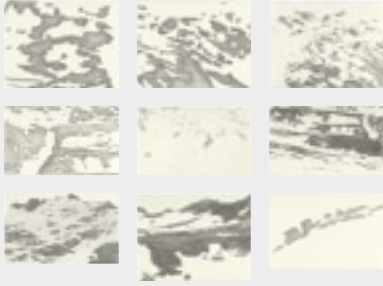


Peter J. Schneemann and Susanne Schneemann

**Transitions. The Art Historian's Gaze on Traditions
within Artistic Issues**

The Heroic Story of a Lowly Genre



From left to right:

AL2002.062, AL2002.061, AL20002.058,
AL2002.049, AL2002.042, AL20002.033,
AL2002.030, AL2002.029, AL20002.108

Fields of snow, mountainscapes as a play between ivory and zinc alloy dominate one of the foremost groups of Alois Lichtsteiner's works, "Untitled" (Mountains). Begun in 1997, it was first presented in the Neues Kunstmuseum in Lucerne in 2001.¹ The following essay is dedicated to this new series, which is not only strongly featured here on account of its size, encompassing as it does some 450 paintings, but also because it allows us to concentrate on the landscape motif and the artist's work on a specific painterly problem.

As a concept in cultural history, the "landscape" stands for the thematic exploration of the subject in the world. The perception of nature as landscape is the result of a frame of reference that has imbued it with meaning. Thus for art it stands as a genre of painting at the point of intersection between two poles in art's understanding of itself, between its achievements regarding representation and those regarding composition and invention.² The specific weighting of these two fundamental axioms, the exact observation of natural phenomena on the one hand and the recasting of this in the form of a self-referentiality and autonomy of the artistic means, is to be found in every master narrative in the history of modern art. Landscape painting appears as a heroic protagonist in the establishment of the autonomy of artistic means.

We encounter early on in art literature a truly compelling struggle to develop principles for the composition of landscapes. Was the motif of the landscape going to find its own independent genre of painting, which is to say to step out of the purely decorative context? How was its composition to be determined outside of narrative textual structures, beyond the momentous deeds of the heroes? How was a new unity of the image to be achieved, how was a section of nature to be transposed into a landscape?

There are many indications that at around 1800, the depiction of fleeting natural phenomena met with growing recognition and established itself as a genre in its own right. Already by the late eighteenth century small sized landscape studies had found their way into the official exhibitions of the French Salon.³ So had the natural phenomenon already achieved a position of autonomy by the turn of the century vis-à-vis the classical model of landscape composition, which was dedicated to the ideal, timeless landscape of Arcadia? In 1800 the landscape painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes published his lengthy text *Elémens de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage*. Within just three years the book was published in German.⁴



Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes,
Titelblatt, 1820

- 1 See exh. cat. *Alois Lichtsteiner, Birken und ein Berg*, Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, 2001; Lichtsteiner exhibited over twenty of his Mountain Paintings two years later at the exhibition in Bern, *Rolf Iseli, Alois Lichtsteiner, Peter Stein*, cf. *Alois Lichtsteiner. Bergbilder*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Stämpfli, 2003. Lichtsteiner devoted himself to the birch bark motif for a total of two years from 1998 onwards, before moving on to the Mountain Paintings.
- 2 We refer here to the analysis by Simmel, which to our mind continues to contain one of the best definitions: Georg Simmel, 'Philosophie der Landschaft', in *Brücke und Tür*, (ed.) Michael Landmann, Stuttgart, Koehler, 1957.
- 3 See for instance Jean-Pierre-Louis Laurent Hoüel (1735-1813), who was represented by such studies in the Salon of 1775 (nos. 193-200).
- 4 Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, *Elémens [sic] de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage*, Paris, Desenne, Duprat, 1800, reprint Geneva 1973, second enlarged edition Paris, Payen 1820.

Time and again Valenciennes is taken as a point of reference for a new interest in the atmospheric manifestations of nature. Especially feted are his cloud studies, which strike us today as astonishingly modern. Free of all compositional arrangement, of any idealisation, and without the customary incidental figures, they seem to represent a concept of landscape that delivers the phenomena from every compulsion to convey meaning. And in fact the treatise actually presents the necessary instructions to the landscape painter – in the form of words of advice to a young artist in which Valenciennes’s expositions are cited as trail-blazing. In his “Reflexions et conseils à un élève” we find the chapter “Etudes d’après Nature”, in which the pupil is confronted with the problem of the constant change in appearances, in the light and the cloud formations, that are witnessed in natural phenomena. The spectacle of the weather and the light is so transitory, as we read, that the landscape painter has no more than two hours, or indeed at sun up and sun down a mere thirty minutes to capture it. Studies of this kind, aimed at grasping the temporary character of the light and the weather are not, as Valenciennes tells us, bound to details.

Valenciennes’ text is exemplary of these new considerations in regard to not only the nature study, but also the importance of composition. The methods he describes originated in a clearly delineated function of the nature study, as already set down in the seventeenth century.⁵ Moving on from such individual studies of nature done in catalogue form, the artist sets out to compose the ideal landscape in his studio. Which is why Valenciennes’ book contains not only his instructions for such a precise study of nature, but also several hundred pages on basic principles. And not by chance is geometry the subject that the pupils of landscape painting must be taught as the basis for perspectival construction. This section revolves round the construction of the “vanishing point”, the techniques for aerial perspective, and the choice of the right colours. In the subsequent chapters Valenciennes moves further and further from the classic fixed points of perspective, because in his opinion other means are needed to construct a landscape. Nevertheless, central perspective seems to be the key to coping with the fleeting forms of the landscape. From the construction of the shadows, the book advances to reflections cast on water and to the waves of the sea. And from linear perspective Valenciennes ultimately arrives at aerial perspective and colours, as well as to fire and rain.

Significantly Valenciennes’ work shows the tension between nature’s ephemerality and the principles of design that the artist employs to devise his landscape. Referring back to the older theory of the genre of “landscape painting”, he stresses the problematic connotations of the word “composition”. The chance and changeable natural phenomenon is contrasted with “invention”, the ordering activity of the painter. The rule of central perspective proves to be a major point of reference in this, for nature is aligned to the beholder, while the latter for his or her part constitutes the prerequisite for the space of the landscape.

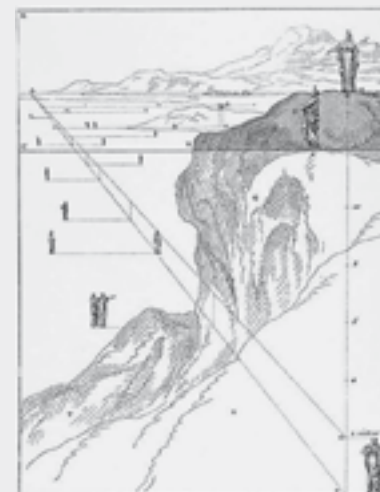
When Valenciennes speaks of “Composition d’après la nature”, he shifts the central act of the landscape painter, composition, to nature.⁶ But the term composition nevertheless shows that he expects the painter to intercede with his own order.

⁵ See for instance Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principe*, Paris, J. Estienne, 1708, p. 243. De Piles was cited at length by subsequent theorists; such as for instance Charles-Antoine Jombert in his *Méthode pour apprendre le dessin*, Paris, Chez l’Auteur, 1755, p. 115.

⁶ See Peter J. Schneemann, ‘Composition du paysage et émergence du sens. La peinture de paysage et l’art des jardins autour de 1800’, *Revue Germanique Internationale*, 7, 1997, pp. 155–170.



Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, Berg über dem Nemi-See, 1782–1784, Öl auf Papier auf Karton, 24 × 31 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre



Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, Perspektivische Größenabstufung von Figuren verteilt in einer Landschaft, abgebildet in: Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, *Praktische Anleitung zur Linear- und Luftperspectiv für Zeichner und Mahler. Nebst Betrachtungen über das Studium der Mahlerey überhaupt, und der Landschaftsmahlerey insbesondere*, Hof: Graub 1803, Tf. XXXV



Alexander Cozens, Titelblatt, 1785

The conviction that may be discerned in nineteenth century landscape studies⁷, that it suffices to behold nature in order to arrive at an inherent order going beyond mere appearances, was elevated to paradigmatic status by the theorists of abstractionism. They used it to explore the medium of the painting and its means as the twentieth century honed them to perfection. Nature's transitoriness seemed empowered to annul the academic rules, as chance and spontaneous compared to the rigidity to which the laws of the ideal had succumbed. More than that: the entire dimension of the unfinished was anchored here.

To quote from Werner Hofmann's *Grundlagen der modernen Kunst* from 1978: *"We arrive at the conclusion that the emancipation of the formal content is connected with the gradually increasing provisionalism arrived at in the artist's personal mode of expression. So this procedure has not developed from the strict practice of the idealist with his strong awareness of form, but is the result of a deliberate disdain for formal finality and discipline. This also corresponds to its origins in the less stringent topic areas. The possibility of improvising with the brush, of enticing the "magic" from the paint, presents itself to an incomparably higher degree in landscape painting because essentially its subjects are more transitory than in the heroic portraits of people that attempt to establish formal values of an ideal and unshakable kind."*⁸

The Autonomy of the Blot or the Inverted Imagination

The qualities of the painterly sign, of its inherent value as an abstract configuration, and its power independent of any literary system of reference to allow a meaningful whole to come into being, have gained constantly in importance in the art discourse of the twentieth century. The legitimisation for regarding the history of landscape painting as somehow prefiguring the search for an abstract language of forms may be found for instance in textbooks on landscape painting, such as that published in 1785 by Alexander Cozens in England.⁹

The point of departure he proposes for devising landscape compositions, which is to say for the ideal distribution of light and shade and the harmony of the masses, is that chance product the inkblot. The didactic illustrations in his textbook look exceptionally modern, coming across as they do as abstract compositions free of any thematic reference. Cozens' proposal draws on an observation that had already prompted Leonardo to a game of associations, in which figurative structures were made to emerge from the stains on a wall.

If one looks at the history of the blot or stain in art theory, its development is marked by a double potential, for we can discern in the blot the perfect image of various complex phenomena, of the complex order of chance, the folds of a dress, or of the formation of the clouds, the waves, or snowy fields. On the other hand the blot has also undergone a development as an independent power, indeed as



Alexander Cozens, Ink-Blot Landscape, 1785, Aquatinta, 24 × 31,5 cm, London, Tate Gallery

⁷ The list of artists who devoted themselves for instance to cloud studies is exceptionally long, and includes such names as Carl Gustav Carus, Karl Blechen, and John Constable.

⁸ Werner Hofmann, *Grundlagen der modernen Kunst. Eine Einführung in ihre symbolischen Formen*, Stuttgart, Kröner, 1978, p. 177.

⁹ Alexander Cozens, *A new method of assisting the invention in drawing original compositions of landscape*, London, J. Dixwell, 1785; see, too, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *L'art de la tache. Introduction à la "Nouvelle méthode d'Alexander Cozens"*, Montélimar, Editions du Limon, 1990.

the actual goal of depiction. As soon as perception is directed solely to the manifestation, it abstracts the blot from out of the landscape.¹⁰

The trail leads us back to the art literature of antiquity. An early, notable example of chance in art practice is to be found in an episode in the *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny the Elder. Protogenes, a renowned painter of his day, was exasperated at depicting the foam that was supposed to drip from the mouth of a dog he had painted. Angered by his own inability, he threw the sponge he had used to remove the paint at this very point on the painting, with the result that it created exactly the impression that the artist had attempted to paint. Chance in painting had produced verisimilitude.¹¹ Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting* published in 1651 also contains notes on the artistic potential of chance for art practice. Cozens refers explicitly to da Vinci's observations in his own work.¹² But whereas Leonardo recommended this game of associations when studying the stains on a wall for the creation of figurative structures, Cozens' approach is more radical. The "artificial blot [as] a production of chance"¹³ serves as the basis for composition and can replace the study of nature. Cozens even considers that the faculty of "invention" is weakened by constant nature study.¹⁴

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the blot was no longer a spur to the artist's imagination, for increasingly it called for the active involvement of the beholder. Of especial interest here is that something already emerges that was to be quite decisive for the blot as a basis for composition: its planar character.

Alois Lichtsteiner's working methods for his Mountain Paintings can, as with his Birch Paintings, be read as a double reflection of the blot. Sometimes his artistic work begins with the search for the right motifs *in situ*, which means documenting select alpine views with a camera, or else copying photographic material from the print media. The resulting photographic document is then projected on to the canvas, where Lichtsteiner extracts the blots from the photo as an abstract visual configuration. Transposed by the art process, the blots become a constitutional part of the painting. And in this function they are no more than self-referential, becoming as they do purely painterly vocabulary. Their formation is experimented with by means of zooms, a game with the single form, the details and the border, and with the whole. In his latest works, Lichtsteiner has radicalised this aspect: a coloured bar lies across the "depiction" of the mountain landscape. This is the absolute positing of painting as surface which, in complete agreement with Clement Greenberg, promotes a negation of illusory space and compels us to perceive the planar quality of the blots, which constantly break away as spatial structures.



AL2004.069

10 See Friedrich Weltzien, 'Von Cozens bis Kerner. Der Fleck als Transformator ästhetischer Erfahrung', in *Ästhetische Erfahrung. Gegenstände, Konzepte, Geschichtlichkeit*, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 626 der Freien Universität Berlin, 2006, pp. 1–15.

11 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historiae*, Libri XXXVII.

12 Cozens, *New Method*; see the original text printed in *Lebensztein* 1990 [cf. Footnote 9], pp. 470–471.

13 *Ibid.* p. 471.

14 See Henri Zerner, 'Alexander Cozens et sa méthode pour l'invention des paysages', *L'œil*, No. 17, pp. 28–33; Charles A. Cramer, 'Alexander Cozen's New Method: The Blot and General Nature', *Art Bulletin*, 79/1, 1997, pp. 112–129; see also the passage in Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images. Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London, Reaktion Books, 2002, pp. 50–54.



AL2003.078

Repetition and the Creation of Meaning in the Transition

Drawers, faces, birch trees and mountains. Ongoing work on series is a constant factor in Lichtsteiner's studio. His work methods are dominated by repetition¹⁵ – an artistic approach that stands in contradiction to chance. An analytical power can be traced from the rhetoric of practice and control which, through its inner consistency, proves to be of much consequence for the concept of the image as well as for authorship.

The idea of using a kindred term such as “cycle” for the form of the “series” – as is evidently the case with Lichtsteiner – highlights further distinctions and characterisations. This series of motifs does not aim structurally at any specific conclusion, nor is it necessary to think of it as a self-contained whole. Potentially at least it is endless. It is not imperative because the subject is neither changed appreciably, such as by introducing different times of day,¹⁶ nor restricted to a specific period in the author's life.¹⁷ Unlike the series by On Kawara or Roman Opalka, a reference back to the point in the artist's life is in no way constitutive of the work. Lichtsteiner devises the transition from one painting to the next quite meticulously. An enormous wall in his studio is reserved for small oil studies for his Mountain Paintings. Lichtsteiner combines these freely, piecing them together in new ways and adding further small works. The meaning behind a series reveals itself slowly and does not predate the act of painting on some conceptual plane. The greater the number of works that are painted in a series, the more concrete becomes their connection. A complex dialectic arises within this constellation between the individual painting and its relationship to those preceding and succeeding it.

On the one hand each painting consists of a new, autonomous positing and its solution, such that every composition is in this sense final and complete, is worked through and concluded and has no traces of provisionality. On the other hand one can see in exhibitions and of course in the artist's studio a tendency to addition. Small sized compositions are gathered together, tightly packed in a rhythm. With that the transition from one painting to the next, from one devised image to next becomes the semantic potential. The slighter the difference, the more minimal the variation, the greater our attention is directed to the interstices.¹⁸ Thus the math-

15 Regarding the series in art see for instance Katharina Sykora, *Das Phänomen des Seriellen in der Kunst. Aspekte einer künstlerischen Methode von Monet bis zur amerikanischen Pop Art*, Würzburg, Königshausen + Neumann, 1983; Hans Zitko, 'Der Ritus der Wiederholung. Zur Logik der Serie in der Kunst der Moderne', in Carola Hilmes, Dietrich Mathy (ed.), *Dasselbe noch einmal. Die Ästhetik der Wiederholung*, Opladen und Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998, pp. 159–183; *Monets Vermächtnis. Serie-Ordnung und Obsession*, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Ostfildern Ruit, Hatje Cantz, 2001.

16 Note here the important difference to Claude Monet.

17 In 1965 Roman Opalka embarked on his series “OPALKA 1965/1 – infini”. For this he painted consecutive numbers on same-size canvases while also speaking them onto tape. At the end of a day's work he photographed himself with a camera set in a fixed position, wearing a white shirt. See Catherine Desprats-Péqui-gnot, *Roman Opalka. Une vie en peinture*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998; Christine Savinel, Jacques Roubaud, Bernard Noël, *Roman Opalka*, Paris, Éditions Dis Voir 1996; Kawara began his series of Date Paintings in 1966. Using around three different formats, he employed white acrylic to paint the current date on a dark background, using the abbreviation or spelling current in the country in which he happened to be at the time. At first he completed a painting on an almost daily basis, later sometimes only one a week or month. On the complex structure of this series see for instance *On Kawara. Date Paintings in 89 Cities*, exh. cat. Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1992; Johannes Gachnang, Marianne Schmidt and Kasper König, *On Kawara. 1973 – Produktion eines Jahres/One Year's Production*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, 1974.

18 See in this context the sequences on obeying a rule in Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1953; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1922.



From left to right:
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emational series 1 2 3, which at first sight can be seen as perfectly straightforward, does not inevitably lead to 4, because the next number could equally be 5. This would be the case if the sum of the two preceding numbers is always added together to produce the next, as in 1 2 3 5 8, etc., according to a Fibonacci sequence.¹⁹

This series with its additive structure, such as is to be found in Lichtsteiner's studio, prompts radical questions about compositional approaches involving combination. Moreover, the tightness with which such sequences are hung pinpoints once again the question of the detail versus the overall whole. Here the thus reduced vocabulary becomes genuinely self-empowered.

Art history is familiar with any number of conceptual takes on repetition and self-quotation, which deconstruct as it were the individual gesture in a programmatic way. In Lichtsteiner's case the repetition and the aspiration of each respective new composition does not resolve itself playfully. The series and the repetition become an inquiry into the artistic activity itself, which does not wish to question its own responsibility.

Repetition²⁰ as a distinctive characteristic of a series presents the beholder with a very specific task. Umberto Eco's distinction between the "naïve" and the "shrewd" reader can equally be applied to the beholder:

*"The 'naive and the shrewd reader', the first employs the work as a semantic machine and is prisoner to the author's strategies ... while the second regards the work as an aesthetic product and delights at the strategies it incorporates, and which are meant to create a model reader of the first level. This reader delights in the seriality of the series, not as a repetition of the same but in the strategy of the variations."*²¹

By always exemplifying the one and the same motif in his long series, Lichtsteiner reveals himself to be a tactician who employs difference and similarity to foster a stance in the viewer that goes beyond the joyous recognition of mountain ridges and alpine profiles. The exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern in 2003 presented the opportunity to face the problem of the series – not only in the installation consisting of the small oil sketches, but also in the paintings. The search for points in common or points of difference in landscapes created by painterly blots captivates the beholder. But by looking at the Mountain Paintings as a series he or she is personally able to try out this aesthetic of artistic production as a paradigm for perception. Starting point for this may well be the kind of concentration that Giorgio Morandi achieved in his small-scale still lives. Apart from this quality of compaction, the endless variations in blot-like spatial development evoke a compositional solution that is arrived at as always one of many possibilities. This impression corresponds to the



AL2007.019

19 Thanks are due to Jakob Steinbrecher for pointing to the importance of the transition in a series, which could be found in his unpublished lecture given at this year's conference "In Bildern denken? Kognitive Potentiale von Visualisierung in Kunst und Wissenschaft", Alfred Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg Greifswald.

20 No attention has been paid here to the concept of repetition as analysed by Søren Kierkegaard in 1843, nor to repetition in the understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis as a compulsive regulator. Søren Kierkegaard, Gjentagelsen. (*Repetition, an Essay in Experimental Psychology*), Copenhagen, Reitzels Forlag, 1843; Niels Nymann, *Kierkegaard's category of repetition. A reconstruction*, Berlin und New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2000; Sigmund Freud, "Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten" (1914g). "Remembering, repeating and working-through", SE 12, (ed.) James Strachey, London, Hogarth, pp. 147-156; Stefan Reichard, *Wiederholungszwang. Ein psychoanalytisches Konzept im Wandel*, Stuttgart et al., Kohlhammer, 1997.

21 See here the section 'Serialität im Universum der Kunst und der Massenmedien', in Umberto Eco, *Im Labyrinth der Vernunft. Texte über Kunst und Zeichen*, Leipzig. Reclam, 1990, pp. 301–324, here pp. 312–313.



AL2002.015

phenomenon that Lichtsteiner's Mountain Paintings do not present a landscape space that is aligned to the seeing subject as an ordering point – just as little as the viewer's vantage point is unequivocal in regard to its proximity or distance to Lichtsteiner's paintings. The claim to power in the landscape painting, of devising the world as a definitive unit for the cognizant subject, is annulled as the visual configuration attains its independence.