



Eckhart Nickel, SPITZWEG

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Genuine and Fake

I never cared much for art. Most of the pictures I laid eyes on I thought either unsightly or vacuous. At times even both at once. How did artists ever come up with the notion that the world ought to be interested in what they put to paper? Paintings as such: what's their point? Before I hang a landscape on the wall, I'd much prefer to look out the window at one. And if I should feel like seeing a human being, I'll install a mirror then and there. Often art tries to be both—window and mirror—and yet can supplant neither one nor the other. The very moment it attempts to depict life realistically is when the magnitude of its failure becomes especially obvious.

This was made clear to me by an incredible event at school, and it required the persuasive powers of an existence whose origins lay solely in art to convince me of the opposite: the miracle of art in its ability to vividly encapsulate a vision of truth in aesthetic form. Seen in this light, I can hardly interpret Carl's appearance among us only shortly before the day on which this story occurred as coincidence.

Our art teacher tasked us with drawing a self-portrait, and as ever, the majority, myself included, once more gave nothing but bumbling proof of its ineptitude. And so as everyone crouched in despair over their sketch pads while trying at least to get the contours of their faces down halfway right, Frau Hügel, her hands clasped behind her back, slinked from table to table, as we were accustomed to her doing.

Her severe black ensemble, from which she only seldom deviated, consisted of a finely woven turtleneck sweater with a pleated skirt. Her greasily dark hair was pulled back at the sides, but a glistening strand always fell forward whenever she leaned over a pupil's shoulder to better scrutinize his work, as she also did with Kirsten, the only one among us possessing talent. With marked exactitude she examined the already near perfect drawing, then cleared her throat at length, and in a flat voice finally issued her verdict: "A real triumph, my respect: the audacity for ugliness!"

Kirsten gulped into the silence that immediately descended. After an excruciatingly prolonged pause during which we all stared at her as if petrified, she stood up and ran out the rear of the art studio, her hands covering her face, into the stone stairwell. And although Kirsten had not raised her daintily high-squeaking voice, to this day I hear her mute cry blanketing the ever more distant echoes of her shoes' clacking on the landing.

Like everyone else, Frau Hügel gaped at the door in the back of the room after the vanished Kirsten, completely gobsmacked. Because I was the only person sitting in the row right in front of her, no one else witnessed the incredible thing that took place in the meantime. Carl, whose seat in art was next to Kirsten's, was looking toward the door, just as all the other schoolchildren. At the same time, however, with arm outstretched, he was slipping his sketch pad very slowly overtop Kirsten's portrait, almost soundlessly, until his covered hers entirely. To this day I do not know why this movement of his automatically reminded me of the moon's shadow sliding across the sun during an eclipse. But I instantly held my breath in the fear that my exhalation might give him away. Although until this point in time I had been rather skeptical of the "new boy," as most everyone called him, I felt something akin to forced complicity binding us together from this moment on. It grew with each millimeter the sketch pad, now with Kirsten's portrait underneath it, wandered back toward Carl before inconspicuously coming to rest in front of him.

Carl was different. He didn't speak with any of us. The first and only sentence I'd heard from him outside class was uttered in the courtyard shortly before the end of recess, at the vending machine. He was in front of me in line and after inserting his coins had looked at the drink selection with mild indecision and boredom before finally pressing the cancel button and slipping the change back into his pants pocket. All the while I must have stared at him a bit too blatantly. At any rate, he snapped his fingers in the air as if calling me out of a trance like a magician. Then he flashed a pained smile at me and with an apologetic shrug said, "I favor milk. And that is obviously lacking here, as so much else." About which he was more than correct.

"That's not how I meant it at all!" Frau Hügel muttered into the oppressive quiet of the room, though more to herself, while shaking her head. Just when I was about to say something in Kirsten's defense, my gaze touched upon Carl, who'd raised an eyebrow and was looking straight into my eyes. His thumb drew an imaginary zipper shut over his mouth, then he bared his teeth for a fraction of a second, and immediately assumed his usual pose again: emphatically impassive earnestness.

After the tacitly sealed accord about the secret we shared, I found it difficult to conceal my disappointment at the fact that he could actually have contemplated I would betray him. My pride was wounded, even though we hardly knew one another and he thus had every reason not to place blind trust in me. Yet I was certain he had acted in the knowledge that I was carefully observing him during the deed. I couldn't help but watch him deftly take possession of the drawing. He had, to some extent unsolicited, forced me to become an eyewitness to his coup and thereby to assume at once a tidy share of the blame. Because it all happened right before my eyes, moreover, he must

have felt the utmost satisfaction throughout the whole initiative at being able to count on my absolute and undivided attention with each minuscule movement, all the while without so much as even glancing at me a single time.

What knowledge about having an onlooker or observer had to do with art as such, on the other hand, I hadn't the slightest conception. As I said, before I got to know Carl, painting meant practically nothing to me. Everything with which I was endowed as regards information about it was due to a column in a program guide at my parents' home which bore the distinctive title *Genuine and Fake*. It was always placed on the last page, where the very same painting was printed twice, one below the other. While the two versions could scarcely be differentiated at first glance, in one of the two pictures ten errors had been skillfully hidden, revealing it to be a fake. Which of the two was the original only became clear if you were able to make a direct comparison after an investigative search for those small differences. An antique vase in the background, for example, was missing one of its handles, or a figure at the leading edge of the scene had one finger too many on his hand—though it wasn't always so certain whether the aberrations might not instead be part of the artist's plan, too. In the end, it all made no difference. In order to overcome the near philosophical confusion of what was *genuine* and what was *fake*, often the only thing left to do was research the painting online or in an encyclopedia to figure out whether the poor gardener in the grass had truly, and with the artist's intent, lost an ear, or whether it was just a matter of one of those macabre contrivances by the column's inventor. Particularly whenever the subject drifted from classics like Early Netherlandish still lifes or attractive landscapes from the nineteenth century, it became complicated. The occasionally bizarre physiognomies in those overpopulated pictures from the High Middle Ages teeming with drastic imagery in the style of a Hieronymus Bosch made every search for differences especially difficult. Then I would almost long for that one chimney too many among a Cubist's city of boxes.

Soon the omitted or added strokes were a pure thought exercise for me, like the forgotten or superfluous commas I had to find in a text assigned in German class. However, the only known rule applied here was my pronounced instinctual sense, present since my earliest childhood. As Carl explained to me later that afternoon when I told him about it, with this practice I was inadvertently cultivating my talent for the analytical study of art. With a great advantage over the actual specialists: my approach was completely free of content because it was merely concerned with a highly detailed analysis of what could be seen formally. For this Carl employed the concept of, as he nearly articulated it in the staccato of his syllables, *un-im-pres-sion-a-bil-i-ty*.

“You have a way of looking at the greatest masterpieces that is shaped by an almost rebellious naïveté. You don’t allow yourself to be blinded by the names in the museums written on the sign on the wall beneath the frame. You simply look at the image and decipher exactly what it shows us and how. In the process you learn something quite different from everything the multitudes of purportedly clever minds before you have read into it. Although they are wont to pull out all the stops while parroting their intellectual household deities, they never came as close to the creative essence as you did in your driest descriptive moment.”

And as if he wanted to heighten this reverence even more with a well-concealed compliment, he quoted the epitaph of one of his artistic heroes: “Here lies the painter Paul Klee. In this world I am beyond all comprehension. For I reside just as well among the dead as among the unborn. Somewhat closer to the heart of creation than usual and still not close enough by far.”

I’m not sure what would have happened if I’d simply ignored Carl’s telling motion for silence at that critical moment in the art studio and—unimpressed by him as well—had raised my voice for Kirsten: exactly in the manner my moral nature had urged me to, as a barely suppressible impulse. But I will never know: whether someone would’ve stood up with me then and run after her to stop her, whether we would’ve caught up to her outside the school, only to clutch her by both arms in an almost cinematic scene, to shake her, look her directly in the eyes, and persuade her that everything wasn’t so bad and had only been a misunderstanding, to convince her to come back with us to the lesson. Yet who knows? Carl would surely have turned his back on me right then. Inevitable: the fact that a loss had to be registered.