

## Picturing Clement Greenberg, at a loss

"Art criticism, I would say, is about the most ungrateful form of 'elevated' writing that I know of. It may also be one of the most challenging to a writer – if only because so few people have done it well enough to be remembered – but I'm not sure the challenge is worth it." The business of the art critic – or to put it more accurately, of the art commentator, which has recently become the more fashionable term (one as neutral as it is pragmatic) – is still, more than half a century after this complaint was first lodged, not always just pleasant and gratifying: memorable writers in the field continue to remain few and far between. The author of the quoted lamentation about the profession is without doubt one of the few who is remembered, though probably now with less undaunted approval than he enjoyed 50 years ago – although surely still with serious respect for his linguistic brilliance and his development of a new vocabulary for a new type of art – but generally with a certain distance to content. A critic like Clement Greenberg, with his assured conviction about where art wished to go, what its actual destiny was, of what it was to cleanse itself and on what its 'essence' was based, hardly seems appropriate to us these days. And yet, when I look at paintings today, I still think of Greenberg, in particular of the pleasant anecdote about how, in his later years, this pope among critics would allow himself to be led to a new painting with his eyes shut and how he – standing the perfect, frontal distance from the work – would then open his eyes with a sure gaze and in mere seconds judge whether the painting was good or bad. (I cannot help spontaneously picturing him in this situation, just as casually self-satisfied as he is portrayed to be in Mark Tansey's painting "Triumph of the New York School", even wearing the same army uniform.) I especially like to think of this attitude-that-became-form, the habitus of the fast as lightning, taste confident uber-critic, when I look at Katharina Daxenberger's paintings and imagine how he would have reacted, especially to a typical "Daxenberger Wall". (This term will surely soon become established in art history as the description for an intentional, dense, rhythmic and tension-filled hanging of extremely heterogeneous small and medium sized acrylic paintings.) Works presented in this way consistently confront the viewer with a rather confusing variety of images, at least at first glance. The spectrum of 'Daxenbergeric' image production commences with the totally abstract and non-representational; with pure studies in colour and form (that at times can be somewhat analytical and cool, at others spontaneous and intuitive); with simple, more or less exactly juxtaposed surfaces, which in themselves can also be structured to various degrees (and yet a House of Nikolaus can literally get in their way at any time). The range of images can also extend to the figurative: time and again, mountains or fir trees are crudely placed in paintings, as are sometimes floral elements, behind which abstract colour fields inevitably become charged with associations of landscapes. There are seemingly naive, absolutely narrative motifs and figures, such as rabbits or dwarfs, and, on occasion, even the completely naturalistic: a partially detailed little bird, whose background is initially reminiscent of a Biedermeier passe-partout, but which, in the end, might also signify the moon and night. At times Katharina Daxenberger herself even refers to this crash potential, which can always be an inherent feature of such a nonchalant position of realism: when, for instance, the artist christens a small, realistic flower study –

which, admittedly, once again virtually floats against a purely non-figurative background – with the defiant, ironic title "Gibt's in echt!" ("But It's Real!"). With respect to this variety, one could imagine that Daxenberger begins each painting at an imaginary zero point, a place in which everything is possible, which is free of restrictions and expectations and at which each painting would be the first ever to be painted. The direction that an individual painting then takes seems to emerge in the act of painting itself every time, all over again, dependant on a complex loop of momentary conditions, associations, foreknowledge, colours, materials, etc., that readjusts itself anew with each decision and every action that takes place on the painting's surface. By stressing the procedural character of painting, Daxenberger's paintings can virtually be regarded as paradigmatic for the autonomization of art that was constitutive for the modern movement. Heinrich Klotz once formulated it as such: for this kind of "painting in itself", (which was free of both the constraints of a mimetic relationship to nature and all other external determinations) another relationship became even more important: "...the relationship between the canvas and the painter himself. The balancing act in the production of the autonomous artwork was concentrated on the painter and the empty surface before him." It was precisely this balancing act that was also of primary interest to Clement Greenberg, especially since he began visiting the immensely important private New York art school run by the German immigrant and painter Hans Hofmann. "Hans Hofmann indeed liked to speak of the spiritual in art, which he did often, but Greenberg was only interested in his concrete instructions on the process of painting. This begins when the artist – who is standing in front of a blank canvas with his colours – puts down the first brushstroke. He then examines the situation that has been created: the painting's internal tension that has been caused by this, a mark of a specific size, colour and form, which has entered into a relationship with the painting's surface. This is repeated with every new brushstroke. Over and over again, the painter observes how the painting 'answers' his marks, so that he may add new marks or remove old ones. It is a question then of an autonomous, self-contained reaction process on which external determinates have no influence." (Karlheinz Lüdeking). In this way Greenberg, whom I just recently imagined standing in front of a Daxenberger wall, confused and overwhelmed, would be able to find, at least in this way, a point of access into the artist's work. Yet the variety of the images discovered, the seemingly adventurous blurring of genres, the significant playfulness, all this would have undoubtedly disgusted him deeply. This is because, from his point of view, with all autonomy and freedom of decision, only very specific visual results can legitimately result from the artist's confrontation with the blank canvas. These might naturally vary from period to period or artist to artist depending on whether one is dealing with Pollock, Rothko or Newman, for instance; within a specific oeuvre, however, the breadth of an acceptable variation was most certainly limited. (The artist that the modern movement imagined was ultimately not conceivable in any other way than as a strong, coherent and a completely identical author subject.) A position like Katharina Daxenberger's is, therefore, simply unimaginable from the point of view of this discourse. Yet Greenberg's best known dictum could even be summoned here as a compurgator, which proclaims that (modern) art would consistently and continually exclude the unnecessary. Because, in the end, why shouldn't art, like everything else, also be allowed to exclude from itself all conventions and preconceptions, for example, regarding subject and its possible expressions, personal and period-specific styles, or various expectations that are delegated to a

painting by both the artist and the rest of the artistic field? Moreover, in the case of Katharina Daxenberger the conscious and openly displayed heterogeneity, which initially may appear to be a naive delight of colour and image discovery, is once again brought together in the idea of the serial, culminating as a meaningful and no longer naive seeming synthesis. The paintings presented at her show in the Galerie Royal in 2006 were significantly headed with the collective title "Das Spiel" ("The Game"). Daxenberger's entire approach can, in fact, be understood as a kind of language-game in the vocabulary (or vocabularies) of painting. The key term to understanding her work is perhaps Wittgenstein's Familienähnlichkeit (family resemblance), which is not derived from a single, common and recognizable characteristic (as the modern movement would have required), but rather from a complex network of crisscrossing and overlapping similarities that are only recognizable when seen together: "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblance'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and crisscross in the same way." This conscious heterogeneity can also be understood as a refreshing stroke of liberation from ingrained habits of seeing, journalistic and art supplement simplification and, above all, from art market rules, all of which most notably require one thing of artists, namely a certain consistency and easy recognisability, which is fondly referred to as an artist's "style", which is, in fact, a kind of "branding" of the artist. Just the mere mention of a name should be enough to know what is about to be seen. Katharina Daxenberger obviously resists all this and confidently counters it with herself and her placement of variety as unity. (She could make a reference here, for instance, to Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who often dismissed questions of style as minor titbits and pseudo problems, believing that "Le style, c'est l'homme" – or in this case, "Le style, c'est la femme"...). One could, on the other hand, think of the older Wittgenstein: In a lucid moment he may have had a foreboding of what Arthur C. Danto was later to call the "art after the end of art", which is to say a period beyond the authoritative manifestos and uniform movements in which even the decisions on how to paint, an approach, an idea or a technique were entirely left up to the artist, including all the consequences of this, such as freedom, as well as uncertainty. "Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (...) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?" And, at the cost of consciously and intentionally misunderstanding him a bit, I have to think one last time here of Clement Greenberg, who, in a rare, conciliatory moment once wrote: "In the long run there are only two kinds of art: the good and the bad. This difference cuts across all other differences in art. At the same time, it makes all art one. (...) And therefore the infinite variety of art – or much more the infinite variety of artists and artistic traditions – is not a confusing coincidence, for it means that the experience of art, according to its essence, is always ultimately of the same kind, despite all differences between the works of art themselves." Peter T. Lenhart, 2007