

Ideal Homes!?

Large-scale 'tract' housing 'developments' constitute the new city. They are located everywhere. They are not particularly bound to existing communities; they fail to develop either regional characteristics or separate identity.

Dan Graham, *Homes for America* (1966)¹

When Dan Graham began taking photographs of typical American suburban houses in 1965 he wanted to show that principles like permutation, the use of series and standardisation were not restricted to the aesthetic canon of Minimal Art but also applied to industrial mass-production, differentiated according to class-specific tastes.

When the painter Felix Malnig explores the same motif found where his parents live, in a small Lower Austrian market town twenty kilometres south of Vienna, for his series *Schöner Wohnen*² (Ideal Homes) thirty years later he does not, like Dan Graham, want to critique the apparent autonomy of postmodern aesthetic idioms. He wants to expose the failure of these suburban utopias. For Felix Malnig, the American suburbs are a deplorable negative example – especially in a context of current developments in Austria and Central Europe.

The target of maximum efficiency in terms of the construction and the usable surface while guaranteeing a particular quality for the housing and its environment leads to the familiar stereotypes of everyday life in suburbs and small towns in industrialised nations around the world. The result is a break-up of the spatial and social mix of different population groups, and the segregation of certain types of homes in suburban locations goes hand in hand with the loss of centrality and population in the urban core. The separation of workplace and residential area, the lack of communal and local identity, loans and debt, battling neighbours, surveillance systems and external communication that is restricted to electronic means are frequently the other side of the utopia of idyllic estates for small family units.

Felix Malnig paints portraits of single-family houses in canvas-filling full-frontal. They are familiar to us as silent testimonies of the process of urban sprawl described above. They look arbitrary, anonymous and oppressive. The complete lack of human presence is here a deliberate stylistic means of representing personal experiences (the artist grew-up in just such a setting himself) as well as numerous other family histories, solely by showing their lifeless environment. The fact that in the production of prefabricated homes subsequent occupants are of little relevance makes their stories as interchangeable as the houses themselves.

It is primarily young families that are drawn to the suburbs, by the dream of living in green surroundings while keeping a job in the city. Due to the lack of services, public facilities and leisure opportunities these people frequently have to cover long distances, and inevitably spend increasing amounts of time in their cars.

Paradoxically, this means that traffic is created precisely in those places where people are attempting to get away from it. While the street is a place of public cohabitation in the city, in the housing developments it becomes purely a transport artery. A car of one's own is a prerequisite for the widespread expansion of the developments. The existing traffic networks can, however, seldom cope with the increased need for mobility in the form of private motor vehicles. Which is why Felix Malnig only shows the car, as a symbol of the modern utopia of unlimited individual

mobility, at a standstill: traffic jams, lines of heavy goods vehicles and breakdowns – everyday scenes for many commuters.

In a series of more recent paintings, Felix Malnig also explores the consequences of such developments for the city itself. To balance out a lack of movement and the lack of green spaces, a rich supply of playgrounds and leisure architecture has been created for children and young people. Half-pipes in skateboard parks allow people to get-up speed in one place, while basketball courts and football pitches are frequently caged off from the road. By emphasising individual pieces of sporting equipment, goalposts and baskets, Malnig also shows the sculptural quality of leisure architecture in the urban fabric, whereby similar facilities are already appearing in rural areas, too.

Felix Malnig has found a method of representation that makes his motifs equally intangible on the surface of the painting in the way they are perceived as the suburban utopias shown are in real life. By painting the bubbled reverse side of a heavy blue swimming pool tarpaulin with car body paint, the image is automatically dissolved into individual ornamental Benday dots. The visual effect is that the subject matter only looks realistic from a certain distance – much like the dream of a better lifestyle. The closer to the painting the viewer stands, the less of the image they can discern. The motifs illustrated become transparent and abstract until they disappear altogether before the viewer's eyes.

The paintings are based on photographs taken by the artist, as well as on images from newspaper reports and advertisements. The exploitation of and competition with images from the media that ostensibly convey reality lead to an examination of the notion of '(Photo) Realism' in the art context as well as in the media in general. In doing so, the artist is not addressing the reality of what is shown but the depictability of reality. Accordingly, with the selection of a particular detail from an image the transformation of space into surface and the 'freezing' of a moment in painting and in photography have always been linked to a particular process of abstraction. Malnig renders the borders of the media world transparent as an autonomous reality on transparent foil, while rendering the material basis of the image visible as a painted surface and as a three-dimensional object on the wall.

In choosing a mass produced plastic-based product as the support for his paintings, Malnig is not only showing his unease concerning the suitability of the painter's traditional materials to provide a contemporary representation, with the bubble wrap he also alludes directly to the art market, where it is otherwise only familiar as packaging material or as rubbish. Simultaneously, his use of Benday dots is an allusion to art historical and current media theory issues of image resolution in digital and analogue processes of reproduction.

Parallel to the dot paintings, since 2002 Felix Malnig has also been painting the single-family house motif with household paint on canvas.

While the paintings on the blue bubble wrap are monochrome due to the materials, since then the artist has applied a limited palette of colours deliberately in favour of the aimed for abstraction, and the result is a series of 'candy coloured' portraits of houses.

In 2006 Malnig worked primarily in a mixture of household paint and acrylic paints on paper, canvas, plywood and translucent acrylic panels. The additional application of spray-paint accommodates a more recent concern with places of significance in a context of pop and youth culture. He has also pursued the subject of (urban) architecture further in an international context: in autumn 2003, a three-month term

as artist-in-residence took Felix Malnig to Chengdu, the almost 11 million capital of Sichuan Province in China. Chengdu, apparently the first place to have paper money issued by the state, in the 11th century, is now a major traffic hub and one of the major industrial centres in western China. Malnig's paintings do not, however, show an upwardly aspiring commercial centre dominated by a building boom, but unfinished high-rise ruins that have been standing in their raw state for years following their developers' bankruptcy, visible even from a distance. Paintings of sculptures in public space supplement the series, addressing the issue of the representational function of architecture and monuments.

Just as for Jean-François Lyotard the city is a place for a specific way of life in the failed project of Modernism, Felix Malnig shows the failure of ways of life in the postmodern project. Just as romantic landscape painting aimed to show utopian ideals as positive and attainable, so Malnig is attempting to create landscapes that are appropriate to a time when the countryside itself is primarily seen from cars.

Elisabeth Fritz, November 2006

¹ Dan Graham: *Homes for America*, in: *Arts Magazine*, 41/3, New York, Dec./Jan. 1966/67, Pp 21–22

² The German language equivalent of *House and Garden* magazine.