

Anne Neukamp

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Oui

Reflections on the Paintings of Anne Neukamp

Hybrids

For the cover photograph of this slim catalogue, the artist Anne Neukamp has not, as might be expected, chosen one of her paintings, but that of a form on a black background. It is not exactly clear what this form is; it distantly recalls the head of a horse, the chess figure of the knight, the leaf of a tropical plant or, in fact, the classical painter's palette - this last an obvious association in the context of an exhibition of paintings. We re-encounter this ambiguous form in Anne Neukamp's first institutional exhibition as *Mischling [Hybrid]* (2012), as an autonomous - and still enigmatic - object within a many-layered, no less enigmatic composition of very differently treated painted surfaces, which have obviously been assembled in this way and not otherwise for considered artistic reasons, as there is no spontaneous expressiveness here in the sense of gestural painting. And yet neither the complex painterly composition nor the precisely contoured, although not identifiable form indicate any kind of 'subject matter'. But because it does not seem to be an abstract painting either, what do we have here? This question also applies to all Neukamp's other recent paintings, of which the most important have been brought together in our exhibition in the Rudolf-Scharpf-Galerie. What do they show? Titles such as *Saboteur*, *Fermate [Fermata]*, *Aussicht [View]* or *Sourdine [Mute]* provide more or less exact indications, but never an answer; they leave what is seen in a realm of inconclusiveness and inexplicability. This openness has frequently and rightly been noted. It stands in particularly interesting contrast to the inviting, often even seductive first impression conveyed by the paintings, with their motifs from popular culture and their complex technique. But is the artist really interested in undermining expectations, in puzzling and unnerving her viewers?

Open Meanings

In a recently published article, Peter Geimer refers to the 'elusiveness' and 'hermeneutic inexhaustibility' so often praised in artworks by critics and curators.¹ 'Such statements', says Geimer, 'follow a simple dramaturgy. First, a very improbable figure is constructed: the backward, pedantic viewer of art, who feels threatened by ambiguity, wishes to pigeonhole everything, demands irrevocable truths from artworks and certainly wants no surprises in a museum. Against the background of this simple-mindedness, the artwork can develop its subversive potential.'²

It may be assumed that Anne Neukamp does not paint for this 'very improbable figure' of the 'pedantic viewer of art', but for an open, thinking

public. Yet even such an audience might succumb to a feeling of perplexity on a closer examination of a painting like *Saboteur*, which shows gigantic metal-coloured fingertips on a pink-clouded background – what kind of a hand is this, what does the implied gesture mean, what are the forms one seems to discern behind the pinky blur?

Isabelle Graw has rightly asked whether Geimer's 'argumentation does not in the end lead to a departure from the topos of the irreducibility of art', which would mean that works of art that don't become entirely accessible would have to be excluded from closer examination or an evaluation of their quality. 'Would this not be premature', Graw continues, 'in the face of artistic works that interest us particularly because they aren't wrapped up in meaning and can't therefore be explained away? How do I distinguish this "good" openness of meaning from questionable obfuscation [...]?'³ Geimer's reply, that the decision must be made 'in the individual case' might not only disappoint those who 'feel threatened by ambiguity'. A first step on the way towards a distinction between openness and obfuscation would not be to leave it at a simple assertion of openness, as so often happens – the fact that Anne Neukamp's paintings are ambiguous can't be denied. But how does she achieve this, and, more interestingly, why does she do it and what is the result of this for our understanding of images?

Painting

Painting has had something of a raw deal in the previous decades – it has been declared obsolete, even dead; it has been revived and, more than any other art form, it has repeatedly been the site of existential battles that have called its meaning and effectiveness into question. For this reason, not least, an extended concept of painting was sought and a media-specific analysis of painted images called for – that is, a consideration of an artwork that does not highlight its technical conditions and qualities of workmanship, but its concept and what is generally described as its 'message'. Painted images, more than photographed or filmed ones, are seen as the direct and personal result of an artistic decision, with which the artist, represented by the work, occupies the same space as the viewer, so to speak. Isabelle Graw speaks of painting as a 'form of the production of signs [...] that is experienced in an extremely personal way. It lies in the indexicality of signs that they are able to tie the knot between product and the absent person of the artist particularly tightly.'⁴ For an artist like Anne Neukamp, who avowedly sets little store in revealing the complex painting process through which her images are created, this tight 'knot' between artist and painting is undoubtedly a special problem. But why does a contemporary artist opt for the artistically overloaded and therefore perhaps conceptually tricky medium of painting?⁵

Anne Neukamp is certainly not one of those artists who make it easy for themselves – but what artist whose work is seriously interesting does that?

And yet I have introduced this apparent platitude, as it can indeed express Neukamp's understanding of the image as a task or a problem. What also seems important to me here is to point out that a painting should not be seen as an illustration of a proposition or an idea; the painting itself is always an object and, as it were, the (provisional) answer to the question of what a painted image can, may, should or even must be today, and how it can persist in the face of other media - particularly the ubiquitous digital ones. What distinguishes a painting from images generated in other ways, apart from its media-specific outer properties?

Hearts, Lips, Skin

An involvement with the numerous other images with which we are continually surrounded is shown in Neukamp's recurrent use of motifs from popular culture, from comics, advertising or magazines, for example. 6 Found motifs - mascots, clouds, mouths, logos, icons and so on - encounter abstract forms, are superimposed, blurred, dissected, abstracted. Causal connections between the different pictorial elements are not offered and can't be inferred. Neither do the always short titles provide any direct information. Rather, they lead the viewer away from an object-related reading; for example, when the portrayal of more or less unidentifiable body parts (or is it part of curtain?) is designated *Fermate* - the German name for a pause sign in music. A composition containing a pink heart-shape is called *Etui* (2012). One's thoughts are thus guided away from the almost dangerously kitschy form of the heart to the principle of the case or capsule, and so to a container that can be related to the complex of forms that interlace with one another - or that overlay one another? Or should they simply be viewed as superimposed painted surfaces?

Anne Neukamp's interest in particular 'types' of images and their connotations is particularly evident in the two paintings last mentioned - *Fermate* and *Etui* (both 2012). If her earlier paintings often contained found - and also historically loaded - motifs, such as mirrors, clouds or curtains, the implied naked skin, the heart, but also the slightly open lips in *Oui* (2011) or the lattice structures reminiscent of fishnet tights in *Aussicht* (2012) are clearly, in a wider sense, seductive motifs, which in the case of the paintings named from 2012 are also painted in fleshy or soft pink tones. One could certainly call the use of classical 'sensuous' motifs and colours risky. By making use of their seductive power as an invitation into the image, so to speak, Neukamp exposes herself and the viewer to the danger of being taken in by the attractiveness of the appetisingly pink visual elements. But her art also consists in constructively dealing with this attractiveness within the respective painting by not demonstratively disrupting, withdrawing or undermining it, but, much more subtly, by relating it as an 'element among elements' to the remaining visual occurrences.

The apparent unambiguousness perceived at first glance gives way to a composition in which all elements, despite their heterogeneity, are given the same relevance within the painting.

Conclusion

What we have before us when we view a painting by Anne Neukamp is a work for which the categories of 'figurative' and 'abstract' are ineffective, as it is quite simply both and has thus overcome this still often-made distinction. Far from wanting to unsettle the viewer with this openness, Neukamp is concerned with identifying and holding - fermata! - the tension between particular motifs and pictorial inventions and with capturing it in the painting. She achieves this by combining very heterogeneous elements into an ostensibly homogeneous whole. Despite all efforts in the direction of a non-media-specific view of images, one is unable to resist the impression that painting is suited to this purpose like no other medium: nowhere else would it be possible to compel elements of very different origin and consistency so consistently onto the same level of depiction and significance, and in this way to both emphasise and question their relevance. The characteristic ambiguities of Anne Neukamp's paintings thus prove to be not so open after all, but rather the coherent visualisation of a complex artistic process.

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1 See Peter Geimer, 'Malerei und Tiefsinn. Die Tuymans-Methode' (with following discussion), *Über Malerei*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Peter Geimer, Berlin 2012, pp. 47-79.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

4 Isabelle Graw, 'Das Versprechen der Malerei. Anmerkungen zu Medienunspezifität, Indexikalität und Wert' (with following discussion), *Über Malerei*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Peter Geimer, Berlin 2012, pp. 15-47, p. 28.

5 It should be remarked that Anne Neukamp also works in the medium of the paper collage, with which she explores similar tasks - the creation of tension between motifs, objects and forms - to those of her paintings. And the possibility of her turning to other media in the course of her artistic development can't of course be ruled out.

6 The artist is undoubtedly aware that this procedure has become one of the most common painterly methods since the pop art of the 1960s at the latest. All the more impressive, therefore, are her very different and distinct results.