

## **The Immediacy of the Image – the work of Christian Eder**

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"Life is a prisoner of its own image", wrote the Italian author Antonio Tabucchi; it would betray nothing of "true reality". "At the same time, life is full to bursting, impatient, eager to break out of the square."<sup>1</sup> Perceptions of things, situations, sense impressions that suddenly crop up and point to nothing other than themselves at times make the observer feel that he or she has collided with the quintessence of nature, its elemental essence, its very being. The challenge of describing or representing these instincts is part of an immanent art process; it already preoccupied Jean-Paul Sartre when he had Antoine Roquetin – the protagonist in his novel – experience a moment of enlightenment whilst looking at a chestnut root: "The world of explanation and reasons is not that of existence (...), gnarled, inert, nameless, it fascinates me, filled my eyes, kept leading me back to its own existence. No matter how often I repeated: it's a root, it didn't catch on any more. (...) Function explains nothing. I sombrely realised that I had no means of understanding."<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean in the end that art lacks the means of translating nature into its medium without lapsing into a banal or even romantic description? That they are both systems independent of each other, whereby real nature is placed in contradiction to art? But the refutation of this question has been part of an immanent discourse on art at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, and Sartre, too, ended Roquetin's observation with the sentence: "I went to the hotel and started writing."

But how do you match an elemental experience in painting?

Christian Eder's work can be classified neither as abstract nature lyricism, which has characterised a great deal of painting since the eighties in succession to tachisme, nor should it be compared to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. And yet this recourse is valid, since it does indeed tell of the dialogue between an external and internal reality, a quest for a worthy form of representation, which in the end must lead to a dissociation from an image with literary associations. This doesn't happen straight away, but – and this links Christian Eder to one of the greats of Austrian painting, Kurt Kocherscheidt – takes place through the very fact of working in nature and being confronted with it. Seemingly a paradox; yet travelling through an untouched landscape in Latin America was in the end decisive for both artists in their later work. Approaching parallels to Kocherscheidt's formulation of painting and his search for its immediacy, Christian Eder is showing a number of early works in mixed techniques on paper, and also a high-format picture, an oval form, which he has been working on in recent years. Today Christian Eder's painting – in terms of pure technique and the colour application itself – differs a great deal from Kurt Kocherscheidt's work. His brushstroke is neither as relentless or pastose, nor is the aura of his forms as far-reaching as that of Kocherscheidt. But what has always reverberated in Eder's pictures is the endeavour to wrest the essence out of perceived reality, to research the essence of painting per se, aspects that distinguished Kocherscheidt's pictures ever since the eighties and in the end led to abstraction. Confronted with nature, Christian Eder began to free himself from the traditional idea of a picture. It should no longer describe, no longer narrate, but immediately and directly convey what it is. The sense impressions of nature, how variously coloured fields collide, the play of light in the furrows of the earth or on the water surface, are drained of all sensitised, emotional mood and presented as a pure discourse of colour. What happens here is the translation of nature into an image that transcends the representative and narrative. It is obvious that Christian Eder's painting lacks all illusionism of depth. Nor is it about this. Everything is simultaneously as much in the foreground as in the background, next to each

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Tabucchi, *It's Getting Later All the Time*, Munich 2004

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981

other, on top of each other. The painter conducts the actual dialogue with nature on the canvas, where model and pure form meet, where the feeling and experience of perception is transposed without using colour as a descriptive element. Christian Eder objectifies and isolates nature by translating it into a monochrome reduction, acknowledging it so to speak as an entity, which is in definition something different from the search for a motif. What happens between the furrows of the earth is now a dualism of colour planes. Wherever the reflection of light was interesting for the artist, he now endeavours to trace the immanent phenomena of colours and works with a different reality, that of the image itself. How does yellow change when a shade of green appears next to it, what happens on the colour plane when a red line confines or runs through it? The picture starts to vibrate, to move, and new colour nuances develop.

Christian Eder's pictures are always produced in process-oriented work series, which he works on simultaneously side by side; they condition each other technically and aesthetically, also through the simultaneousness of the production. They share in common a frontality of imaging. The artist approaches the things he depicts without giving them the potential of imaginary depth – which doesn't mean that they are not spatial. Yet space is not generated in Eder's pictures out of the components of perspective, illusionism, the play of light and shade and so on, but solely out of the dialogue of forms and colours with each other. At times he combines the homogeneous plane with a motif that permits more painterly freedom, which allows the observer's eye again more scope to sweep over it, only to confront him in the same instant – through the adjacent colour field – with an area that is far stricter in form: as if the artist wants to use the ambivalence of openness and rigorousness to acquaint the observer with the contradictions and fractures of life.

The high-format panel Christian Eder describes as a kind of "bookmark" for his work is defined by a large interior oval. It is more painterly, not as exact as his later pictures, the brushstroke is clearly evident in its movement, and more pastose. What points towards the later pictures of his *String Series*, indeed, as if formulated within them for the first time, is the ellipse. It dominates the picture as the central interior form in this work and presents itself as compact, almost monolithic. The ellipse is manifest in Christian Eder's painting as central form, its tension gradually dominating the picture, as if the component modules of nature were condensed into a single form. The ellipse embodies ideal form for the artist; in contrast to the circle it is not finite and is pivoted towards all directions. "It is a form that expands. Applied to my pictures, this means that the movement of the ellipse also springs over onto the painting, expands here and eventually forces its way, as it were, to the fore."<sup>3</sup>

The question of time and movement is immanent in his pictures, although the constant alternation between an apparent static state and a movement – occasionally perceived as a flickering of the colours – keeps changing as if the artist wants to condense our visual capabilities. But what is the secret of the temporality and movement of his pictures? This does not keep to any inherent logic of before and after. The temporal properties are based in the image itself, the morphing of perception of the picture space, the variation of colour in *Strings* in their relation to the ellipses. Both are basically nothing more than geometric forms on a pictorial medium. Yet the transition to a spatial and temporal sequence is generated as soon as these individual forms are seen as a whole and thus edge towards the boundary of the inexpressible, the premonition, the indescribable. Hence there is no fixed or defined direction in interpretation either; the eye of the observer is always guided in one direction. The pictorial experience is in constant flux, all options are simultaneously open, but cannot be interpreted simultaneously – which in the end brings us back to reality and its divergent perceptions and onto the plane of super-temporality in the picture's essence.

The artist is entirely aware of the division between the two systems of art and nature. But it is exactly in this that he sees the challenge and potential of fathoming out the relevance of

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<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Christian Eder in his atelier, Vienna August 2008

each. The interaction and overlaying of the systems generate a new interface. An instant of eternity? Or the moment when painting unfolds all its richness and aura. Because in contrast to photography, painting has far more means of visualising the moment of engagement in movement; not by recording an instant, but by developing space and movement – and thus ephemerality – and making them sensuously palpable primarily in the process of painting. Life, full to bursting, is captured not in the representation itself, but encroaches upon the awareness of the observer first through this process.

Küb an der Rax, August 2008