

The Unbearable Lightness of Being an Artist*

On the meditative gestures in the work of Eliška Bartek

By Markus Brüderlin

“The skin is the deepest in humans.”

Paul Valéry

Who approaches to Eliška Bartek's works will soon realize that they are not applied in a balanced visual experience. And certainly they do not want to satisfy the need for the pleasing, although their sensuality attracts. Hostile to each other the colors suddenly meet and mingle at times to a nondescript mush of color. Again and again the paint surface is a roiling, cracked field, as if the wildest skirmish occurred. “The images appear coarse and repellent, ... awake an uneasy feeling, even trepidation”¹, the art historian Matthias Haldemann describes his impressions of the images of Eliška Bartek.

The artist herself confesses the distance to her own work admitting that the images immediately after their completion are “alien”. And yet: who withdraws and suspends from a distance the value held in clayey color, suspended areas of color or layered strips of regular painting, hear a deeper desire for reassurance and consistency. Like a smoothing water surface the troubled painting surface strives to be a homogenized level. Gradually the commotion subsides in the still nascent regular stripe pattern. Only on a close view the gestural trace of an excited act of painting bursts forth again. What Haldemann a sentence later has described as “emotional tension” and “suggestive attraction” can also be taken with another term staple that spans the ambivalent disposition of the painting of Eliška Bartek: gestures and meditation.

Impulsive gestures and meditative experience capability

“Impulsive gestures” and “meditative ability to experience”, these are the two conceptual moments which crystallize for me after prolonged contemplation of the images. Impatience and aggressiveness is characteristic for this painting, which can be experienced as a kind of vitality. The inner inclination to calmer depth and width forms the other pole which confronts us in the regularity of the image pattern. In which way the description of the first impression that also art scientifically represents a useful introduction to the work of an artist corresponds to the very nature

* *Free after Milan Kundera*

1 *Matthias Haldemann: „Die Spur verwischen – Zu den neuen Bildern von Eliška Bartek., (catalog) The Huberte Goote Gallery, Zug 1993, o.P.*

of the art of Eliška Bartek, or let's say it directly, to what extent the phenomenon corresponds to the artistic idea, this will emerge in a fuller employment with the present conception of painting here. So we have to turn to the structure and the style of the pictures to learn about the basic conception and perhaps also on the mental background of the painting of Eliška Bartek.

Dealing with the conceptual and the material is even more important as the images are not so much applied to the visual impact, but on a haptic effect produced by the visual in this case. The visibility of the picturesque structure is not primarily serving the mediation of a sensory illusion, but rather that of a palpability. The visual irritation of the eye's sense has as object the activation of our body sense. So it is not about the creation of illusionistic, thing-free color spaces such as in Mark Rothko, nor about the intangible resolution of the monochrome color image into pure light as with certain representatives of the Radical Painting, but about the haptic processing of real paint surface, which is deposited in layers on the canvas.

Strictly speaking Eliška Bartek's painted pictures are no pictures, but with color coated screens that are mounted on stretcher. The French have a sharper conceptual distinction for this state of affairs, by differentiating between “tableau”, “image” and “peinture”. Only the invention of photography, the painter Joseph Marioni makes us attentive to the historical circumstances, provoked the distinction between the two terms “image” and “painting” in the English and German language. It was the technique of photography that had set the fundamental study of painting itself in motion – an era-making enterprise which employs modern painting up to our own day. The photo relieves the painters of the production of “platonic manifestations” and allows them to work on the actual, the investigation of the structure of the painting².

Despite the focus on the real materiality the art of Eliška Bartek has little in common with the tradition of analytical, self-referential painting, which reduced the painting to its material conditions and celebrated its peak with Robert Ryman in the sixties. Objectification contradicts her artistic temperament. In this respect, the negation of visuality applies to the suppression of image illusion and not to the prevention of secrecy. Responsible for the “suggestive depth” of the material image surface is the typical style of the work in which the artist clasps together two opposite processes in an unconventional way: the gradual overlapping of different layers and the subsequent plowing up and blurring of this picturesque deposits.

Layers, mixing, scratching – to the style of painting

How does Eliška Bartek zoom on the image or better on the big screen? By choosing the square format, the artist first solves a “troublesome” design question in the sense of the “reduction of unknowns” in order to concentrate entirely on painting beyond

2 Vgl. Marioni: „Malerei jenseits von Narrativität“, in: *Kunstforum int. Bd. 88*, 1987.

form. After priming, which is just like the stringing of the stretcher with canvas an important part of the artistic process, the brushing of the image carrier with a more or less homogeneous follows. The artist uses unmixed color straight from the tube. This process must be thought as a sensitive process – with the “pleasure and desire on brushing the color” as the painter colleague Adrian Schiess had described once³. But soon impatience stirs in view of the visual outcome. And usually even before the viscous oil paint has dried, Eliška Bartek lays a second layer of paint over it, sometimes in a complementary color or in black or white. Impatience causes blurring the two layers at specific locations to color streaks. At this stage a breakdown in either horizontal fields or in a horizontal stripe pattern is carried out as supporting structuring of the indefinite, monochrome background.

In the first case, in particular it's about a series of images that emerged around the year '92⁴. Where the fields abut, critical points arise. As the dirty joints in masonry, they attract the attention of the artist. It starts to work on gaps and cracks intensively – with hand or with tools such as chisels or painters' brushes. By this plowing the not quite dry backsheet comes partly to light again. Depending on the degree of drying, the layers at these interfaces combine to create an indefinable, greyish mush of color or solidify into a restless, colorful fabric of pure color, which mixes only on a distant look impressionistically into a uniform gray color. These gestures of the processing follow the spontaneous access of painters, led by current emotions and moods. In this, the actionist painting of Eliška Bartek can be recognized. Conceptually, however, this process reflects the “idea of the itself painting image” as it has introduced in the history of modern painting, Gerhard Richter. “The picture painted itself, I smear only a coat of paint”, confesses Eliška Bartek. She is thereby aware of the contradiction between the psychic sympathy, which brings in the subject in the painting, and the conceptual, the recourse to anonymous procedural matters. In this polarity we meet again our initially established duality of gestures and meditation.

In addition to these picturesque aspects of post-treatment, which results from the mechanical weaving of paint layers and the blurring of boundaries of the color tiles, secondly the “graphical” editor of “covered” painting plays an important role. Where the layer structure is settled, the manipulation of the hard tool acts as a kind of “cracks”. The Greek 'graphein' means not only 'write' but also 'scratch'. In this case, the colored base coat as clear-cut track through the incision as it was surgically made emerge. In a work of 1992, the glowing-red ground flashes above under a dark gray color ceiling as the magma cooled under a layer of ash. Again, one is tempted, coupled with emotional energies to see the mechanical act per se and to read the scriptural lines and traces as a kind of psycho graphic.

In recent years, Eliška Bartek has discovered an additional technique that exacerbated

3 Schiess: „It's only Rock 'n' Roll but I like it“, in: „Abstrakte Malerei zwischen Analyse und Synthese“, Ed. Galerie St. Stephan, then Klagenfurt 1992, p.75.

4 See Katalog Zug, a.a.O.

the haptic explosiveness of the painting's surface. She “rips” the half dried, resinous paint layer with a rubber roller, as used in the graphic arts, too. This creates a chapped, sharp-grained skin, indicated by the flashing of the underlying color coat.

Painting as skin and shell

Eliška Bartek's actionist, graphic and sometimes sculptural handling of the applied paint layers is, as mentioned, always something aggressive and can be understood in this sense as a violation. At this point we encounter an also art scientifically repeated analogy of haptic painting and skin, which consequently establishes the act of painting as a kind of “tattoo”. The panel becomes equivalent to the body or the flesh⁵.

In fact, the artist confirms this physical approach to painting. She refers to the painting process as a specific way of acting on screen, namely, as a gradual, i.e. layerwise “tightening” of the image carrier; “aaleggä” as it sounds in Moravian broken Swiss-German. The physical-textile treatment manifests itself initially in the stringing of the canvas, like a skeleton that supports the panel. The primer forms the “second skin” on which are then “drawn cases” further. The textile character comes not only in construction but also in the mode of painting stripes to wear, often reminiscent of fabric samples. Eliška Bartek confirms this impression as well calculated, and it takes so unconsciously on an original technique of set up of people in the world back. The architect and designer Gottfried Semper has derived in his falsely as “materialistic” primed art theory in 1889, that the aesthetic products of our culture come from the function of clothes. The decorative forms of the Greek temple can be traced back to the original need for protection of clothing and textile techniques. Finally, the ornament emerged with its rhythm and rapport from the observation of the regular pattern which is created by a random different color straw in the braiding,.

Eliška Bartek's proximity to such original and atavistic features of design is also confirmed by their avocation as a jewelry maker. Perhaps it is useful to point out that this in our part of the world a bit suspiciously seen combination of art and crafts has a long and “deep” tradition in Czech art . From this manual, at the same time tough and sensitive activities, the second phase of the painting process can be partly understood: the mechanical processing of the color layers. What is reported in the jewelry trade as hammering, chiselling and crannies, takes place in the medium of painting as tattooing, the tattoo again is the original form of adornment – adorning the own flesh⁶.

Opposite to the “osculating” of decking Eliška Bartek's “action on the skin image” happens from a gestural and actionist, sometimes aggressive impulse, and the viewer

5 *Such analogies are reflected in various ways in the language of science, such as Theodor Hetzer's distinction between image and body image. Hetzer means by “image body” the formation of the panel painting in the 16th century obeyed as an independent organism, the autonomous life principles.*

6 *Already Veit Loers has 1990 pointed out this aspect of tattooing in catalog Eliška Bartek. (see. Gallery Hannah Feldmann, Bern)*

is immediately present as a kind of injury. That is to understand especially in the newer, here displayed stripe images in which the uniform patterning rather withdraws behind a disjointed gestures of the individual strips.

Shirt of Nessus and the dilemma of autonomy

In this respect, as with the skin of paint the body surface is meant the canvas becomes the shirt of Nessus⁷. From this perspective, we can understand the artistic act as a projection of own states of stress, even as processing own pain experiences. The painting becomes the “extended shirt of Nessus”, which is stretched as an autonomous area on the stretcher and no longer burns on one's own soul. It will ignite only under the gaze of the viewer. If it is no longer even the own skin, so it retains its vulnerability. The act of applying the paint formed by Eliška Bartek is always a healing and a protective operation.

The violent immediately emerges when the artist begins afterwards to “mistreat” the image surface with hard tools. In the residual scarring something of the painful division becomes current again, resulting from the isolation of the carrier from the skin's own self and their insulation on the stretcher. Finally, the autonomous panel using this “injury” reveals the longing for authenticity and harmony with the world. The artwork is an ambivalent projection box that displays the unit, but also its absence and thus in a movement against itself to be what it is: the antagonists of himself.

The remarks of Eliška Bartek prove that we do not overburden the work with this interpretation. I have the psychophysical function therefore exposed to the rational analysis, as it dominates modern, monochrome painting since the sixties, making this physical painting. Eliška Bartek's black and white images as well as monochrome color images can not be reduced on the negative “zero area” and the aesthetic nihilism of the eternal, “last picture” (Ad Reinhardt). Although this already has become clear by the aforementioned ambivalence of “gestures and meditation” and by the physicalization painting as sensitive skin – the artist speaks sometimes of a “nervous system” – at this point Eliška Bartek's artistic conception has to be recognized in a larger art-historical context. We take a look at the tradition of abstraction that has collected on the material conditions to a main aspect of modernity reflexive preoccupation with the phenomenon of “panel” and its return.

Monochrome painting and the paradox of the surface

The approach for this development was formulated in the eighties of the previous century by a manifestation of the Nabi artist Maurice Denis: “We remind you that an image before it is a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, its essentially flat

⁷ *Shirt of Nessus: According to Greek mythology Herakles got from his wife Deianeira a beautiful garment that she had received from the vengeful centaur Nessus with the promise that it mounts a love spell. Upon impact of the first ray of sunshine but it flared up into a carnivorous shirt, was redeemed from the embers of the immortal demigod hero to Olympus.*

surface is covered with paint of a particular arrangement.” The goal of this “ontological reduction” could be seen in the identical elements which are involved in the panel. So it went in a first step to the smoothing out of the illusionistic spatial depth in the plane of the image, to the realization of Cubism contributed significant impetus. Concrete art then sought to identify the pictorial means of color and form with the reality of the image area. “La Peinture concrète est non abstraite”, van Doesburg announced in the thirties, “parce que rien n'est plus concrète, plus réel qu'une ligne, qu'une couleur, qu'une surface ... “⁸. In the fifties, the identity of space and color were achieved: “Everything is color and surface, and all this has to merge together”, stated Kenneth Noland. The prerequisite for this was the elimination of the mold. With Frank Stella's approximation of the internal structure of the image contour the painterly magic and individual depth items should be washed up on the smooth and objective surface so then with Donald Judd the painting could be taken up in the “One Thing”, the uniform, some loose unit thing, in which the idea and appearance are identical.

What in this linear process of becoming literally was going on, was less an autonomous agreement of all the parts in the whole, but rather the successive elimination of what constituted the painting in its very nature. Identity became a tautology beguiling of the existing and visible and exaggerated painting for smooth, clear manageable object. At this point, Gerhard Richter made his criticism of tautology fixed: Without meaning exemplary decay monochrome painting to a “stupid painting”, said the German painter.

But the question of what secret forces between material support and a picturesque area, between the tangible world of things and the visual field of the surface of an image ignite repeatedly was by no means exhausted. Periodically appeared ever again on the monochrome, smoothed out all wrinkles and deep suggestions zero surface, without the painting on its proper end, as it had first be announced in the thirties by Aleksandr Rodchenko⁹. Among the most exciting soundings in the layers of the painting belongs Robert Ryman's analytical-aesthetic asceticism that a rich and dazzling arrays of artistic experience opportunities sensualized just in the extreme restriction.

An important reason why this continent can never achieve the total autonomy and identity, is shaped by a fundamental contradiction between our being in the world and our consciousness of it. Science has approached closest to it at the level of perception theory: it is the aporia of the perception of the world as a complex bundle of (upper) surfaces, which we are constantly peeling off with the eye of the world of things as images, abstract and knowledge of the physicality that resides invisibly behind these cases. It is an existential rift that affects us so that we constantly perceive the world

⁸ Quoted after *Seuphor, L'Art Abstrait. Les Origines, les Maîtres, Paris 1949.*

⁹ “I brought the painting to a logical end and have three pictures on display: a red, a blue and a yellow and this by noting: everything is at an end. ... Each face is a face, and there shall be no more representations” Rodchenko, work with Mayakovsky, 1939, in: “From Painting to Design” (cat.) Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne 1981, p.191.

seeing-peeling and simultaneously are themselves residents of a body. In the field of psychology for there the notion of subject-object dichotomy, and at the level of the senses, he describes the difference between visibility and palpability, between eyes and body sense meaning.

As aesthetic equivalence for this though naturally become, but ultimately unfathomable state proves surprisingly not the sculpture, but the painting in its unsolved stringing of pictorial imagination and rem factuality. As a mediating category between two ontologically separate spheres of two and three dimensional human mind invented the concept of "surface" that neither the one nor the other and yet both is at the same time. The most prominent and most familiar is the skin surface, a complex organ, which also acts as a container, as a limit and as a venue.

Post Minimalist painting and the complexity of the surface

Since this failure of the complete rationalization of panel painting and since the failure of the co-ordination of idea and appearance, the post-minimalist painting has to deal in a new way with the complex phenomenon of surface. The aesthetic practice of modern abstract painting fragmented thereby in a wide range of diverse approaches, of which we only want to mention a few.

The supposed objectivity of the painting to the flat paint led already in the seventies to an identification with the wall. The exaggeration of the panel painting for environmental painting of Daniel Buren or conceptual reactivating the category of decor such as Gerhard Merz were the consequence of the irresolvable paradox of the image surface.

Those who remained at the panel, such as the representatives of the so-called Radical Painting, tried to break the cycle of tautological self-reference and the dogma of the "last picture" (Ad Reinhardt) either by transcending, quite legacy of Malevich's apology for "liberated nothingness" to overcome by the radicalization of the materiality of paint or by addressing the reception point of view. The "radical painting" as "beyond the art-immanent consideration circle by acting and feeling the creative act and at the reception strongly emphasized", Amine Haase said in the introduction to the book published by her subjects volume of the journal "Kunstforum"¹⁰. Painting as a kind of "form of action" will be specially practiced by the Cologne artist Günter Umberg while his longtime discussion partner Joseph Marioni observes the materiality of color and its flow on the surface as a behaviorist, while tangible perceptual intensities transcend into a kind of sensationalist sense experience.

The more recent abstract Americans are building on process-oriented methods of imaging: John Zinsser for instance uses equipment such as brushes, rods, window

10 See.: „Malerei – radikale Malerei“, in: *Kunstforum int.*, Bd. 88, 1987, p.80.

scraper to preserve the distance between himself and the image¹¹. But the painting of young artists is more “intuitive” than intentionally analytical. It gives a room to random and tends to exchange the deconstructivist generation of fathers against the immediacy of the experience. Where references occur to out-artistic, their “surfaces” refer to less transcendental, as in everyday life. Adrian Schiess muses in connection with its varnished with car lacquer panels like about the “pleasure and desire the spreading of color” and the perfect, smooth surface in which the volatility of daily life on film reflects. Bernard Frieze places culinary forgotten starting points in the French tradition. In special tubs he stirres mixed color emulsions into a thin mush of color with surprising optical effects, these can dry up and then pull it off as a skin and applied to the canvas.

Claustrophobia and cosmic security

Although perhaps the time is not yet ripe to situate Eliška Bartek's artistic conception in this international environment of current positions of abstract painting, her specific treatment of “painting as a skin” and the mental as well as psychological formulation shows art as self-encounter the path to an independent creative work.

One aspect we must not forget, that is perhaps not decisive for such a position, but probably enlightening for understanding. Anyone familiar with the artist, knows that her art is very strong connected to her biography. As art historian one must indeed always be skeptical of biographisms, but in some cases the mention of specific life experiences can be important for understanding the existential base layer of an art. Eliška Bartek is, how many of her peer compatriots, connected to the political fate of the former Czechoslovakia. 1972, four years after the Prague Spring, she fled to what was then West Germany. As many emigrants, she managed to escape in a getaway car, squeezed into a little drawer-large compartment under the rear seat. Enveloped by darkness she had to endure for hours in this distressing situation, the constant threat of being discovered. Claustrophobia joined with the fear that the protective dungeon was suddenly opened by the wrong people. When it was mentioned at the outset that Eliška Bartek's images are not so much applied to the visual impact, but rather on a mold made on the visual feeling, one could see in this image view equivalents to the existential experience of claustrophobic oppression and darkness.

An indication of the dominance of palpability may also be seen in the studio situation and in the trouble-free, even preferred use of artificial light while painting. As a visitor, it takes a while until you become accustomed to the glaring spotlight, which rebounds on the rich, varnished canvas. While painters usually strive to sunlight, this artist loves the ground level, dark cell in her farmhouse in Lucerne Neuenkirch. Here, where once a cheese factory was housed and where the “mother heat” can be felt, she feels comfortable. Moreover, Eliška Bartek prefers to paint at night when it is dark

11 See John Zinsser: „Vom bewußten Umgang mit dem Material“, in: „Abstrakte Malerei zwischen Analyse und Synthese“, a.a.O., p.136.

outside and the world expands infinitely and simultaneously touches things in an embracing way. Around the turn of the millennium, the mathematician Hermann Minkowski has been dealing with the material palpability of the night space: The night space “touched me directly, it enveloped me ... it invades me and penetrates me entirely ... so that one might almost say that I am transparent to the darkness, while I'm not there for the light.”¹²

Although this ambivalence between claustrophobic oppression and liberating resolution in a night, cosmic continuum in the pictures is not immediately understandable, some of the mental state can be grabbed, from which Eliška Bartek repeatedly draws artistic energies. Finally, you win with the empathic dualism of claustrophobia and security a physically-dimensional equivalent of the mental constitution, which we were trying to approach by the terms that were referred above as “gestures and meditation”. Finally, I would not like to renounce the suggestion that two moments of artistic basic constitution are addressed therein, who found their theming already in the cultural-historical theory building, namely in 1908 in Wilhelm Worringer's “Abstraction and Empathy”.

12 Otto Friedrich Bollnow: „Mensch und Raum“, Mainz 1963, p.226.