

ULRICH LOOCK Closeness / Distance

By painting, Herbert Brandl can make something that does not otherwise exist. By painting, he can adopt and relate to one another different distances to one and the same thing. Denys Zacharopoulos has said, "Brandl simultaneously mobilises the two greatest metaphysics of painting I know, and breaks their unity. On the one hand there is the metaphysics of the microcosm-Seurat. We see reality so close up we see every dot in it. You get closer to the world than your own glasses. On the other side there is Yves Klein, where everything is blue. The world is blue."¹ Painting is the only practice that makes it possible to resolve the irreconcilability that separates one distance from another. Brandl formulates the fault lines between analytical science and comprehensive spirituality of which Zacharopoulos speaks, as the difference between the materiality and tangibility of a thing, of its temporal and spatial immediacy, and its transition into an image as a form of existence. The image pushes things into the distance, offers a large overview and a comprehensive context of things; it is the realm of visuality and disembodies what it offers for view- for Guy Debord the image is an intensified form of the commodity character of things, whose exchange value is replaced by the spectacle of imaginary satisfaction.

Brandl's paintings concern the question how the distance to things can be overcome, how it is possible to bring things close and deal with them. That is his desire: its distance makes something desirable for its closeness. But that also means the distance cannot be bridged, cannot be eliminated. The distance of things has to be preserved; it even has to be increased, since otherwise its closeness loses its power to attract. Only from the greatest distance is it worthwhile to implement a closeness. Hence Brandl turns to things that have not yet been processed but rather already exist or have grown or come into being: things from nature. They are things that are inherently undefined and unachievable, in terms of space and time: namely, the highest mountains, landscapes between water and land, between brightness and darkness, a waterfall, wind, fog. They are ungraspable places that attract those who are not satisfied with the socially and practically assigned place; places of ecstasy, echoing the subject's difficult-to-describe moods and sensations.

The closeness of things and places that Brandl seeks is not the same closeness with which the commodities of consumer society impose themselves; it is a closeness that is opposed to the latter. It is a different closeness, which is, however, inevitably as its opposition implies shaped by the unwelcome availability of everything at all times. Brandl says of the mountains he paints: "If it didn't have any personal meaning in my life I probably tackle it so apprehensively. It comes from a nameless sensation, a field of sensations. It is rooted in my personal history, it is painting as I got to know it as a child."² The desire for the closeness of things is based in his memory, and his memory leads him to a past time and lost place. Hence the sought-after closeness itself is impregnated with its unattainability, just as much as distance is. Moreover, however, in a further complication of the conditions with which Brandl sees himself confronted, he cannot overlook the fact that the highest mountains and the most inaccessible landscapes have long since experienced their industrial exploitation in mass-produced images. He takes their interchangeability into account by modeling his paintings on illustrations from calendars and mountaineering magazines (but also on his own photographs, like those he took in the riparian forests near Vienna). In addition to their opposition to the universal availability of commodities (imposed closeness), his paintings also have to oppose the tourist fetishes of distance. The search for a conjunction of closeness and distance is a reaction to the efficiency of their appropriation as commodities, which no longer permits a

¹ Denys Zacharopoulos and Ulrich Loock, "Siding with a Metaphysics of Chance," trans. Malcolm Green, in *Pintura: Herbert Brandl, Helmut Dorner, Adrian Schiess, Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2004), 20, 22.

² Herbert Brandl, in "Ulrich Loock in Conversation with Herbert Brandl," in *ibid.*, 101.

romantic project of devotion to the numinous, to the dissolution of the subject in the perception of comprehensive and intangible nature.

Closeness and distance-unattainable as nature and memory and yet omnipresent in the form of commodities and images-agree with, condition, and motivate each other. For Brandl, therefore, the point cannot be to eliminate their difference but rather to bring them into play with each other in such a way that each is intensified at the same time. Closeness is determined by distance, and distance by closeness. In his mountain paintings Brandl projects both relationships onto each other: that of the mountain climber, who is so close to the mountain that he no longer sees anything else (and no one has seen him, as Zacharopoulos says) but merely clings to the material world; and that of the image industry, which makes available spectacular icons whose actual referents will probably never confront their consumers.

Brandl paints with a physical commitment that is always recognizable in his paintings. Paint is a material, vested with its own weight and various other qualities such as viscosity or fluidness, drying conditions, smell, and so on, present in large quantity and applied with large brushes. The painter has to cope with that; the physicality of paint and the extreme extension of the canvas are his primary challenges, which he has to confront in the brief time he permits himself for a painting. Brandl himself has associated his activity as a painter with a mountain climber's exertion. Falling lumps of paint are avalanches. Indices of an activity, brushstrokes, dripping paint- everything that, in the context of another kind of painting, is called gesture or characteristic style- are nothing but traces of work, not psychological indicators. The color of this material is used to mark the differences between snow, rocks, and sky or between brightness and darkness, different zones in the atmosphere, foggy areas and clear views. Brandl's color is local color in the sense of a color that is associated with a specific place and is motivated by the requirement of that place. With all the necessary provisos, it could be said that colors are as little guided and assembled according to an independent logic as the mountains and meadows, the twilight states of nature, are composed. Colors do not produce their own relations independently of the specific sites. Dealing fundamentally with the physical reality of painting, which he harmonizes with its objects, Brandl rejects any optical effects that could produce a similarity to the things and places he paints (mimesis).

His artistic activity is oriented around a preexisting image, either an industrially produced illustration, his own photograph, or based on a memory or idea. The purpose of Brandl's painting is to make this image recognizable, not to process it, sublimate it, or turn it into painting. Making it recognizable means preserving and intensifying the distance of the things and places that he needs to keep his desire for the realization of closeness alive. Brandl paints into this image; he traces it out with his colors, invests his labor in this image, loading it with masses of paint; he gives it weight and, with that weight, closeness. Only through this activity does the image become visible, but it is not something that was actually produced by the painting; it was already there before it was painted. In fact, one practical indication of this preexistence of the image is how little time Brandl needs to paint it. He needs more time to think up this image, to establish it before it is painted, and he also refers to many other paintings that precede each new one. Brandl is a painter who always paints yet another painting. Because the image comes before the painting, the painting is never finished with any image.

The closeness into which Brandl pulls the image, with the weight of his paints and the exertion of his activity, does not eliminate its distance. It anchors the distance, making the intangibility of the image tangible. But the image cannot be transformed, cannot be overcome; for its part, it makes the traces of the activity of painting the instruments of its visibility. To understand the elaborated contradiction between visuality and the physicality of the practice of painting it is necessary to

consider Brandl's dismissal of the paradigm of representation, a paradigm based on the effects of making the image visually similar to the object depicted.

When Brandl began to paint, he conceived the picture plane as a panel that was available to pile up paint on it (tableau). He started to achieve the physicality of paint as a material, which is so crucial today. Yet, following the model of Van Gogh, he organized the mountains of paint in such a way that they could evoke the idea of bodies and landscapes. In the form of a "wallowing in paint," he sought relations that were suited to making visible something that escaped depiction, the inside of things, the desires and feelings of the subject that become apparent in them. These images were dependent on the good fortune of a unique success, of a privileged relationship to things that was first recognized and made real through painting. The point was to animate the puddles and crusts of paint in processes akin to magic.

At a certain point, however, Brandl began to make images that work as if he had painted over his earlier works with a uniform coat. It is something like a personal iconoclasm. His paintings with silver spray paint have a weak glimmer, something like that of a cloudy mirror. The picture plane, which was taken for granted in the earlier paintings, now itself appears as a vague zone in which reflections from the surroundings produce a suggestion of depth, illuminate and mix with the materiality of the paint and canvas. The shimmering and mirroring infuses the plane with visual aspects that are not produced by painting but rather registered by a device—namely, the plane painted over with silver. This registration has something in common with the photographic process: it does not evoke a similarity; instead, a situation is captured by mechanical processes. No analogy, no mimesis but rather a detached recording. This reveals the paradigm shift that is a prerequisite of Brandl's intensification of closeness and distance of places and things and the simultaneous resolution of their irreconcilability. It consists in the transition from the similarity to things produced by painting, which can be characterized by the concept of aura in its famous definition— a "unique apparition of a distance, however close it may be"— a mechanical tracing which is determined by the things themselves.

It is only this paradigm shift, which introduces elements of mechanical registration into painting, that makes it possible to bring together distance and closeness, pictorial totality, and the physicality of the painting process without converting the one into the other. How that should be thought of has already been expressed on an earlier occasion: "Brandl paints from the photo as if he were painting directly onto the mountain. The canvas is the necessary substitute for the rock faces on which the coat of paint cannot be applied. Brandl paints on the canvas as if he were overpainting the mountain reflected in a mirror—in the mirror of the canvas covered in silver paint. This painting can be pictured as a scaled down version of part of the mountain, which could be reversed in order to coat the mountain completely with paint and thus to paint it according to the legend of how painting was invented: by tracing round a shadow." ³

This interconnection of images of distant mountains and amphibian twilight, on the one hand, and the material details of the palpable approach to things, on the other hand, conveyed by an imagined mirror, does not demand any balancing of the two but rather permits not only shifts in either direction but also changes in distance and even an oscillating exchange between microcosm and macrocosm. If the image of Mount Everest is charged by the material closeness of stone, snow, and sky, it is also possible to produce—with a few changes in pressure, the speed and range of the movements, changes in the consistency and amount of the paint—wind and mist that dissolve the contours and alter the recognizability of the image. In recent years Brandl has worked a great deal along those lines and produced different types of images, which are, however, never totally set

³ Ulrich Loock, "The Contemporary in Painting Present," trans. Malcolm Green, in *China retour: Im Osten geht die Sonne auf, im Westen auch I China and Back: New Abstract Painting from Austria*; Erwin Bohatsch, Herbert Brandl, Gunter Damisch, Hubert Scheibl, Walter Vopava, Otto Zitko, exh. cat. (Vienna: MUMOK, Museum Moderner Kunst, 2005), 44.

apart from one another without a transition and are not opposed dialectically. He can take the blurred areas of a mountain painting where the colors run into one another and create a marsh landscape by reorienting the brushstrokes into the horizontal, and, using different colors, produce a zone of darkness that is tinged by the last light of day. A storm pushes from both sides against the still recognizable ridge of Mount Everest, freeing up a jagged, fractured vertical form that in another painting is a flash of light or a waterfall. Sometimes the idea suggests itself to give names to that which is visible in the painting, but such realism is not imperative. Brandl's conception of different distances enables him to devote himself to a practice of painting that exhausts the vocabulary of brushstroke and manifestations of color, of frequencies, orientations, and movements, that expands them, alters their relationship to one another in such a way that ultimately no pictorial model is recognizable, and yet emerges again. This can then produce irresolvable doubt whether a painting of horizontal layers belongs to the immediate proximity or the great distance.

Brandl's painting is framed by the universal transformation of things into commodities and images; it takes up these conditions and settles down in them. Under such circumstances it is a model for an access to things and places that gives them back their distance from claims to utility and at the same time pushes them into that physical proximity in which an individual being-in-the-world is achieved.

Ulrich Loock, catalogue HERBERT BRANDL, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Cologne, 2009, pp. 36-38