

SEDUCED BY SILENCE

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The aspect which most fascinates Ulrike Stubenböck about many of the paintings by Vilhelm Hammershøi (a Danish painter who lived in Copenhagen from 1864 to 1916) is the remarkable way in which these paintings fall silent. This process occurs simultaneously in several pictorial dimensions. The subjects depicted in the paintings refuse to submit to any account or story, any historical, religious, tragic or emotive melodramatic narration; thus they first fall silent at the subject level. This does not imply that the paintings are still lives; the subjects they show are silent, not mute: in other words, they depict absence, silent or absent subjects (or an absent gaze); the viewer of the painting is often doubled by a viewer in the painting who looks into the, neither fathomable nor visible, depth of the scenery and the room. Similar to some paintings by Vermeer or Caspar David Friedrich, interiors are revealed which are inhabited by persons who are inactive, lost to the world, who may, for instance, be pensively or thoughtfully looking out the window, without it ever being disclosed what it is they are looking at. And even these viewers in the painting, who double the viewer of the painting while also making him familiar with a contemplative pictorial perspective, may be omitted; for instance where visible interiors are mainly defined by openings, by windows, doors and passages which permit a view of something absent, of an invisible depth.

And it is not only the narrative that falls silent; an aspect which even more fundamentally halts or prevents the murmuring of stories and narratives is that the depicted gaze, a doubling gaze, a contemplative gaze, is not directed at functional subjects with the aim of identifying them, but loses itself in the unfathomable, the abstract – the distance, for example – and thus, in a further step, is reflectively reversed, turns back on the gazing subject, in a self-observation no longer brought about by the external reflection of a mirror image but an inner reflection of subjectivity, a complex aesthetic awareness process. The viewer of such a painting no longer tells a fictitious tale to himself or others but enters a world that is almost devoid of language, but is of a reflective and self-reflective nature, where the ceaseless roar of knowledge subsides and gives way to a profound silence. Whereas we, in our everyday, functional attitude, are constantly surrounded by the noise of objects contending with each other for our attention by shouting out their names, their functions, their origins, in these paintings a silence begins to

spread, leaving the subject alone with its perception: it is no longer about identifying objects and subordinating them to a specific knowledge and a specific narrative, but the gaze is reflected in itself and on to itself and begins, consciously, reflectively, to observe itself. And there is a third dimension in which these paintings fall silent: they refuse any pictorial luxuriance, any kind of expressiveness in terms of colour, any kind of emotiveness. They nearly refuse any colour at all; painted almost exclusively in shades of grey with a touch of brown, they deny any pictorial-culinary approach: rather than offering a feast for the senses or for the eyes, they direct the viewer's gaze into an absence, a reflecting and reflective depth – a depth not so much of space but of the subject or of subjectivity.

Ulrike Stubenböck has chosen to adopt the colours from some of Vilhelm Hammershøi's paintings. On the basis of colour scales she determines the colour values of the paintings as accurately as possible, and from the range of colours arrived at in this manner she then selects a limited number of shades, and three of these for each painting. The double transfer of colour values – from Hammershøi's paintings to a set of scale values that have not been selected but discovered, established by comparison, and then from these values to colour pigments in the painting – actually results in a kind of transformation, invalidating the potential allocation of the individual colours to a colour system and producing an obvious contingency and lack of system of the colours used. The viewer is thereby also deprived of the possibility to perceive colour connections and, linked to these, colour compositions; the silence of the paintings becomes still more profound. The method adopted by Ulrike Stubenböck destroys further levels of meaning and, therefore, of communication in the paintings: besides the obvious absence of identifiable objects, she also denies two other pictorial levels of interpretation and meaning, namely composition and hand. By spreading three colours applied on to the canvas with broad, parallel, horizontal palette knife strokes, she destroys two central aesthetic categories in the perception of painting: the neutral, horizontal tracks deny any form of composition and prevent any expressive or gestural or even just subjective interpretation of the stroke, the track, the action of the hand. Yet in the tradition of European Modernism, paintings first and foremost speak through composition and hand: the composition of planes, lines and shapes and the composition of colours, the visible trace left by the hand as an articulation of the intellectual or creative invention or as an expression of psychological conditions. And thus, these paintings are silent – beyond the silence of subjects and pictorial spaces – also as (no longer composed and no longer “painted”) paintings.

The profound silence of these paintings, though, forces the viewers – who are no longer able to recognize, who are not given food for their eyes – to face the terror and the seductiveness of

silence, to turn their gaze reflectively back on themselves and observe themselves while observing. In this reflective observation the viewers discover a purely visual world, which precedes any determination of objects, of percepts: a differential, sensual-reflective world of visible differences.