

What Can Painting Be?

Thoughts On Clara Brörmann's Work

Ellen Blumenstein

Consideration of the image is still a sacred cause today only because the fate of thought and liberty are at stake in it. . . . In order to be able to envisage a world radically founded on visibility, and starting from the conviction that whatever constitutes its essence and meaning is itself invisible, it proved essential to establish a system of thought that set the visible and the invisible in relation to each other.

Marie-José Mondzain¹

In the end, I can only try to work out different solutions.

Clara Brörmann

Every work of art is generated first of all from its creator's worlds of experience and imagination. Beyond that, however, its final form is determined by a series of supra-individual factors that in their present are usually assumed as given, and can therefore only be reflected upon from historical distance. This includes not just the conditions resulting from a concrete place, time, or the cultural and political context in and for which a work is made, but it also includes, much more fundamentally, the relationship of people to their environment and the function of images within this structure.

¹ Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* [1996], trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

The foundations for the Western understanding of images were laid as early as the eighth and ninth centuries in the course of Byzantine iconoclasm. In her 1996 study *Image, Icon, Economy*, the French philosopher Marie-José Mondzain describes the birth of this concept of the image, which took a double strategy that absorbed both the image-revering Greek and Roman cults and the monotheistic literate cultures of Judaism and Islam, which were hostile to images. On the one hand, the notion of the image as something invisible protected the church from the suspicion of idolatry, on the other hand, the icon could become the visible center of the political and pedagogical power strategy of state and church.

Older, non-figurative image concepts did not have a chance against the identificatory potential of an image that was “real” in this way. The ornament, for example, which plays a special role in Islam, whose tradition is committed to writing and reserves the production of images to God alone, symbolizes the perfection of creation in the contemplation of symmetrical patterns and geometrical principles.

But the complex relation in Christian philosophy between visible and invisible, world and meaning was stronger, and therefore to this day we look at pictures on this basis: they work because we believe in the reality of what is represented, whether these are images from the media that report on events in remote places, visualizations from the worlds of industry or science, or indeed art. In this respect, discourses about images were from the start eminently political, and painting was for centuries a means for enforcing state and church doctrines, and for underpinning social identities.

In modernism, newer media replace the political function of the panel painting, but even now we still expect what is actually paradoxical: to make sensually experienceable things that cannot be seen with the bare eye. This aspect can be traced directly back to the icon.

At the same time, the Western image concept seems to have arrived at the end of a long career. Its greatest success, which causes even the defenders of a ban on images to take recourse to its means (the terrible execution videos of the so-called Islamic State pay appalling witness to this) on the one hand, and the reductionist relations between reality and the imaginary of pictures of all genres on the other hand (either it is put in place of reality, or it retreats completely from it), have exhausted this transcendent model.

How it will develop further from this current position can hardly be predicted, but probably art is a good place to pursue the question of what a picture today can be and what role it can play in a society. As the direct inheritor of the icon, the picture as mediator of the invisible meaning of a visible world can be questioned in and through painting. Because only once the picture no longer is legitimized by a higher order, but determines its meaning from what is there, can we really think differently about it.

This is the point of departure for Clara Brörmann's oeuvre – she always considers the functional context in which an image is embedded. Her pictorial spaces – now exclusively abstract – are the result of a development that began with the figurative motifs of her early paintings. Her interest in translating moods, music, or spaces into pictures was initially tied to a figure. The viewer could identify with the supra-individual figures who were the bearers of existential human experiences such as loneliness or sorrow, but also trust and a sense of security, and, as it were, enter into the painting. But this immersive relationship between the work and the beholder was apparently unsatisfactory for the artist. Brörmann shifted the focus from what is represented in the painting to the painting itself, and thus detached herself from the figure. In a certain way, this reverses the relationship of the gaze. The abstract paintings no longer pull the viewer into an autonomous pictorial space, but rather point from the painting to the viewer – we do not look at the painting; rather, the painting looks at us.

Whereas the figurative painting initially developed its (from the start abstract) theme within the limits of the panel painting, the abstract works expand their frame of reference and connect the viewer with the pictorial space of the painting. In this way, Brörmann constructs a reflexive structure where the theme is not just processed within the stretch frame and in an engagement with what is represented on the canvas. The painting makes both the means and strategies of this engagement visible and transparent for the viewer, and necessarily involves us in this process.

In this sense, the painter returns with every painting to the origin of the image, and negotiates its basic parameters. It therefore seems consistent that both Byzantine icons as well as ornamental symmetries have recently become points of reference for Brörmann's work. The artist declares she has no role models in whose tradition she sees her work. However, unlike the specific image composition by Caspar David Friedrich, the painterly translation of music and moods by Wassily Kandinsky, or the striving for simplification in the Bauhaus, which in one way or another have left their traces in her work, icon and ornament do not merely cause certain effects or trigger reactions, but show in the painting *how* they are produced. As references, as I've described above, they go far beyond questions of style.

Even if, therefore, Brörmann's paintings intentionally avoid striving for a uniform style (this can vary depending on the question the artist addresses at the time), Brörmann has developed a technique whose application she has continuously refined and expanded in recent years. Her principle of always applying the paint in layers is based on the notion of a production process that is not necessarily linear, but can also return to earlier steps. By working on a painting simultaneously with pigment, acrylic, and oil paints, Brörmann ensures that the superimposed layers in the finished work remain mostly visible and create literally (and not just in the sense of perspective) a three-dimensional pictorial space. The canvas becomes an object. At the

same time, she has the opportunity to reveal areas under which she applied acrylic paint (by peeling off the acrylic paint, thereby also removing the layers on top of it), thus uniting several temporal levels in the finished work.

Series titles like *von vorne* (2014), *Zeiten* (2014), *Raumzeit* (2015), or *Dauer* (2016) point to the fact that this way of proceeding does not just have an aesthetic function, but also represents a long-term engagement with the possibilities of non-linear, reversible concepts of time – quite different from Western notions. *Raumzeit* (space-time), the title of one of the series, was described more than one hundred years ago by Albert Einstein in his relativity theory, and it immediately shook the foundations of modern science. But only about half a century later did composers like the founder of musique concrète Pierre Schaeffer (1910–1995) or the American Morton Feldman (1926–1987) experiment with expanding or contracting sound continuums that become faster or slower and which negotiate time and space as factors that are independent of one another.

It seems even harder for the human imagination to translate this abstract concept into visual parameters. While in recent years scientific and artistic attempts in this direction have been made with the aid of virtual imaging processes, Brörmann devotes herself to this mission using the – seemingly – anachronistic medium of painting.

The works in the series *von vorne*, for example, play with the dual possibilities of interpreting this phrase as a spatial-physical reference to the position of the viewer or the artist (“from the front”), or as a call to re-begin the very acts of painting and viewing (“start anew”). In both respects, the title emphasizes the processual nature of the paintings. They can only be experienced as time-space by the intellect and body together.

In the paintings for *Zeiten* and *Raumzeit*, Brörmann designs symmetrical geometrics that take up functions of the ornament such as mirroring, shifts, or overlay, albeit replacing references

to a divine order with an analytical-reflective composition. In both series, time and space are related to one another from changing perspectives, and sometimes they seem like notations of superimposed sound surfaces.

Dauer, finally, the most recent of these projects, seems to focus more on the moment of circular, discontinuous space-time structures. The structures increasingly converge, become thicker, and are more reminiscent of densely woven sound carpets or sound clouds than of surfaces. What in writing can only be described as a linear process, for the beholder (happily) takes place through observations, associative jumps, comparisons, movements, involving the body in front of the painting, the gaze that enters into a relationship with the painting, and the thinking that abstracts in front of the painting. Quite possibly, this kind of painting can therefore make the fourth dimension more graspable than computer-generated images; depth can here be experienced not just in the surface and time, but actually in movement.

On a different level, Brörmann's oeuvre also affects the relationship between work and beholder: by means of a subtle sense of lightness and irony, which is already echoed in the dictum of "pursuit of happiness," the title of an exhibition in 2016. The pursuit of happiness sums up the legendary American dream of self-realization and equal opportunity. But instead of taking the conventional approach of pointing "critically" to a possible failure of this worldview, with all of its focus on the individual, in Brörmann's case it remains open how the artist sees the human ability for happiness, and whether her paintings make any kind of statement on that issue. Once again it's up to us as viewers to relate Brörmann's titles and works to one another and to our own perceptions. Work titles and the choice of motifs function structurally in a similar manner, and with titles such as *Die Liebenden*, *Fortuna*, *Der Wald*, *Schwimmbad*, *Wurfzabel*, or *Ringdansen*, they deflect any reservations people might have in encountering paintings. The slightly tongue-in-cheek reflexivity of title and subject is

stimulating and generates an open mind that is so often missing in contemporary painting, oriented as it so often is toward expert discourses. Love, the woods, or a swimming pool – everybody has memories and/or affects associated with them; *Wurfzabel* or *Ringdans* sound so unusual that they inevitably awaken our curiosity.

Brörmann's current series *Horizont* also takes up this strategy in terms of painting. The concrete title triggers associations and enables our first, direct access: seven diptychs, arranged on top of one another, display different abstract formations, mirrored on the central axis. Two double semi-circles in blue and yellow, in whose interstices parts of the untreated canvas remain visible, could be interpreted as a sunset reflected on a slightly agitated surface of the sea. However, this association is a dead end, because none of the other motifs allow for such a concrete interpretation – we have to look again, and keep looking.

Just as in the series with the abstract themes, Brörmann here, too, experiments with mirror reflections – the space between the paintings marks the horizon – and arranges lines and planes in various constellations to one another, whose intentional stylistic variety points to the fact that the artist confronts a certain question again and again, and starts anew (*von vorne*) to work through them. These works are (probably intentionally) reminiscent of spot-the-difference pictures, because on closer examination it quickly becomes clear that the two parts of the painting are never identical. Of course it is both impossible and unnecessary to determine the difference clearly, but this slightly deviant repetition forces us to compare, and that is the beginning of a reflexive engagement with the painting: in this way it shows us how it was made, and that every pictorial element, its colors, its form, its composition are all based on numerous painterly decisions that influence and change the end result.

To trace these differences in observing them, to feel how our own gaze becomes more precise and exact, neither intimidates us, nor do we get the impression that the artist or the painting

know more than they are willing to show. Rather, it is enjoyable in a way that feels positively enriching.

In Brörmann's paintings, the invisible is not an unreachable truth (in the afterlife), but rather the sum of ideas, experiences, technical expertise, and painterly references that reveals itself in the painting and yet remains effective – if we as viewers are willing to engage with it.