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Images at Second Glance - An Essay on the Void in Markus Oberndorfer's photographs

The following reflections make reference to the New Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz. In recent years many introductory texts have been published on this topic.

Life in Situations and Contact to Atmospheres:

In reflecting on ourselves ("Who am I?") and about our place in the world ("Where do I belong?") we tend to rely on singular details, the totality of which is supposed to supply answers to those questions. Trivial examples from our everyday life, however, show us how little the weighing of singular facts helps us to make important decisions in our lives: the choice of the future partner or the attempt to determine the ideal moment to start a family are well-known examples where we tend to rely on a fundamental perception, a "sensing" of a clear, yet not clearly determinable positive overall impression along the lines of: "I knew that he/she would be the right one for me."

In our very own experience we thus find evidence of the fact that we are actually already well accustomed to living in a world that does not (only) present itself as a summation of particulars, but rather in comprehensive impressions, which we cannot hope to explain in their plenitude. Hermann Schmitz, founder of the New Phenomenology, draws our attention to our mother tongue as a good example of this kind of interaction with the world and uses it to contrast the situation¹ from the constellation: when we learn a foreign language we consciously construct the meaning of a sentence from single words and certain rules of grammar. This corresponds to the life in constellations, i.e. in infinitely complex, yet ultimately definable arrays of facts. Speaking in our native language, however, corresponds to a life in situations, the true meaning of which can never be fully made explicit.

¹ Hermann Schmitz: Was ist Neue Phänomenologie? Rostock, Ingo Koch Verlag, 2003, p.89-97.

As soon as we enter a room, we can either focus on singular facts and particulars or we can allow ourselves to be captured by the atmosphere of the room without already feeling the need to make explicit where this impression comes from. Paintings and photographs, too, create a certain atmosphere, which becomes perceptible as soon as we enter the room where the pictures are displayed. To be sure, it is also the other people in the room who pick up the atmosphere of the room and who make it easier for us to become immersed. Silence, whispering visitors, careful movements or agitated moods, clicking heels and quick motions highlight the potential of the pictures; spectators who are prepared to indulge in the sensations (as opposed to a awkward, giggling class of school children), be captured by them and caught up in a certain atmosphere. We understand atmosphere here in the sense of Hermann Schmitz who uses this term to make clear how feelings diffuse as 'rimless pouring out of atmosphere'².

² Hermann Schmitz: Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand - Grundzüge der Philosophie, Bonn, Bouvier Verlag, 1995, p.292.

Images undoubtedly possess authority, they define the atmosphere of a room, affect the attentive spectator. Very often we are unable to explicate why we are affected by a certain mood. Photographs do so in many different ways, sometimes using soft words, sometimes a very clear and explicit language. One could say: press photos, which mainly advertise the sale of a magazine, shout into the face of the spectator, they make statements which are easily explicable and the spectator is able to take in this kind of a message in the blink of an eye. Artistic photos, conversely, shape the room in a much more subtle way, they leave an impression in the viewer which is hard to describe yet clearly discernible, an impression which possibly takes hold of us so subtly, that we

become aware of it only when we have left the exhibition room and realise that we miss something, something the existence of which we hardly noticed before.

The photographs of Markus Oberndorfer have precisely this subtle effect of the latter. They do not impose themselves, they do not attempt to immediately capture the spectator. Rather, the photographs I like the most first and foremost create a certain SOMETHING, a feeling of emptiness, which only bit by bit develops into certain qualities. This becomes clear in the pictures "Ohne Titel", "Vendredi" and "Yachting". In all of these photographs I notice very well that I am observing, yet am not fixing my gaze onto something in particular. However, these photographs still spark an interest and invite me to stay; they possess the authority to call me back into the room, as if I were uncertain whether I have really seen all there is to be seen. Apart from this fascination, which they all share, the three photographs have quite distinct effects on me.

In contemplating "Ohne Titel, 2010" I am drawn into the picture, it creates a wistful longing to explore the expanse; it also creates the desire to run back and forth between water and dunes. The picture invites me to leave the standpoint of the spectator and creates strong suggestions of movement.³

³ Cf. Fig.: "Ohne Titel", p.81.

In contrast, "Vendredi, 2010" invites me to stay put, to remain on the spot from where I watch the scene on the beach; it asks me not to approach any further but to observe from the distance. I feel as if I am lurking, as if I am waiting for the persons on the beach to make the first move, to leave their state of stillness and show me which game they are playing. The mood conveyed here has a certain slight hostility, which waits to unfold under the surface of apparently unspectacular attitudes.⁴

⁴ Cf. Fig.: "Vendredi", p.75.

In "Yachting, 2010" this lurking, subtle hostility becomes explicit — the picture develops a suggestion of movement to the rear, away from the position of the viewer. The scene appears inanimate, rigid; the perspectival depth is missing. I sense a certain agitation and notice that my gaze jumps around hoping to discover something to which it can hold onto, to something that explains the choice of motive.⁵

⁵ Cf. Fig.: "Yachting", p.74.

These remarks should make clear that I use the concept of a "suggestion of movement" for two different cases: on the one hand a picture suggests a movement of the spectator — moving into the picture, remaining in the same place, gaining distance from the picture. On the other hand the picture commands the authority to steer the eyes of the spectator, from the slow gazes of "Ohne Titel" to the frantic movement of "Yachting".

The first impression of the other - an Impressive Situation:

What happens to the spectator when looking at these photographs? I want to make reference to Schmitz' reflections in which he describes what humans apprehend when they look at each other: the impression of someone often becomes clear in an instant, yet without one being able to point one's finger at precisely what has brought one to this assessment.

Applied to the dialogue between spectator and photograph one could say that we encounter similar phenomena — a photograph (or a series of photographs) captures us, the photographs look at us and capture our gaze. When looking at a good press photograph we not only notice that we are observing with fascination — spellbound observation — but we can also explain why. In the photographs of Markus Oberndorfer, however, something completely different happens: they capture at second glance and clearly leave something (not nothing), something, however, which is very hard to name. This kind of experience, however, can only happen if the spectator is prepared to enter into an open dialogue with the photograph, to hold back the impulse to immediately reach an assessment, i.e. to engage with one's own experience for a period of time.

⁶ Hermann Schmitz: *Was ist Neue Phänomenologie?*, Rostock, Ingo Koch Verlag, 2003, p.22.

In terms of the New Phenomenology this mutual exchange of impression and being impressed corresponds to an impressive situation, the handling of multi-faceted impressions. With its internally diffuse, inexplicable or only incompletely explicable meaningfulness this kind of situations appears in the blink of an eye.

We apprehend primarily impressions. However, impressions are 'polyvalent' by means of their ability to carry with them more meaning than we could make explicit verbally. This applies not only to the deep, and emphatically meaningful impressions, but also to the banal.⁶

It often happens in an exhibition that the spectator tries to inscribe structures into the polyvalent situation of the observation and being-touched; this happens, for instance, by establishing links to other artists, by trying to unlock the composition of the picture or to say something about the assumed motives of the artist. In every essay about art — and this applies to the present text as well — one can find expressions that can be tied to such an approach. In terms of phenomenological contemplation the spectators try to draw lines in the inner space of an impressive situation, a space which is hard to describe; along these lines certain chains of thought about cause and effect can be formulated. In doing this, however, one has already moved from situation to constellation! In contrast to situations the elements of constellations can be listed unambiguously: they consist of particular facts, problems, or programmes that are related in potentially infinite, yet fundamentally knowable complexity. As spectators we sometimes experience how these concretisations destroy the atmosphere that dominates the room, e.g. when we eavesdrop on the dialogue of experts; in our very own bodies we can then feel how the magic vanishes, how the tension abruptly decreases. I notice these moments by the feeling of regret, something like: "What a pity — this happened too quickly." Or: "That's too much detail."

An essential component of such an impressive situation is the suggestion of movement, which evolves between two persons — or between a picture and a spectator. I have given examples of this above in the description of my reaction to selected photographs of Markus Oberndorfer.

Is trivial what we cannot describe in detail?

There are, of course, stock judgements, which are simply naïve and are indicative more of the fact that the spectator has successfully withdrawn from the fascination of an exhibition, rather than that he has engaged with it. It is possible that the bad reputation of non-explicit judgement can be traced back to the phenomenon, that this, which cannot be made concrete, that this, which cannot be described in detail, carries the fault of the incomplete. If someone cannot say something clearly then we blame him who fails to express himself clearly, and we do not take this to be the quality of that irreducible something that determines the situation. Maybe these phenomena are experienced more often in contact with others; however, they also happen when we encounter space, a landscape or a piece of art. A room, too, has an atmosphere even without people in it. The New Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz has more respect for the vague and distinguishes it clearly from the uncertain. A good example of this difference are sensations of the lived body like faintness and feeling fresh. I might for example say: I am certain I felt wide awake and fresh when I woke up today; however, I can only vaguely determine where precisely this sensation took place (did it happen in the head or the stomach?).

Directionless feelings - if the photograph moves me peculiarly and I do not know why:

In the New Phenomenology feelings are described as rimless pouring out of atmosphere. The second part of the third volume (Space In the System of Philosophy) is dedicated to the emotional space (Schmitz, 2005). Here Hermann Schmitz in more than 500 pages investigates the different dimensions of feeling and emotion by presenting a plethora of literary references taken from between the 7th century BC to the 20th century, references which subtly describe subjective experience. It would be especially rewarding for the contemplation of the photographs of Markus Oberndorfer to focus on feelings without an intentional directedness (as opposed to e.g. "The spoiling of the landscape makes me really angry [looking at a documentation of environmental disasters]"). This includes "being content and being in despair"⁷, both being feelings, which can be attributed to abundance and emptiness, respectively. Sometimes we experience emptiness as a limitless space which cannot be determined in its boundaries⁸, a space in which nothing exists to which our thoughts could attach themselves; a feeling of pointlessness and indifference. Amiel condenses this sentiment to a succinct formula: "Il ne vaut pas la peine de se donner de la peine (It is not worth the effort to make an effort)".⁹

⁷ Hermann Schmitz: System der Philosophie, Studienausgabe, Bonn, Bouvier, 2005, p.256 ff.
⁸ Ibid., p.222. ⁹ Ibid., p.220.

I think the desire to say something concrete when viewing these images also stems from a dread of this emptiness. This emptiness — just as the vague — is taken to be inferior, it is defined as the absence of an effable content. However, following Schmitz, it is worthwhile to engage with this feeling of emptiness in its pure form, i.e. not as "despair about something", since even without this directedness it is already tied to distinct modes of experience and images.

Sometimes this emptiness takes on a menacing quality, the spectator reports the impression of an abyss, which is lurking somewhere, an abyss from which one cannot protect oneself as one does not know where it will open. Sometimes in this menacing emptiness a certain direction of bodily sensation develops: the emptiness takes on something burdensome, a direction from top to bottom.

Maybe the language about the direction in which the emptiness takes hold of the lived body becomes more easily comprehensible if we focus on the way the spectators move through the space of an exhibition. Do they move as if a heavy burden weighs on them? Or do they move more springily, as if they wanted to overcome heaviness in every step? Does the emptiness have the quality of a downward depression or a joy pointing upward? In order to clarify for oneself the direction of atmospheres or of the suggestions of movement, which inhere atmospheres one could try to develop stage directions for an actor. What would we tell him? How should he move in order to make clear to the spectator the particular atmosphere in a way that everyone feels, what is at issue?

The numerous examples which Schmitz cites in his book demonstrate that directionless emotions and feelings can only be described metaphorically. A metaphor which is commonly chosen is the "wind-nature of excitement"¹⁰. Non-directional feelings share with the wind the impossibility of answering the question of where it came from and where it goes. "Sorrow lies like a dark cloud or a numb burden around the person concerned or on him, but this mass neither has clear boundaries nor does it radiate phenomenally from a circumscribed source, as light radiates from a light source, or sound radiates from a source of sound. This lack of a determinable phenomenal source of direction of excitement is described by Schmitz as its 'abyssness'".¹¹ Just as one can be suddenly caught by a gusty wind, one "cannot anticipate a stirring feeling, since

¹⁰ Hermann Schmitz: System der Philosophie, Studienausgabe, Bonn, Bouvier Verlag, 2005, p.268 ff. ¹¹ Ibid., p.273 ff.

phenomenally it does not have a circumscribable origin, but abruptly emerges from the uncertain and indeterminable."

With these remarks I want to encourage all of us to accept also those feelings which do not have a direction; it might very well lie in their nature, that they can touch us bodily even lacking a clear source.

I hope that it has become clear that for me, being a layman in the contemplation and interpretation of art, the experience of the pictures of Markus Oberndorfer are an example of the actual situation, in which the fascination lies therein that at first hardly anything or nothing happens — yet still these photographs do not leave us cold, rather the opposite. I have used the concepts of the New Phenomenology to try to explain how this is possible.

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