



Elisabeth Masé:
Untitled, 2017
Watercolor, 24.4 × 17.5 cm

Putin Is Not an Artist!

If artists were allowed to be politicians, people might find a different way of dealing with each other. In 1963, the New York poet and composer Jackson MacLow wrote a “Social Project 1–3” on three small postcards: “Find a way to End Unemployment”/“Find a Way to end War”/“Find a Way to Produce Everything Everyone Needs & Get It to Them.” An additional phrase — “Make it Work” — was appended. In 1970, the French artist Robert Filliou “ceremoniously” offered the nations of Europe the recommendation that they exchange war memorials — a dramatic gesture by which he hoped to bring about the reconciliation of the European nations. He thought it would also “truly honor the victims of the twentieth century’s world wars.” In addition, he wanted “to make coming generations aware of the nonsensical and murderously obscene nature of all nationalisms.” A mixed committee, which he hoped would bring a spirit of “sober reflection” and “exalted joy” to the work, was to enjoin countries “that are thinking of a war today” to consider instead “an exchange of their war memorials.” Two years later, in 1972, when Joseph Beuys was forced to leave the Academy of Arts under police escort, he wrote curtly, fully conscious of the irony, that “democracy is a jolly business.” He wanted to admit into his class everyone who wanted to study art, and lost his professorship due to the current rules limiting the number of admissions. With a smile, almost augustly, he received the current prime minister’s decision. Today we are hardly inclined to smile at the world situation. **We have not seen an exchange of war memorials over the last fifty years. We are looking in the face of autocrats who are either encircling Ukraine or instigate the storming of the Capitol over alleged electoral fraud.** Who spend large sums of money on missile tests, even as their people have been living in want for decades. Who imprison thousands upon thousands of intellectuals without justifying their despotism through democratically legitimized courts. Who torture and even build concentration camps because parts of their population are Muslim. Who enlist slave labor from those captive populations to carry out road construction and other infrastructure measures in Africa at particularly low cost while the local population is desperately looking for work. We also see African autocrats claiming ubiquitous attention to cement their often shaky power base.

An overview of the world situation suggests that some politicians have turned into ruthless artists. They act like omniscient geniuses. They rewrite history and prove themselves to be egocentric and fanatic by wanting to be “saviors.” They are unteachable. Supported by a strong military, they see “the people” as a sum of claqueurs. Anyone who doesn’t applaud should be punished, in their view. We are experiencing the omnipresence and chutzpah of autocrats to such an extent that we no longer need monuments, because under today’s conditions three-dimensional naturalistic portraits of any kind are obsolete. In any case, Urs Fischer has long since transformed them into wax candles the size of human figures, so that they go up in smoke at biennials, in galleries, and now also in museums. In Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel “War and Peace,” which sheds light on Europe at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the autocrat is linked to the book of Revelation, chapter 13, verse 18, in order to bring up the subject of the “number of the beast,” 666, which stands for an impending catastrophe and the evil power of a “dragon.” “All the earth turned in amazement to the beast.” In the Bible, this beast represents worldly authority. In the third volume of “War and Peace,” *L’empereur Napoléon* is equated, via the number *quarante-deux*, his age at that time, with the number 666, which makes the limit of his power in 1812 conceivable. What is decisive, however, in literature, in art, in the Bible, and in political life, is that we reflect and re-assess, that is to say reckon carefully, at the stock exchange or in the art market, whether we in the place of Tolstoy’s hero, *Comte Pierre Besouhoff*, have calculated correctly or not. Whether the number and therefore the evil event will affect us or not. I.e., whether we are perhaps quite personally implicated or not. Thus, in art as in life, truth is always associated with forms of poetry. “The genius,” writes Friedrich Nietzsche, “is the self-destructing phenomenon.” (*Serpens nise serpentem comederit non fit draco.*) Elsewhere he writes: “In order for moral values to prevail, many immoral forces and affects must play a part.” As art consultants at a Swiss private bank, we wish for a world art without war, without excessively great beasts, without hunger and without torture. Just compensation is also important. We do not think of autocrats as artists. Cunning calculation and manipulative cleverness are not sufficient.

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