

## Barbara Heinisch – Painting As An Event

By Susanne Ließegang

„The possibility to develop pictorial design with the help of the other person is so overwhelming to me that I am going to explore this field for the rest of my life ... „

Barbara Heinisch, 1993

In the past, there have been many attempts at approaching the paintings of Barbara Heinisch. A text by Rainer Volp, written in 1993 for the catalog “Bilder vom Anderen” (Images Of The Other), comprehensively enlightened the process of the coming into being of a picture and its existential background and therefore deserves special emphasis. To have another essay here is due to the realization that the ways to the opening of perception for the consideration of works of art to speak the truth has to be tried and retried over and over again. When Barbara Heinisch practices painting as an event, this specification makes it necessary for an author to find a language which will transfer the event into the realms of perception and experience of the beholder. The “Schauder der Bildwerdung” (the frisson of becoming an image) need not to be recreated here in poetical description, rather the location should be circumscribed where this frisson can materialize for each beholder. This necessitates going far back into the history of Barbara Heinisch’s life’s work, back to her beginnings as a painter.

There are the conflicting teachers at the Dusseldorf Academy: Joseph Beuys, who radically questions Barbara Heinisch’s desire to become a painter and asks the provoking question “how long do you want this first step to last?”, and, as a counterweight, K. H. Hödicke who demands that “it has to become a picture”. Both teachers followed different goals and Barbara Heinisch could have been torn between the two, or follow one of them leaving the other aside. But Heinisch accepted the challenge coming from Beuys and questioned the status of the picture very radically. In one of her early performances she took a monochrome painting, held it over her head and then stuck her head through it to finally push through it completely. The head and the body tear the pictorial plane apart, the artist is reborn by this passage through the picture.

The destruction of the image and the real presence of the artist form the beginning of this artistic recapture of the image. Shortly after that, when asked by Hödicke to paint a self-portrait, she doesn’t only refuse the traditional position of the model in front of a mirror, but she also

denies the aspect of a model as the basis of the image. Instead of visually appropriating the counterpart and creating a likeness, she covers her own face with the painting cloth and touches her face with her paint-covered fingers. A “Gesichtsabdruck” (face print) is created, the real presence of the face records without help from the eye, the thinking, reflecting authority of the painter.

It wasn’t the intention of the painter, but there is a reference to the European myth of creation of the “primal image”, the origin of the icon of Christ. Veronica hid the primal image of Christ when she, during the Passion, handed him the sudarium to wipe the sweat off his face, during which process the face was transferred on to the cloth. In a second version, the so-called Image of Abgar (Image of Edessa), the face of Christ was imprinted on a cloth because he did it himself, thereby legitimizing his likeness. In both versions the question of the “vera icon” (the true image) is not answered by the likeness between the model and the image, but by the real presence of the face in the imprint on the cloth. The power of the icon rests on this. (1) By her radical question, how the image of a person can be created without the reigning power of vision, Barbara Heinisch found the way to put the “touching hand” on an equal footing with the “seeing hand”. In touching the counterpart (in this case, herself) she discovered the ignition spark of the image in progress no longer concerned with the question of likeness but rather with the question of presence.

Looking back, the radical consequence becomes clear, with which, starting from these first artistic attempts, an artistic process was created, in which the canvas became the membrane between the painter and the model and the painting the testimony of an artistic encounter beyond all representative functions of the image.

Starting from there it wasn’t a big step, but an important one, to stop hiding the production of a painting behind the closed doors of the studio. The importance of the presence in the creative process demanded creation of the picture to be publicly shown in front of an audience. The audience becomes witness of the event and thus amplifies the presence. Barbara Heinisch calls this a celebration, thereby pointing at the equality of participation and presence on the one hand and event (performance) and observation (image) on the other.

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(1) See Hans Belting, Bild und Kult, Munich 1990, p. 233 ff

For Barbara Heinisch, performance developed to be the step in the creative process constituting the work, while for other artists, such as Georges Mathieu, painting in front of an audience was just a painting show. (2) Also for Yves Klein, who is constantly mentioned when one speaks of Barbara Heinisch, it is true that performance was just a transitory stage in the development of his painting. In the quest for the truthfulness of painting he put an end to the creative hand, made his models cover themselves with paint and lie down on the canvas in order to achieve an imprint. Given all the radicalness, Yves Klein did not change the status of the image, it remained a surface, a plane on which something was depicted (3), much in contrast to Barbara Heinisch.

Compared to Yves Klein it is made clear that the change of the canvas from surface to membrane isn't just a technical detail of the work process, rather it is an indication that the encounter between painter and model in the event has become the essence of painting. The membrane hides the model from the painter's view, it appears as a shadow and a body relief, the already existent distance of the view is made trenchant and raised to a higher power. The touching and painting hand, the physical contact with the canvas, and the model turn into the fiery ignition spark for the image. (4)

In the story of Veronica, the hand, caring for reasons of charity, gave rise to the image. Barbara Heinisch says "Painting is love", thus opening a horizon of meaning far beyond Western art analyzing and explaining the world. This horizon begins where Heinisch understands her painting as "social sculpture" in the sense of Joseph Beuys. Contact, encounter, and movement and, last not least desire are the basis of all these pictorial designs.

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(2) Georges Mathieu: "During the creative process I am alone with my canvas, be it in the studio or in public"; see catalog Westkunst, 1981, p. 204

(3) Yves Klein, *Anthropométrie*, from 1958 onw.

(4) Dieter Mersch has, in his book on "Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen", Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002, presented copious material for the fathoming of the philosophical boundaries between work and event. He describes the gradual supersession of the work, like it was developed in the Renaissance, by a performative concept since the middle of the 19th Century. The positioning of Barbara Heinisch's work in this context is still to be achieved, but this would lead too far here.



**“ ... but it has to become a picture”**

Barbara Heinisch hasn't followed the path of myths. She never recognized presence, or in other words, the "real presence", as the sole legitimation of her paintings. She was never content with an understanding of the picture as traces left by a former encounter. The postulate of Hödicke, "but it has to become a picture" remained, for her, assignment and challenge. But under contemporary conditions there weren't any unscrutinized rules any more as to what constitutes an image. She understood early that images do not rest on a wild, subjective acting out. They had to turn to other sources for persuasiveness. So what merits do the performances and paintings have?

Almost all performances are subject to preparatory work in the studio. The subject, the music, the condition of the dancer and the painter enter into communicative exchange. The spectrum of the music reaches from a ready-made composition to free and pure improvisation. The structure of communication changes in the interplay of model and painter dependent on the music: free improvisations and detailed choreographies can become the basic concept of a performance.

In the choreographic work there are several sittings in which positions from the flow of movements of the model, often a dancer, are

chosen and their positioning on the canvas tried out as the pillars of the painting event in the performance. Within the framework of the structure developed in the studio, the flow of movements of music, dance and painting intertwine in the public performance. The music can take up the scratching of the brush on the canvas, the dancer can react to the hardness of the rhythm, the hand wielding the brush can follow, with short strokes, the staccato of the music. The model isolates a pose from all flows of movements, pauses., the painter follows with her movements of the brush the impulse of movement contained in the gestures, accompany it with motion until, at last, the model disperses the gesture into a new action.

The motion pattern of the model, congealed in the gesture, is superimposed by those of Barbara Heinisch. For both, the music is the pathway to unknown, unpredictable structures of movement. The artist's stepping back will interrupt the exchange of motion, so will the arrest of the hand and the examining look at the painting. Bye and bye the painting will intervene in the communication, giving new impulse to the continuation of the performance. This kind of painting isn't in any way a secondary score of movements. Rather it designs and follows a meaningful structure of encounter. Meaningful has to be understood in the sense of Vilém Flusser who sees gestures as drafts of meaning, whereas a simple movement is just an unreflected pattern of reaction to a given environment. His example is pain. Somebody pricks me with a pin and I react, my reaction making the pain readable.

This motion is taken up and integrated into the gesture, and further developed to become a pattern of movement communicating pain. The gesture is movement reflected within in order to communicate – to speak about oneself or something. A form of announcement that cannot ever be completely retranslated into a meaning and yet carries meaning, initiates understanding. Readability develops, when the beholder couples his own horizon of experience with the gesture. (5)  
You shouldn't ever expect the explicit gesture, the pathetic or kitsch gesture, because the impulse of holding fast to it is not its interpretation nor its translation, rather it is the

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(5) See Vilém Flusser: *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*, Dusseldorf 1991, esp. "Geste und Gestimmtheit" (Gesture and mood), p. 77 ff (re pain: p.11) and "Die Geste des Malens" (The gesture of painting), p. 109 ff

opening of interpretation, communication which is aimed at. This is the reason why Heinisch's images do not open themselves readily to language – they are never, in the sense of language, unequivocal, but logical in the sense of the gesture. It is not by chance that Heinisch has been more and more often working together with dancers. Dancers have developed their movements into a language of the body, they are capable to fill the subject matter of music, of a subject, with the language of their bodies. The dancers communicate in this language transcending individuality – a language defined by culture, superseding the individual quality of a subjective bodily expression, so that supra-individual communication weighs heavier than subjective expression. We read this language with the eyes and the body. Hereinafter a few pictures will be presented, as one can only experience what has been said at the specific image.

## Love

In the center of the surface of an untreated canvas a full-length human figure stands, filling the portrait format from top to bottom. Multiple corrections of arms and legs in different positions grow from a shared trunk, whose consistence cannot be described neither as a dense mass nor a dissolved body. Soft, without a shell or base it forms the center of both the figure and the image. A purple line marks its middle. Further down near the share and between the legs colors coagulate to form an impenetrable mass, just like further up in the area of the head. The cautious parlance reveals that colors and lines do not allow any depiction to stand before its own energetic and material qualities. The sensuality of the colors still breathes something of the touching hand which "rubbed" them on the canvas. The gestural trace of the painter's hand and the brush is densified is the body relief of the figure. Lines denote the boundaries of the body inseparable from the energetic quality of the traces of movement. Although the figure stands in contrast to the ground, it doesn't separate from the canvas, rather it seems like sunk into it.

This ostensive evidence can be explained by the knowledge that, for this early work of 1983, the canvas was stretched in front of a wall. Thus the model only had a small space to move in between the wall and the canvas. The body did not only cast a shadow, it also formed a relief in the cloth. The portrait format limited the space for movements at the sides so that the motion

“stills” could not juxtapose, only superimpose. Looking at it there remains an indecision whether we deal with one figure in different phases of movement or with several figures standing one behind the other and the second embracing the anterior with hands placed in the share, in the erotic center of love.

The image unfolds in the process of becoming a picture before the image and in the verbal formulation after. The comprise what stands against the very quality marking the image: We see the unification of the before and the after in the integration of the movements of the model into the movements of Barbara Heinisch: Painting as an event means that it is not about a depiction of something or a demonstration of meaning, rather that the canvas grows into a location for the experience of identity (density), the complexity of which cannot be retranslated into single different facts. The unity of the image is not an addition of a couple of gestures or meanings. The unity of the image is the not re-translatable density in the power of language of color and line we experience bodily, sensually, and take for truth. The quality of the painting (s) by Barbara Heinisch originates where there isn't any question any more about a vocabulary of translation, rather where we witness the process of amalgamation between painter and model under the conditions of painting.



When Barbara Heinisch starts by patting down the canvas it is not an empty gesture, rather it

serves to establish contact and it is also a valuation of the location that makes it possible to lend continuing presence to a density of encounter unheard of.

No sweet nothings, no rose-colored world, no fabric of social relations. Heftily attacking, carrying off everything yet founding – that is love and that is painting as an event. Love, the becoming one of two people, something that can only happen at the peak of ecstasy, is the model for painting as an event, where the painting itself turns into the hoped-for moment and place. A painting like this does not depict anything, doesn't represent anything that happened, it is not the remnant of any event, it is the event itself.

The image is the membrane where the energies of the painter and the model meet and marry. Barbara Heinisch has fulfilled the postulate of Hödicke of creating a picture and the radical demand of Beuys to transcend the frontiers of the picture and created an image which cannot be re-translated by using seeing as a bridge, but one which opens new worlds: rough, wild, untamed like love.

## The Dance

Alongside love and ecstasy, dance is Barbara Heinisch's central subject. When young, she had to decide whether to follow her artistic willing either in dance or in painting. She took the path of painting, but the dance, as a self-felt experience of the body remained fertile soil for her, accompanying her on her way to painting as an event and focusing it.

Her own training as a dancer allows the painter to corporeally and intuitively understand the movements of her counterpart. The movements of the dance turn into painterly movements on the artist's side, the motions known to the body becoming painterly traces. The model's withdrawal from view through the canvas did not lead to a reduction of the visible to the shadow, but it changed the “mode of transmission”,. The denial of view made it possible for the painter well versed in dance to strengthen the sensorium of body experience. The score of motion is a body score and vice versa.

The prescience of a primal ground we have when looking at the painting “Ekstatischer Tanz” (Ecstatic dance) from 1987 may be due the body of color carrying both the dimensions of the body and the motion, without going through the eye of the needle of seeing and experiencing its



specific reduction. The energetically charged body and the energetically charged traces of light are made from the same fabric. They take the whole picture into the rush the drummers created at the time of the performance. In this picture, like in a number of others, the spaces between the figures are neither the backgrounds nor the depths of a perceived logical order of space but rather something like the negative pattern of the bodies. They share the same qualities and are also part of the energetic tension. The spatial order of this painting is not an antecedent receptacle into which the actions flow. Space is a quality like the figure, and both are created in the ecstatic dance. It is, if something like that is possible, ecstatic space.



If we look at "Aida, rot" (1986) under the aspect of this image description then the eye now already Heinsch-trained will quickly take up the special characteristics of the scores of body and motion, serving a changed subject: The crucial test of Aida's love (6) has given turmoil to the whole image. Here, even more clearly than in the former painting, figure and ground are inextricably woven into this test. The whole forms a space of sound in which one believes to hear Maria Callas' voice: Her arias form the musical part of the creation of the image. Centering the image in "one" body strengthens the impression that the "vibrato" of the structure of space and plane is equivalent to both the vibrato of the voice and the subject.

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(6) Aida, opera by Giuseppe Verdi, first performed in Cairo in 1871. Aida, an Ethiopian slave at the court of the Pharaoh, gets roped in the loyalty conflict of the Egyptian military leader Radames, who loves her, but who has to be true to the Pharaoh and who has been promised his daughter Ameris as a bride. Aida follows her

lover, who is sentenced to death for High Treason, into the grave.



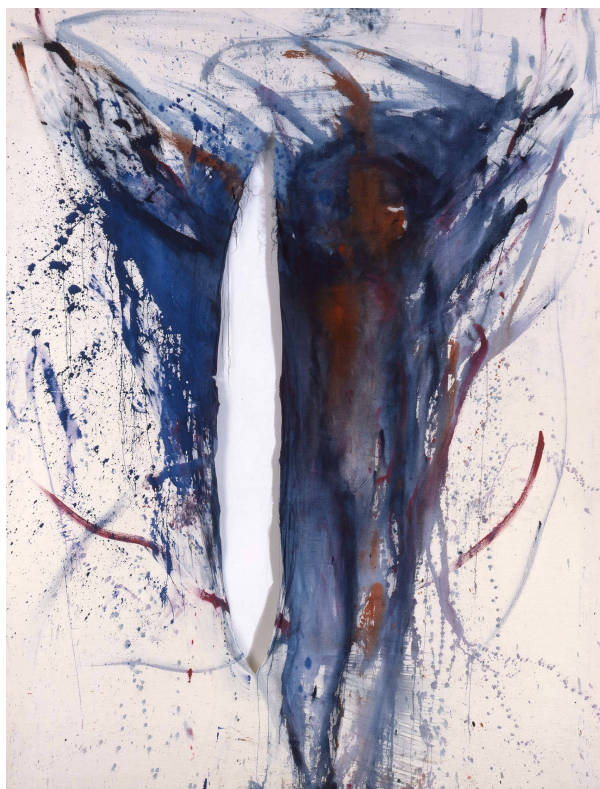
Only when sound as a physical event combines with the subject of a psychic drama and the seeing of the image to become a space of experience, only when the density of the image is not retranslated into some component or other, the whole dimension of the "theme" can be taken benefit of. Only by not translating the perception of the picture becomes another event – one whose space of experience transcends the visual space.

### The Rip

The cutting of the canvas and the birth of the model through the cut canvas which accompanies her work since 1977 has to be evaluated against the background of what has been said. Every painting is scrutinized by the reflecting eye of the artist in order to find out whether it has become an image under the conditions of seeing. This scrutinizing, however, entails a reduction to something seen and to be seen which cannot entirely match the process of the making of the picture and the event. With the cut into the canvas the level of seeing becomes the level of the body, the "image" is turned into an object. The model, stepping through the aperture into the realm of the painter and the audience, confronts them with corporeality, disturbing the calm aloofness of the incorporeal gaze. In the painting "Ostern" (Easter), executed in 1980, we sense the existential momentum tearing the newly won pictorial level. The rip

stands against any easing in the birth of a painting or a model. Nothing here is calmed down, nothing circles to produce an image. The rip turns the frontiers of imagination into an event. The disturbing of the image by means of the rip makes death and resurrection a radical liminal experience of our imagination.

If Easter, like everything we can appropriate by thinking, solidifies in a painting, it will lose its all-changing power. In the performance, the rip is the blasting demolition of the image. The encounter between painter and model becomes physically real, the image as the membrane of encounter has its peak here, losing its functionality in the very same moment, in order to gain lasting presence as a picture. But the rip, in viewing, also disturbs the finishing of the image. While the beholder is "putting himself into the picture", the visual plane is torn open. In the rip, the picture un.masks "the image", pointing to something beyond the powers of imagination, thus still holding it in an event-status. Easter can become a never ending (ritual) event. It is an important.



To prevent any misunderstanding it should be noted that the rip in Barbara Heinisch's paintings is not an exercise in the theory of the image. It always emanates from the performance and roots in the spiritual dimension of the image. The change of pictorial levels originates where it is needed both pictorially and thematically. It is a crucial part of each of the performances and images, but not its gist like in the works of Lucio

Fontana. Paintings with a rip and those without one stand side by side. The all originated from the oscillation between physical experience and seeing in the respective encounter. This has remained an open field of research for Barbara Heinisch until today, in which every encounter with the model passing through the respective painting-event will always result in a valid ending.

"For me, art is living wholeness in a moment."  
Barbara Heinisch, 1993

Translated by Mason Ellis Murray

About the author:

Susanne Ließegang studied history of art in Gießen with Norbert Werner and in Bâle with Gottfried Boehm. She received her PhD with her book: "Henri Matisse : Gegenstand und Bildrealität (published 1994). She works as an independent art arbiter in her own "Forum Kunstbetrachtung".