

Butter Milk Soap

A Conversation between Josef and Felix

Josef

What interests you the most at the moment in your ...

Felix

That's a strange question. You've known me for more than 33 years. But if you must ask, I like to eat and drink, and I bathe more regularly now.

Josef

I was referring to your work, however.

Felix

At the moment I'm predominantly doing my coping-with-the-past bit. I saw apart old sculptures and overpaint old paintings. Moreover I have those other long-term projects of mine.

Josef

Doesn't it hurt you to destroy old works?

Felix

On the contrary, I actually don't destroy but rather develop the pieces further. I thus carry out a kind of recycling process. If I repeatedly overpaint a picture, this builds up a history which expresses itself in the painted ground. Through this method of working I can wait for the actual images while painting — without the pressure of having to make something important. That is very good for me, for if I have nothing to do, I become nervous and grumpy. As a farmboy I was raised on work. Only at the time I didn't know that there's also work I could enjoy. I used to hide my boots so that I wouldn't have to help with the milking.

Josef

I picture a very romantic scene with lush meadows, neighing horses and buzzing bees. How about it, did your childhood have a decisive influence on your artistic themes?

Felix

I'm not so sure. Naturally there are formative moments, but there's no question that each person is conceived and born to live through a longer or shorter time period, and then to die. But the point simply is to fully use this time, with the enormous possibilities that lie in all of us. By this I mean to say that there are no important events, as it were, without perceptual sensitivity. For example, millions of people experienced the Chernobyl catastrophe, or heard about it, but only a few thousand reacted to it at all.

Josef

It also seems clear to me that each person is born and dies, but it is life's circumstances and natural abilities which play a large role.

Felix

Sure, but that's only true as long as the conservative fashion of mating continues to exist. If science gets its way genetic make-up can be manipulated or improved. Thanks to genetic engineering geniuses will be swarming all over the place. It will then be possible to turn out by the thousands the blond, blue-eyed baby of the soap packaging. Imagine if all these children made art . . .

Josef

In fact, I don't particularly feel like discussing the possible products of genetic engineering. What really interests me is the pessimism I sense in your work. You use an awful lot of black, and in general your art doesn't strike me as being that happy.

Felix (roaring with laughter)

Color equals happiness, Americans, then, would be a totally cheerful people. Now, color is not a question of happiness, but rather a phenomenon which manifests itself through light. For me, this light must be called forth by the viewers themselves. This light originates from human warmth, and this warmth makes everything more colorful.

Josef

Sometimes I simply wonder where to look for your humor. You can't seriously claim that your works are amusing.

Felix

I don't make any claims, but I bend over with laughter at some of my works. It's just like jokes, not all people laugh at the same jokes. Every joke, however, has something fundamentally primitive and primordial in it, that's the very thing that interests me.

Josef

What exactly do you mean by <primitive> and <primordial>.

Felix

I just believe that deep within us lie knowledge and images that from the beginning on have been handed down to us through the generations. Thus it is only a matter of wrenching these archetypal images to the surface.

Josef

But how do you get to these depths, you can't simply dip into yourself and fish out images.

Felix

Perhaps it's the other way around with me, I mean in fairy tales a beautiful girl kisses an ugly frog, which then turns into a prince. When I as the frog kiss someone, this sometimes produces so-called ugly, primitive pictures.

Josef

Now this answer to me is absolutely stupid. When I kiss, I forget everything.

Felix

See, different strokes for different folks. That's what distinguishes us from the other mammals, that we feel, think and act differently. I let myself above all be led by my instinct.

Josef

Yeah, that shows. A little bit more thinking would do you good. If I understood you correctly, your art isn't produced through thinking, but rather instinctively.

Felix

Yeah, I have already pointed out that I think up some kind of program in which I can freely move around. This has the great advantage that I don't need a new idea every morning in order to be able to work. At the moment the Butter Milk Soap Project is such a program.

Josef

How did you arrive at this idea?

Felix

I went to the Art Fair in Basel with Monika. We had forgotten toothpaste.

Josef

So your ideas come with unbrushed teeth.

Felix

No, we went into a drugstore, and Monika drew my attention to this soap. I was so fascinated that I ordered 100 bars on the spot.

Josef

And you knew right away what you wanted to do with them?

Felix

No, it doesn't work so fast. At the Art Fair I saw some of the multiples by Beuys. Among others the Samurai Sword, which a few years ago still cost 2500 Marks. That was now offered for 60 000 DM. Then I thought if Beuys no longer can be afforded, why not make inexpensive Müllers. That's not bad, either.

Josef

So you purposefully aim at the art market?

Felix

No, I realize my jokes only produce tortured grins. (Ha, ha). I was simply intrigued by this packaging. This blond, blue-eyed, smiling child, and then the soap. Each soap experiences the most exciting adventures, once they are being used. The soap touches the most intimate spots, hides smells, removes dirt and gives off a scent. I simply wanted to brand each wrapped soap with a drawing, details of intimate stories, which in a series would always be viewed by this grinning kid.

Josef

Hence you've recorded your own private history?

Felix

Of course, my own experiences flow into every aspect of my work, but I wouldn't stop there. I do hope that I can formulate something universally true. Content that does not only concern me.

Josef

Isn't that dangerous, to produce miniatures. You feed the art market with 100 tiny, little «Müllers».

Felix

Yeah, and when I make big things everybody says he's going megalomaniac – crude and monumental. I don't give a shit, I feed nobody, but I let off steam. Moreover, I am of the opinion that quality has nothing to do with scale. The content and the concrete result are important.

Josef

In this case the soap.

Felix

You're getting too fresh, I need some coffee.

Josef

I really needed this break. I will attempt to pose more intelligent questions and to treat you with more respect. I have realized that with people I know well I become forward and disrespectful. Actually, it ought to be the other way around.

Felix

That has to do with getting to know weaknesses. The better you know someone, the more maliciously you can enjoy twisting the knife in their wounds. We must learn to lick and nurse these wounds. We don't need electric heating pads, but human warmth instead, which adds color to life.

Josef

Are you queer?

Felix

Now, what makes you think of that? Just because occasionally I run my fingers through your hair, doesn't mean I am gay.

Josef

You blether on about human warmth, paint mostly men, it was just an idea.

Felix

Naturally, I like men, but most of them are too hairy for me, I love skin. Today I read an interview with Jürg Federspiel in the *Weltwoche* and he says that Paul Valéry said: «The skin is the most profound in Man.» If he says what the other said, it must be true.

Josef

I also read that, but you dodge my question.

Felix

You want to know more about men or my relationship with men. — Don't you? — Well, the juiciest kiss I ever got was from a man when I was a child, on a haystack, for a few sweets. I didn't understand my parents' repulsion at all, they were shocked when I told them about it. They said something, I believe, about guardian angels holding up my suspenders. After all I grew up in almshouses, homes for the poor (not as a tenant, my father was manager of the farm), and there I realized very early that there are not only men who like little boys but also those who love cows and pigs. For me, at that time, the only intelligible difference between bulls and men was that bulls don't wear clothes. Naturally I could also tell you about the house for the dead or the dungeons for the irascibles and the drunks but that goes too far. Even then, as a child, I sensed that men are full of enormous repressions and potential danger. They screamed and howled, threatened each other with axes, shovels, spades and beer bottles, they drank till they passed out. One of them lay once throwing up under the cider barrel, fermenting juice streaming over him. The women seemed to suffer less, once in a while they pulled each other's hair, bickering and bitching, but generally I found them calmer and more satisfied than the men. These men appeared to me like wounded animals, yelping, yowling and whimpering. Through art I attempt to reach these depths, to get to these vulnerable spots.

Josef

That puts me off a little, that you try to make yourself interesting by throwing in selected biographical titbits.

Felix

If you strike out your origin and the related experiences, that's up to you. As opposed to me, you seem to be notoriously repressed.

Josef

In that case your youth still has a decisive influence on that therapeutic shit that you keep making.

Felix

To me art is not therapy. I would like to make that perfectly clear. Art is a form of survival, a way of living. I take it as my starting point that not I but rather society and our lifestyle are sick and make us sick.

Josef

Beuys once said that he thinks with his knee — I believe that you think with your tailbone.

Felix (laughs frowning)

I like that, this sentence could be one of mine. Beuys thought with his knee, and I think with my tailbone. Really good. Do you happen to know that with many people hair and teeth grow on their tailbone or rump-bone and can lead to inflammation. It seems to be a residue in the genetic make-

up from a time when all humans still had tails.

Josef

What you say there is not true at all. In the case of these ingrown hair and teeth in the region of the rump-bone, we are dealing with an embryonic cannibalism. An embryo devours, so to speak, his twin competitor. These hair and teeth are the remains of a hard struggle. Do you think that humans are a kind of refined animal?

Felix

That is certainly so. If I listen to birds twittering, this seems to me to be a pleasant form of communication. I don't know if that's different with people. Sometimes I rather get the impression that animals are refined humans. It might well be possible that humanity evolved from primeval to contemporary man and then developed into a special animal species.

Josef

That seems to me to be one of your quick, unreflected evolution theories. You have already claimed that apes stem from a specific type of conservative politician. I personally am of the opinion that humans are the left-overs of the act of creation out of control. Like an after-work mutation or so.

Felix

Well, if you begin to philosophize, I feel sick. In the role of the dumb interviewer you do a much better performance.

Josef

We spoke about mutual respect, didn't we? We've strayed from the subject a little. Just now you said something about potential danger in men. Are you having difficulty with your role as a man?

Felix

Occasionally I would prefer to be a Felicia, but when I think about the position of women in our society . . . ? Sometimes I catch myself slipping into a defense of male values. That's where women can fight a much more positive battle. But I think that male/female has been completely misdefined. Aggression, toughness, emotionlessness, ambition, etc. are wrongly attributed to the male domain, and freedom, warmth, domesticity, empathy, tenderness, fragility etc. is looked upon as female. This categorization I find absolute nonsense. This entire discussion could simply be ended if women and men agreed on a neutral gender. I'm thinking of a very interesting, mobile, always wet, sensitive organ shared by men and women for millennia. This strong, very movable, mucuous-covered, muscular organ equipped with taste buds we employ to taste, chew, swallow, and speak. This precious piece — popularly called the «tongue» — moreover has the privilege (as the only part of the body) to be able to move in a bodily opening. So, if we were capable of declaring the tongue the universal (male and female) gender, all problems would solve themselves.

Josef

So you're thinking of a completely neutral sexuality. If I think of neutrality, I get really bored. Switzerland as a neutral country, for example, is everything else than . . .

Felix

I'm not speaking about politicians, I'm speaking about people that take their point of departure from a new sexual concept, the egalitarian tongue. I am concerned with a sensitive spot which men and women have in common. Needless to say, there are variations in length, thickness, sensitivity, pore-size and flexibility. The individual qualities of these organs is naturally an important factor for an interesting sex life in the future.

Josef

Yeah, and what about the rest? I mean, the male and female genitals, do you just omit them?

Felix

Certainly not. But we would have to learn to accept them just like our hands, feet or nose as useful and functional body parts. Aren't ears also wonderful things? We would then primarily be human beings. In each intimate encounter with another human being it would be exciting to find out what dangles from the other body — or not. Just imagine, men and women would no longer dress gender-specific . . .

Josef

You make it too easy for yourself with this theory. After all, there are clear-cut differences in human anatomy, hair and beard-growth etc.

Felix

Do you think that I have entangled myself in my own net again? Instinctively I have never painted hair on the figures in my art. If environmental pollution carries on at this rate, future generations will definitely have no hair. If they're lucky maybe a little fuzz on well-protected spots, but that's all.

Josef

Well, if I were you, I would strike these abstruse theories out of this interview.

Felix

Nothing will be struck out. But if you want me to I could ask you a few questions.

Josef

Go ahead. We are equal partners after all. Only I have the bad feeling that nobody's interested in my opinion.

Felix

Do you suffer from an inferiority complex?

Josef

You laugh at me all the time if I question your ideas, doubt or do not accept you work without reservation. You have turned me into an unsure, reticent and intimidated creature.

Felix (stirred)

First you rip my fundamental beliefs apart, and now you claim I undo you. — O' — whose soul sinks its teeth into my breast? — O' —

After prolonged abusive quarrelling, it was decided to break off this conversation and possibly to continue it at a later time.

Josef and Felix were born December 10th, 1955 in Eggersriet, grew up in Oberriet, and have lived since 1973 in St. Gallen. Extended travels, shared adventures and experiences bind them together in an intimate friendship.

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Translated (1990) from the German by Daniel Ammann and Mark Staff Brandl

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