

Straw into Gold 1 - Strategies of Transformation in the Work of Anke Völk

by Klaus Merkel (January 2012)

Anke Völk makes use of a wide range of materials - painting, cutting, tearing, gluing and spraying her works into and onto surfaces including canvas, paper, cardboard, fiberboard, aluminium, and walls.

Völk's pictorial motifs are determined in equal measure by the element of chance and by a constant rapport between figure and ground. In using abstract, shifting shapes and lineaments and plumbing the depths of her subjects, she creates pictures with an open quality.

Lines can appear as cracks in the material, extending through all the layers to the very bottom, or as cut-out silhouettes which open up contours that reach out into space.

Her use of torn newsprint and cheap paper saturated with metallic spray paint, pasted directly onto the wall, reveal Völk as an action painter who takes a performative approach, creating works "on the spot," as it were, and anchoring them firmly in place.²

In pasting a piece of rope as a border around her work *...im beiläufigen Wunsch* (... the Incidental Wish; 2010), Völk takes up the old issue of framing in painting. This "camp-baroque" intervention may ironize the boundary of the picture, but in so doing, it thrusts the painting itself into the arena, onto the stage. Each delicate, painted metallic frame calls attention to this incursion and at the same time conversely points to the possibility of breaking free of the confines of the picture format.

This urge to step out of the painting is present in Völk's works from the very beginning. Indeed, it could be seen as the very foundation of her oeuvre and perhaps its most reliable constant. Her use of tears, cuts and scraps, and of extreme hanging arrangements, superimpositions, light projections, and layering are all expressions of this impulse and the methods by which she effectively turns her painting into objects.³

But rather than altogether abandoning the traditional concept of easel painting that dictates that all painterly qualities must be anchored in the individual picture, Völk takes it as a point of departure from which to risk further interventions on her picture-objects. Thus dark, deep, mottled tones such as those in the painting *Lob des Schattens* (In Praise of Shadow; 2009) are replete with atmospheric density and fuse into a complex body of color radiating liberated energy. Here the brushwork and the layering produce a constant interplay between organic gradations of color and geometric composition that results in an uninhibited visual aura.

Völk does not merely work on the texture of her surfaces, she actually creates them anew, building them up out of layers piled on top of each other. Even if the shapes these layers take are determined by chance, in Völk's system they become steps leading into new visual terrain. As the various alternatives are played out one by one, the pictorial options are progressively reduced. Various gestures are established, superimposed, added, and, in the latest works, transformed into a heady, sensuous presence - an exuberant opulence. In *Überwurf* (Overthrow; 2011), minimalist gestures assume an almost operatic quality, unfolding on a three-dimensional stage to create an impact of baroque proportions.

Die Strenge Deines Weges (The Rigor of Your Road; 2010)⁴ projects into space and - in a sensational finish - breaks the painting up into surfaces where the various hybrid states are inextricably intertwined and at the same time presented sculpturally. These multipartite composite entities⁵ all have in common that they appear to be teetering on the edge, on the brink of chaos. Jarring combinations that are disquietingly beautiful in their precarious balance because they demonstrate - with no holds barred - that the key to unlocking them has been lost. For all its visual opulence and detachment, Völk's painting always transparently remains painting and does not attempt to obscure its habitus or its objective. Spray paint remains spray paint, and varnished strips of sheet metal conceal nothing - but by painting them as she does, Völk gives them a new "look," creating a mask, as it were, by applying "make-up" to the shapes. By virtue of painting, she turns their surfaces into a *trompe l'oeil* - material that pretends to be another material. This act of camouflage embraces not only the work itself, but the frame in which it is presented, so that it becomes the pedestal for its own display - a pedestal that in turn reflects its own image as it is exhibited.⁶

We see images that are always simultaneously other images, floating in their own world and at the same time frozen in the frame. Völk creates states that are pure atmosphere and that allow

plenty of “breathing space.” Her works are charged with a controlled intensity that speaks of seduction and desire, in which what is depicted and the media used in creating it coalesce into an indissoluble whole, like an organism that is continually regenerating and transforming itself, forever in motion.

1

The title alludes to *Rumpelstiltskin*, a Grimm fairy tale in which a king gives a beautiful miller's daughter the task of spinning a room full of straw into gold - if she fails, her fate will be death; if she succeeds, good fortune will be hers. The allusion to the craft of spinning is a reference to and an analogy with women's work and lives; the idea of turning worthless, mundane objects into luxury items is an eternal fantasy and challenge, especially in art.

2

This aspect of Völk's work was prominently displayed in 2006, at exhibitions in the Galerie Ben Kaufmann in Munich (*La Baum I*) and the Sies und Höke gallery in Düsseldorf (*La Baum II*), where the independence of Völk's spatial arrangements could be seen in juxtaposition with works by artists such as Poul Gernes and Jeremy Shaw.

3

Since the late 1990s, Anke Völk has worked with slide projections and video installations, and explored various juxtapositions, constellations and hangings that demonstrate her enduring interest in blurring the boundaries of the picture and creating new spatial arrangements. In her earlier work, she used various wall constellations to explore questions of format, wallpaper, light, framing and media crossover, while her current installations focus on the correlation of individual works.

4

The significance of the titles of her works is not bound directly to the works themselves. The titles of her most recent works refer programmatically to artistic positions and morals. Cf. also the origins of verbal imagery in titles by Abstract Expressionist artists such as Barnett Newman.

5

The same applies to *Zwischen Morgen und Nacht liegt Geschichte* (Between Morning and Night Lies History; 2010); three-part work on aluminium, acrylic and paper.

6

Mirrors and remnants could be figures given that easel painting is no longer a place of narration in contemporary art. Ever since the frame was abandoned by the painters of the New York School and the “auratization” of the expanded picture as an object without boundaries (consider that Barnett Newman gave one of his paintings the title *Gothic*), the frame itself has been grafted onto the content of pictures as an intrinsic pictorial element with its own narrative function. The more frames became irrelevant as an object in their own right in Modern Art, the more they became wedded to the artworks themselves. Such implosive and explosive processes accompany Völk's work, as well. Her painting can be seen as a historical reference to Kazimir Malevitch's *Black Square*, above all to the notion of framing as an inherently pictorial construction. One can discern similar tendencies at work in sculpture, for example in the work of Constantin Brancusi, where the pedestal has become an inseparable part of the sculpture itself.