

TIME WITHOUT INNOCENCE RECENT PAINTING IN SLOVENIA

What is the status of painting today? The question serves as the point of departure for an exhibition of the recent production of the younger generations of painters in Slovenia, i.e. artists born in the 1970s and 1980s who entered the art scene in the late 1990s or at the turn of the millennium. The moment these artists entered the institutional space of art is not without significance; both in Slovenia and globally, the 1990s were an extremely productive and in many ways new, watershed era, a time of general awareness that past art models and their interpretations were over. The phenomenon of the expanded field of art emerged in the 1990s and brought to the fore non-autonomous artistic practices, positions and media, from art in the social sphere to models of participatory art and various forms of relational art, hybrid practices coalescing biotechnology, cybernetics, AI and art, and pioneering works in internet art. This predominance of contemporary art put painting as a medium in a difficult, defensive position; once again, as so many times before since cubism and the historical avant-gardes, it seemed pushed into the background and put to the test.

In the face of the shifts and changes that occurred in art over the 20th century, painting as an eminently traditional medium ran up against all conceivable boundaries, and also managed to transcend them all, moving into physical or social space. The strongest and long-prevalent paradigm of modernist art had limited painting to explorations of the medium and to being self-referential. In this narrow field modernist painting saw countless realizations, most extremely so in abstract painting, which became the holy grail of the modernist experience of painterly thought and practice. Following that, painting transcended its (physical and symbolic) frame in numerous ways, entering both the physical and social space. Finally, in the late 20th century, visuality prevailed in all spheres of life, public, social, private and intimate: mass media used images like commodities, most effectively spectacular and attractive images that

could easily be turned into instruments for manipulating and interpellating the spectators, shaping their imagination and desires, politically constituting them and affecting all of their choices, even the most intimate ones. The emergence of media images, literally countless and ubiquitous, endlessly generated and consumed, was the final stage of the “visual turn” that pushed painting into the background relative to the mass-media image, and at the same time placed it in a position where it had to face the challenge of this unprecedented profusion of images.

The challenge of persevering and keeping its place in the internet era proved to be very constructive for painting as a medium. The internet fundamentally altered not only the way information circulates and is accessed, but also our perceptions of the world, reality, mechanisms of power, security, privacy, authorship, property, and the commodification of every conceivable thing, from health and romantic relationships to worldviews and ideas – and painting assumed a productive attitude to this new technology. As time has shown, interest in painting has not died in the era of visual culture, and neither has its production, which seems as lively as ever. This is likely due at least in part to the solid position paintings continue to hold as prestigious commodities on the international art market. While the conditions in Slovenia cannot be compared to those on the global market, the younger generations of artists, symptomatically, produce paintings as though a viable art market existed also in our country. At the same time, the internet as an inexhaustible source and archive of visuals (as well as all other forms of artistic and non-artistic production) that can be accessed synchronously and largely non-hierarchically (even if decreasingly freely and without censorship) has essentially changed our reception of culture, art and their history. Never has access to any image from the archives of human endeavors in any area been both so simple and so unselective, which makes history appear as an unstructured synchronicity, and any value system a mere matter of choice.

The position of recent painting in the new millennium entails a confrontation with at least two basically new situations. One is the unmanageable plethora of images in all spheres of modern life, which forces painters to take this unprecedented inflation of images into account when conceptualizing a painting. This challenge is not really new; historically, photography had also seemed a fatal rival to painting. What are new are the scope and the power of the visual in the era of visual culture, and the specific political moment of late neoliberal autophagy. The other new situation is the weight of the “historical memory” of painting as a medium; having reached and surpassed its extreme limits, especially of the celebrated tradition of European and American modernism, painting can no longer be conceived of as an innocent *tabula rasa*, a new beginning, creation *ex nihilo* (the entire tradition of modernism is based on the tyranny of the new), and neither can it be conceived as a way of expressing personal, intimate experiences, psychological states, empathies, not even those least specific in abstract images, since the presence of all these has been disclaimed in painting and art in general by postmodernist art with its ironic quoting and distancing from its own position of utterance and – in philosophy and psychoanalysis – by the notions of the subject and reality as being fundamentally constructed.

The status of painting in the new millennium no longer affords us the innocence of perceiving or conceiving of a painting as a vacant, blank site devoid of memory or history, or the innocence that would allow retreating into the safe haven of the autonomy of an artwork. After the experience of modernist abstraction, it is no longer possible to paint an abstract work without some basic awareness of its history, without knowing that every monochromatic painting is the heir of some other, already existing decision. Nor is it possible – after it has been recognized that a subject is a construction of an ideological system – to harbor the illusion that such a painting can authentically convey a truth that is more than merely a

construct, even when it refers to such highly subjective matters as memory, intimacy, fears or dreams.

Even though a painter’s point of utterance has become so narrow and weighed down by the long history of the medium and the experience of its relativization (and of the relativization of art and its power to express anything vital), the younger generations of painters seem to perceive painting as a practice with infinite possibilities of utterance, although an utterance that is fundamentally casual and uncommitted to anything solid or final. Recent painting is much more open to the world; painters treat the painting as a site in which to expose and express social dissent, the everyday, personal, and national and supranational pathologies, to retreat into the walled gardens of private anxieties, or cynical and frivolous frolicking in the shallows of emptied media images multiplied ad infinitum, images that are fascinating precisely because of their core characteristic of infinite randomness. At the same time, none of this prevents the artists from euphorically playing with such images, from finding real joy in casually transposing, borrowing, copy-pasting, sampling them and more. Used in this way, images still construct, in all of their minor, ephemeral, temporary formulations, works full of content, oftentimes funny, caustically critical, cynically distant or merely reflective, meditative, even lyrical.

Such use of found images is fundamentally related to the postmodernist art of the 1980s and its use of appropriation of past forms of artistic expression, styles, images, and historical styles. According to some writers on contemporary art,¹ a minor difference nonetheless exists: this contemporary appropriation of images from all manner of sources is devoid of the tendency to adopt past styles in the uncritical, anything-goes way of a readymade, which would bring into the new constellation of a painting the baggage of the image’s original meaning(s), triggering (possible) juxtapositions of conflicting meanings. Rather, it seems that images are treated as appropriated out of some notion of an endless collective imagery, in which all

images exist in a horizontal equality, like on the internet, and are available for use, while (art) style signifiers, such as gestures, languages and strategies, become motifs of the works of art, in addition to other motifs deriving from reality, autobiography, other arts or periods, history, nature; in short, anything. Images can be used to convey anything, and their original meaning is unimportant or even completely ignored; all worlds, virtual and real, history and the present, mass media, art history, Instagram and personal memories – everything is an infinite reservoir of images in which the status of an image is equal to that of everything else, including reality itself and its fundamental unsolidity and inconsistency. It seems that nothing solid or certain can be said about contemporary reality even in painting, that there is no artistic statement that could encompass any reality with any claim of universality. There are as many realities (and styles) as there are artistic statements. The incredible polyphony of artistic statements found in recent painting in Slovenia indicates that our (political, social, personal) reality no longer has a solid core; there is not even a minimum consensus about a common value system (let alone a prevalent art style). Zygmunt Bauman calls such reality fluid, but this fluid flow between identities, roles, relations, and beliefs contains something dramatically baseless.

Of course, none of this means that painting today is irrelevant, even if it can no longer be measured by some universal standard; on the contrary, it is always authentic to the point that it manages to present in its language, which has become the legitimate language of expression by appropriating and taming all images, the relations and constellations of contemporaneity in such a way that it inevitably exposes it – even if only in fragments – often with an incredible insight into the depths of the social and global crises of our time. And this, after all, has always been the essential purpose of painting.

Martina Vovk

¹ Laura Hoptman: *The Forever Now. Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, MoMa, New York, 2015.

Mito Gegič: *4_35 AM*, 2015, akril, samolepilni trak na platnu / acrylic, duct tape on canvas, 180 x 165 cm (foto / Photo: arhiv avtorja / artist's archive)



Uroš Weinberger: *Air One Ground Zero*, 2018, olje na platnu / oil on canvas, 204 x 272 cm (foto / Photo: arhiv avtorja / artist's archive)



Staš Kleindienst: *Zmagoslavje teme / The Triumph of Darkness*, 2017, olje na platnu / oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm



Vladimir Leben z / with Ericigoj Art: *Plešočji medvedi / Dancing Bears*, 2018, instalacija / installation, detajl / detail (foto / Photo: Ericigoj Art)



Uroš Potočnik: *Delavca / Workers*, 2014, akril na platnu / acrylic on canvas, 165 x 226 cm, Moderna galerija



Adrijan Praznik: *The Final Frontier*, 2014, digitalni kolaž, transfer in akril na platnu / digital collage, transfer, acrylic on canvas, 250 x 170 cm (foto / Photo: arhiv avtorja / artist's archive)



Arjan Pregl: iz serije *Karneval* / from the *Carnival series*, 2018, olje na platnu / oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm



Maruša Šuštar: *Igra nezavedajočih se (Rdeča lunina preproga) / Game of the Unaware (Red Moon Carpet)*, 2013, olje na platno / oil on canvas, 160 x 190 cm



Miha Štrukelj: *Nakupovalna četrt / Shopping District*, 2016, akril, tuš, oglje, svinčnik, krep papir na platnu / acrylic, ink, charcoal, pencil, crêpe paper on canvas, 300 x 225 cm



Ana Sluga: *Triptih I / Triptych I*, 2016, akril, pršilo na platnu / acrylic, spray on canvas, 150 x 120 cm (foto / Photo: arhiv avtorice / artist's archive)



Joni Zakonjšek: *Beli veter / White Wind*, Velika sela, jesen 2013 – poletje 2017 / Fall 2013 – Summer 2017, olje na platnu / oil on canvas, 132 x 230cm



Iva Tratnik: *Totalitarizem sezone parjenja / Mating Season Totalitarianism*, 2014, olje na platno / oil on canvas, 210 x 194 cm



Sašo Vrabič: *Dajem se za vas / I Will Be Given up for You*, 2016-17, olje, papir, tuš na platnu / oil, paper, ink on canvas, 60 cm x 70 cm



Žiga Kariž: *Brez naslova / Untitled*, 2014, kemični svinčnik na papirju / ball-point pen on paper, 20,4 x 14,5 cm



Marko Zorovič: *Pièces de clavecin*, 2015, akril na platnu / acrylic on canvas, 130 x 160 cm

