

# Untitled (Immanence)

## Notes on the Paintings of Stefan Guggisberg

Marc Ries

1

It is true for many contemporary paintings that the significance of what there is to see must be considered as equal to the aspect of how the picture was created. The modality of creation, the knowledge of it, is what guides the spectator. Without this knowledge of the creation of the painting, the act of seeing is insufficient; it does not know what it sees. If it does have that knowledge, however, the picture itself begins to change its expression. It is important to acknowledge that these paintings do not convey themselves through their iconic-narrative elements. The paintings of Stefan Guggisberg radicalise the question of the source of the images. Where do these images come from, or, to begin with, what are the objects that are depicted in these pictures, where do they come from? The pictures lead us back to the question of the relation of copy and “Urbild” (the original image), of representation and what is represented. While many of the things shown in these pictures are there, these things do exist inside the painting perhaps only as parts of images, as part of the image planes from which they emerge. Perhaps the surprise and hesitance we feel on looking at these paintings is caused by those figurations that seem familiar, yet whose actual point of reference or notion of an original form cannot be fathomed.

2

Every creation of an image in the visual arts seems to be a representation, a representation of a model image or, in a platonic sense, an Urbild. Each picture poses anew each time the question of its relationship to that which it translates into the visual format. This first image, the reference, the Urbild – in other words the beginning – can only be conceived as something previously defined, a thing that is perfect, without difference, whole. Otherwise it would be no Urbild or something that can be represented and thus depicted as such. In fact, every representation requires that which is to be represented to be already presentable, meaning that it fits the expectations of what presentability – in the present time – means. We know of what is to come only via the media of the here and now. Therefore all representations are required to be more than mere agents of the “creation of an image of God”. In opposition to the negation of images in the Old Testament the works of the visual arts gain legitimacy through the visible appearance of God. Pictures are the only way to make the Urbild tangible and perceptible and therefore they also have determinative authority over it. “For strictly speaking, it is only through the picture (Bild) that the original (Urbild) becomes the original (Ur-bild: also, ur-picture) – e.g., it is only

by being pictured that a landscape becomes picturesque.” (Gadamer)

But what if the original image were not defined, if even the idea of it were no longer relevant? If there were only forces instead of original images, only material or creative intensities, that come before every form? And which perpetually reinvent those first images?

3

Ohne Titel (Trommel) [Untitled (Drum)], oil on paper, 35 42 cm, 2012. Why this refusal to name a title, only to pronounce it still, even if in brackets? The conveying noun selects one element from the whole of the painting, the drum, yet there is much more to see. It is almost as if the twofold title affirms the aesthetic difference between presentation and what is presented in a highly ironic way: the presentation alone is supposed to matter, and yet that which is shown – in understanding – may, of course, not be relinquished. It seems to be important to provide a note indicating the direction of the gaze, in brackets, in a modest way, little more than a hint. And here the hesitance continues: is what we see really a drum? Or does the hint rather give shape to an indistinct, open form? The ambivalent title is followed by the information: “oil on paper”. Oil on paper, a rather unusual choice, no canvas made for painting, but an image carrier that is commonly used for writing and drawing, for prints and photographs. The painting titled Ohne Titel (Form) [Untitled (Shape)] clearly shows that Stefan Guggisberg intends an authoritative de-composition for the whole picture plane, that he employs a special technique with strong resolve. There is no subjection to determined forms; rather, shapes are intended to appear again as new forms, to take form and compose themselves during the work process, in the creation of the painting.

4

There can be no titles for these kinds of paintings, as they work in reverse. There is paper. Onto this, various layers of paint are applied – indifferent, with no figurative intention. Far from being a mere prime, these layers of paint create a matter, a substance; oils, which are layered and sedimented as an autological medium for painting, create an independent body of paint as a mode, as a possible way of autonomous existence. The matter of paint, the nature of paint is considered as something common, undifferentiated, as a complex thing in itself. Each singular body of paint is able to have affective consequences by itself and to stir ideas by way of affect inside the painter. In this way, shapes and figurations are developed in a “matrix of possibilities” created by the matter through an intuitive and presuming questioning of the painter: by subtracting – an erasure – the material, by rearranging or condensing. Shapes can have highly varied, individual characteristics, they are genuine singular objects. The funda-

mental act in creation is that of stripping away, of erasing, of liberating, and not that of drawing and recording from an outside position (there are no model sketches) or of addition. It is necessary to introduce differentiations and concretions. Shapes accidentally emerge from many others; carved out of the fabric, unfolding, they have similarities with shapes known to us. It seems as if the zone from which these paintings emerge is engaged in a certain exchange with the world in which we live, but which can never be occupied by us.

It does not matter whether these figures / figurations refer to something that came before. What matters is that they are, in a general sense, a direct outflow of the picture, of the image carrier, while at the same time they are an outflow of the painter's work in the creation of an image. Strictly speaking, this implies an inverse emanation. In the neo-platonic tradition the variety and diversity of bodies stems from the intelligible beginning, the nous. In this case, however, the matter of paint on the carrier – although already inscribed with meaning – is provoked to an emanation by the process of painterly work – erasing, rearranging, liberating – to a channeling of unique, heteronomous figures. Or: out of the affection caused inherently by the layers of paint and their (gestalt) ideas, shapes, landscapes and interiors begin to coalesce as they pass through the painter, claiming an existence of their own. This concurs with the notion, “that what emanates is an overflow. [...] if the original One is not diminished by the outflow of the many from it, this means that being increases.” (Gadamer) The world created from the emanation of the images is one of increased strangeness, interleaved with the familiar. It lives inside hints.

5

To only hint at things, wanting them to not have a definite meaning. Many things remain vague. Similarities may be assumed, yet what is visible remains ambivalent. It could also be something else. As if this technique were inept or not intended to produce clarity in the assessment of what it issues forth. As if what is shown would have to be characterised by an entirely fundamental inconclusiveness, an uncertainty, an incompleteness. The preference of the implied over the explicit might reveal a certain distance to the (original) image's purpose of conveying meaning. It is, however, also an expression of a renouncement to present a copy at all. In this method, the dissolution of unambiguous identities is accompanied by an increase in the variability, the variety, and also in the strangeness of what is shown. The variable, the changeable reinforces the provisional, strengthens the ambivalence. Following simple identification, e.g. of spatial structures or objects, a mattress, a chair or a jug..., the gaze quickly becomes lost in the indefiniteness of amorphous figures, curious hybrids and ambiguous objects. Most things that can be seen within the frame do not represent exactly the same things beyond the frame. But they represent, if you will, the material, the cause from which and from where they begun to take

shape – they represent the process of removal, unfolding, in which the exposition advances. Even if these individual things do not exist outside of the picture, i. e. beyond the tension between the singular matter of paint and the intuitive interventions of painting, they are still contained inside the Other of the picture in such a way that they can be understood from this position, as way to justify their existence.

The vague notion which guides the process in the moment of elaboration likewise requires supposition on the side of observation – in a certain way. So that in a certain way both aspects strive to indicate a meaning, an always provisional, blurry meaning, a meaning slightly shifted according to the situation of observation, based on what is made visible and what we see.

6

Some paintings have the appeal of old photographs, calotypes or albumin prints. In a beautiful essay Michel Foucault described the gliding movements of pictures “between device and easel, between canvas, plate and – exposed (*impressionné*) or printed (*imprimé*) – paper” in the years between 1860 and 1880. “Love was directed less at paintings and the light-sensitive plates than at the images themselves, their journey and their reversal, their guise, their veiled difference.” These delightful games between photography and painting stand in a peculiar contrast to William Henry Fox Talbot’s allegorisation of his “*photogenic*” technique as a “*pencil of nature*”. The camera makes it possible for the natural forms to draw their own portraits via the reflections of the light; it is the flawlessly exposed outside shapes of things that helped to increase the acceptance of photography. The art of drawing is thus declared as the highest – even if automated – technique for creating copies of the world, as the pinnacle for presenting the original forms. In consideration of the “*material character of a picture*” Talbot acknowledges that light, “where it exists, can exert an action, and, in certain circumstances, does exert one sufficient to cause changes in material bodies. Suppose, then, such an action could be exerted on the paper; and suppose the paper could be visibly changed by it. In that case surely some effect must result having a general resemblance to the cause which produced it: so that the variegated scene of light and shade might leave its image or impression behind, stronger and weaker on different parts of the paper...” Thus the thing a photographic image makes a statement about is first and foremost light itself, its very cause and effect – and less a visual redrawing of things.

Perhaps this peculiar analogy of cause and effect could also be a statement about the method of painting used by Stefan Guggisberg. That which we see is the life of a body of paint, whose affections on the painter have become ideas, that make figures appear as contemporary and let us conceive of them as such, while their affects lead us back to that which is the “*cause of itself*”. And yet perhaps it is simply like this: that it is easier for me to find the picture behind the picture using this approach.

This text contains references to:

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Continuum, 1975/1989;

Benedictus de Spinoza; Daniel Drake Smith: *The Ethics of Benedict de Spinoza: Demonstrated after the Methods of Geometers, and Divided into Five Parts*, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010 (engl. orig. New York: D. van Nostrand, 1876) (Orig. 1678);

Michel Foucault, „Die photogene Malerei (Präsentation)“, in: M. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits. Schriften in vier Bänden, Vol. 2: 1970–1975*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002, pp. 871–882 (citations in the text translated by Gunnar Wendel).

William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, New York: Hans P. Kraus, 1989 (orig. 1844).