

The Befalleness of Life

Jens Burk, Expert for Sculpture and Painting 1550–1800 at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, in conversation with Petra Sterry

Jens Burk (JB): Your intervention *The Self-Complying Order*, which can be seen at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum from April to September 2019¹, revolves around the head by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, an older artwork, from the eighteenth century. How did you become aware of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, and how did your relationship to his work develop?

Petra Sterry (PS): For a long time now, I have been devoting my attention to emotions and inner states. Actually it was quite early, during my studies, that I came upon Messerschmidt and his work. I must say that initially I was very irritated by the titles: in my opinion many of them don't match with the heads, and this even caused me to lose interest in him to some degree. Only later, when I returned to them and explored them in more detail, did I become aware of the fact that the titles are not from Messerschmidt at all. This opened up a whole new perspective on the heads.

JB: The titles only became associated with his heads later on, after his death. Today these works are referred to as the “Character Heads”, but this term is put in quotation marks, because not even it is from Franz Xaver Messerschmidt himself.

PS: Exactly. I think that this has caused a lot of confusion, and it goes beyond just that. The titles were added around thirty years after his death. People were invited to send in suggestions for naming the heads. In my opinion, adding a title to an existing artwork is very problematic. It interferes with the artist's work. It is like taking someone else's work and changing it – painting over something or correcting it.

JB: Actually, the artist gave these heads no specific titles at all. The titles that they later received were added for marketing reasons, to promote these objects, which have always played a role on the art market.

What was your point of departure? You mentioned that you have long been exploring the theme of “emotions and inner states”. Could you elaborate a bit there? For you it was apparently a sort of

liberating realization, that the traditional names were not original. Thus you could set aside the titles and turn your attention to the heads' aesthetic presence, to the effects they evoke, in your work.

PS: That's right. I find that when you drop the titles, you have a less distorted view of the heads. Some of the titles are even misleading. The heads are multifarious, sometimes simply because the expression on the upper part of the face does not fit together with the expression on its lower half. Messerschmidt made these connections intentionally, and I find it important that one is open to them. What, in the end, is the characteristic that stands out most? I look at each head with a sort of blurry gaze, and then it sets off in a direction of its own: what inner state would I assign to it, and how would I describe, or circumscribe, this state?

JB: In the course of the project, we have on a number of occasions discussed the various existing interpretational approaches to Messerschmidt's heads. Their long reception history stretches from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. At its end is a very recent interpretation proposed by a medical doctor, which Maria Pötzl-Malikova has outlined in her new monograph.² The theory is that Messerschmidt was afflicted by a specific disorder: the heads – with their grimaces and pronounced contortions around their eyes and mouths, with their exaggerated opening or closure of the eyes, with their myriad wrinkles, in other words in states of the highest tension – display signs of a disease that Franz Xaver Messerschmidt was obviously unable to address in his day in the ways we can today with the help of modern medicine. Yet it seems to me to be an extraordinary phenomenon that this artist sought to come to grips with these states, which must have been threatening and painful to him – that he dealt with them in his own way. We know of his late years, in Bratislava – and this was a period of only a few years, from 1777 to his death in 1783, which is the time during which most of these heads were created – that he managed to establish a new existence and get his life in order again, acquiring a house and fulfilling official portrait commissions for individuals of very high station. The scenario of earlier interpretational attempts, of a withdrawn, afflicted artist devoting his entire attention to these bizarre artworks, simply isn't true. I would like to know if you have reacted to this new interpretation in your work. In other words: how do you, in relation to your work, assess the theory that these heads do not reproduce any emotion at all? You imply this conclusion yourself by noting the sometimes contradictory grimaces in the contortions of the eye and mouth areas.

PS: First of all, you are right in addressing the fact that Messerschmidt's heads are frequently discussed in the context of his illness, which seems to have broken out around 1770–71. Some people – and I do

not number myself among them – say that they can only be understood and explained in this context. Here it is important to mention Ernst Kris, the art historian and psychoanalyst, who wrote a study on the sculptor in the 1930s. This study is cited very often. In the catalogue of the 2006–2007 Frankfurt exhibition at the Liebieghaus *The Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt*, Heike Höcherl attributes its popularity to its overall significance in Kris' endeavor to anchor the discoveries made by Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis in art history.³ Kris subjected Messerschmidt to a posthumous psychoanalysis, diagnosing an acute psychosis at the beginning of the 1770s. He saw evidence of paranoid schizophrenia in the characteristics displayed by the heads. Höcherl is of the opinion that this study is still cited so frequently because it was one of the first to make use of the discoveries of psychoanalysis. Maraike Bückling, the catalogue's editor, criticizes Kris' method of analysis, particularly because it is based only on surviving artworks and on second-hand accounts, and also because it does not take into account the era's notions of insanity.⁴ There was, after all, a gap of 150 years. Maria Pötzl-Malikova proposes a new theory: she states that the heads could be related to dystonia. Dystonias are neurological movement disorders, accompanied by involuntary muscle spasms. As you have already mentioned, Messerschmidt was quite able to support himself in Bratislava. His papers contain an accounting of his possessions, which makes it clear that he was by no means as poor as the literature often depicts him to have been.

JB: One can say that this evidence indicates a successful recovery of the position, in Bratislava, which he had lost in Vienna in 1770–71 after the outbreak of his illness. He was quite clearly forced to end his career in Vienna, something which is documented in several sources and in contemporary accounts. His emerging illness was the cause of the break in his career, and of the rejection of his bid for the professorship he had hoped to receive. Without commissions, and having been more or less written off, he left Vienna, first returning to his hometown Wiesensteig and then moving to Bratislava after a stay in Munich. What I would like to ask you in this context: You are not the first contemporary artist to devote your attention to Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, rather you are, as it were, working within a tradition of various artists who have dealt with Messerschmidt. Have you been exploring the work of these other contemporary artists alongside that of Messerschmidt himself?

PS: Artists like Arnulf Rainer and Tony Cragg have created work expressly in reference to Messerschmidt. Less overtly, Bruce Nauman's series *Studies for Holograms* or the video *Clown Torture* also contain references, as do Cindy Sherman's photographs of clowns. Every artist approaches things

on the basis of his or her own artistic background. Messerschmidt was experimental, and for many artists that is a point of departure.

I would like to address what you said before about Messerschmidt's illness. Not only has Ernst Kris' theory played a key role in the reception of Messerschmidt. State Chancellor Kaunitz, who served during the years under discussion, advised Empress Maria Theresa against appointing Messerschmidt to a professorship. It might be that he used the illness to cut short Messerschmidt's career. The "Account of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in 1781" by the Berlin author Friedrich Nicolai has also been decisive in the reception. He visited Messerschmidt and listened to what he had to say about his heads. It is very interesting to read Messerschmidt's own description. I can understand his position, the position of an idiosyncratic human being, an eccentric. Yet it is also well known that Nicolai was a proponent of the Enlightenment. He was presumably not interested in propagating theories and reports of spirit visitations. It is rather likely that Nicolai's view of Messerschmidt was prejudiced.

Here I would also like to say a bit about the various theories. You mentioned Maria Pötzl-Malikova: in her 2015 book she advances the theory that Messerschmidt was afflicted by dystonia on the basis of psychiatrist Michal Maršálek's conclusion that the sculptor had a secondary dystonia. The similarity between the heads and photographs of patients with dystonias is, in fact, striking. Comparisons are made to several varieties of dystonia: One is known as blepharospasm, a form that causes involuntary bilateral contractions of the eyelids. Pötzl-Malikova thinks that several of the heads could be matched with this condition. She also compares some of the heads with cases of apraxia of lid opening, in which the patient cannot voluntarily open his eyes, and with cervical dystonia, which affects the neck and the nape of the neck.

JB: To return very specifically to your work: In the lead sculpture displayed at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum we are confronted with a person who is apparently not in a position to communicate. The mouth is closed tightly. It is drawn into a cramped line. Your work is also a literary treatment, because you also provide a text giving a description of an inner state. In other words, you supply an inner monologue contrasting with the uncommunicativeness of the face. What could you say about this?

PS: Well, with this head I am attempting to create my own image of Messerschmidt. I want to see him in his present. For me this head, like some of his heads, has the character of being befallen. It seems as if something is happening to him or has happened to him. Perhaps it is also the thin mouth that contributes to this effect. With other heads it is the eyes pressed shut, as if in a state of uncontrolled contraction. This is a state in which the person is not relaxed, rather very tensed. I can imagine that Messerschmidt

himself might well have been restlessly driven. The association of befallenness is the leitmotif of the head at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. How is it when one is befallen by something? How can one stand up against it in an existential sense? This question thrusts itself upon me, and indirectly I also think that it is a fundamental question for Messerschmidt.

JB: Here you are alluding to the fact that this befallenness involves not only a relationship to the outer world, a reaction to it, but that it is also a response to something of which we cannot say whether it comes from within or without.

PS: Exactly. One cannot classify it. It has often been remarked that the heads seem detached from the world. That might be true, but they always have something fundamental, existential, which relates to both the interior and the exterior, that comes from both inside and outside.

JB: How do you see the relationship between this existential situation – which quite evidently must involve suffering and pain – and this artistic ability, this unbelievable artistic exertion, this aestheticization? In the end the heads are also a fantastic transposition into formal, ornamental structures. They are not self-portraits, rather the artist's own face is merely a point of departure. He was certainly portraying himself, at least at times, but variations in the head form also indicate that not all of the heads must be self-portraits. How do you evaluate the way in which Messerschmidt's work has resulted in such impressive aesthetic creation, which is also expressed in the ornamental quality of these facial features, in which suffering and pain or contortion give the face a certain form?

PS: Really the head form fixes the ornament, and the ornamentality and symmetry are played out within the facial features. Messerschmidt often makes use of certain elements again in other heads. In the 2006 exhibition catalogue from the Liebieghaus mentioned earlier, Frank Matthias Kammel writes in his contribution "Series as System"⁵ that other artists of this era also created works grouping variations of a theme. Kammel attributes this phenomenon of the series to the advance of the sciences. The discipline then known as physiognomy, for example, was demonstrated with study materials, graphic charts and manuals illustrated with series of images or rows of motifs, and artists used these. Messerschmidt certainly also knew such series and rows. During this period the body was also understood as a functional unit, as a whole. The principle of repetition and of setting objects or images in relation to one another made it possible to behold something in its entirety as a "system".

In my opinion, it is also important to shed light on the issue of the physical body in its relationship to the lived body.

JB: Could you explain what you mean by *physical body* and *lived body*?

PS: Here I also see the idea of the “whole”, which belongs together in that its parts affect one another in their interworking. In saying *physical body* I mean that Messerschmidt used his body for demonstrational purposes, experimenting with a great variety of facial expression. He pinched himself in the ribs, and his body responded with a physical reaction, which he interpreted as being a “correspondence”. A facial expression is a physically performed movement, which makes a transfer in a psychological sense. In a certain way it is also the embodiment of something fleeting. I mean of emotions, and of psychical states.

JB: And what does *lived body* stand for?

PS: In German we have the word *Leib*, and *lived body* has become the equivalent term in English. The idea of the “lived” body is also demonstrated by Messerschmidt and his work. The lived body refers to the body that is experienced, that interacts with others, that relates to the world, in contrast to the physical body, which means the body as a measurable object not differentiated from other matter. Messerschmidt also lets his own self, his personal convictions flow into his work. I think that this idea of the “whole” plays a role in his work. For me he is an artistic researcher, who substantiates his own highly personal theory through self-interrogation. In his case, the question of self-assertion is a central and intriguing issue.

JB: Your intervention, and here I mean your text: could one describe it in relation to his lived body, instead of his physical body? Would that be a fitting description of your intervention?

PS: Messerschmidt experiences himself in his physical body, and he makes his lived self a part of the heads and their artistic statement. Both of these aspects meld into a single whole. Maraike Bückling has pointed out that one can see Messerschmidt’s theory in part as an expression of his era. She finds that he developed a theory of inherent natural laws for himself, by taking up certain ideas deriving from Freemasonry and from Franz Anton Mesmer’s animal magnetism, particularly in terms of proportion and correspondence, or more generally in the establishment of natural laws. For the Freemasons the

world was a reflection of the powers of the universe at work. Mesmer expounded the model of a universal fluid linking cosmos, human being and nature. Messerschmidt applied a principle of this sort to his own body. He believed that everything was determined by proportions and relationships. And he saw this principle expressed in the pains that he felt in a particular spot of his body, which, he maintained, corresponded exactly to the spot on the bust he was working on at that particular moment. For me this makes sense; one can understand what he was thinking. It also has nothing to do with any sign of insanity – it has its own inner logic.

JB: I also think – regardless of interpretations on the basis of art history or psychoanalysis, or conceived as more exacting medical case studies – that we stand before a persona and a body of work displaying strength and autonomy, unique in its era, because it defies all of that era’s artistic conventions and aesthetic demands, and radically devotes itself to a very private project.

PS: Here I agree with you completely. From Hans Rudolph Füessli, one of Messerschmidt’s contemporaries, we know that “cabals arose against him frequently.” He writes further that “his enemies were in a safe position in seeking to foil him, since his openness and his choleric temper could be exploited as weakness to their advantage.” Pötzl-Malikova has compiled what we know about Messerschmidt as a person. The picture that emerges depicts him as generous, well-tempered, at times odd and peculiar, but also stubborn and quarrelsome, prone to react to criticism emotionally, and with a rather uncouth sense of humor. Furthermore, he became kind of a local celebrity in Bratislava ...

JB: ... who was very sociable and went out a lot, and who apparently did not withdraw into himself at all, although it seems there were times when people were not very happy to see him. That conforms with the dystonia interpretation, and this could also explain the end of his time in Vienna, because he would not have been in a position to appear in public. He appears worthy of admiration, when you think that no diagnosis or cure was available in his time, that he really was left alone with his condition. As you say, he had to be able to explain it to himself somehow – and I think that many of the later interpretations function on the basis of the widely varying approaches available in the culture-historical setting in which they arose, be it animal magnetism, some arcane teaching or this or that. You quote Messerschmidt’s conversation with the Berlin publisher Nicolai, in which he stated that he had taken up a project through which he thought he could help himself by doing what he did.

PS: It has been mentioned on a number of occasions that the heads might have had an apotropaic function for Messerschmidt.

JB: Against the evil that befell him, or what he understood as evil. Not only could he protect himself through them: he could overcome it, or even fight against it, vanquish it. That would make the heads an unbelievable act of self-assertion.

He was an artist who was trapped in the yoke of conventional commissions, like portraits, monuments and memorials. Here too you can prove yourself as a genius, by doing things that have never been done before, but we are dealing with a completely different matter. He created this entire group of heads in separation from the rest of his work. Although he certainly received offers, he refused to sell them. Hence the entire group remained together until the end of his life – it was his heirs who then split it up and marketed it.

PS: I agree with what you are saying, although I find the concept of the genius problematic.

JB: And so, all told, your intervention does not reference the many varying interpretations?

PS: I find the interpretations interesting, but I do not incorporate them into my work, also not in regard to what Messerschmidt might have intended by creating his heads. I have my own approach. In reference to the text for the head “A Surly Old Soldier” at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, I am interested in the temporal context, in that it was an era of upheaval and insecurity. Thomas Knubben describes this in his Mesmer biography.⁶ You have to think about the period during which electricity was discovered, and how absurd it appears today. There were public demonstrations, in which groups of people were electrified to entertain the masses. And there were things like the medical treatise *Electric Medicine*, from the year 1766, in which the Regensburg physician Johann Gottlieb Schäffer reports how the paralyzed foot of one of his patients was set in motion to the accompaniment of sparks and a loud bang. I am also interested in how it is for someone who feels his personal circumstances very strongly: how can he position his precarious self? It might be that he fails. But he doesn’t want that to happen. I pose side questions to myself, from which I later crystallize my text. For me it is important to look at the head for a long time, and then to filter out, determining for myself what its central characteristic is, which then becomes my central theme.

JB: Thank you very much for this final comment, which has once again described the development of your work and its exact relationship to the head.

PS: The question of self-assertion is what fascinates me in the case of Messerschmidt, and it is also a central question in contemporary art.

¹ Petra Sterry, „Die sich fügende Ordnung“, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, 3.4.-30.9.2019
Narrator: Nikolaus Kinsky (German), Howard Nightingall (English), Recording: ZONE Media

² Maria Pötzl-Malikova. Agnes Husslein-Arco (Ed.): Franz Xaver Messerschmidt 1736-1783; Monografie und Werkverzeichnis | Monograph and catalogue raisonné, Bibliothek der Provinz, Weitra 2015

³ Heike Höcherl, Wahngelbilde und Kunstwerke zugleich, in: Die phantastischen Köpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt / Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt; Maraike Bückling (Ed.), Hirmer Verlag, München 2006, p. 90

⁴ Maraike Bückling, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt – Verrücktheit, Intrige und Genie, in: Die phantastischen Köpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt / Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt; Maraike Bückling (Hg.), Hirmer Verlag, München 2006, p. 35-35

⁵ Frank Matthias Kammel, Die Serie als System, in: Die phantastischen Köpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt / Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt; Maraike Bückling (Hg.), Hirmer Verlag, München 2006, p. 242-265

⁶ Thomas Knubben: Mesmer oder Die Erkundung der dunklen Seite des Mondes, Klöpfer & Meyer, Tübingen 2015, p. 64-69

Translation: Christopher Barber