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Spaces behind spaces. Jan Wawrzyniak's closed heterotopias,

in: H.L. Alexander von Berswordt-Wallrabe (Hrsg.): Jan Wawrzyniak.  
Drawn Pictures (Ausstellungskatalog), Bochum, 2007:  
S. 6-12.

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## Spaces behind spaces. Jan Wawrzyniak's closed heterotopias

„... „just look at this waiting room.“<sup>1</sup>

The works that Jan Wawrzyniak, who was born in Leipzig in 1971, created between 2005 and 2006 may be seen as post-Utopian continuations of abstract painting. The larger ones – remarkable hybrids lying between drawing and painting – are reductive charcoal drawings on canvas in which black, slightly hesitantly drawn lines and expanses of grey generally set at odd angles to one another hint at spatial depth or stimulate our eye to perceive perspective. The works alternate between abstraction and figurativeness, developing singularly changeable perspectives that make us sense a world characterised by vulnerability and endangerment.

In his untitled “painting”<sup>2</sup> (06038) which measures 170 x 180 cm, Wawrzyniak has left the canvas largely blank. Only in the upper left and the lower right corner do we find expanses of black and grey. Reminiscent of differently shaded sides of geometric figures or spaces, they encourage perspective-based seeing. Two long, fine lines lead from these small grey constructs to the lower left-hand corner of the canvas, seeming to open up a void, a large empty field. Overall, however, no composite construct offering plausible perspective emerges as we look at the work. The perception of such perspective is simultaneously encouraged and frustrated: it is encouraged by the geometric forms, the juxtaposition of obtuse and acute angles and a specific connection of the lines, while it is frustrated because the images we see can neither be imagined as a real, three-dimensional space nor appear to be derived from one. In a similar way to Joseph Albers' *Structural Constellations*, Wawrzyniak's picture (06038) does not permit the unambiguous visual perception of perspective. Rather our eye is offered “only partially accurate spatial experiences”,<sup>3</sup> thereby – as Max Imdahl commented with respect to Albers – creating an impression of “unavailability”.<sup>4</sup>

Yet in the case of Wawrzyniak's picture, it is not just our eye's spatial perception but also our sense of equilibrium that is subjected to significant uncertainty: the fine lines provide no compositional support for the dark, flat constructs pushed out to the work's edges. The large white pictorial field seems remarkably empty and undefined. The balance is precarious. Something similar happens with the untitled “painting” (06021), which measures 150 x 140 cm. In this work, five broad black bars traverse the entire canvas from top to bottom. Massive as the bars are, the picture's

<sup>1</sup> Kafka, Franz: *The Trial*, London 2005, p. 61. The other quotations featured in this text come from the same passage, which describes a visit K. pays to the court building.

<sup>2</sup> In view of the works' hybrid nature, the term painting is used in inverted commas in this essay. The artist has commented as follows on this point: “I imagine that one can reverse the path from a small sketch to a large picture: the canvas, measuring 200 x 300 cm for example, is a preliminary work, a sketch, that is only completed on paper, on a sheet of paper that then measures [...] 10.5 x 14.5 cm.” Wawrzyniak, Jan (2002): *Stille Räume. Arbeiten auf Leinwand und Papier*. Stuttgart: Edition Galerie im Radius-Verlag, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Imdahl, Max (1996): “Moderne Kunst und visuelle Erfahrung”. In: Janhsen-Vukićević, Angeli (ed.): *Max Imdahl. Zur Kunst der Moderne, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 329-340, p. 334. With regard to Albers' *Structural Constellations* Imdahl inquires: “So what is the essence of a pictorialism in which the projection projects something that can exist solely within the projection?” (ibid., p. 332) According to him, such seeing is frustrated “by the impossibility of being able to conceive that which is projected as a predetermined three-dimensional spatial construct in reality.” (ibid., p. 333)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 334

structure conveys an impression of instability. All the distances seem to be mobile and moveable, while the contours are restless and the bars themselves seem to diverge considerably from the perpendicular. This picture, too, has a direct physical impact on our sense of balance but, unlike the luminous, cheerful work (06038), it radiates heaviness and melancholy. It also seems less abstract. The black bars resemble a massive lattice that blocks our view of the space behind it. The extremely short, bevelled horizontal bar in the upper left corner of the picture, which runs at an angle, creates the impression that what we can see is just part of a whole. As in the case of the 160 x 160 cm square untitled work (06043), it is difficult not to see an interior space in this work, even if there are no figurative elements we can definitely identify.

The experiencing of Wawrzyniak's more recent works therefore seems to present two characteristic aspects. The first is that possible ways of reading them are never more than intimated. Just as perspective never becomes unambiguous, so there is an oscillation between a figurative "recognitory sight" and a free, purely formal "seeing sight"<sup>5</sup> that explores the constellations of shapes and lines on the canvas. The second important characteristic is that, through their colourlessness, their mute, matt surfaces and their constant readjustment of their unstable balance, the works create a very distinctive, slightly oppressive atmosphere, radiating the melancholy aura of a fragile, ultimately inaccessible world. The two characteristics together create exactly that relationship to the world for which the terms post-Utopian and endangered seem appropriate, since they make us sense the great Utopias of the highly intellectual and spiritual world of abstract painting, albeit as something that, being over, has been reintegrated into temporality and figurativeness. The regime of abstract art and the absolute primacy it accords to the aesthetic – as described by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière<sup>6</sup> – does not hold sway here, but the material world is pallid and empty too.

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the distinction between "seeing sight" and "recognitory sight", see Imdahl, Max (1988):

Giotto Arenafresken. Ikonographie, Ikonologie, Ikonik. (2nd expanded edition) Munich, pp. 43 and 45.

<sup>6</sup> See Rancière, Jacques (2001): *L'inconscient esthétique*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, p. 25 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Kafka, see Note 1, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Mazumdar, Pravu (2004): "Repräsentation und Aura: Zur Geburt des modernen Bildes bei Foucault und Benjamin". In: Gente, Peter (ed.): *Foucault und die Künste*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 220-237, p. 225

*"It was a long passage with crudely made doors leading to the various offices in the attic."*<sup>7</sup>

The philosopher Pravu Mazumdar has described art's change of position in the post-representational age as a shift from picture to object: "To a certain extent, the picture ceases to be a transparent window. No longer something that helps viewers to see the truth of a transcendent object, it is instead an opaque thing that blocks the viewer's gaze. The picture is transformed from a channel for viewing into a cul-de-sac for the gaze."<sup>8</sup> The blocking of the viewer's gaze mentioned by Mazumdar is particularly striking in Wawrzyniak's case because the notion of a window is still perceptible. Particularly the black expanses of charcoal cause our gaze, which is drawn

into the intimated depths of the pictorial space, to run aground; they block the eye's access to imagined depths. Something similar also occurs with the untitled work (05049), in which the vanishing lines in the picture's centre lead to a black expanse that is simultaneously a hole and an opaque surface. The way in which our gaze is blocked has a completely different quality from that in the already mentioned works by Albers, where the space always remains a purely intellectual and spiritual one, a completely abstract construct, something Utopian. Wawrzyniak, on the other hand, repeatedly evokes a material world that actually exists: interior spaces, rooms, corridors, doorways, lattices, corners and vistas in rooms, with even narrative elements being intimated. So Utopian, purely abstract seeing is always thwarted by figurativeness, being cast back into the temporal sphere, into a world from which we cannot escape because the yearned-for gaze to the outside, the other side, is disturbingly displaced.

Looked at in this way, Wawrzyniak's pictures evoke a quiet futility. In this, they resemble the world of Kafka's narratives. In the novel *The Trial*, K., the protagonist, repeatedly tries to find the courtrooms or to gain access to the judge, seeking in this way to find out about the unfathomable offence of which he is accused. By going to the places concerned, K. hopes to understand the "regime of truth" (Foucault) that challenges the legitimacy of his person. Yet the institution of the court always remains concealed and K. never gets an answer. He becomes increasingly embroiled, finding himself in a succession of cul-de-sacs and labyrinths that offer neither answer nor exit. Wawrzyniak's pictures, reductive and self-evident as they may appear at first sight, recall this and other narratives. We sense spaces lying behind the spaces we see – for example, in two untitled works done in 2006 (06023 and 06021). Yet those spaces not only evade a fictitious accessibility but also fail to confirm our gaze. The decisive thing is that we, as viewers, are those who, enclosed or excluded, look into the pictorial space and are enabled to seek "other spaces" – the kind of heterotopias defined by Foucault – to look for those places "that oppose all others, in a certain way effacing, replacing, neutralising or purifying them."<sup>9</sup> Yet those specific "counter-spaces", those "localised utopias" that Foucault states to be known to children, too ("the attic or, to be more precise, the wigwam erected in the middle of the attic"<sup>10</sup>) remain hidden: we merely sense that they could potentially exist.

*"Although there was no direct source of light, it was not completely dark, since some of the offices on the corridor side, instead of having solid wooden walls, displayed wooden lattice-work that reached right up to the ceiling..."<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, Michel / Defert, Daniel (2005): *Les hétérotopies*. Zwei Radiovorträge. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 37-52, p. 40

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. According to Foucault, museums and libraries are also heterotopias (ibid., p. 46). Heterotopia is a technical term for Foucault, which he uses to describe places associated with transition and transformation (ibid., p. 46). He also writes: "Heterotopias are completely closed to the outside world, but completely open too. Everyone has access but once you are inside you realise it is an illusion. A heteropia is an open space that nonetheless only ever leaves us outside." (ibid., p. 48) He goes on to write: "Here we indubitably encounter the real nature of heterotopias. They call all other spaces into question in two different ways: either like brothels, in that they create an illusion that unmask the rest of reality as illusion, or by actually creating another real space, which is totally ordered compared with the confused disorder of our space." (ibid., p. 40)

<sup>11</sup> Kafka, see Note 1, ibid.

Jacques Rancière describes artistic practice as the formation of the relationship "between knowledge and ignorance, sense and senselessness, logos and pathos, reality and fantasy".<sup>12</sup> It is in this intermediate sphere that Wawrzyniak's pictures develop their references to the world. The artist – against the background of painting's history – does not necessarily seem to view his works as spectacular new inventions. He quite obviously does not seek to formulate superficial claims in the field of art with a grandiose gesture. Rather his real venture seems to be quietly to formulate post-Utopian approximations to other spaces (an empty white space, a corner, a shadow) while, not least, showing his own insufficiency in the process. Looked at in this way, Wawrzyniak's art can be seen as repudiating the dynamics of post-modern cosmopolitanism. This repudiation is not, however, a simple attitude of rejection but can also be understood as a new ethos. In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*<sup>13</sup>, the American philosopher Judith Butler suggested that ethics should be founded not on the basis of the humanistic ideal of a subject who is responsible for all his or her actions but on the impossibility of full accountability<sup>14</sup>, ie on a subject that is "opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself".<sup>15</sup> In her view, mutual respect for our insufficiency and the acknowledgement that we are "of necessity, exposed to one another"<sup>16</sup> should be the foundation of ethics. Ethics is accordingly based on the idea of interpreting weakness as a virtue. Seen in this way, ethics means "the solidarity of the vulnerable", the acceptance of endangerment and the "recognition of limitation" of others. Wawrzyniak's endangered, introverted pictorial spaces evoke such a self-understanding and a world relationship that is experienced in this way.

<sup>12</sup> Rancière, see Note 6, p. 51

<sup>13</sup> Butler, Judith (2006): *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York 2006.

<sup>14</sup> In the same work (p. 40), Butler writes: "My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>17</sup> The Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek used this term when commenting on Butler (Žižek, Slavoj (2005): *Die politische Suspension des Ethischen*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, p. 17)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 16