

Simon Baur: On Location, with the Motor Running

When I first saw her works in a gallery in Basel, I assumed that Judith Ammann was an installation artist who reconstructed old buildings or facades in Los Angeles and then—her works being too large for storage—documented them photographically, as in the case of Michael Heizer and Gordon Matta-Clark. The buildings had to conform to pre-defined sizes and ratios, be dipped in a specific light, have a particular color and—in addition to their properties as installations—also function like facades. For only in this way was it possible for her to create not a representation of something but an image in its own right. This last statement is the only thing I have just written that is correct.

The hermeneutic method, based on hypotheses, leads to the strengthening of a structure of prejudice and thus to a means of cautiously approaching the art of Judith Ammann.

The Subject Matter

Judith Ammann travels a lot by car in search of her subject matter. It is a tough job: the heat of summer, concentration in heavy traffic while at the same time keeping an eye out for possible pictures, situations that are sometimes not without danger if the locations she chooses are on the outskirts of town, and lonely. Yet making art and writing about it has always been a lonely job. Hamish Fulton and Richard Long likewise spend longer periods traveling, both keeping photographic records of their trips and the installations that have emerged from them, usually made of found objects or materials. Generally, Judith Ammann's works do not reveal their history. When discussing her art, however, that history warrants mention, since it is worth knowing if we are to view the works not just as aesthetically perfect artifacts. After long periods spent behind the wheel, suddenly, out of the blue, it is chance (should such a thing exist) that shows her a scene, a situation which she has long searched for without having a clear idea of it. When she sees it, she usually recognizes it immediately, but sometimes not until she is homeward-bound, or days later when driving past it again in a different light. Because in order to capture the building in the best light, she often has to return to the site several times.

The motifs Judith Ammann chooses are unspectacular, but it takes a trained eye to find them.

In this context she points to her background in graphic design, to her interest in all possible types of fonts, signs, special textures and surfaces, in the simplicity of themes, in color nuances, in the residues of human presence.

However, a trained eye does not suffice. You also need the right locations, where such buildings are still standing because there is sufficient space. Where things do not immediately get redecorated, as is usually the case (at least in Switzerland, where cleanness seems to be an utmost imperative and quality implies cleanliness and perfection). Buildings that she could use as motifs might perhaps be found on the outskirts of Berlin, in the banlieus in France, in the industrial wastelands of Northern Italy or in several Balkan countries, yet these locations do not offer the unprecedented light Judith Ammann travels to Los Angeles to capture. It is of a clarity and acuity that is not to be found in Europe; even the Provence so favored by the Impressionists cannot really compete. Perhaps it can be found in Petersburg or Lisbon, but that may have more to do with my bedtime reading than anything else: Joseph Brodsky's *Less Than One: Selected Essays* and Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*—both well worth reading if you are interested in Judith Ammann's works.

The Structures

I enumerate the elements that describe structure: two horizontal bars, the lower one a deep dark blue, the paint peeling off the wall, the white one above it revealing a texture of bricks. Three openings in a vertical line, one above the other on a facade onto which shadows fall from the left. To their right, starting at the level of the second window and so large that it extends higher than the third, the word "Liquor".

A violet building, subdivided by diagonal stripes sloping rightward. Cut into it a large trapezoidal shape in yellowish green, half in light, half in shadow; large rectangles, merely intimated, above them a bright blue sky.

A long pink wall exhibiting the remainders of some climbing plants that have been torn off it, ivy or Virginia creeper, in front of it five box trees, each pruned to form the same shape, unshapely thujas to either side. Or the wall of a house with a grid of rings where the sunlight has created a sharp shadow that doubles the grid. A corrugated billboard, similar to the metal containers used for ocean shipping, bearing plasticized tracks that have been supplemented

with a declaration of love, above it in red letters “Bow1”. Remains of other letters. There are many other examples, and they could be described quite differently, implying that they could also appear quite differently—and could thus be photographed quite differently. I discern structures and unconsciously thus narrate the beginnings of stories that get us closer to the intentions behind Judith Ammann’s images.

The Light

The colors stand out from one another almost systematically, like segments that have arisen at different times. What can hardly be managed from a car window when driving past buildings can be achieved by taking pictures of them—namely the focus on a certain section of a scene. This reveals just how strongly the color fields are set off from each other and possess a life of their own. If we thus concentrate on the surfaces, we discern particularities that we would overlook if we simply allowed our gaze to wander. In the case of the violet building, which is set off from the sky by a broad black contour, there is a line on the right that suddenly stops, only to reappear in the illuminated section of the shadowy green. Another black line is to be seen on the pavement in front of the building, though we cannot say precisely whether it is also a shadow, as we are not familiar with the actual site.

In the case of the yellow word “Liquor” we can see a tiled wall behind it, with individual panels in dark and bright red, green and yellowish brown. The upper third of the image is in the shade, and as a result the color of the back wall changes dramatically. The ornamentation achieved by the colors in the lower section condenses in an ever more abstract image, the individual colors blend, and only the yellowish brown tends toward gold, instilling the wall in the shadow with a structure of its own.

The eye is repeatedly deceived by the light (and thus by the shadow) due to its sharpness, its clarity and at times its cold harshness—a deception that sends our minds off on the wrong track.

Images

If Judith Ammann is an installation artist, then her installations are photographic. What is

decisive for her images is the “right” moment, and that cannot be planned in advance. Motif, situation and the right light must come together wondrously. She later processes the images on-screen—not changing them dramatically, but purging them of residue and sediment, eliminating distracting elements, supplementing others, balancing the images to achieve an ideal harmony. The dark green wall with the red star becomes slightly greener, the bright patches are reworked, power lines or irritating lights omitted. In this way, the photograph is given a painterly quality—after all, with a painting you also never know what was intended, and what actually took form. At times, neither does the artist, a fact he or she may or may not reveal. Do we even know whether the paintings on view in our museums really concur with the artists’ intentions? We can at best assume this to be the case. After weeks of working on the picture, the final result is what we see: not the representation of something found in reality, but an image in its own right. And this image conveys the ultimate state; we are confronted with it resolutely and uncompromisingly and cannot escape the impression it has made on us. No section that was neglected, no loophole for a fleeting thought. It is like coming up against a hard object that thus kindles a sense of sobriety from which there is no way out.

These are the purest and clearest of images—and nothing else.

(Basel 2008)