The Dialectic of the Apocalypse: Olaf Probst's Katastrophen (Catastrophes)

Probst has been creating his Katastrophäen sculptures based on drawings dating back to 2012 for around eight years. These mushroom-like sculptures take shape in a variety of materials and sizes. Some of the catastrophes, which range in size from life-size to finger-sized, are made of PU foam, aluminium, or silver. The catastrophe complex also includes a special sales strategy: elaborate videos showcasing the Katastrophäen as exclusive objects encourage their purchase. Probst sells the PU foam sculptures at the current daily lead price, the aluminium figures at the current daily silver price, and the silver Katastrophäen at the current daily gold price. To close the circle of values, he now offers lead figurines at the price of aluminium. The Katastrophäen work cycle is completed when the individual pieces are given names, mostly common first names.

The series' title and the mushroom-like nature of these artworks leave no doubt that the subject of the catastrophes is the atomic or nuclear threat. This threat demonstrated its destructive power to the world for the first time with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Since then, the mushroom cloud has been regarded as a visual symbol of an immeasurable capacity for destruction, extending its destructive potential over years and decades, unlike conventional explosives, which are effective immediately. Nuclear weapons destroy entire cities and atmospheres, the latter being contaminated by radiation that is almost incomprehensible in its scale. Furthermore, today's nuclear arsenal is capable of wiping out humanity entirely — an unimaginable escalation of violence.

The paradoxical logic that the nuclear arsenals of various nations today guarantee global peace is hardly capable of dispelling fears about the possible destruction of humanity. Theodor W. Adorno remarked on this: “One would have to soberly counter the false reverence by saying that the progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb is indeed satanic laughter. But only in the age of the bomb can we envisage a world without violence.”

The nuclear threat forces us to consider the apocalypse as a real event, as an occurrence that renders the familiar parameters of the world, such as events, time and history, invalid. This is why, in 1957, Günther Anders, anticipating the extinction of humanity, was

able to write: “Time was an accident.” When disaster education fails –Peter Sloterdijk once asked, 'How much disaster does man need?' – perhaps only the arts, alongside philosophy, will be capable of imaginatively negotiating the ultimate catastrophe.

Before interpreting Probst's catastrophes as an ambiguous aestheticisation of horror, we must delve deeper into the novelty of a nuclear apocalypse. Elias Canetti recognised the significance of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a turning point when he stated: “The atomic bomb has become the measure of all things. The smallest has triumphed: the paradox of power. The path to the atomic bomb is a philosophical one. ”Even the civilian use of nuclear power cannot invalidate the philosophical warning against nuclear danger. In light of the Chornobyl reactor accident, Ulrich Beck also highlights the paradigm shift represented by the nuclear threat. “It is the end of the ‘other’, the end of all our highly developed means of distancing ourselves, which has become tangible with nuclear contamination. Necessity can be excluded, but the dangers of the atomic age cannot. This is where its novel cultural and political power lies. Its power is the power of danger, which removes all protective zones and differentiations of modernity”.

Shortly before the first atomic bombs were dropped in 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno described the fateful 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' with almost visionary foresight. This not only liberated the Western subject but also unleashed a profoundly destructive dynamic as instrumental reason. Their conclusion was as follows: “The wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity." The two authors held the idea of progress responsible for the same intellectual movement that led, on the one hand, to the subjectification of the liberal subject, and, on the other, to the disastrous destruction of humanity's inner and outer nature. They could have learned this from Walter Benjamin: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo ’is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.” Horkheimer and Adorno refer to this prevailing catastrophe as the 'context of the delusion of progress’.

If so, the question arises: does Adorno's ban on images after Auschwitz also apply to the nuclear catastrophe, which the philosopher deemed to be of a similarly horrific

magnitude? To what extent should the nuclear catastrophe challenge art? Olaf Probst certainly takes up this challenge. His catastrophes, which tie in with the popular image of mushroom clouds, contain a series of productive contradictions and dialectics explained below. When the artist models his catastrophes on mushroom clouds from nuclear explosions, he uses an aesthetic of horror that, at first glance, seems to elude moral attributions. The initial appeal of mushroom cloud images corresponds to the aesthetic accessibility of Probst's catastrophes. The real dissolution in the wake of the explosion contrasts with the artistic and material condensation of the metallic catastrophes. At the same time, the worthlessness of the catastrophe contrasts with the monetary value of, for example, the silver catastrophes. The message of death conveyed by nuclear catastrophe is countered by the hope of achieving immortality through art. Through his catastrophes, Probst renders aesthetically permanent that which lasts for only a few minutes in the ephemeral reality of the explosion's aftermath and is invisible to the naked eye due to the intense light. The mushroom cloud itself is merely a consequence of the nuclear explosion, and thus only a sign or image of the catastrophe whose origins and protracted consequences remain invisible. The concept of trophies implied in the term 'Katastrophäen' also points to the cultural and ritualistic appropriation of an image that characterises and emphasises a particular situation. Ultimately, Probst's Katastrophäen point to a phenomenon that seems essentially unspeakable, unshowable and, in a sense, unthinkable. In view of this, the artist uses Katastrophäen to present objects that sometimes appear terribly human. Probst merely presents viewers with symbols reduced to human size. By giving names to his individual catastrophes, such as Greta, Alibi, or Gereon, Probst draws on the names of nuclear weapons test series, such as Trinity, Hurricane, or Pollux, adding – not without irony – a further humanisation of the artworks through individualisation.

Another interesting semantic aspect of the Katastrophäen is their material aesthetic, which refers to the fact that most of the works are made of polyurethane foam – essentially just foamed air bubbles. Even when Probst later casts some of his catastrophes in aluminium or silver, the artistic process usually begins with the foam’s expansion. The formation of the typical mushroom cloud in a nuclear explosion also involves a cloud-like, atmospheric structure of dust and ash, propelled upwards by the fireball of the detonation.

After all that has been said, the trophy character of disasters must seem ironic or – even more so – cynical, since trophies usually signify victory. One could speculate that Probst is using this semantic game to criticise the pedagogy of catastrophe, which draws immediate lessons from every misfortune, but these lessons soon fade away, as they did after Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Harrisburg, Chornobyl, and Fukushima. Sloterdijk, on the other hand, has recommended a culture of panic arising from such disaster pedagogy.

Could the trophy character be interpreted differently? The sales strategy outlined at the beginning for the catastrophes might provide a clue. Horkheimer and Adorno should once again be included as discussion partners. After all, one dimension of the dialectic of enlightenment consists of the fateful development of capitalism. In the Marxist tradition, this is based on the exchange of fundamentally different things that are equated in terms of value. 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence,' writes Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment. The exchange value, materialised in the medium of money, expresses a fundamental act of abstraction that disregards the unique qualities of individual things. Non-identical things are transformed into identical entities.

What's more, money represents a fetish for capital that stems from an alchemical creation of value, so to speak, which comes at the expense of the working class, whose value has been reduced to capital. Capitalist value creation ultimately alienates workers and capitalists alike, while at the same time driving a wedge between people and things, as the former make the latter totally available to themselves in the sense of a subject-object relationship. In this context, Georg Lukács speaks of ruthless ‘objectification’, which affects the relationships between people and between individually characterless commodities alike.

Against this backdrop, Probst's catastrophes take on a broader meaning. The sales strategy embedded in the artworks in question refers to the dehumanising exchange of equivalents, whereby unique objects are brought to market as commodities — the universal game of capitalism. When an external value is referenced, the individuality of things is neutralised, and exchange value dominates over use value. By incorporating precious metals such as silver and gold, which once served as currency standards, Probst highlights the reification process in capitalism. Furthermore, he highlights not just a simple exchange of equivalents, but a double exchange. This is a mediated mediation

that relates the catastrophes to both money and precious metals. Even by calling up the current daily metal value for his catastrophes, the artist brings the highly volatile process of value creation into even sharper focus. Through their dual reification, the catastrophes embody their trophy-like nature. Ultimately, capitalism triumphs — trophies symbolise victory — as the universal equaliser that not only makes us forget the uniqueness of the nuclear threat, but also disempowers individual artistic production, reducing it to an external value standard.

How can we find a way out of this tricky situation, in which nuclear threats and the capitalist neutralisation of the world are endemic? Horkheimer and Adorno again warn against overly simplistic solutions. “It is not the portrayal of reality as hell that is suspect, but the routine call to break out of it.” From Marx to Lukács, the ideal solution was a proletarian revolution to bring about a non-capitalist society through class struggle. Adorno, on the other hand, favours a different option. For him, successful art allows people to escape the trap of equivalence. According to Adorno, art is a process in which aesthetic appearance dialectically transforms into truth. This truth should not be confused with one based on propositional logic. Art rejects any notion of equivalence or identity because it refers to a sphere beyond the realm of calculating economics and reason. However, Adorno is not interested in mere reconciliation through pleasant art; rather, he seeks to represent reality as hell. In his essay on Kierkegaard, he noted: “Only the image of hell... tears man out of the enchantment of his hopeless immanence by shattering it.”

Probst's ambiguous catastrophe artworks enable us to explore the causes and depths of a dual catastrophe: the pervasive nuclear threat and the dynamics of capitalist alienation. Through their dialectical nature, they transform the 'representation of reality as hell' into visual art. Through their aesthetic of horror, they encourage us to find truth through art, beyond the enlightened techniques of reason. As an interpreter of the constantly anticipated apocalypse, Probst seeks to address the end of the world discursively, using an imaginary language that allows the fundamental upheavals of the present to be retold — if only to make them bearable. Only the most daring imagination allows us to dream of paradise from time to time.