

Katharina Schilling

*Für Immer*

21.03-25.04.2025 • GROTTTO, Berlin

At midnight, sitting at my desk and trying to write about Katharina Schilling's paintings and the anachronous as condition and form of their *Kunstgeschichtlichkeit*, I light a hand-poured candle.<sup>1</sup> Unable to find a lighter, I break a match from the book of matches that Sarah Rapson produced as a catalogue a few years ago for her exhibition at the Vienna Secession. On the back of its cardboard cover, it reads: "i see that you are less some german painter from the 1970s or even some linguist from the 1960s rather some italian sculptor from the 17th century I have one in mind", on the inside above the rubbing surface the address Berggasse 19. Richter, Jakobson, Bernini, Freud come to mind - history as the history of the padri of modernity. On the inside of the book's cover and extending behind the rows of matches, I read John Keats' *Ode to Psyche* (1819) about the ancient myth of Cupid and Psyche. In Sarah Rapson's matchbook, times fold into one another; the matchstick is outside its time.

The burning matches in Katharina's diptych *Für Immer* (2025) are also, albeit differently, outside their time, unlike their time. Painted in a realistic style, they refer less to the photorealism of *some german painter from the 1970s* than to the interplay of microscopic realism, trompe-l'oeil illusionism, and perspectival truth in Dutch still life painting. Seven of them appear to dance in a *Reigentanz* against a dark, psychedelically cosmic background, where red, yellow, and blue patches of pigment drift past like nebulae or condense into stardust. The primary colors reappear in the emissions of the burning matches. The painting is part of a series in which profane yet strangely sacred objects - rendered as such by their ritual staging - often edible, such as eggs, peas, inflamed apples, horse spurs, and sewing needles, seem to float in spirals or circles, in parallel or triangular constellations, rarely alone, on batik-like New Age or galactic backgrounds.

The matches appear to be removed from time and space, yet in the simultaneity of movement and stillness, in the eternal instant of the fleeting flame, they draw the viewer into both the presence of the image-event and the space of its contemplation. The painting, its horizontal format nearly spanning the entire back wall of the exhibition space, mirrors the dimensions of the storefront window opposite it, so that window and painting, when seen from outside and frontally, form a central perspectival space - the lower edge of the painting becomes the horizon line, the vanishing point lies at the dance of the matches.

The temporal determination "für immer", the invocation of an indeterminate eternity, finds a spatio-temporal form in Katharina's image of the infinity of the universe, which, in art history, coincides with the discovery of central perspective - with an infinitely distant vanishing point disappearing into infinity. Yet the vanishing point can never truly depict the infinite; it can only signify infinity within the confines of the subjectively finite. The moment I step into the exhibition space, the vanishing point disappears. And the picture falls completely flat as soon as the spatial depth of the perspectival representation of the matches is drawn back to the two-dimensional plane by the raw materiality of the pigment structures sitting on the surface of the canvas. Then, finally, my gaze drifts toward a single dying matchstick in the lower section of the left half of the painting - finally, as Sophia Eisenhut might say, the phallic gaze of central perspective is reverted into a "virginal" simultaneity.<sup>2</sup>

If the title of the painting and the exhibition, conjures something "forever" - a blood-sisterhood, a love pact, painting after the end of painting - it is not to project a linear, central-perspective development of (art) history into an ever more improbable yet unending future. But rather, to define the historical place of contemporary art in relation to infinity, to what lies outside of time - and before art. Sarah Rapson's matchbook, with various temporalities nestled in its cardboard folds, tells the story of contemporary art as a kind of anachronous miniature modernity for the pocket, ignited by the Romantic reception of antiquity and the return of the baroque in modern times. This could be one version of the history of contemporary art. Katharina's paintings, however, turn their gaze

<sup>1</sup> „There is history insofar as men do not 'resemble' their time, insofar as they act in breach of 'their' time, in breach of the line of temporality that puts them in their place by obliging them to 'use' their time in some way or other.“ (Jacques Rancière). In contrast to the term anachronism as the incorrect localization of an event in the chronological sequence, anachrony as a condition for history, according to Rancière, refers to the incongruity of an action, an event, a thought, a subject with the place assigned to it in the chronological sequence. Cf. Eva Kernbauer (ed.), *Kunstgeschichtlichkeit. Historizität und Anachronie in der Gegenwartskunst* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sophia Eisenhut, „Giotto or: The Hymen of the Simultaneous Perspective“ (translated by Sadie Plant), in *Katharina Schilling: Sand Is Water You Can Walk On* (Berlin: Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2023), pp. 102-108.

toward the premodern era - to "art before art," as her friend Eva Hegge described it in a lecture on the paradigm of the flat image after the internet. With its gaze from nowhere, I think Eva said, the internet finally, and perhaps *forever*, breaks with the model of central perspective. The history of art before art, the history before the discovery of central perspective and the invention of the modern subject - a history ultimately preceding history itself - leads Katharina into the miniatures of the Middle Ages. *i see you are rather some french writer from the late 14th century i have one in mind.*

Christine de Pizan - "the lady in blue with the white wimple," as Katharina describes her to me in an email - appears twice in an illumination in her *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1404). On the left, at a table with three women in a space built by columns, round arches, and a checkered floor; on the right, holding a mortar at a construction site, building a semicircular wall in the city of women. The perspective is flattened, the floor tilted. *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a feminist architectural-literary utopia whose building blocks are formed by the lives of women from mythological, biblical, and ancient history. In a series of seven small-format paintings, Katharina abstracts various women from Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, and Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* - among them the Greek painters Timarete, Marcia, Eirene, and Iaia, as well as the mythological weaver-turned-spider Arachne - into geometric fragments of symbolically or perspectivally distorted floors found in miniatures depicting master builder Christine, self-portraitist Marcia, or medieval events like the *Bal des Ardents* (Ball of the Burning). The cropped floors, as a form of artistic historiography of feminist (auto-)biography, become portraits of these women, but as portraits of a medieval perspective without a subjective point of view, they also, at the same time, act as a critique of biographical narratives of the self and the subject. The female subject disintegrates into pixel-like geometric-ornamental patterns, whereby a medieval time *before* the central perspective seems to coincide with the post-digital present *after* the central perspective that Eva speaks of, thus combining, in the mode of the anachronous, contemporary imagery with premodern structures of seeing.

During the Q&A following Eva's lecture, the older dudes, as Sophia writes in her essay for Katharina's book, "used this public platform (which should have been about your paintings) to obsess and outwit each other about the discovery of central perspective in European art history. Central perspective as a consequence of the discovery of the subject. We exchanged glances, conspiratorial, amused, yet embarrassed too. Let's not call it failure. 'An aesthetic practice in which self-abolition appears and takes shape in its impossibility.' This could be modernity's happy end. (Why do I automatically write in the first person?)." <sup>5</sup>

When I visited Katharina three years ago in her studio in Vienna, the city where we both live, across the Danube Canal from Berggasse 19, in the attic of a corner house designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (another architect of the City of Women), she described her way of painting with the term "anti-subjective," articulating precisely what Sophia, citing Kerstin Stakemeier, formulates in the above passage. Katharina's anti-subjective painterly practice is one in which self-abolition appears in its impossibility and takes *collective* shape. In some paintings, the ornament forms through difference in repetition into a group; in others, the hoofbeats of horses call for a political assembly, or the folds of headless figures' garments unite into the movement of the Beguines. In this exhibition, the collective follows a connection of seven: Christine, Marcia, Timarete, Eirene, Iaia, Arachne, and Anastasia dance as seven matches in a round at the Ball of the Burning, across the tilted floor of history, which hangs as an anachronous image of the present on the walls of GROTT0.

Text by Sophia Roxane Rohwetter

---

<sup>5</sup> Sophia Eisenhut, „Giotto or: The Hymen of the Simultaneous Perspective“, p. 104.