

VOYEURS OF ABSENCE

„The child was still looking in his direction. But it was difficult to say precisely whether it was watching him, or something else, or nothing in particular; his eyes seemed to be opened almost too wide to be able to perceive an isolated object, unless it was something very large. Surely the child was just looking at the sea.“ Alain Robbe-Grillet: *The Eye-Witness*

Absence is absence and everything else is everything, else – this paraphrase of one of Ad Reinhardt's most famous pronouncements („Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else“) came into my mind when I was looking at Ute Lindner's work on the Galerie Beckers stand at Art Cologne '95. The faded red felt wall covering was too large for the central wall space, about 6 m by 3 m, in the modest trade fair stand, and so it was rolled up in the left-hand corner, so that you could not see how long it actually was. You had to come closer to see that the red of the cloth gradually changes: the faded, slightly yellowing edges around the darker rectangular areas of different sizes turn out to be parts of the wall that have been exposed to the light for longer periods. The wall covering comes from the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe picture gallery in Kassel, which is being converted at the time of writing. The pictures and their little label panels used to cover the darker areas and protect them from the light, thus leaving traces of their edges and of lettering in the faded red felt. The effects of the light have made the lettering illegible, and so it is almost impossible to establish anything about the identity of the pictures by anything other than their format. The various shades of red overlap, which shows that the gallery had been rehung twice or three times: a number of large and small pictures had hung there before the last set, but we can't find out what they were either. Research could probably discover more, but there is absolutely nothing at all to be seen here now. Nothing is represented. The only thing that can be identified visually is the fact of an earlier presence of some unspecified pictures (present neither here nor now), simply on the basis of the marks made by light on a piece of faded red felt. And yet a large number of visitors to the show did stop, curious and with a sense of amazement, to look at this „nonrepresentation“, at a wall that was simply covered in red.

It was as though the red felt exuded a fascination, a „desire to see“, of the kind that cultic images must have had, and that is precisely because there is nothing or almost nothing to be seen here. It is also impossible to presume that anything, perhaps of a religious nature, has been mysteriously hidden behind the red felt.

What we have here, offering itself so uninhibitedly and deliberately to the eye, illustrates something missing, the lack of anything visible. It provides that „appearance of distance“ from very close quarters that Walter Benjamin once used to define aura. However, it does leave some questions open: does this phenomenon occur because the works of art are absent (with the fabric testifying to the loss of aura, both as circumstantial evidence and proof of what has been lost)? Or does the red felt Wall covering itself acquire such presence that it bestows the quality of an aura, because the fabric is a medium for shifting and dislocating art contexts (for example from the museum into the trade fair hall; from art history into post-history; from metaphor to reality)? Has this red cloth emancipated itself from the work of art as a trace of historical circumstances, or has it constituted itself as a work of art only because of this? Does the significance lie in what we see or in the fact that we do not see (something)?

Or does the effect derive from the fact that asking questions like this is so topical, that this work presents us so accurately with the current situation in art in general?

Post-modernism's playful pluralism, its diversity of styles, meanings and possibilities, seems increasingly to be a pluralism of loss: Sedlmayr's „loss of the middle“ was recently followed by the „loss of distance“, the „loss of identity“, of history, of the body ... Space, the real, the object and the work of art fell victim to the intoxication of an „aesthetic of disappearing“, along with the concepts of quality, beauty and innovation. The death of Modernism has been consistently proclaimed, the „last pictures“ that were conjured up and the „pictures after the last picture“ were in no way inferior to the „end of art history“. Discussion about art developed into a diverse complaint about sense deficits, about the lack of meaning. But at the same time there were complaints about extravagance and excess. The flood of images and the hunger for images draw strength from each other, the removal of the world's corporeality corresponds with its reification, with the devastation and immaterialization of the superabundance of things and consumer goods. Not that a virtue was made of necessity: asceticism was declared to be a luxury item, and it is no longer possible to differentiate between refined techniques of concentration and meditation and those of distraction and entertainment.

We are also robbed of any kind of familiar certainty in art: while hitherto the 'nature' of art was explained exclusively by seeming and appearance, and was defined in showing itself and coming to light, Peter Weibel sees the new kind of art as absence or ab-essence. In his view there is not just an aesthetic of absence but also an aesthetic of figures, forms, scenes and stations and allegories of absence. Praesentio and absentio are always played out and alluded to against and for each other. Art today does not come into being until it is no longer there: emptiness, the void, things that have disappeared, that are not available, invisible, lost – everything is absent to the same extent. Everything is art and is not.

But – is absence a void, a nothing, a zero-point aesthetic?

It is well known that the whole abstraction of modern art is based on reductive processes, on taking away to the point of eradicating objects, the work, the subject in favour of a concept or context. Though what has remained as a result cannot be defined as nothing; nothing represented and expressed is still more than nothing. Even the most purist, radical and minimal works of art, or those that explode the definition of the work and reduce it to something that happens in time – an event – count on an experience, an effect that is perceived sensually but not necessarily visually. Absence is certainly a void, but also more than that: absence is that unity of place and time in which something fundamental is missing – something that was certainly there and is not there at the moment. But what – or whoever is absent is unique, is important to us, cannot be replaced or exchanged, is missed, lamented, expected and hoped for ... But it is equally possible that we become aware of the fact that an object, a person, a situation or an environment existed earlier only by the fact of its absence. This can mean loss as well as gain.

Beyond this, absence is the characteristic and theme that was always immanent in art. The three empty thrones of the Phrygian goddess Cybele; Penelope waiting, for the departed Odysseus; Orpheus losing Eurydice; the elegiac song of the abandoned shepherd; Dante's faithful search for Beatrice and Petrarch's despair at the death of Laura – to mention only a few of the missing presences of absences that mark the topoi of art – and it is always the tragic, the event that is distant in time and space, that awakens nostalgia and memories or rouses hope of a return of paradise or arcadia after long years of wandering, waiting and remorse.

The era of the absence of God in which the divine element of the Pietà became a question for art and art became an earthly comfort and substitute for religion started with the lament for Christ after he was taken down from the Cross. Since that time absence has occurred not in the fantastic, not in a Utopia shifted forwards or backwards, but in reality. The requirements for such an absence are a presence that first notices the absence and another that has left traces in a real place, and is missing. These requirements are now at the forefront in the sphere of the human condition: remembering, feeling, thinking and observing.

For this reason it is not surprising, that works of art dating from the 1960s, which were concerned above all with self-reference, iconoclasm and abstraction, were charged with a certain anthropomorphism. A quality of presence that can be best tapped in the feeling of missing something („as a person is left“). It is an absence that has lost its magic, but is nevertheless very potent.

Ute Lindner's ability as an artist, her (self-)confident way of using the work described to formulate a questionable quality that is very appropriate to contemporary art, does not lie in completing, a work skilfully, in making and constructing. Here nothing was made, not even negated, not destroyed, rubbed out, caused to disappear ... Every act of doing is absent, even those deeds that are seen as strategies for an aesthetic of absence in modern art.

This kind of involvement by the artist in her work is extremely minimal – it consists much more of analysing art, of knowing about the context of art, about the difficulty of still wanting to make art today even though both the work of art and the art context are exhausted, although everything has already been done and seen: being an artist in a world that suffers more and more from overproduction and excess, rather than from the opposite. The intelligent idea that doing nothing effectively proves the productive potential of what is already there, but at the same time ironizes it, indicating that values should be investigated further.

A wall covering taken from a museum and presented at an art fair may not become a cult object but is not an ordinary, everyday, functional, anonymous thing – not a mass-produced article. Thanks to the unassuming function as a practical object discharged by the fabric in its art-immanent surroundings, it acquired its (added) value when it 'moved' into a different art environment precisely by showing that it had completed its useful life. The felt is a genuine object taken from a certain historical time and place. Its significance is not religious, but purely historical. Nevertheless it conveys something precious, like a reliquary.

Ute Lindner has not invoked any art, present or absent, and has not complained about any loss. Instead she provokes questions about the value of what is available: she asks whether it is possible that art history – as we perceive it today as measurable time created by mankind – can be as valuable, precisely because of its transience, as the immeasurably eternal, absolute time of the divine used to be. And in doing this Ute Lindner simply shows us what she has perceived with her alert and attentively artistic eye: she did not look for the reality of art in absence, but thought it through and asserted it in what she saw. She has asserted the reality of art. Reception can become productive, art (history) can have an autopoietic effect in self-observation and -reflection.

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