

WHERE DO I END AND THE WORLD BEGINS

Günther Dankl, 2014

Where do I end and the world begins sounds very much like a piece of program code, but is the title for the exhibition of Michael Fliri. The exhibition is showing 18 mask sculptures all in black and of varying thickness. These are impressively presented by the artist, by arranging them individually on slender, light coloured wooden pedestals in the room. Only, what at first sight looks like real masks, is revealed on closer inspection to be casts of the insides of original masks from all over the world that the artist has borrowed from the International Mask Museum, Diedorf. Also there is an incubus Krampus mask that the artist wore himself in his youth. As new insides, Fliri has in turn superimposed casts of various fronts of the masks as well as two casts of his own face on the new masks made in the way just described. By opening the eyes, masks can therefore look through masks.

Michael Fliri looks as it were at what is visible behind the mask. However, he is less interested in the area of tension that opens up between the person in the mask and the viewer, but rather in the "interspace" that arises between the mask and the wearer of the mask. Fliri directs his attention not only at the outside of the mask, as is usually the case, but also takes a cast of the mostly seldom or little considered inside of the masks, and makes this the positive mould for the outside of the sculptural mask so created. With this inversion he transforms not only the function of the mask, but at the same time makes what is actually invisible, that is the "nothingness" into the sculpture and a new mask.

In an article on the creativity of the English artist Rachel Whiteread, the philosopher and art critic Richard Noble once described Whiteread's casts of walls, stairs and entire interiors as the "Archaeology of Absence": "The history of an empty room is brought to life in a new form. The floor and the information it contains signal something else as soon as Whiteread has made a mould and casting. The historical information becomes clearer and refers us to the past of a particular room, but also to the personal and political possibilities which the recovery of lost, forgotten history and experience provides". Whereas in the case of Whiteread "Emptiness becomes sculpture" as it were – and thereby "the everyday world of people with their relics of furniture and rooms is made into a monument" – by contrast Fliri in his work makes the nothingness, the space between the wearer and the mask visible, as both material and mask. In so doing, he removes the boundary between the "I" and the "We", and opens a window to a new "world" where the inside and outside meet or fall into each another. What comes to the surface are the different traces of the production process, the fine and coarse working marks, which now bulge visibly outward and give the mask sculpture not only its new formal "face", but every now and then in turn a new mystic dimension that is attributed to masks in all cultures in advance.

Fliri's mask sculptures release an abundance of meanings: They make the function as well as the history and the production process of the individual masks visible, and

show that the inherently non-visible and inconspicuous take on a new impact and significance of their own through a visualisation that is difficult to escape as a viewer. The history of a mask and its ritual use is brought to life in the moulding, thereby relating the hidden with the known, and the inconspicuous with the significant. Moreover, Fliri associates the masks through their sculptural form with other meanings, for example art-immanent meanings. As formal objects, they refer to the broad field of art history, from an expressive dynamic and moving design through to minimalist and abstract forms.

However, with his casts of the insides of masks, Michael Fliri makes not only new sculptures of spaces visible, alternating between the inside and outside, but joins the back of the sculptural masks so created in turn with the front of other masks, which can see through them via the eye slits that the artist has opened. The face of each mask therefore gets a new back that is the negative mould of the front of another mask. This newly created back is combined with the positive mould of the original inside of another original mask, and appears in the mask sculpture as a new front to the viewer. A mask from Mexico can thus look through a Japanese mask, or the inside of a mask from Korea can, for example, come into contact with the outside of one from Tibet. In this way the artist is opening an exciting area of multicultural relations that not only reflects the penetration and overlaying of different cultures, but which can also be regarded as an expression of the political and social situation of our time.

As a look at the use of the mask in the art of the 19th and 20th centuries down to the present day shows, the mask has served a line of artists as a suitable medium for viewing the world from the outside at a distance. A topos that Friedrich Nietzsche once described as "looking from within". With *Where do I end and the world begins*, Michael Fliri draws on earlier work. As then he also makes use of the mask here not purely as a cover for the face behind which his self hides, and which in its etymological origin primarily stems from the Arabic word "mas-chara", or "buffoon". His use of the mask as an artistic form of expression on the other hand has more to do with the origin of the mask from the Ancient Greek word "prósopon", in Latin "persona", originally used to describe a mask in the theatre of Greek Antiquity which typecast the role of the actor. The notion of a person and individual is also derived from this word.

"Going to make-up" in the theatre meant not only going into the make-up room, but also getting "into the character". "Going to make-up" then also means, according to the drama expert and producer Ekkehard Schönwiese, "that an actor who is given a mask enters into the character with his whole body, and lets his face disappear in the mirror as it were". Schönwiese adds: "Masks are guises outside our everyday perception of space and time [...] If I am consciously wearing a mask, then I am at the same time with me and outside of me."

What Ekkehard Schönwiese said can not only be applied to the entire performative work of Michael Fliri: it also applies to the exhibition *Where do I end and the world begins*. Also in the case of Fliri, fresh light is cast on the relationships between mask,

wearer and viewer, and new possibilities of looking at them never before considered are created, along with the associated perception and interpretation. The effect of Fliri's abstract mask sculptures ranges from the expressively moving to the tranquil. They give the "nothingness" a form, thereby releasing new meanings and possibilities for reflection.