

Herbert Brandl = Gentle Halle-Schuster and Peter Vedel (1977), Neue Galerie Graz

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1.2-3 (Beilage)

Transavanguardia, Neue Wilde, Neue Malerei: these were the concepts with which, in the eighties, painting rose like a phoenix from the ashes, although it had more than once been declared dead even by painters. Reorientation began within painting. In Austria, Herbert Brandl was adopted as "the leader of a group of young artists" (Wilfried Skreiner, 1991) alongside painters like Schmalix, Anzinger, Mosbacher, Kern, Zitko, Danner and Damisch. The Neue Galerie Graz, managed by Wilfried Skreiner, had then already become a centre from where these artists made their international breakthrough and which accompanied them on their career.

Hence this museum strongly wishes and feels obliged to focus now on one of the most important representatives of this movement. It would be a mistake and most inappropriate, however, to consider Herbert Brandl's great pictorial oeuvre exclusively from a historical angle, i.e. from the theoretical point of view of the eighties. Instead, the focus should be on the potential of painting, or on the visual in general.

The primary place of the visual is the tangible world – without medium. The development of different representational media such as painting, photography, film, narrowed visual experience and later dominated visual consciousness. In this way, panel painting forced itself immediately upon any pictorial concept – being the prime renowned pictorial medium. However, painting has been perceived since then as part of the tangible world. The two poles, i.e. figuration and abstraction, have thus lost their importance. However much Brandl's painting refers to an origin – the landscape – it is as much a meta-lingual

painting, the reference of which is historic painting, representational as well as abstract. Arthur C. Danto said of contemporary painting, that "one can (...) be an abstract painter in the morning, a photo-realist in the afternoon, and a minimalist in the evening". Richter and Polke being good examples, according to him. It is in this context that we must understand why Jan Hoet, in the documenta 9, 1992, placed Brandl opposite Richter. Despite the high-grade emotion and subjectivity, Brandl's painting still features a sound analytic component. So he recognizably resorts to well-known stylistic means, from Informel to Art brut, and to well-known problems like 2D-spatial representation and transparency. The pure methodology of historical abstraction, the clear differences and combats between figurative and abstract painting are no longer decisive, but become mere elements of fundamental pictorial research, become special effects from the history of painting, that can freely be used by any painter. They are no longer part of the metaphysics of painting, but are the basic equipment, the technology of painting. The tool of new abstract painting is a meta-lingual coding, whereby the signifiers of abstractions float freely, like company logos, referring to nothing but the history of painting and modernism itself, from which they may be selected as if from a source of codes, and used playfully and interchangeably. The history of painting and all other codes of the visual universe and the primary visual world (nature) form the action space of Brandl's painting. Without quitting the set of rules, he moves in it rather freely, looking for possibilities, conscious of probable failure. Can one still paint? What can one paint? Has the bourgeois' need of decoration, which makes art, be it by Turner or by Pollock,

'dry up' on the walls, left any chance for panel painting? "(The pictures) are precisely a demonstration of the unstable situation from which they originate." (Julian Heynen).

In his mountain tableaus, his most recent working phase, Brandl clearly illustrates this whole array of questions. In these pictures, the dedicated hiker oscillates between the visible and the perceived, evading any romanticism. His choice of formats supports this insofar as he considers small formats as panels and oversized formats to be pictorial spaces. Herbert Brandl roots his painting very precisely in the sphere where conventional reading does not work any more, but which can still be experienced visually. Co-representation of the un-represented by representing: a most topical challenge. Herbert Brandl has undoubtedly found a way to represent and, at the same time, to represent representation. These representational techniques imply extraordinary formal parallelisms and analogies. The interior sphere of chromatic grammar (trickling, dripping, wiping, etc.) and the external phenomena of the concrete world are brought into correspondence. This is also true of the scales: the large represents itself in the small, and the part in the whole, and vice versa. Visual structures repeat themselves in macro and micro zones. A crystal can look like a mountain, and a mountain like a crystal, a colour stroke like a snowfield, and a meadow like an abstract colour field. Figuration and abstraction are a question of interpretation, of the participation of the observer.

This overview of Herbert Brandl's work can only be seen adequately if one detaches it from its original context of the eighties. To continue to interpret him within the framework

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of this movement would mean doing him an injustice. Since then, Brandl has had exhibitions with renowned painters of the nineties: Adrian Schiess, Christopher Wool, Franz West, amongst others, who, just like David Reed, cannot be considered as Neue Wilde either. The positions of these painters are of as much importance for Brandl's work as the Neue Malerei position of the eighties.

Peter Weibel who, together with Herbert Tasquill, was one of Herbert Brandl's teachers, wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition *Pittura/Immedia* (Neue Galerie Graz, 1995): "Abstract painting does not only check its environment in an abstract manner, but also, very concretely, its real context, its connection with life. The spatial and objective context of their painting does not mean arbitrary expansion, but an interconnection with life". The artistic experiences Brandl made with other pictorial host media, from postcard to video, as well as with the medium of music – in the eighties, Brandl was a member of the New Wave groups "Wirr" and "Dumpf" – converge in an intertextuality of painting which reconcile the historical definition of painting as a medium with the modern questioning of painting as a medium.

Thus the exhibition is as much a retrospective as an outlook on painting, of which this overview shall give evidence.

Günther Holler-Schuster, Peter Weibel