

Verwoert, Jan, "Generative Disappearances: On the Paintings of Markus Amm," *Markus Amm*, Basel and New York: Kunsthaus Baselland and Karma, 2017, pp. 21-25

Generative  
Disappearances:  
On the Paintings  
of Markus Amm

Jan Verwoert

Imagine all the things you did today were to disappear. You would look back at the day and realise you had not left a single trace. The outbox empty, no messages sent. Did anything happen? The day went by. The sun is going down. And in the place where the day's work should be, you see the warm glow of the sinking sun refracted on your computer screen. It is like an apparition, not spooky, as such, but certainly spectral, in its calm presence, changing nuances with the fading light. Could you be at ease with this moment of sublime erasure? This is not a meditation on disaster, but neither is it a state of reconciliation. It may be a lifelong exercise to grasp how it can be that some acts do not produce outcomes, as such, but disappearances of a particular kind. They make you disappear into the world, into matter. I am trying to talk about paintings here, by Markus Amm.

One tends to think of disappearance as a process in which something fades into nothing. In Markus Amm's paintings, however, for something to disappear is for it to dissolve into something other. Days spent on layering colours disappear into a surface which looks practically untouched. Its colour presents itself in an instant, as if it always had been there, and, as it holds your eyes, more time vanishes, in the duration of a long gaze. One look at the sides of the gesso boards, the paintings' supports, will give you an idea of the way paint has been layered to give depth to the colours. It is not a disappearing trick. Nothing is hidden here. It is like in a fireplace. You see the wood that is burning. It has been chopped and lit. But the warmth, crackling sounds and ever-changing flicker of the fire is still something else. It is neither an illusion, nor a miracle. It is the phenomenon of one thing, wood, disappearing into something else, light, warmth, sound and flicker. Fire consumes matter. Colour does not. It enters matter, sinks into, permeates it. This is why painting and fabric dyeing were sister arts for the longest time. Pigments made from earths, minerals, plants or animal secretions were dissolved into colours which in turn were soaked up by fabrics. This is one form of disappearance into matter. In his approach to painting, Markus Amm reconnects with this legacy. Only that in his case the support is not fabric but gesso boards, made from gypsum, chalk and binder. So, the old knowledge that his work taps, in some sense, is closer to that of fresco painting, or glazing: the art of sinking an image into a wall, of dissolving colour

into architecture. In the Pergamon museum in Berlin, the Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon is on show. Its glazed clay bricks glow, as if from within, in the most intense cobalt blue. It is a type of radiance very similar to the one Amm's works can emit. What if one looked at them less as pictures, and more like parts of buildings? In music, it is common to call a densely layered sonic texture a 'wall of sound'. So why not refer to Amm's works as gates of colour? The Babylonians built their gate from blue dissolved into brick glaze. By passing through the blue you would go into their city. Likewise, your gaze will enter the depth of Amm's paintings, to roam or rest within them.

The persistent luminosity of the Ishtar Gate's glazed bricks is but one strong reminder of the magic ways in which light is absorbed and refracted by pigments, so as to shine forth again as colour. The blue of the gate is like a battery charged with centuries of light. In fact, if you think about it, the glaze on its bricks is not so different from the coating of photo-sensitive paper which captures the light so an image sinks in. This too is a phenomenon of generative disappearance: the light of the world vanishes into a photo-chemical process, and re-emerges in the form of a picture. It is alchemy at its best. In this sense, there is something quite fundamental about the passage Markus Amm opened up in his practice between photography and painting. In earlier works, he concentrated on foregrounding the particular character of chemograms: a technique so modern, scientific and factual on the one hand, and yet so impenetrable, mesmerising and undeniably magical on the other. In his use of the chemogram, Amm found ever new ways of what one might call a zero-level of the technomagical, meaning: a threshold on which the sober factuality of the technique and the opaque fascination of the alchemically generated visual texture come to be experienced with equal intensity. This is because, by virtue of being reduced to bare essentials, the technical and magical are brought so close to each other that you cannot quite say anymore which is which. If there is a particular sensitivity, humour or pursuit at the heart of Amm's work it perhaps lies in his way of locating a line to walk between a modern affinity to the factual qualities of material processes and an attunement to deeper, alchemical potentials that lie dormant in them. Walking this line, Amm transitioned into painting. Yet, what remained alive in this

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current work is the tangible familiarity with the way that a specific coating can absorb the light, convert it and generate an image—a visual sensation, that is—of something shining forth from the depth of a surface. His colours are an alchemical agent. And if it were not pushing the analogy too far, I would suggest that looking at his paintings is a little like gazing into a chemical bath waiting for the photographic picture to emerge, only to realize that the liquids in the bath are the image.

So it would seem apt then to assume that, to some extent at least, Amm's work emerges from a meditation on the qualities and legacies which inhere (and persevere) in particular techniques of working with colour, coating and texture. But maybe it doesn't suffice to only point out that he delineates a thin threshold between the modern factual and older alchemical sense of what a colour is and does when it covers a surface. In fact, there is something about the overall sense of generative disappearance prevailing in his work which deeply challenges the conventional understanding of technique as such. We usually connect the use of technique to a concept of goal-oriented, premeditated actions: it is crucial to know the outcome of your actions before you act. This is the idea. How else could you make sure that you accomplish your goals? Not just once, but each and every time? You perfect your means to reach your ends, and finish the job. Undoubtedly, this way of thinking has its advantages. Certainly there are situations in which it is a matter of life and death to succeed in doing what must be done. Still, there are states of immersion in creative action during which you sense that the value and significance of an act, and its outcome, cannot simply be measured in terms of how efficiently one leads to the other. No, each has its own character, and yes, the act prepares the outcome. Without the first the second would not occur. But nevertheless, the status of the act can neither be reduced to being a means to an end, nor can the outcome be isolated as its product. Act and outcome remain inseparable, yet still fundamentally different in nature. Cooking is not eating. The seed is not the harvest. Just as every beginning of the day is different from the way it ends. Without something being written, there would be nothing to be read. Yet in the instant when words find their rhythm, their own flow is what counts. Without being pulled forth onto the page by that flow, they would not

come, and hence there would be no text. In the end, the writing exists only by virtue of the fact that its writer lost it for a moment. So the place in which the reader finds the words is the space in which the writer was lost in the writing. They miss each other, even and especially if they should be one and the same person. When I reread the lines above I am no longer in the place I was in but seconds ago, when I followed my intuition in stringing these particular words together. I might as well be a different person, in fact I am pretty much in the same position you are in when you read these lines.

Perhaps all of the above holds true for any piece of writing, and, by the same token, for any work of art, or, for that matter, for any kind of practice (of creation) which pulls you in so deeply that you get lost in its exercise, and awaken, as if from a dream, when the work stops and you face its outcome. Maybe, with some practices this is always how it goes. But even if this should be so, it is equally true that not everyone practicing such arts of deep immersion focusses on this very aspect of their practice. It is not a given that someone should concentrate their artistic efforts on bringing to the fore precisely that quality which makes immersive practices so difficult to grasp: the realisation that process and outcome are most deeply connected, but that the experience of each fundamentally differs from that of the other. For a writer, focussing on this difference would mean to try to write something so attuned to the pull of its own process that, in reading it afterwards, it would feel like a text just arrived like a letter in the post, with sender unknown. It happens, in lucky moments, and when it does, it does not even feel that otherworldly. Special, yes. But also factually real. You do not know how it came to this. But this is how it is now. Surprising, strange, capable of holding your attention. It is by analogy to my own practice that I try to describe the eerie joy here that I experience in the face of Markus Amm's paintings. What I am trying to say, in speaking through analogy, is that these works ask for a twofold response: one is to empathise with the process of their making, sense the duration of time spent layering and layering colour, and grasp how all this time vanished, so as to allow for the peculiar glow of colour shining forth from the depth of a surface that looks timeless. The other is to step back, forget the work and its making and permit these paintings to be the strange things they are, material artefacts and gates

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to liquefied colour spaces, at one and the same time, each one as specific as the days were, on which they came about, and particular in every moment you watch the colour of the light that falls on them mix with the way they glow.