

Jean-Christophe Ammann: Naked Perception

Where the gaze is its most intense, it becomes vacant. The image is not a concentration of associations evoked by a certain atmosphere. The image is simply itself. The transition of the gaze to a state of vacancy resembles a sudden recognition: light, color, proportion. Moments, indeed monuments of loneliness. Loneliness suggests emotion but this is not the aim. There is an underlying loneliness to the image. It is inherent, and consequently all the more likely to evoke memories in the observer.

Judith Ammann allows the observer's associations free rein. Her gaze does not contaminate the latter's perception because the image is intrinsically coherent. What is seen is captured in the documentary (the motif); that which is grasped visually is catapulted into timelessness.

This timelessness of the transient!

The memories evoked in us may go back a long time. There are smells (a leather sofa); tactile sensations (the smooth tiled wall whose grouts you run along with your eyes and fingers); the sudden interplay of light and shadow; a neon light (the physical discomfort you experience when there is an abrupt transition from daylight to artificial light); a logo.

As a young boy I was delighted when the billboard for "Borsalino" rose up on the Autostrada del Sole, lemon-colored italics on a finely ribbed Yves-Klein-blue background. I will never forget that the corners of this gigantic billboard were rounded and that the blue extended around the edges.

Yes, those logos! How do you write "Liquor"? Since the word has been taken out of its larger context, you might imagine yourself looking over the typeface designer's shoulder. Not that he attempts to liquefy the potent beverage, no, he attempts to lend the writing an onomatopoeic sound. We stand as observers in front of the image and softly articulate the word in the manner prescribed.

What Judith Ammann captures in her images—and they never include people—always has to do with time. The gradual isolation in the passing of time, because people have moved away, because the world has changed, because the place still awaits people. Were I to say her photos were deserted, my choice of words would not be accurate. You see the efforts people have made and their delight in building something, creating something with care, even inventiveness, and then the hour strikes. Fate changes course. What remains is this painful

melancholy of loneliness conveyed by Judith Ammann's cool, precisely composing gaze. What I have just said is something the photographer leaves to the observer. Of course, she creates the blueprints for an emotional perception, which functions, however, only because the vacant gaze creates the necessary pre-conditions.

This vacant gaze is sensual! It is structured down to the finest nuances. Actually, we get the impression Judith Ammann ought to be a painter. Sometimes we feel as if she were wielding a brush, as if her hand were moving in a cosmos of basic existential forms.

This enormous five-pointed, gleaming red star outlined in white on a green-painted facade is the counterpart to an extensive two-layer lattice ornament of oval shapes created by the shadow. A vibrant, melodic continuity responds to the powerful geometric concentration of the star. And once again the emphasis is on the painterly component.

What repeatedly startles the viewer is the candor with which Judith Ammann explores the world or, more precisely, the parts of it she seeks out. There are no formalisms, no preconceived notions. There is this awareness for what human beings have created, which leads to something being one way and not another. The foundation is formed by a consistency of approach intrinsic to the action. A mysterious beauty of arrangement emerges, accompanied by the disappearance of the person. Yes, Judith Ammann disappears behind her works.

Light is fundamental and, consequently, so is color. In the repeated long months spent in Los Angeles, Judith Ammann made meticulous notes on places and times of day—which is to say she noted the sun's position. It speaks for her approach that she elicits the right moment of the light. In the same way that we speak of form and content having congruence and transparency, for her light is the generating force for the character of the form: this light, which modulates the sound in innumerable nuances, but can also be contrapuntally accentuated.

The motif is the primary focus. It is the informative, striking element, irritating in its perspective; the pictorial subject, though, is sought and found by our tradition-schooled gaze. Yet there are other images that are totally different. For instance when we are confronted with structures only, that might have an obvious object-related nature, yet we ask ourselves whether the motif is still a motif?

In the work of Sol Lewitt for example, the structure, based on the laws of order and disorder,

is a clearly defined motif in the range of extensive options that underlies that motif. In Judith Ammann's work, the gaze—intuitive recognition and sensation—passes through space and time. Alien to her is the American brand of formalism familiar to us from Minimal Art. For her, the explicit subject in its clearly recognizable setting is ultimately only a particular phenomenon, surely in the form of an emotionally established abruptness. A moment in the universe. In the same way that each On Kawara

Date Painting is a day in the universe. Criteria of order and disorder do not take place on a single level, in a programmatically defined sphere of thought and action. Rather, they are transgressive criteria that connect the microscopic with the macroscopic, containment and expansion, structure and object, concentration and its dispersal. It is always the law of chance and order: as an image!

Above all in the structure photos, it is the painterly aspect that captivates our attention. The colors have the transparency of watercolors. There are line structures which recall Stewart O'Nan's observations, when in *Last Night at the Lobster* he describes how, when seen through the Venetian blinds, the "Easy Street Bus whisks by, disassembled into several layers". There are lamellar iron structures of varying tonal shades that overlap like transparent strips of light. There are mosaic walls of varied constellations resembling computer-controlled flows of information: mathematical modules of a cosmic order. There are vertical zigzags—white on a green background—, a facade whose rhythmic monotony creates a bipolar cadence in its rife repetition since two zigzagged strips always form a pair, while at the same time each leads an agitated life of its own. It is roughly as if two areas of color—say, red and blue—enriched with identical color values collided with one another: it is difficult to discern the dividing line because it begins to flicker and jump. There are transparent lattice formations—part of a facade—which are transposed into a painterly mode in such a way that they resemble a diaphanous wall: a composite of delicate color layers placed one on top of the other to form a resonating space. Static and at the same time oscillating in the spatial depth, it recalls the meditative coloraturas of Minimal Music.

The sheer breadth of Judith Ammann's photos becomes comprehensible when we consider her "world view"—that close proximity which becomes so remote in the localization of the found object.

Ultimately, the photos are a consequence of many areas of experience if we also include her two books on a music scene that developed out of punk rock and her video on Henry Rollins. She was equally interested in the lyrics of the musicians and their attitudes: the existential dissolution of boundaries, the imaginary vanishing point, the immediacy of the occasion and its projection into an ecstatic loneliness.

One reason why Judith Ammann's photos remain in my mind is because an infinite number of images come together in a single one. It is not that we have already seen these photos. Yet they generate in us a memory of images we believe to have seen before.

Judith Ammann's photos are like images from a distant age, with the power and beauty of the present.

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