

Temporal Discords

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translation C. Penwarden

Gilgian Gelzer¹ is engaged in the simultaneous exploration of three mediums: painting, drawing and photography. The specific features of these practices are rigorously maintained, and all of them produce (and are produced by) their own asynchronous experiences of duration. The resulting instability and arrhythmia – like an endless, controlled slide – are also the characteristics of contemporaneity itself. After exhibitions last year in Clermont-Ferrand, Montbéliard and Les Sables d’Olonne, Gilgian Gelzer is at the Ludwig Museum in Koblenz for spring 2006.

In an age that is considered posthistorical, in which postmodernism itself disorients its own definitions (starting with the one by Jean-François Lyotard), any artistic project, – whether individual or collective – seems to have no choice but to come to terms with the fact that the notion of the project itself is no longer self-evident. The possibilities are infinite. Many artists now are producing works which, in their very different ways, are about their own making. “Every attempt at drawing is a questioning of what might appear,”² says Gilgian Gelzer. This is an artist who works on the virtual. Which is not to say that he makes conspicuous use of a technology and naively makes the contemporaneity issue secondary to the technical apparatus. On the contrary, he deliberately limits himself to drawing, painting and, to a lesser extent, photography. When I say “virtual” then, I am referring to the original meaning of the word, before it became a slogan: that which exists only as a possibility; what is contained as a latent power, a potentiality that will take physical shape only in a potential future. In this sense, a web or a sheet of blank paper are virtual paintings and drawings.

Gelzer’s method – or rather, anti-method – consists wholly in the absence of a predetermined project. The colors cover each other or sit next to each other on the canvas; the shades mix or clash, the smooth confronts the granular, transparencies afford a view of the successive layers, the forms grow more complex. The limitations are worked out in real time in keeping with the development of the painting. The first question is, “When does the painting start?” There then follows a journey through the possibilities, a series of explorations, choices, coverings-over, up to the last question, which is also about time: “When is the painting finished?” Gelzer answers it as follows: “At a given moment, there is a rightness between things. It may be a balance, may

1 Unless otherwise stated, the quotes by G. Gelzer are from an interview with the author in October 2005.

2, 3 Talk at the École Supérieure d’Art et de Design de Reims, April 24, 1997.

be an imbalance or a tension, but anyway, a state that I don't think can be taken any further.”³ To go further, to expand: that indeed is the vocation of these spreading colors that know no limits but the very concrete ones of the other colors that they come up against, or of the format. When it reaches an obstacle, the paint stops or flows over it, eludes, mixes, moves alongside or rebounds in what is like a game of ping-pong or billiards played out within the frame defined by the canvas.

The Impure and the Rule

The specific means of painting, as practiced by Gelzer, are primarily the layer of color, liquidity and mass. Drawing, in contrast, is a matter of lines. But, depending on the moment, this line can be trace (past displacement), movement (“improvised” experience) and direction (the sum of virtual developments). That said, if one makes the transposition, then the same logic holds for the painting: that of rightness, which is neither harmony nor dissonance, beauty nor deception, but the dogged avoidance of the fixed and the one-way. Lines proliferate in a kind of hysterical multiplication, to the point of totally obscuring certain zones, before crossing the entire space of the paper and then converging further on in a strange agglomeration. No definition really fits. At times, even the notion of abstraction itself seems dubious. Structures appear: concentric lines that might be indications of relief, penciled graduations inevitably seen as modeling, convergences evoking an embryonic perspective, forms in steps, in grids. “Why not accept it?” asks Gelzer, “Especially since I am very interested in figurative painting anyway. Something there holds me.”⁴ This last formulation is ambiguous: is it figurative painting that holds his attention, or does he hold back from making it? Probably both at the same time, which comes down to distinguishing between the time of looking and the time of doing.

It so happens that Gelzer is a polyglot: his mother tongue is German, he has lived in France for more than twenty years, and he also speaks English and Spanish. “That is one constituting – or deconstituting! – element of my work,” he says. The questions of language, of translation, mistakes, accent, awkwardness, idiom and barbarism, etc., are echoed in his work, which is fundamentally impure. For all that, there is such a thing as a style of impurity, a rhetoric of failure, just as there is a thematization – in fact, a very fashionable one, these days – of mixing, sampling and nomadism. “Let us not entrust ourselves to failure. That would only be to indulge nostalgia for success,” writes Blanchot⁵. Gelzer never reassures himself with posturing. He remains highly lucid as to the fact that the simple choice of certain tools, notably “the rejection of the rule” – in every sense of that word – “can also become a rule”

4 “Les Aguets”, interview with Olivier Kaepelin, *Face Time*, ex. cat. Frac Auvergne, Le 19 Centre Régional d’Art Contemporain, Musée de l’Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Ludwig Museum Koblenz, 2004, p. 44.

5 Maurice Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980. Translation: *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln/London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 12.

A Need to Act

Photography occupies a particular position in Gelzer's work, first of all because it was not originally a part of his art that people saw – not until 2001 (when he had his first exhibition featuring photographs). Originally, he used photography as a means of notation. It was the tool of his searching gaze, ready to capture an incongruous vision where the real exposed itself in unlikely appearances, with particular symmetries, colors, distortions, contrasts of scale or luminosity. Of course, these configurations are not literally transposed into the paintings, but they do help constitute a repertoire of forms that develops by accumulation and that reappears, later, in other guises. Indeed, Gelzer does not think of himself as a photographer, but only as a painter who takes photographs.

Contrary to what his approach might lead us to believe, Gelzer does not work “blind” but, instead, follows the logic of sight. For the lack of any other organizing principle, it is the gaze that determines “the point where the road turns, the extreme point of a movement that will stop or change direction. Each instant is crucial, each instant is decisive, or it is not an instant. It interrupts a state or a durable movement, it causes a layer of time to slip into the past and opens up another.”⁶

This view implies that we call into question another reductive vision of the work, one that would see it as an automatic practice in which active will recedes totally behind action. There is no transcendence, but nor are things just left to themselves: the artist remains wholly the author of his work, in the sense of having authority over it. The painting, drawing or photography are simply the accumulations of countless deliberate and extremely precise choices.

In Gelzer's work, certain elements may also have a political or ethical meaning. The negotiation between the forms in the process of finding a point of equilibrium, the oblique relation to language and norms, the interweaving of reserve and wonder at the real attested by photography, the way conventions are thrown into crisis – all these aspects define the work's conditions of coherence and, at the same time, the non – subsidiary nature of its constituents. “There is simply, at the beginning, a decision to do something or a need to act, and on the basis of something that is fairly trivial.”⁷

Which is what makes Gilgian Gelzer an anti-Bartleby.

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6 Sylviane Agacinski, *Le Passeur de temps. Modernité et nostalgie*, Paris: Seuil, La librairie du 20^e siècle, 2000, p. 62.

7 Talk, Reims, loc. cit.