

Of phenomenological reflections, dematerialized things and the recognition of one's own existence. Janna Oltmanns in conversation with René Wirths.

Since the late nineties, you have predominantly painted objects, following a very strict formal concept: Simply put, these things are enlarged, restrained within the confines of the canvas, painted against a white background, frontally or in profile, and ostensibly realistic. Despite an apparent narrowness of concept, within it you have played again and again with different possibilities. What has made it so exciting for you to move within this framework for so long?

The things are simply there and thus available at any time. We live in a material world. So the existence of things shapes our experience to a great extent. We need only open our eyes to find a feast of perception: shapes, colors, meanings, and, in between and just as important, space. I also paint portraits from time to time. In doing so, I always have to deal with my own psyche and that of the other person, in series also with sociological factors. In contrast, I experience an object as something somehow abstract, separate from me. I often feel this distance as an advantage. I certainly perceive things as a mirror of my own life, but I don't have to think so much about what image of society I want to portray when I paint them. Images of people and society are constantly changing; the world of things remains seemingly immanent in its essence. As a rather analytical person who reflects upon the world, I can focus on observing things in the world and on life at the same time as retreating into contemplation. In the past, I myself did not know exactly why I painted objects. You could not really call it a "concept" yet. It was just an idea. But I already felt that there was a lot to experience. I usually learn by doing and trying things out, and then develop concepts from this experience and reflection on the practical processes, so

rather inductively. And the pictures were not necessarily painted quickly. So it makes sense for me to deal with an idea over a longer period of time in order to condense it more and more, to be able to penetrate it intellectually. For a long time, my focus was very much on the things themselves, although it was important to me early on that all the formal means of the picture form a meaningful and logical unity: For example, the boundaries of the object always defined those of the picture plane and vice versa. And so, to this day, the sum of my observations about objects and images corresponds to how the elements of each have condensed in a painting. Like a sculptor, but using an additive not subtractive technique, I work my way from the rough to the fine, layer by layer, until the painting is just as exciting up close as it is from a distance. For a long time, I felt like a silent observer, very disciplined and patient, but the monastic austerity and calmness I had chosen for a certain phase of my life eventually became too confining. Too much concept prevents intuition.

The new direction you took a few years ago is not a break. Your signature style remains unmistakable, but among the most obvious changes are the colorful backgrounds and the grown space around the things. How did that come about and what changed for you in your work?

It took a step back to move forward, so again more playfulness, openness, trust in improvisation - and just intuition. So the slow shift in my phenomenological focus—away from the thing and toward the image and its expanding possibilities, which began a few years ago—was necessary to keep the processes in the studio alive. I have to keep realigning and adapting these processes to my needs. I don't question the paintings of my past; I just expand the possibilities for myself.

But the need for change doesn't come out of nowhere, of course, and it wasn't new to me either: before, during, and even after my studies, I went through a lot of different phases, went here and there, dealt with Futurism and Cubism for a long time in a very

practical way, then with Martin Kippenberger and Gerhard Richter. But I always returned to *things*, and after each interruption my approach was more mature.

It was only about 17 years ago, when I was already in my mid-to-late thirties, when I made the decision to stick with it. For a long time I thought that "sticking with it" meant diving deeper and deeper into similar processes, but that was only true for a while. Namely until I once again became aware of my freedom to make new decisions at any time. "Sticking with it" should not have to be something static, otherwise life would be just as static. But I want a life in flow. The continuous searching and expansion became part of a more open concept. And it's really a challenge to always enable new paths and, at the same time, remain recognizable. Of course, I am also interested in whether or not and how my view is shared, not least how I view myself and my images. Today, I no longer need to question myself fundamentally, but I keep questioning my status in society, in my family, in the studio. The colored backgrounds that I have been using for a few years now have led me out of the reduced austerity of the years before. They are a commitment to painting and increasingly emphasize the pictorial character over the depicted object. I also no longer constantly paint new things but rather always the same—also because I have digested and internalized them so frequently that I know them almost by heart. This allows me to devote much more of my perception to the picture and painting. The "what is in the picture" is therefore no longer so central; the "how something is in the picture" is becoming more important. A lot has changed in other ways as well: Color is given a lot of space, writing has disappeared and the structures on the surface are becoming increasingly independent. This happens during painting—out of the processes—and it makes them more unpredictable. Often the paintings turn out completely different from what I had imagined. I have never been a storyteller, have always rather tried to look at the world and life structurally—namely, as a whole. My paintings are primarily there to be looked at. I want to create small universal universes of perception that are self-sustaining. At the end of my life, but only then, I want to be able to let things go completely.

You have never used photo templates; your paintings have never been photorealistic. You said in the beginning that the thing itself is abstract for you. When you look at the thing, “incorporate” it in the working process, and the painting condenses, then another degree of abstraction emerges. This is true of your earlier paintings and especially your more recent ones.

I don't reject photorealism in principle. People like Gertsch, Richter, and Close have shown how to fill that style conceptually and visually to great effect. But my processes are simply different: Thus, while I paint objects, a transfer from three to two dimensions takes place. If we add the dimension of time, which is condensed and stored in an image-immanent state, there are even four. Finally, the lighting situation in the studio is also constantly changing, not to mention my moods. So I don't paint a single state, which I would do if I were painting from a photograph, but rather many states, which in turn merge into one state. So, unlike the photo painter, I have to understand and interpret the object as such in its spatial interpenetration. Painting such a picture is therefore a completely different achievement of visualization and abstraction; a kind of synthesis of subject and object emerges. These processes are as physical as they are mental, and an immediate attitude towards the world and to life develops from them. Nevertheless, I am not quite sure what is actually happening with my pictures recently. I do not literally abstract the object in order to get closer to it, but I use it in its colorfulness, form, spread across space, to paint a picture. So I am obviously concerned with a general essence of appearance and being in the world, which I can look for in the object as well as in the picture. The thing is still very present in the painting, but I almost don't look at it anymore while I'm painting it. I read the form of the object in the world already like an abstract picture. And, as I said: my long-term plan is to eventually emancipate the image completely from this thing, without however—and this is also important to me—wanting to turn the image into an object itself. This vision gives me orientation and each of my paintings and each creative phase the context of a larger dimension.

You want to increasingly emancipate the painted from the object; things serve you primarily as the basis for pictorial phenomena. So is the selection of things that you deal with in painting over weeks or months of secondary importance today?

No. That would be a misunderstanding. Only relatively has the thing in the picture lost importance. Unlike in the past, when it played a more important role, today everything in the picture stands side-by-side on an equal footing. Everything is mutually dependent, nothing is coincidental, everything is consciously decided, even though much arises during the processes: Even when sketching, I adapt the form of the object to the arithmetic of the picture rather than subordinating the format of the picture to the form of the object, as I used to. The background color often changes, the structures of reflections offer me a large field to play with, even the dissolution of the outer form is no longer taboo. The selection of things is just as important as it always was, if only because they continue to be recognized as such. Only what I intend to do with the things in the picture changes. I adapt it to my needs. The selection of things will only really play a subordinate role when there are no longer any to recognize.

In her wonderful essay The Drama of Perception. Looking at Morandi,¹ the novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt claims that the first aspect of a thing that would disappear in its extensive contemplation would be the word for the thing. The titles of your paintings simply name the objects you paint. Is "the word for the thing" important so that the object doesn't slip away from you as you paint?

The precision that Siri Hustvedt finds through the use of language for her observations is something I also seek in my paintings. Already for this reason, I am naturally concerned that the perception of my pictures is not exhausted with the naming of terms. However: **I have long thought** about whether I should, and if yes, how I can title the pictures. The picture is the result of a process, the tautological title

naming the thing is already part of the setting. The very term “representational painting” denotes a contradiction. I want to tease this out even more, and so it is actually an **intention** of mine that the object slips away and becomes more and more subordinate to the logic of the image. In the “LIQUIDS” series, on which I have been **working on periodically** for over three years and which was designed from the beginning to metamorphose, abstracting tendencies toward dissolution that are already very visible. Yet I name them after the liquids in the glasses. So what am I concerned with? With this liquid itself? With the glass as an actual as well as symbolic vessel for all possible life juices, the three represented aggregate states: solid, liquid, and gaseous, or more about the picture arithmetic and the optics, the conceptually logical as well as pleasurable handling of color, surface and form? At some point, the title may become a question, because the picture will hardly reveal the strongly abstracted object. But that's more of an interesting side issue, because I'm not **primarily interested in** concepts when I paint; I paint what I want to see.

At the beginning of your thing paintings, you could hardly imagine leaving the path, with all its processes. Intuition became increasingly important in your work. Did you also redefine your own sense of freedom with it?

Sometimes I feel free and sometimes not, like most of us. Nothing fundamental has changed about that. Artistic freedom can certainly have many qualities. For a long time I have considered the decision to paint things starkly against a white background as freedom. I created a framework for myself within which I wanted to explore my possibilities. The freedom thus consists in not always having to be on the look out for a new approach. It's like deciding to have a monogamous relationship. And I realized at some point after many years that my idea of a framework that I set for myself became too narrow and then decided to change this set-up. In my life, phases of consolidation and growth have always alternated. Both have their justification; everything in its time. Both should be possible at any time, always according to need.

At the moment, several parallel strands can be found happening in my studio: quite realistic thing-paintings hang there directly next to rather abstracted ones; here and there a real breakout, which could lead to new directions at some point ... or could simply be discarded again. By freedom I mean taking responsibility for oneself, being aware of one's needs and making decisions on this basis. I feel it is an incredible privilege to have been born at this time in this place—where, up until now, life has progressed because of the possibility of making relevant decisions for my own future.

*At the beginning you said that you work not very fast—which is obvious with this form of painting. **And** you refer not only to the speed of your craft, but also to the spiritual transfer that simultaneously takes place. This time-intensive work is necessary for you and thus part of your freedom. Does this take courage? And do you sometimes feel restricted in your freedom in light of this fast-moving art world, especially in a market that's always seeking new goods—which you as a painter have to serve, since you want to make a living from your art?*

My work takes its time, and you can see it. It used to be quite different: in the 1980s and '90s, I painted a picture every day. I had an insane output, and half the storage shelves in the art-school studio were filled with my paintings only, even though there were eight of us in the studio. I allowed myself to do everything. A lot of exciting things came out of it, but also a lot of junk. And it simply became too much for me, too arbitrary, and I could no longer judge what was really good and what was not.

Last but not least, immediately after I finished my studies, I had an epileptic seizure that showed me my physical limits. That was a real shock. But in the end, I used the time to realize where I stood, what I could do, and what I couldn't do. I needed to slow down and concentrate, because I always wanted to grow old as healthily as possible. That's how I got back to painting things—still life! For me, authenticity has always been the magic formula for a successful life. A good picture does not

necessarily need good painting, and good painting does not have to result in a good picture. I still wanted both, and both should be directly related to each other, as my life processes and those in my studio. I live my paintings, so to speak. And my pictures live me. And therefore I want to make them myself. And because I don't run a medium-sized business today, like some of my artistic colleagues, my pictures don't have the appearance of products. They will probably remain rather rarities and unique specimens. I see that as a strength, a view apparently shared by some. Art does not function in a vacuum, just as the individual cannot live well without companionship. I work with several galleries, so I'm also somehow wrapped up in this system, which can sometimes be criticized. There are always given frameworks. That could be the essence of our lives. I personally feel this—sometimes in one way and sometimes another. One thing is certain: each framework offers an infinite number of possibilities.

The title of this book is Zeug (Stuff). Your big solo show at Kunsthall Rotterdam in 2011 was called The Thing Itself, your first solo show at Galerie Michael Haas in 2007 was called Dinge (Things). What is behind these terms for you?

The book and exhibition titles allow me to playfully make references between my paintings and my approach or way of thinking. The German title of this book, *Zeug (Stuff)* can be read as a whole or as parts of words. In addition to the individual things and groups of things it names, there are also the verbs “zeugen” (procreate), „bezeugen“ (testify) und „erzeugen“ (produce) sowie den „Erzeuger“ (procreator/producer) den „Zeugen/Zeugin“ (witness) und das „Zeugnis“ (testimony, certificate); all terms that I can relate in some way to my processes. The terms you mention play, on one hand, with profanity as well as with the meaning given to them by great German philosophers of modernity. For Immanuel Kant, the *thing-in-itself* is on a level separated from us humans, ultimately inaccessible. He sees it as the real state of the world, which we can perceive only subjectively. Edmund Husserl, on the other

hand, thought that he could come closer to the essence of things by observing them phenomenologically, i.e. as precisely and unprejudiced as possible, preferably by excluding all prior knowledge. His student Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, said that the *Zeug* (stuff)—for example, *Werkzeug* (tool)—would still exist but would be robbed of its “*Eigentlichkeit*” (authenticity) if one would not use it in this way, but would only “gawk” at it. I am more of a phenomenological gawker, and I am actually also concerned with an essence behind the existence of things. In my paintings, my phenomenological observations and contemplations of the object merge with those of the image, the painting, and ultimately the *processes themselves*. These are, as I said, very contemplative and therefore embodied in a withdrawn, rather spiritualized ductus. Nevertheless, my paintings also have something very physical; after all, they deal with the world. So I accept the existence of things, literally celebrate them when I paint them. But I also alienate them, dematerialize them, and reconstitute them as pictorial phenomena. I make “gawk at stuff”, so to speak. I seek knowledge about my own existence in the world through visual sensory perception and handicraft. I agree with physics and earthly boundaries and laws. But as a painter, I am also a metaphysician. I don't know if I have faith, but I am puzzled every day that I am alive. And that's exactly how I want to stand in front of my own paintings: puzzled. By the way, other titles of exhibitions were *Nature Morte* and *Diesseits und Jenseits* (The World and the Hereafter). I look for the big in the small, behind the surface the depth and in the immanent the transcendent. In my life, many people close to me have already died. Death and our finiteness in infinity are therefore very present to me. Painting is always also therapeutic.

Your paintings are by no means "sober" or "objective," which may well appear so at the first glimpse. They carry much of your personality, your thinking, your life. Now and then, you appear as an actual reflection on one of the objects. But mostly you renounce this way of revealing yourself.

The fact that my pictures at first seem very "factual" is probably due to the subject matter itself, but also to the gesture, which is rather unpretentious. What is a painting without an author? I give all that I am. The level of meaning of clearly visible self-reflections has nevertheless left my pictures for the time being. When cleaning up, something always has to give way in order to make room for something new.

¹ Siri Hustvedt, "The Drama of Perception" (2008), in: *Siri Hustvedt: Living, Thinking, Looking* (London, 2012), p. 232-244.