

In Search of Lost Painting

“... If a sponge, filled with a great range of colours, is thrown against a wall, it leaves traces in which a beautiful landscape can be seen.

Such traces contain a diversity of inventions
if one is ready to see such things ...”

(Leonardo da Vinci)

“It has become taken for granted that nothing regarding art is self-evident any longer, neither in itself nor in relationship to the whole, and not even with respect to its right to existence”. That is the first sentence in T.W. Adorno’s “Ästhetische Theorie” (“Theory of Aesthetics”, 1969). It records a troublesome fact known from personal experience to anyone who has devoted attention to contemporary art. Only uncertainty is certain in the objects of art. There are no clear-cut answers to such questions as: Can one work in this way? Is one allowed to do this ? Can one stand by this ?

In the twentieth century there were many reasons for abandoning painting and distrusting all art. How should art react adequately to world wars and dictators who shaped global history. How amid a profusion of avantgardes should art avoid the dead-end of repetitions ? Reality demands too much of art just as art asks too much of its public. What is too much is too much. A carousel of ever more fleeting art fashions, accompanied by comprehensive commercialization, finished off what remained. Defiantly continuing to work – without the security of a style or the guarantee of a supportive theme – seems to be the task facing the contemporary artist. Time and again art seeks to be re-invented.

Of course no real artist has allowed himself to be constrained by this shattering diagnosis. In art at least there is life after death. The fact that art has to date always found ways of surviving declarations of its death is one expression of art’s existential vitality. All that has ever been ascertained is a highly vital suspended animation which is refuted by each new work of art.

However it also goes without saying that any artist is affected by all the talk about the impossibility of art. Malevitch is supposed to have said: "If you ask me what art is I can't tell you. If you don't ask me, I know immediately". Having to live and work in a doubt-ridden milieu is simply disruptive. It is probable that an artist's resilience today can also be partly measured in terms of how he or she deals with doubts about art.

Christian Frosch has chosen the solution of permanent experimentation. For several years now he has been pursuing what he calls "research into painting". He started out with idiosyncratically comical investigations of paint brushes and canvas-stretchers. Brushes were cut open as if secrets were to be revealed in their innards. Frosch presents the provisional findings of his investigations pinned down and exhibited in showcases, just like medical specimens. His experiments transform canvas-stretchers from mere background elements into the subjects of a picture. The frame thus appeared as the art itself which it was normally intended to underpin. A roundabout approach to painting replaced painting itself.

This artist has given precedence to the most amazing investigations of the instruments of painting rather than to the actual act of painting. His work centres around "test series" and ever new "experimental procedures". He playfully copies the precision of scientific procedures so as to arrive at "objective" statements about art. In his "colour tests" paint samples from various manufacturers are pressed between pieces of glass and conserved. It thereby became possible to compare colours. The differences were amazing. No one vermilion is the same as another. No Prussian blue gleams like another, etc. A colour's emanation was reduced to its chemical nucleus, but was obviously not lost in this residue.

Now Frosch is presenting findings made during a two-month study period at the Villa Romana in Florence. He once again deployed a method already tried out in

his "Paint Sample" series. Every day at the same time during his stay in Florence Christian Frosch distributed identical amounts of paint on sheets of glass, on each occasion using a different postcard of this art metropolis as a spatula, and then moved this glass across his paper. In these work-processes he made sure that the same procedure was followed time and again. His interest focused on what was left of the paint on the postcards and paper rather than on the remnants on the glass.

The paint and the glass to which it was applied separated when they came into contact with the paper. This detached artistic activity gave rise to astonishingly poetic pictorial discoveries: fantastical products of an artistic procedure which seemed to deliberately deny itself fantasy. Even though these works remain consistently conceptual and absolutely abstract, the outcome comes across as being romantically pictorial. The results of this pseudo-scientific activity are reminiscent of the most delicate drawings of nature or images of landscapes.

There has thus come into existence highly idiosyncratic documentation of Frosch's time in Florence which nevertheless lacks any biographical dimension. This journal of his stay in Florence gives expression to an ongoing search for lost painting. The impersonal procedure has the character of a personal affirmation: above all of defiant insistence on art.

The paper has done the artist's work. Free of the artist's doubts, without any hesitation or questioning, these sheets simply have an aesthetic presence. All of them are similar but none is identical with another. Together they all testify to the passion of this painter who denies himself painting. These material citations are painterly without in fact being the outcome of painting.

Strange though it may seem, the idea behind this experiment, forbidding itself any personal style, was sufficient to endow the results with an astonishingly clear-cut style. An artist is unquestionably moving towards painting here.

Deploying the ruse of reason – or should one say the ruse of unreason – he has allayed his yearning for painting.

This art lives from the tension between the artist and his materials. It develops out of hesitation about painting, out of shying away from the canvas or sheet of paper. His art is a protracted approximation to painting without this ever having really got as far as a painterly gesture to date. This is an art of 'Almost Painting' deriving from a "Nevertheless".

Research into painting as pursued by Frosch is perhaps an absurd but certainly a "Gay Science". At any rate it is far from academic boredom. Of course he is part of the tradition of Concept Art. A trace of Dada, emanating from the history of the avantgarde, plays a part in his activities. Black humour receives expression here in yellow paint. Or in Hans Arp's words: "Sense is nonsense; nonsense is sense".

In his most recent work with buckets of paint, Christian Frosch has radicalized his approach even further. Here the question "Where is the picture?" is answered absolutely positivistically. The picture must be where the paint is. Since paint is delivered in buckets it must be there that the picture is to be found. His idea follows a logic which could have been devised by Karl Valentin. Bernard Frize would at least have found it necessary to put the dried skins of his paint pots on the canvas. To present his art Christian Frosch simply takes the lids off his paint cans, just as other people take off their hats. The bucket of paint does the rest. Like Bernard Frize, Christian Frosch entrusts his art to the material itself. When the paint dries the picture comes into existence with the artist doing (almost) nothing. He doesn't lift a finger or transmit anything to the canvas. That is an ironical revival of Minimalism and Arte Povera, bringing the Ready-Made into the sphere of painting.

Christian Frosch attempts to square the circle as if art were taboo. He pursues the continuation of painting, using pseudo-scientific means in the spirit of romantic belief in the ongoing existence of art. This is painting without painting. If the higher beings whom Sigmar Polke once cited withhold their services, then materials themselves have to speak. Here is an artist who obviously doesn't allow his pleasure in art to be taken away.

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