

Reflections on *gestohlen bleiben*

The information label stated that it was a small sixteenth-century engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi. I no longer recall the title, but the work depicted a profane scene – or so my intuition tells me. That day, all conditions had conspired against my gaze: the ceiling lights allied with the glaring morning light from the opposite windows and the (highly?) reflective glass plate guarding the precious print. This made it impossible to catch a proper glimpse of what lay behind; instead, I was confronted with my own visage. Added to this, of course, was the proximity alarm system – specifically its piercing tone – which prevented me from closing the gap enough for my own shadow to counter the reflection. Thus, despite my best efforts, I found it impossible to approach the work visually. No matter what position I took or how I craned my neck, it refused to reveal itself. It was truly absurd, since no other work in the cabinet resisted in this manner... The Schongauer right next to it offered an impeccable view, despite being glazed and subject to practically the same lighting conditions. This circumstance sparked a fleeting suspicion that the institution – or whoever – was pursuing a deliberate purpose. But what would such a gesture, reminiscent of conceptual art, be doing in the halls of the Old Masters?

This disconcerting experience resurfaced abruptly years later when I encountered “indulgence/Nachsicht.” I speak of an encounter intentionally, for the industrially manufactured glass plate, installed in the doorframe between the central and main rooms, stands in one’s way like a guard, looming with a startlingly human height. The luminous application of paint on the glass lends the material a presence that is usually automatically tuned out. Instead of keeping the view clear and shifting attention to what lies beyond, the glass in my encounter produces a different relationship of spatial perception. My gaze does not simply permeate to what lies behind; rather, it condenses, in a sense, upon the glass. A layering emerges: the oil painting, the varying space behind it (depending on what side of the work you’re looking at), and finally the subtle reflection that merges with the work on the glass surface.

Seen from the well-lit central room, I encounter my silhouette once more. The intensity of the reflection is by no means comparable to that in the Raimondi. And yet, I see – as if through myself or into myself – an image: the painted surface divided into zones, an application of paint that obeys the hand and the body rather than the eye; Mirjam’s sensing, clearly identifiable, loose brush movements, imprints of her clothing – that is, the image as activity, and thus, Mirjam’s presence within the image. And yet, the glass redirects my perception back to my own presence. But what does it mean when we can no longer evade ourselves within the image? You may sense that this ambiguous phrasing cannot yield a

straightforward answer. For the question aims less at an individual image than at the conditions of spectatorship itself.

To write “I am in the work” seems to me here synonymous with the question: “Where am I?” What I mean is that the subject’s influence on the perception of the work – or more radically, on what appears as a work at all – cannot be denied. Every question we direct at the work is reflected back to the constitution of the I that asks the question in the first place. Where is the I located? To encounter ourselves, we do not need to travel far, according to a plausible platitude: everyone is their own closest neighbor. And yet, this proximity is deceptive. For what is closest to us often eludes our attention for that very reason. We move within ourselves, without distance, without an exterior, and it is precisely this immediacy that prevents vision. If we, the subject of knowledge, are identical with its object, we cannot perceive ourselves without simultaneously changing ourselves. In this sense, Rimbaud echoes: “I is another.” Are we not, then, also the most distant to ourselves? And does that not conversely mean that others are closer to us than we thought? The physical distance suggested by these two contrary rhetorics must be measured from within the act of looking itself. The measuring stick is applied where the observation begins. Exactly where that is supposed to be cannot be answered in one go. All in due time.

Let us begin, for simplicity’s sake, with the object of observation: the works. For this attempt, I lend my eye. Mirjam’s works in this exhibition can each be identified as paint on a support (corresponding to the common definition of painting). Here, material fatalists would rest their case. But that cannot be the end of the story. For obviously, that is not all we see. When I look at “untitled” in the exhibition, I cannot help but recognize something in this application of paint, with an emphasis on re-cognize. Even with “untitled,” one can ultimately only speak of an encounter. The perception of this work is essentially influenced by its hanging. The paper hovers in front of the wall; two nails protrude two to three centimeters from the wall, from which the upper corners are fixed by magnets. This type of presentation also applies to “hüten” in the main room. What is special about “untitled,” however, is the lower-left corner of the paper, which curls noticeably toward us, as if wanting to approach us, as if reaching out a hand. It should be noted at this point that all the works in “gestohlen bleiben” are consistently oriented in a vertical format – “portrait mode” almost slipped out. All in all, “untitled” is a layering of colors; a small, elongated fragment exposes the paper ground, while the rest of the image oscillates between glaze and impasto. On the largely brown and ochre surface, which has something of tree bark about it, I recognize – and you likely recognize too – an eye to the left of the center. An oval (not quite oval) form – broken conically by a slight elevation – stands out from the moderate brown surroundings through both lighter and darker patches. In the oval form, white, violet, and dark blue paint mix directly on the paper, so

that their components are still clearly distinguishable. At the left edge of the oval form, white brushstrokes run downward, which I register in context as an iris. A vertical, black, pastose stroke divides the form in two: eyelid and eyeball.

Several factors contribute to this collection of brushstrokes being read as an eye: certainly the placement of the form, which makes the tall format comprehensible as a head, and the facial axis, coinciding with the central vertical of the paper format. (But then, where is the other eye and the other facial features?) Or do I recognize, more specifically, a tree eye – to recur once more to the possible interpretation of the brown surface as bark? Even if pareidolia is the name of the game, what is seen remains in any case not uniquely determinable (it is not an eye!), as recognition and strangeness occur simultaneously. Let us stick with recognition for a moment.

Painting discourse has devised two terms that, although plucked from different eras and contexts, are often used as a pair, suggesting a spectrum in between. I am speaking of figuration and abstraction. Figuration is considered representational. It arranges color material so that objects become recognizable. Recognition forms its conceptual core. In this logic, an image at the beginning of the painting process necessarily appears abstract, non-objective, and must first be transformed into a corresponding representational form – figured – through the artist’s activity. Abstract art could thus be understood as the primal state of painting, at least insofar as it is inherent to the work with the material: the first brushstroke initially appears as an abstract blotch of color. Let’s look at it from the other side. The very term “abstraction” suggests a process, if not an action: something is abstracted, meaning it is made less figurative. However, this can hardly mean that an actually figurative image simply becomes more unrecognizable. Gerhard Richter’s blurring of painted photographs of RAF members, for instance, does not necessarily make these images more abstract. Rather, the concept of abstraction presupposes a provision that the image is subject to a representational function and that its referent exists outside of painting to be compared with it. If we recognize something that appears formally less familiar but remains identifiable, we speak of an abstract (abstracted) representation. On this side of the spectrum, the first brushstroke is a figurative one. This description holds even where painting wishes to be understood as “maximally abstract.” Informel as well as Monochromatism – grouped by Amine Haase under the catchphrase Radical Painting – made painting itself the subject, albeit through different strategies. And yet, the image could not be entirely stripped of its representational function. Even where works are considered “very abstract,” they do not begin in a vacuum. Wols as well as Phil Sims abstract a referent that is painting itself and whose “platonic form” is already figuratively laid out. Their work can be understood as an attempt to free the image from its representative quality without ever quite leaving it behind, although the discourses of those times tell a different story. The projects of mo-

dern abstraction ultimately find themselves in the same dead ends as “figurative,” photorealistic, hyperrealistic (whatever you prefer) painting à la Chuck Close or Richard McLean, which embody the belief in a “more or less” of figuration. Thus, Pollock ended up painting nothing other than portraits of Lenin, if one follows the logic of Art & Language. Perception could not be disciplined.

When I ask who or what came first, Giotto or Twombly, the chicken or the egg, then chronology – the mere reference to birth dates – is not a sufficient answer. To even ask this question, we must entwine the historical, genealogical level with the level inherent to the material. When we understand that the beginning of painting is – in several respects – not a point, but a split between the material image and perception, we can see that the idea of a spectrum between abstraction and figuration is misleading. If we want to treat the terms seriously, we must understand them as inseparably entwined. Painting testifies that the disposition of seeing – and of perception in general – lies in the encounter, the acknowledgement, the recognition. The moment of recognition forms the integral and irreducible mechanism of our experience. Recognition becomes possible because earlier encounters have shaped our memory. Memory functions as a quasi-form – not a form in itself, not a stored image merely retrieved, but a fabric of images constantly undergoing change. Recognition is thus not a stable process; rather, it allows for a continuous adaptation to an environment that is likewise defined by change. This is what enables us to cast a second look at a work – with entirely new eyes, as the mere passage of time is at work. The image is never fully seen. If one understands the subject’s perception as the constituent moment of art, it follows that the work itself, in this sense, is never finished. In this context, abstraction is understood as a paradoxical undertaking, as it requires the malleability of perception as a condition of its own openness, while simultaneously struggling against perception’s constitutive compulsion to immediately re-occupy the sought-after emptiness and non-objectivity with the quasi-forms of the memory-fabric. If we follow these threads, the distinction between abstract and figurative also dissolves in another way, namely within perception itself.

Is Courbet more figurative than Philip Guston? – You think Courbet is more figurative? How about Courbet and Velázquez? How does Guston relate to Lassnig? I remind you: figuration means that something is recognized. One could try to translate figuration into a quantitative relationship – more identified things, signs, details that can be listed, equals more figuration. But this idea quickly runs aground when one considers that recognition is not an additive procedure, but a constitutive event that arises directly from the situation. Take Guston and Courbet again: if we identify Guston’s figures as members of the Ku Klux Klan, this figuration is no more precise or unambiguous than Courbet’s depiction of the stonebreakers – an activity whose real referent is hardly directly accessible today. Even Courbet’s insistent naturalism, for example in the careful

drapery of the clothing, abstracts its referents just as much as Guston's deliberately schematic, noseless smokers in bed set their own conditions. Detailed mimesis can equally lead to the reference to the supposedly depicted world shifting, becoming historicized, and unrecognizable. In both cases, I would argue, these are not images of a pre-existing world, but image-worlds that generate proximity or strangeness only in relation to the respective memory-fabric and the subjective frame of reference.¹ The image is by no means an isolated object. In observation, the gaze inevitably passes through us and into us; it traverses what constitutes our constitution, our memory, and our daily training of recognition – a *déjà-vu* toujours. Hans Platschek speaks here of an inert "first visibility" of recognition, which is eventually trumped by a "second visibility," "which one could simply call language."² Here, the discursive event begins. I do not interpret the sequence of "first" and "second" visibility as a chronological activity, for in our perception, these events are difficult to separate. Rather, this distinction points to the fact that recognition is the condition for language itself, yet does not necessarily result in it, as the existence of other living beings illustrates. For the sign, as a monad of language, constitutes itself only through its repeatability and defines itself through its recognition, through the echo in memory.

When Mirjam speaks about her painting process for "gestohlen bleiben," she describes her experience of painting as something resembling a pre-verbal, vocal expression. As with Kathy Acker's weight training³, which sets in as a momentary loss of speech – a state in which scream and meaning coincide – an onomatopoeic tendency resonates in Mirjam's description. It is a practice in which repetition, whether on the weight bench or the canvas, short-circuits conventional meaning-making. In this ritual performance, iteration acts paradoxically. It no longer serves to establish a recognizable sign (the second visibility) but leads back into the intensity of the first visibility. Recognition here becomes recursive; abstract, if you will. Yet I remain skeptical whether Mirjam or Acker can truly disappear in their routines, even if only momentarily. Understandably, there is great hope that it is possible to overcome language as the structure of our being and thus, conversely, to overcome the world and oneself for the better. But as long as the brain is ticking, language must be present as a condition; the second visibility is always already allied with the first. At the same time, I must state: the point at which life and meaning no longer face each other but are one – where perception in the sense cited above can no longer be spoken of – can also no longer be spoken of as life. This "being dead" cannot be registered. That is, even if it is possible to do the impossible and leave language, it remains structurally impossible to recognize and perceive this event in life. Perhaps Mirjam's process can be thought of precisely from this dilemma. What does it mean, then, when I feel a certain unease in recognizing something in the traces? Is this unease not the expression of a hope within doubt and vice versa? It is the hope that painting can indeed achieve the impossible, and at the same time the gnawing doubt, precisely because I may

never perceive this event.

When I now encounter “indulgence/Nachsicht” again and see the work, as it were, through myself, I recognize myself in doubt and hope. But the core of this perception lies not in recognition, but in misrecognition (Verkennen) – a term that here denotes not a mere error, but that inevitable leeway that the memory-fabric keeps open in the production of its quasi-forms. Until now, we have placed too much emphasis on correspondence. But is it not precisely this leeway, this gap, from which doubt emerges in the first place? This supposed recognition of myself, for instance in the figure in “der Selbstausdehnung,” remains a question mark. I automatically read the dark ink lines as a body, a ribcage, and a spent matchstick for a bald head, yet this body is not mine. I have never seen it; why do I think I recognize it? The body is an other within me. Thus, observation begins neither in the work nor in me, the subject, but in the impossibility of bringing both into alignment. Every beginning here remains stolen (bleibt gestohlen); it is aporetic. The subject is not a fixed position that could be taken, but the tension resulting from this lack of congruence. The measuring stick does not lie as a measurable distance between me and the image; it runs through me. It begins at the point where my gaze does not coincide with what is seen – and I myself am not identical with the one who sees.

- Ilja Zaharov

(Translated from the original German with the assistance of a LLM)

¹ This brings to mind Helmut Federle’s absurdly simple yet controversial painting “Asian Sign,” consisting of four rectangles and their negative form. Is this an abstract image?

² Hans Platschek: “Über die Dummheit in der Malerei,” Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984, page 169 (translated into English).

³ See Kathy Acker, “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body,” 1993.