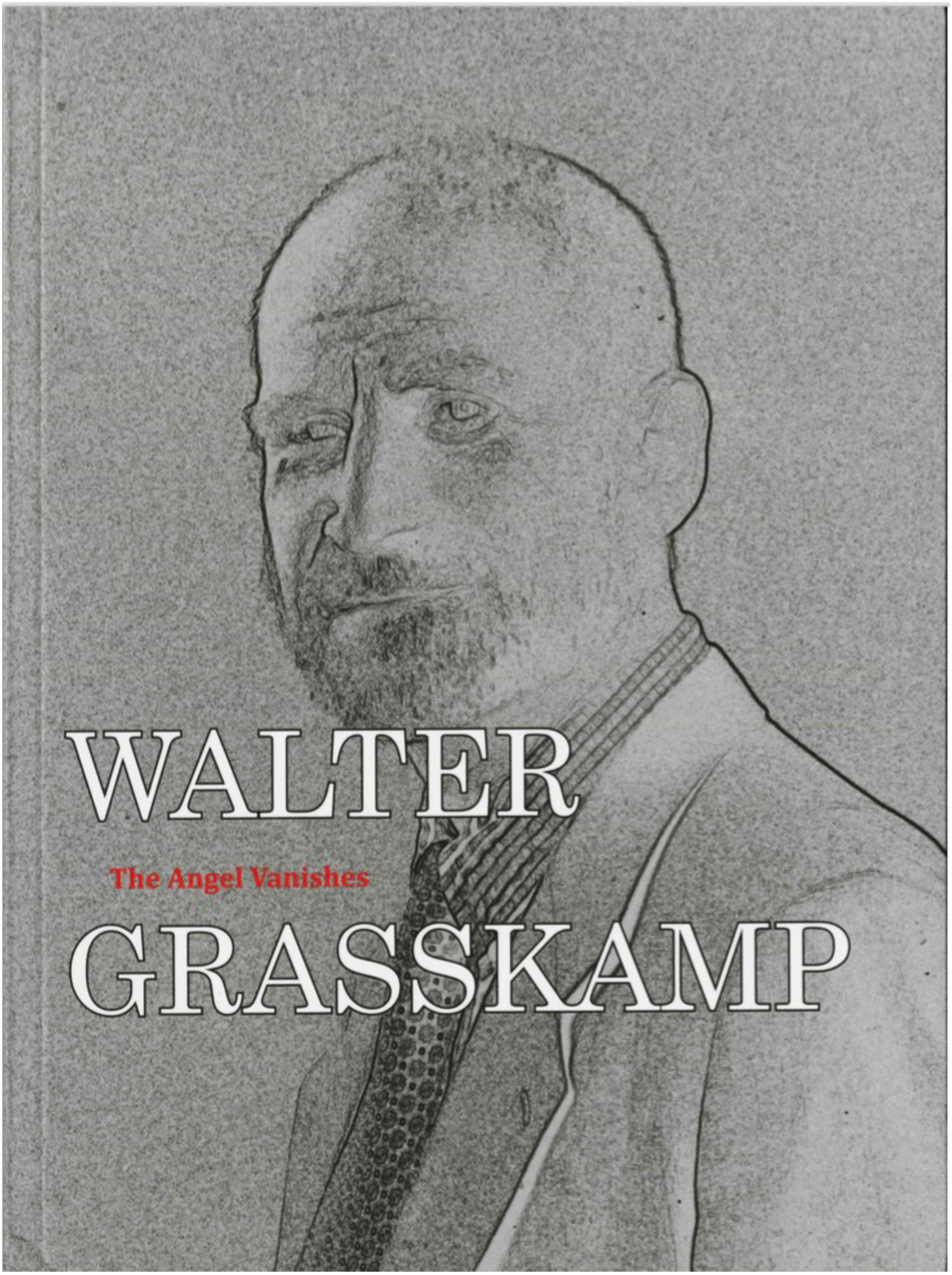
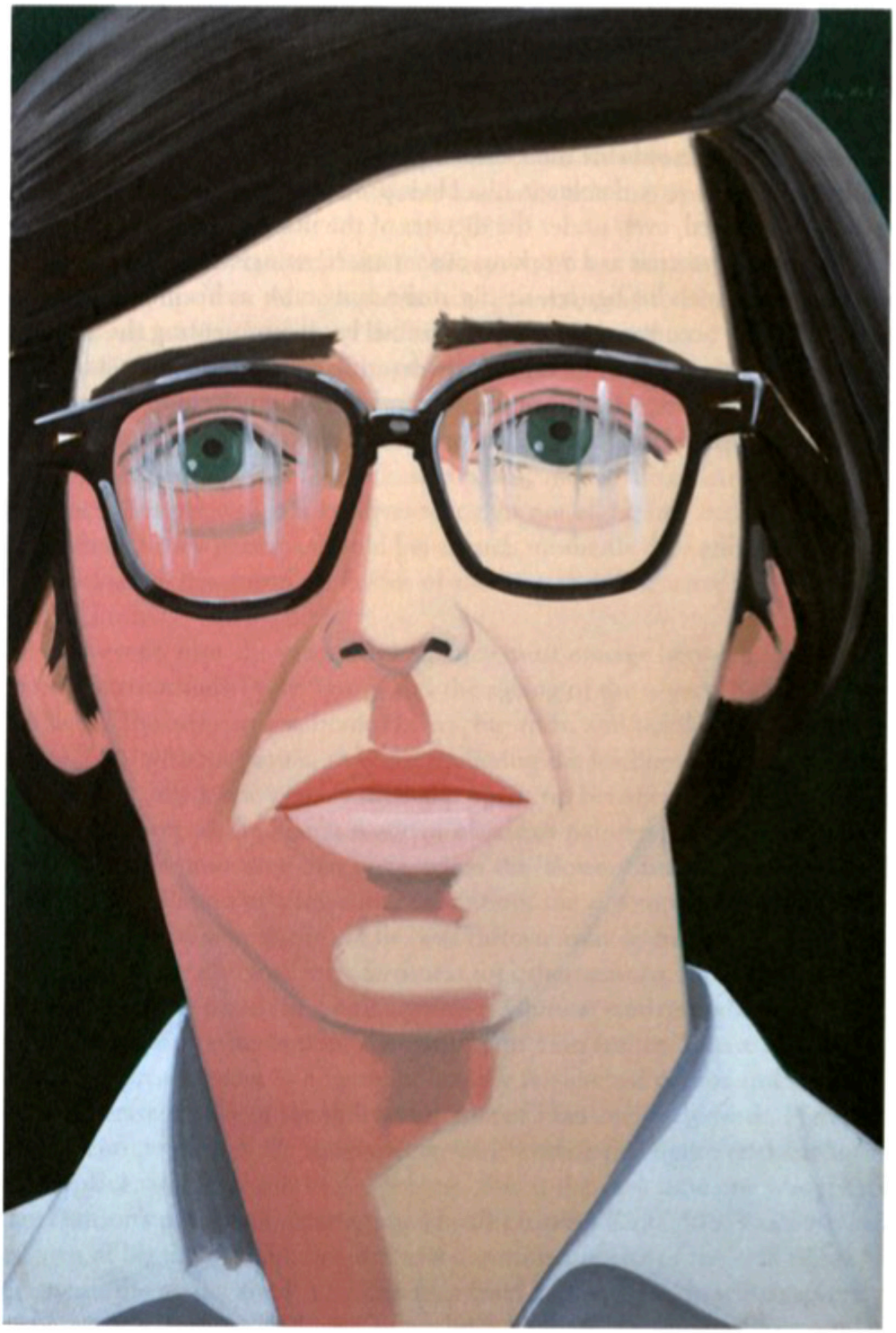

WALTER
The Angel Vanishes
GRASSKAMP



Alex Katz, *Portrait Kenneth Koch*, 1967

Fashionably Late
Alex Katz

Like Philip Guston, Alex Katz was already a renowned painter in the USA before he was properly recognised in Europe. With his bold and colourful paintings, Katz seemed too American to be palatable for the Europeans, but with his technical traditionalism, he was too European to earn a bonus for his transatlantic exoticism. On this side of the Atlantic, he thus remained for a long time in the shadow of the Pop artists of his generation, the Lichtensteins and Warhols, who since the 1960s have been imported *en masse* from New York. Even when the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn presented 'Back to the USA' in the early 1980s, and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne examined the 'history of an artistic fascination' with 'Europa/Amerika', the quintessentially American painter Katz was missing from the line-up. He has never been invited to a documenta; and, in 1993, he was not invited to the major Berlin exhibition 'American Art in the 20th Century'. Magazines such as Parkett in Zurich, Gallerists such as Bernd Klüser in Munich, and curators such as Jochen Poetter in Baden-Baden, who strove to draw attention to Katz's work in the German-speaking world, remained without resonance with collectors and critics until well into the 1990s.

For a long time, only one small portrait painting hung in a museum in this country, which the collector Peter Ludwig mixed in with his Pop acquisitions, as well as a landscape that Dieter Honisch had acquired for his Nationalgalerie in West Berlin. I had liked the painting that Peter Ludwig purchased from the very first moment I saw it in his museum in Aachen, the Neue Galerie – Sammlung Ludwig, in the early 1970s: a strongly contoured and colourful portrait of the poet Kenneth Koch. Over the years, it kept its attraction, while the impact of the large formats by Lichtenstein and Wesselmann, and even Close and Estes, gradually faded, and I often passed them lackadaisically in order to visit my smaller-format favourites, which included the portrait by Katz, as well as the series 'A German Requiem After Brahms' by Tom Phillips.

I am not telling this to boast of a judgment that could not be corrupted by the spirit of the times, but because, on the contrary, I am still embarrassed to this day that I never admitted to this admiration at the time and would never have done so – for fear of being caught out of the usual canon:

The European reception of Katz reveals much about the conformism of taste and recommendations, and I myself am a good bad example of this.

The admiration that the Italian instant stars of the early 1980s, Clemente and Cucchi, had for the New Yorker as a painter's painter, did little to change the underestimation of Katz in Europe. Only since 1997, with Bice Curiger's exhibition 'Birth of the Cool' and the Saatchi presentation in London, has Katz also become more present in this country and then even quickly became a cult figure, which the magazine of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* acknowledged in 1999 with a special issue dedicated to him. By then, of course, Katz was already over seventy years old. In the end, the nearly seventy-five-year-old triumphed in 2002 at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn with the exhibition 'In Your Face', that comprised about fifty paintings, most of them large-formats: the first and only European retrospective, because no partner institution had been found for the long overdue and apparently still seemingly capricious project of introducing a painter who was not among the usual suspects of the transatlantic canon.

Katz did not deserve such a reception in instalments, for he is not a late convert who, like the fourteen years older Guston, changed direction in the middle of his career. Rather, as the exhibition in Bonn demonstrated with paintings spanning fifty years, he has remained true to himself from the very beginning. He was intrigued neither by the abstraction that dominated the New York art scene in the late 1940s – in his student days – nor by the cynical populism of Pop Art. He is an indispensable individualist who has no need now to be ennobled as a classic of Pop Art. For he distinguishes himself from Pop Art by the simple fact that he only works in the academic genres, albeit without appearing academic.

For European eyes, however, Katz is still difficult to bear when he paints beach nixies with candy-coloured bathing caps or places metres of luscious yellow golden lilac in front of a turquoise sky. His seagulls and flowers appear at times as if he had first carved them in wood and painted them, before transferring them onto canvas; his conversation pictures are American in a sense one has not yet fallen for in this country, and they seem too grotesque to be ironic. In various portraits, the faces appear to be cut out with scissors, and their mask-like appearance extends to a dab of cosmetic.

His frozen milieu studies of chirpy cocktail parties, however, do not represent any sociological theses; and for entire series of pictures ('Pas de deux', 1983), Katz did not shy away from depicting his characters wearing clothes by the renowned designer Norma Kamali. For the elegant low-cost label GAP, he even stooped to posing as an advertising model with the conviction of the happy consumer. Anyone who, like Katz, has been preoccupied with portraiture

for five decades could not, in the long run, ignore the pithy urban messages of fashion, the textiles that were an aid to 'presence', and the magic of cosmetics. And the superficiality of fashion had to fascinate a painter who has always concentrated on the pictorial surface.

In the 1990s, *style* could therefore become the international passe-partout of Katz's reception because it was so wonderfully ambiguous and thus, ultimately, meaningless, but was able to bind that sentimentality that one could just barely afford in the 'clinical chic' of Prada capitalism without having to be considered a wimp.

His primary model for over forty years has been his wife, the strikingly distinctive Ada; this alone justifies his reputation as a dandy. For privacy is a key to both the unwieldiness and the quality of this work. His portraits, especially the fabulously cheeky likeness of his Maltese dog, 'Sunny' (1971), radiate an uncomplicated satisfaction with his standard of living, which every art collector in Europe can afford to display, but not an artist, at least not to the outside world. As an accomplished painter of moods and a determined genre artist, Katz therefore seems like an escapist, whose good mood may be inviting in America but must appear infectious in Europe. Both laconic and accurate, detached as well as curious, he depicts people and animals, leaves and stones, as if he were merely cataloguing his Sunday pleasure in the world. All his landscapes – like those of the Impressionists - look like recreational areas and his characters like the incorrigible middle classes, his beaches smell of weekend excursions and his cityscapes call it a day.

If his portraits camouflage emotion through posing, which is a classic displacement function of both art and fashion, then privacy is of course also a pose. Katz's interest in dance theatre, a second key to his work, also indicates that the garish choreography of images suggests more than just a laid-back staging of lifestyles: Even the cheerful figure paintings seem to darken, when the surface effects wane. In any event, cheerfulness is not the theme of this work, but rather an unconventional view of everyday life, his very personal, almost private painterly perspective, that makes you accept the imbalances of pictorial intensity.

Although Katz has not been painting from photographs for a long time, his pictures look like details selected through a viewfinder. But he has mastered the grand art of turning a small snapshot of a sidelong glance into a veritable image of the moment. One senses why this outsider has remained true to himself in a way that now earns him much praise for his endurance: He has been timeless since he learned to trust the moment. The third key to Katz's work is therefore his relationship to the American poetry of his generation. For Katz, who has repeatedly portrayed his favourite poets and has always sought to collaborate

with them across genres, is a painter-poet: Isolation and enlargement of motifs, reductive psychology, sharply observed contours, casualness of language and understatement of emotion have all been regarded as poetic virtues since William Carlos Williams, and have also made an impression on other American painters. In Katz's work, one could almost imagine at last finding Williams's famous red wheelbarrow, the one 'so much depends upon', even though it does not appear anywhere as a motif.

Completely opaque, on the other hand, are the night paintings and fog scenes, which border on abstraction, and live quite picturesquely from the colour surface. And the lurking silence that reigns in some of his landscapes has hardly been heard since the era of Romanticism. Katz finds the dark side of existence not only in the metropolis of New York, where his elegant characters in the 'Pas de deux' series could come from the novel American Psycho, but also – like any decent American regionalist – in the summer retreat: The stream behind his summer house is the second most frequent motif in his work; for fifteen years, it has been expecting the painter every summer, as a constant challenge to examine his painterly position. A recent example, 'Black Brook #16' (2001), was a veritable black hole in the otherwise colourful exhibition in Bonn, a renewed attempt to blur water refraction and reflection, illusions of foreground and depth in such a way that the eye could only slip on it as if the water had frozen over during the night. Heinz Peter Schwerfel, who deserves great respect for his both sensitive and precise portraits of artists, captured the production of 'Black Brook #16' in a television film and was convinced that Katz had intentionally produced this 'work in progress', which he had been asked to do for the film, as a painting that could not be captured on film at all. Katz is in any event not comfortable, although even his rain pictures look cheerful, as if they had been painted in the sun.

Although the large-format paintings make do without formal agitation, they have an unmistakable, though sometimes amazing signature style that merges completely into the image. This is particularly evident in the silkscreens, the change of scale of which makes the pictorial quality of his work almost tangible. In any event, the prints are not a sideshow within his oeuvre but allow the strengths of this great picture maker to be fully recognised and to emerge completely from the shadow of neglect and misunderstanding. The almost still-life quality of the landscape details in the woodcuts and linocuts bears witness to a great craftsmanship and a poetic magic which, in the middle of Europe, one can apparently only afford to allow oneself if, like Kabakov, the artist comes from the unknown Russia or, like Katz, from even more unknown regions of New York.