

#### THE CRACK IN THE SURFACE

In *Frischzelle\_13*, Markus Amm exhibits a mural painting and examples from five different groups of works. All of the art works have been produced recently and share the surprising element of a minimalist formal language and a broad variety of techniques. Markus Amm concentrates on several groups of works at once, alternating between small and large formats, photograms, collages, and oil paintings. At first glance, each group of works seems complete in itself, but a closer look reveals that the artist poses formal questions that he answers in different ways. He continually returns to the question of the surface, which can be transparent, closed, reflecting, or opaque. In his works, the surface is interrupted by a line or sometimes a crack, which represents a special kind of line. But when we try to describe this surface appearance in language, it loses its distinctness. Does the line really break up the surface? Is it a seam separating two canvases, or is it a painted line? This play with optical illusion brings up questions about painting's potential that go beyond its formal aspects.

In his newest paintings, Markus Amm worked with several coats of chalk primer. This traditional material is called *gesso* – a chalk or plaster mixture which has been used since the 14th century to prime canvases and give them a smooth absorbent surface. In Amm's art, the primer becomes a subject in its own right. Instead of covering the different colors of primer with a layer of oil paint or acrylics, Amm uses a difficult process to apply the primer in several coats, after which he removes or sands down selected sections. The result is a monochrome work with an unusual luminous intensity and gravitational pull.

In another group of art works which he created at the same time as the first, the result could not be more different. In these works, Amm applied only one coat of primer, allowing the texture of the canvas to show through. He then laid a reduced structure of lines over the large gray surfaces. Because these lines would bleed if applied with a brush on the thin layer of primer, he used an elaborate, lengthy process of spraying paint with stencils to draw each line. Several of Amm's large works actually consist of two canvases put together in which he allows the shadowy gap to become an integral part of the composition. Only close-up does it become apparent that these lines are not painted.

Through Amm's clear and reduced painting style, the beholder is coaxed into believing that everything is visually comprehensible and definite, only to be surprised over and over again. This is precisely the difference between his work and classical positions in art history like minimal art and constructivism, whose aesthetics Amm doubtlessly applies and reflects on in his works, but without building on their content. He is not interested in the historical idea of an »honest painting,« which would require all aspects of his painterly methods and techniques to be optically compre-

hensible to the beholder. Instead, Amm chooses to engage in a dialogue with viewers – something which can be seen most clearly in his four-part work »Coin-Study.«

In this piece, he exposed four sheets of barite photographic paper measuring 160 x 140 cm, turning each into a monochrome black surface. Each of the four works in this group has a different rounded corner – upper, lower, right, left – which the artist created using a coin as a template. Each monochrome work is in a box frame covered with glass without anti-glare coating. The result is a reflecting black surface in which beholders can see the museum and themselves. The monochrome black picture has many programmatic prototypes in art history, but this piece is not a painting; rather, ironically, it is a photograph acting as a surface that reflects and absorbs the surrounding exhibition space and its accidental beholders. With this simple method, Markus Amm outwits the definition of photography as being able to capture a single point of view in a single moment. Through its reflective surface, the overexposed photograph becomes a changing and indefinable snapshot. Amm thus lends new attributes to the classical medium of photography. In addition to its meaning in English, coin also means »corner« in French. These two curious etymological meanings are given their due in Amm's »Coin-Study,« which also refers to the relationship between money and art. A coin directly defines the shape of the artwork in a way that is analogous to how the value of an artwork is defined through money on the art market. Markus Amm says that he is interested in how someone can own an artwork. Is the legal definition of ownership enough? How is art mentally appropriated? These are questions which do not become immediately apparent when looking at »Coin-Study« but which, like the formal aspects, play a role nonetheless.

Markus Amm likes to work with photographic paper, which he exposes directly. The resulting art works are not photographs, but photograms. Objects leave direct traces on the paper and are not filtered by optical lenses. The abstract structures which characterize Amm's photograms are based on a unique creative process. The artist tears the unexposed photographic paper into two pieces. He then overlaps these pieces and rolls them up before exposing the rolls by holding a lighter inside the hole. When the paper is unrolled, an irregular black line can be seen standing out against the whiteness of the unexposed surface. Amm then lays out the two pieces of paper in different arrangements until he finds one he likes. Finally, he makes a print of the ripped paper in which the rip disappears and an abstract composition in black and white is the result. In this way, Amm plays with illusion and makes it difficult for the beholder to determine whether there is really a rip in the paper or whether the surface is actually one piece.

Cracks are also a central motif in Amm's collages of white plastic tarps mounted in irregular shapes on a canvas. The black painting beneath is visible through a hairline crack. But at first

glance, it is difficult to see whether this is indeed a crack or a line. Amm juxtaposes the uniform black surface with the irregular arrangement of the white surface. Because of the nature of the material, paint can only be sprayed on the tarps, which then develop areas that seem to be more matted than others. Within this regime of black and white, the choice of materials and working methods creates a highly vibrant surface structure.

As to his mural paintings, Markus Amm sometimes complements the idea of the crack by playing with adhesion and assembling. In one, he painted oversized strips of tape in a corner, creating the impression that the tape's irregular and frayed edges hold the room together. This work is based on the true-to-scale paper models and tape used by curators and artists to try out different art arrangements for an exhibition. This method allows the size of art works to be taken into consideration, but their effect in the museum space cannot be simulated through a model. As in the reflecting piece »Coin-Study,« the various references, visual axes, and surprising points of correspondence can only be experienced by the beholder moving in real space. Amm turns the principle of the idea of the model around, transferring the strips of tape used for the true-to-scale paper models into the exhibition space through painting, allowing the huge tape surface to serve as a negative form on a black wall surface. This encounter is yet another example of Amm's subtle illusionism that leaves us wondering whether or not the surface is actually painted or taped.

The exhibition space, in this case the museum, becomes a model in which the artist conducts experiments. For Amm, the exhibition is a model of social representation. As is the case in politics or business, the focus here is on economic contexts, cultural self-image, the power to define, influence, and empowerment. These are all things which may not be immediately obvious to viewers but which relate to situations of showing and presenting oneself.

Markus Amm's work can be explained by looking at many levels. He is interested in formal questions of painting and the effect of color. The effects of the materiality of the canvas, primer, and spray paint play an important role in his work. He focuses on the contrast of contradictory forms: open vs. closed surfaces, translucent vs. opaque effects, painted lines vs. hairline cracks, and reversals of light and shadow, which can be seen most clearly in the photograms. On this basis, the artist pursues philosophical questions. What does a crack signify? What is a model? What happens when two-dimensional painting meets three-dimensional space? What does it mean »to exhibit«? These questions are posed in a quiet and unobtrusive manner and are simply meant as an invitation for those who ask themselves similar questions.

Markus Amm often finds philosophical themes which are relevant for his art in other contexts. One such example is Gilles Deleuze's analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's essay »The Crack-Up« (1936).

In this essay, Fitzgerald reflects on his own psychological breakdown. He describes cracking-up as a slow shift in perception which can lead to the dissolution of the person's positive worldview, for example when a person is depressed. The metaphor of the crack in a plate which is first ignored and keeps developing until the plate breaks inspired Deleuze. His description of the crack can be used to describe Amm's real and painted cracks and will therefore conclude this text:

»There was a silent, imperceptible crack, at the surface, a unique surface Event. It is as if it were suspended or hovering over itself, flying over its own field. The real difference is not between the inside and the outside, for the crack is neither internal nor external, but is rather at the frontier. It is imperceptible, incorporeal, and ideational. With what happens inside and outside, it has complex relations of interference and interfacing, of syncopated junctions—a pattern of corresponding beats over two different rhythms. Everything noisy happens at the edge of the crack and would be nothing without it. Conversely, the crack pursues its silent course, changes direction following the lines of least resistance, and extends its web only under the immediate influence of what happens, until sound and silence wed each other intimately and continuously in the shattering and bursting of the end. What this means is that the entire play of the crack has become incarnated in the depth of the body, at the same time that the labor of the inside and the outside has widened the edges.«<sup>1</sup>

Simone Schimpf

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, »Porcelain and Volcano,« in *The Logic of Sense*, translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 155.