



Maria Vogel

## **UTOPIA**

The utopia of a gentle, tender relationship with the world and our fellow humans is diametrically at odds with our current experience. Noise around us prevents stillness, and yet we need stillness if we wish to hear the quiet voices inside and around us. Haste keeps us from lingering, and so we lack the time to calmly take things in or pass them on. Greed of all kinds prevents us from carefully drawing nearer to and touching others. An atmosphere of violence is increasingly pervading our lives, urging the addictive satisfaction of the crudest urges. Some presumptuously exploit all and everything to that end, with no concern for the consequences. Others try to distance themselves, and struggle. If they isolate themselves, then they are no longer able to exchange thoughts and feelings, and risk withering inside. If they give up and conform with the masses, they become all the more incapable of contact, since they lose their sense of their own identity. Genuine communication necessitates a You and an I, the whole self with body, mind and soul, or, as Renate Bertlmann names it, "thinking loving, loving thinking".

Communication based on closeness and respect needs people who are prepared to open up to one another, to whom all forms of violence are alien, who lack the thirst for power. Nowadays however the dead and injured are par for the course. A society in which everyone respects one another is a dream of the future, a utopia. Working towards it requires a struggle, a fight with love against all that kills. Death however is inescapable. One of those puzzling antinomies of our existence is that there are some people – Elias Canetti is one of them – who take on this hopeless fight against death. For Canetti, death is an "opponent who life-long calls upon us to develop, in resistance to him, what makes us essentially ourselves". Deeply anchored within us there is a yearning for something lasting which death cannot touch, a longing for indestructible life. There is no cult and no religion which is satisfied with death as the final end of existence. Death may always mark the end of our earthly existence, but it is also a transitional stage to another, unknown life.

Nevertheless, death is feared. We fear the unknown, even though death is the only certainty in our lives. It strips away our final doubts about our unique existence. In the face of our certain death, the short timespan of our lives takes on a weighty significance which only love helps us to bear. Love frees us from the fear, brings us closer, erases what separates, connects us. It does not banish death from the world, but it enables us to accept it in allowing us to act as conscious beings and, through fear of death as the final, most painful abandonment, allows uncompromising courage to grow. It is the utter fearlessness of a Cassandra who proclaims the truth in the face of all false hope, or the utter fearlessness of an Antigone, who in her loyalty to the commands of the gods buries her brother in spite of the will of the king. This is the limitless courage which the utopias of love demand.

The works of Renate Bertlmann are steps in this direction. They are purifying exercises marked by the hardness of battle. They show the paradoxes and polarities connected with our inner and outer worlds. They hint at mystical experiences of love, life and death, like those described by Angelus Silesius's short verses in his "Cherubinischen Wandersmann" ("The Cherubic Pilgrim"):

"Der Mensch hat eher nicht vollkomm'ne Seligkeit,  
bis daß die Einheit hat verschluckt die Anderheit".

("Man does not know perfect bliss  
Till unity has swallowed otherness.")

"Der Tod, aus welchem nicht eine neues Leben blüht,  
der ist's, den meine Seel' aus allen Toden fliehet".

("It is the death from which no new life grows,  
from which, of all deaths, my soul flees.")

AMO ERGO SUM. This not only signifies self assertion and a sense of self focused on communication, it also calls to account a philosophy based solely upon logic and which does not involve the whole body, mind and soul of a person but separates out only one part, that of thought. It likewise calls to account a theology which reduces love to mind and spirit, with moral guidelines seeking to distance us from the body ("Wann werden uns die Theologen endlich etwas von Zärtlichkeit erzählen?" / "When will the theologians finally tell us something about tenderness?"). Further untenable is a psychology which limits love to the realm of the body and soul, to the exclusion of the mind. AMO ERGO SUM means the equal value of body, mind and soul, in an entwined, inseparable wholeness which may not exist for itself alone but seeks a unification as an "I" in collaboration with a "You" and finds therein its zenith.

The "Utopia" objects by Renate Bertlmann – each complementing one another – contain the components which can transform our human relationships: In the setting of the cemetery, among graves and urns, we familiarise ourselves with death. In purification rituals we take leave from the pleasures of the senses and our desires. ("Hinter jeder Sehnsucht steht der Tod und droht mit dem Knochenfinger Versagung" / "Behind every longing waits death, threatening denial with its bony finger", "Wunsch abnehmend" / "Wish decreasing"). It is the processes which are similar to death which lessen our fear of it. In "Les Amants" we are witnesses to a kind of dance of death. In the meditation wall "Ich-Du" ("You-Me") we find fulfilled love, in the unopened envelopes we find messages of love preserved, and in the burial objects of the urns our innermost self is kept safe from destruction. The "Mutter-Urnenwand" ("Mother Urn Wall") shows how tenderness transcends death. The poignant grave-finds in the "Haus der Erinnerungen" ("House of Memories") awaken feelings of protectedness. The tomb "Hier ruht meine Zärtlichkeit" ("Here lies my tenderness") lets us mourn the loss of something very important. The abused "Schnuller-Heilige" ("Dummy Saint") with its soft "feelers" on the closed winged altar awakens our sympathy, and, when we see it on the opened altar picture, unprotected and helplessly vulnerable to injury, our admiration. It becomes a female counterpart to the thorn-crowned, crucified Christ.

With great will power, energy and distancing irony Renate Bertlmann exposes herself to public scrutiny through her objects. She penetrates into our innermost selves via our senses – as long as we don't close ourselves off – and challenges us. Through veiling her face in the photo cycles she can be apprehended all the more clearly through the language of her body gestures. By concealment, whether it be with scarves, with latex skins, with urns or with envelopes, she shows us something very significant, precious, delicate. Concealment ("Verbergen") becomes shelter ("Bergen") and protection of the most essential ("Eigentlichstem"), personal ("Eigenstem"). From this protection comes the strength to open oneself up, expose oneself, to let go of everything,

to accept death and so overcome the fear of dying. "The self assertion of our essence is never a rigid insistence on a chance state, but the giving up of oneself into the hidden originality of the source of one's own being" (Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art").

At the threshold of death the opposites which characterise our lives touch: tenderness and hardness, devotion and refusal, concealment and revelation. At this meeting these opposites are cancelled out and something new is formed, as similarly in love when two individuals merge into oneness. Loving, living and dying are all inextricably linked. They are a prerequisite of our existence. They make us able to arrive at our true being and able to return to our origins.

*Translation: Larissa Cox*