



# EBERHARD HAVEKOST

A TEST CARD FOR REALITY

**Hans Rudolf Reust**



LATE EVENING LIGHT on the lake, twinkling reflections in the slightly ruffled water, utter silence, woods framing the view of the distant snowy mountains under an immaculate blue sky. The hard shadows of the naked rock walls by the dazzling fields of snow are distanced by a gentle veil of mist. It must be this merest film of mist that distinguishes the real view of the Alpine panorama from the painted version. Otherwise Eberhard Havekost's mountains seem much more 'real.' Or perhaps the glaringly red flowers, thrusting up into the extreme horizontal format from the bottom, turn

this piece of landscape into a backdrop for us, just as easily constructed with set-pieces from the pictorial archive. An experience by the lake overlaps with the views on picture-postcard stands.

*Landscape*, a limited view of a larger situation in wind and weather, will ultimately always remain a construct made up of seen elements and the stock of ideal landscapes. "Benutzeroberfläche" (User interface) is Havekost's name for an eight-part series of landscape and architecture pictures. This computer term refers to the on-screen appearance of operating systems

**Benutzeroberfläche 5, 2001. Oil on canvas, 170 x 330 cm. Courtesy Gebr. Lehmann, Dresden/Anton Kern, New York.**

and programs used to control and evaluate the processes concealed within the system. There is no reality outside the machine behind a user interface, just the system's abstract logic, asking external users to choose between the program's offered options. And correspondingly, when pictures are 'user interfaces' they no longer relate to lakes and woods, but to images viewers call up because of what they see, like things to be

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clicked on from the depths of the hard disk. Every interface generates more interfaces.

Façades, vehicles, tents, figures, and even jungle plants from the zoo are brought together by perfect images of sealed surfaces. Reflected highlights on glass and metal, on windscreens, chromed strips, nylon suits, ski goggles and sunglasses, shinily made-up foreheads, distract the eye just as much as the closed surfaces of painted concrete and skin that seem to be calculated with all the delicacy of a 3-D animation. Even the cloudless blue of the sky has no depth. Flatness, the key to modern painting, is a feature of the outer skin of Havekost's objects and people, even when he models them three-dimensionally with light and shade. There is no mystery behind these images. Mere surfaces and images are shown in a state of high artificiality, above all the hybrid surfaces of camouflage, veneers or lifted faces. The spell of the artificial seizes landscapes, buildings, and people alike, as though the superficial eroticism of Matthew Barney's world of fauna and fairies was now taking over the architecture of the suburbs, the caravans, the cars and the department store displays.

In an essay for the Kunstmuseum Luzern catalogue, Ulrich Looock examined in detail how Havekost's pictures relate to the world of electronic images: "The Renaissance paradigm of the picture as window is replaced by the paradigm of limitless image availability and encapsulation, which the language of electronic image manipulation interestingly also calls 'windows.' Havekost's painting replaces Alberti's windows with 'Windows' and ad-

dresses the convention of electronic image production and manipulation" (Ulrich Looock, "Fenster-Fenster," in: cat. Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1998, p. 9). Looock was working mainly on the basis of video images, but Havekost now uses purely digital models for his painting. Photographs are scanned as well, worked over in Photoshop, cleaned up, sometimes shrunk, stretched to the point of distortion. Finally a 1:10 ink-jet print with a grid is transferred to the canvas, without projection. This makes an even greater variety of initial material available. Eberhard Havekost collects things he has found and seen in a folder of things to be painted. While the individual works resist narrative almost completely, narrative networks build up between the individual images in the sequences, and between the sequences.

Balconies from modernist apartment blocks in some suburb or other become almost minimalist geometry in extreme views from below, seeming at first to tilt slightly into the abstract. The hard static presence of the apartment block encounters the soft, water-resistant and yet semi-physical organic mobility of tents, though admittedly they are not pitched outdoors, but on a stand in a department store. And these are answered by the hard, ultimately only potential mobility of the "Rheinsdorf cabins" — parked caravans — or parked cars and gliders. Runners on the spot are also standing still in an intermediate mobility zone. Ultimately the computer-calculated prairie is like the artificially staged jungle at the zoo.

Painting is essentially bound by its static, persisting presence. But Havekost uses this link with the still to increase the incon-

**From left: Luft, 2003. Oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm;  
College, 2003. Oil on canvas, 43 x 27 cm;  
Zukunft, 2002. Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm.  
Opposite: U1, 2003. Oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm.**

sistency of the image: what he produces are more than stills, super-stills, like catapults for ideas, for nightmares sometimes, until in the end every emotion slips off the surface. Movement is produced by surprising painterly gestures and by a composition the hard cuts and often strongly fragmented sections of which take up the rhythm of video clips, so that torsos and torsions show a reality in transit, images that point beyond themselves towards the next in sequence. For in fact Havekost very often does paint in series that convey at least the semblance of a story, but actually form more of a space for reflection and association. The landscapes and suburbs remain empty of people, the equipment or the transport cabins seem far from any human use, as if in a mail-order catalogue. People are not individuals but types, avoiding our gaze by wearing peaked caps or reflective spectacle lenses. They are isolated, sometimes shown only from behind or quite frequently as cut-outs, cut off under the chin, wrapped in textiles or linked up with tubes and cables, in a context that can be guessed at, but that is ultimately inexplicable. Individual motifs are distorted to the extent that they are scarcely recognizable at first glance, but remind us of familiar contexts only through their material quality or a certain shape. The interlacing, vertical line structure of a folded tent becomes an abstract object through the supercharged presence of its illusionistic depiction.

Eberhard Havekost now lives mainly in Berlin, but Dresden, the town where he was born, became important for his artistic development during his art training in the GDR days, and later through the Galerie Lehmann, where his fellow painter Thomas Scheibitz was also much promoted. This city in the far east of Germany has a strong artistic tradition, with Die Brücke, A.R. Penck, and Gerhard Richter. But Havekost's painting is more like Caspar David Friedrich, not the religious Romantic, but the painter who even in those days synthesized mountain landscapes like *Der Watzmann* in his studio (1824-25) from heterogeneous sketches. Digital image production is still largely concerned with fusing individually computed picture elements into an illusionistic unit, as Friedrich did in his pictures. But Havekost uses painting to evoke the unity of the image and to break it up repeatedly at the same time. The impenetrability of surfaces is suddenly broken by purely painterly elements: by free brushstrokes, through a deliberately inserted lack of focus. Cuts between pictorial elements that are scarcely discernible in the composition at first glance make the parts of the painting seem like a live insertion.

Thus Havekost is introducing an element of enlightenment into a pictorial world of pure simulation: he does not show the simulation as a result, but while it is under way, there are no fixed reference points for the eye. The tent motif stands metonymically for a kind of seeing that is constantly in motion and bivouacked in the picture only briefly, in a precarious position, and secured temporarily, pausing, resting, not finally achieving repose. And the tent is not pitched in a landscape, but on display in a department store.

Havekost is probably not the only person who can't take holiday photographs anymore. He says that he no longer knows anywhere that has not been taken over by the media, in which the mediatized view and current experience are not mutually dependent. And so it is not easy to detach a view of people, of objects and landscapes, from their relationship to Havekost's painting. It is well known that successful simulations wipe out any memory of a first nature.

*Augen* (Eyes, 2003): a landscape, dissolved into individual, unfocused painterly gestures, becomes a background before which a number of very different cameras are set up like primeval creatures, with 'eyes' watching the viewer from the painting. They technicize the space in front of the picture and challenge the user to a duel with many different perspectives formulated in two dimensions. The viewers keep their critical distance only in the dead angles between the camera eyes — and that is also where Havekost's next reality test card is located. ■

(Translated from German by Michael Robinson)

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