

# DAS MINSK

## KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

### INTERPLAY NO. 5

#### PETER HERRMANN AND ANDREAS GURSKY

The INTERPLAY NO. 5 in DAS MINSK's cabinet brings together the painting *Landschaft mit Kühen* (*Landscape with Cows*) (1979) by Peter Herrmann (b. 1937 in Großschönau) from the Hasso Plattner Collection and the large-format photograph *Greeley* (2002) by Andreas Gursky (b. 1955 in Leipzig) from the Viehof Collection.

Here, an idyllic landscape in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with three cows, there mass cattle farming in the United States. The depicted scenes are not only geographically separated by thousands of kilometers, but they were also created over twenty years apart. Different artistic means are also employed: one is a painting while the other is a digitally processed photograph. Both artists deal with agriculture, but from very different perspectives.

"I'm a romantic person," the artist Peter Herrmann says of himself. His landscape depicts three cows in a hilly meadow with trees. A *Plattenbau* towers in the background, roughly implied by a simple black brush stroke. At that time, farmers, animals, and their meadows had to make way for concrete living spaces, Herrmann explained during a studio visit in Berlin-Spandau. Romanticism and modern GDR architecture clash in the exaggerated juxtaposition of the free and seemingly happy cows with the solid, cold concrete building, whose height remains undefined. The artist remembers the reality of the GDR that had inspired him while creating *Landschaft mit Kühen*: "Before there was this romantic notion of farms with cows in front of them. Then, quite brutally, such 'huts', i.e., new buildings, were erected in the countryside. Not exactly like here in the painting, but it was quite strange. Of course, these were also brutal ruptures in the landscape, but little thought was given to them."

The cows in Peter Herrmann's painting will soon have to make way for living space. From the 1960s, farmers in the GDR had to join LPG cooperatives (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft—agricultural production cooperative), which had initially been founded in 1952 as a voluntary association. From 1960, however, a forced collectivization took place—sometimes using drastic methods. Many farmers refused to join the LPG and to give up their property. Peter Herrmann remembers: "In the GDR, the farmers were almost like industrial workers. Some of them brought their farms into the LPG, so the property was then transferred to the LPG and they then became, in the truest sense of the word, farm workers, employed by the LPG, perhaps having as much land as they needed for a garden and two shifts a day. It was a form of alienation."

Andreas Gursky's photograph *Greeley* also shows livestock farming. However, the image depicts masses of cattle in Greeley, Colorado, captured from a bird's-eye view,

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sharp with detail that extends far into the distance. His method of digital montage does not detract from the documentary character of his works. On the contrary, Gursky achieves a convincing representation of reality down to the smallest detail. Only by superimposing different shots can he achieve the depth of field over the entire surface.

The landscape is crisscrossed by a grid of individual rectangular plots where the cattle are kept. The photograph makes the intervention of the human hand in the earth and the dimensions of mass farming and production visible and nearly palpable in its size and detail. The way in which the plots of land appear to continue on three sides—with the horizon in the background—suggests infinity. The romantic notion of the vast landscape is broken through a sea of animals, who have their last stop in Greeley, Colorado, on the way to the slaughterhouse in Chicago.

This INTERPLAY illustrates how destinies depend on the distribution of land and the use of natural resources: Nature, humans, and animals repeatedly bend to the will and arbitrariness of political systems. It is about power and economy, about the yield and utilization of natural resources and living beings, ultimately leading to exploitation. This is equally noticeable in both the communist and capitalist systems: whether it is the “prestige object” pig high-rise near Maasdorf in Saxony-Anhalt, which remained in operation until 2018, or the former high-rise chicken house in Neukölln, the open cattle sheds in the GDR, or today’s pig skyscrapers in China.

There is a great deal of tension between Peter Herrmann's *Landschaft mit Kühen* and Andreas Gursky's *Greeley*, but in their interaction both artists reveal themselves to be incisive observers of landscape as a social phenomenon in which humans, nature, animals, and economic interests collide.

What should be done in the face of all the constraints and various interests at play here? Peter Herrmann's recourse to a German saying at the end of our conversation in his studio seems apt here: “You stand in front of it like a cow in front of a new gate!”

Paola Malavassi

All quotations come from a personal interview with Peter Herrmann on 16, January 2024 in his Berlin studio.