

Picture. Building. Sign.
Reflections on Helmut Federle

Helmut Federle was born in Solothurn. His monumental painting *Woman Standing in the Doorframe* (1983) is mounted in the stairwell of that city's museum of art. Along with Ferdinand Hodler's *Wilhelm Tell* (1896/97), it flanks the entrance to one of the most important collections of modern art in Switzerland. The two paintings are practically the same size. Both show a strictly axial symmetry. Both make an appeal to the viewer climbing the stairs. With the pathos only a hero of mythic fame can muster, William Tell declares, "Caution: ordinary life stops here; this is the reign of art." Then, on the opposite side of the entrance, Federle: a mighty exclamation point objectified as a figure. Black against a muted greenish-yellow ground. A warning sign, nocturnal writing on the wall – and also an assertion: art needs to have passed through the bottleneck of Suprematism in order to merit the adjective "modern" and, given that prerequisite, it can be geometrical *and* figurative, abstract *and* representational, as ordinary as a traffic sign and as sublime as an apparition from outer space.

Federle has been characterized as something of a cowboy of post-World War II art, a "lonely runner" on the verge of the forbidden and the suppressed (Fanni Fetzter). When Nazi symbols and even a swastika appeared in paintings shown in Basel in 1985, all hell broke loose. "Like Blakes's tiger, Federle's invisible night panther stalks and threatens the spectator with its unfathomlessness" (Donald Kuspit). The irritating ambivalence of twilight has always been part of romantic mystery. Such pictures (we are reminded of Caspar David Friedrich, of Philipp Otto Runge) make us wonder whether night is falling or day is dawning. Nor is there art without memory and *Weltanschauung*. If Robert Rosenblum's epochal book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* had not been published back in 1975, Helmut Federle – he says that his visit in 1971 to Rothko's Chapel in Houston was seminal to his work – would most certainly have made an appearance there.

Even more important to my mind: there can be no *making* of art without memory, be it simply endured, intentionally conjured up or subjected to critical scrutiny. Lest we forget: more often than not in Modernism, "reality" is a function of the way pictures are made or, in some cases, the way they are "built". This is where architecture comes in, beginning with the architecture of a picture. About Federle's *Edelweiss XII* (2004), Robert Storr writes, "Never have wildflowers so jarringly resembled shattered glass." The painting doesn't have much to do with the profundity of American transcendentalists. Or does it? It evokes broken or, as Storr says, shattered glass. In the act of shattering, the splinters seem to emphasize the frame around that motif, for their edges are anchored in the margin like the threads of a spider web. Fixation on the frame: That was the bone of contention that caused Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg to part ways in the 1920s. Triggered by van Doesburg's *diagonal* compositions. Except that van Doesburg's diagonal turn was just an excuse. Mondrian couldn't and, in fact, didn't want to accept van Doesburg's decision to permit geometry and colour to act on behalf of an inner-worldly physiology of *Raumgestaltung*. The offence lay in ignoring transcendence. In *Edelweiss*, ironically a veritable bouquet of diagonals, Federle has fallen in line with Mondrian once again.

But the path leads beyond Mondrian and all the way back to the Renaissance, to the topos of the painting as a "window on the world". The formula is borrowed from architecture. The question is: what kind of window? By the 16th century, landscapes were envisioned lying down (like today's widescreen cinema) in contrast to the vertical format of the classical Renaissance window (and of portraits). Upended like the page of a book. Upended like writing paper. Upended like the open and therefore automatically double page of an artist's sketch-book. Assuming there is an architecture of communication in Western civilization, then its fundamental building block is the book, the notebook, the sketchbook and the signs recorded therein.

If painting has anything to do with understanding the ontology of communication, with practicing communication by enacting its means, then Helmut Federle is an ontologist of communication and his art, culturally speaking, a means of securing anthropological evidence. With Federle's *Black Series* of 1976, it is almost impossible not to be reminded of Mondrian, who died in 1944, the same year that Federle was born. They are double pages from his "intimate diary". On these double pages we see nothing but pitch black surfaces on a white ground whose rectangular format responds to the shape of the sketchbook. They are arranged in pairs, left and right on each double page – pure Mondrian, one might think; a laboratory of the "art-immanent" tensions that are the essence of "relational painting".

Which makes it tempting, in retrospect, to apply this series as a kind of genetic code towards deciphering Federle's monumental works. No wonder that letters crop up, as if out of nowhere, in this basic toolbox of communication: the H ("Helmut"), the Y (*Ypsilon, du bedrängtes Zeichen des Alters und des Geheimnisses* [you embattled sign of age and mystery]), HRI (a dark illusion to "INRI" on Calvary), the large exclamation point of a figure in Solothurn and the disturbing *SS Painting* in the Ricola Collection. Not to mention Federle's muted, architectural, four-storey-tall signature on the Swiss Embassy in Berlin, diagonally across from the Federal Chancellery. If the "SS" painting is "scandalous", then certainly *also* inasmuch as the two angular S runes almost form a swastika.

Primeval language as a provocation? – Possibly On the other hand: taking SS runes in a museum at face value as a political statement on the part of the artist means ignoring the nature of museums. Clearly, Federle's art is *also* about European history. Yet in the present case this is so primarily because of the duality and equivalence of the two signs, and the way this duality reflects a primal Western order: the double page of a sketchbook, in other words, the architecture of a book as a classical trope of communication. Might one go so far as to suspect that some of Federle's pictures were painted with the intention of being made accessible to the world in the format – literally: in the frame – of wonderful books, indeed "artist's books"?

To place Helmut Federle's paintings in the broader context of the arts and, indeed, the applied arts, is all the more appropriate. Federle has worked with a number of architects over the years: with Herzog & de Meuron, with Adolf Krischanitz and with Roger Diener. But what is the logic of his obvious interest in architecture – granted that he recently tends to relativize his passion for *today's* architecture? For the philosopher Georges Bataille, things appeared to be comparatively clear. Surrealism's brother-in-arms saw architecture first of all as synonymous with power and order. In 1929, he spoke about "monumental productions, [which] are today the masters of the whole earth, herding in their shadow servile multitudes, forcing on them admiration and astonishment, order and constraint". Given the "enslavement" imposed upon mankind by the "chiourme architecturale", there was only one way open for painting, in Bataille's view: it had to take the side of anarchy, "of bestial monstrosity; as if there was no other way of escaping enslavement to architecture."

Much has changed since Bataille's indictment of architecture. Though architecture has in no way ceased to cast its shadow upon the "servile multitudes", it certainly no longer represents petit-bourgeois expectations of grandeur and dignity. In fact, architecture itself now toys with anarchy and can, if it must, engage in reckless rituals of bestial monstrosity in order to garner the awe of the masses. As a result, painting may well end up not in the camp of anarchy, but in the opposite camp of "order" and "spirituality", so vigorously denounced by the Surrealists. And in this situation, it may well find itself assigned with astonishing and unexpected roles. Federle has adopted some of them with extraordinary perseverance, thus creating signs that verge on the absolute.

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