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A SUCCESSION OF QUALITIES

About four years ago, I became acquainted with the art of Tobias Pils. The first works that I saw were ink on paper. I soon discovered that his paintings, too, were limited to black and white. The chromatic restriction seemed to open the artist to an extraordinary range of feeling. In both drawing and painting Pils would appear to pursue a motif—a grid-like array of lines, a bulbous organic form—only to abandon it, as if he were suddenly affected by a turn of mood, whether his own or that of the emerging forms he was configuring. In each of its singular acts of expression, Pils's art appears to make contact with numerous aesthetic mentalities. He may be more than one person.

"I try to paint as personal as possible," Pils told me, "to get to a point where it's too personal and I lose the hint of my own persona in the painting." Here, the repetition of closely related terms—personal, persona—suggests an internal contradiction. Yet, to me, the statement makes remarkable sense. Why should it not? The artist ought to be in the best position to offer an explanation of his art. A context of critical discourse—postmodernism, late capitalism, deskilling, affect—is not necessarily an aid. The critical terminology in general circulation often blocks direct verbal paths to the crucial idiosyncrasies of the work in question. As a result, explanation reveals more about the social and historical context than about the work of the individual artist, presumably a product of this context. To remain close to his experience, Pils needs to keep his explanation "personal." His differentiation of the personal from the persona accomplishes this task.

A persona—a temperament, a personality—is so fundamental to a person's social identity that it seems established virtually at Ebirth and hardly changes. This, at least, is the

common opinion. Misfortune is unlikely to convert an optimistic person to pessimism. A person with a strong sense of irony does not lose it. We might think that to "paint as personal as possible" would ensure that a person's persona would be expressed in the process. Yet the persona constitutes a relatively fixed attitude and outlook. Although "personal" to you, your persona is more than personal to others, who recognize it as a social type. A persona constitutes a general orientation that shapes a person's experience. It regulates thoughts and actions in a way analogous to the cultural, ideological indoctrination that makes a person acceptable to others within a society. A persona amounts to a person's adopted rule of conduct. We might equate it to a person's ideological formation. It matters not that ideology is a product of external social forces, because a persona feels distinctively personal. It is yours. If your persona felt alien to you, you would be either a schizophrenic or a swindler.

"To paint as personal as possible": this implies that the experience of painting becomes as intimately unique as it can be. Personal experience happens only to you. So the personal cannot be guided by your persona. To the contrary, immersion in the personal becomes a means of release from the persona—from its fixations and cultural limitations—with no risk of developing schizophrenia. The release is temporary but informative and exhilarating. When the personal dominates the persona, an individual experiences the most intense, absorbing sensations.

How does Pils paint "as personal as possible"? To resort to an art-historical metaphor: Pils becomes a one-person Exquisite Corpse. I refer to the Surrealist practice of the early twentieth century, in which several artists would draw on a single sheet of paper in non-collaborative collaboration. They would fold the sheet so that only one segment of it remained visible as the top surface. After one member of the group completed an image in this initial area, the sheet would be turned to place a fresh segment at the top; and the next participant would begin drawing from the points at which the first artist hit the folded edge. The only restraint would be to start from the other artist's (the other persona's) points. And so on, proceeding to a

third or fourth or fifth fold, depending on how many individuals were playing the game. Unfolded, the collective image would express no single tendency or personality and would come as a surprise to all concerned. This collective practice defeated the conditions that each artist's personal habits would impose on free creativity.

But Pils works alone. He needs neither the device of folding nor the cooperation of collaborators. His compositions of marks have no representational intent to guide them yet often result in suggestive figuration. He likens a section of one of his recent paintings to the fronds of "palms," while another, which displays a similar sequence of feather-like branching, contains a section that becomes to his eye an "arrow." An entirely natural, virtually absent-minded stroke of the brush—a gentle curving motion that seems hard-wired into the functioning of the human hand—leads to such figurative resemblance. The representational associations that appear to Pils arrive after the fact, or perhaps even during the process of painting, but without guiding the outcome. Depending on how the curves cluster or branch, they may suggest feathers, leaves on a stalk, or hair. Or nothing.

Each of Pils's paintings contains marks and tones that seem to derive from inconsistent impulses. As in a completed *Exquisite Corpse*, the various parts of a single painting may seem to belong to various personalities. Some of the painter's gestures seem decisive and others seem tentative. Perhaps all are decisive at the moment of their making. In a single painting, they vary in character to an extreme degree: some strokes are translucent, some opaque; some have sharp edges, some are fuzzy and seem to bleed or blur. It becomes hard to imagine that these various qualities derive from a single mind with a single purpose—a persona.

The variation of surface qualities draws a viewer's attention away from the total composition and toward the details. This may be as true for the painter as it is for his viewer: each detail is all-absorbing as it comes into being. Each genre of marking among the many stands alone—a personal sign that lacks an integrating persona. Pils painted his recent body of work on exposed linen (sealed by primer on its reverse side).

The rough surface introduces bits of foreign color, light brown appearing among all the variations of white, black, and their combination as gray. Because of the absorbency of the linen ground, Pils can create infusions of black as well as a kind of dirty, muted white, a grayish white that contains no black. This dull variant of white results from laying thin, translucent strokes of white pigment over the raw linen, allowing Pils to contrast his dirty white to the pure, opaque white that he adds to the same canvas in a different area. Because of the various ways of applying the paint, not all whites look alike, not all blacks look alike. The differences are sometimes exaggerated because a black such as Payne's Gray has a cool bluish cast that will induce a warm brownish cast from a pigment such as Mars Black. With all this variation, both in temperature and tone, Pils's color remains chromatically restricted. The net effect is decidedly odd. His color is integrated in the manner of grisaille, consisting solely of neutrals. Yet it seems wrong to identify his use of grays with grisaille, for his compositions lack the continuous transition of tone typical of grisaille technique. Think of the situation this way: grisaille is a persona—an orderly, predictable type. In contrast, Pils's grays represent one distinctly personal experience after another. Each painting constitutes a single image, but, as with an *Exquisite Corpse*, the image expresses no integrating personality and no part of it predicts any other part. It represents discovery beyond the vision of the individual persona and its culture, neither of which are truly "personal."

Pils's painting is of the no-rules variety. I think of Albert Oehlen and Charline von Heyl as precedents—or, further back, Simon Hantaï, with his techniques of creasing and folding. And if we can fairly establish such a lineage, Pils is the minimalist among these painters of anything-goes. He discovers effects that are "too personal," too unique, and does so without resorting to chromatic color and extremes of texture. "Using color," he says, "would make the process of painting too emotional for me and further distract me."

Although Pils may not have been thinking this way, it occurs to me that the emotions we regard as the strongest ones are the least personal ones, the ones that everyone seems to

experience—the grand emotions that have general names: anger, fear, joy. The degree to which we express such emotion is conditioned by the general culture and its ideologically imposed patterns of behavior. The “little” emotions, the ones that have no names—emotions that parallel the experience of drawing a line with a certain curve or painting the jagged quality of a certain edge—these are the personal emotions that belong to no persona. Such emotions constitute experience without order or constraint. They give to painting an intensely felt quality, but directed to no purpose. When I view the art of Tobias Pils, I feel these little emotions and their succession of qualities. The experience is direct, converting little feelings into something grand.