

Jörg Heiser

*Things that Matter
in Contemporary Art*

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they're doing. Be it industrious copycats in the slipstream of the Leipzig School or other gems (cute high-gloss porn and neo-romantic retro remain popular), these pictures will probably be bought like ill-fitting clothes by someone who feels awkward leaving a store empty-handed after trying things on for two hours. If there's one characteristic of the avant-garde that is worth salvaging, it's the intransigent rattling at the bars of things long established. This is something which neither tautological reflection on the world of painting itself nor mere recourse to photographed and filmed reality can even begin to replace.

Reproduction versus Uniqueness I: Gerhard Richter, Glenn Brown (Feat. Tomma Abts)

Despite being in huge demand, there *are* paintings that still have a spark of self-doubt in them, as if asking: Am I really needed? But let's assume for the moment that painting doesn't have any such problems of legitimization. Regarding a conscious approach both to competition from technically reproduced pictures and to the history of painting itself, there's no need to worry about either Gerhard Richter or Glenn Brown. But regarding the productive aspect of self-doubt in their work, a different question poses itself: What is the relationship between the actions and decisions that shape a painting and our own actions and decisions as physical and social beings? I'm not concerned here with a direct, linear link between a painter's biography and psychology and the way he or she paints. Nor am I talking about the idea that has existed since Impressionism, if not before, of a "literal translation" of the finest nuances of perception into painterly marks.

The abstract painting of Tomma Abts is a good place to begin outlining this issue in more detail. As critic Jan Verwoert has pointed out in an essay on her work, the question of the decision-making process in painting cannot be satisfactorily answered by pointing to either the rational intention or the irrational intuition of the painter, as both falsely imply a congruence between starting point, realization, and end result. It is, as Verwoert says, rather the case that painting, "on the basis of its irreducible inner differentiatedness," produces "its own form of rationalism." This sounds less abstract when you actually look at a painting by Abts; you immediately see in concrete terms how it appears to be governed by rules of its own, a sequence of freedoms of choice. She always starts with the same size canvas, a classical portrait format, vertical, forty-eight

by thirty-eight centimeters. What emerge are clearly defined forms, more complexly fractal than strictly and simply geometrical. But what at first looks like two-dimensional origami or psychedelic wallpaper turns out on closer inspection to be more like polygonal volumes flattened and pressed into the surface, as if a cosmic steamroller had run over constellations of wildly orbiting planets (Abts paints on a table, the canvas horizontal). These constellations are not planned, however. Abts begins without a model or a sketch, without any fixed idea of the result. In the course of a process of overpainting, she raises forms out of the surface or lays them bare in areas she has masked. At a given moment in this often lengthy procedure, the picture comes to life, taking on a creature-like vibrancy, the shapes forming a kind of binding congruency. Identifying this moment is the final decision involved in the making of each individual picture (followed by other decisions, including how it should be exhibited). It is a play with inherent dynamism, with the unruliness of the process as compared with total permeation by the artist's will. So there is something supra-subjective at play here, something that owes a debt on one hand to the autonomy of the painterly process—and, on the other, to everything that is not painting.

There are behavioral analogies between the solitary decisions of painting and decisions made in the social world. Painterly acts can be read as the ritual mimesis of possible social acts: you get the same systematic, logical, self-confident, even stubborn pressing ahead; but you also get the same tactical obfuscation by modifying, reworking, or blotting out acts once performed and decisions once arrived at, followed in turn by recall and retrieval. Seen this way, the canvas becomes a kind of two-dimensional voodoo doll that "magically" interferes with the weave of decisions made in the social environment, and with the reactions to them—a voodoo doll, however, that also instantly rejects this proxy function and, like the artist-individual, insists on having its own way.

With his paintings made after photographic originals, Richter developed a "manual-mechanical" working method which—once the choice of motif and coloration has been made—at least rigorously holds in check, if not entirely prevents, any impulsive interference in the painting process. Unlike Dada, his appropriation of existing source images is not based on montage/collage, but simply on copying, as in Pop art. The liberating thing about this approach, developed in the mid-1960s, was the way it made the painter-as-subject disappear in the individual paintings (the artist no longer expresses himself via interventions in the source), while emphasizing it all the more in the context of his series and



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Gerhard Richter
 59 Man Shot Down 2, 1988
 60 S. with Child, 1995
 61 Self-Portrait, 1996

with its rumors about the relationship between the paintings and his private life, that he reserves the right to interpret and present that life. But Richter may have sensed that this role of Joseph playing God (for who else can this father be, who portrays mother and child like Mary and Jesus?) was a dead end. In 1996, he made two self-portraits, the only “photo-realistic” ones in his oeuvre (an earlier picture, *Untitled (self-portrait)*, from 1971, is a blurry abstract). One shows Richter lit harshly from the front against a dark shadow, staring out past the camera, in a blue shirt and scarf, looking vulnerable and tired; the second picture, this time with thicker, blacker frames on his glasses and wearing a tie, Yves Saint Laurent-style, shows him looking down at the ground as if in concentration, the portrait blurred as if behind opaque glass, unapproachable.

But—to emphasize this once again—we are not interested here in speculations about which private motivations lie “behind” the choice and subsequent treatment of photographic images. For Richter’s work (and not least his abstract paintings) shows the importance of painterly method to any understanding of the way the painter relates to his own actions. In the case of one group of his purely abstract compositions, including pictures made in 1995 immediately before and after the mother and child series, Richter leaves the making of the picture as far as possible to a particularly extreme manual-mechanical painting technique: In one movement, he draws a large spatula over the picture support. Both techniques (blurring the image and using a spatula) are analogous not so much to “biomorphic” movement as to industrial and technical processes—to the imprecision of a photographic image on one hand and the spreading of ink in screen printing on the other. These final steps in the painting process, then, involve either micro-movements (a soft swishing brush) or macro-movements (the large spatula) that are not typical for the human body. There are also abstract compositions, like the *Inpaintings* of the 1970s, where Richter was evidently aiming for gestural processuality. It’s as if he is deliberately pushing richly gestural approaches from Informel to Abstract Expressionism into entropy. Instead of creating compositional spaces or a dynamic allover (a texture of marks covering the entire surface of the canvas), he skillfully “muddles” the picture ground in the way he spreads the paint, as though the gestural had become a robotically self-executing advance into the void.

At first sight, then, one might think that Richter skeptically and specifically rejects decision-making once the painterly process has been set in motion. That, in other words, “decision” is only to be found—as in many examples from

Conceptual art—in the original idea and in the result once presented, while between these two points a kind of automatic process takes place. This is one of the main reasons why his name is often linked with Conceptualism. And indeed he does shift the focus of artistic decision-making onto the structural level of the organization of an inventory-based pictorial system, the *Atlas*, or onto a systematically deployed inventory of techniques of painterly abstraction. However—and this is crucial here—he does so without denying himself the manual realization of his paintings (with one known exception, in the early 1970s, when he sometimes used assistants to help produce his *Color Charts*). This particular aspect sets him clearly apart from Conceptualism.

Why, unlike Baldessari and Kippenberger, did Richter never have his paintings executed by well-trained commercial artists? Stock answers include: because he deploys a specific manual technique which only he has really fully mastered, and because he invests the pictorial motif with a specifically affective charge, calling for quasi-ritual engagement with the act of painting. Neither of these suggestions is wrong, of course, but both fail to address the question of the decision and the actions determined by that decision. The painter sets up a game, the point of which is that he submits to the execution of self-imposed tasks, whatever the consequences.

Richter's eureka-like discovery, in the mid-1960s, that a banal photograph from real life can lead to a painting opened up a radical freedom in decisions for or against possible motifs: stags, airplanes, kings, secretaries. But this radical freedom only makes sense if it goes hand-in-hand with a radical suppression of his own persona as the executor of the work. He's his own master when the choice of motif and detail is being made, but his own minion when this decision is being enacted and transferred to the canvas. Social power struggles are transposed into the painter's relationship with himself: The total freedom of a choice based on taste, and the equally total submission to the consequences of this choice as the "executing assistant" once the decision has been made.

The English painter Glenn Brown always works from existing paintings (in the form of reproductions in books). In the pantheon of painters he takes as his points of reference, there's a wide span between the two ends of a spectrum of possible relationships between painterly and social acts. One end is very clearly defined by Gerhard Richter, who has been crucial to Brown's artistic approach, although he has not, to my knowledge, ever directly provided the source material for any of Brown's paintings. The other end is marked by Frank Auerbach,

whose working methods are diametrically opposed to Brown's, but who has served all the more frequently as a source. Oscillating between these two poles in Brown's visual world is a scintillating palette of overexcited surrealisms and undermined expressionisms.

In the case of Frank Auerbach and the working method which he has pursued as steadfastly as Richter for over half a century, the relationship of master and minion is very different, as is the nature of the decisions involved. As a portrait artist, his characteristic focus on live sitters recalls the relationship of analyst and analysand. Once a week, at a fixed time, the story told by the patient is overwritten (over-painted) afresh. Where Richter controls the crisis by structural means, Auerbach emphatically unleashes it. During the genesis of a painting, the question as to who, in this relationship of painter and sitter, is master and who is minion is poised precariously (to use the terminology of psychoanalysis) between transference and countertransference. And, as in the relationship of analysand and analyst, there must also be an element (at least potentially) of sexual attraction. This in itself is problematic, since Auerbach's characteristic impasto style inevitably suggests a direct parallel between the depth of the paint applied and the depth of a sensual touch.

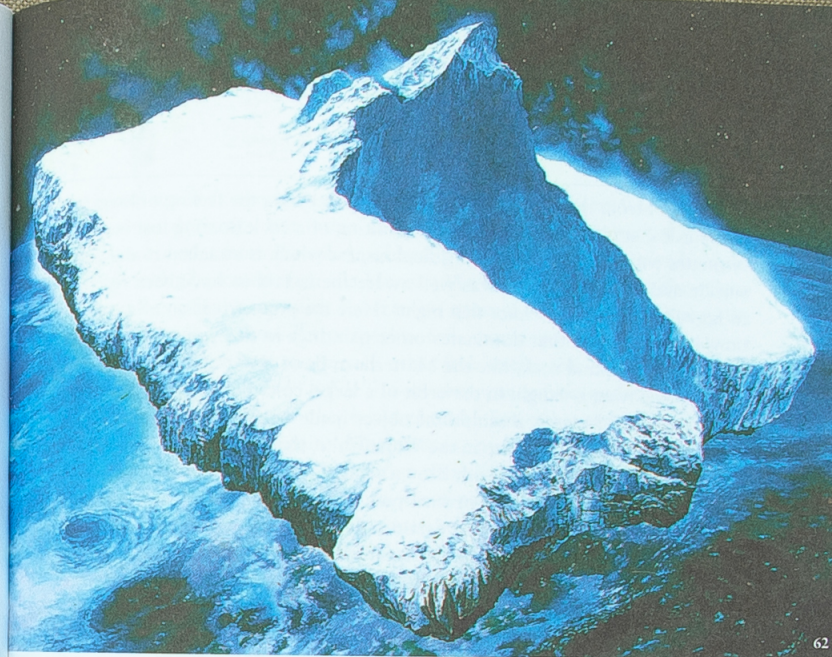
So when Glenn Brown refers to his own working method—especially with respect to his portraits—as “voyeuristic,” he is not just being ironic. The voyeur, by definition, does not intervene in the action. However, the depth of the “sensual touch” he feels is—as an imagined action—located in the infinite realm of the imagination. On one hand, this relates to the fact that Brown only works from paintings (Richter only does this on rare occasions, as when he recreates details from his own abstract compositions, or when he copied and “blurred” Titian's *Annunciation*). On the other hand, it also relates to the act of painting itself. In Brown's work, not unlike Richter's paintings from photographs, the main effort goes into executing micro-motoric movements, movements that are “bodiless” in the sense that they, like writing, require everything apart from the hand to be at rest.

Like Richter, then, Brown is his own master when it comes to decisions concerning motif, framing, and dimensions (although, unlike Richter, it's not unusual for him to combine a number of source images, which in fact takes him closer to what Richter would no doubt regard as the vulgarly manipulative working methods of Salvador Dalí). But, again like Richter, he is also his own minion when such decisions are being transferred to the canvas. Frank Auerbach offered

Brown the eureka of a liberating escape route from the endgame that this working method seemed to entail. In his series based on Auerbach portraits (made between 1998 and 2000), Brown rendered their gestural application of paint as a high-gloss print, thus completely robbing them of their corporeality, their physical fullness. He did the same with Georg Baselitz's feet: Brown turns the crude portraits of the German artist's feet (made since 1963 with the toes pointing upward in anticipation of his later upside-down pictures) into a surface that possesses a delicately rotten shimmer but that is totally smooth and immaculate, as smooth and immaculate as *The Osmond Family*, the 1970s pop group after whom Brown's picture from 2003 is named.

But Brown's "flattening" is not merely ironic. It is a statement on physicality itself and its relationship to the world. To describe this with a comment by critic and curator Robert Storr on Richter, which to a certain extent also applies to Brown, he "removed the body as the agency of the psyche or spirit." Yet this is also the point where Brown fundamentally differs from Richter. The latter's removal of the body from his subject matter has, over the decades, increasingly been directed toward achieving a form of the sublime (usually secular but sometimes openly religious) that wavers between cruel and merciful, whereas in Glenn Brown's case the "poison" of contamination with the body is in evidence (that is, embarrassment). Even where Richter rhetorically allows doubt and failure to feature in his work, he has increasingly banned unpredictability from the actual results (which may also explain the growing lack of humor in his pictures). "To some extent each painting is a controlled failure," Brown once said, pointing the way to an understating of the function of embarrassment in his work. After all, embarrassment is nothing other than failed sublimity. The squashed Baselitz feet and Auerbach heads, flattened like something run over by Bugs Bunny's bulldozer, are an almost banal cipher for this.

The idea of action and decision as it appears in Brown's pictures vacillates between the absurdly exaggerated pathos of the ultimate solitary act—suicide—and the sobering, realistic embarrassment of erotic undertakings, such as a failed sexual approach. This spectrum is illustrated by two exemplary works: *Exercise One (For Ian Curtis) After Chris Foss* (1995), a picture from the series of paintings based on originals by the science-fiction painter Chris Foss and dedicated to Ian Curtis; and *Three Wise Virgins* (2004), one of Brown's oil-paint sculptures. Ian Curtis, legendary singer of the nihilist-romantic punk band Joy Division, hanged himself and his cat in 1980. In order to paint the series, Brown "detached



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- Glenn Brown
 62 *Exercise One (For Ian Curtis) After Chris Foss* (copied from the illustration "Asteroid Hunters" 1979), 1995
 63 *The Osmond Family*, 2003
 64 *Three Wise Virgins*, 2004

[himself] ... from the world," as he has said, describing the feeling of long, late hours in the studio. *Exercise One*, the painting of a rock floating lost in space, resonates with the hopelessly sad ridiculousness which is attached to the act of suicide and of which Curtis was well aware (he is said to have been listening to Iggy Pop's album *The Idiot* that night). Here the pop surrealism of space stations in cosmic mist that dominates other paintings in this series is altogether absent: an ice-bound rock, like the Matterhorn flung into outer space by some monstrous power, is caught in the orbit of a large, cold planet.

Three Wise Virgins is a sculptural object made using oil paint that stands there as a polymorphous lump in the White Cube, the standardized, neutralized exhibition space. Compared with Brown's imagined visual worlds, it embodies the sobering reality of the downward pull of gravity for which sculpture has often been derided ever since Baudelaire's day. The title points to the biblical parable (very popular in the Middle Ages) about the wise virgins who, unlike their foolish counterparts, took extra oil for their lamps when they went to attend a wedding ceremony, so as not to miss out on the honor of a nocturnal encounter with the bridegroom. So the parable is about foresight, about actions where oil gives control over future events. But Brown's three wise virgins are actually fools: Three red balls protrude like clowns' noses from this turmoil of disordered, not exactly virginal-looking corporeality. Forward planning—be it administration of society or the control of the artistic process—becomes slapstick: the collapse of grace as the last great act.

Reproduction versus Uniqueness II: Maria Lassnig, Dana Schutz

Whereas Richter decided to restrict his subject matter to existing photographic motifs or pure abstraction, from the 1950s on Maria Lassnig did the exact opposite, focusing exclusively on conscious perception of her own body, minus (insofar as this is even possible) what she could see in mirrors and photographs. But it was not about the unconscious, at least not in the Surrealist sense. Lassnig—who was born in 1919, grew up in Carinthia, Austria, and studied during the war in Vienna—did experience the tail end of Surrealism in early-1950s Paris, meeting André Breton through Paul Celan and persuading Benjamin Péret to write a prose text for her portfolio of drawings (which did display a residual Surrealist influence). But the Surrealist technique of automatic writing interested

her not so much as a method of giving "unmediated" expression to the psyche in words or drawings, but rather as the starting point for a method of more conscious transfer from the sphere of bodily experience. In other words, in the era of French phenomenology à la Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she is (without having actually studied him) much closer to his concept of corporeality than to the Freudian school. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the experience of ambiguity when a person's own two hands touch each other (the inseparable overlapping of the sensation of "outside" and "inside"). For a moment, subject and object are one. The painterly equivalent to this is unagitated, alert rather than tense. There's none of Jackson Pollock's paint-dripping dance over the canvas, that speaks less of an introspection of physical sensation than of its ecstatic relinquishing. And there's certainly none of the theatrical speed-painting of someone like Georges Mathieu, who translated Pollock's dance into an indulgent crowd-pleaser: In 1956, Mathieu performed at a Paris theater for an audience of two thousand, finishing a huge picture with hundreds of tubes of paint in half an hour; thanks to Mathieu's calligraphic bent, the results were always surprisingly decorative.

At this time, everyone, especially the men, still had the experience of fighting World War II in their bodies, followed by the austere order of the early Cold War. It is this which, in the less accomplished moments of Tachisme or Informel (the European answers to Abstract Expressionism), seems to come out as a kind of flailing about in front of the canvas, a gestural displacement activity resulting from numbed physicality. In Lassnig's work, however, motor functions do not constitute the emphatic, demonstrative element. Instead of all the grand theatrical gestures of the men, she made pictures called "static meditations," which trace the border between the body and the surrounding space like a series of accurately thrown lassos, as clear dark lines on a white ground. These lines soon increase in density, becoming what Lassnig calls "dumplings," a term which, with inimitable concision, anticipates the disrespect that's sure to be directed at painting that dismisses grand gestures. The dumpling sits on the plate—a round object with steam rising from it. The same is true of the painting of body awareness: it is tersely everyday, provocatively undramatic—but not to be underestimated!

The painterly idea of the body awareness pictures comes across not as mawkishly spiritual, but with an unyielding alertness and presence. In Lassnig's journal, there is an entry from 1980 in which she gives a precise description of the process of introspective body awareness that gives rise to most of her pictures: