

C.H.R.I.S.T.A LÜHTJE

Why is simplicity so hard to achieve? Perhaps because it contradicts life as we know it? Because it is so contrary to our everyday experiences? Because it gives little or no expression to our feelings? Because it is too definite, too apodictic? These and all the other reasons one might be able to think up may indeed have a grain or two of truth in them, but on the whole we must suspect them of being evasive, convenient, or even cowardly, inasmuch as they all stem from an unwillingness to accept the laws that govern design. Simplicity is unavoidable and hence feared.

We cannot of course say that all that is simple must necessarily result from a strict reduction to essentials, that it must flaunt inspired poverty, that it must be particularly chaste or exceedingly modest. Never and nowhere must simplicity be denied the qualities of sensuousness, richness or costliness. These qualities must, however, be inherent in it; they must be entirely in keeping with its essence, and in no way must they appear extraneous. Simplicity must be discovered, recognized, acquired. It does not come of its own accord and will never be found by the wayside. Experimentation is probably alien to simplicity, for it lacks the certainty about its goal. Simplicity cannot be achieved unless it has a goal.

Thus simplicity is always something which we feel has been thought through to the end. It manifests itself, for example, whenever the material has undergone a mental process rather than just a manual one, for then the resultant form is the product of the intellect and the effect is relaxing, pleasing, even cheering. We, the observers, the ultimate beneficiaries, are at once astonished and not a little humiliated, for our initial doubts about its success were not inconsiderable and now we have been shamed into silence.

The ways that lead to maturity are manifold, often winding and intersecting, sometimes—if they are too short—fatal. Artists' biographies reflect this clearly enough. This maturing process can best take place when the way is long and straight and the artist craftsman does not stray from it but, rather, lives and works in relative seclusion without the burden of an exalted public. Of course, fashions lurk here, too. Nonetheless, the cosmos is more intimate, the purpose more demanding and the reward more objective.

But enough of these generalizations. Let us now turn to the particular reason why we are here and concur that, at sixty, Christa Lühtje makes beautiful, irresistibly simple things. Her longstanding friends and customers have been able to follow her

development for many years. My own observations have been limited to more recent times, but this made my acquaintance with her work more dramatic and forced me to approach it with the utmost concentration, which of course would not have been possible without Christa Lühtje's competence in presenting her work in an appropriate context.

One of the questions I already asked myself during our preparations for the 150th anniversary exhibition of the Bavarian Arts and Crafts Society in the autumn of 2001 was whether Christa Lühtje was the first goldsmith to hit upon the idea of cutting rings into several parallel, identically shaped parts. It would indeed seem to be the case. This idea—which is naturally the product of long reflection—is so wonderfully convincing because it enriches and diversifies our notion of the ring as an item of jewellery. It is also of fundamental significance, for it further strengthens the *raison d'être* of the artist craftsman and craftswoman.

Whereas rings, once they have been removed from their wearer's fingers and put aside, normally convey the impression of helplessness, like flotsam and jetsam washed up on a deserted beach, this innovative creation invites us to play with it, to stack its four or five parts in regular or fortuitous arrangements. Some of them can be stood on end, like arched gateways.

Or we are pleasantly surprised to discover that its decorative motif— simple leaf—is not arranged centrally, like, say, the setting of a stone, but radially, that is to say, in the direction of the ring's movement around the finger. Moreover, this wonderful piece also has a secret, a sensible one, too, and one known only to its wearer, for if the latter raises her ringed finger to eye level and glances across it, she will notice that her ring does not come full circle, as it were, but forms a gap, its plain, invisible end freely tapering to a point underneath the leaf motif. This feature testifies to the logical consistency with which the ring has been designed: its value is intrinsic and needs no justification in practical terms – the material is strong enough anyway, whether the ring is closed or not.

Such clarity of thought is also the distinguishing feature of another ring, its essentially plain form having been severed by an elegant, S-shaped gap. How much more thought-inspiring is this graceful line than any self-satisfied stone! Or perhaps we are slightly irritated by it because of its severing effect? The point is that we are free to react entirely according to our own preference or mood.

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Christa Lühtje has been making the same high demands on herself ever since she began her career, on the one hand through her dedication to the strict exactitude of geometrical forms; on the other through her overriding preference for gold. The mild, flattering sheen of silver is not for her. No, for Christa Lühtje it must be the bright, imperious gleam of gold. How powerful gold must be, we say to ourselves, instinctively remembering that gold can even make the world its slave. And how ideally it combines with meticulously cut rock crystal, we say to ourselves, as we marvel at a necklace of regal magnificence. Even on display, this necklace is a thing of beauty in its own right, but then we immediately think of its purpose and look around for the neck which, for its sake, may willingly loose its head. Ultimate bliss, but not without a slight shiver of fear. What immensurability must lie in smallness, what greatness must lie in the sheer simplicity of these cruciform elements. Indeed, it is simplicity that counts and there are no roundabout ways of achieving it.

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