



## Two In One, At Least, To Begin With

Reflections on a series of paintings by Emmilou Roessling

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The Berlin-based German choreographer and visual artist Emmilou Roessling has recently realised a series of paintings. Paintings that at first glance come across as possibly banal or superficial but when you look back at them – What was it that I saw? -, they open up for something incredibly intricate, a layered dynamic that makes any derive come across as phoney and instead creates a whole consisting of superimposed incompatible phenomena. It's at the same time their somewhat dismal existence that enables a delicate, simultaneously complex play between capture and withdrawal, literality and fiction, presence and absence, image and movement, conceptual and concept.

We tend to say that we watch paintings. A painting is something one looks at, and we need to learn and practice ways of seeing. But what if that is only half the story and that the supremacy of the ocular in fact diminishes what painting can be? The gaze cages painting in perspectives, theories of colour, elegance of execution, and those obligatory steps away to create the appropriate distance. Watching is mixed up in forms of power and ownership. To look at something implies to appropriate it, make it one's possession or property. One need only think about the history of nudes in painting, and how connected it is to exploitation, power, scopophilia and proprietorship.

For time-based art turning away from the gaze towards experience might be less complicated, but it's crucial to also understand static art, may that be paintings, poetry or sculpture, as experiences, or least also and at the same time. The gaze identifies, selects, separates, distantiates, locates and dominates, whereas experience knows nothing about

those aspects and instead appears to oscillate between bliss and fear, desire and demise, gentleness and violence, attraction and repulsion etc. Not through a pendular movement, from pole to pole, from plus to minus, but rather through bursts of unpredictable undercurrents/commons. Watching, looking and seeing has issues of overcoming polarity, opposition and back and forth, which frames and domesticates the artwork whereas experience unfolds landscapes, not seldomly without direction, meandering with a sense of aimlessness, avoiding guidance and making sure to stay of a prescribed path.

This is not a matter of using all our senses, smell a painting, lick a poem, or putting an ear to a sculpture, but instead of refraining from the temptation to fasten the artwork in discourse to, deny it forms of intimacy, duration or being with, multiple forms of attention and most of all allow us to skip over interpretation in favour of the possibility of the production of new kinds of sensibilities.

Emmilou Roessling's so-called camouflage paintings are small format canvases wrapped in what appear to be sheets of paper from tourist brochures. The glossy prints, wrapped so that a name of a city, country or tourist attraction is visible, performs a skewed repetition of cheesy forms of consumable projection. It's almost painfully literal in regard to how these images promise a sustained moment in paradise. It's images that are so familiar that "we" cannot not snowball into forms of fantasies of sun, umbrella drinks and Hollywood versions of honeymoon at a beach resort, or some other romanticised scenario trashed by globalised escapism. Even though we know it's fake we enjoy it too much not to continue performing the illusion.

On the one hand, these images are extremely optimised, with an image dramaturgy that is effective to the last pixel. But because they are, in addition to being painfully predictable, they appear to transcend watching and instead boost experience.

If art is in the eye of the beholder, it can never be something else than what has been agreed upon. If art, or the experience of art, is a matter of being implicated, does that not propose that an encounter with art perpetuates established forms of knowledge? One can, after all, only be implicated with something already known, at least known as something. Relations are formed on the basis of convention, and as we know conventions can never be broken but at best complexified. Never mind, there is no life, world, reality or language without relations, especially not if we consider the lack of relation to equally be a form of relation. Simultaneously, however, relations are, which is a seriously good thing, what makes it impossible for humans to access anything in itself. Relations are like an interface that cannot be bypassed.

One layer of the camouflage paintings communicates an excess of relations. It's of course possible to interpret them as a form of critique of the modern project, or perhaps as a commentary on global climate crisis, but readings pointing in those or similar directions would miss the point. Roessling's paintings are smoke screens in regard to several dynamics, one of them framing them as critique which always, at least implicitly, is an occupation with securing known or familiar ground. Critique is a matter of power and power's first dictum is stability. Instead of acknowledging the image, in the sense of what is in the image, the wrapping slash surface operates like a detour opening up for the possibility of bypassing the ocular and the temptation of extracting something from the image. The glossy images rather become something similar to what Alice had to fall through before landing in Wonderland. A kind of passage that isn't necessary, but still cannot be left out, and that we recognise from endless adventure fictions, and whose function is to, precisely undo relationality, not to eradicate relations but to corrupt their continuities.

If the aesthetic encounter is formulated around relationality what consequences does that have regarding arts possible or assumed autonomy? Perhaps it wasn't an accident that the art and the beholder construction gained traction at a moment when a general modernist project was strongly hegemonic and art's convergence with essence remained largely unquestioned. Needless to say, a notion of art carried by the possibility of essence proposes at once universality and violence, and, monolithic and impenetrable mysticism. Postmodernism undid this knot when announcing the performativity of language, everything's relativity and hence that art is all about relations, however, the price to pay was an unmitigated denouncement of whatever art could be (which it no longer could) beyond text, meaning, signification, interpretation, critique and identity. Even though thinkers like Francois Lyotard, Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze objected, through attempts to resurrect the sublime, the postmodern regime ended up untouched, which implied that contemplation, in particular interestless contemplation, was evicted and the centrefold occupied with the artwork's relevance, what it was about or the position of the artist. In the long run, elaborated for example by Dorothea von Hantelmann, the artwork was revamped into a token. Firstly, if art is a bundle of relations, it loses its autonomy and can only be valued as a pawn in a network of relations, and secondly, a token that is used in different social plays. Aesthetics is swapped for sociology, being an inch categorical in regard to Hantelmann's reading of Tony Bennett's theories around museums, and aesthetic experience is evidently flushed out.

Spoiler alert, well it's not really a secret. What is wrapped inside are paintings of ordinary camouflage patterns. Commercially fabricated stretched canvases painted with regular acrylic and oil, well executed but one-to-one, nothing special. In the layering between wrapping and painting, surface and content, something of a collapse of signifier chains erupts, where the images that frames the experience conceal what looks like an image, it's after all a painting, but at the same time isn't. A tension is produced between an experience that accelerates through an optimised dramaturgy and a destination – the canvas – upon which experience cannot land or gain some form of actualisation. Emmilou Roessling's paintings make absolutely no sense being looked at but approached as an entry point for experience they unfold, not at all as a riddle, but instead as an enigma. Watching, within a Western tradition, following Mario Perniola, is hierarchising, vertical and homogenising in the sense of favouring the consistency, and hence power, of relations in front of the object in itself, may that be a cigarette, painting, image, dance, sound or memory. Roessling's paintings unground conventions of watching, complexifying techniques of appropriation to the extent that experience emerges as the most adequate approach. The paintings one could also argue, pose tokens in a social play but engage in a conspiracy where whatever is at play loses bearing, position or reliability.

Aesthetic experience defined as an experience in kind different from any other, that is as something un-identifiable or non-locatable though convention, becomes even more complicated through the introduction of the so-called, performative regime, in particular, concerned with identity understood as performative and hence a politics. If identity is to be through and through performative, and therefore without origin or nucleus, it goes without saying that there cannot simultaneously exist a domain differentiated from language. With a bit of a stretch, the downside of performativity is the demise of magic, mystique and the supernatural in general. A paradox can appear when scholars, activists and artist simultaneously claim the performativity of identity and engage with practices with strong connections to truth, essence and purity.

Not only did art detach from essence, over the last 50 years, it also missed out on truth, as well as lost its autonomy, but the real tragedy is that art also had to give up its speculative

dynamic. Here the reference is not speculation as in stock markets, which is based on analysis and probability, but speculation in regard to forms of prefiguration or, so to say, non-reactive projections, which engages with contingency and rejects any form of probability.



The camouflage paintings corrupt both positions and submit to neither. Here's evidently no claim toward essence and yet isn't the absence of image, or perhaps better the non-image of the hidden camouflage painting, a kind of acceleration towards an experience that refers only to itself as experience. It's however crucial that it's an experience and not something that can be "seen", as experience, in this context, something that takes place in the implicated independently of what is "in" the image. Essence is not captured but instead generated, but not through the forming of a relation, which cannot not have qualities, morals etc., neither through the absence or Absence of relation, but through non-relation. Emmilou Roessling's paintings show us nothing but carry the possibility of the production of truth, and we can have no idea what that truth is, before or after the moment of its production.

Through cinema, we are familiar with the notion of out of frame. An individual can for example be present in the image through the voice, yet absent a body. The person is and isn't at the same time in the image, and, is or isn't present in the image. This proposes two overlapping and incompatible forms of relation. The conjunctive relation is defined by "and", and the disjunctive relation is proposed by "or". Approaching the camouflage paintings entangles the implicated in a vibrant space-time engaged in a paradoxical oscillation between and and or.

The tension between conjunctive and disjunctive relations, a moment when something is both this and that, and this or that, can be understood as a dynamics in regard to which a decision can not be made. A negotiation without premises or stability and therefore requires the implicated to, rather than "deciding" between given options, generate a decision or create a ground. It's in other words not a matter of choosing from a menu of opportunities, whose effectivity can be measured and compared, but instead, the pressure of establishing, by the individual, criteria for the possibility of any decision at all. This procedure, although the reference to cinema has its etymology in Gilles Deleuze, overlaps with the notion of emancipation in respect of aesthetic encounter, elaborated by the French thinker Jacques Rancière. Emancipation for Rancière, although it might appear paradoxical, has nothing to do with liberating oneself. On the contrary, it's the emergence of a moment of being free from oneself. Roessling's paintings makes the tensions between liberty and freedom tangible, without offering solutions (how could they?), where liberty is always established vis à vis identifiable forms of power whereas proper freedom implies

the absence of power, which is the reason for why those seemingly harmless paintings in fact are quite haunting or even somewhat nauseating.

Emmilou Roessling's paintings destabilises how art is able to claim the specificity of experience, autonomy, speculative aspirations, open-endedness or properly de-stabilising effect we need to get free art from the eye of the beholder, and insist on that art, or more specifically possible experiences emerging from encounters with art, is actual and material. That the experience exists, at least partially, independently of the viewer/ beholder, and rather withdraws from the beholder in order to not become subject. The aesthetic encounter is not a matter of establishing, consolidating for of relations, or establish relationality. On the contrary, in order for the aesthetic encounter to carry specificity in regard to experience the experience must be empty, or call it self-referential, if not it can be compared with other experiences and thus measurable.

The American modernist painter Barnett Newman once said about his painting, that he just wanted the paint on the canvas to be as beautiful as it was in the tube. I find the sentence quite endearing, modest and not exactly the wording of a male imposing subject. As long as the paint stays in the tube, it can become everything, it's not nothing but perhaps a full emptiness. Whereas when it attaches to the canvas it cannot not become something, even if that something is just a stain, a monochrome, maybe a cloud, some smoke, a few lines or something fuzzy Rothko. Newman was searching for that withdrawing movement, not for essence, neither for truth, but exactly that emptiness that as encounter, is the harbinger of possible essence, truth, liveliness or autonomy. Essences, truth, liveliness and autonomy that crumbles, withers away or go up in smoke the moment one stretches out in order to capture it. Not because it's like a fish, snake or shady character, but in the sense that the moment at the moment of capture essence, truth, liveliness and autonomy shapeshift and becomes tangible, available for inspection, identification and taxonomy, in other words, it goes through a process of actualisation which singular destination is signification, language and convention.

Without making too much, or little, of the Newman reference, Roessling's paintings is shifting the modernist painter's statement into something gentle, touching and alive. Not cute or girly, not a critique or middle finger, but with a sense of hope and care. These paintings are modest and yet they carry something immense. They are not images of, as in Friedrich or Turner, but rather bridges into an experience beyond the self, knowledge and the world.

There is a curious connection between camouflage and expectation. Camouflage is conventionally understood to hide something, make something precious invisible, to disappear. More recently camouflage, appropriated by fashion etc. has transformed into a form of image. Today we *recognise* camouflage which seems quite counterproductive, but perhaps camouflage has become a matter of hiding in plain sight. It is although possible that camouflage is not as predictable as it seems, that it practices a double standard, that there exists a hidden agenda. On a primarily level camouflage is certainly addressing misinformation, diversion and blending in, but it can also function as a kind of screen, a project surface, with a front and a backside, thus simultaneously screen and membrane. It's something but its function is to be empty, to be meaningless. Camouflage in this sense can perhaps be regarded as pure expectation. It is not hiding something, nor is there nothing behind. Camouflage is the contingent capacity that there is or not something behind, and this something, or not, is nothing disguised into something, expectation without realisation or in fact the promise of aesthetic experience.



A second layer to camouflage's hidden agenda concerns its status as image or even the possibility that camouflage, even whilst watching it, doesn't coagulate into becoming an image. Camouflage seems almost to be an image without content, or its content is constantly withdrawing from capturing. Camouflage is an image of the absence of image, and it comes across as a little bit silly to consider what is in the image, which might not result in the causal solution that camouflage automatically ends up being what an image is. Camouflage is not an image, nor is it not not an image and certainly not an anti-image, but it might be a non-image, which is to say the suspension of the image claim to locate or consolidate something. With a twist, camouflage is an image in and of movement.

Painting has throughout the last, at least, hundred years experienced an ongoing battle between paintings' fictional dynamics and hence psychology, symbolism and mysticism, and painting as something that is occupied with materiality, actuality, the facticity of a surface, colour fields, abstraction and so on - what-you-see-is-what-you-get. Emmilou Roessling's paintings invite us to consider the possibility of a painting that is both at the same time or that without becoming a matter of psychology, symbolism warps what-you-see... into what experience, is what you have evoked, what you have conjured up.