

Ambivalent Surfaces: An Encounter with Rococo Paintings

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

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Abstract

This project sets out from an encounter with a series of rococo paintings by Francois Boucher's and my unexpected fascination with them that I try to understand. I presume it is the mimetic texture of a fabric and the shimmer of the paint itself that prompts me to the strange difference between them. In the sensual absorption, on the other hand, paint becomes its own presentation. This in turn raises questions about the painting surface. The surface carries judgement, that is intertwined with the judgement about the rococo. With formalism as the dominant art criticism of modernity, I discuss the concept of the painting surface as predicated on a split between material and image, connected to the distinctions of form and idea, presentation and representation.

My key research question thus concerns the role of the surface. The surface is not understood as an isolated picture plane but rather as one of passages and relationships. The play between substance, subject and surface constitutes a network of meaning. The relevance to my practice is explored through the figures of the stain and the splotch, plastic surfaces, and movement on the surface.

The research method is developed as an exchange between three main component strands of writing. The poetic serves as a generative, intuitive interface, the art historical and aesthetic a sober grounding for observation, attentions, and factual encounters, and the philosophical arena provides the structure for speculation and projection. There is in turn no privileging of one over the other but rather a series of passages and circulations that provide connections. This triangulation serves to articulate other structural conjunctions such as the relationship between affects, percepts, and concepts, and the structure of spacing within the project of the studio, gallery, and library, which all serve as a play of triangles within triangles.

Boucher's paintings evoke ambivalent affects in me. I partially feel repulsion towards their representations and simultaneous attraction to the way they are painted and the effects of their materiality. An object of research that puts me in a place of uncertainty allows for an exploration that is open to experiment, experience, and surprise as is the process in the studio. Ambivalence, as the suspension of judgment, opens up a space for me to move within and inhabit different positions. I thus consider a politics of ambivalence and pose the question of its capability as a method or even as an aim.

The key references this thesis is built around are Boucher's paintings as much as the recent discussion by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth that investigates Boucher's artistic individuation through the materiality of his work. This provided me with perspectives that in turn entered the act of looking to forge connections with my practice. Rococo spatiality evokes a floating movement. Another key reference is Timothy Morton's argument for an (im-)possible ecology sensibility within consumerism that connects ambivalence and floating in speculating about the potential of ambivalence to question our categorical dualist thinking of subject and object at the expense of the latter.

What this project proposes is therefore a way of looking that opens out another way of encountering art history that is usually governed by the authority of iconography that in turn relies on representation as the dominant system of signification. With this, it is also an exploration of how looking differently can be a method to painting. The contribution of rococo to practice is a notion of the in-betweenness of the surface of painting that de-centres the subject and opens out to a subject/object encounter in the experience of ambivalence. The starting point of this research was a state of ambivalence the object of research put me or I put the object in. From this moment of suspended judgment, ambivalence finds its expression in the a-signifying movements of floating and drifting. This gives rise to the exploration of contradiction, the production of dialectics and the liberation of uncertainty.

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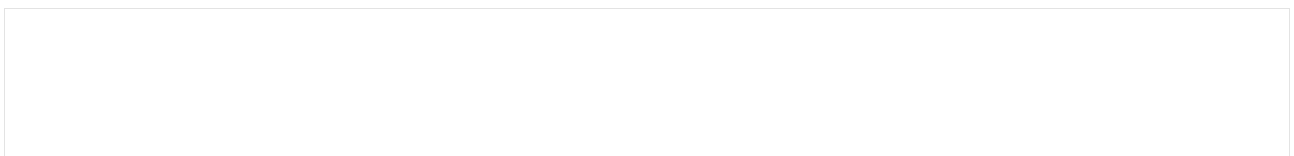
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1. Introduction

This project originally embarked as an exploration into showcases. During my strolls in Hamburg and Rotterdam, peculiar arranged storefronts of small businesses provoked my interest. They displayed plants, art prints, fabric drapes, and handicrafts: penguins made of papier-mâché, landscapes crafted from felt. Sometimes used as a storage, they function rather as backsides than fronts. However, in practice, I found myself at a loss with my findings as I could not see the connection between this interest and my painting practice. While I liked to discover and collect pictures of these shop windows, I lacked the desire to paint the peculiar objects or take up their arrangements, as I wasn't interested in them as signifiers; they were already placeholders, constructing a whimsical theatre or creating a humorous effect that was due to the discrepancy between their value and their placement. This contingency between the economy of presentation and the evocation of desirability occurred to me as a relationship between object and space. The appeal of them was not this insight, but the unexpected discovery. They yielded a break with the expectations of looking to the effect that I came to notice how not only the showcase as a viewing device sets up a signifying order but something in the act of looking itself.

My interest in Rococo paintings, which led me to visit the Wallace Collection one day, was guided by a similar inclination. One finds the collection nestled in a quiet courtyard. Inside, older women make up the majority of visitors. This local seclusion seems analogous of the positioning of rococo within the canon of European painting. Indications of exact dates for the period of rococo vary. This might be contingent with the rococo being a surprisingly contested term, as it originally designated a specific style of decoration that came to be applied eponymously for the entire art of the 18th century, encompassing architecture, interior design and painting. As Rémy G. Saisselin points out, this is largely indebted to German art critics of the 20th century like Max Osborn and Wilhelm Worringer.¹ Perhaps in conjunction with its sprawling nature, rococo is often deemed too broad as an art-historic term and was never fully accepted by French art history.² In painting, however, the period can be bracketed by the live and work of what are now considered its most famous representatives. Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), Francois Boucher (1703-1770) and Jean-Honore Fragonard (1732-1806).³

¹ Rémy G. Saisselin, 'The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 19 (1960), 145-152, p.145 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/428280>>

² Ibid.

³ The rococo has lost its cultural hegemony with the French revolution (1789-1799). However, this distinction is

Coinciding with the era of enlightenment in place and time (1685-1815) the style that later came to be known as rococo was considered courtly, frivolous and decadent by coeval philosophers as it was associated with the social elites.

Despite being uninformed about its history of reception, it were these connotations of the saccharine, the slightly frowned upon, the lack of critical appraisal on one hand, and the unquestionable recognition of its value on the other, that made rococo paintings an object of interest for me and provoked a curiosity to examine and undo predetermined ways of seeing. Looking at a series of Francois Boucher's paintings I was attracted to their translucent glazes, the shimmers and pasty textures of the objects represented. The case that the painter's attention goes to paint, to the 'technical', might seem banal, but what was crucial was what the encounter with its materiality did for me.

My attention was drawn to the mimesis of material as much as to the materiality of paint itself. By zooming in on the details, something opened up for me. In the detail, representation gives way to the self-consistency of shimmer, texture and the differences of surface. Something occurs which isn't the subject matter, which is paint, which is its own presentation. Or is the matter of fascination rather this doubleness of the texture of a fabric and the shimmer of the paint itself that points to a strange difference between them?

This question concerns the relationship between image and material, as conjoined in the experience of surface. This surface encounter gave rise to the idea of poetics as a 'theory of form' to foster correspondence between form and content.

Even in its time, Boucher's paintings have been criticised for their lack of relevance to the project of the enlightenment. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Boucher were of the same generation and one of Boucher's harshest critics came to be Denis Diderot (1718-1784). They evaluated art rather under the standard of morality than for its materiality and effect. Our contemporary perspective on Rococo is still shaped by the discourse of the time, as Ewa Lajer-Burcharth assesses.⁴ Diderot named Boucher's paintings 'artificial and cosmetised, fussy and

oversimplified as it was nevertheless a gradual evolution from Rococo to the dominance of neoclassicism. Melissa Lee Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics*, (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), p.2.

⁴ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), p.10.

trivial'.⁵ Although Diderot's criticism is usually seen in conjunction with Boucher's representations, namely female nudes provoking the moral judgement of their 'vulgarity', I proposed this delineates an underlying judgement about the period's emphasis on surface. As Diderot's concluded the greatest deficiency of Boucher's paintings was that they lacked the 'truth' this implies they represent its opposite, that is illusion.⁶ Both this term and the aforementioned attributes are semantically close to surface and the contemporary judgement of it that coalesces in the notion of the 'superficial'.⁷

What makes this judgement contemporary is, I suggest, a conjunction to consumerist culture that was emerging at this time. Hence Rousseau's criticism of consumerist culture can be read as an implicit critique of the surface, as he "raised the issue of the profound subjective losses entailed by commercial modernity in general, and by the spread of consumption of superfluous good in particular. (...) consumption of unnecessary goods turned man into a socialised, artificial individual, a self defined by vanity and self-love and by the rituals of display and performance that transformed all intersubjective relations such as friendship and the self itself, into mere appearances."⁸ With this, I suggest the judgement about Rococo is a judgement about surface. Thus, I propose different understandings of surface throughout this thesis. The first notion of surface that goes on to inform the concept is the 'surface appearance' in Jacques Lacan's imaginary as it not only proposes a close relationship of illusion, appearance and surface with affects and ambivalence, but also is interwoven with the orders of the symbolic and the real, thus counteracting the notion of separation and reduction.⁹ With Lacan, there is no 'mere surface'.

⁵ Hyde, p.2.

⁶ Lajer-Burcharth, p.11.

⁷"Superficial, late 14c., in anatomical and mathematical uses, "of or relating to a surface," from Late Latin *superficialis* "of or pertaining to the surface," from *superficies*"surface, upper side, top," from *super*"above, over"+*facies* "form, face". Meaning "not deep, without thorough understanding, cursory, comprehending only what is apparent or obvious" (of perceptions, thoughts, etc.) first recorded early 15c. (implied in *superficially* "not thoroughly")." As the chart on 'etymonline' shows, the word was much more frequently used in the 19th century, peaking in 1880 and declining about 50 % percent in the course of the 20th century. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/superficial>

⁸ Compare: Jean Jaques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Science* (1750) and *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men* (1755), Lajer-Burcharth, p.49.

⁹ "The imaginary is the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure. The principal illusions of the imaginary are those of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and above all, similarity. The imaginary is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure; the affects are such phenomena. (...) The imaginary also involves a linguistic dimension. Whereas the signifier is the foundation of the symbolic order, the signified and signification are part of the imaginary order. (...) In its imaginary aspect language is the 'wall of language which inverts and distorts the discourse of the Other. The imaginary exerts a captivating power over the subject founded in the almost hypnotic effect of the specular image. The imaginary is thus rooted in the subject's relationship to his own body (or rather the image of his body)." Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.82.

In the formalist discourse of modernity, the surface is still the place of materiality, albeit elevated for this very notion. Although formalist art discourse and its ideas of autonomy and purity are outdated in contemporary discourse, I claim they reverberate in the notion of the painterly surface. As I claim the surface is unstable, I prioritise the notion of surface encounter over any clear definition of surface. The surface is thus not understood as an isolated picture plane but rather as one of passages and relationships.

The encounter with Boucher's paintings also marked a turning point for my research as it made me complicit with something, that on another level, I am also slightly repulsed by. The judgment about what I see, the level of the signifier, is in competition with the seductive way it is painted. These ambivalent affects inhibit a clear positioning towards the object. It occurred to me that this was not a problem but rather enabled me to hold a contradictory position, allowing a back and fro between absorption into a sensual encounter on one side, and the formation of a position in a critical distance on the other. This feeling of ambivalence connects to my experience in the studio, thus posing the question of its capability as a method or even an aim in itself. This gives rise to a discussion of a possible politics of ambivalence for my practice. An object of research that puts me in a place of uncertainty allows for an exploration that is open to experiment, experience, and surprise as the process in the studio. Ambivalence, as the suspension of judgment, opens up a space for me to move within, shifting between different poles to ultimately follow as much as create a movement. It is furthermore a site for the acceptance of contradictions as much as their productive capability.

Accordingly, the structure of this text is not linear as it does not construct an argument but rather sets up a system for exploration. Developed out of a series of observations and encounters, the writing takes on a circulatory movement, looping in and out of different places, laying out and revisiting arguments and intuitions. The writing is developed in three main component strands: the poetic, the art historical and the philosophical and aesthetic. There is in turn no privileging of one over the other but rather a series of passages and circulations that provide connections. The poetic serves as a generative, intuitive interface, the art historical a sober grounding for observation,

attentions, and factual encounter and the philosophical arena the structure for speculation and projection. Each of these are developed out of a series of figures that create an accumulative play across the whole of the text. As I prioritize the poetic, as well as the flow and movement of the text, philosophical references and discursive contextualization find themselves positioned in the footnotes, serving as architectural support. Paintings are placed in the text with the aim to give authority to painting as its own argumentation. The poetic contests clearly demarked meanings and as such is an incline towards the a-signifier, the art historical attempts to draw its findings into a series of propositions, and the philosophical develops overviews and statements that serve to codify its figurations. This triangulation serves to articulate other structural conjunctions such as the relationship between affects, percepts, and concepts, and the structure of spacing within the project of studio, gallery and library which all serves as a play of triangles within triangles.

A key reference for the approach to Boucher is 'The Painter's Touch' by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. In applying cultural history, psychoanalysis, as well as new materialism to the works of Boucher, Lajer-Burcharth investigates Boucher's artistic individuation through the materiality of his work.

This opens up a new perspective on the role of materiality for my practice as it is not understood as the confining notion of medium-specificity, but on the contrary, it presents materiality as constituting a network of meaning.

This gives rise to the exploration of painting as a play between substance, surface and substance. In the studio, this takes place through experimentation with figures of the surface and surface configurations such as the stain, the splotch, viscosity or the plastic surface.

Boucher's circulatory compositions are seen as going into a passage with soft, viscous and fluid substances that in turn evoke a floating or drifting motion. With that, a connection to object-oriented ontology and its speculations about ecological relationships is opened up. Philosopher Timothy Morton suggests floating as a form of relating that is connected to ambivalence.¹⁰ For Morton, ambivalence is a feeling evoked by consumerism, emerging in the permanent urge of choice, that is expressed in the movement of browsing, surfing, roaming, strolling, scrolling. In a state of intensified ambivalence, these movements tilt into floating and drifting as movements of suspended directionality and purpose that potentially open out to all sides. For Morton, this is the moment when our entanglement with all live forms can be felt that in turn is connected to an

¹⁰Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, (London:Verso, 2017)

extended understanding of existence as not only encompassing ideas, objects and subjects, but, with reference to Jaques Derrida's concept of spectrality, the dead as much as the living.

This induces speculations for the surface to become a site for the dissolution of dichotomies between image and material, form and content, object and subject. Spectrality on the other hand undoes the basis of representation: if there is no origin, appearance can't be bound to a signifier. These concepts correspond to the open-ended form of this project. In this thesis, a surface encounter sets something in motion, unfolding new relationships between subject, substance and surface as a space of becoming.

2. Rococo Spatiality

In the Oval drawing room in the Wallace collection, I am enclosed by pattern and ornament from all sides. Three high-size paintings of Francois Boucher are displayed in opulent frames, hung on the curved wall opposite the window. It is not only their proximity to tapestry that evokes the comparison to a mesh, but a dense brushwork, comprised of brushstrokes of the same size, with a regular rhythm producing a tight mesh that stitches together the textures of skin, fabric and sky. The picture plane appears to be a space of surfaces and their textures.

In the stairway, two monumentally sized Boucher paintings are hung opposite to each other. Despite their subjection to the laws of perspectival space, these paintings seem to function in ways that reduce spatial difference. Although the titles 'The Rape of Europa,' and 'Mercury confiding the Infant Bacchus to the Nymphs' (1732-34) refer to mythological narratives, there is no spatial order that would correspond to a depth of the scene, as can be seen for example in Nicholas Poussin, that attends to the same myth In 'The Nurturing of Bacchus' (1626-27). In this painting, a stark contrast of light and darkness gives rise to an internal depth of the figures, while space is divided into sequential succession of at least three discernible levels. The last is the far removed horizon that is a withdrawal of light thus pulling the viewer in, as it alludes to a space that extends beneath the painting plane. Spatial depth produces a tension that stages the significance of the scene taking place in the foreground, drawing attention to it by ways of contrasting. In the two paintings by Boucher that will be referred to as 'Derbais pendants', named after their commissioner, myth becomes alibi for the projection of erotic fantasies.¹¹ In both paintings, space is divided into earthly ground and heaven, while the horizon is obscured by welling clouds that connect the figures of both spheres. Thus, there is no clear delineation between the overlaid foreground and a bright blue screen of sky, a backdrop, as a flat background that fills the space in between, to secure coherence. Corrugating forms push to the foreground, where attention accumulates in a sense of spectacle, resulting in a sense of 'all-at-one-ness', evoking an intensity of the moment. At the same time, the mass of subject matter pushes the viewer back, the confrontation with the allover fleshiness producing an affective response, potentially repulsion. The abundance of compositional

¹¹ Lajer-Burcharth, p.18.

tensions and corresponding forms disperse intensity across the painting's entire surface, resulting in a sense of being overwhelmed. The thick varnish on the other hand is a distancing layer, that produces reflections, that reject the eyes and induces us to slide along, causes the eyes and the body to move as the reflections inhibits us to see the entire painting at once. Thus we rather slide along with it then being drawn in. What sticks out in this space of harmony and coherence are the interruptions, the slight anatomic incongruences, the identical facial features and the bizarrely distorted faces of the putties. The middle ground in 'Mercury' is indicated by a changed tonality in colours: in the darkest spot, two figures crouch under a ledge. They mark the middle ground that recedes to a gradual darkness as paradoxically darker than the backdrop. Positioned in the shadow, they are painted flatly in a red brown patch, lacking the plasticity and voluptuousness of the rest of the painting. They rather appear to be painted on the darkened space, giving rise to a sense of additive composition that is opposed to geometrical rigidity. All of this results in a sense of spatial disintegration. With this, the unity of constructed empirical space of classism breaks up, giving way to a more open-ended conception of space.



Fig. 1. Francois Boucher, *Mercury confiding Bacchus to the Nymphs*, 1732-33, Oil on canvas, 230 x 273cm

There is a perception of an intensification of surface in these paintings. Light does not come from an identifiable source shine on the whole picture plane, that is fading into darkness only in the corners of the painting. It is an unreal spatiality, becoming an unreal space altogether if we consider what is represented. I am not sure where to start with pointing out unrealistic representations, from the idealised female figures to the fall of folds, instead picking up on the plants as the composition of roses, pines and palm trees as part of one biosphere as strikingly artificial.

Vegetation appears to be unreal, not only in its array but also in its texture. Not even showing a hunch of decay, their blossoming corresponds to the notion of beauty as being eternally present, or not bound to time at all. Leaves display their topside, and blossoms their interior, all directed towards the viewer. In a way, they seem solidified. This corresponds to their origin as probably not drawn from natural studies but rather from decorations. They are removed, depictions of depictions and signifiers of the 'exotic'. This is to be seen in the context of the emerging consumerist culture in the 18th century that thrived due to new trade routes, that brought objects and substances to Europe, turning them into commodities and yielding new styles such as 'chinoiserie'.¹² The flattened-out spatiality is thus influenced by images and depictions on objects such as vases or tapestries from East Asia. This appears in image conceptions that present a spatiality different from the renaissance lineage of constructed perspectival space, that, for example, Poussin as a predecessor of Boucher was attached to.

As representations and spatiality coherently present an artificial space full of signifiers, referring to images of images, representations might appear as unambiguous, yet spatiality becomes somehow abstracted, pointing to a space far removed from 'reality' that is from the reality of social space.¹³

The insights of a blossom are a presentation of visual accessibility yet they do not invite an immersion in their beauty. They present a space that is not one to be imaginatively entered but brushed, evoking an encounter of drifting by. This movement gives rise to images floating into each

¹²“There were many reasons why chinoiserie gained such popularity in Europe in the 18th century. Europeans had a fascination with Asia due to their increased, but still restricted, access to new cultures through expanded trade with East Asia, especially China. The 'China' indicated in the term 'chinoiserie' represented in European people's mind a wider region of the globe that could embrace China itself, but also Japan, Korea, South-East Asia, India or even Persia. In art, the style of "the Orient" was considered a source of inspiration; the atmosphere rich in images and the harmonic designs of the oriental style reflected the picture of an ideal world, from which to draw ideas in order to reshape one's own culture. For this reason the style of chinoiserie is to be regarded as an important result of the exchange between the West and the East. During the 19th century, and especially in its latter period, the style of chinoiserie was assimilated under the generic definition of exotism.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinoiserie>

¹³ This removal can be seen in conjunction with rococo being a counter reaction to the style of Louis XVI, and its strict, geometric style. The loss of depth of space can also be seen as emerging in conjunction with the secularity of the movement, that does not share the Baroque's counter-reformatory interest to endow religious scenes with psychological drama. See: *Rococo: The Continuing Curve: 1730-2008*, Gail Davidson, Ellen Lupton, Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 2008)

other, as in the imaginary order. As opposed to the symbolic, perception in the imaginary is 'the *movement* of the event of the object perceived', the realm of the ambivalent, of images in flux.¹⁴ The surface emphasises materiality, presents and represents textures, in a push and pull between the materiality of paint and its capacity to evoke illusions. In this way, the prevalence of surface is connected to spatial flatness that evokes a spatial remoteness that extends further than a constructed spatial depth.

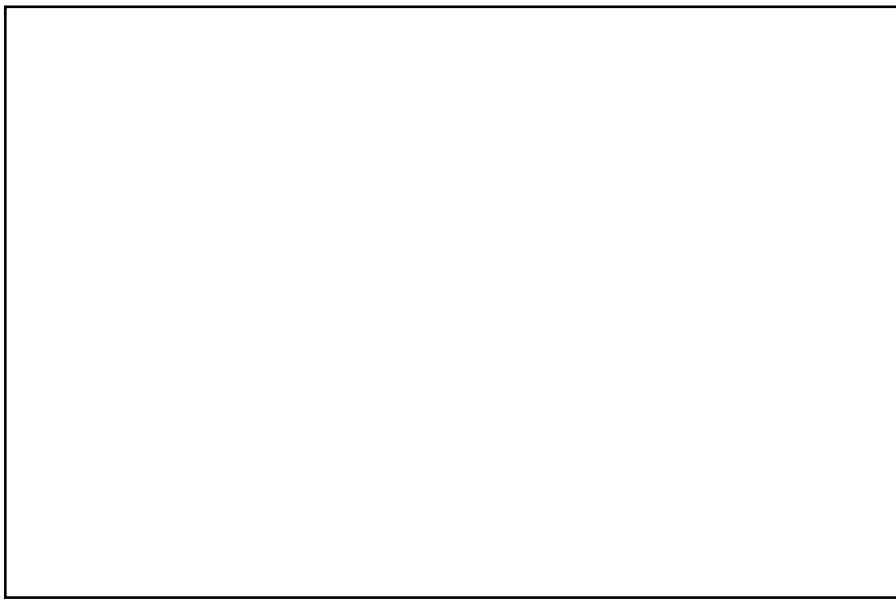


Fig. 2. Francois Boucher, *The Rape of Europa*, 1733-34, Oil on canvas, 230 x 273cm

¹⁴ According to Lacan, the human psyche and with it, perception is structured by three overlapping orders: the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. As for Kant's account of apperception, the image itself is conditioned by the schema. An Image is 'reproductive imagination'. According to John Hendrix, Lacan's account of perception can be compared in that it is a dialectic of the imaginary and symbolic, the image and the conceptual framework in which the image is perceived. However, there is a notion of the imaginary as prior to the symbolic (the symbolic order is entered in the mirror stage, occasioning the split of the subject into his image, which in turn occasions self-recognition and self-enunciation. The notion of this perception in the imaginary before the symbolic is a multiple and fragmented one, that derives from the experience of the body without a self that would be able to synthesize itself as an image, it is thus a perception as 'a phenomenal flux of forms'. In this realm, images exist without their perceiver, 'as if they had been always there.' Thus "pure perception cannot be conceptualized, as it is prior to thought." Through the formation of the unified body image in the mirror stage, perception evolves into apperception 'in a conflicting manner.' Thus, the imaginary in perception reverberates in the "the *movement* of the event of the object perceived" while the symbolic is the "movement of pointing-out". John S. Hendrix, 'The Imaginary and Symbolic of Jacques Lacan', *Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation Faculty Publications*, (Roger Williams University, 2019), pp.2-6.

3. Surface

The surface in painting is subject to historical prejudices. In the discourse of representation, surface does not attract much attention, as it is assumed as a material given that holds the painting's contents like a vessel, a border that delineates the painting's outside from an inner meaning. To access this inner meaning, the surface must be 'read'.¹⁵ Formalist art critics and artists analysed and impelled the modernist departure from representation thereby linking it to an idea of progression.¹⁶ Clement Greenberg famously gave American Abstract Expressionism its critical currency by announcing the break with representation, understood as figuration. Impelled by the idea of medium-specificity, according to which art forms distinguish themselves through the conditions of their medium, Greenberg asserted flatness as painting's defining quality. In defying representation as mimesis, the surface is given priority over the illusion of spatial depth.

This notion of surface is seen to expose the limits of painting itself, thereby displaying its self-consciousness.¹⁷ Modernism thus is an attempt to delimit the proper domain of painting in order to secure its autonomy. On one hand, this delineates an understanding of the surface as mere materiality. The surface is part of the display of painting's conditions that follows a Marxist materialism, according to which objects should be connected to their modes of production as opposed to an alienation, that Greenberg ascribes to figuration that is understood as pictorial illusionism.¹⁸

¹⁵Art historian Holger Otten suggests, this notion of surface goes back to Plato's allegory of the cave, according to which we have to distinguish between appearance and truth. This interpretation is taken up by Hegel and remains influential until this day. Compare: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, p. 36. Cited In: Holger Otten, 'Matisse's La Danse: On the Semantics of the Surface in Modern Painting', *Estetika : The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 45 (2) (2008), 173-183, p.183.

¹⁶ The starting point of formalism is marked by the manifesto 'Definition of Neo-Traditionism' by post-impressionist painter Maurice Denis in 1890.

<<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/formalism#:~:text=Formalism%20describes%20the%20critical%20position,relationship%20to%20the%20visible%20world>>

¹⁷“Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it. “ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting'. *The Voice of America Forum Lectures*. Published In: *Arts Yearbook 4*, (1961), pp.101-9, p.102.

In the third critique, Kant addresses the gap he finds in the process of cognition. This is where Kant's idea of free beauty emerges that Greenberg transforms into an idea of free form. In this vein, painting is an exercise in autonomy, embedded in a theory of freedom with ideological implications, reassuring a concept of American identity as opposed to socialism within the context of the cold war. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of judgment*. trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987). and Marie Lind, *Abstraction : Documents of Contemporary Art*, Ed. by Marie Lind, (London:Whitechapel, 2013), p.4.

¹⁸“The fragmentary silhouette of a human figure, or of a teacup, will do so, and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the literal two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as an art.” Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.103.

On the other hand, the 'pure' surface as spatial flatness is charged with the effect it is deemed to exert: as throwing the viewers back on themselves, the flat surface is pointing to the subject as bearer of meaning and affect.¹⁹ With this, the flat surface is tied to the centred subject.

As Rosalind Krauss points out, despite disavowing figuration as mimesis, Greenberg's conception of the surface in fact maintains the dualism of figure and ground. This is a paradox that I will discuss later with the figure of the stain. Greenberg's understanding of surface in effect keeps object and subject in its place. This secures and stabilises both categories at the expense of excluding the contradictory, the unstable, the de-centred, the ambivalent.

The circulatory composition in the 'Derbais pendants' keeps the eye in motion, thereby giving rise to an experience of the surface as one of floating. This opens up another proposition for the connection of the subject to surface, that is a spatial encounter.

While the Rococo on one hand bears the prejudice against surface as connoting the shallow and the superficial, that resonates with the formalist understanding of the surface as empiric and evident, on the other hand the figurative is seen as illusionistic. As the flat surface is tied to stability, this also excludes movement. On the painted canvas however movement is 'empiric' as it shows itself in the movement of the matter. It is the flow and arrest of viscous and liquid substances that merges with the canvas, to become the surface itself. As the surface is substance, there is no ontological basis to separate the surface into a 'surface with substance' and 'pure surface'.

Something transmits in the shine of a thin glaze, in a thick creamy splotch. There is a strange disposition of the subject to relate to the flow of substances. With this, the materiality of paint is concrete but nevertheless mystical. Something is set in motion, that comes with the materiality and its ways to unfold. Splotches, traces and glazes can't be evacuated from the figures they represent but go into a passage with the figurative. Rather, they produce a complexity, that makes itself evident in a gap between them or as a synthesis. With Jean-Francois Lyotard, this could be understood as the 'figural.' In Lyotard, the figural is in opposition to the conventional rule of discourse in both figurative and textual space. While discourse operates primarily on representing

¹⁹ This corresponds to Kant's first Critique as the theory of schematism, as imagination that moves from imaginary to ideas, to the effect of an increased sense for the self, that is an elevation of subjectivity. Schematism demarcates a subjective turn in knowledge that centres the subject. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by N. Kemp Smith. (Macmillan and Co.: London, 1953), pp.180-187.

concepts through oppositions, the figural exceeds this economy. Instead, it introduces heterogeneity, singularity, and difference that defies rationalization or assimilation to the order of representation. The limitations of the discursive system become apparent when faced with such singularity, as it struggles to incorporate it into its network of meaning.²⁰ A reason for the persistence of iconography might be the difficulty the figural confronts us with. As it exceeds conventional systems of understanding, it is that what cannot be fixed, it opens out into uncertainty.

²⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Mary Lydon, Anthony Hudek, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p.3-4.

4. Ambivalence

While I am attracted to the depiction of smooth skin radiating on the surface that almost seems to shine from within, I am likewise repulsed by the dripping-sweet facial expressions, the blushed cheeks, and the big eyes devotedly looking at me in a swirl of flesh and plush. In another moment, the grotesque faces of the fat little putti in ecstatic postures provoke amusement, while the backdrop they are set against is a blue sky of dazzling luminosity. The wallpaper, which has the same tonality of blue, evokes the vastness and infinity of the sky. It has a quality of yearning to it, 'only if there would ever be a sky so bright'. Yet the room is stuffed, stuffy, enclosed, bordering on the claustrophobic. The surfaces of the frames, the clocks, the mantelpiece squiggle, bud, and sprout in endless convolutions. The concave room evokes ambivalent affects.

Ambivalence is defined as 'the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone'.²¹ In many ways, ambivalence can be viewed as a key notion for feminism as it is both part of the problem as well as its potential. On one hand, it is an elementary experience for the socialisation of women and non-binary persons as growing up in patriarchy entails simultaneous identification with it while experiencing one's own difference. Thus both affirmation but even more so, emancipation, a gradual disidentification, involves recognizing and grappling with ambivalence, as patriarchal subjectivity is deeply internalised, thus involving both, acceptance and rejection of one's own affects and judgements.²² In Lee Krasner's view '(she is) a product of the culture, and the whole culture is macho.'²³ This does not only apply to first and second wave feminism. Overcoming conflicts through the acknowledgment of ambivalence has been crucial for the development of feminism itself, fostering its plurality. The idea that diversity strengthens feminism rather than undermining its trajectory is brought forth by the tolerance of simultaneous agreement and disagreement, which allows for difference within the project of feminisms. In the auto-theoretical essay 'Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology,' Caitlin M. King refers to ambivalence 'as a mobile and aporetic state that, from an individual perspective, embraces the holding of multiple contradictory personal opinions.'²⁴ However, according to King, ambivalence is

²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'ambivalence (n.)', July 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/672300113>> [accessed: 12.04.24]

²² As for example Laura Mulvey's concept of the Male Gaze. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 3, (1975), 6-18.

²³ Rebecca Fortnum, 'Baggage Reclaim: Some Thoughts on Feminism and Painting', *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 3(1), (2017), pp. 209-232, p. 229.

²⁴ Caitlin Merrett King, 'Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology', *Arts*, 11 (2011) <<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11040078>> [accessed 10.03.24]

experienced as a negative emotion. This makes it, on one hand, an affective rebellion. With reference to recent feminist positions, such as Audrey Wollen's internet project, 'Sad girl theory' which critiques 'gendered expectations of happiness' that I see in connection with compliance and capitalism, or Joanna Hedva's 'Sick woman theory', ambivalence is proposed to align with them as 'an appropriate contemporary, meta-modernist response to late-stage capitalism, our current socio-political moment.'²⁵ Subsequently, ambivalence is to be recuperated from this negativity. King refers to the exploration of socially undesirable emotions in 'Ugly Feelings' by Sianne Ngai.²⁶ Deemed unpleasant due to a perceived lack of agency, King applies Ngai's proposal of a 'critical productivity' of ugly feelings to ambivalence.²⁷

In the studio, I experience ambivalent feelings and uncertainty. However, this is not purely unpleasant, but pleasant as well. The ever-reoccurring feeling of uncertainty is connected to both, anxiety on one hand and on the other hand excitement, curiosity yielded by the premise of potential, speculation and surprise. I find myself grappling with the distinction: is ambivalence something my practice leads me to experience, or is my practice a means of generating this experience? The answer might be that ambivalence enables a suspension of cause and effect, allowing for the articulation and acceptance of unanswered questions. My practice holds a space for this and ambivalence might hold a space for my practice, the means by which my practice navigates on the social plane.

Is ambivalence then an end in itself? Or is it rather a method? This induces me to think about the navigation through and with ambivalence in my practice. This is where the notion of intuition comes into play as well. Intuition is deemed a commonplace that is dismissed as personal and insignificant.²⁸ It has become somewhat clichéd under accusation of serving as a stand-in for the

²⁵ King, Paragraph 5, 'Unsure Theory'.

'Sick Woman Theory' is an essay by the artist and writer Joanna Hedva, published in the online magazine 'Topical Cream.' Drawing on Tiqqun's collective work 'Theory of a Young Girl' (2012) Hedva discusses the politics of sickness, examining who is labeled as sick and for what purpose, as well as the difficulties of political participation as a sick person. The authorial essay adopts a manifesto-like style.

<<https://topicalcream.org/features/sick-woman-theory/>> [accessed 10.03.24]

Artist Audrey Wollen's 'Sad Girl Theory' (2015) is a now-deleted collection of images and statements on Instagram. See King.

²⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007)

²⁷ Ngai, p.2.

²⁸ As Rebecca Fortnum remarks, this is largely indebted to New Art criticism. Elizabeth Fisher, Rebecca Fortnum, *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), pp.70-86.

artist's perceived inability to express themselves or the affordance of a naïveté, that is detached from society and its issues. The Oxford English Dictionary defines intuition as "Immediate understanding, knowledge, or awareness, derived neither from perception nor from reasoning. Immediate knowledge of a concept exists when a person can apply the concept correctly but cannot state the rules of its application."²⁹ With this, intuition is in itself an ambivalent notion, an unaware awareness, a form of embodied knowledge that lacks the knowledge of reason, therefore, intuition is constituted by a lack and deemed as a lower form of knowledge, while also acknowledging the existence of a sensual, embodied knowledge. The denigration of the senses compared to the intellect, based on the split of mind and body, is ingrained in the concept. In a way they are reunited in the term, yet in a way that is not reconcilable. The notion of intuition contains the contradiction of this distinction, thus making it deeply ambivalent but also impermeable.

On the other hand, the proposition of 'critical productivity' is enticing yet it begs the question what this productivity serves. In Ngai's view, art's potential is to interrogate its own 'limited agency'.³⁰ This agency, in the end, aims at political purpose, in measuring art's value with the effect it has on the political sphere.³¹

In 'Painting with Ambivalence' Helen Molesworth explores the works of Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, and Joan Snyder. The expression of their ambivalence manifests in their painting as they oscillate between the poles of the grid, as a symbolic form of distance and the Abstract Expressionist gestures centre the artist-persona through their indexicality. This dichotomy is linked to painting's position between historical superiority and its preceded death, but moreover, the painters' situatedness as women 'entrenched in the power dynamics of patriarchy and a utopian vision, offering the potential for feminist liberation'.³² This ambivalence is not a problem but rather something that is acted out, productively, that is underpinned by these female artists seeking their expression in a male-dominated field, thereby not only making a critical comment, as for example

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'intuition (n.)', July 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0419060?rskey=1Gj4eN&result=1> [accessed: 12.04.24]

³⁰ Ngai, p.37.

³¹ Charles Altieri, 'Ugly Feelings, Powerful Sensibilities', *Contemporary Literature*, 47 (2006), 141-147 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4489151>>

³² Molesworth, H. (2007), 'Painting with ambivalence', In: L. Gabrielle Mark (ed.), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, pp. 428-39. Cited in: Fortnum, *Baggage Reclaim*, p.26.

making visible the gendered code of what was at times still discussed as a 'universal language' but crucially, producing something 'new' through the dialectical approach their conflicted situation facilitates.³³ This project unfolds as a shifting movement between proximity and distance to its object. The contradictory affects I harbour towards my object of research leads to a suspension of judgment on one hand, while on the other hand, between the poles of affirmation and rejection, enjoyment and disgust, a space of affective mobility is opened out. In this way, I hope to keep open the subject-object-relationship. If an ugly feeling, with Ngai, is defined as an “unpleasurable feeling about the feeling” in this project, ambivalence is instead, a conflict acknowledged and embraced.³⁴

With this perspective, ambivalence is not seen as a method in the sense of a strategy for a predetermined outcome. Rather, its 'critical productivity' might be that it gives rise to a dialectics, as a method then capable of producing synthesis and transformation.

³³ The idea of abstract painting as a 'universal language' was coined in 1912 by Wassily Kandinsky in 'Das Geistige über die Kunst.' Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, (Piper Verlag: München, 1912)

³⁴ Ngai, p.10.

5. Night

'Monday is a compact day.'³⁵

To paint on a Monday, is to paint in a specific time and space.

Mondays are yellow. This markation is evident as yellow is the brightest colour, yellow as the sun, that is symbolised in the 'o', bringing with an energetic quality that signals a beginning. Office time oozes in as if to create a density of mood. The rays of light cut through the blinds to separate labour from production. It is a day of exposure, demanding clear vision and foresight. Light brings with it an imperative of order and organisation, exerting the force of symbolic vision that makes me an item in the order of representation and in turn enables me to take command over things.³⁶ There is a hovering moment in the beginning, before things are being enacted, named or placed in a grid of signification, a moment filled with potential containing the immeasurable.³⁷

The beginning poses as a blank plane, like an empty canvas. However, this emptiness is nothing but symbolic, an ideal figure attached to the beginning that is a cover at best, for the canvas in fact already contains in it, all of the models, diagrams, the laws and structures that organise our vision. Thus, the beginning poses the difficulty of how to engage with all of that which is already there, which might require 'to paint all over the images and figures' to evade reiteration that would undermine the beginning, the possibility for the emergence of the new, as suggested by Gilles Deleuze.³⁸

³⁵ Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. by Stefan Tobler, (London: Penguin Modern Classic, 2014), p.84.

³⁶“The symbolic is also the realm of radical alterity which Lacan refers to as the ‘other.’The unconscious is the discourse of this Other, and thus belongs wholly to the symbolic order. The symbolic is the realm of the Law which regulates desire in the Oedipus complex. It is the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature. Whereas the imaginary is characterised by dual relations, the symbolic is characterised by triadic structures, because the intersubjective relationship is always 'mediated' by a third term, the big Other. “ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 201.

³⁷In distinction to Jacques Lacan that defines desire as constituted by lack, Gilles Deleuze holds that desire is productive, a positive force, that produces states of intensity. As it is not within the subject, neither located inside the subject, nor outside it, it is infinite and absolute and relates to the concept of body without organs “The Body without Organs is desire; it is that which one desires and by which one desires. And not only because it is the plane of consistency or the field of immanence of desire. Even when it falls into the void of too-sudden destratification, or into the proliferation of a cancerous stratum, it is still desire. Desire stretches that far: desiring one's own annihilation, or desiring the power to annihilate. Money, army, police, and state desire, fascist desire, even fascism is desire. There is desire whenever there is the constitution of a BwO under one relation or another. It is a problem not of ideology but of pure matter, a phenomenon of physical, biological, psychic, social, or cosmic matter. Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus- Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis :University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.165.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans.by Daniel W. Smith, (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p.61.

With this, the empty canvas also contains in it the residues of past dreams, the faint images and figures of the night. As light withdraws with social time, another space opens out.

The night alternates spatiality as darkness limits the ability to perceive spatial depth. Darkness obscures the lines that divide an object from its background as the distinctive parameters of vision as cognition. As the tables, jars, bags and piles of wrappers, foils, clothes and clutter, recede into darkness, they slip out of their function, to conjoin with our dreams, where they move between form and meaning.³⁹ The night obscures. We cannot be sure, where things are in place. Spatiality changes. the background might inscribe itself in the appearance of a figure. When the lines between inside and outside become blurred, the symbolic gives way to the imaginary, to the place of images before naming. Empiricism belongs to the space of day. The night is its testing ground. In the 'Space of Literature', Maurice Blanchot develops a dialectics of day and night. With this, day and night produce each other: "(day) builds up its strong points in the night. Night speaks only of day (..) it is the presentiment of day, day's reserve and its profundity."⁴⁰

The night is characterised by disappearance. It is a space of possibility and uncertainty.

The night envelopes us. But the night is only in the outside, if we separate and prioritise vision over other senses. If we consider the biorhythm as a covertly working clockwork of substance releases we are subjected to, this is an attunement that makes us part of the night in the outside, that is different from the ever-present darkness inside our bodies. The night is 'the world that seizes me by closing in around me, the self that opens to the world itself.'⁴¹ With this, the night is transgressive. As Blanchot remarks, the notion that we are 'in' the night evokes a strange intimacy.⁴²

"The more it expands, with the proud aim of becoming universal, the more the nocturnal element threatens to withdraw into the light itself: the more nocturnal is that which enlightens us, the more it is the uncertainty and immensity of the night."⁴³

³⁹ This notion of perception as a relation of things and their concepts delineates Kant's account of perception as apperception. In apperception, the image is conditioned by the schema. The schema is 'an object in agreement with the category', that "applies to things as they appear". An Image is the result of 'reproductive imagination' in schematism. On the other hand, the image always exceeds concepts. This is the clear distinction between presentation (Darstellung) and representation (Vorstellung). Whereas representation schematises the powers of the subject and thereby gathers the subject's power of apperception, presentation, on the other hand, suspends the claims of the subject's powers over material forms. In effect, the cognitive relation to nature is suspended within presentation whilst at the same time the insight into the subject's power is gained as part of the consequence of this suspension. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.180-187.

⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p.162.

⁴¹ Deleuze, p.42.

⁴² Blanchot, p.162.

⁴³ Ibid.

This is what Blanchot names 'the other night'. The night surpasses day, in that it becomes more than day's limits and its counterpart. It is a space of liminality, that opens out to the beyond. Detaching from any dualism, it becomes absolute. This is when one finds death, as defining the limits of existence, death is 'temporal ecstasy'.⁴⁴ Despite the 'other night' is absolute otherness, Blanchot maintains it is 'never pure' thus it stays paradoxical. This paradox paves the way out of rationality. As a poetics, the text enacts the night. Existence, for Blanchot, is ingrained with this elementary duality that traverses all distinctions of the symbolic, metaphoric and the actual. Day and night are spheres of experience. As such, death is not an absolute notion, but takes on different meaning in the sphere of the night and the day. 'In the night, to die, like to sleep, I am one more of the world's present moments, another of day's resources.'⁴⁵

In painting as in writing, something impels us to go somewhere we don't know, always following the hunch of something that cannot be named nor figured, a ghost that harbours in the night to haunt the day. The 'other night' can never be fully entered, rather it is a cypher for desire, a space of longing. Day and night represent the necessary duality of the structure of desire as predicated on a separation that will not be overcome.

If painting ground is the empirical surface, the surface of day. a mark comes in, to fall into a signifying hierarchy of background and foreground. This is a projection of the day, of linear time. When the straightforward signifying hierarchy dissolves, the night appears in the day. Then we see spatial ambiguity, we see imaginary space and space as imaginary.

In the night the surface is not a limit anymore as the night limits visibility. In the night, the surface of the day is a 'connective, pervasive and enveloping substance'.⁴⁶ Surfaces are not only what is in front of us but inside us, behind and beyond ourselves.

This is the surface in phenomenological space. With Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the depth of space cannot be objectified.⁴⁷ Space extends between the visible and what is out of reach, so between

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Blanchot, p. 163.

⁴⁶ Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), p.4.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty rejects the classical conception according to which depth can be objectified if only viewed in a context of defined relations - such as the convergence of the eyes, the apparent size of the optical image or the legitimation of a perspectival point of view. These conceptions, that issue in a conception of depth as a "breadth seen in profile" are predicated on a static system of regular relations or "undeformable objects". (See: Merleau-Ponty,

presence and beyond or perhaps to what might be deemed as elsewhere. Its depth is always at a distance from the subject, separated from it, propending to the dynamic of desire.⁴⁸ This is the condition of painting as a space of ambivalence between visual presentation and an expansion of space that cannot be determined objectively.

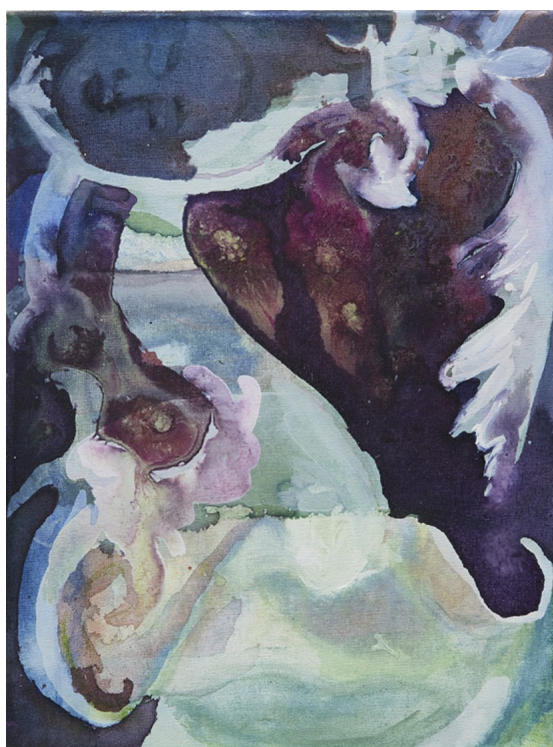


Fig. 3. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Vessel*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 297-300) “But the aesthetic-sensual world - in the sense of aisthesis, that is, sensuality in general - has nothing stable to it for the phenomenologist; the less so the realm of aesthetics - in the sense of the realm of works of visual arts - that is committed to changing relations and deforming objects and aspects. In this sense, depth is by no means limited to a parameter, a spatial coordinate. Rather, Merleau-Ponty recognizes in it the very paradigm in which space is generally constituted.” Translated from Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1992) p.152.

⁴⁸ Didi-Huberman interprets Merleau-Ponty's conception of depth with psychoanalysis : “Therefore, for us, it is in itself a moment of desire, of presentation - what Merleau-Ponty meant when he spoke of a depth that arises under the searching gaze, according to a body immersed in his "tasks" deepened and capable of a “movement” and be it abstract.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*,, p. 125, p.137. Qtd. in: Didi-Huberman, p.306.

6. Stain

In the new studio, I am surrounded by surfaces of concrete, steel, glass, and plastic. They are even, immaculate, unmarked, untainted with no cracks and no gaps. It feels hermetic and thus enclosed. The desk has a granular water repellent surface, that is soon marked by paint dripping from the brush, spilling over the edges of canvas and paper. The paint dries in abject blotches, small puddles, perpetuated in their withdrawal, in their conation towards a centre that makes visible the structure of the surface they set a contrast against. In this environment, paint is a disruption, a nuisance. It devaluates the plastic surface that poses as pristine. There is no other possible reaction of an accidental drip and the repellent surface of this table than rejection. Hard plastic is opposed to the liquid and the viscous. This material resistance is indebted to a density of the surface. The stain is the accidental, that which diverts from the mark's agency. It is the marginalised counterpart of the mark, the probability which always surrounds it.

Both mark and stain are traces of different types. If the trace is conceived as a mark or a stain also depends on its ground or the surface it reacts with. On the ground of painting, the stain introduces another concept of the painterly mark. According to the logic of modernism, it poses a further transgression of mark making that ascribes autonomy not only to colour but to the substance of colour in its most undifferentiated, a-signifying state. It moves further away from the signification of the mark and the indexicality of the trace, and detaches from the gesture, the agency of the body. The stain however relates to the body in another way; it imports an implicit history of marginalised matter that carries with it a judgement against the uncontrolled, unintended, the impure, marked, tainted, that is socially intertwined with the childish and the libidinal, everything that cannot be contained. In another vein, the stain relates to the unconscious, through an emergence of something unforeseen, that underwrites our control over form. Its shape in turn facilitates the potential to be signified. According to the gestalt psychologists, this signification grants access to everything split from intention that in turn becomes intellectually available through an iconographic interpretation. The stain is the agency of the substance taking over. It detaches from a trajectory of control of subject over substance, of human over nonhuman. With Hegel, the stain might be a sudden registering of material agency that displays the substance's self-determination. In this way, subject is split from substance, while also relating to it, as both are determined by negativity, by self-

splitting and differentiating. Negativity thus is a force that 'makes' substance subject.⁴⁹ The stain relates to the subject as other, as being distinctly split from it, while at the same time, an arrest of movement displays its inner animation yielded by negativity. Part of the fascination of the substance might that it is exposed to contingency. This relates it to the flow of subjectivity.

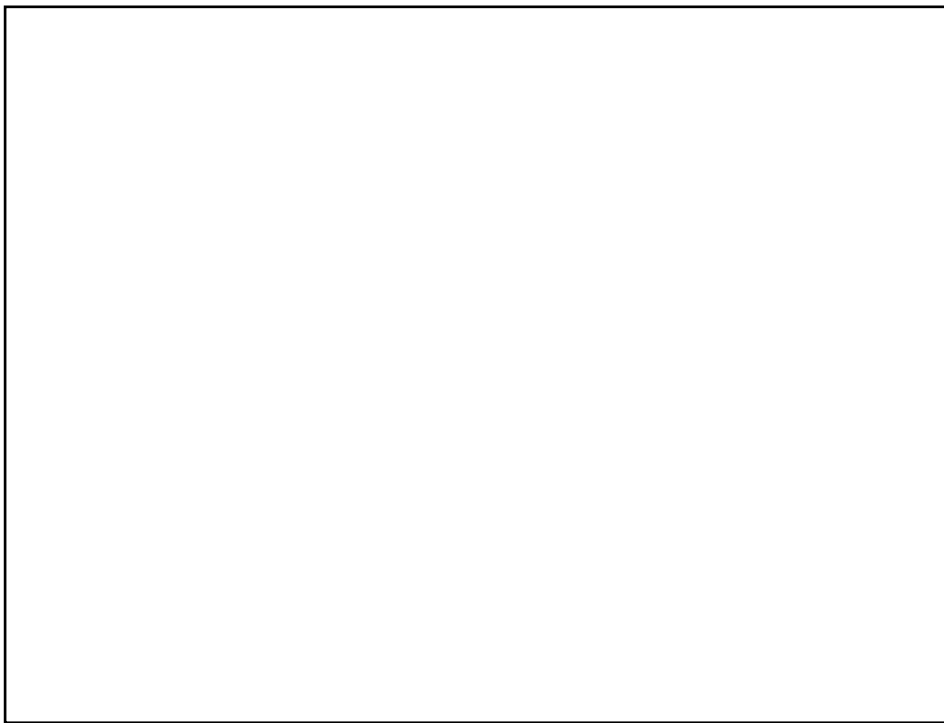


Fig.4. Helen Frankenthaler, *Vessel*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 25,4 x 23,9 cm

⁴⁹ In Hegel, the relation of subject and substance is dialectical. “The negativity which separates the I and Substance is the very power that is the I and the animating soul of substance. Substance is “*in disparity with itself*,” shows negativity active within it, and negativity is constitutive of substance’s very being(...). Substance is Subject because it has negativity, absolute negativity. It negates itself, it splits itself, differentiates itself, becomes determinate and endures as an object through its own self-negating power. Substance relates itself to itself; thus, it has the very same self-moving power as the I in determining itself. (..) negativity splits and unites the I and its object, negativity flows through each and constitutes the opposition itself and is reflected within each as they embody a sub-totality.” Substance as subject, thus means, that the static being is “dynamism itself if we are to explain the self-relation of being at all, a relation which can only be accounted by activity which negates and splits while at once uniting through this very split.” Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary: Blackwell Philosopher Dictionaries*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 286.

In the space of painting, the stain becomes something else. Helen Frankenthaler paintings introduced the stain into Abstract expressionism. Looking at 'Jacob's Ladder' (1957) space is organised in a network of drips, splashes, marks and stains. Frankenthaler's paintings present us with a complex spatial structure. Despite working within a paradigm of flatness, that is the one-layered space, in which all gestures are visible at once, space is structured rhythmically, with the reduced means of varying dimension, an overlapping of forms as well as the internal depth of patches of colour, that absorb our attention.

The space is marked by a passage of actions that is shown as overlapping, forming and transforming. There is the relation of the image to the presence, so this passage is represented as a moment, and this distortion and contradiction brings about an exhilarating energy of these accumulated gestures that change the perception of time, that differ from the linear understanding of it. The substance of thinned down paint on unprimed canvas unfolds a specific entanglement of time, matter and vision. In her own words, colour soaked in and “became the canvas. And the canvas became the painting”.⁵⁰ This is an approach invested in the figure-ground-relationship that reconfigures the ground. With Krauss, perhaps, this painterly ground becomes transparent to the perceptual field as a prevalence of forces that determine vision. The unprimed canvas is a deep surface, a structure that the liquid soaks in. Colour is being subdued as pigments encroach in the depth of every fibre. It submerges underneath the surface. In conjoining with the materiality of the ground, the stain also makes visible the texture of the background, giving rise to the depth of its structure. A demarcation has been removed that isolates the ground and cuts it out to announce it as an abstract space.

⁵⁰ Helen Frankenthaler Tribute Film, Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame, online video recording, January 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPddPgcqMgg>, (accessed 01/03/23)

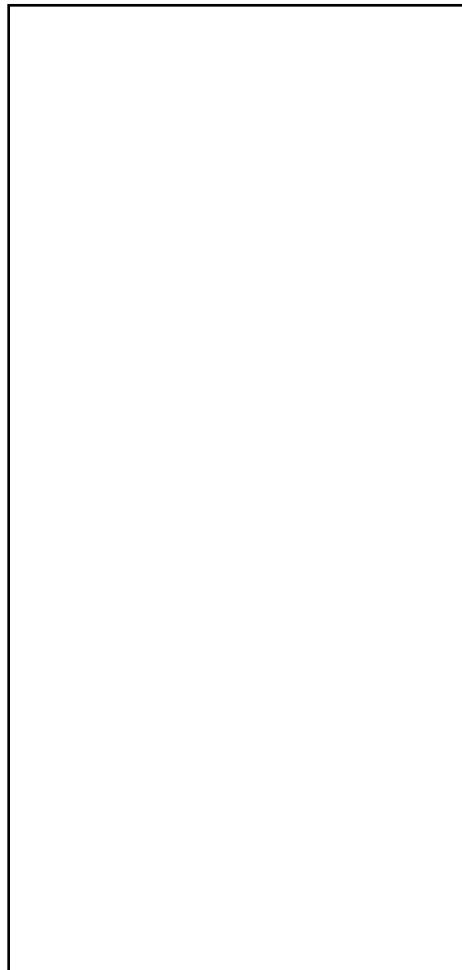


Fig.5. Helen Frankenthaler, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 287.9 x 177.5cm

Empirical vision is structured by figure and ground. The geometrically constructed space in European painting since the renaissance is built up on this structure. The modernists prominently abolished this notion of space. According to Rosalind Krauss, however, the canvas was not suspended from this spatial paradigm but rather negated. Krauss thus argues this led to a concealed continuation of the dual structure, that was ultimately continued as a combination of inversions, the negation of the system with unchanged parameters is thus to oppose them with 'not-figure' and 'non-ground'.⁵¹ Krauss develops a graph for this: a square of the binary opposition of vision 'ground'

⁵¹Krauss develops a graph for this: a square of the binary opposition of vision 'ground' and 'figure' with their corresponding negations, to propose this as the logic of modernism. For the variability of combinations contained by this graph see: Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge, Mass.:MIT Press,1993), pp.24-29.

and 'figure' with their corresponding negations, to propose this as the logic of modernism. The 'not-ground' stages and reduces the canvas' spatiality to flatness – it is a "background that has risen to the surface of the canvas to become exactly coincident with its foreground" -thus the canvas becomes a figure again, while the 'not-figure' in turn becomes ground.⁵² Krauss further expounds the epistemological implications of empirical vision as continued by modernism. The modernist logic thus emerges from empirical vision as predicated on the synchrony of the visual and perceptual field, that bounds the effect of representation to its presence. The field of perception is the background of vision that includes time, 'the all-at-oneness, that restructures successiveness as vision.'⁵³ It relates to the field of vision in complete simultaneity that allows seeing to become a form of cognition. The modernist's inversion turns 'vision as cognition' into vision itself. Cognition takes place when the visual is identified as 'pure exteriority'. This pure exteriority cuts the figure from the field issuing in the perception of the immediate to the subject, that is, in that what is seen is reflected back to the subject and thus assuring the subject of its presence.⁵⁴ Through this notion of pure exteriority, the background of vision, its assumed conditions, come to the fore. Subjectivity is produced in a loop of perception and self- assurance that is predicated on the clear distinction of exterior and interior. The 'purity' of exteriority describes a boundary emphasized by cognition, that enhances the notion of the singularity of the subject, becoming present, that is available to itself, thereby giving itself significance.

The perceptual field stays behind its objects. It is their support, their background, their 'ambience'.⁵⁵ This background encompasses everything second to the figure, that implies the successiveness of vision, its spatial and temporal rhythm. In this way, the ground has an environmental quality, that foregrounds its susceptibility, the sensitivity of the bare canvas that absorbs all that touches it, that shows its inclination to join in with the viscous and the liquid.

⁵² Ibid., p.24.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The pictorial logic of the modernists is predicated on empirical vision and ignores the perceptual field that is its background. But the effect to which the visual in the perceptual field occur as synchronous to the self is rather 'a limit case of self-imbrication.' Modernism, as Krauss describes it, is 'constituted by limitations as it is the 'not ground' that becomes available to the painter (..) in a logically conditioned, single way: as the new order of 'figure'." This governing of painting by a predestined conception of spatiality is expressed by the graph: 'Whatever is in the field is there because it is already contained by the field, forecast, as it were, by its limits.' Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.26.

Soaking, sinking, melting.

These processes corresponds to abstract forms of entanglement of substance and subject. Sinking and melting are slowed down movements, forms of dissolution and synthesis, that unfold an atmospheric quality, an ambience. The background loses its stability. It becomes transparent in the sense of not posing an end, but presenting a passage. The rim of the stain is also a shadow, evoking a ground it is projected on. The stain is thus a figure that simultaneously figures a background. It acts between surface and depth. This shadow endows the stain with a presence, that is a subject-like quality. The stain operates on the surface and below. As a visual mark, it attracts our attention as an excess, producing an excessive visuality. Another aspect of this excessiveness is its contingency. The singularity of each stain makes the concept of the stain contains all shapes imaginable. Its sensual absorption, on the other hand goes back into the substance of the canvas. In this way, the stain is the figure of a paradoxical surface, moving in both direction appearance and its dissolution.

7. The Surface of the City

The city is comprised of surfaces, thick glazes of paint hold together broken structures, glueing, covering, evening out crumbling substance, spalling layers. Layers of road marking stand against the coarse grain of the street, separate, flake off. Exposed aggregate concrete looks like sesame cracker, passing by you touch the shining stones in hundred shades of caramel and might be compelled to pull one out as many did before you. On painted front walls, time figures in the abject breath of pollution, contrasted by the contours of dismantled shop signs.

"The limitless modification of the skin is different from modernization- surface morphologies, (...) include decay, blanketing and smothering, shedding, dissolution and penetration and pendulous swagging and draping."⁵⁶

Within this mesh, faces are surfaces of the city, absorbing our attention. Surfaces we absorb subliminally, we read compulsively, seduced by the affectivity they transmit, lured by their unfathomableness, intricate architectures comprised of surface and scaffolding. Some folds are slits through which we get a glimpse to a dull black ground, others are dappled in descendent shades of subdued pastels. 'All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape.'⁵⁷

Shiny surfaces shimmer between sublimity and abjection. Our eyes have touched them before we even cast a glance. We glide and slide along these surfaces, we stroll, we browse, alleviated, but suspended between our affects, effected by the soft but compelling power of being desired to desire. A whiff of strawberry vapour synthesises enjoyment with its evacuation and a piercing sense of indeterminate longing.

⁵⁶ Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, (Ontario: Coach House Books, 2016), p.34.

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.169.



Fig. 6. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Ceruse*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

8. Plastic Oblivion

In the context of the emerging consumerism in the 18th century, the proposition of the 'subject as effect of surfaces' emerges in conjunction with Boucher's painting.⁵⁸ This induces me to speculate on consumerism as a perceptual ground for painting. Plastic surfaces generate a relationship of subject and surface within consumerism that evokes a certain kind of desirability.

The supermarket used to be a place outside time. The illusion of the flawless product was conditioned by our willingness to forget the touch on the plastic surface. It registered as less materially present, as less real to us, than the product it envelopes. In its ubiquity, plastic became invisible. It submerged to the ground of perception. Subliminally, shiny, transparent, inexhaustible plastic structured our vision as cognition in neoliberal capitalism. Then, the blemish was introduced into the supermarket: shortages and empty shelves exposing lack, traces of heavy use disclose precarity and exhaustion. Stains corrupt the symbolic order of shiny consumerism to the effect that this signifying order strikes us as such.

The pre-primed canvas on stretchers is wrapped up in plastic. This serves a certain practicality that consists in the effort to preserve it from contamination or the possible deformation of touch. The plastic is a barrier preventing its exposure to mechanical and material effects of its surrounding. It is a way of arresting, isolating and cutting out an object from others. This is the state of the object as a product. The aesthetic effect of the transparent foil is not unlike that of the showcase. The isolated object is a principle of commercial display emerging in the beginning of the 20th century. This delineates a development from the evocation of luxury, the symbolic creation of value, from opulence to minimalism. The singular object in a showcase is symbolically charged by the empty space surrounding it.⁵⁹ The visibility provided by the plastic foil thus acts like a frame, a form of markation that draws a line around the object that determines how we look at it. It marks the object as product, singles it out and preserves it in a state of promise before use. With the thin layer of

⁵⁸ Lajer-Burcharth, p.42.

⁵⁹ This movement from opulence to clarity and minimalistic presentation can be seen in conjunction with the occurrence of mass produced goods which in turn required the impression of scarcity. In Germany, these aesthetics were promoted by the 'Deutscher Werkbund', an association of artists, architects, designers and industrialists established in 1907, that, among other, published guidelines for the decoration of show cases. Inspired by the Bauhaus movement, 'The Werkbund' represented a state-sponsored effort to integrate traditional crafts and industrial mass production, driven by the goal of enhancing Germany's economic competitiveness. The aesthetics of the Werkbund were thus also driven by the desire for unification and standardisation, which stood in conjunction with an ideology of functionalism. Robin Schuldenfrei, "Der Luxus der Objektivität: Schaufenster um 1914" in: *Kunst und Architektur an der Epochenschwelle: Das Hauptgebäude der Universität Zürich von 1914*, edited by Martino Stierli (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2016), pp. 153-96 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutscher_Werkbund

reflective plastic foil, its surface is unified. Cut from its individual tactile qualities, internal differences, it separates the haptic and the visual. The plastic wrapper yields visual availability at the expense of a reduction, or even a rejection of the desire to touch it. According to Morton, commodity fetishism effectuates alienation not only of the consumer, but also of the object itself. This is an augmentation of the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism that expands it to an object-oriented viewpoint. The object, or the entity is deprived of its sensuousness. Morton exemplifies this with a mass of chocolate that is cast in a mould to form a chocolate bar, a process that effectuates that 'neither me nor the chocolate nor the mould are exhausted by the ways we mutually access one another'.⁶⁰ With this, the chocolate bar is a fetish covering a lack of enjoyment.⁶¹ The product stipulates how we relate to objects altogether. In capitalism, there is no object with agency, as Morton remarks. Albeit objects circulate, they do so only because of a system that engages with them in a reductive way. They move according to the value that is ascribed to them, a price tag that splits the commodity from the object, not unlike the split of mind and body. The agency stays with capitalism as a 'hyper-object'.⁶² Commodity fetishism according to Morton is predicated on demystification, 'the capitalist operation par excellence' that is 'stripping the appearance from things'.⁶³ The plastic foil operates according to that demystification. The premise is that 'What you see is what you get'. But it is essentially an aesthetic operation of the commodity masking itself. The plastic foil provides an aesthetic isolation that serves to cover its socio economical relationships.⁶⁴ According to neoliberal ideology that transposes political responsibility to the consumer, the plastic package signifies oblivion, and with this a form of socially disrespected consumption. It thereby marks its buyer in the gaze of the Other. If the haptic sensual experience is the gratification reserved for the buyer, the barrier of plastic also marks a barrier between the public and private, one sphere being connected to the abstractness of the global market and the other to the

⁶⁰ Morton, *Humankind*, p.61.

⁶¹ Lacan refers to Freud's concept of fetishism as a lack. 'Freud argued that fetishism (seen as an almost exclusively male perversion) originates in the child's horror of female castration. Confronted with the mother's lack of a penis, the fetishist disavows this lack and finds an object (the fetish) as a symbolic substitute for the mother's missing penis. (Freud, 1927e)' Evans, p.64.

⁶²Hyperobjects are 'massively distributed in time and space relative to humans' f.e. global warming, styrofoam, and radioactive plutonium. Hyperobjects are abstract, only representable through data, nevertheless they are superior to all other objects, posing a threat to them. As such they are 'the demonic inversion of the sacred substances of religion.' Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 131-132.

⁶³ Morton, *Humankind*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ The commodity is "masking itself," as commodities appear to have inherent value or power independent of the labor that went into producing them. This creates the illusion that the value of a commodity comes from its physical properties or characteristics, rather than the social relations involved in its production. The focus shifts to the material form and perceived value of the commodity, leading to the fetishization of the object itself. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp.4-6.

particularized intimacy of the home. This is the sphere of touch where we hold corporeal relationships with objects, plastic package is a spectral waste, that subliminally haunts us.⁶⁵ We tend to forget the germs on the keyboard. Plastic lures us into the idea of an almost immaterial material that is transparent and neutral. It comes to us from a singular source, produced in an opaque process of industrial alchemy. In the flawless, there is a desire for the immaterial that we are inclined to invest in. It is a surface promoting presence. As such, it belongs to the neoliberal past. Transparent plastic determines what we think of as 'surface': something smooth and stable that rejects other substances and displays them as dirt. This is 'mere' surface. On the plastic surface, paint awaits to be wiped and cleaned. The empiric function acts upon the gestural and the material, showing every hair of the brush, the exact degree of liquidity of paint, its material composition. Paint is screened and its material properties are soberly registered, however also staining and marking the clean surface which thereby comes closer to the symbolic order of trash. However it remains unclear if that is the reason for its precarious status or if the markaton effectuates a newfound singularity disturbing its homogenising function.



Fig. 7. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, XX, Acrylic on canvas and cling film, 20 cm × 30 cm

⁶⁵“Who really wants to know that in a world where there is no 'away/ to flush our toilet waste to, it phenomenologically sticks to us, even after we have flushed it? “Morton, *Humankind*, p.67.

9. Splotch

The paintings in the Oval room have a ‘deliciousness’ about them. Bright pastel colours are prevalent, that are based on intensive pigments generously mixed with white. The texture of oil paint covered with varnish is not crusty but shiny, evoking a fresh glow that resembles other substances comprised of fats, milk or cream, the colour of nourishing substance. This paint-emulsion is comprised of lead white, a pigment that is especially thick and opaque.⁶⁶ Pastel colours bring to mind patisserie and candy. Regardless of this relation of the aesthetics of the period, oil paint is an emulsion as well. The reflection on the putties' foreheads is evoked by a thick splotch of paint. In the handling of the paint, we see a surplus that exceeds an economy of mimetic rendition.

We see this generosity in the use of colours as well. The palette is comprised of saturated dark green, brown, warm yellow, and pink in all its variations. The prevalent colour however is blue, the luminous blue of the sky, that fills the elongated background of all five panels. Blue is known as one of the most valuable pigments in the Renaissance, as it was produced from lapis lazuli, a mineral that was mined in Afghanistan. The colour produced from it was named Ultramarine, meaning 'beyond the sea', thus ascribing a sense of longing and remoteness to the pigment, evoking a space and a narrative.⁶⁷ These 5 panels however, might have been painted with Prussian Blue, as a recent material analysis of 4 other paintings by Boucher, that were painted at the same time, suggests.⁶⁸ Prussian Blue was first synthesized around the beginning of the century.⁶⁹ One of the first painters to use it had been Boucher's predecessor and indirect teacher Jean-Antoine Watteau.⁷⁰ Prussian Blue did not only have the advantage of being more affordable and increasingly attainable in the course of the century, thus allowing for a generous deployment, but due to a smaller particle size and a higher tinting strength, than the preceding ultramarine, it could also be easily mixed.

⁶⁶ “Lead white is a thick, opaque, and heavy white pigment composed primarily of basis lead carbonate $2\text{PbCO}_3 \cdot \text{Pb}(\text{OH})_2$, with a crystalline molecular structure. It was the most widely produced and used white pigment in different parts of the world from antiquity until the nineteenth century, when it was displaced by zinc white and later by titanium white. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lead_white

As such, it was also used as make-up in the rococo and before, as for example in 'Venetian ceruse’, making it a substance that was both, seductive and toxic. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_ceruse

⁶⁷“The name ultramarine comes from the Latin *ultramarinus* which means 'beyond the sea' as the pigment was imported by Italian traders during the 14th and 15th centuries from mines in Afghanistan. Much of the expansion of ultramarine can be attributed to Venice which historically was the port of entry for lapis lazuli in Europe.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultramarine>

⁶⁸Jamie Mulherron, 'Prussian Blue, Boucher, and Newton: The Material, the Practice, and the Theory of Rococo Painting,' *Object* 3 (2001–2), pp.68–93.

⁶⁹ Probably around 1706, Johann Jacob Diesbach, a Berlin paint manufacturer, produced Prussian blue for the first time. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prussian_blue

⁷⁰ Five years of his life, Boucher's exclusively spent with the reproduction of Watteau's etchings. Lajer-Burcharth, p.6.

We thus find Prussian Blue in the blueish green in all of the panels, resulting in a coherent tonality of the painting and a correspondence between top and bottom of the canvas, that acts like a tonal brace. Additionally, a higher tinting strength facilitated a lighter texture, with greater intensity of the colour, which brought about the possibility for thinner glazes. Rococo's involvement with surfaces is thus also indebted to the synthesis of paint.⁷¹ A higher availability might have facilitated a more generous deployment that in turn enabled a lighter handling.

A detail has drawn my attention, it is the thick splotch on one of the putties' forehead.

Corresponding to the idea of rococo painting as morphology of marks and traces, this emphasis on the viscous textuality of paint gives rise to the palpable within, or perhaps even over, the optical. Different from the trace, that is still indexical, in its plasticity, there is something that withdraws from the mimetic even further and presents more than it signifies.

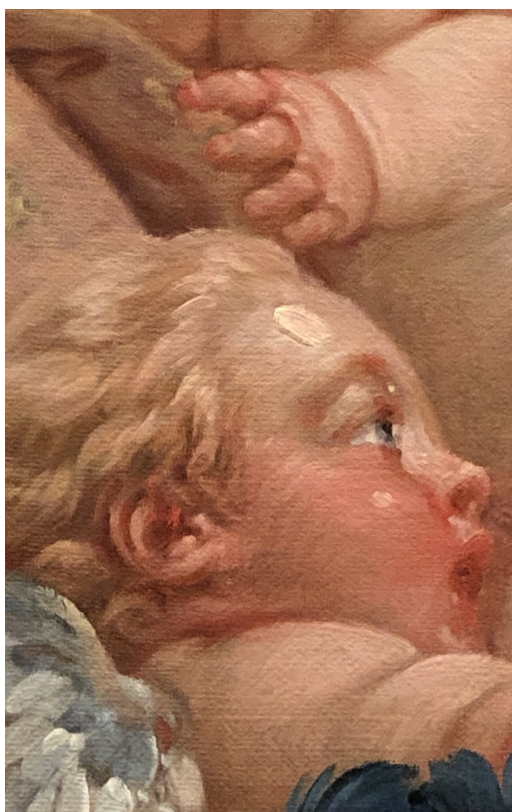


Fig.8. Francois Boucher, Detail from *Mars and Venus surprised by Vulcan*, 1754, Oil on canvas

⁷¹ Relative to Prussian blue, the traditional blue pigments had technical, visual, and economic limitations: ultramarine was too expensive to be used as an all-purpose pigment; azurite and smalt have to be coarsely ground to retain their colour, forming gritty textured paint, affecting their covering power; indigo loses its colour properties and fades in oil paint. Prussian blue has a higher tinting strength, a different tint, and a lower particle size than the traditional blue pigments. A further factor to recommend it was its relative cheapness. It could be used liberally to cover large areas of canvas thinly, and freely, without any loss of intensity, without any loss of covering power, and without great expense. (...) countless modern (rococo) paintings with remarkably strong greens and blues in relation to the thinness of the paint layer, are a product of the pigment's capabilities." Mulherron, p.69.

There is a sense of seduction in the splotch. This notion of being seduced might be evoked by being made complicit in a play of composing the mimetic and evoking textural illusionism. It is a glimpse into the process, that lets the viewer partake in composition, while rising attention for the detail that propends to a decomposition of the mimetic. Lajer-Burcharth attests a turn to materiality to rococo painting.⁷² This is connected to the loosening of the painterly gesture, which is also a display of painterly skills, that was critically appreciated at the time. 'Elegance, lightness and refinement' were the qualities that were sought after in a painter, ultimately resulting in his 'excellence'.⁷³ These qualities point to the execution of painting, to the increased attention to materiality and the act of painting rather than representation and iconography. Accordingly, the 'touch' of a painter was an important criterion that was seen in conjunction with desirable manners, corresponding to an ideal way of relating with and navigating in social space.⁷⁴

The touch links the habitual and the performative. While the behavioural appears in the consistency of marks, the repetition, that constitute the background and move along the parameters of mimetic figuration, the performative is that what comes to the foreground, sticks out and erupts. With this notion of mastery to be found in a certain performativity, yielding elegance and lightness, the speed of execution was brought to attention. Not only was the loose gesture indicative of this, also the fast execution itself became a further proof for the painter's high abilities. To that effect, it was reported that Fragonard painted his series of 'fantasy portraits' within one hour.⁷⁵

This emphasis on painterly mastery that shifts from the creation of an illusion to the execution is also to be seen in the context of an increased importance of individuality, that is expressed in a shift to the body and the embodied as Lajer-Burcharth suggests.⁷⁶ This brings forward the trace, as integrated yet a-signifying element within mimetic coherence.

⁷² Lajer-Burcharth, p.4.

⁷³ Ibid., p.14.

⁷⁴“ The appreciation of Boucher's outstanding pictorial skills was often expressed in terms of praise for his touch, which his contemporaries judged to have been invariably easy, light, elegant and refined. Symptomatic of an increasing attention to the material aspect of painting, these were common enough terms for artistic excellence at the time. Lightness of touch, a quality that was expressly promoted by the renowned amateur, Comte de Caylys, under the term of 'La lagegerete d'outil' referred to the capacity of the painter to convey effortlessness of execution. The refined touch implied a knowing approach to technique, one that was both animated and self-aware.” Lajer-Burcharth, p. 13.

⁷⁵“In his doggy pictures, Fragonard treated the subject in a new way. As scholars of Fragonard's art have long noted, his distinctive handling of the materiality of paint was interpreted as a form of creative enthusiasm. His contemporaries admired the fantasy portraits, one of which is Portrait of a Woman and Her Dog,, for having been painted in an hour.” Rococo Representations of Interspecies Sensuality and the Pursuit of "Volupté". Jennifer Milam, 'Rococo Representations of Interspecies Sensuality and the Pursuit of "Volupté"', *The Art Bulletin* 97, (2015), pp. 192-209.

⁷⁶ Lajer-Burcharth, p.5.

With regards to the splotch, the notion of performative mastery is either predicated on, or in turn produces a presentation of that which is to be mastered, that thus poses a resistance. This resistance is visible in the voluptuousness of the splotch, that sticks out from the signifying order of the image. In this way, the performative aspect, that is the presentation of the painter's agency in turn implies an agency of matter. The splotch is thus not only an element that detaches from a coherent mimetic system, such as the mark or the trace, rather it is a trace presenting an irreducibility that is the morphology of matter itself. Unlike the stain, the splotch sits on the surface but through its viscosity, it sticks to the surface, to binds with it and to become the surface. The splotch presents the painting as material object, thus it is opposed to the aim of a 'pure' image that degrades material to a means of presentation, thereby separating the two. With that, the splotch might be conceived with Deleuze's concept of the plane of immanence, that is the notion of a becoming within, of meaning being produced by and within substance, as opposed to occurring on the side of transcendence, as a dualistic tradition would hold it.⁷⁷ In Immanence, the relation of subject and object is constituted by elementary forces, by 'pressure, inertia, weight attraction, germination' that underwrite our sensed knowledge, our vision.⁷⁸ This relationship of vision and the force of rhythm opens out a continual becoming. Vision is 'traversed' by rhythm, since rhythm is a principle, a structure organising different orders of perception, it is more 'profound' than vision. As there is no pure opticality, vision cannot be cut from other senses. Rather, immanence assumes an underlying unity of all senses, that is based on an 'existential communication' between them.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Although immanence, departing from Descartes, is in opposition to transcendence, Deleuze's notion of immanence refers to Spinoza's as 'the substance, which has no outside, expressing itself by its own affections.' (Spinoza, Ethics, I, qtd. by Spindler) In this way, immanence is always beyond and always before. Rather, its opposite is chaos, as it lacks consistency. The distinction between chaos and immanence, is one of thought versus 'real experience', that begins 'through the sectioning or instructing of a plane. François Zourabichvili, *Le vocabulaires de Deleuze*, p.58, qtd. in : Fredrika Spindler, 'Gilles Deleuze: A Philosophy of Immanence', In: *Phenomenology and Religion: New Frontiers*, ed. by Jonna Bornemark, Hans Ruin, (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2010) pp. 149-163.

⁷⁸ Deleuze, p.33.

⁷⁹ This is a term adopted from Henri Maldiney: "Phenomenologists like Maldiney or Merleau-Ponty see Cezanne as the painter par excellence. They analyse sensation, or rather, "sense experience" [le sentir], not only insofar as it relates sensible qualities to an identifiable object (the figurative moment), but insofar as each quality constitutes a field that stands on its own without ceasing to interfere with the others (the "pathic" moment). Hegel's phenomenology short-circuits this aspect of sensation, which nonetheless forms the basis for every possible aesthetic."

See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 207-42, and Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace*, p. 136. Qtd. in: Deleuze, p.42.

With Deleuze, sensation, as describing the entirety of the effects of senses, is constituted by this momentum of communication that is non-representative. Like Blanchot's night, what impels creation might thus be the impossibility to represent that what essentially cannot be represented, that what gives appearance to the 'unity of the sensing and the sensed'.⁸⁰ Painting gives visibility to forces and intensities. In this way, painting seizes hold of us, and liberates the centred subject. Immanence is undoing the dualist figures of thought, of mind and nature.⁸¹ With this, there is no dualism of surface and depth, but rather, depth is immanent to surface.

The disposition to be affected at the sight of the viscous corresponds to vision being 'subscended' by touch, that comes to the fore at the sight of it. Touch traverses vision in a way that is bypassing cognition.⁸² The aesthetic qualities of the viscous, the glistening reflections on a splotch of saliva, affect us in a way that is corporeal, sensual, and subliminal. With this, the splotch speaks to an embodied seeing of a specific sort, that is connected to the effect of stimuli that are not cognitively mediated, that arrive before language and that the naming process is always subsequent to. In 'The Viscous' Freddie Mason draws a connection between the 'viscous', original meaning 'full of birdlime' and the 'visceral':

“To feel something viscerally is to feel it in the guts. To remove the organs, to empty something of meaning, is to eviscerate. And it is by some gut feeling that we are most likely satisfied with the fact that birdlime came to mean the viscera, and then onwards to the viscous, everything that is neither solid nor liquid, not one thing, but rather a quality of resistance and of flow, of stickiness and of slipperiness. To say that something is sticky is enough. Its spreads through likeness like magical thinking.”⁸³

⁸⁰The painter would thus make visible a kind of original unity of the senses, and would make a multi sensible Figure appear visually.” Deleuze, p.42.

⁸¹ “The field of immanence is not internal to the self, but neither does it come from an external self or a non-self. Rather, it is like the absolute Outside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.157.

⁸²According to Morton, vision is 'subscendent' to touch, as much as thinking is. Being touched by thinking is 'not a guarantee of full metaphysical presence, but a disorienting flicker that haunts me or pleasures me or hurts me.' The concept of subscendence derives from transcendence and designates processes that are connecting entities in an underlying manner rather than the superordinate of the spiritual and mental. Subscendence determines our susceptibility to things, as we are comprised of these subscendent systems, a complex organization of matter like nerves and bacteria. Subscendence above all describes “the idea that the whole is less than its parts.” With a critical view on the equation of seeing with knowing, Morton argues that touch is 'nearer, more intimate' than vision. As the senses rely on their interconnections, 'touching is always a part of seeing'. The sense of touch is ever-present underlying the experience of seeing. Assuming this interconnectedness, not only of senses but also of the mind, the distinction of the material and immaterial become blurred. Morton, *Humankind*, p.120.

⁸³ Freddie Mason, *The Viscous: Slime, Stickiness, Fondling, Mixtures*, (Santa Barbara: Punctum books, 2020), p.20.

The viscous thereby unfolds a specific dynamics between substance and subject.⁸⁴ It has a capacity to mix and blend, that is to dissolve physical and metaphorical boundaries. The movement of substance speaks to the flow of perception, to the formlessness of the unconscious and to intensities presenting themselves in their arrests, in their splashes and splotches, that render the result of forces.⁸⁵

The viscous can provoke intense affects of fear or disgust. Hence, for Jean-Paul Sartre, the viscous poses a threat. While on one hand its primitive formlessness and its undifferentiated malleability makes it inferior to the subject, on the other, these properties also make it withdraw from control of it. These forces undermine identity as predicated on limits, form and stability. Its amorphousness harbours the threat of absorbing and engulfing the subject. It is a 'voracious' matter, the subject must resist and pass through.⁸⁶

In 'Being and Nothingness', Sartre conceives of existence as divided into the categories of the 'for-itself', that is existence in awareness striving for freedom and the 'in-itself', that is the existence of things outside consciousness, an inert presence that withdraws from our access of it. The negotiation of these categories also takes place through an ontology of the viscous, as it is taken as an example for the 'psychoanalysis of a thing'.⁸⁷ For Sartre, "the ontological synthesis of the human and the nonhuman" can take place through the viscous.⁸⁸ However, the viscous is coded female, revealing deep misogyny. The viscous is 'essentially suspect', representing the other.⁸⁹ It is 'the great universal symbolic network by which we translate everything repugnant to us'.⁹⁰ Deriving from its

⁸⁴Hegel's concept of substance draws on Spinoza. "The accidents or modes of substance are not themselves genuinely independent subjects. Human beings are no more than modifications of substance. One reason why the modes are not independent subjects is that this would be, within Spinoza's framework, incompatible with them belonging to a single substance. (...) he claims that, in effect, everything is one within the absolute." Inwood, *A Hegel dictionary*, p. 38.

⁸⁵"Deleuze's ontology of becoming denounces the error we commit when we think exclusively in terms of things and their qualities, because by privileging extension and extended magnitudes we bypass the intensive genesis of the extended (transcendental illusion). In an ontology of forces like Deleuze's, force refers to the relation between forces. Forces are experienced only through the results they render; and the results of forcefields are extensive and qualitative. Transcendental empiricism, therefore, demands that the intensities that constitute an extensive being be sensed - the famous Deleuzian 'sentiendum'. It needs to be noted that this sensing cannot be achieved through the ordinary exercise of our sensibility. Intensity can be remembered, imagined, thought and said. Intensities are not entities, they are virtual yet real events whose mode of existence is to actualise themselves in states of affairs."

<<https://deleuze.en-academic.com/84/intensity>> (accessed: 22.06.23)

⁸⁶ Robert Harvey, 'The Sartrean Viscous: Swamp and Source', *SubStance* 20 (64), (1991), pp. 49-66.

⁸⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.661. Qtd. In: Harvey, p.52.

"In Jean-Paul Sartre's view, being is subdivided into three regions: being-in-itself which lacks self-consciousness and is massive, full and actual; being for-itself or consciousness which is dynamic and spontaneous; and finally being-for-others." Reza Amiri, 'Being-for-Itself in Sartre's Philosophy: A Critical Examination', *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 8 (2007). pp 33-57.

⁸⁸ Sartre, p. 667. Qtd. in: Harvey, p. 56.

⁸⁹ Ibid.p. 668.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

material evocation, the viscous encompasses the metaphorical and imaginative: 'a handshake is viscous, a smile is viscous, a thought, a sentiment is capable of being viscous'.⁹¹ As suggested by Harvey, this ontology of the viscous retrieves in the literary motives of Sartre's novel 'L'age de raison' in rather obvious ways: the mixable, malleable is connected to the reciprocal, that poses a threat to the protagonist's 'for-itself', his autonomy and freedom.⁹² Ultimately, the ability to live in the for-itself is conditioned by this dialectic relationship to the viscous between exposure and the ability to take control of it.⁹³ The threat of losing control over the viscous 'haunts' the for-itself, the notion of total being, for 'the viscous is the revenge of the in-itself', the persistence of objects.⁹⁴



Fig. 8. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Toilet of Venus*, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

⁹¹ Sartre, 665. Qtd in: Harvey, p.59.

⁹²However, as Harvey remarks, the viscous in Sartre is ambivalent, as he states: "the ontological synthesis of the human and the nonhuman can take place" and "the viscous appears already at the beginning of a fusion of the world with me" Sartre, 668. Harvey thus concludes: "By revealing its own intimate bond with the viscous, Sartre has done nothing less than draft the outline of the indescribable nothing". Harvey, p.62.

⁹³"The viscous is *docile*. Only, at the very moment when I believe to possess it, by a curious reversal, it is *it* which possesses me. It is there that appears its essential character: its softness makes a suction. If the object that I hold in my hand is solid, I am able to let it slip when it pleases me; its inertia symbolizes for me my entire power: I found it, but it never finds me ... here it is that the viscous re- verses the terms: the *pour-soi* is suddenly compromised. I remove my hands, I wish to let go of the viscous but it adheres to me, it sucks me, it clings to me; its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of a solid, nor a dynamism as that of water which wears itself out sliding away from me: it is a soft activity, frothy and feminine of suction, it lives obscurely under my fingers and I sense it as a dizziness, it attracts me ... as the bottom of an abyss would be able to attract me. It is like a tactile fascination of the viscous. I am no longer the master of *stopping* the process of appropriation." Sartre, p.700.

⁹⁴ Sartre, 701. Qtd in: Harvey, p.59.

This ties in to the argument of Luce Irigaray's feminist essentialism, according to which 'women' is bound to matter and formlessness, like 'mother' to 'sea' in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or, in another vein, as 'commodity for men' that represents 'material substance'.⁹⁵

In the 'Sex which is Not one' (1977), Irigaray conceives a theory of the fluid. 'Woman' is encoded as excess to form, which corresponds to her inferiority but in turn also poses a threat to the patriarchal order. While in Irigaray, the fluid and the solid are subject to the ontological opposition of male and female, her proposition of an ontology of the fluid might be separated from their coding to gender. The 'mechanics of the fluid' are:

“continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible, ... That it is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable; that it enjoys and suffers from a greater sensitivity to pressures; that it changes-in volume or in force, for example-according to the degree of heat; that it is, in its physical reality, determined by friction between two infinitely neighbouring entities-dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unities hardly definable as such (in a coefficient of viscosity measured in poises, from Poiseuille, *sic*), and not energy of a finite system; that it allows to be easily traversed by flow by virtue of its conductivity to currents coming from other fluids or exerting pressure through the walls of a solid; that it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogeneous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse "in itself~": which disconcerts any attempt at static identification.”⁹⁶

This is what Irigaray names 'fluid speak', as language is 'always metaphorical', or metonymous, in a psychoanalytical understanding:

“Fluid speak is :“speaking in a way that is “not identical to one's self”.. Woman speaks “fluid,”... Thus it's necessary to know how to listen unconventionally in order to hear/understand what she says. That it's continuous, compressible, expandable, viscous, conductive, diffusible...”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Didi-Huberman, p.12. Luce Irigaray, *The Sex which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter, Carolyn Burke, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1985), p.30.

⁹⁶ Irigaray, p.111.

⁹⁷ Irigaray, pp.110-111.

This delineates a critique of the hegemonic speech of knowledge and authority. Its dominance, that Irigaray connects to the 'phallic', is founded in the solidity of form, as monolithic, representational, as the power of one-dimensional meaning. This is the format of public debate as discussion that is operating with a clear set of rules and conditions. These are speech structures that evacuate the joining up of subjectivities in favour of reiterating and stabilising positions against resistances. Rather than being bound to female identity, 'Fluid speak' might instead correspond to other forms of speech that refuse to subject to the solidification of order, as reasoning, rationalisation, argument and what we conceive of as discourse. This might be forms of communication that correspond to a diversity of streams and flows of meaning as becoming reciprocal, as form of speech that blend, unite and split subjectivities.⁹⁸ It might be forms of speech that, by their very form bring attention to all that slips underneath representational discourse and language, that which might only be expressed in metonymy. It might be forms of speech that undermine signification in constant contradiction. 'Fluid speak' is the form, the modality of speech coming to the fore to the effect that this form produces itself, produces its own meaning.

With this, fluidity has a relation to the aesthetics of opacity as an ontological condition with ethical implications as proposed by Edouard Glissant.⁹⁹ A translucent viscous or liquid substance might still be obscure to us, not revealing its identity. Viscous substance is thus in a sense opaque, while its mixability gives rise to further differentiation, and makes viscous and fluid substance reciprocal spreading beyond control allied with authority. At the same time, it is self-differentiating, giving rise to an alterity that is unquantifiable.¹⁰⁰ The viscous corresponds to the aesthetics of opacity in this double working of differentiation and unification as it implies both, a critical capacity that exposes the limits of the categories of visibility and form, as much as the capacity to subvert them.

⁹⁸This again corresponds to a Hegelian understanding of substance. "Since a substance generates its own accidents, it is in any case relatively independent of other substances and they do not enter into the initial account of it. The interaction of two or more substances is considered under the heading not of substance but of reciprocity." Inwood. *A Hegel dictionary*, p. 286.

⁹⁹In the 'Poetics of relation'(2006), Edouard Glissant develops the concept of opacity, as an ontology that interweaves ethics with aesthetics. Opacity is conceived as the counterpart to transparency, as aesthetic category that connects vision with power, deriving from Foucault's panopticon, to the reality of information capitalism. To claim 'the right to opacity' (p.1) is to be seen in a postcolonial context, deriving from the context of cultural hybridity in the Caribbean, it is an ethical and political claim in reaction to the violence of clarity, of information, access, judgement and reduction. "Opacity thus tries to overcome the risk of reducing, normalizing and even assimilating the singularities of cultural differences by comprehension. Glissant thus "challenges the rational epistemic of Enlightenment and its assumption of universal truths by calling into question the etymological meaning of 'comprehension' (com-prendere) as an act of appropriation." <http://www.transcultural-english-studies.de/opacite-opacity-edouard-glissant/>

¹⁰⁰ As Substance in Hegel is split by negativity. Inwood, Ibid.

While the viscous encompasses concrete association such as bodily fluids, its more powerful quality is that of evoking a movement, of being unstable, as Irigaray says, of sliding and slipping.¹⁰¹ Boucher's painterly surfaces with their glowing varnish and smooth planes, thick yet detailed brushwork, attend to the appeal of viscous matters, although dried and solidified, there is an imbrication of sensual properties, that is elicited in conjunction with what is represented. The creamy, the shiny and delicate open out to realms of substances in conjunction with oral and haptic pleasures. But more than through the specificity of association, alluding to the viscous is to imply its dynamics that produces an excess of association, as it embodies an excess of potential variations of forms within formlessness. Hence, what produces pleasure, is this notion of excess and this is what exceeds representation. On the other hand, the viscous inhabited by splotches and glazes withdraws from cognition, its instability make it slip underneath representation. The seduction of the thick and shiny is thus leading us beyond and below the threshold of the surface. The agency of the viscous is 'a directionless want, something that, from its interior, wants to make everything the same'.¹⁰² In this way, the material properties of the viscous and its evocation is part of Boucher's concern with 'the want itself understood as the experience of senses bound to surface'.¹⁰³ The viscous is a collaborator in his endeavour, in his investment in a 'lustful surface', if we want to emphasize the cognitive control over the material. But just as much, the visceral encounter exerts a power over the subject. Rather, then, the viscosity of paint might be an agent impelling and raising the artist's desire, luring and entangling him in its dynamics.

¹⁰¹ Irigaray, p.110. Qtd in: Harvey, p.55.

¹⁰² Mason, p.30.

¹⁰³ According to Lajer-Burcharth, this is rather his concern than 'the moral drama of wanting itself.' Lajer-Burcharth, p.42.

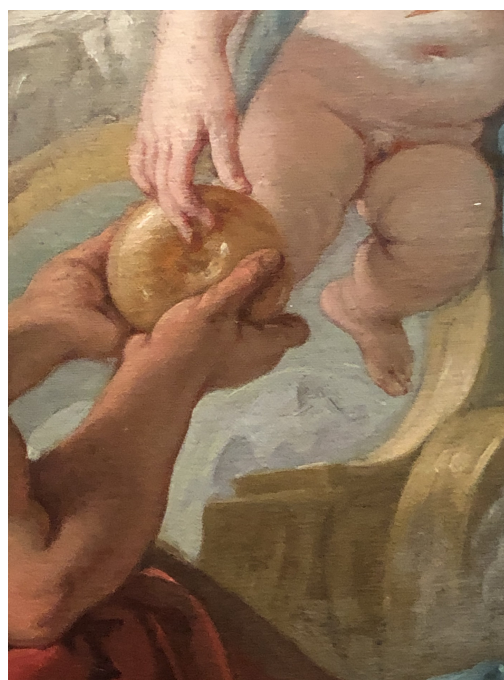
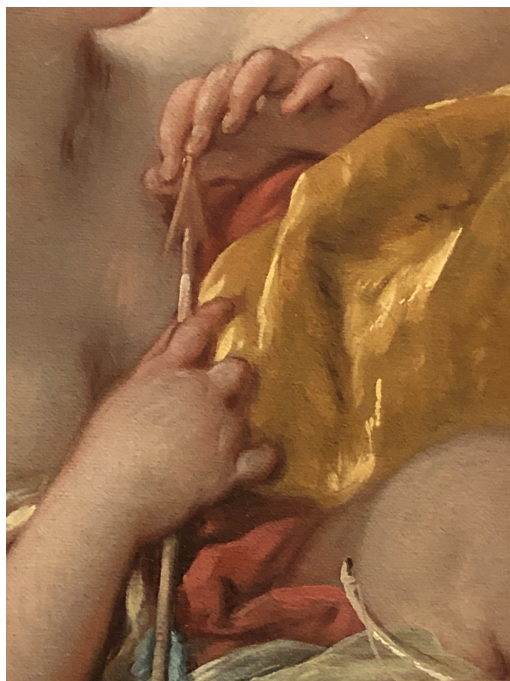


Fig. 9. Francois Boucher, Detail of *The Judgement of Paris*, 1754, Oil on canvas

Fig.10. Francois Boucher, Detail of *Cupid a Captive*, 1754, Oil on canvas

In Boucher's paintings there is an increased attention to the mimetic rendition of surfaces of luxury objects that points to the context of emerging consumerism.¹⁰⁴ This material differentiation of the surfaces gives rise to a lure of substance. In 'The Poetics of Spices', Morton analyses the 'discourse of spice', encompassing the representation of spices in British 18th century literature and early forms of advertisement, alongside the topos of wind and trade as an adventure, enmeshed with the desire for an imaginary place. 'Capitalism (...) arose from desire. It was in itself a kind of poetry.'¹⁰⁵ The far away, the hardly reachable became part of the construction of consumerist desire, that gave way to the legitimization of global trade.¹⁰⁶ Spices held the place of an 'ideal substance' to be found in an

¹⁰⁴ Lajer-Burcharth, p.23.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spices, Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), p.8.

¹⁰⁶ For further discussion about the development of imperialism in conjunction with Christian ethics, see : Morton, *The Poetics of Spices*. p.10.

imaginary place. These two forms of desire crystallise in the rhetorical figures of Ekphrasis and Fantasia. While Ekphrasis describes the punctual appearance of an image yielding "the vivid effect of a substance jumping out, as it were, of its textual frame, appearing to break the tissue of the text and stand forth at somewhat of a distance 'in front of' it".¹⁰⁷ Fantasia is the element of a text that 'appears to be folded into itself, or into a potentially infinite supply of other texts: travellers' tales, mystical stories, narratives of a 'beyond' not in the present here-and-now".¹⁰⁸ Consumerism sets up encounters with desirable substances and entangles us in affects, thus desire is both caught within it as much as it is uncontainable, breaching out of it and exceeding the structure of consumerism. The rhetorical figure of Ekphrasis and Fantasia might correspond to the relation of Eros and Thanatos. This then implies that, Ekphrasis poses a threat of excess towards form, while Fantasia, on the other, through its repetitive and destructive force, propends towards the dissolution of structures and representation.¹⁰⁹

'Fantasia' also relates to the imaginary, as it is the 'flow of figuration'.¹¹⁰ With that, Boucher's conception of space, the circulatory composition and an openness of space gives rise to a spatial connection between Boucher's paintings. The familiarity of the myths referred to as much as the repetition of Boucher's figures, the likeness of the female bodies and faces, whose postures seem to represent an alphabet of ornaments, evokes this condition of being 'folded into themselves', according to both, an already established canon and one that Boucher established for himself. The flowers as depictions of depictions and signifiers of the exotic perhaps most pointedly set up that passage from, or rather to, the beyond.

The splotch on the other hand is connected to both. As it represents a glow on a putti's forehead, it has an imaginary dimension. This is folded into the realm of putti images and imaginary relations. If the mark is the trace that is determined by signification endowed with the stability to organize representation or mimesis, the splotch exceeds the mark, as it is a trace slipping back or slipping forward into the a-signifying. It 'jumps out' and its vividness is that it slips from the securing signifying order, to something that subliminally and inevitably take us in. Its formlessness facilitates a connection, like a smell does.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.129.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Freud conceived the dynamics of the psyche as constituted by two oppositional drives (Urtriebe): On one hand Thanatos, the death drive encompassing destruction, repetition and compulsion and on the other Eros as the libidinal, the will to live. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (London: Hogart, 1920)

¹¹⁰ Morton, *The Poetics of Spices*. p.9.

To paint is to be entangled with substances and to an economy of their deployment. With the material expenditures of layers, splotches, glazes, stains, marks, lines, thus enjoyment is organised in the formation of the figure. The line and the splotch then are economic figures that represent polar opposites, one delineating excess, the other poverty. The splotch and the line are involved in an economy of appearance and disappearance. Both economic figures thus organise appearance and disappearance of the subconscious and the figure giving rise to the elsewhere, the symbolic and the imaginary through their ability to signify or evoke.

If the splotch is the surplus that exceeds the economy of mimetic rendition, with that, it displaces our attention from representation onto the substance. The line, on the other hand, retreats from materiality and reduces mimetic rendition to the indexical, giving way to abstraction. The signification of the line is that it performs intent, or according to Lyotard, produces meaning, albeit not representing anything. Its poverty is that it presents us with an immaterial space, that directs our attention to an elsewhere. This absence of the body connects to the sublime.¹¹¹ The splotch, on the other hand, is mystical in its visceral presence, as the subconscious of the substance is something that exceeds signification, leaping beyond or creeping underneath it before our ability to name and signify gets hold of it. We can't withdraw from visceral presence that touches us, produces affects of enjoyment or disgust, evokes movements and affective relations of unification and separation. Thus, the splotch is a surplus, both substance and figure, both affective and imaginary. With this, the splotch corresponds to both, Ekphrasis and Fantasia, as it represents both 'itself', pointing to a condition of formlessness, yet this does not dismantle anything as illusion. On the contrary, this splotch then is a figure that makes the surface a place where the imaginary appears as immanent to the material.

¹¹¹“The poverty of the line is mystical, a simple line of drawing and the paper splits and you find something as directed elsewhere, it is the most complete form of power and of dispossession because the one who draws this line does not know what he is doing. This poverty is something perfectly equivocal, both everything and nothing. The trace pertains more to the sublime than the beautiful, it is not a form, it does not present anything outside its own poverty producing meaning without giving way to form. Thus, contemporary art can only be abstract, a scribble and through this scribble you can see the poverty of those who cannot speak.” Catherine Malabou - *The Representable and the Irrepresentable*, Lecture to the Royal College of Art CHS Project Group, online video recording, 22.05.2022, <https://rcachprojectgroup.wordpress.com/2022/05/10/catherine-malabou-the-representable-and-the-imrepresentable-22-05-2022/>[accessed 20 August 2023]

10. Circulation and Drifting

With the occurrence of the splotch, the gaze circles between the relationship of parts-to-whole. . Both of the Derbais Pendants present us with a circulatory spatial order. Dark corners hold an internal space populated by figures that relate to each other in a rhythmical structure that forms a bundle. As Lajer-Burcharth points out, the 18th century materialist thinking brought about by the enlightenment set out from an understanding of the world as a material organization.¹¹² The formation of different materialist philosophies shares assumptions exemplified by Thiery d'Holbach's claim that matter unfolds in 'an interrupted progression that is a perpetual chain of movements and combinations'.¹¹³ By conceiving of the world as a material organization, in 'combinations and proportions', the realms of culture and nature became available to each other. Circulation as a principle of organization pointing to the relation of things to each other corresponds to this essence of materialism. Observations from the natural world and ensuing assumptions of its functioning were transferred to painting and so, the notion of an 'irreducible agency' of the body that impelled material operations and that was often named 'morphology', leads to the proposition to conceive of 18th century painting as a 'morphology of marks and traces'.¹¹⁴

In the emphasis on the foreground in the Derbais Pendants, there is a sense of release as there is little spatial difference that builds up intensity. The circulatory composition of figures, rather than signifying an order of movement, effectuates a dispersion of tension, lacking a distinct focus and direction. All figures are moved by a rhythmical structure of curves, lines and colours. This similarity of all representations prompts to read them as signifiers linked to each other in a chain that gives rise to a 'metonymic drifting'.¹¹⁵ For Lacan, the rhetorical figure of metonymy is the condition that determines the operation of desire. As a trope of correspondence, metonymy is the formula of desire's constant deferral and replacement from one signifier to the other.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹²As Lajer-Burcharth points out, this is a movement turning away from god und metaphysics, albeit there were strands of materialist thinking that held on to these within materialism. Lajer-Burcharth, p.6-7.

¹¹³“From the stone formed in the entrails of earth to the innermost combination of analogous and similar molecules that came together, to the sun, this vast reservoir of inflamed particles that lit the firmament, (...) we see an uninterrupted progression, a perpetual chain of combinations and movements from which beings result that do not differ from one another but in the variety of their elementary substances, and the combinations and proportions of these substances, from which originate varied modes of being and acting.”Paul Thiery D'Holbach, *Systeme de la Nature*.(1770). Qtd in Desne, *Les Materialistes francais*, p.141. Qtd. in : Lajer-Burcharth,p.6.

¹¹⁴“The material realms of culture and nature were 'opened to a morphological kind of analysis to identify the 'infinitely varied modes' not of being and acting but of meaning.' Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “That is not to say that Boucher's paintings have no meaning but that their meaning is linked to the effect of metonymy rather than metaphor: generated by the relation of contiguity rather than depth, it glides on the painting's surface.” Lajer-Burcharth, p. 62.

¹¹⁶The use of metonymy is essential to understanding Lacan's concept of the unconscious, which he viewed as being

signifying chain is horizontal suggesting an equality of parts as substitutes for each other. The flowers are an attribute of female bodies as much as the feminine is an attribute of the flower. In their interdependence, they become reversible. In 'Mercury' and 'The Rape' nude female figures are assembled all across the picture plane, de-centralised, but in their bright fleshy presence, still central to the paintings. With that, garments, curls, clouds, roses, putties, are all signifiers metonymous for the feminine, that in turn is metonymous for a desired object. Desire, in Boucher, is non linear. It finds no fixed point, rather, it is circulating, encompassing the entire surface.

Drifting and floating correspond to specific movements in consumerist space, as Flanerie, browsing, surfing, are all connected to weightlessness and ideas of freedom, in conjunction with suspended choice, while on the other hand, the uncontrollability of this a-signifying movement might unleash, and drift off into the unknown, the beyond, the elsewhere. With this, other possibilities for the relation between subject and object within consumerism are opened up. Morton suggests floating as a movement opening out to the spectral, and this attributes spectral presence to objects and thoughts, thus extends the formerly anthropocentric concept.¹¹⁷ With this, an idea about ecology and its relationship to aesthetics is presented that prioritizes the affective encounter to conjoin the immeasurable with the scientific.¹¹⁸ Thus, floating can be thought of as a figure that sets up a relationship between ethics and aesthetics that is not structural or instrumental but a movement that goes back and forth to a relationship we are not in full control of. As Morton holds it, the gap between appearance and essence cannot be closed and floating is the state of staying with the ambivalence this effectuates, and this in turn is connected to an ecological consciousness.

“structured like a language”. He referred to (...) Roman Jakobson's definition of language as structured by the binary figures of metaphor and metonymy, as corresponding to condensation and displacement.

According to this, desire is metonymous as every signifier is linked to the next one in a contiguous chain, and desire is constantly being deferred. The lost object is substituted by other objects, but desire always ultimately points to something beyond those objects. Thus, desire is a longing for the whole that is expressed through a part. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Routledge, 2019)

¹¹⁷Spectrality or Hauntology derives from Derrida's 'Spectres of Marx', which will be discussed later. Spectrality implies that: “ the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; (...) we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. “ Frederic Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, (London:Verso, 1991), pp. 26–67, p.39.

¹¹⁸As it is implied, that a succession of splits have lead us in the contemporary state of crises, (what Morton calls 'the severing') the thinking in dualist categories between appearance and essence, body and mind, culture and nature, human and nonhuman, must be overcome. Thus, an ecological consciousness can no longer exclude and separate but instead must be lead by everything that overcomes firm categories and raises our awareness of our entanglement with 'the symbiotic real', the sum of our conscious and unconscious interdependencies. This is a path lead by affects, sensations and encounters and the ambiguities within them. See: Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, (London: Verso, 2017)



Fig.11. Francois Boucher, Detail of *Mars and Venus surprised by Vulcan*, 1754, Oil on canvas

Perhaps, the categories of figure and ground correspond to the same philosophical distinction. As much as they present an illusion showing itself as such, we won't get behind it. In ambivalence, however, opposites might come close to their dissolution.

It is both ingrained in the tradition of anticapitalist cultural critique according to Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as in ecological discourse to identify the problem of consumerism as the pursuit of constant enjoyment. This has issued in the generalised notion that hedonism is a problem, resulting in the abandonment of either production or social responsibility, depending on the political ideology of the criticising position.¹¹⁹ Both tangents issue in the precept that we must curtail our enjoyment that is in turn appropriated by capitalism itself, the pressure of self-imposed restraint again building up a tension that is released in the act of consumption, propelling a libidinal machine of consumerism. It becomes part of its very texture, materialised in diet-products and nuts sold in units of a hand full, that occasion the consumer to consume more, constantly deferring pleasures through dosages and substitution, a libidinal economy that suspends pleasure, spreads out pleasure like a carpet, releasing pleasure from tension, flattening it out to a background of the always available that detaches us from it. Pleasure is at the same time omnipresent and removed. It is only accessible as a vicarious experience. This Lacanian structural principle retrieves in consumerist culture, in that it sets up a spectacle of illusions in order to establish the commodity as desire or enjoyment of the other.¹²⁰ These appearances provide us with the reflexivity needed to enjoy and that must live on through constant renewal. For the fantasy of the other to be maintained it must be kept at a distance and thus constantly newly masked to evoke the attraction of the vicarious experience.¹²¹ In this way, consumerist desire is determined by the commodity, there is thus a dependency that is reversible. The consumer is structurally embroiled in this metonymic chain of attaining and consuming desirable commodities. In this view, there is no difference between luxury and necessity.¹²²

¹¹⁹As the terms “Spaßgesellschaft”, (translated 'Fun society'), along with “raving society” dominated German feuilleton discourse in the 90s. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaßgesellschaft> [accessed: 01/06/23]

¹²⁰“Commodity fetishism triumphs as spectacle. As spectacle, the object becomes image and belief, and is secured by an erotic, rather than a religious, aura.” Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p.11.

¹²¹The spectre of the consumer gives rise to endless abstractions. (“I imagine the person, that imagines the person, that imagines to be the person in the ad, that enjoys the coke.” Timothy Morton, ‘Consumerism’, *Literature and the Environment*, Lecture series at University of California, Davis campus, audio recording, Apple Podcasts, Fall 2008 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/consumerism/id399641376?i=1000411507884>[accessed 20 August 2023])

¹²² Morton, *Poetics of Spices*, p.27.

The objects represented in Boucher's are signifiers of luxury. Lajer-Burcharth refers to 'Luxury and Capitalism' by Werner Sombart, that stages sensuousness as a central aspect for the desirability of objects that in turn induce economic processes.¹²³ With this, consumerism can be seen as built upon the corporeality of experience, of the senses and their close relationship to imagination. According to Lajer- Burcharth, this investment in the painting's surface represents an effort in positioning painting in the emergent consumerist culture. There is a seamless thread going from the presentation of desirable objects in compositional alignment with nude figures that are erotically involved with each other, to the desirability of these objects being connected to their varying surface qualities from the shiny to the smooth and soft, to the lure of the mimetic and to the materiality of paint itself that seduces with loose brushstrokes, light touch and rich texture.

However, in Boucher's paintings, there are “more complex questions lurking behind the notion of consumption. As they document the ascendancy of the thing in social life and in the cultural imagination, they also speak, indirectly, about how circulation of commercial goods altered the nature of human relations and the relation of human beings to themselves.”¹²⁴

This suggests that we might find in circulation, in the order of entanglement we are presented with, something more than a cultural or historic argument and that concerns not only another perspective on the figures, the subjects to each other, but also to the relationship between objects and subjects, to a mutual embeddedness. Consumption is a material, morphological and existential process. It is an encounter with substance that is real, symbolic and imaginary. It confronts the subject with fluidity, that is both within itself and the object, effectuating a process of blending into each other. It thus delineates the instability of the subject as body. The act of consumption inhibits an analytical subject object relation, as it dissolves their boundaries. From the point of consumption, we can see inside and outside as a construct, as a kind of illusion. In this way, consumption poses an encounter with the object that is destabilising and liberating for the subject.¹²⁵

¹²³” If Luxury is to become personal, materialistic luxury, it must be predicated on an awakening sensuousness”. Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch*, p.41.

¹²⁴ Lajer-Burcharth, p.50.

¹²⁵As Michael Delville remarks, consumption signifying the process of ingestion, is devaluated in the tradition of Western philosophy, according to the mind/body dyad and the adhering distinction of the upper and the lower senses, the pleasurable and the spiritual, as in Kant and Hegel. The perception of art is limited to the senses of hearing and seeing that are privileged over taste, that is seen as too close to the body, conceived as a private enjoyment. According to Hegel, consumption produces a 'self-like unity' that impedes critical judgement. Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-garde*, (London:Routledge, 2008), pp. 6-8.



Fig. 12 and 13. Francois Boucher, Details of *Venus and Vulcan*, 1754, Oil on canvas

“Men do not by any means begin by finding themselves in this theoretical relationship to the things in the world.” They begin, like every animal, by eating, drinking, etc. that is not by “finding themselves” in a relationship, but actively behaving, availing themselves of certain things of the outside world by action, and thus satisfying their needs (They start, then with production.)¹²⁶

Morton cites this lesser known notion of production from Marx, to state that production is at the core of the human condition, connecting the human with the nonhuman. 'Production is enjoyment', that is to consume as well as to create, whereby both actions are as natural, as they are inevitable.

Walking through the Wallace collection, I see an azure blue clouded sky, and a foot on a cloud that on closer inspection is a kaleidoscope of apricot and pink hues composing itself in

¹²⁶ Karl Marx “Notes on Adolph Wagner's 'Lehrbuch der politischen Okonomie', marxists.org. Qtd. in: Morton, *Humankind*, p.61.

light brushstrokes. I see surfaces thickly saturated with colour, creamy white, glossy glazes and curved brushstrokes, altogether producing a voluptuousness of the surface, an allover opulence I am quickly oversaturated with. In following the established understanding of kitsch as opposite of beauty, Morton argues kitsch is 'the enjoyment of the other'.¹²⁷ This means it is close to my own enjoyment, and it might become my own vicariously through the imagination of the enjoyment of the other.¹²⁸ As such, kitsch is an impure mixture of enjoyment and disgust. Perhaps, this is an explanation for why we are so inclined to conceive of rococo as kitsch, not to reduce it to historical and cultural reasons, for why this is not felt as an inherited aesthetic judgement but as an affect provoked again and again for what is rococo but the enjoyment of another class, another time? In their way of frontal presentation, offering and abundance, the Derbais Pendants and the paintings in the Oval room have a similarity to shop windows, in that they effectuate a similar way of looking at them. For Morton, window shopping is not a side-effect but a crucial element for the inner structure of consumerism. Paradoxically, the constitutive activity of consumerism does not take place in the act of buying itself, but of browsing the selection.¹²⁹ We linger in the suspension of enjoyment. On the surface of 'The Rape of Europa', our eyes circle between breast, blossom, legs, bulky forms in saturated reddish pastels. It is a circulatory dynamic, not quite a circulation, lacking a distinct direction or focus. It is a floating, that disperses and suspends the pleasure of looking, evoking "enjoyment tinged with disgust tinged with enjoyment".¹³⁰ This is an ambivalence of our affects, the becomings of desire, and it is this ambivalence, that, for Morton, presents us with the nature of our relatedness, of our being in the world in a deeply entangled condition. Ambivalence is also defined as 'a vibrating body': 'the fact or state of absorbing sound according to its acoustic properties as an emitter.'¹³¹ This links ambivalence with empathy for if we are not sure about our feelings or judgements towards an object, we in a sense, stay exposed to this encounter. The notion of vibration on the other hand, is both movement and exchange. Ambivalence occurs in relation, and it might be a feeling of this in-betweenness itself coming to the fore. Ambivalence is also the state in which we can relate with a feeling without adopting it. With this understanding of ambivalence, we might see empathy not as pure, homogenous emotion that is overdetermined by its attribution as a virtue, but

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.67.

¹²⁸ Kitsch is defined as "Art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way. The word comes (in the 1920s) from German." The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (2. ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.406.

In his essay 'Avantgarde and Kitsch' (1939) Greenberg established the term to mark the opposition between high art and consumerist culture. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 1961)

¹²⁹ Morton, *Humankind*, p.65.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p.65.

¹³¹ See: King, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'ambivalence (n.)', March 2022

<https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ambivalence_n> (accessed: 02.02.2024)

rather as always permeated by conflicting feelings and judgements, which inherently involve a profound engagement with another subject/object, or perhaps even constitute it. It is the condition of empathy as a process of mutual change that enables political progression.



Fig.14. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Trees and Flowers*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

For Kant, the object is split between its reality and its appearance.¹³² Cause and effect are on the site of reality, that we translate as data whereas appearance belongs to the thing itself, and is a matter of intuition or the speculative side of perception, which displaces appearance from the field of science as it is not measurable. This, Morton argues, yields a dramatic contradiction that 'things never are exactly as they appear, yet never what they seem', as they 'always and never coincide with their data'.¹³³ Morton opts for staying with the gap without attending to Kant's theorisation of containing the ambiguity that is opened out and fuses it with an Object-Oriented-viewpoint. With this, the irreducible strangeness of the thing, is not a privileged experience of the subject but of all beings. Accordingly, 'licking is (as) an access mode as valid (invalid) as thinking'.¹³⁴

This split of the object is further dramatised in consumerism through the fetish.¹³⁵ In this way, our relationship to the object within consumerism gives rise to a 'Kantian floating'.¹³⁶ The contemplation of this state is embodied in the figure of the Flaneur, as Morton conceives Charles' Baudelaire's poems as explorations that open out to the 'phenomenology of the symbiotic real'.¹³⁷ This, ultimately becomes Morton's proposition of ecological consciousness.

The symbiotic real, for Morton, describes the interdependency of all life forms. Despite being non-hierarchical, the relationship is far from harmonic coherence, rather incomplete, 'ragged'.¹³⁸ It is the 'loose connectivity that affect(s) other orders, such as language'.¹³⁹ The symbiotic real is a reaction to nature as a concept that is predicated on the separation from the human. It rather conceives 'nature' as encompassing and traversing everything, that is a state of spheres, subjects and objects being permeated, the state of the world without inside-outside boundaries between culture and nature, the human and the ecosphere. The implication of considering these relations as close entanglements points ultimately to a solidarity with the nonhuman. This not only implements an equality of all objects that removes them from their origins of culture and nature but crucially also

¹³²“In ID (the ideas of Reason) Kant is still working within a traditional opposition of appearance and reality. Appearance is an object of sensible knowledge and is opposed to the intellectual or rational knowledge of the intellect. The objects of each branch of knowledge, Kant comments neutrally, were called 'in the schools of the ancients' (ID §3) phenomenon and noumenon. Furthermore, appearance (here indistinguishable from phenomena) is unequivocally opposed to truth, and identified with the matter of sensation as opposed to the form of the intelligence: 'things which are thought sensitively are representations of things as they appear, while things which are intellectual are representations of things as they are' (ID §4).” Caygill, *Kant dictionary*.p.78.

¹³³ Morton, p.8.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p.12.

¹³⁵ It is implied that Marx' materialism was in this way influenced by Kant. pp.40-47.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.69.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p.67.

¹³⁸ Morton, *Humankind*, p.1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.2.

reconsiders the definition of life as such. By introducing the idea of spectrality into ecological co-existence, Morton suggests an ecological ontology that moves beyond the empirical and is not 'bio-centric'. This includes the appearances of things, imaginings and imaginations into the symbiotic real.¹⁴⁰ After all, overcoming the mind-body dualism consequently means to consider thinking as a form of reality.¹⁴¹

“Ecological awareness interrupts my anthropocentric mania to think myself otherwise than being surrounded and permeated with other beings, not to mention made up of them? Which is to say, isn't ecological awareness a spectrality that consists of awareness of spectres?”¹⁴²

Ecology, Morton defines simply as the organization of enjoyment of all life forms.¹⁴³ Economy is acknowledged as a structuring principle, that is however based on the exclusion of the nonhuman. Morton thus integrates the notion of libidinal economy into ecology, so that economy becomes a category within ecology, that is thus subordinate to it, or subscends it.¹⁴⁴

Commodity fetishism sensually estranges us in ways that are both material and imaginary.

However, Morton suggests that there are spaces within consumerism that imply a perspective that is non-anthropocentric, that correspond to our being-with consumerism, our entanglement that is inevitably ecological in the definition of the symbiotic real. Flanerie describes a consumerist subjectivity that harbours an awareness for ecological entanglement as 'being surrounded by the spectral presence of evacuated enjoyment'.¹⁴⁵ Morton refers to Charles Baudelaire's poem 'The Flowers of Evil' as a 'blending of incongruous things' that evokes 'a feeling of being haunted, through frequency and repetition.'¹⁴⁶

Though originally the prerogative of a male bourgeois identity, the spread of consumerism to all spaces and spheres of experiences makes Flanerie available to all.¹⁴⁷ A state of 'boredom' as a

¹⁴⁰The concept of Hauntology or spectrality derives from Derrida's discussion about the death of Marxism in the *Spectres of Marx* that refers to Marx' sentence: 'a spectre is haunting Europe'.

'If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between the two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost.' Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p.13.

¹⁴¹ “Thinking itself is one mode of convocation of spectres in the symbiotic real.” Morton, *Humankind*, p.63.

¹⁴² Morton, *Humankind*, p.68.

¹⁴³ Morton refers to the term *ecology* being coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866 as applied to the 'relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment.'<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernst-Haeckel>

¹⁴⁴ In 'Libidinal economy', Lyotard introduces libido, as well as the concept of the drives and polymorphous perversity, and Lacan's concept of jouissance into economy in a bit to undermine Marxist theory and its immobile notion of value. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. and ed. by Ian Hamilton Grant. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

¹⁴⁵ Morton, *Humankind*, p.68.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

cognitive overload would be a psychological consequence of embracing the symbiotic real at the sight of the overwhelming interdependences and relations that we are constantly entangled with.

The affective modes of Flanerie and ennui are states of latent ambivalence, that open out spaces between the 'perverse acceptance of pop culture' and the reifiable rejection of punk.¹⁴⁸

It might be the feeling of moving through consumerist spaces, of staying with the cold freedom of choice, of not knowing what to order, the hesitation that opens out a space of weightlessness.

We are suspended between desires with unknown origin, moved by something, by a force that effectuates currents, flows and arrests. In floating, we can submit to an uncontrollability.

In the perspective of the Flaneur, we find a way to conceive of consumerism dialectically, that means to think its political opposite with it, that is ecology. But since we cannot think one thing without its opposite, no figure without ground, and as we saw with the rejection of modernism, rejection is not emancipation as it depends on what it rejects, and crucially, because our environment is that of consumerism, the ecological pursuit must start by thinking beyond dualism. Morton thus opts for an attention to ambiguous feelings, of an intertwining, weaving and melting of our affective investments, like 'uneasy acceptance of disgust, disgusted acceptance of unease' as possible ways of relating to our environment that might lead to 'find ways to the symbiotic real underneath consumerist possibility space'.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.,p.69.



Fig.15. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Flower of Evil*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

Spectrality

In consumerism, we are called to desire. In a way, the product desires the consumer. This leaves us suspended between the polarities of affects, of enjoyment and disgust. In this way, ambivalence is a latent but unresolved tension. This connects it to the movement of floating, as a movement that detaches from direction, that is from signification. The insight that harbours in this state, thus might be that desire is neither in me, nor in there.

If there is no pre-existing subject with pre-existing desires, that questions the notion of the subject and the hierarchy of subject and object points to a porosity of their boundaries. This might for once be understood in a sense that seems obvious, namely that the subject's condition as desiring subject points to our interdependency and entanglement with the nonhuman. This is the symbiotic real as we experience it. On the other hand, Morton proposes the floating movement as spectral presence, as giving rise to a spectral awareness of appearances. The notion of spectrality is evolving out of the split between signifier and signified in language. Meaning is thus 'already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome.'¹⁵⁰ Accordingly, 'the origin of identity must inevitably find itself dependent on an always-already existing set of linguistic conditions.'¹⁵¹ Thus, presence is 'displaced by a deferred non-origin', that in turn gives rise to the spectral as a disembodied presence, that transgresses linear time, by either appearing in the presence from an indistinct past, or rather, by neither being present now, nor then, by floating through time. '(Spectres) hover, in suspense, at the limit between being and non-being, beyond the jurisdiction of either.'¹⁵²

According to Derrida, spectrality poses another form of relation between signifier and signified, as it is distinct 'not only from the icon or the idol but also from the image of the image'.¹⁵³

What is opened up in the gap between the two, in spectrality, is a sense of an unfathomable relationship to time. The spectre 'sees without being seen', resulting in a feeling of being looked by a 'spectral someone (..) outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p.175.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p.45.

¹⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Trans.by Peggy Kamuf, (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), p.19.

generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolute disproportion.¹⁵⁴ The spectral thus corresponds to what we might find in the revelations that a painting holds for us, in slow appearances. Figure and ground flicker, background and foreground might appear or disappear in one another. While we see one thing, another thing slips in the background again. As surface and appearance don't fall into a straightforward signifying hierarchy, this in turn denies representation as the order of looking. The painted surface in itself is always double; the visible produces the invisible of the symbolic and imaginary. This gives rise to an intuition that 'every appearance is haunted by disappearance.'¹⁵⁵ Paintings can open out this ambivalence, by unsettling the gaze, that means by evolving us in an economy of attention, that is beyond linear time.

The spectral harbours within it the unconscious, that traverses time likewise, as a latent presence, a form of knowledge that is not present, underneath the surface, as it is the 'knowledge that can't tolerate one's knowing that one knows.'¹⁵⁶ Introducing this transgression of inside and outside boundaries into ecological discourse has radical implications: accordingly, life is defined as entailing all spectres 'as they move'.¹⁵⁷ With that, the static notion of existence is mobilised, the empirical determination of presence, as movement includes the imaginary and the invisible.

'Thinking itself is one mode of convocation of spectres in the symbiotic real'.¹⁵⁸

This proposition in turn leads to a radical suspension of the border between life and death or 'non-life'. "To embrace spectrality is (..) the way in which appearing and being are impossible to separate in such a way that a basic ontological ambiguity is a possibility condition for existence as such."¹⁵⁹ With this suggestion, Morton conjoins Eros and Thanatos with the ecological discourse, introduces desire into the sober scientific, the biological, measurable that targets to undermine the judgemental that reduces the human condition, as ignoring its ambiguity and its desires. While Eros as the libidinal drive retrieves in the definition of ecology as an organisation of enjoyment, spectrality corresponds to Thanatos, as a movement that insists on desire in the face of its impossibility, as exerting a pull outside of representation.

The spectre moves beyond representation and beyond the idea of an origin. The concept of

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p.6.

¹⁵⁵ Derrida, p.10.

¹⁵⁶ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p.4.

¹⁵⁷ Morton, *Humankind*, p.90.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.90.

spectrality thus displaces the relationship of representation and identity. In the context of an ecological discourse, a criticism of origin is inevitably connected to a notion of nature as origin, as other to the subject, that seeks to be overcome, as the current situation of human interaction with environment is predicated on it. Thus, Morton calls for a concept of 'ecology without nature'.¹⁶⁰

The tradition of conceptual art holds a reductive relationship of image and language. Joseph Kosuth's 'One and Three chairs,' (1965) might be an exemplary work in this regard as it presents a chair as an image, as a dictionary definition and as an object. As much as this might depart from a tautological notion, it also questions it to confront us with a philosophical problem of the relation between image, concept and object. To that effect, the viewer is required to interpret. The viewer has to prove herself as an emancipated, critical, autonomous subject. Different tendencies in art and their concepts since conceptual art can be understood through the relationship between image and subject they assume. The process of painting perhaps lends itself to a closer interrogation of this entanglement, as there is an absorbing quality to it. Substance involves the imagination, relating the subject to it, to become absorbed to the effect of an image. This experience corresponds to an understanding of the image, that requires an 'abandonment' of the subject, as it 'surrenders itself in seeing' and 'relinquishes the thing seen.'¹⁶¹ With this, the image, rather than presenting the subject with what it knows or affirming it in its ability for cognition, induces an encounter that undoes the subject's self-certainty. Art fails to make use of this most intriguing capability of confronting us with questions and fostering experiences that lead to an existential puzzlement if it subjects the image to the role of a conveyer of information and the work of art to a distribution of knowledge with aesthetic means. With this approach, one risks to fall into didacticism or into a fetishism of knowledge, both of which pose an arrest of meaning, an endpoint.

To that effect, art critic David Joselit, in the essay 'Against Representation', argues against an understanding of art that assumes a stable relationship of materiality and meaning.

“It is common to find meaning in art by linking a physical substrate – such as a painting by Raphael – to a singular image, like a Madonna and Child. In doing so, however, we make a false equation – an *exchange*– between a finite quantum of matter and a unique image.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007)

¹⁶¹ Mikko Tuhkanen, 'Being Fascinated: Toward Blanchotian Film Theory', *Postmodern Culture: Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought on Contemporary Cultures*, 2016, Volume 29 (2), pp.45-56, p.45.

¹⁶² David Joselit, *Against Representation*, *Texte zur Kunst: Art vs. Image*, Vol. 95, (2004), pp.96- 99, p.97.

As the conflation of the thing represented and the thing itself, in art history, goes back to the notion of iconography, Joselit proposes a different understanding of the icon: 'the icon does not represent Christ, but rather articulates the economy of his appearance- as an image of God that is always absent from the believer's presence in the moment of contemplation'.¹⁶³ The image thus rather proposes a relation between visibility and invisibility, the specifics of which are determined by an economy of revelation. With that, mimesis is not a doubling of appearances but rather produces a conflict between image and object, as Jean-Luc Nancy states: 'The image disputes the presence of the thing. In the image, the thing is not content simply to be, the image shows that the thing is and how it is. This is not a presence 'for a subject'. (..) it is, on the contrary, if one can put it this way, 'presence as subject'. 'The thing presents itself.' Thus, the image is not subordinate to the object it represents.¹⁶⁴

On the surface, figure and ground structure perception. The tension between them results in states of intensities, evoking relief, dissolution or ambiguity. This in turn results in different considerations of representation and presentation. In Kantian schematism, presentation precedes representation, that enables the ascription of identity, truth and meaning.¹⁶⁵ In this view, presentation is in effect subordinate to representation. In distinction to that, Nancy conceives meaning as occurring in presentation, as a 'coming to presence' that corresponds to Jacques Derrida's concept of difference, as 'belonging to the spacing of being 'that remains between us'.¹⁶⁶ This notion of temporal, processual meaning as presentation in turn inverts the hierarchy of surface

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Image and Violence", in: *The Ground of the Image*, trans. by Jeff Fort, New York 2005, p. 21., Quoted in: Joselit, p.98.

¹⁶⁵ "Concepts are brought to intuition, in that a process of the imagination gives them their image - That is the schema of a concept" Kant argues that there is a necessary connection between our concepts and the objects in the world, but this connection cannot be directly perceived by the senses. Broadly speaking, concepts condition the possibility of cognition. It thus can be said that meaning, in this way, is formed in representation. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.180-187.

¹⁶⁶ According to Alison Ross, Jean-Luc Nancy discusses representation as a metaphysical category, that delineates the Kantian a priori signification. "Signification, which takes place in Kant's thought, in Nancy's account of it, centrality takes on different modes, ranging from the ostensive mode of mathematics to the analogical symbolic and even 'negative' modes of morality, aesthetics and history - but it is still essentially signification, it is still the demand and the logic of its closure (Kant speaks of the "satisfaction" of reason) that are at stake' (G, 23-24). The Kantian ideas of reason are thus the orientating ideas that in the symbolic and negative forms of morality, aesthetics and history precede, govern, and arrange presentation." (156) Meaning, which has its location in the 'between and the 'with' that is the shared dimension of being cannot be essence, an origin or pure presence; rather, meaning begins when 'Being does not identify itself as such but shows itself, gives itself occurs, disposes itself... as its own singular plural with. (.....)" Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy*, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 135-163.

and depth as being is conceived as taking place 'at the surface of sense.'¹⁶⁷ Presentation thus comes before and after representation. With this, the surface is a site of becoming. Representation is implicated in the language of advertisement. Commodity fetishism is predicated on a fixed image, yielded by the separation of the essence and the appearance of a thing. Representation produces coherence, cuts out and presents things to us in splendid isolation. It propends towards reification. Complex entities are packaged to units. In this way, representation sets up a structure for paradigmatic relationships. Things relate to each other in analogy. This concerns the subject as much as the product. Identity lends itself to a reifiable image that make itself available to an enclosure in capital. On one hand, commodity fetishism is an elevation of appearance, on the other, it produces a demystification, a reduction of what is split from the appearance, as the material reality is contained in a system of signification, becomes pure data, that poses a dematerialisation of it. This mind-body duality retrieves in the notion of medium, as Joselit points out. The medium is the substance that is subordinate and perceived as a 'given' in relation to the image that produces meaning.¹⁶⁸ Representation tries to stabilise identity but thereby produces a split. If the medium is a given, is nothing but materiality, undifferentiated mass, a goo, a lump, then, it threatens representation as it is in opposition towards it. Representation is an economy which measures, which fixes, but at the expense of leaving an ocean of immeasurability, of wastage underneath it.¹⁶⁹ In this way, the capitalist operation simultaneously destroys fixity and gestures towards its own immeasurability.

¹⁶⁷“This attempt to redefine the ‘origin of sense’ not as ‘being-within or being-elsewhere’ or as an essence, principle, origin.’ but as the exterior surface of the network of ‘co-appearing’ is also ventured in Nancy’s recasting of the integrity/exteriority distinction according to his view that being is ‘at the surface of the sense.’ Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths*, p.154.

¹⁶⁸ Joselit, p. 96.

¹⁶⁹“The 'crisis' of Libidinal Economy is a perpetual displacement, an eternal turning rather than a splitting: 'drifting by itself is the end of all critique' (Driftworks, p. 13) . Instead of fixing territories, setting up shields, or installing garrisons, libidinal investments traverse the entire metamorphic range of these unlimited displacements. The shores are disfigured and identities wrecked in this postcritical torrent which engulf Kant's safe seat as much as the garrisons of the psychoanalytic superego.“ Iain Hamilton Grant, Foreword in *Libidinal Economy*, p.19.

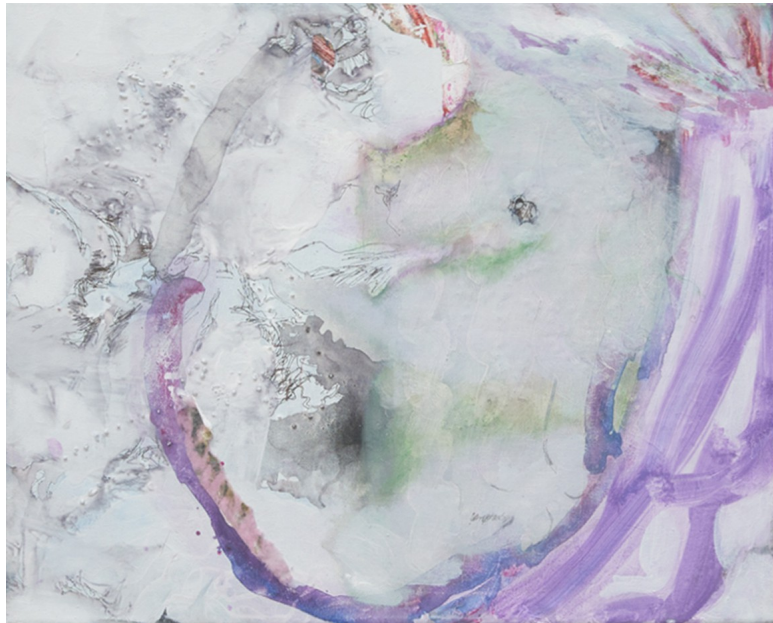


Fig.16. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Cupid a Captive*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 40 cm × 60 cm

Floating away

'Veiled eroticism' is a trope in rococo paintings.¹⁷⁰ This connects them to the notion of fetishism. What is the role of the figure of the female nude in Boucher's paintings? I propose that there is no objectivity to what they 'are' but rather to conceive of the production of meaning as a process in the act of looking. Representation is an order of looking that relies upon a constant reproduction of meaning in the symbolic order that we can chose to undo. With reference to Lajer-Burcharth, I propose that Boucher's paintings offer another way of looking at them, propending towards a dissolution of this order.

In both Freud and Marx, the fetish signifies a libidinal fixation. The concept originated to explain the role of a cult object within an unknown culture.¹⁷¹ It is thus not without postcolonial baggage, that retrieves in fetishism in Marx and Freud insofar as it criticises object elevation.

In Freudian Fetishism, the surface is a cover, involved in the repression of the lack: 'The psyche constructs a phantasmatic topography, a surface, or carapace, which hides ugliness and anxiety with beauty and desire. This (is an) intricate confusion of the semiotic and the topographical.'¹⁷²

As commodity fetishism is predicated on the invisibility of labour, the topological painting surface of Boucher, with its marks and traces, is not fetishistic. Thus, ascribing fetishism to Boucher's painting is only possible through the representation of the female figure, since the topological painting surface has to be equated with the semiological. A fetishistic view invests in the illusion of the paint signifying skin, as a substitute for another fixation. '(The fetish object) has to hold the fetishist's eyes fixed on the seduction of belief to guard against the encroachment of knowledge.'¹⁷³ The commodity's value is an illusion and this relates commodity fetishism to the mirror image of the self as a foil of false identification.¹⁷⁴ The fetish thus presents us with a notion of representation

¹⁷⁰ https://digitalcommons.sia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=stu_theses

¹⁷¹ "Fetisso derives from the Portuguese word *fetiçio*, which in the late Middle Ages meant "magical practice" or "witchcraft (...). The study of the origin of the fetish concludes at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the text of Willem Bosman, for his *Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* provided the image and conception of fetishes on which Enlightenment intellectuals based their elaboration of the notion into a general theory of primitive religion." William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Spring, 1985, No. 9 (Spring, 1985), p.7, pp. 5-17.

¹⁷² Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996) p.5.

¹⁷³ Mulvey, p.6.

¹⁷⁴ "For Marx, the value of a commodity resides in the labour power of its producer. If this labour power could ever possibly inscribe itself indexically on the commodity it produces ... if it could leave a tangible mark of the time and skill taken in production, there would be no problem. But the index, the sign based on a direct imprint, fails. Value has to be established by exchange. Marx shows how value can be marked by the equation of different commodities of equal value. One commodity acts as a mirror; reflecting and thus expressing the value of the other or, indeed, as many others as it takes for the equivalence to balance. This stage is analogous to the Peircian icon. Slavoj Zizek has pointed out that

as illusion, as false identification yielded by disavowal or alienation. It reduces perception, in that it directs the gaze and fixates it.

On the smooth flesh of Boucher's nude figure however, the gaze slides, slips and wanders to the shimmer on the fabric, to the leaves and rose petals, all painted with attention to detail, with equal sensual investment. The female figure is not a surface of fixation, and nor particularly staged as illusionistic. In 'her' ubiquity both within the paintings discussed, in throughout his work, the female figure is presented in mannered postures and similarity. This yields a relation to the ornament and the reproducibility of a cypher. Thus, Lajer-Burcharth suggests, the female figure is a signature, a representation for the artist himself.

If it is for this specific function or for many more, that the female figure might be thought of, not as representing an eroticism of their bodies, but rather through the ongoing reiteration of them to an abstraction of desirability. It is in this vein, that Lajer-Burcharth suggests to see the female a 'token for desire'; that signifies the painting itself as a desirable commodity.¹⁷⁵

In this way, the female figure is a template for the desirability of the painting surface, that involves us in a complex play of substance and signification, that presents and produces an attraction passing through evocations of flesh and delicate textures, that become attractions to paint and the painting itself.

This is a mobilisation that defies fixation. From the smooth flesh of the nude body, the eyes slide across the shiny surface, full of appeals of soft and shiny surfaces between the concrete and the imaginary. Albeit lured by representations, this gaze is bypassing signification. The female nude is an erotic posture gliding on the surface, an ornament, a cypher, a 'face structuring the surface', 'she' or rather 'it' is 'semantically floating'.¹⁷⁶

As we drift along the surface the bond between signifier and signified floats away, resulting in an elusiveness of the female body, that withdraws to the space of the imaginary where we cannot be sure of the appearance's meaning. It occurs at 'the surface of sense', hence its meaning will be

since this process assumes value to be a natural and pre-existing property of the commodity, it is analogous to Lacan's analysis of the mirror phase as a misunderstanding of identity." Mulvey, p.3.

¹⁷⁵ Lajer-Burcharth, p.42.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

different each time we look at it.¹⁷⁷ The floating aspect of the paintings seduces us and becomes persuasive as it is absorbed in its own pleasure taking over meaning. Implications, representation and presentation produce eruptions within this circulation. In looking, there is a drift that goes into its passage of another to be found in the material of paint, pointing out to what the painter attends. Accordingly, the form of spectatorship these paintings produce, is one of being with them, of floating along. Boucher's paintings set up a structure different from classical painting that subsumes the painting itself into the hierarchy of figures, that conceives painting as a passage of networks of marks and traces, encompassing the gestural and the material.

¹⁷⁷ Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths*, p.154.

13. Conclusion

This research set out between the three different spheres of the museum, the library and the studio. These places in turn correspond with the poetic and generative writing, the art historical context and the factual encounter and speculation. Movements from paintings space went into a passage with practice and research. They related to each other in a circulating, spiralling or sprawling motion. Thinking, feeling and looking became intertwined with each other, as in Deleuze's sensation. With this, I generated a methodology for research that corresponds with its object. However, there remains an irreducible difference between these three spheres and approaches that will not become fully available to each other or resolve the tension between them. Thus there always remains a form of dislocation that is expressed in fragmentation and gaps. The difference between them in turn leads to new possible meanings and relations, that makes this investigation open-ended.

The encounter with rococo paintings sparked speculations about surfaces and their entanglement in object-subject relationships. A part of what I seek out for in the studio is a material encounter and a sense of absorption in it. Through the encounter with Boucher's paintings I found a passage to explore this role of materiality as not defining and confining painting but on the contrary, I conceive of materiality as the means of an entanglement with the subject, hence with the social, with culture and politics. This also prompted me to the philosophical foundations from which we seem to constantly reproduce the split between idea and material, and conceive the first as secondary to the latter, as becoming evident in the discourse of the surface. Painting, then is conceived as entanglement of surface, subject and substance. Substance holds a relation to the unconscious, that corresponds to the dynamics of the viscous and the fluid, its a-signification and excessiveness as much as its internal friction. This is explored through figures of the surface and surface configurations such as the stain, the splotch, viscosity or the plastic surface.

In the stain, I see a mobilisation of the figure-ground-relationship that questions representation as the order of looking. The stain sinks into the surface's depth. In its permeability, the surface sets up a passage to its environment, while the sinking movement and its process of absorption has a relation to disappearance. On the other hand, the stain is a figure of excess. This for once challenged the assumption of a subconscious below the surface. The surface appears as paradoxical. Through the stain, the depth of surface comes to the fore.

I propose the transparent plastic foil as the perceptual ground of consumerism that simulates existence outside time and is involved in the fetishisation of the commodity. After this one use-function, it passes over into the order of trash. Through its rejection of viscous and liquid substance, paint loses adhesion and precariously sits on the surface, in a somewhat liminal state. The stained plastic foil does not represent anything outside itself, but rather enacts this symbolic order.

The thick splotch then produces affects of attraction and repulsion. I conceived it as double as it on one hand mimes the glaze of the object represented while on the other, it borders on formlessness. In the studio, the material dynamics through which figuration takes place are that of the viscous and liquid. Hence, I refer to Hegel's idea of 'subject as substance' differentiating by a dialectical process of negativity, thereby proposing a deep connection. The dominance of subject over object comes into question through viscosity and its material-affective powers, as deployed in Sartre's literature. Painting involves the agency of matter, as the liquid and the viscous produce their own form, their own meaning. Poured paint comes to constitute painting space. This space opens out to movements of floating and circulation, in turn relating to the movement of the imaginary, the realm of ambivalence.

What I see in rococo is the invitation to an encounter; it does not establish a focus of attention, it is not full of meaning, it does not hold expectations towards the viewer. It has a relation to eroticism and fantasy, that I see not as much in its representations, but in its floating movement that relates to imagination in various ways discussed. The reflections of thick varnish come in as a barrier that evokes a surface encounter of drifting by. It is in this aspect that rococo presents a space of desire, that holds in suspension and never discloses itself. This space has a weightlessness, yet it raves for objects and their materiality. In its emphasis on the mimetic surface of objects, subjects, as much as on the texture of paint-matter, the imaginary appears as immanent to matter.

Throughout this project, ambivalence moved from an affect evoked by rococo paintings, to a consideration of its productivity for a female subject position and a feminist enquiry, to its relation to empathy, to a speculation about its contribution to an ecological sensibility. The last argument was given most attention to as it proposed ambivalence finds its expression in the a-signifying movements of floating and drifting. In the name of ambivalence however, it must be maintained that it is characterized by uncertainty. As in Blanchot's metaphor of the night, uncertainty is a risk to take, as the instability of meaning might lead to suspension, that is into nothingness.

What I found in rococo is a surface that stays paradoxical, that keeps on moving as it sets up relationships. The gaze moves between the plasticity of a splotch, to the suggestive, to the illusive,

the dreamlike and back. Rococo puts the body at the forefront of perception. It is transgressive and its intensities produce affects and emotions, leading into deformation. The painting poses a series of encounters that subliminally take us in, hence we say it appears like surface.



Fig.17. Clara Palmberger-Suesse, *Semi-Detached*, 2023, Acrylic, ink on canvas, 20 cm × 30 cm

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