MARINA SCHULZE'S PHOTOGRAPHIC GAZE
or the infinite complexity of simple things

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I came across Marina Schulze's paintings for the first time in the 2007 exhibition Rauhe Fasern (Rough Fibers) in the Galerie Beim Steinernen Kreuz. I was particularly taken with Untitled (SB VII) from the pantyhose legs series. Everything about this picture appealed to me: color scheme, image detail, subject. What was depicted was immediately recognizable in its seemingly photographic accuracy, and at the same time it seemed so wonderfully puzzling. The intimacy of the motif was almost a little uncomfortable, the precision of the painting almost uncanny: the large-format and strongly zoomed-in section of large-meshed fashionable fishnet tights, under which the naked skin of its wearer peeked out. You could literally feel the suppleness and sensuality of the skin. At the same time, however, it relentlessly revealed its natural irregularities. The texture of the tights was painted so you could almost feel them. The haunting interplay of the superimposed layers of stocking and skin gave an idea of the veins hidden underneath. The artist masterfully succeeded in transferring the materiality of this microcosm into the two-dimensionality of the picture surface.

But how do Schulze's fascinating pictures come about, how does she choose her subjects? And what about the unusual image details? As a viewer, we only see the end result, the finished work of art. But what is her process to get there and what does it tell us about the work and the artist's point of view?

Schulze finds the ideas for her paintings in everyday life. Something in her immediate environment arouses her interest and an image begins to form. It can have its origin in nature (mushrooms, water, clouds, animal fur, savoy cabbage, cucumber), in the spatial or representational environment (paint residue, wall plaster, woodchips, wallpaper, plastic) or the people around her (hair, skin, calves, pantyhose legs, a navel, nudes, facial details). A seemingly absolutely irrelevant detail such as the accumulation of paint residues on a sweater, a tattoo, or the ladder in nylon tights can also come into focus. The artist's gaze is in no way hierarchical—she often focuses quite consciously on things that are easily overlooked or not immediately recognizable with the naked eye.

In an attempt to capture the mental image, the artist photographs the objects that she can later develop into motifs. The medium of photography not only allows her to capture a motif, but also the object itself, in a certain moment, defined by specific lighting conditions. The result is a photographic study that later serves as a template for a picture to be painted and which can be a source of inspiration, a reminder, and research material at the same time.

Marina Schulze often comes across her motifs by chance. For example, she sees a mushroom during a walk in the forest or finds a plastic bag near a glacier while traveling through Iceland. At other times, such as with the pantyhose legs, the facial details, or the projections on nudes, she constructs the subject herself in order to realize the desired photo.

On the white and smoothly primed canvas, the artist makes a preliminary drawing with charcoal, then applies a first relatively thin layer of strong colors (acrylic or diluted oil paint). Further layers of muted colors follow, applied meticulously and in detail, overlapping each other, so that ultimately a translucent surface is created. Since 2005, Schulze has regularly used an episcope to project the original images onto the canvas. This gives her the ability to better control the alignment of the image and pattern, and avoid distortion.

The process of selecting and transferring the photographic study should not be thought of as a simple linear process. Days, months, sometimes even years can pass between the creation of the original image and the actual painted picture. Sometimes a shot disappears indefinitely in the artist's extensive stock of images until it arouses her interest again, triggered by an experience or an external event. The artist often works on several motifs at the same time; different versions of an image may be created, only one of which then fulfills her expectations. "Paintings are created in a process that, due to its duration, fundamentally entails constant scrutiny of what you are doing."[1] At times, while painting, she strays far from the original study. The section and color may vary greatly from the original photo. The artist is in no way concerned with transferring a photo onto paper or canvas as true to the original as possible, or imitating the accuracy of the photographic image. Rather, her goal is to get as close as possible to the mental, "ideal" image that she has in mind. "There is this image in my head that I would like to reach. I find it around me in a smaller form and then I can enlarge it."[2]

During the creation process, different layers of images interact in a complex way: the image in the head, the memory of the motif, the photography, and the painted image while it is being created on the canvas. Sometimes a further layer is added in the form of a small-format, painted preliminary study on paper. In this way the artist tests the effect of a motif. On the way to the final picture, these pictures flow into one another, each of them with its own temporal dimension.

Such complexity is comparable to the complexity of our visual perception. From a physiological point of view, vision is the process of receiving electromagnetic waves (light rays) through our eyes and processing the nerve impulses (electrical stimuli) triggered by the retina into images in the brain. But perceiving something also means processing and interpreting it cognitively, where the level of emotions comes into play. Perception is therefore always a selective process that depends on the specific context of the individual. This seemingly simple, unconscious, and absolutely everyday process is actually extremely complex.

While a painting is being created, the complexity of the layers, created through the pictorial surfaces and varying human perceptions, interlock. In her paintings, Schulze explores processes of perception. This interest is the basis of all of Schulze's pictures, but is explicitly the subject of the series Drehpunkt (Turning Point) (since 2016). Over the years, the artist has discovered that she repeatedly creates images in which no clear "below" or "above" is recognizable. This is especially true for the fragmentary and almost abstract subjects. In the studio or exhibition context, she begins to test what it would be like to hang a picture the other way around, so to speak "upside down" on the wall, or a horizontal vertical. What effect does this have on the viewer and what does it do to the picture? In the series Drehpunkt, she leaves the decision to the viewer and thus enables unforeseen views of the image and the motif, clearing the way for new associations.

Back to the light through which we perceive our environment: In particular, we can see colors only in light. The wave spectrum of light, and how it is reflected or absorbed by objects or bodies, determines the quality of the colors we see. Last but not least, light and its representation are one of the very central themes in Schulze's painting: light as a reflection on the surface of the water, as a projection on human skin, as a shadow on a stockinged calf, as the glittering material of a pair of tights, as a reflection in the pupil of a human eye, or on the surface of a fungus.

Schulze's non-hierarchical view makes it clear to the viewer that the things we encounter in everyday life are infinitely more complex and exciting than we are aware of. The artist shows the complexities of surfaces and structures. She observes and examines them in detail, examines them with an almost scientific eye—in the truest sense of the word. "While I paint, I often ask myself what it could look like beneath the visible surface and think about how the colors we see are actually composed."[3] She defined art as an "attempt to find out things," "at work there are questions that I want to fathom."[4] She is particularly fascinated by things that are not immediately apparent. As she explores and analyzes the chosen motif more and more closely by painting it layer by layer, in the end what is puzzling about it becomes clear. To a certain extent, painting is visual research.

But Schulze's pictures do not stop at the surface of things. They show astonishing depth and plasticity, created by the skillful use of colors and the use of light and shadow or light and dark. The animated surface, so to speak, leads us into the depth, creating an illusion of physicality and three-dimensionality, which has always played an important role in Western painting. At the same time, however, her pictures have no specific spatial references such as the horizon or other external landmarks that could help the viewer to identify the motif, place or time. In most cases, what is depicted fills the entire surface of the picture, sometimes like a pattern, without a center being discernible. If there is a background, as in the case of the nudes, calves or sections of the face, it shows neither spatial connotations nor recognizable context, but presents itself as very two-dimensional. It is mostly white, but monochrome and uniform, what is depicted sometimes seems to float in front of it in a surreal way. And so absolutely nothing distracts from the actual subject; the artist directs the viewer's focus on what is essential to her. The use of large formats supports this effect.

The focus is not only on the details in terms of the selections or sections of images. The artist enlarges them many times their actual size. The section of an arm can become nine meters long or a hairy navel can become three meters wide. The real size of things turns out to be irrelevant once depicted. What is more important is the scale that portrays them as the artist envisions. In order to fully understand the picture, we are forced to look at it closely as well as from a distance. The realistic representation combined with the detailed view and the shift in size creates a field of tension for the viewer that moves between intimacy and distance.

Schulze's view of things has been described as a "photographic view."[5] Michael Stoeber points out in his text, A Wide Field: The Works of Marina Schulze, how the focus on details "after the invention of photography migrated to painting."[6] It is worth investigating this connection more closely.

For Schulze, photographs have different and important functions. They serve as inspiration in the process of finding images as well as templates. In the case of the spatial images, they also function as a "tool of selection,"[7] in the process of selecting the area to be painted and the exact perspective. Finally, they also document the end result of this site-specific and spatial painting, which physically often only exists for a limited time.

But the successful interaction between painting and photography in Schulze's works is also evident in the composition and selection of the image details. The artist's approach appears factual, objective, almost documentary, through the exact representational images. This aspect is combined with a dynamic alignment of the image, the use of unconventional perspectives and idiosyncratic image sections: close-up and detailed views primarily, and the associated fragmentation of the object, but also extreme top or bottom views or oblique views. The structure of the picture does not follow any classic formal or compositional rules such as symmetry, focus, or central perspective. The procedure tends to dissolve the motifs into abstract forms and surfaces, which is made even clearer by the lack of a concrete "space" and the fading out of any context.

These fundamentally experimental approaches have their origins in modern and avant-garde photography and were developed and used in particular by those photographers who were committed to the visual language of the "New Vision."[8] Parallels could be found, for example, in the factual photography by Albert Renger-Patzsch, whose aim was to reproduce the elements shown exactly. In addition to the shape of the objects, he was particularly interested in the description of surface, structure, and material. He also used "close-up vision and enlarged detail, whereby the object is deliberately staged".[9] Experimenting with light effects and patterns on bodies or faces is also a motif that photographers of the artistic trend of "New Vision", such as Alexandr Rodchenko or Man Ray, have not only frequently used, but to a certain extent invented. The new visual language is spreading across Europe through advertising, magazines and films, various of the innovative elements have entered into popular culture over the decades and live on in it to this day.[10] The German photographer Heinrich Heidersberger, for example, referred to Man Ray, pioneer of the surreal direction of artistic photography, when he created an iconic series of nudes for the newly founded magazine Stern at the end of the 1940s, Kleid aus Licht (Dress of Light). He experiments with the projection of light patterns onto the female body using a self-made light cannon and the use of various templates. These effects reveal parallel motifs between this work and Schulze's 2017 nude painting.

The close relationship to photography is also indicated by the terminology that is often used in connection with Schulze's painting. Close-up, focus, depth of field, or macro view are terms that appear again and again in the texts about her work. Schulze herself has repeatedly referred to her pictures as "snapshots", a historical term in the field of photography that originally referred to a short exposure time, but is also understood in everyday language as a synonym for photography itself. The symbolism of photography thus flows into her pictorial work in different ways. It is an important part of the works' creation processes.

What defines the painted representation, in relation to reality on the one hand and photography on the other? For decades, representational painting, in an overly linear and simplified version of art history, was seen as outdated and no longer legitimate. This was especially because of the increasing influence of new media in art such as photography.

Schulze belongs to a generation of international artists who have redefined representational painting and freed themselves from the eternal, supposedly, opposing nature of abstraction and figuration. At first a viewer may not be aware that what seems real is actually a construct, an artificially created illusion, be it through photography or painting. Different approaches to work, topics, historical image sources, and languages are understood with new freedom and combined with one another in a non-hierarchical approach.[11] In her work, a fine painting technique, almost like the old masters, meets elements from Pop Art and Surrealism, from photography and installation art.

She seems to see painting as a kind of challenge and explores the fantastic possibilities of this technique patiently, confidently, and with focus. Is it possible, with the means of painting—canvas, brush, and paint—to depict something exactly as we perceive it at a very specific moment? She not only examines the nature of her motifs in an analytical way, but at the same time deals intensively with the fundamentals of painterly representation and human perception. Painting as communication, visual language, and a way of understanding the world—a human perspective on the world in today's extremely complicated times, dominated by the flood of digital images. The artist invites us to take a closer look and to experience our environment, with all complex details in it, more consciously—to SEE it NEW.

1 Alexander Klar, "Am Ende zählt, dass ein gutes Bild herauskommt," in Jetzt! Junge Malerei in Deutschland, Munich, 2019, p. 16.
2 The artist in conversation with the author, November 2020.
3 The artist in conversation with the author, November 2020.

4 Ilka Langkowski, "Irritierende Strukturen," in Mein Kunst-Stück, Kreiszeitung, March 1, 2019.
5 Michael Stoeber, "A Wide Field: The Works of Marina Schulze," in Marina Schulze: No Depth without Surface, Bielefeld, 2014, p. 11.
6 ibid.
7 Roland Mayer, "Behind the picture: On Marina Schulze's room paintings," in Marina Schulze: Blow up, Wilhelmshaven and Wuppertal, 2010, p. 78.
8 Birgit Joos, "Das 'Neue Sehen': Extreme Perspektiven in der Photographie", in Perspektiven, Durchblicke, Ausblicke in Natur und Leben, in Kunst und Volkskunst, Murnau, 2000, pp. 84–90. The "New Vision" style developed in photography in the 1920s and is a visual language closely linked to the "New Objectivity" art movement. "'New Vision' means, on one hand, documentary, factual photography such as used by August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, or Werner Mantz. But it also includes artistic concepts from the Bauhaus or Surrealism environment, such as the oeuvres of Man Ray, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy or Herbert Bayer." Prestel-Lexikon der Fotografen, Munich, 2002, p. 263.
9 Prestel-Lexikon der Fotografen, Munich, 2002, p. 199.
10 Birgit Joos, "Das 'Neue Sehen': Extreme Perspektiven in der Photographie," in Perspektiven, Durchblicke, Ausblicke in Natur und Leben, in Kunst und Volkskunst, Murnau, 2000, p. 89.11 Cf. Jeffrey Deitch and Alison Gingeras, Unrealism: New Figurative Painting, New York, 2019, and Anja Richter, "Jetzt! Alles und Nichts," in Jetzt! Junge Malerei in Deutschland, Munich, 2019.