

Atmosphere(s)

The motifs of Andreas Walther's images are not very spectacular: a hilly, treeless, wide landscape underneath a gray sky, a birch forest in the snow, a rice field with a background of cloud-covered mountains, underwood with white-flowering shrubs in a dark forest, nocturnal woods, or even a stone wall. The scenes are sometimes close visions, sometimes seen from a distance; it is never possible to locate them.

Even a second or a third photo, which capture the same situation in a slightly shifted perspective and are combined into a diptych or triptych, do not contribute to local clarification. The second and third image however reinforce the possibility of comprehending the location spatially and add a moment in time, and create dynamic. The images rarely have a center; all details are equal and balanced so that the eye can move and wander within the image without obstruction.

The question of whether and how the image is composed is rather redundant. Compared to the New Pictures from Paradise by Thomas Struth, for example, which present to the viewer a dense, diversified, green forest, Walther's images are less composed and in no way anecdotic. But Struth also wants his gazes into a vivid green to trigger, in the end, new visual experiences and lead to contemplation.

Struth refers to Tai Qi, where sensations are described as a flow of energy. Here we are already close to Walther's ideas. However, unlike Struth, Walther devotes himself to the relationship between East Asian and European culture not only episodically but fundamentally. And these exciting encounters are manifested in his images that integrate photography, as well as in his video works.

The nature images of Walther emanate tranquility, they are an expression of inner peace. It is not an eternal, infinite tranquility that is described here, but tranquility in the sense of a pausing – as if time has stopped and the world is allegorized and visibly concentrated in the 'now'. And this 'now' expands and fills itself up with space in time. All this is a process of perception that is not just comparable to breathing in and out but in fact is breathing itself: Nature breathes, and while intensely contemplating Walther's images, the breathing of nature coincides with the breathing of the beholder.

This allows a complete immersing into nature and lets the beholder forget that s/he contemplates an image, the illustration of nature. The latter becomes an image, and despite the cut-out of the image frame that is taken from a wider context, this image becomes an expression of a whole that one can experience with all senses. The image-space expands into real space, whereby the beholder finds him- or herself entirely surrounded by the image's atmosphere – as if the contemplation of this atmosphere leads to an increased sensual perception comparable to the one of the artist on original location. This effect seems to be achieved as Walther's approach fundamentally differs from that of other photographers.

Walther wanders in nature without intention, and if possible alone. If he is taken by an atmosphere while wandering, he contemplates for a long time and increasingly perceives what he senses. 'The world is what we perceive' (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). If 'perception of reality' denotes the passive process of taking in what is external to the 'self', it is through contemplation that this passive process transforms into an active form of awareness.

And, according to Walther's understanding, it is only through the active, intellectual reflection of sensation that nature transforms into landscape. While we are usually used to distinguish pristine nature from man-made landscape, Walther translocates this process of transformation from nature to culture to the impact that nature's atmosphere unfolds upon observation. 'Without reflection (of sensing), landscape is nature', Walther says. Within the interaction of the exterior (nature's atmosphere) and the interior (sensing of this atmosphere)] we get, as already suggested, to the rhythm of intuitive inhaling and exhaling, calmly observed by the mind.

That is why the actual act of photographing is – despite or perhaps just due to long experience – almost negligible for the artist. The photograph is nothing more than a visual, figurative notation parallel to an inner mood resulting from being completely filled with the atmosphere of the scenery. That Walther has to handle the release of the camera on location several or even many times can hardly affect – let alone disturb – his sensual state of mind: in the end it is the eye that sees and not the camera lens. Perhaps Walther's way of photographing, that does not bear calculation, is in the best sense of the English expression of 'taking a photograph'.

With this experience of sensing nature's atmosphere, taking photographs is only a marginal event and a first step in the artist's further work process. Days, even weeks may pass before the atmosphere of the scenery unintentionally awakens in his memory and only then does Walther examine the many 'snapshots' he took. He chooses those photographs that come closest to the remembered atmosphere and subjects them to a long-lasting, manifold process; he deals with the photographs and alters them for however long it takes so that they – just like the artist himself on location – breathe this very original atmosphere as purely as possible. Although this atmosphere remains vague and is not entirely explicable, sensing and thinking nevertheless have found an ineffable atmospheric unity. Here this unity has turned into an image beyond what is conceptually comprehensible.

It is essential to ask what role the motif – initially characterized as only rarely enthralling – plays in the exciting as well as meditative process. Walther realizes images of beautiful, bright-white flower umbels as well as of treetops in dense mist. Both views, the exhilarating and the melancholic one, are of natural, self-evident beauty; the aesthetic stimulus, however, does not intrude and disturb because it is not a superficial (specious) one: it is not the object that appeals here but the impressive atmosphere, emanating from the object in the sum of all sensing. After all, it seems that aesthetics does relate to ethics. Walther intensively dealt with and was inspired by Friedrich Schiller's 'Aesthetic Education of Man'. It is from the point where Schiller lets the ever-threatened balance of sense and form culminate in the ideal of beauty that Walther starts to move towards the philosophy of Daoism, which replaces the concept of beauty by a dynamic, in the sense of openness. With this focus set on dynamic, sense and mind are suspended in a goal-free, energetic space. 'Suspended' here applies in a double meaning: on the one hand as an embeddedness of sense and mind, on the other hand as space and time almost boundlessly discharged into openness.

Therefore, it is coherent of Walther's thought to take the motif further out of focus: In some of his recent works, for example, he merely deals with sections of walls. These however exercise their enchantment precisely: since they are not distracted by anything objective, one can entirely engage in the attentive palpation of an image surface of, for instance, manifold shades of gray. Along the way one perceives natural traces of decay as well as scratches, or sprawling green moss. Nevertheless, vision does not attach to those but glides back and forth, unintentionally and aimlessly and as a result, consciousness opens up further.

An even stronger effect is imparted by Walther's hand scrolls. This format allows the artist to realize and visualize much of what he has been continuously settling himself in over the last two decades. These friezes, consisting of many seamlessly merged photographs about 25 centimeters high and four meters wide, depict for instance a wall without its upper and lower boundaries, and again without conveying any topographical context. The subject matter is barely relevant, instead the frieze takes on painterly traits in all its shades of gray. The medium of photography always demands a real counterpart that the apparatus can capture. It is certainly important for Walther that his works remain linked to the reality of life; however this is not realized by the image's subject but by its atmospheric effect. When the image is spread horizontally at chest level it is not only the eye that wanders along the frieze, but the whole body. Since the work does not include any narrative, the direction of 'reading' is open to choice – a

circumstance that can be perceived as an attentive gesture towards the encounter and approximation of the cultural environments of East Asia and Europe. The hand scrolls almost appear as sculptural objects. Reading them, one remains and moves within a personal rhythm and traces the infinite number of structures and color shades. The physical object is pushed back to the limits of abstraction, an aspect that causes an attenuation of the whole mental and physical condition. Here it is particularly noticeable that Walther has intensively internalized Far Eastern culture. The hand scrolls as well as the whole body of work demonstrate how a European can, even though employing the medium of photography, approach Chinese philosophy and mentality in a respectful manner.

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