reality. Nevertheless, Immendorff had fueled this chimera by repeatedly accepting the realpolitik illusion. *Naht* (Suture, 1981) symbolically represents the scarred borderline between the two German states during the Cold War. Immendorff simultaneously formulated the intention to “Bring Germany back into order” (*Deutschland wieder in Ordnung bringen*, 1983). Beginning in the mid-1980s, the process of reunification loomed as a vague possibility on the political horizon. The more the process of social change (*die Wende*) took form, the less concretely historical events find their place in Immendorff’s pictorial concepts. In the historically prodigious 1990s, he painted *3. Oktober ’90* (1990), a paradigm for the depoliticization of the political. It shows Immendorff sitting with Max Ernst at a table on which stands a dish of steamed potatoes; behind them, André Breton carries a crate of cucumbers, one of which bears the date of October 3, 1990, a motif that recurs in several paintings from this year, while in the background Penck releases an eagle from its cage.

In the same year, Immendorff produced the painting *Kleine Reise (Hasensülze)* (A Small Journey [Rabbit Brawn]), which likewise did not directly address the question of reunification but conceptualized a scenario that highlighted the artist’s own situation at the time. The story takes place against the backdrop of a bleak, imaginary landscape crisscrossed with streets and paths peopled with figures from bygone eras. Next to a group of brightly illuminated LIDL houses, all dedicated to his most important artistic companions, Immendorff sits with Marcel Duchamp at the table of a bar. Joseph Beuys moves in sideways to light Duchamp’s cigar. On a screen over the backrest of their bench appears the suggestive word “Einheit”—unity. The term, which had become a slogan for regained national identity, appears here to flash also in reminiscence of Immendorff’s personal history.

In the group of works *Café de Flore* (1987–92), Immendorff finally attained his distinctive, autonomous artistic identity, embodied in a pronounced painterly expressivity and a narrative complexity. The configuration of the paintings constituting this ensemble shifts to the major figures of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, in particular Duchamp, the Expressionists, and the Surrealists. With typical self-confidence, Immendorff conceives of himself as a lone fighter who refuses to have any artistic tendency attributed to him and therefore “seeks out allies that appeal to oneself.” These he finds “most readily in the history of art and poetry.”²

In this respect, Immendorff also turned his attention to prominent maverick figures from works of drama with whom he felt a conscious connection. In *Peer Gynt*, Henrik Ibsen had created a romantic figure who spent his entire life fleeing from reality into his own world, only to return to the point of departure, finding redemption at the end of the play through his spurned childhood sweetheart. For

2 Ibid., 31.



Naht (Suture), 1981. Oil on canvas, 180 × 400 cm. Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf

Café de Flore, 1990–91. Oil on canvas, 300 × 400 cm. Birkelsche Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur, Cologne

Gyntiana, 1992–93. Oil on canvas, 350 × 700 cm. Private collection

Immendorff, Peer Gynt is “a seeker,” and his interpretation of the play’s material in *Gyntiana* (1992–93) goes “far beyond the story of Peer Gynt.” Immendorff chooses as a location the Café de Flore, in which he arranges a panorama composed of separate fragmentary scenes. In the center he depicts himself as a geisha with a fan on which can be seen “a small figure who digs and tries to make the desert fertile.”³ The configuration places emphasis on the greats of world literature—Arthur Rimbaud, Brecht, Heiner Müller, and of course Ibsen—who had preoccupied Immendorff in this context, according to his own account:

It is an amalgamation of various theoretical, artistic, and also literary perspectives.... *Gyntiana* is a new country that has to be fashioned.... There is no point in merely identifying the figures. They are only triggers, or signs. It can also be seen as a landscape.⁴

In the figure of William Hogarth’s Tom Rakewell, Immendorff encountered a second character in whom he inevitably perceived shared traits. He first came upon Rakewell when he accepted an invitation to design stage sets and costumes for the production of Igor Stravinsky’s adaptation of the material in his opera *The Rake’s Progress*, on the occasion of the 1994 Salzburg Festival. Hogarth’s series of paintings and engravings relate the downfall of a rich merchant’s son who squandered his father’s legacy and ended his days in an asylum. Immendorff’s picture, painted in the context of his work for the theater, adopts the perspective of the actors, who are seen from behind, standing in a row on the edge of the stage, gazing out on the confused goings-on in the auditorium.

V

Immendorff’s final struggle was against the incurable illness ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). He battled the devastating diagnosis, delivered in 1998, with all his physical and mental forces. He was soon obliged to adapt his work due to his physical diminution. With astounding vitality, he developed artistic processes that rendered the realization of his ideas in pictures more and more delegable.

He dexterously handled his blurred motifs, which are increasingly frequently permeated by art-historical quotations from Caspar David Friedrich (*Hünengrab im Schnee* [Cairn in Snow], 1807–19), Hans Baldung Grien (*Nackte Kugelläuferin mit Putto* [Nude Walking on Balls with Putto], 1514), Albrecht Dürer (*Melencolia*, 1514), and the Italian masters. These works dwell on themes revolving around metamorphosis, transience, and mortality. It is the process of pupation whereby the caterpillar attains a state of perfect tranquility in order to finally transform into a butterfly.

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Jörg Immendorff, in conversation with Pamela Kort, in *Jörg Immendorff: Gyntiana*, exh. cat. Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1996), 33



His diminishing control over his hands led Immendorff to employ formal means that gave his pictures the characteristics of collages yet without renouncing the idea of painting. The artist himself was nearly always the subject of these works. Two remarkable representations, *Letztes Selbstporträt I – Das Bild ruft* (Final Self-Portrait I – The Picture Calls, 1998) and *Selbstporträt nach dem letzten Selbstporträt* (Self-Portrait after the Last Self-Portrait, 2007), resume the composition of *Bild mit Geduld* (Picture with Patience) from 1992. It depicts him gaudily made-up and sitting at a table in the glow of a candle, engulfed by the silhouette of an eagle and contemplating the palette in his lifeless hand. And yet Immendorff sees in the hopelessness of his fate his artistic fulfillment:

I would have liked to have had the possibilities / the possibilities with which I've had to familiar myself due to my illness, I would liked to have had them earlier, if without being directly afflicted / yes / so / I am speaking now of the production of the past two years, where I see myself in the role / of a conductor, my assistants prime canvases, they prepare templates, and I set the notes, I am the composer and the conductor / I still take up the brush directly / but I am more destructive, I work, as odd as that sounds, destructively in pictorial terms, which I always wanted to do, damn it, but it's damned difficult to achieve consciously / and I was always rescued by this smidgen separating intention and ability.⁵

5 Jörg Immendorff, in conversation with Erwin Koch, "Ich bin zu sehr noch hier," *Die Zeit*, no. 14, March 31, 2005; translated in *Jörg Immendorff: Male Lago*, ed. Anette Hüsch and Peter-Klaus Schuster, exh. cat. Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), 49.



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