REGEN PROJECTS

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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A MEDIUM UNDER DIFFERENT CONDITIONS
On Silke Otto-Knapp
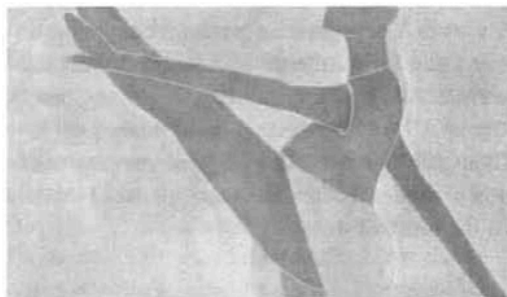
Some works elude the widespread assumption that painting is fully obsolete by employing aesthetic lightness. Silke Otto-Knapp's paintings are deeply rooted in the history of the medium, yet they go beyond it.

Otto-Knapp finds her sujets foremost in the history of modern dance, as well as in the tradition of landscape and architectural depictions. Her most recent pictures are equally fragile and dynamic. By employing a specific technique, they raise the question as to the procedure of painting itself and additionally establish links to feminist art of the 1960s.

Silke Otto-Knapp's work provides plenty of evidence for the claim the present issue champions: that painting is not what is at issue in painting. For although this London-based artist's oscillating and shimmering watercolors and gouaches may seem unencumbered by the severities of the canonical critique of painting, the references visible in them to techniques of dance, graphic art and design cannot be smoothly aligned with exclusive ambitions for the genre. The way Otto-Knapp's visual language enacts painting's struggle with a post-classical artistic praxis – which is to say, a praxis that works across genres and media – thus reveals the criterion of specificity to be arbitrary and compelling at once. A form of painting that appears repeatedly in temporally distant phases of Otto-Knapp's work derives its effect from densely layered areas of silvery watercolor, frequently with a gouache finish; sometimes, thus in "Single Figure (silver)" (2005) and "Two fig-

ures (white)" (2006), this technique is at once the painting's subject. Seen in this light, her pictures, mostly small and medium formats, seem designed to counteract the expressive value of color by means of kinetic-phenomenological effects.[1]

We might interpret such effects, which are based on a repetitive procedure of washing off and "reconstructing" (Otto-Knapp) pictorial layers, as a decidedly painterly equivalent to Pop and Minimal art's responses to the problem of color:[2] the problem, that is to say, that color continues to be tied up with the symbolism, intentions and associations with which iconographic and expressionist traditions charged it. What we have here, then, would be an aesthetic reference to the manifestations of a post-classical modernity that was to shake the leading role the institution accorded to painting. Yet the reader who believes he recognizes in this process an irreversible relativization of painting's claim to cultural significance ought to be aware not only of its attempt, apparent in the (denaturalizing) "neutrality" of color, to hold its ground against the image industry, but also of how this attempt is in concert with that industry's addiction to stimulants and affects.[3] From this perspective, it would seem logical to derive literally reflective monochromy from the phenomenological and pop-cultural material rhetoric of the avant-garde of the 60s, for it was the latter that rehabilitated the "ultramodern" preference for mirrors, crystals, and reflections, which had been repressed by the primacy of visibility in 40s and 50s realism and expressionism.[4] This modernism-critical movement seems to be what the puzzling play between light and shadow, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence aims at that appears in Otto-Knapp's paintings and that provides one possible motivation for the formally simplified motifs that populate them: ballet dancers of both genders (e. g., in "Figures and mirrors", 2007), stage designs (e. g., in "Stage)", 2007), costumes (e. g., in "Costumes, 2008), interiors (e. g., in "Figure by window", 2008), park landscapes (e. g., in "Garden", 2007).

As Tom Holert argues in "Figurative Language", an instructive essay about the artist's work, it is the optical sensationalism of these watercolors and gouaches constructed from multiple pictorial layers that reduces the realism of the representation to the automatism of the color technique it employs. The use of watercolor, thus Holert, impairs our ability to fix the referential image by virtue of its immanent tendency to produce aleatory, amorphous, and anti-figurative blots.[5] If this approach suggests that the artist undertakes to objectivate the process of artistic production by means of the act of painting, then Otto-Knapp's painting "It's automatic" (2007), a composition shimmering in hues of silver and gold that shows a puppet-like ballet dancer in an interior, comments on this undertaking with subtle irony by connecting painterly technique and the choice of subject. What might look like mannerist emphasis on the ephemeral and over-the-top is thus explained by an experimental approach that at once also becomes thematic as a discipline of the body burdened by the conventions of (high) culture. Especially with a view to the recurrent motif of the dancer, a literal condition seems to be inscribed upon the conjunction of painterly technique and pictorial subject, that of permanent exercise: an aspect highlighted by the title of Otto-Knapp's 2009 exhibition at the Modern Art Oxford, "Present time exercise" (at once also the title of one of her pictures). The invitation card and the catalogue cover show a 1940s photograph of Mary Wigman's dance studio; its emptiness at once also recalls the gym Yvonne Rainer's 1972 film "Lives of Performers" stages as an interface between the private and professional lives of her ensemble. The reference is significant, because it is Rainer's choreographic conception, with its repetitive rhetoric of everyday bodily movements, to which Otto-Knapp explicitly refers in a series of paintings such as "Single figure (Yvonne)" (2006). As Rainer's first film, located on the threshold between performance and cinema, demonstrates, this rhetoric implies the structural indistinguishability of rehearsal and performance, of process of

production and work, of techniques of presence and media representation. We might recognize another analogy with Otto-Knapp's pictorial method in the equivalence of intuitive, accidental, found and staged poses characteristic of Rainer's choreographies – an equivalence that, according to Jacques Rancière's theorem of the "aesthetic regime", results from a de-hierarchization of genres, media and subjects that is immanent to modernity and that renders the distinctions between the arts based on criteria of realist and abstract visual languages meaningless. It is thus this tendency of a modern critique of representation, radicalized by minimalist choreography, that Otto-Knapp's citation of the motif of the ballet dancer stages as a way for painting to interpret figuration as a form of representation emancipated both from the predominance of realism and from its constitutive antagonism against abstraction: on the basis of a relation between pictorial production and the body that is neither actionist nor conceptual but organized in choreographic fashion.

For instance, the "Upside-Downs" – diagrammatic-looking works that, thus in "Two figures (handstand)" (2006), suggest a de-hierarchization of up and down, right and left – employ "hieroglyphic"[6] horizontals, verticals, and diagonals to create a stereometric impression. And yet another aspect points to the structural equality of method and subject implicit in Rainer's choreographic conception that seems characteristic of Otto-Knapp's pictorial technique as well: the simultaneity of fragment-like pose and diegetic movement permits the beholder to perceive the individual painting in a sequential relationship with other paintings, despite the absence of serial modules. That is the case even for works that differ significantly in the choice of subjects and colors. For instance, "Two figures (facing)" (2005), "Two figures (leaning)" (2006) and "Figure (diagonal)" (2008) translate the geometrical vocabulary of minimalist dance into a linearist syntax of figure and ground, while the constructivist transparency of the graphic line undergoes graphical ornamentalization in the paintings

"Group (Les Noces)" (2007) and "Rehearsal for Les Noces, first tableau" (2008), which are based on photographs of Bronislava Nijinska's 1923 choreography for the Russian Ballet – as though the painting were dissolving into a temporary projection screen of light and shadow. According to Holert, the "Rorschach-like symmetrical pattern"[7] in the "Les Noces" series transposes the automatism of production onto the automatism of perception, engendering an aesthetic effect that counteracts the fixation of iconographical focal points, shifting the beholder's attention toward the sequential interactivity between the motifs and images and the media-technological conditions of their being beheld – as though it were possible, by applying principles of abstract dance to pictorial syntax, to reveal a structural equivalent of the beholder's spatial and temporal horizon of perception (of himself). Such transpositions of techniques of production onto methods of the aesthetics of perception, then, suggest that Otto-Knapp practices painting with those instruments of abstraction that, in the avant-gardes, were apt to overcome the rationalism and subjectivism of expressive and figurative iconographies on the basis of materials and techniques capable of objectivation only in the act of reception.

One might accordingly think that Silke Otto-Knapp's delicate visual language eludes the canonical discourse of the crisis in painting because it has internalized the blow that (post-)Duchampianism once sought to deal it, and has internalized it in a way that enables it to reintroduce even the sort of iconographies whose legitimacy was precisely at stake: iconographies that, drawing on Florine Stettheimer's and Henri Matisse's studio and interior paintings, revive the mannerist-celebratory dissolution of the wall between art and decoration that recalls the aesthetic of ultramoderne as well as the avant-garde project of social design. Stage-like interiors such as those in "Girls in grey" (2005) and "Paint and Powder" (2007) ostensibly serve not the exclusive purpose of surface-design but the perspectival transparency of these surfaces toward spaces located between the

private and public spheres that attest to a feminine sociality. As in Stettheimer, this project implies an aggressive commitment to the inseparability of art from the aesthetics of merchandise and everyday life. For instance, the colors, patterns and cuts that fluidly transform into one another in "Group (Dior 2)" (2008) and "Group (purple dress)" (2009) take recourse to the tradition of "fashioning" already invoked by Baudelaire, a tradition that would later form the common ground for the counter-avant-garde Susan Sontag called *camp*. It was from the interweaving between "fine" and "applied" arts, between the styles of high and commodity cultures, that artists such as Stettheimer drew the aesthetic inspiration for works that bear witness to a history of modernity different from the unbroken patrilinear and heteronormative one. The motif of the ballet dancer, interpreted by Otto-Knapp on the basis of historic and contemporary choreographies, can thus also be seen in a gender-critical perspective on a tradition in painting that – thus in Edgar Degas – reveals in the misogynistic stereotyped representation of the female body a profoundly ambivalent attitude toward the industrialization of modern lifestyle and the role art plays in it. Such ambivalence, which would also find exemplary expression in painting's contradictory relationship with photography and film, permits us to trace the ambiguity suggested by Otto-Knapp's pictorial layers not to a distinct and intrinsic value but to a quality of color that is at once referential and unstable. This very dynamism that dematerializes and rematerializes color seems to incorporate the interdependency between painting and the surfaces of technical media, such as photography, that the artist employs as templates for her improvisations. The convergence of post-classical media technology and pictorial procedure manifested in Otto-Knapp's painting would thus seem to have found a way to stake painting's claim to cultural significance without still, or again, having to rely on its institutional role as the leading medium, which it explicitly calls into question.

(Translation: Gerrit Jackson)

Notes

1   See Tom Holert, "Figurative Language", in: *Artforum*, January 2007, p. 235: "Any encounter with Silke Otto-Knapp's new paintings inevitably becomes a kinetic affair."
2   See Holert on this point, ibid., p. 237.
3   The poet and painter Mina Loy would write in the magazine *The Blind Man*, published in response to the scandal surrounding Duchamp's "Fountain": "Only artists and serious critics can look at a greyish stickiness on smooth canvas." Mina Loy, "The Artist and the Public" (1917), in: Manifesto: A Century of Isms, ed. by Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2001, p. 333.
4   See Robert Smithson, "Ultramoderne", in: *Arts Magazine*, no. 42 (1967), pp. 31–33, repr. in: The Writings of Robert Smithson. Essays with Illustrations, ed. by Nancy Holt, New York: New York UP, 1979, pp. 48–51.
5   See Holert, "Figurative Language", op. cit., p. 236.
6   See Catherine Wood, "Lipstick, powder and paint," in: "Silke Otto-Knapp. Present Time Exercise", exh.cat., Modern Art Oxford, London: Walther Koenig, 2009, p. 19.
7   See Holert, "Figurative Language", op. cit., p. 236.