

## **Anti-Social Flag — Riches and Loss**

“Hanging from my Earlobes is a Rock, hanging up my Waistline is a Glock” (Juice Wrld)

Sofia Goscinski's early works date back to the very first years of the millennium. At the time, the artist was enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Ever since, she has been developing her art against the background and with the awareness of the global political crises and events that have, for now, culminated in the current social lockdown triggered by the corona pandemic, and her works often react directly to them. Since 9/11, continually rising anti-democratic sentiment has been stoked by government-led intervention in the customary living conditions of the individual, the effects of social media, restriction of the freedom of movement, and radically changing working conditions, along with the associated economic consequences. Arguably, the overall conclusion is that the first two decades of the twenty first century can be called a time of fear, a period in which a subliminal feeling of panic and paranoia spread like a pandemic across the planet and its globalized media world. This is true even without taking the current corona crisis into consideration. It feels like the world is in a continuous state of emergency and we are confronted with measures that, until recently, were unthinkable in Western democratic societies.

This threatening sense of crisis is further heightened by the capabilities of social media that play into the hands of the powerful, providing them with the arguments that legitimize encroachment on personal spaces and liberties. Deliberate over-interpretation of developments by charlatans is used as an instrument of disruption. This is true for agitation in the context of political correctness, terrorist offshoots of politics, migration movements, and ecological issues. The same goes for Brexit-exacerbated damage inflicted, and knowingly accepted, on forward-looking peace projects, such as the European Union. All of this is used in the media to fuel feelings of insecurity and legitimize radical tech-based surveillance. Billions of people are thus kept in check. On top of that, in the shadow of these warning signs, individuals themselves are beginning to restrict the hard-won freedoms of an open, democratic social order. The sheep have begun to lead themselves to the slaughter.

What now emerges as a consequence of this development is a surveillance society in which the liberties of the subject are increasingly subordinate to artificial intelligence. Ever better technologies of control are developed and their possibilities of application are expanded. A gigantic number of cameras and sensors placed around the world not only monitor and control people's movements, but ultimately also take hold of their emotions. The theoretically available possibilities of neuro-cybernetic or neuro-prosthetic technologies, implanted microchips, and "brain-computer interfaces" can be used to manipulate the behavior of individuals, groups or entire societies. In the future, their potential application will become

even more radical, extensive, and likely to bypass the law. The government can thus gain direct access to the body and, following the playbook of militarism, enslave it in the name of supposedly protecting the community. And so it appears that the road to digital totalitarianism has already been mapped out. The achievements of the Enlightenment, human rights, and international law are at stake.

On the other hand, there is the perennial obligation of art to take a critical stance. In recent years it has no doubt become increasingly necessary to harness the means and capabilities of art to raise awareness of issues that are significant on an existential level; to appeal to the human faculty of making free choices and decisions as individuals; to remind people of the imperative of existential awareness, which lets individuals become living beings in the face of danger and loss. It is this trait that distinguishes man from machines. It is only the realization of doubt, failure, oblivion, and death that ultimately turns man into a humane cultural being. Above all, however, works of modern art point us to the achievements of humanist thought, to the analytical and self-reflective synthesis of unconditional individuality and the simultaneous ability to communicate. Only art can give expression to the cognitive empathy this process involves, insofar as mimetic and cathartic functions are attributed to it. In other words, in the age of modernism these gestures have repeatedly taken on the form of revolutionary theories of empathy, which led to the development of psychology and psychoanalysis, and thus created the preconditions for democratic developments that enable us to accept the Other or the rights of the Other. In this sense, Sofia Goscinski's concept of art is deeply rooted in the conviction that it is one of the first obligations of art to identify threats to the integrity of the individual and highlight the dangers of undermining its humanist rights. In her art she develops complex and formally elegant ways of pointing to the fracture zones of critical socio-political trends and of invoking the need for empathetic action.

In order to elaborate on these thoughts in relation to Goscinski's notion of art, I would like to suggest taking a closer look at three of her works — albeit ones to which the artist herself has attributed rather little importance. Probably due to their ephemeral character, they have never been shown in exhibitions or publications. What I mean here by ephemeral is less their material fleetingness of form, but rather the peculiarity of a cursory expression of a thought, which doesn't take away from its precision and commitment. Perhaps the "modesty," in the sense of "Arte Povera," that is inherent in these works will render more clearly visible the fascinating representational range and diversified vocabulary that Goscinski has developed over the past two decades. Because with these "small" works, it is fascinating to see how skillfully she moves between the various media spheres equally available to art today. To appreciate the precision she brings to finding forms that impress the viewer with their enigmatic directness and are capable of triggering the deep mental cognitive work that legitimizes these sophisticated works of art. The "Liberty Pill" is probably the artist's smallest

work in terms of format. It is an object in the form of a pill cast in gold in its original size. The "Anti-Social Flag," on the other hand, is an image printed on fabric in the form of a flag. From the point of view of its minimalist pictorial invention, it also functions as a red flag, a sign. Produced with the simplest technical means, the animated film "Totentanz" ("Dance of Death") is, in turn, a hybrid work of art between painting, sculpture, performance, and film. It embodies the expressionist impressiveness that is often characteristic of Goscinski's art. Is the "Liberty Pill" therefore a sign representing the healing dimensions of art, of *life*, while the "Anti-Social Flag" signifies the political dimension and function of art, the *existential conditions*? And does the "Dance of Death" stand for one of the most obsessively covered themes of art history, suggesting a sensitive reaction to the dark challenges of the present? Does it invoke the transience of human existence and *death*?

The peripheral character of these works is indicative of the basic process of their creation, the way in which the artist conjures up discrete signs, as if out of nothing. At this point it seems fitting to quote a line that Pier Paolo Pasolini has Giotto say in his film Decameron, in which he points out the fragility and semi-consciousness of the creative process: "Why produce a work of art when it's nice to just dream about it?" Are these works that, in the sense of C.G.Jung's "Analytical Psychology," describe elements of the fundamental human approach to dealing with its existence? Does Goscinski succeed in creating modern signs with these works, ones that can be characterized as archetypes of a new dimension of perceiving reality? In any case, her work seems to be based on a search that often involves semi-conscious areas of the mind and is aimed at the primordial form, around which her designs constantly revolve. Is this the source of the existential, enigmatic, and often dark mood that is frequently said to be characteristic of all her works?

Her works elegantly live up to the demand that, according to C.G. Jung, is key to the epistemological capability of the archetype, namely the synthesis of image and energy. As one of these primal forms she chose the pill that references the totem meal, the cultural use of drugs as a knowledge-enhancing and healing gesture. The perfect circular shape of the sign on the "Anti-Social Flag" reflects the sun as an archetypal representation of life on planet earth, which is only possible through light and heat energy. In the metatext of the image composition, however, she also succeeds in compellingly combining the cleansed minimalist form with a concrete political reference. She draws attention to the strategies of exclusion inherent in the human being, such as racism, various phobias, and social injustice, thus putting her finger on one of the deep wounds of our socially, politically, and culturally globalized present. On the other hand, for "Dance of Death" the artist again chose a form of expression that brings to the fore another one of her own character traits. With its aesthetic provocation extending into the surreal and humorous, it points to her self-image as that of a "trickster." This term, along with the primordial patterns he called archetypes, is another apt attribution

coined by the Swiss psychoanalyst. In his theory "the Trickster is a primitive "cosmic" being of *divine-animal* nature, on the one hand superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, and on the other hand inferior to him by virtue of his unreason and unconsciousness."<sup>1</sup> In her self-portraits, for example in "Self-Portrait with a Ritual Mask" from 2017 or the "Self-Portrait for the Future" from 2015, Goscinski likes to mask and thus stylize her position as a shaman-like being between animal and goddess<sup>2</sup>. She becomes an ambivalent "master of transformation" who provokes and crosses boundaries, and in doing so likes to shake up the order and laws of the human universe. All of these are characteristics that are associated with the "trickster" as a synonym for the artist. Thus, in these challenging times she single-mindedly works towards fulfilling her vocation as one of the heroines of contemporary art.

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works, Volume Nine, Part One, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans R.F.C. Hull, second edition, Routledge, London and New York 1968, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> As part of her family has its roots in the cultural homeland of the Tatars, one could speculate that fragments of the shamanistic faith of the Tatars that preceded their Islamization are preserved in her DNA.