Paint as a verb

"472. When a child learns to talk, it learns at the same time what it should investigate and what not. When it learns that there is a wardrobe in a room, it is taught not to doubt that what it sees at a later date is still a wardrobe and not just some sort of stage set."
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

"Since Wittgenstein described the statement as an 'image of reality', the image could be considered as a statement on reality."
Nicholas Callas, *Art in the Age of Risk*

Ludwig Wittgenstein's analytical investigations into language and the possibility of making objectively true statements about reality were accompanied by doubts that were existentially threatening. Language, which has at its disposal an extremely structured system of symbols, led the philosopher on several occasions to come up against the epistemological limits of the abilities of linguistic description. Since only language has a conventional relationship with the visible and empirical, as well as the abstract things we experience, it is an extremely fragile instrument when it comes to truth. Language maintains its vibrant relationship to reality through those who see or perceive and are in a position to express what they see and perceive in conceptual terms. As a result, we humans precariously straddle our environment and language. We are permanently producing statements that behave similarly to pictures in order to remain, at least symbolically, in contact with our environment. Yet in the process there is no guarantee that the environment understands us. Although a wardrobe is a wardrobe – which is what we learnt without a shadow of a doubt – the word wardrobe tells us very little about the object itself that is described by the word. Phenotypically the wardrobe thus remains relatively vague, and appears only as an vague outline in our mind's eye – in the thousands of variations of what a wardrobe could look like. With regard to emotions, things are even more complicated where language is concerned. If linguistic statements can only be 'images of reality', what are we to make of pictorial depictions of reality?

If we are to pursue Nicholas Callas' suggestion, images offer a visible statement on reality: *One can look at an image as a statement on reality*. Reality as transposed by Anita Stöhr Weber into a work of art and thus opened up to the viewer's eye seems, however, to hardly be compatible with how we generally view reality. The primary cause of this discrepancy in perception: the fact that Stöhr Weber favors a symbolic or iconic relationship between a picture and reality in her work over one that is indexical. And she does so as a result of well-founded doubts about mimesis in painting. As opposed to a symbolic or iconic sign, indexical certainly has the advantage of being in contact with its environment; in the way for example that feet leave their imprint in sand, or skin changes its color when pressure is exerted on it. As such, an indexical symbol provides at least one truth: The foot imprint in the sand or the reddened spot of skin are – even if only

fleeting – 'pictorial' depictions of a reality, one that actually happened. The footprint exists and is real not because the word exists, but rather because the foot exists and then left its mark in the sand. However realistic painting may be, it cannot compete on the same terms.

Therefore, in order to wring truth from reality the greatest possible similarity in representative image does not help, nor are other iconic exaggerations in art of benefit (as pointillism, for example attempted in order to approximate as far as possible the optical impression left on the retina). Should you want to palpably grasp true objects, then it would seem that you require information about their physical existence. Being able to touch their surfaces could be a first step in this direction.

Anita Stöhr Weber's "Farbstücke", that hang like thin parchment paper over thin mounts, are pictorial shapes that are produced by means of an indexical process. Having brushed paint over a pre-defined surface and let it dry, the artist then removes it from the backing, allowing the monochrome color skin to become a source of information about a specific surface. The side of the "Farbstücke" on view adopts the shape of the former backing material; its texture comes into view. As such the paint is not simply a tool for painting, but the concrete, physical imprint of genuine reality. In doing so the "Farbstücke" are still in the tradition of classic painting inasmuch as viewed from the front, they can be perceived as abstract pictures. Their being hung at some distance from the wall causes the "Farbstücke" to assume wholly figurative qualities as after all they share the same space as the observer. In this way the "Farbstücke" intervene in culturally received ways of seeing and in genres defined by the history of art, without completing breaking with painting or sculpture. Rather, because the color actually becomes physically tangible, painterly and sculptural constants blend.

If paint is detached from its traditional grounding, namely the canvas, the latter then becomes open to visual coding, which address the canvas as an object, which would otherwise be neglected. Freed from being reduced to a state as server, Anita Stöhr Weber's frottages reveal a hidden structure: "Malgrund 1" to "Malgrund 4" make four sections of canvas visible and thus tangible, without presenting the canvas as a real object. The artist decided not to display canvasses as untreated ready-mades, but to highlight their individual details: What would a canvas be without the weave of the fabric?

Paradoxically, however, the indexical imprint depends on something that it does not then display. The relationship between what the frottages and also the "Farbstücke" depict and what they were based on can be described as a relationship between absence and presence. In Stöhr Weber's works what is visible is the embodiment of something that is absent and yet at the same time refers to its existence in reality. Photography functions in exactly the same way: It also portrays things that must have been there in order for the camera to take them. Given this state of affairs one would be justified in asking why Anita Stöhr Weber does not approach objects by means of photography in order to produce pictures that can be regarded as a statement on reality. Photography's reference to reality not only asserts the factual existence of objects, but also portrays them in the manner in which we believe we see them. The chances of making a true and objective statement about reality are not that bad. But what does photography make of the texture of objects? How does it display their physical qualities, which they doubtless possess? Photography

transforms texture and physical qualities into a smooth surface, it obeys the trace left by light, yet does not come into direct contact with the object itself. Seen in this light – is not photography much more of a set than an object?

Contrary to our powers of perception, which register objects from a single perspective and not from all vantage points, they have front and rear sides. Cézanne and his successors attempted in their painting to simultaneously portray the numerous sides to objects, thereby preserving their physical qualities in a picture. Interestingly enough the more it wanted to capture objects, the more painting became initially tactile and then abstract.

With regard to the depiction of the front and rear sides of objects, it is not just Stöhr Weber's "Farbstücke" and the frottages that provide artistic solutions to the problem of how to do justice to the pluralistic sides to things that exists in reality. Her silk-screen prints and large-format "Hinterglasbild" highlight the problem of the principle shortfall of perception, i.e. that we only viewi certain aspects of things and not the things in their entirety. As such the thin, slightly frayed color seams along the deckle-edged paper are the visible edges of a monochrome layer of paint that has been applied by silk-screen printing, and which is turned away from the observer – and which he only perceives as light shading on the paper but cannot see as paint that has been applied over the entire surface. If we consider the large "Hinterglasbild", the individual acrylic glass panels with their perforations are reminiscent of oversized printing plates over which a fat paint roller had passed so as to give an even grid to a base material that had been fashioned in some manner. The impasto red, which protrudes through the perforations, would appear to be the remains of paint from the printers that was left on the reverse of the panels and dried on.
The reversal of the traditional viewing side of a picture by means of silk-screen prints as well as the transparency suggested by the "Hinterglasbild", of at one and the same time looking at and behind paint, and yet still actually only revealing one side, makes real the pluralistic way of looking at things. Although the "Hinterglasbild" and the silk-screen prints, as opposed to the frottages and "Farbstücke" emerged without any reference to a specific, real counterpart, they still embody the pointer to a physical contact, which caused the paint to turn into a concrete object.

If one considers Anita Stöhr Weber's pictorial output, with regard to technique and/or appearance the works are effective through the dichotomy between absence and presence. By demonstrating how paint can function as a material that can be shaped, things are depicted, albeit extremely abstractly, as they actually exist in reality: physically and in full view. Although in Anita Stöhr Weber's ouevre color, form, surface, texture, line and format are the creative means that make up her art, she does not aim to have them become subjects themselves. As such she differs wholly from the definition of Concrete Art, which attempted to produce works of art that, in the words of Max Bill, "came into being without borrowing from natural phenomena, without transforming those phenomena, in other words: without abstraction." Whereas Concrete Art made use of arithmetic in an attempt to produce as objective a depiction of reality as possible and cited the logical truth of mathematics, it implicitly neglected the empiricism of objects. With regard to the perception of the world the concrete picture referenced nothing.

In order to go through Wittgenstein's wardrobe (in other words perceive it not as a stage-set but as an object and treat it as such) we need, as stated, information about its physical existence. Art that addresses the empiricism of objects must therefore maintain their claim on reality. In order to wring some truth out of reality, it can, as Anita Stöhr Weber's works demonstrate, take an alternate route, by referring to sides of certain things that we do not see. Do the works not refer to a place, an act, an origin and thus to another time? In Stöhr Weber's art, paint and thus color is present as an agent imparting reality. It happens at a place, by virtue of an act, refers to an origin and is thus of another time. In the works, the paint and color governs our perception in the same way that a verb governs a sentence. If we think of the paint as a verb, we appreciate how it explores, comes into contact with, penetrates, possesses and registers parts of the world surrounding us – like a finely tuned sensor, with which we are familiar through the sensitive tips of our fingers. Anita Stöhr Weber's empiricism of paint creates an aesthetic coding of the world, which no longer occurs as painting. Her art is unpainted, as Anita Stöhr Weber formulates paint as an indexical sign. Gray dispersion paint, applied two-dimensionally to a wall, can therefore be nothing more than a "coating".

Claudia Seidel