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Dennis Gün: Abstraction and Non-Indifference

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Governments are occupying but not interesting
because masterpieces are exactly what they are not.

Gertrude Stein

Painting is rare. But when it *is*, that is, when its logic of sensation as an intense visual presence opens up a view of irreducible difference, then it is an absolute surprise, an unforeseen possibility in which an impossibility comes to itself. This kind of real painting is always paradoxical, a possibility of its impossibility. Even its conditions are not conditions of possibility in the Kantian sense, but conditions of impossibility in the non-sense of painterly presence. It only arises there where its impossibility and its necessity become one. Painting, this "impossible and necessary act" (Samuel Beckett). When it comes, painting comes at least in the double meaning of this verb. Its arrival in presence is a material event that cannot be reckoned with, a moment in which the consciousness of its problematic and questionability bursts in an infinitely short fulfilment of perception. This is nothing metaphysical, but a simple, profane illumination. It is, however, not an illumination that is identical with itself, but one that is self-contradictory and articulates also its own impossibility. A view of the impossible continues to be a criterion for painting. The possibility of a kind of painting that still had something to say, which would be in a position to formulate oppositions, is identical with the necessity not to gloss over the fundamental aporias, but to bring them out. Anything else is necessarily naive or a cynical confirmation of being controlled by alien forces within existing power relations. Only where the contradictions, antinomies, paradoxes and aporias of art and real life are not decided one-sidedly in a narrow-minded way, be it political or religious, but are fought out, can paintings arise which parry the situation, that is, accept it as it is, without any embellishment, and at the same time, contrapose it with an intense form that is not absorbed by it. Such a stance takes on the legacy of the sublime, whose concept Kant defined as the resistance of the spirit against every superior power.

But real painting is always also abyssal. This concerns above all its sublimity which not infrequently has been confused with formalistic illusions of absoluteness. The legacy of the sublime in painting is a playing out of opposites against each other. Real painting gives problematic contradictions a form that does not gloss them over, harmonize them, betray them to illusions and references by pandering to them, or softening them up in tranquillizing aesthetics. Real painting comes to an image by visibly fighting through its contradictions, by taking the path of being in between, of passing through in between — the path of an intentional displacement, of a singular intermezzo. One of the most magnificent and still unsettled intermezzi in painting was created by Jackson Pollock with his drip paintings. His declared intention was to paint large, movable paintings that assume a middle position between a painting and a wall. And this is precisely what he created: movable, not static, but processual, interstitial paintings, neither a traditional painting nor wall painting, neither object nor environment, but nevertheless touching all that and unbounding it, negating and in a commanding, affirmative turn, overtaking it, something posited decisively in between: a painting as non-identity that, without points of reference, advocates true freedom beyond its ideology.

The question whether something like that can still happen today becomes superfluous in the moment of real painting in which a painting grabs the gaze of its perception, opens up the view of an unforeseen infancy and looks at the viewer. In this way, a "non-present presence" (Maurice Blanchot), present absence of origin in which a not-yet "shines into childhood" (Ernst Bloch) takes the place of the illusion of presence. This is the moment of fascination which, as Blanchot says, is experienced as the view of loneliness in which an impossibility can be seen. I want to call this moment the moment of art, despite all the reservations about its industry which in the meantime has completely taken its place. There is no longer any outside, but there is *immanent difference*, and that is art.

When I saw Dennis Gün's new paintings for the first time, I immediately had to think of the im-possibility of real painting as immanent difference. I had not reckoned with it because I knew Gün as an artist who seeks a visual critical engagement with the philosophical currents of our times through video works, electro-acoustic experiments and installations integrating verbal linguistic elements. Dennis Gün is an artist who loves philosophy, has studied it, practises

it, corresponds with philosophers (including Jacques Derrida), who, however, consistently avoids a blurring of art and philosophy which happens quite often in so-called contemporary art. Like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, for him too, philosophy and art are different forms of thinking whose relationships can only be oscillating. Philosophy thinks in concepts and art thinks in sensations and percepts. "With its concepts, philosophy brings forth events. Art erects monuments with its sensations." (Deleuze & Guattari). Gün has always heeded this distinction in his work and also expressly articulated it in his theoretical writings such as the fragments, *Tasmanian Devil* from 1998. After working for more than twenty years on art projects which make the most of the oscillating relations between art and philosophy in various media, in the past few years he has devoted himself consistently to a painterly formation. His decision in favour of painting appears to be theoretically necessary against the background of the development of his oeuvre, but is in a painterly sense as impossible as it is surprising, since at first glance it does not seem to have anything directly to do with the contents, motifs and theorems that preoccupy Gün. But could it not be that precisely such a form of non-referential painting gets closer to philosophical thoughts than what is painted figuratively as a representation which only illustrates theorems, in this way remaining external to them, and in the end has nothing to say other than hinting at pseudo-conceptual or pseudo-social points of reference which only affirm its superfluity? Avoiding the dead-end of illustration, Dennis Gün has painted out a diagram for himself which realizes a strongly visual sensory thinking parallel to the conceptual thinking of philosophy. The titles of the paintings are names and concepts that allude to what could be at issue, but do not prescribe any meaning. On the contrary, they provoke once again an interesting oscillation between concept and percept. A lot could be said about the symbolism of the goddess, Athena, who speaks the truth in the place of Apollo, about the beautiful Helena and the war which was fought not least of all because of her beauty and her love, and about the cultural origin of Europe between Greece and Asia Minor. Dennis Gün was born in Istanbul, studied in Vienna, has lived in Paris and New York, and now lives in Berlin. He knows what he is talking about when he brings such names into (the) play (of art). Living in national non-identity, he is interested in non-identity also in art. The concepts which he sometimes uses as the titles for paintings appear against this background. Many conceptual interpretations could be stimulated by titles such as *Parrhesia*, the frank, dangerously refractory saying of the truth with which Gün also reclaims the pretension to an artistic production of truth or to "saving the phenomena" of things and feelings in a figurative abstraction. But the closer these conceptual

allusions seem to be, the greater the distance from which the paintings look back at us. They stand for themselves in an obvious lack of reference to their titles, but therefore in an all the more close, emotional, sensuous proximity to their contents and substance. A painting-out of philosophical movements of thinking here finds independent perceptual forms. What is to be seen are constellations of complex sensations in the form of reciprocally obliterating brushstrokes and interwoven lines which get in each other's way, similar to the formation of rhizomes, ganglia and growths of the heart, a ramification of contradictory feelings on wood paths in sensory thinking. Sometimes there is a smouldering glow in the midst of the psychic undergrowth around which refusals of resentment and wishes for autonomy are entwined — sensory formations of an insistent desire into which contradictions, resistances, yearnings, demands for clarity, unreserved duplications, substrata of suffering and other bodily ways of thinking also play. The unscrupulous beauty in *Aphrodite* and the unreserved intensity in *Ecstasy*. Painting as a place of thinking, visible in the multitude of painterly lines of flight which consider all directions simultaneously. If one looks at how Gün employs and varies painterly means such as poly-focal all-over, anonymization of the brushstroke, lack of overview, decomposition and equivalence of the individual elements of the painting, it becomes obvious that here someone, after the figurative opening of painting in the 1980s (which was only interesting as long as it was extended abstraction), has again taken up Pollock's thread. But this is happening not only with the awareness of the nevertheless magnificent failure at the highest standard for which Pollock's abstraction stands, but also whilst incorporating the great tradition of oriental ornament which Gün paints against the grain with graphic displacement. The result is an independent ambiguity consisting of painted abstract lines whose closeness to flowers appears like the written letters of a "writing of disaster" (Maurice Blanchot). Julian Schnabel once called the kind of painting that is the issue for him a "bouquet of mistakes". Gün presents bouquets of diverse formations of difference. "Nobody roses (Niemandrosen)" (Paul Celan) of a non-identity painted against the slightest hint of a thinking in terms of identity. They appear on the scene with the lightness of an inviting floral abstraction whose substance touches upon much that is abyssal, paradoxical and incipient. The only flower that can be identified within the figurative abstraction is the poppy. As sometimes a red and sometimes a black rupture, it forms, as an incision in the composition, its constitutive wound. But could it not also be a 'political' sign? Let us not forget that the poppy as the source of opium and the basis for the distillation of heroin is not only a symbol for dream and intoxication, but also and

especially for the illegal trafficking undertaken with it and for the shadowy economic and power factor which this trafficking represents within the world economy. — Abstraction here is not the opposite of figuration. Gün's painting moves beyond such binary couplets derived from the dominant logic of concepts. As in de Kooning's *Black Paintings*, what is abstract here is figurative, and what is figurative is abstract; background is foreground and vice versa; light is darkness and darkness is light. Like Willem de Kooning, for whom abstraction meant abstracting not only from representation but also from the abstract, for Gün too, at issue is not a formalistic reduction in the name of an ideology of the pure, absolute form, but an attitudinal stance, a form of subtraction in which painting draws off from the stereotypes of art. Abstraction is a stance of non-positive affirmation which, with the means of the formal, resists succumbing to death as it presently dominates in our cultural paradigms. Gün's painting draws on the force of the formal which, following Michel Foucault, I understand as a power of transformation, a force for innovation and a locus of visual thought, "beyond the images of 'formalism' behind which one would like to have hidden it" (M. Foucault). With the title of a painting, Gün indicates the direction and perspective of this force: *Upgrade*. This means appreciation in value, revaluation, increase, intensification, climb, painting as an exponential multiplication of its sensory strands and duplication of its lines of flight, painting as self-acceleration and self-overtaxing with regard to the painting which, as a difference in intensity, stands for itself and asserts a demand for freedom. Gün's exponentiation of sensory thinking in a painting of "upgrade" does not have a moral, but is guided by a morality without which immanent difference does not exist. There is no difference in art without *non-indifference*. It is the gaze of non-indifference vis-à-vis the other in which differences of intensity come to themselves. Every interesting (the only interesting thing to do is to speak the language of another which one does not understand) painting breathes an ethics of non-indifference without conscience composed of what our culture suppresses and what insists within our bodies. From every interesting painting, suitably simple existential questions speak which Roland Barthes has formulated for us in the following way: "What are others for me? How am I to desire them? How am I to lend myself to their desire? How am I to behave among them?" Gün's new paintings are interesting because they play these questions to us in the gaze of their non-indifference. They breathe a lot of Aegean light and dry, Trojan coastal air. A non-identical breeze of seduction wafts through them. Their seduction is the abduction of identity. It puts desire at risk with regard to a painting of non-identity which

parries unfreedom and affirms freedom without reference, beyond its impossibility.

What Dennis Gün gives us to see is very close to what Julio Cortazar heard in a trumpet solo by Clifford Brown: "Suddenly, near the middle of the piece we sense that the unerringly groping trumpet, searching for the only way to sail beyond the limit, is less a soliloquy than a contact. It is the description of an ephemeral and difficult affirmation, of a precarious relinquishment: before and after normality."