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The portrait in the age of digital substitution

Remarks on the paintings of Anne Hoenig

The painterly work of Anne Hoenig is a complex struggle with specific pictorial forms, and with their perception and mediation at the beginning of the 21st century. An attempt will be made in the following to approach this phenomenon in individual, conceptually-defined steps, to express this complexity without causing it to disappear.

Humans Among the creatures that populate our planet, the human belongs to a very special species. As homo sapiens sapiens, he is the jewel of creation, who, simultaneously, seems busy destroying both the planet and himself. Perhaps this is also the unconscious reason for wishing to duplicate himself with the help of various technologies. At the end of the story, the duplication thus becomes a substitution. Whether the clone, the digital image, or the substitute survives this process is not yet certain.

Perception Whoever wishes to create a copy of himself must have a type of self-consciousness. He must be able to recognize himself in a mirror, and be able to recognize that the image has a relationship with his own person. This consciousness is what first allows perception to be limited to one's own body; the body which envelopes one's own consciousness. However, this consciousness develops beyond the body and its limits. In self-awareness, the body separates from its consciousness until it re-materializes in the mirror. The consciousness becomes the body again when this body experiences pain. Anyone subject to extreme bodily experiences discovers this transmutation from consciousness to body in a singular manner.

Others However, the ego also experiences itself in separating itself from others. Already the portrait in a mirror allows a feeling of detachment. Within it, the image of oneself already appears as perceived by the other: by him, who is not I. The cryptic sentence "I is another" from Arthur Rimbaud becomes more understandable in this context. Nevertheless, the replica in the mirror is not congruent with the image of the self, because the mirror reverses sides. Only in the photographic image is the right-to-left relationship of the view by the other correctly depicted. However, the photographic image is a technical construction, in which the image annuls itself.

Image Among the semantic precursors to the German word Bild (image) are the verbs 'separate' (trennen), 'discern' (unterscheiden), 'judge' (beurteilen), and 'interpret' (deuten). That leads in later steps to symbol (Zeichen), allegory (Sinnbild), intellectual being (geistiges Wesen), and moulded (Gestaltete). In a first approach, an image can be understood as a 'separate construction', and an analogue to 'I' and 'the other' would result from this aspect of the separation. Hence, the image would be the other image of the self: image is always reproduction.

Image of man If this reproduction depicts humans, then the relationship with the image changes significantly, for the gaze of the observer is answered by the gaze of the portrayed. In this encounter may be hidden a significant aspect of portraiture in occidental painting. Only landscape painting had a comparable effect and importance, having influenced our perception of nature to this day. This applies in even greater measure for portraiture, which becomes, in an art-historical context, the 'portrait'. The image of man is significantly influenced by the painted portrait. That the image of man has thus developed out

of portraits of potentates is a reflection of real social circumstances. Not until the late 19th century did we develop an eye for the underprivileged, allowing us to consider the masses in an environment of social upheavals. Icons From today's point of view, iconoclasm seems to have been an incomprehensible confusion of the spirit. After all, today's traffic in images is determined by icons. One could speak of icon idolatry if pictures of famous people were understood as images. An advertisement from Adidas shows Muhammad Ali on a poster measuring 82 by 49 meters, the world's greatest athletic portrait of the greatest athlete, and simultaneously the greatest advertising poster. Whether their names are David Beckham, Britney Spears or Brad Pitt, they are icons in a global traffic in images which accompanies the global flow of capital. Simultaneously, these reproductions as icons also represent a substitution, in which the picture claims precedence over the photographed subject. In the end, this leads to an autonomous picture which refers no longer to the photographed subject, but only to the picture itself. Self-reference Homunculi and cyborgs are two sides of one coin, in which the image of man is now only a picture and no longer a reproduction. The decision between David Beckham or Lara Croft is no longer a decision, because in both cases the person has become a commodity. That is the purpose of their existence, and in being a substitute for themselves, as clone or digital figure, they fulfill this purpose. Men in suits This cycle of paintings, created in the years 1993 to 1996, can be viewed and interpreted against this backdrop. Its iconic character is an ingenious deception, for the artist says: "It's the image, not the person." However, the subjects are clearly identifiable, but their selection is based not on the person, their significance or history, but on their metaphor. Thus, the portraits are not created from a single reproduction, but from several. Every portrait only refers to a conglomerate of other pictures, which are, and will be, simultaneously preserved and nullified in the respective concrete portrait. That leads to the strange and convincing outcome of being able to watch one's own work in memory. For although we know the photo, be it an effigy of Man Ray or Jorge Luis Borges, we realize that the painting transcends this photographic reproduction in every respect. On the other hand, we then recall the classical topos of portraiture, in which the person being portrayed obtains even more significance through the act of portrayal.

The persons portrayed in this case are not icons in the global traffic in images, but rather figures of resistance in a culture of local origin but international significance. In the sense of Malraux and his "musée imaginaire", the names of the people portrayed formed an imaginary culture that, frozen in a picture, seems to be preserved outside of time. Think of Burroughs, Bresson or Borges. One could speak of imagined portraits, but only in reference to 'images', for these persons are present in a specific manner, as a figure and as a work. The artist also makes her selection based on the work that appeals to and has affected her. Thus, the portraits are also the result of a reading. Viewing these paintings is again a reading, which leads to a further reading. In these paintings, culture reveals itself as a system of references that lead the way out of cheap subjectivity in order to formulate a different concept of global intelligence, bridging various ages and cultures. However, that should not lead to a misinterpretation of the paintings themselves, for, as Anne Hoenig says: "These paintings could be regarded as a sequence or narrative, but they are not. Meaning does not exist between the works." The artist

herself speaks of paintings as emotional generators. This statement becomes understandable when one learns that viewers of her works often respond physically. In this context, Anne Hoenig points to the language of the face, which is the first language we learn to interpret as children. This interpretative skill is essential to our survival, and yet, we are all such imperfect practitioners of physiognomy. Anne Hoenig's work confronts the viewer with this inability. "The paintings are enigmatic. What is it that we can't see and can't read? What is beyond our understanding and beyond the frame?"

One can certainly speak of old master qualities in relation to these portraits, which are also manifested in an unusual plasticity of the faces and hands. In accord with the statuary poses of the subjects, this results in a physicality that gives the paintings depth and aura. In a text about her cycle of paintings 'Time Slice' Anne Hoenig writes: "The technical finesse, the dense and lush surfaces, the rivers of light and the detail are merely vehicles towards evoking deeper and more basic emotions." However, that means that we should and will abandon ourselves to their contemplation, without the filter of a description or characterization. "The compulsion to see the truth leads to an intensity of representation", writes Hoenig in the above-mentioned Text. She herself interprets the key to perception: "The keys to this work are the intimate immensity of the preserved moment, the power of gesture to evoke emotion, and the states of mind in between all actions." No more substitution, only the original. Thomas Wulffen