

Ulrich Loock

Between Hand and Eye

In his outstanding essay on seeing, “Eye and Mind”, which revolves round the experience of the seeing body also seeing oneself and thus of not only seeing things from the outside but being “with” them and also seeing them from within, Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes in a section devoted to the “world of the painter”, the eye “is *that which* has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible world through the offices of an agile hand.”¹ Alois Lichtsteiner’s painting, on the other hand, creates a disruption in the loop that returns artistic “introspection” back into the context of the visible things. In his work, “the hand” is not the “medium” through which the link between one visibility and another manifests itself. He does not withdraw his hand. It remains with the painting and inserts itself before the eye. Haven’t we come across pictures depicting a hand in which an eye is set, as well as the notion of being able to see with one’s fingers? For Lichtsteiner the hand is not subject to the provisos of the eye, but wishes to take its place. His painting incurs a blinding, the unforeseen preference for the sense of touch. One of Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” concerns the sculptor Pygmalion, under whose touch and to the satisfaction of his desire the sculpture he has created – not, it should be noted, the representation of a woman he had seen but a synthesis of the loveliest features of all women – finally comes to life. We have here the total denial of sight in a departure from the symbolic field of art. Why does Lichtsteiner stick to painting, or more concretely, why does he still prefer painting after having also made ceramic vessels in the 1980s? Why doesn’t he search for forms for his work that are better suited to the rejection of visibility? Because one of the specific prerequisites of a painting is a distance that cannot be overcome by any other means than visually. What is the meaning behind this contradiction?

Lichtsteiner is unable to attain that felicitous interlocking of seeing and touching that Merleau-Ponty describes when he writes – “That [the body] which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.”² Lichtsteiner’s privileging of the hand comes as a reaction to the inordinate primacy that Modernism has given the eye, which reveals itself in the overall view, in the distance we take to things and the way they yield to us as a result. It reveals this primacy and confronts it with what at first is an irreconcilable alternative.

Since 2001 Lichtsteiner has painted snowy mountains, normally from up close, which rarely allows any characterisation of their overall form. Like two other contemporary artists who paint or have painted mountains, Gerhard Richter and Herbert Brandl, Lichtsteiner bases his paintings on photos. That is to say, all three painters rely on precisely those depictions that quite paradigmatically realise the modernist primacy of seeing. The photographic gaze consists of seeing with one sole, motionless eye, a “theoretical” seeing that fixes the objects, transfixes them and readies them for their technical reconstruction – in complete contrast to that seeing which Merleau-Ponty describes as allowing one to be “narcissistically” involved with things. Lichtsteiner takes images – whether his own or from others, or even from the mass media – and processes them in his computer before printing out the result and turning it into a slide which he can project on the canvas and render in outline. The drawn out fields are then covered with paint. Through this procedure the painter – and he continues to be a painter, even when he manipulates his images using a computer – removes himself step by step from the ini-



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1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. John Wild, Evanston, Northwest University Press, 1964, p. 165.

2 Ibid. p. 16.

tial image of a mountain that he may possibly never have seen in real life. Each of these steps permits further recasting, taking the picture as its yardstick, always the picture and never the visible mountain itself.

When Gerhard Richter paints a mountain he paints its photographic image – his dictum as he commenced his *Photo Paintings* was that it is not the photo that is rendered as a painting, but rather the painting as a photo. In keeping with this, painting is subject to the constraints of photography and visibility. Herbert Brandl paints, metaphorically speaking, through the photo and the canvas as if it were a matter of relating to the mountain as a painter in much the same way a mountaineer does, tracing its line by line with brush and paint. He negates the image through his claim to establish direct contact with the mountain by these means. A falling lump of paint is an avalanche. So, on the one hand we have the greatest possible approximation of painting to image, while on the other hand we have an approximation of painting to its object. Lichtsteiner in turn paints *on* the canvas, *into* the photo. When years after his first *Photo Paintings* Richter literally paints on a photograph, he divides painting from image in dialectical contradiction to his earlier practice. He leaves behind streaks of paint that partly obscure the image and tell of its distance to painting. But Lichtsteiner claims to bring image and painting together – the history of their prior separation need not be investigated here – and to abandon neither the image (Brandl) nor painting (Richter). He does this by painting out the photograph, in both senses: by filling out the fields in the outline drawing with paint, and by thus erasing the photographic image. Lichtsteiner brings painting and image together by subjecting his painting to the figural constellation of the given image and thus superimposing it upon the image so as to take the latter's place.

Lichtsteiner paints with heavy, creamy oils in which the traces of the brush stand out. As with his Birch Paintings, he uses just a few shades for his Mountain Paintings, white, and three or four different greys. The colours are already mixed and applied the way they are, without any further break. Likewise in his earlier paintings Lichtsteiner typically employed few colours. Some of these paintings are monochromes, and none of them lives from colourism, the lively relationships between the colours. Essentially the colours tally with the forms and figures; they are scarcely modulated and thus come across as planar. Their radiance is restricted to the fields they fill. As if to confirm the independence of his paintings from the interaction of colours, Lichtsteiner will sometimes also paint a black and white version of a colour painting.

He is conversant with different ways of applying paint. But his choice is always methodically predetermined and remains binding for the whole of a particular work. In earlier Mountain Paintings Lichtsteiner adapted his brush strokes to the individual forms and traced round them on the inside and outside. Instead of contours, this procedure resulted in interzones of mingling colours which makes these paintings seem softer than more recent works, in which the brush is set on the perimeter of a field and made to proceed from this in parallel lines in order to create the surfaces. For all this difference in approach, his painting always conveys a hint of the rhythmic, repetitive motion involved in applying a coat of paint to a wall.

Lichtsteiner's paintings give clear indications as to how his work should be grasped. At first, up till around 1983, they accorded with prevailing interests and were expressive, primitivist, theatrical, and driven more by the desire to attack than to touch. They evince no perceivable awareness of the nature of painting per se, apart from one particular idiosyncrasy in his method of painting that continues to determine his work today: the frequent return to the same image, the repetition of a certain representation with only minor modifications. Then with increasing clarity from 1983 on, Lichtsteiner conceived



AL1986.019



Gerhard Richter,
Gebirge (WV Nr. 179-3), 1968,
Amphibolin und Kohle auf Leinwand,
102 × 92 cm



Herbert Brandl,
o. T., 2001, Öl auf Leinwand,
195 × 130 cm, Privatsammlung, Courtesy
Galerie Sabine Knust, München



AL1984.020

of the painting as a self-referential system in which the depiction refers to the painterly aspects that make it up. The first works of this kind, which simultaneously mark the beginning of his own independent oeuvre, bear the title *Der Inhalt der Gefässe* (= The Content of the Vessels). The metaphorical correspondence has been pointed out repeatedly between a vessel and a support that is covered in paint in much the same way a vessel may be filled with liquid.³ In one painting with this title from 1984 that has frequently been reproduced, the depiction of a coloured liquid running out of a bowl that has been tipped forwards is linked with the same colour which self-connotatively forms a colour field covering part of the picture surface; colour is employed here to represent colour, in the transition to colour that presents nothing but itself. “Self-referentiality” in Lichtsteiner’s paintings is a feedback that links together image and painting, representation and presentation in such a way that the material aspects of the painted work are reflected, determined and set down by a metaphorical depiction, while conversely these aspects are opened up to further layers of meaning. A self-referentiality of this kind stands for a dis-identity between the painting and itself, and thus for an infinite potentiality.



AL1986.019

Initially Lichtsteiner’s thoughts about his work seem to be strongly marked by dualistic ideas: colour as the *content* of a vessel, canvas and stretcher as *support* for the paint, the representation of what is present. But with time he has tightened the feedback loop of image and painting, bringing the various determinants in his work closer together and allowing them to merge with the heightened effect of what I have previously referred to as “specified indeterminacy” (Präzisierte Unbestimmtheit).⁴ In connection with his paintings of vessels, from 1984 on he created an appreciable number of ceramic bowls and finally in 1986 an almost human-sized vessel that he painted both inside and out with oil paint. This mixture of craftsmanship and sculpture may be seen as an option for transposing his painting into spatial reality, as an attempt to elude the contradictions in his work up till that time. And yet he married the ceramic object with a form of painting that did not really suit the material, without integrating the two to produce a new whole. Although the bemusing aspect of the representation of the given is largely eliminated, there remains the duality between the material support and the paint that is applied.

The fact that Lichtsteiner was soon to give up producing three-dimensional objects must be taken as meaning that this failed to bring him to a satisfactory understanding of his own practice, of applying paint to a substrate. But this is what it is all about, the application of paint, a concern from which he did not even desist with his ceramics. The metaphor of a vessel for his painted work is, however, only of limited viability. Nevertheless Lichtsteiner returned in 1992 to this metaphor in a different form when he began painting drawers of which all that can be seen is the front side with a horizontal hole for the handle. He painted them repeatedly next to one another in an expanded grid, parallel to the picture surface – as a “representational” interpretation of the metaphor of content and as an evocation of an unknown and inaccessible “behind”.

Against this, parallel to his ceramics Lichtsteiner began in 1985 to paint scarcely differentiated, almost monochrome canvases in which little more than a curved line set within the colour field depicts the rim of a vessel. These works marked a decisive transition, and they enabled him to attain two things: the extended uniform colour surface,



AL1985.084

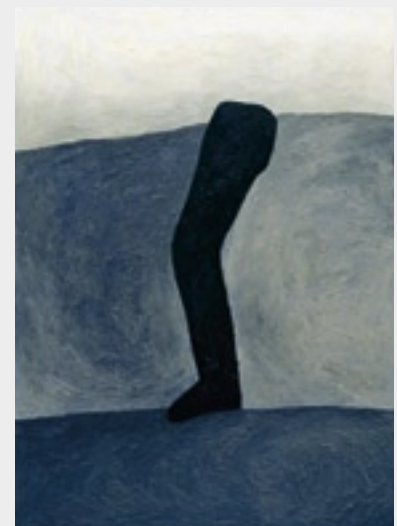
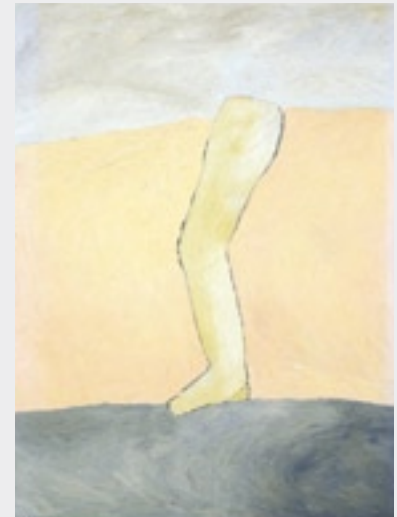
³ See Stephan Berg, “Der Inhalt der Malerei. Zu den Arbeiten Alois Lichtsteiners”, in exh. cat. *Alois Lichtsteiner*, Freiburg, Kunstverein Freiburg e. V., 1992, p. 6 ff.

⁴ See Ulrich Loock, “Alois Lichtsteiner: Präzisierte Unbestimmtheit”, in exh. cat. *Alois Lichtsteiner*, Bern, Kunsthalle Bern, 1992, p. 9 ff.

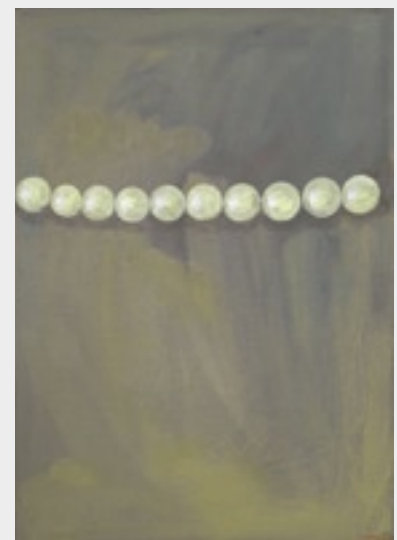
and the possibility of summoning up a pictorial idea with a minimum of intervention, with a significant particle. Evocation takes the place of representation. As such this and the following works come close to his ceramics: by limiting the depiction to a metonymic allusion, the contradiction between image and painting is reduced – at the cost of the image. Finally in 1987 Lichtsteiner arrived at a decisively new understanding of his practice for applying paint. He had begun by introducing simple figurations into the colour surfaces, which stood for human members: hand, foot, fingers, female breast, and later other body parts such as legs, tongues, fingers once again, and objects that belong to the body, such as a boot or a necklace – but nowhere an eye. Limbs and objects loom from the painted surfaces, and are connected to it – a painted surface with the leg of a dancer, the boot of a workman or a soldier or, most touching perhaps, with a piece of jewellery – giving it a new meaning, that of the body surface, of skin. This meaning is not due to some sort of representation, but rather to a re-evaluation brought about by transition and connection. An exceptionally large pair of paintings from 1991, one light and the other dark, and both with colour surfaces done in even brush movements, is titled *Portrait*.

Here Lichtsteiner hit upon the right metaphor, which had enormous repercussions: the paint applied to the canvas is no longer a coat but a skin – it covers the stretched canvas in much the same way human skin covers the flesh and bones. This metaphor is based on comparison on the material level and no longer on the conceptual one, as had been the case with the metaphor of the vessel. It is an organic metaphor, not as metaphysical as the former one, and it corresponds to customary linguistic usage while avoiding the contradiction between presence and representation, without abandoning the inner dis-identity of the “painting”. The “painting” is a body, is not a body. Painting as a skin is realised by the painter’s hand as it guides a brush drenched in paint. His presence during the time of painting is reflected in the traces that inject rhythm to the applied paint. These traces are traces of desire. The actual meaning of the skin metaphor comes from the fact that Lichtsteiner sees desire at work in his paintings, in the “offices of an agile hand”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. As soon as he recognises this he can also allow himself to be explicit. The pulsating movement with which the paint is applied generates a colour surface and is reflected in the image of a clapper, a swinging piece of metal with the shape of a male member, which might also appear however in another painting in the shape of a bone. In his Birch Paintings, vertically oriented wounds in the bark of a tree – which is another avatar of skin – result in the image of a woman’s sex. The painting is a sexual body that gains form through painterly desire while offering an object to this desire. But this desire remains just that – which is the difference between Lichtsteiner’s practice and what occurred to Pygmalion –, because the canvas is canvas and the skin of painting the planar extension of paint on this canvas. But we have yet to fully answer the question raised at the beginning as to why Lichtsteiner stuck to painting. It may be said, however, that precisely this steadfastness has kept desire alive.

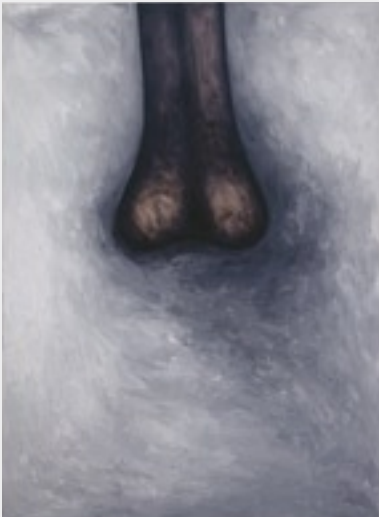
The painterly desire is physical and not visual, which is why the movement from the visible (the things) to the visible (the painting) remains unfinished. The hand wants to remain with the body of the painting, resulting in the repetitions that inform Lichtsteiner’s entire oeuvre and are especially apparent in the Birch and Mountain Paintings. Individual paintings have been painted four or perhaps even more times. These are genuine repetitions, not variations nor part of a process of working through the experiences gained from one work by painting a further work. Lichtsteiner emphasises that he does not paint these works consecutively. Sometimes there are months in between, forgetting. As such each of these paintings is new, although no different to those that preceded or those



AL1991.061, AL1991.054



AL1996.014



AL1997.023, AL2000.019

that follow it. Desire awakens anew and directs itself towards the same. Conversely, it is impossible for Lichtsteiner to paint further paintings in a series once he “knows how it is done”.⁵ This repetition of paintings is Lichtsteiner’s way of creating an incomplete work that demands to be painted evermore – precisely in order to avoid that withdrawal of the hand that inserts itself before the eye. It is in this light that we must understand the speculation that the images are to be perceived through the skin, or that the appropriate way of studying them is to turn one’s back to them. The images are taken in by the same means as their production, i.e. by the prolongation of the painterly desire. But at the same time the conception of an unfinished work that goes through a series of repetitions, even when it is not continued over and beyond a certain point, contains an element of stagnation and death. The work has something of the “unknown masterpiece”⁶ about it, and Lichtsteiner also points to this in his painting: the icon of desire, the clapper/phallus, a fetishised image of the process of painting, can be substituted by a bone. Then in the Mountain Paintings, in which the skin of previous paintings is incarnated by snow that partly covers the naked rocks and provides protection, Lichtsteiner reflects on the connections between painterly desire and death in the motif of the lofty mountains – a region of the utmost remoteness from humankind, of ultimate exposure.

Repetition means closing the work off to the eyes, disallowing it to attain visibility. Yet this reaction to the primacy of seeing does not manage to cope with seeing, and thus the preference for hand or skin remains bound to the unwelcome exclusiveness of the visual. Lichtsteiner covers the image with painting yet remains subjugated by it. The ambivalence of painterly independence and dependence on the pictorial precepts distinguishes the singular position of his painting, which in this way amounts to a completely different approach to that of Richter or Brandl. This ambivalence is constantly reformulated in the implicit rejection of abandoning painting, with the aim of realising that unequivocal physicality that is impeded by the inevitable way painting is conditioned by visibility. On the contrary: we can see that in his series of Mountain Paintings Lichtsteiner consolidates elements of the visual in a hitherto unfamiliar way, through the distribution of the grey and white patches, the rock and the snow which, as Matthias Frehner has demonstrated, by no means have to concur with the given reality of snow and rocks, but that may swing round rather in a flickering flux between figure and ground.⁷ This swing, this divergence between what can be seen and what is denoted, can only be acknowledged for what it is under the proviso of the re-establishment of visibility. The visual effects in the Mountain Paintings augment and replace the markings left by painterly activity, the rhythmic and uniform painting of the Portraits, for example, which even fails to be realised in the Mountain Paintings for technical reasons – because of the diminutiveness of the pictorial elements. Traces of painterly desire are combined here with markings of visual desire. As such it seems open whether, on the basis of his preference for hand and skin over seeing, Lichtsteiner will not create a completely new gateway for seeing to his works in the form of a deconstructive assimilation of Merleau-Ponty’s idea mentioned at the beginning.

⁵ In conversation with the author on 16.10.2007.

⁶ “The Unknown Masterpiece”, a novella by Honoré de Balzac dating from 1831, presents all of the motifs that may be discerned in Lichtsteiner’s work: the impossibility of completion, the intention of painting a body, in Balzac’s case a “female nude”, the complaint about the lack of a “model”(which prompts a visitor to offer his own wife to the artist for the purpose), and finally failure and death.

⁷ See Matthias Frehner, “Malerei ist möglich. Alois Lichtsteiners ‘Bergbilder’”, in exh. cat. *Alois Lichtsteiner. Bergbilder*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Stämpfli Verlag AG, 2003, p. 10.