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BETWEEN THE FIELDS HERBERT BRANDL'S PAINTING OF THE TRANSITIONS

For all its being unmistakeable Herbert Brandl's oeuvre, as far its surfaces go, is very diverse. It hovers between traditional motifs like flowers, landscapes, or mountains on the one hand and non-representational textures and planes on the other; as well as between nearly sculptural masses of oil paint and watercolour-like, almost immaterial hues or huge, black and white works in Indian ink on paper. During a first group exhibition in the early eighties an unframed canvas, 4.2 by 2.4 meters, crammed into the space at hand, formed the centre of an installation situation in which the painting material, abundant inside the picture, spread throughout the gallery space. Thick, seemingly dirty paint covered the canvas and became a rudimentary system of signs that, beyond the two-dimensional, referred to painting as activity and action in three-dimensional space. In precise contrast to the "wild" painting in vogue at the time this was not a work in search for the autonomous panel thus aiming to deliberately distance itself from non-painterly artistic practice. It was much rather an attempt to define painting inside a context encompassing and processing conceptual installation or actionist techniques. The materiality of the colour here is being set against figurative content. Yet not, and this is relevant for Brandl's entire work thereafter, in the sense that this materiality were to replace content, i.e. become a means of abstraction. Even in these early works it becomes obvious that he will never be about deciding between figure and the potentials of the medium, reaching as far as the monochrome, or to formulate any decisions at all at this stage pointing into one direction or the other. In other paintings of those years, when figures reminding us of Art Brut once again superimpose each other before a complex background, these seemingly abstract signs themselves become a part of a totally different abstraction or figure and in this way are embedded in the picture in a manner that makes it impossible to regard them as either the starting or the end point of a figuration or abstraction. With the flower pictures and landscapes painted during the same years much of the same applies: It don't seem to be brushstroke, colour and texture that distort an image of nature, are drowned out by the subjective points of view of the artist. The figures, rather, often seem to arrive in the picture only at the end of the artistic process, are therefore less a starting point than an end point. The images are never the reason for a picture. If a dark expanse takes up the bottom verge a landscape may become of it. The figure, as a result, is not excluded but equally in no way compulsory and therefore laden with a secondary meaning at best. At the very next moment the swathes of colour and the shadings once again disperse in a way that makes it impossible to finally reconstruct a figure, a landscape. And still the artistic method, the internal grammar are visible in a forcefulness that makes it very hard indeed to draw a dividing line here. Since his pictures of the early eighties the relationship between figure and colour with Herbert Brandl has invariably been a very open and dynamic one and in the last instance one consistently is at a loss to determine what brings about what. One moment the painting generates a meaning and in the next covers it up again. In a picture from the year 1982 there is a dark green, almost black swathe through which, near the middle of the panel, bright yellow is shining and thus hinting at a centre. The line from dark green to yellow, though, again is broken by the mingling of the green with white paint that evokes much colder grey hues. The swathes of colour thus emerging on the one hand support the composition of the picture with its bright centre. On the other hand they also seem once more to cover up this centre and to position themselves in front of it while the yellow appears to shine through the dark. This contrast yet again is broken when in the right picture half the

yellow hues mix with the grey ones and in this way suspend the layering in other places. In the bottom right-hand corner the whitish grey hues touch on the very edge and thus appear to enter the picture from the outside, as it were. The brushstroke is clearly detectable in many places, in some it aids the construction of a centre, in others it contradicts the latter and seems to point in a totally different direction. The game with figure and colour here also turns into a game with figure and background, with a layering that it is hard to decipher or that is full of contradictions. Just as there is no given direction, in Brandl's pictures, from colour to figure or vice versa there equally is no anchored plane starting out from which the picture might be structured. This floating works in all directions. Points of reference like, for example, a landscape are no more than ostensible, neither starting point nor post-modern quotation. The medium, its tradition and possibilities are worked over by the artist with a directness and a lightness that make a positioning superfluous and impossible. On a series of white pictures from the year 1984 a naked female figure is depicted with its head tilted to the side immediately calling forth reminiscences of a painting between Jugendstil and Munch-like expressionism. Looked at from today's perspective, and in the context of Brandl's entire oeuvre, the tradition and the historical weight of the motif surely lead us on a wrong track just as the other motifs do. Maybe this is just a quick reference triggered by the glimpse at an old piece, no more. There is no dissolving of the figure in the sense of the abstraction of modernity. Again it is not the starting point for a depiction process and the dissolution thereof but enters the picture, in our perception, at no definite point. On the one hand it may be a simple joke yet it also is an important detail that the inclination of the head seems to be motivated by the format of the canvas. The artist does not want to get closer to his motif and its substance, the motif props up the picture in a manner turning it into a completely abstract component. Of course the artist thus categorically denies the possibility that the observer really might be able to reconstruct content with all the weight it carries. With him content matter becomes a part of his grammar of painting. The reference to a field beyond the picture in this way turns out to be arbitrary and irrelevant. The reason for the picture is not an outer object. In fact there no longer is the attempt to set up a relation between the object and the picture. The figure has strayed here by chance and has not arrived at this point at the end of its path from the outside or through art history. The monochrome pictures from the second half of the eighties too differ substantially from their late modernist counterparts. They do not pretend to be pure picture, beyond any object-ness, on the contrary: their thick, brittle layering suggests a spatial-ness and an object-ness reminiscent of installation and minimalism. The monochrome expanse is not the result of a reduction. It appears rather like a curtain or a door through which to enter another, hidden space. Like minimalist sculptures these pictures seem to hide something that may only be revealed in the mind of the observer. The game with the floating background here is being turned round, for the outer surface so rigidly hangs in space that we do not know which and how many rooms may hide beneath. Some panels, putting us in mind of Sigmar Polke's chemical experiments, have a very similar effect: It seems as if something were hiding behind the canvas and were about to break forth from the inside like an illness. The psychological room here is not created with the help of perspective but with delimiting layers which nonetheless have holes or they are porous so that we can guess what they conceal. They do not bring about contemplative moments like Mark Rothko's pictures. Their beauty always has something uncanny that constitutes itself beyond the object. In the pictures from the end of the eighties the colour becomes thinner but the spatial effect remains intact. The glaze-like colours at all times permit our looks to permeate to the beyond and the brushstroke generates structures suggesting materiality and three-dimensionality. Even if two swathes of colour divide the canvas these do not seem to stand beside each other but in an indissoluble relationship of background and foreground. Figurative works like the

flower pictures also do not solve this relationship as the red blooms are pushed into the background by the rest of the expanse. Consistently there is no beginning and no end in this painting. As for the relations of the swathes of colour to each other it frequently happens that elements almost appearing like dirt push their way into the picture only to destroy an equilibrium on the flat canvas. The large works in Indian ink created simultaneously also occupy an indefinable space between enlargement and fragmentation, surface and depth. In their composition these works remind us of drawings. But their size turns the stroke into a swathe and frequently the black dominates to such a degree that white surfaces emerge. In this way the pieces enter into an illusionist borderland between stroke and swathe, figure and ornament. In the pictures from the nineties the cold, seemingly inorganic colours take up more and more space. In some of them it appears as if the wall-paint itself were spreading across the canvas, overgrowing it. The red, green and yellow hues are gaining a strange exclusiveness. Often they seem like relics from a past only reflected in the grey, metallic surfaces and breathing life into them. Or the greys, while being looked at, turn out the result of an endless blending of previous colours which it is very hard for the eye to reconstruct. Increasingly procedures from earlier works intertwine or overlap each other in layers. Expanses of colour that used to be brittle more and more turn liquid. But still the materiality in the pictures does not disintegrate, it only achieves a floating quality. It was around the same time that an actual contrast between non-representational and representational works took shape in Brandl's painting. Flowers, for instance, constitute solid objects against the melting backgrounds. In this way, though, they take on a poignancy they never have in nature, recalling photographic representation and Pop painting. In the non-representational painting, on the other hand, the solid layers and barriers of previous pictures increasingly are liquefied or they spread fog-like across the canvas. The brushstrokes become more and more crude until they are made to disappear in a thick undercoat. The inorganic, grey colours mentioned above progressively mingle with the other colours. And so un-structured spaces and depths come into being. The three-dimensionality still remains an important aspect in the pictures. It is represented less by layers, though, and more by interfaces melting into each other. But at the same time new structures begin to form out of these liquid surfaces in the shape of drops, runlets and webs. The picture thus disintegrates not only along the axis of its depth, i.e. from the front to the back, but progressively also along its edges. As always in his work, however, Brandl does not leave this development un-contradicted and disturbs it in some corners and crannies. Through colours becoming denser and by way of lines between the liquid swathes a different direction is indicated and at times the cloudlike structures break open before a backdrop. To me it seems one of the most elementary qualities of the artist that in his method of working he has always escaped a definite development and in this way never has simulated modernist fictions of a goal-oriented-ness or absolute reduction as an end point. Suddenly there will be the mountainscapes once again that seem to sum up the swathes into content and to make structures explicit. But the mountain too is a wrong track in this painting. It too turns liquid in some places, thinning out or containing layers that conceal something. In the monumental objects their own disappearance is contained, for every figure in Herbert Brandl's painting has to face the contradictions of the medium and so finally is made to disappear again. The story told by this art is about having neither a beginning nor an end. The pictures invariably reside along interfaces from which they may be spun out in all imaginable directions.