

## Doing Things with Pictures

On the image of man in Sabine Dehnel

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What explains much of the eternal fascination with portraits is no doubt the human face, its potential as the most symbolic part of the body, where we can read the signs that existence has left on us. The close ties between artist and model (at least this is our impression) is a source of inspiration for both. The artist's ideas and visual language exert their influence on the portrait, just as those portrayed exert theirs. This exchange of interpretation and inspiration is usually seen as a creative and productive interface between different characters.

Sabine Dehnel's works bring a new dimension to this theme as, unlike many of her colleagues, she reveals photography's ability to represent, i.e., its ability to refer to reality. Like distorting mirrors, her captivating yet unemotional portraits of women manage to blur the borders of perception, concealing more than they actually show. At the end of the day, in most of her works all we see is a torso, a face hidden behind the hair or even the typical three-quarter profile portrait showing the back of the head. Hence, when we attempt to convey in words who it is we are actually seeing in these strange portraits we soon realise that it is impossible to reach any conclusion regarding either the body, the face, the personal traits or the attitude of the sitter. Instead, we are obliged to describe a fictitious object—to be precise, an image. Yet, isn't it also possible to recognise someone by approaching a likeness of him or her? Or is there no reality at all behind the image? Isn't the portrait, reflected over and over again, rather unique even if it reproduces the totality? This is apparently

the case, for the viewer never knows for sure whether the pictures present a real person or only the clothes or hats to which a body is attached. In point of fact, all Sabine Dehnel's portraits refer exclusively to other portraits, and the viewer is always kept in the dark, with no information about the sitter or the reproduction.

This is partly because Sabine Dehnel's paintings are based on photographs. More often than not (as in the gym series) she departs from pictures she has already painted to construct complex spaces that link the subjective visual angle to a new reality in order to depict it again. If these spaces are eventually filled with dematerialised bodies, the dimensions of which seem about to fall, and conductive systems that were originally functional end up transformed into an abstract background decor, the question of the degree of reality of certain pictures is also aptly conveyed by their form.

At the end of the day, in the different media she has chosen, Dehnel reflects the loss of meaning of the rememorative and representative functions of the classical graphic arts, a process that has accelerated since the beginning of modernism. The stages in the historical reassessment of visual and material forms of representation are somehow completed, and the resulting idea that the portrait artist should respect the features of his or her sitter over and above other traits is forsaken. This process presents all the stages of the 'distorted likeness', as Walter Benjamin paradoxically defined the abyss separating the image from its reproduction. Dehnel introduces the multiple representations of the portrait genre in an almost infinite curve of asynchronic synchronism that knows no hierarchies, no before or after.

Speaking of portrait, Benjamin stretches the range of possibilities between the two poles, 'likeness' and 'distortion', thereby endeavouring to create forms of mimetic capacity, forms of correspondence with the surrounding environment-nature, that mediate between the individual and the world. A prerequisite for this figure of thought is the idea of a subjectivity

'distorted' by itself, continuously surpassing its medium and consequently, to a certain extent, alienated.

This process, the initial stages of which were documented by Benjamin, is now almost complete. For some time now the aesthetic strategies conceived to discover the subject in the object, i.e., in that which only seems to belong to it externally, have replaced memory and naturalistic personification. What at first seemed to be a merely ornamental detour (in Sabine Dehnel's paintings, for instance, the excessive presence of materiality in the form of extravagant hats and brightly coloured items of clothing) becomes a necessity. As fixed points in memory, these objects then take the place of the subject which still wanders around the layers of our memory like a shadow.

The artist skilfully uses 'involuntary memory', in other words, spontaneous evocations and sensory associations that with a special intensity bring to mind objects, smells or places, real or imaginary impressions, thereby enabling us to remember them for the first time. In all likelihood, the most famous example of reminiscence triggered from without is the taste of the madeleine soaked in tea which makes Swann (Marcel Proust's alter ego in *Remembrance of Things Past*) fully relive his childhood in Combray.

Given that Sabine Dehnel does not merely reproduce and imitate things but always ascribes them to a body and even singles them out in her titles, she succeeds in reviewing the old questions regarding the ties between body (or face) and painting, the dichotomy between body and spirit and the links between individuals and symbolic objects. Hence her works are highly reflective pictures that relativise themselves by anticipating the objections raised by image theory, the self-poiesis of which irrefutably presents as new the changing ideas surrounding 'truth' and if there really is a difference between experiences of the first, second and third orders.