

Following the Impulses of Life

Beatrice E. Stammer

There are essentially two stances that determine the relationship between (Western) art and the discourse about art: the philosophical and the theological. Common to both is perhaps the turning toward transcendence, the areas of thought that go beyond sensory experience with objects, whereby philosophy limits itself to this world, and religion(s) deal(s) with the 'Beyond'. Temporality and transcendence play a crucial role in European philosophy. The assimilation of understanding of the world and ourselves is determined by the aspect of time; according to Heidegger, '...the moment of reasonable insight and thoughtfulness is what first permits 'time to become'." Time is '...the transcendental horizon of the question of Being". (1)

An art that tends toward abstraction, more than any other form of art, assimilates the transcendental approach as a style-shaping principle. In the struggle for representationality, symbolized as 'world', and abstraction, as 'freedom from the world', artists since Classical Modernism have sought entanglement here and limitlessness there.

The Berlin painter Harald Gnade, too, stands in this tradition of relationship to objects and of pictorial autonomy. The work of Harald Gnade is tied to the theme of transcendence in two ways: through the energy potential of color and through the reduction of the events in the picture as abstraction. Pictures of intense quiet thereby arise, shimmering in a turbulent, Mediterranean emptiness. The successive layers of color of a monochromatic or bi-colored tonality – layering that is visible only at the margins – develops corporeality and volumes with a wide range of connotations of skin, materiality, and spatial relations.

The painter achieves the many overlapping layers of paint by means of a pouring technique: applying impasto masses of paint produces relief-like layers, rigidified in motion, or, poured as fluid substances (chalk whitening), resulting in tissue-like openings exposing underlying layers. But this spontaneous application of paint, 'controlled by strong emotion' (H.G.), is not a purely impulsive gesture of the actionist aspect of his painting; rather, it is a concept of cultivating spontaneity, as with Jackson Pollock, Gotthard Graubner, and Fred Thieler, who poured paint on the flat-lying picture surface and learned to pour downright 'sharply' in dialogue with the paint (2).

Against the pulsating spirit of the times and the ever more complex questions posed, the painter sets untimeliness, in the form of a very 'material' painting that provides space for the experience of color. Harald Gnade's precise knowledge of art history and the humanities makes him a warner against the Zeitgeist of an exclusively natural-scientific approach to the world. This sensual involvement corresponds to a demand for beauty, which has its place in the artist's thinking and is manifest in allusions to Classical Antiquity. At the same time, the painter clearly underscores the craftsmanship aspects of his works. Harald Gnade's painting is suffused with the spirit of draftsmanship, but it also confronts painting, often even in dialogue. ... besuche mich zeit ... 2001/2002 (... visit me time ... 2001/2002) is the title of an exhibition as well as of a 72-part ink painting tableau. In it, the artist

places free forms in an imaginary space that condenses weightlessly, in filigree or compact corporeality, to a rhythmic narrative. It seems to lose its essence to the space in the sequence of increasing material, as if, after a wide range of manifestations of form, sound, and shape, to abandon itself entirely to the stillness and lightness of a poetic landscape. Here we can recognize the painter's roots as a formerly practicing musician.

In *Anatomien*, 2001 (*Anatomies*, 2001), which consists of eight pictures, collage is used to focus the gaze on a script-like object, in order to cover it up as if fragmentarily. In the act of gluing over it, a common third thing seems to want to take shape, a simultaneous presence and absence of what seems to shine through from beneath. This delicately accentuated state of floating hints at something unfinished, a play of interpretations that releases emptiness, air, and thoughts; as Roland Barthes put it when referring to Cy Twombly, a gliding '...to the edge of that enigmatic dys-graphy that is the essence of his entire art'.⁽³⁾ While Cy Twombly, like an energy-producing compression, heats up symbols in the search for a meaning behind the hints, Gnade's parallel wavy lines, scribbles, and script-like sign fragments invite the viewer to a deeper exploration of the object, in order to bring forth its inner being. Today, the drawing is taking on ever more autonomy in the artist's work; it is increasingly emancipating itself from painting, seeking a new self-assertion in a minimal use. In the *Vier Bilder über Pontormos Fresken*, 2000 (*Four Pictures after Pontormo's Frescos*), drawing, in the form of line or construction, seems to stand for transcendence or transition in the Passion of Christ.

After the analytic painting of the 1970s, in parallel to Minimal Art, the painters of the 1980s were less intellectually constrained; 'Radical Painting' comprised a sensual feeling, even if the artists used it as a field of investigation. Where the pictures liberated themselves from representational occasions, they were reduced to the essential. The art critic Amine Haase saw parallels to societal phenomena of this time as a 'counter-position to the mass principle of distraction, a position that offers the individual... a chance at self-determination again.' ⁽⁴⁾

Today, a broad, pluralistic spectrum of painterly possibilities points beyond the present Zeitgeist currents of a 'new' Realism; and the classical criteria of stringency and coherence have long since been insufficient, as major thematic exhibitions of painting have shown in recent years (Leipzig, Basel, Paris 2002). Whether painting serves skepticism about perception or a critical analysis of media, whether a boom or a bust is proclaimed, pictures are painted, despite everything, that are in friction with the times and whose particular ambition is to capture world events.

In this sense, the works of Harald Gnade in Berlin's St. Matthew's Church find a meaning-creating place – today, the sacred room is grasped more as an energy-laden space for seeking and questioning than as a site of answers (Friedhelm Mennekes) – because it evokes moods of extreme intensity, including both the earthly and the cosmic, that render the immaterial palpable. Just as, through the filter of his painterly way of seeing, every artist announces relevant decisions to assimilate reality and filter out what is specific to the times, Harald Gnade sees his challenge in extracting the greatest truthfulness from reality by reducing it to its original essence.

Agnes Martin, a U.S. painter who created a work without objects as pure 'lightness' in the fusing and dissolution of form, formulated it radically: 'Reality, the truth about life, and the secret of beauty are all the same.' (5)

The freedom of the mind must be defended.

Beatrice E. Stammer, Berlin 2006

1. Thomas Rentsch (Hsg.), Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, Berlin 2001, S. 211, S. 269
2. Hartmut Ackermeier, Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung: Fred Thieler, Retrospektive - Dialog mit Farbe, Galerie Nothelfer, Berlin 2004
3. Roland Barthes, Cy Twombly, Berlin 1983, S. 32
4. Amine Haase, Die Farbe denkt, in: Amine Haase (Hsg.), Kunstforum International, Band 88, Köln 1987, S. 86
5. Dieter Schwarz (Hsg.), Agnes Martin, Schriften, Kunstmuseum Winterthur 1992, S. 101