

## The Riverside Moves Along With the River

**It's the presence of a subject and object without a dividing barrier between them. Uninterrupted activity and the presence of all things without a person to identify them. A state of subject/object as parallels: the riverside moves along with the river.**

Magnus Plessen<sup>1</sup>

The worst punishment: three-dimensional beings flattened and trapped in an infra-thin glass pane that spins listlessly in the vastness of outer space. The greatest glory: an expanding balloon, swelling in space and also across time, change without cease. The former, the fate of villains from the planet Krypton in *Superman II* (1980, courtesy of Jor-El, played by Marlon Brando), and also painting, for Magnus Plessen. The latter, a vision of reality in the metaphysics of Henri Bergson, and also painting, for Magnus Plessen. The trick is to get the balloon into the painting, to press it through the glass and blow it up.

This is what Plessen's paintings do. It's something new, and so, hard to understand. To use old categories of thought – abstraction vs. representation, imagination vs. perception – the critical tools we already possess, in order to understand this new something would be to miss our chance. Relying on these theories generalizes and divides experience into broad identities; this way of thinking, according to Bergson, creates all of the 'difficulties inherent in metaphysics, the antimonies it raises, the contradictions into which it falls'.<sup>2</sup> How, however, are we to think without the ideas we have at hand? Bergson suggested that we must make the effort to think differently: not only to use different concepts, but to reconsider the very primacy we place on concepts, to, as he put it, 'reverse the *normal* direction of the workings of thought'.<sup>3</sup> What is this new philosophical mindset or practice that would allow us to understand, or, better, to fully contact art (and everything else)?

The key may be undoing the largest of conceptual antimonies: the modern division between subject and object that produced the Kantian problem of how an interior, immaterial subject can know the external, physical world. One metaphysical and artistic response to this dilemma has been to emphasise a single side of the conflict, as with formalist abstraction's heightened attention to objects – the empiricism of Donald Judd, for example. For Judd, things are just

<sup>1</sup> All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from an email correspondence with Magnus Plessen between October 2011 and July 2012 and a conversation that took place in his show at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York on 16 February 2012, as well as in his studio in Berlin on 13 July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Bergson. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison [1911] (Dover, New York 2007), p. 159

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160; the italics are Bergson's.

only unfigured material can do this, can introduce elements of genuine novelty and surprise. Maybe I'm wrong, but your paintings definitely bring this experience to me.

And I agree completely about the loss of control and the importance of intuition; that becomes more and more clear as we move out of a historical moment when social life was dominated by ideology. That is the importance of the kind of painting that you do, and it's there to see, for anyone who is willing to see it.

But I would like to try and understand your earlier statement based on the T.S. Eliot quote: "For me, the key to understanding inner and outer space in painting is the space of the revolving door; at its centre there is no one looking back at you. The line between inside and outside is indifferent to appearances. Representation in abstraction. 'Neither flesh nor fleshless'. All things present without being recognised. 'Neither movement from nor towards'. Representation continuing even when you close your eyes."

**MP** For quite a while I thought that a painting should look back at you. I believe this implies that the painter/onlooker has a defined position in front of the painting, and that there is a kind of readiness on the part of the painting to come alive when someone is looking at it. In some of my paintings I took this relationship to an extreme by imagining that I am the person in the painting who is looking

back at me observing the painting from the outside. In this context, I once talked about a transparent revolving door to describe the sensation that I am both exterior to an object, looking at it, and at the same time, in my imagination, I am acting within the object. That's more or less where the revolving door in my statement, which I sent you a week ago, comes from.

In my show with Barbara [Gladstone Gallery, 2012] I will have some paintings which, I believe, have a different relation to the viewer than my previous paintings had. This is a quote of mine from the press release: "These paintings take less notice of the presence of the viewer than earlier works. Imagine a theater performance being in full blast as you enter the space of the theater to take your seat. This indifference to me, or possibly the onlooker, and a feeling of the unfamiliarity of the depicted heads and body parts, give the rotation paintings a quality of coming from a long distance to my mind."

**KS** The shift between the earlier work and the new work, in terms of the viewer, is clearly put. I am especially interested in the concept of unfamiliarity, and what it might hold. What makes the body parts strange, or foreign to you/us, and where in the distance is the image coming from? I don't expect you to answer, but the questions are compelling.

**MP** The individual body parts, such as a hand, look familiar when seen by themselves. But the

Plessen says he knows 'what a foot looks like'. But rather than describing the feeling in words, or looking at his foot, or pointing to it with his finger, he (unusually) gestures with his foot, waving it in the air. He knows what it is to have a foot; more accurately, a foot feels what it is to be a foot. Feet often feel heavy and large, out of proportion relative to the rest of the body, because of gravitational pull and their function in grounding the body (a sensation that is particularly strong for Plessen). Similarly, in front of a painting of a yellow hand mounted on a wooden stick that seems to pivot and trace a blue arc of paint, the artist bends his right arm at the elbow repeatedly, grasping it with his left hand at the wrist. 'I know what that feels like, mechanically', he says. The right arm feels the motion itself, as a subject, even as, with his other hand, the artist objectifies the motion as a mechanical movement, located outside of himself.

The human self and its body parts may appear estranged here; when that self is placed in relation to other kinds of objects, the feeling becomes one of closeness, empathy. Plessen's painting *Tisch* (Table, 2012, p. 43) has a strong affinity with Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966), the photograph in which the artist's body, stretched between two chairs

themselves; specific objects not to be known, but perceived. Much of the art we call Minimalism attends to the qualities of the thing, leaving intact an unbridgeable distance between it and the viewer. A few years later, that distance preoccupied Bruce Nauman. With his body part casts, as well as his later performances and videos, the artist sought to 'use the figure as an object' in investigating the subject/object divide.<sup>4</sup>

Plessen's sensitivity to and frustration with this same divide connects him, surprisingly, to Nauman, despite their different historical moments and chosen artistic mediums. In his recent work, body fragments take the place of the figure, most often feet, hands and heads, the primary organs of bodily orientation and sensation. The feet in these paintings of the past two years are too large; the hands are wielded on sticks, divorced from conventional representations of a figure. In the studio, looking at a painting with a large yellow foot,

individual parts don't assemble to form one complete human body, a single, meaningful *Raumfigur* (figure in space). Heads without a body, a hand without an arm, etc., seem to be held in position by an unfamiliar (spontaneous) force or logic. The presence of this logic, this constellation, is strong but it does not evoke a person that one could know.

Imagine that Velásquez has left the centre of *Las Meninas* [1656] and that the king has abdicated. This leaves two positions empty: that of the artist as maker of his creation and that of the viewer. And it leaves the gaze directionless, as the person in the painting to send it out and the viewer outside the painting to receive it and send it back are not in position.

Some time ago I thought about a still life in space. What would happen to the order/positioning of objects if its coherence (*Zusammenhalt*) were not defined by a concept of (painterly) gravity which has the human eye at its centre? This led me to turning the canvas while painting and to approaching it from all four sides. I will have one painting in Barbara's show that is a still life in one position and turns into a painting where the objects are placed in open space when you turn the canvas 180 degrees. The sensation is less that of an Arcimboldo painting; once you have identified the double image you will never not see it again. It is more that when you see the still life my relationship to the painting feels familiar/grounded; when I turn the canvas this familiar relationship – facing



Bruce Nauman: *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, 1966  
Black and White photograph  
20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm)  
Collection the artist  
Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York  
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an object that faces me – is dissolved. In this process the location that I am used to occupying when looking at a painting is moving away from me to reappear at the centre of the painted image, unpopulated.

So many words and I realise now that I didn't answer your question about the image coming from a distance to my mind. I will try.

I remember a dream I had a long time ago. It has no story that unfolds but instead a very strong physical sensation. I am present in a space that is not defined by anything. I do not feel that I have a body but I am there. In this space a lot of weight is present. It feels like my limbs are becoming heavier all the time, even though I have no body as a visible correlate for this feeling. What I see are lines that become more and more complex to follow. The sensation of being heavy builds up and up and suddenly I wake up and feel relieved that, being awake, I do not feel this weight any longer.

For a long time I thought that this dream meant something negative, as it was a very unpleasant experience and one that I was afraid of. Now I am beginning to understand that there is nothing to be gained from a psychological interpretation of my dream. What if this mass of heavy lines is but the momentary 'visibility' of a barrier between the physical world as we experience it every day and another degree of reality? The fear of crossing the line would be similar to the instinctive sense of alarm felt before entering unknown territory.

he then begins to unravel it. Perhaps the different historical situations of the two artists, bringing changes in philosophical and artistic conditions, have shaped their different approaches. But there are some things to which the medium of painting also lends itself – acts of physical imagination we might call them. The objects in Plessen's recent paintings circulate freely: table-tops, cups, the fruit bowl from his home, the ubiquitous water bottles from his studio move around the paintings, intermingling with body parts surfacing amidst torsos and between legs. Things and people, objects and subjects come together, describing an unfamiliar organisational logic, one not dictated by conventional compositional or earthly gravity. It also puts the things on the same level as the people, animating them and implying that they possess what Bergson would have called a life force (and not only abstract materiality, as in Judd).

In interweaving subject and object, and objectifying the subject, Plessen begins to undo what Theodor Adorno pointed to as the heart of the dilemma: 'Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself.'<sup>5</sup> This undoing colours even figures with more obviously human attributes. Many paintings from 2009 on – like the several 'Zwei' works – have two or more

and struggling to rise horizontally, simultaneously fights gravity and its own innate softness. In Plessen's painting, a body similarly contradicts its own physicality, but the attempt is staged through empathy with a table, at either end of which its limbs merge with the table legs (at right, performing this leg-leg merger linguistically as well as physically). The fact that the midsection of the body sags, its soft, organic form opposed to the table's hard geometry, underscores that the empathy is effortful and not immaterial or a matter of transcendence. We feel the sag – a familiar feeling for bodies – but also a flash of what it would be like to be a table. We enter into the life of the table, more fully grasping what it is.

Nauman, concerned with the impossible relationship of subject and object, sought to place the viewer within that schism, to hold us in the repeated shock of its realisation. Plessen too locates the conflict, but

<sup>4</sup> Willoughby Sharp. 'Interview I' [1970], in Robert C. Morgan (ed.), *Bruce Nauman* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2002), p. 241

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno. 'Subject and Object' [1969], in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (Continuum, New York 1985), p. 499

After my last statement about the dream, the gaze and the position of the artist/viewer, I thought of cutting the first part of my email as I felt it was too complicated and trying to be theoretical. I decided not to do that. I have the feeling that it corresponds to the aspect of my work that happens in front of that barrier to another degree of reality, and the description of my dream is about trying to see beyond that barrier.

**KS** This makes me think how strongly these codes of the viewer's position, as well as that of the artist and the painting's subject, are enforced. I just finished writing an essay on Frank Stella's early paintings, the 'Black', 'Aluminium' and 'Copper' series of 1958–61. Here the symmetrical, aggressively frontal paintings dictate not only a frontal approach to the works, but a single central viewing position – the artist says he wants there to be only one place to stand. I relate this to his physicality; Stella was a wrestler, and Michael Fried describes wrestling with him in college, matches in which Stella would end up sitting on his chest within a minute. You are an artist who does not wish to sit on anyone's chest, as it were, even if we – the artist and the viewer – are knocked over in relation to what we see.

So, knocked off our feet, rotated and turned around. What I wonder is whether it stops there – a viewer, displaced and disoriented, left to find her way, in some new fashion, through a painting. This is fantastic, and more than enough for a new painting experience.



*Picnic*, 2012

But the description of the body parts that do not cohere, and the lack of a single viewing position makes me wonder if something still more radical is happening here. The painting without a coherent viewer, the dream without a dreamer – the world not emptied of human beings (as in early Jasper Johns), but subjectivities that are dispersed somehow. I am not sure how that would work. But a different sense of self and of sensation – sensation without a coherent singular sentence organising those sensations. So, is this multiple subjects? A disorganised single subject?

I also wonder what the barrier is in front of, what lies on the other side. And by the way, de Kooning also had a sensation of being very heavy, although his feeling was waking and fairly constant. His hand could move so fast, this heaviness is surprising.

[A time lapse occurs: Edgar, the artist's third son, is born.]

**MP** We could start again by discussing this new painting, *Picnic* [2012]. I hope I can answer your question a little bit like this. It is a work in progress and I would like to show it to you even though it's not finished, and is possibly at an earlier stage than the other images that I sent you last week. By turning the attached image 90 degrees clockwise it changes, in my view, from the scene of a picnic to that of a crucifixion. I feel that the ideas of a picnic or a crucifixion are both contained in the same painting, depending on the viewer's

aspect that became pronounced in 2009. This type of structure recalls the revolving door metaphor Plessen has used to characterise the transparency of the picture plane in earlier paintings; here, the door has no glass panes to look through – the painting takes place within the round, revolving space itself. Further emphasising the non-frontality of these works, Plessen has painted figures that either keep their gaze inside the space of the painting, refusing eye contact with the viewer, or simply lacking eyes. All of this defeats the classical relationship between painting and viewer, in which we look at the painting, and the thing in the painting – its object or subject, as art historians confusingly refer to artistic depictions – looks back at us. In Plessen's paintings, our position as viewers with respect to the interior space and the people that do not acknowledge us is unclear; our own subjectivity is cast into doubt. The point here is not our psychological exclusion, but that what we see, what is shown, is not seen from our perspective.

We, after all, are not the issue. Just as objects are given life and agency in these paintings, the subject is diffused, its solidity loosened. This mutual dissolution brings us, finally, to Bergson's remedy for the errors of pre-conceived, static philosophical thought: 'Intuition, then, signifies first of all consciousness, but immediate consciousness, a vision which is scarcely

figures or heads. Within these paintings, the heads and bodies, as in *Badezimmer* (Bathroom, 2010, p. 79) and *Frau Mann Stuhl* (Woman Man Chair, 2010, p. 77), merge with each other, as easily as they do with other kinds of objects; the fruit, bottles, tables, chairs, etc. What we see is perhaps some mutual, relational combination of their perspectives and experiences, the differences allowed to co-exist. Because the two people represented are often Plessen and his wife Sarah (although they are not recognisable portraits), friends of the artist have pointed to these paintings as being personal. We might say with more accuracy that they are intimate, in the sense that the artist has intimate knowledge of both himself and Sarah as objects.

Two is the minimum number of figures, according to Plessen, required to create interior space in a painting; the interiority is underscored by the frequent appearance of an arena-like cylindrical wall or structure, an aspect that became pronounced in 2009. This type of structure recalls the revolving door metaphor Plessen has used to characterise the transparency of the picture plane in earlier paintings; here, the door has no glass panes to look through – the painting takes place within the round, revolving space itself. Further emphasising the non-frontality of these works, Plessen has painted figures that either keep their gaze inside the space of the painting, refusing eye contact with the viewer, or simply lacking eyes. All of this defeats the classical relationship between painting and viewer, in which we look at the painting, and the thing in the painting – its object or subject, as art historians confusingly refer to artistic depictions – looks back at us. In Plessen's paintings, our position as viewers with respect to the interior space and the people that do not acknowledge us is unclear; our own subjectivity is cast into doubt. The point here is not our psychological exclusion, but that what we see, what is shown, is not seen from our perspective.

position in relation to the canvas. I also feel that by keeping these two options open I begin to fill the canvas with life through something other than the subject matter. The subject is more like a side effect. I am still happy when a subject appears, and most of the time I find it's more than one. In a way I am losing my ambition to represent one subject over another. I am more curious that both images exist simultaneously in one space. I believe I am beginning to work on a layer beyond that of coherent figuration or narration without having to cut out representations altogether. The body parts or objects that I paint don't interact with one another in a familiar or logical way; they are however, recognisable as individual parts.

I think I will stay with the picnic angle and keep the crucifixion a hidden property of the painting. An aspect one can only see when knocked off one's feet, falling to rest on the horizon. Floating in accordance with gravity's pull on the surface of the ocean. Seeing with one eye how the sun rises and with the other how it falls into the sea. I have taken the place of the tanker ship, which I used to see from the beach, curving the horizon, clockwise.

p.s. Something made me shy away from the last sentence of your question and I would like to find out what it is. It's almost like the question about multiple subjects or a disorganised single subject slows my thinking down and points to my past. I read this in the beginning as multiple personalities or a disorganised individual, and I am not sure if I



*Picnic*, 2012, rotated

understand the English here correctly? In the past the idea of multiple personalities or a disorganised individual allowed me to analyse the illness of another person, thinking that I could use their displacement and suffering to revitalise painting. Now I think it's very important to base painting on my own experience and not on that of another person.

**KS** I love this painting and what you say about it. The two images at the same time remind me of the duck/rabbit of Gombrich and Wittgenstein, although you are stressing one image, or placing it in the foreground. And of course, the relationship between the two very different subjects – picnic and crucifixion – is rich, with their different social and art-historical connotations. In a way, it is another route to or another kind of abstraction: instead of no subject there is more than one, meaning not a single, impossibly possibility. It shares the freedom of abstraction, while still being so grounded in physical, bodily experience and in the recognisable world. It takes away the dictatorial absoluteness of the relation between the painting and the viewer.

The layer 'beyond coherent figuration or narration' – is it sensation? The way you speak about these works is extremely vivid in terms of sensation, of being knocked off one's feet (those feet are so emphatically ungrounded in the painting!), the horizontal pull of the ocean, the arc of the sun and the curve of that horizon line. Those curves and turns are everywhere in the recent work, and create a very

came a sensation: 'I am riding the image.' The physical feeling of squeezing and pressing his lower legs around the image came to life when Plessen turned the canvas itself.

Rotating the canvas during the process of painting is a frequent technique for the artist, who often turns his paintings 90 degrees as part of finding his way. Rarely does he turn them upside down; when he does, his aim is not to abstract the picture, the painter's device most famously practiced by Georg Baselitz, nor to overturn common sense. This one-quarter rotation of the canvas asserts that things could always be otherwise, or at least two ways – both images, both subjects struggle to simultaneously maintain themselves. It is characteristic (and Bergsonian) of Plessen to insist on tolerating this tension, which to others might appear as incommensurability. Speaking of one recent painting, he says: 'By turning the image 90 degrees it changes from the scene of a picnic to that of a crucifixion', 'I feel that the ideas picnic or crucifixion are both contained in the same painting. By keeping these two options open I begin to fill the canvas with life through something else than the subject matter... I believe I am beginning to work on a layer beyond that of coherent figuration or narration without having to cut out representations altogether.'

distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even coincidence.'<sup>6</sup> We must place ourselves into the flow of life first, and only afterwards draw from this experience our concepts and philosophies – we must give up the primacy and certainty of our knowing, our ideas, dearly held, apart from and above the world.

Intuitive thinking disrupts, or simply ignores, tired conceptual habits. This is clear in Plessen's most recent paintings. He began *Horse and Rider* (2012, pp. 22 | 23) with a picture in his head, and the first laying-down of the painting reflects that simple, familiar image, down to the cowboy hat on the rider. As he continued, however, he worked according to painterly and not representational logic, adjusting the rider, splaying and draping the legs this way and that, following the rhythms of colour and line. And then he turned the image, and along with image logic and painting logic

<sup>6</sup> Bergson, op. cit., p. 20

specific physical resonance. I think this corresponds to the turn of the canvas – you do not turn things on their head (like Baseltz or Althusser), to render them as their opposite or to lose all sense, but you turn them 90 degrees, if that makes sense, to see things from a new perspective. The point of the angle is at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical axes that created it, and the curve is the arc joining those two lines.

Is there anything else in that layer beyond? That is, is there sense as well as sensation that is not normally available to us with our conscious mind, thinking our habitual thoughts?

I completely understand your discomfort with that sentence – these things are so complicated, I wish I could express myself precisely in German. I did not mean seeing as a deranged or mentally ill person, but rather seeing from multiple perspectives. I have been trying to think this through, sensation and even subjectivity without a single fixed subjective identity (the problem with such identities is evident in the painting labelled 'neo-Expressionist' or 'die Wilden'). Your earlier self-portrait with someone else's head begins to point to the possibility of seeing from more than one subject position, possible through the imaginative act of empathy, although perhaps I misunderstand that painting. The emphasis on materiality in works in which you made a correspondence between the physical dimensions of real objects and their representation also draws us away from (your) singular subject position –

sensation freed of a particular individual subjectivity or identity. Maybe here though, in these paintings, the different possible perspectives all belong to you and your experiences? 'Disorganised' is a bad word; what I mean is something not conventional or rigid, but with multiple present possibilities. This I think is one of the most important issues in contemporary painting and even metaphysics, and you seem to be right at the centre of it.

**MP** I feel the same excitement that I find in my work in our conversation! This is very unusual for me! Our discussion happens simultaneous to new discoveries in my work and we come to similar conclusions at the same moment. I just hope that you benefit from it as much as I do. One point is the 90 degree turn of the canvas, rather than turning it on its head as you pointed out in your last email. I am sending you some images of another painting that I am working on. Stage 1: *Horse and Rider*. Stage 2: *Horse and Rider* turned 180 degrees, plus a new image from that direction. I think both angles maintain a familiar relation to the position of the viewer. Stage 3: the canvas is turned 90 degrees clockwise from stage 2. The 90 degrees creates a pull – it's almost like the two images that sat comfortably on the canvas now have to battle to stay in place. This makes me think of Bruce Nauman's work, where his feet and head are resting on two chairs and he tries to keep his body in the air as long as possible.

*Pferd und Reiter* (Horse and Rider), 2012  
Stages 1 to 4



2



1



3



4

[One day later]

Stage 4: I have added the legs of the rider and a curve. I feel that this is probably the moment where I am working beyond the layer of coherent figuration and narration. I can work on this painting now without having to represent anything in the sense of a copy (*Abbild*) of reality, or having to distort to give the image more intensity. The legs feel in the right place sitting on the curve, and they help evoke a horse rider image without having to assume a place in a model of representation.

There is something fundamental about the changes that take place in my paintings at present, and it comes along with the feeling of excitement that I get from looking at them. I don't know if I see the world differently from other people. I think that my paintings develop at this stage quite independently of direct perceptions. My vision of the world may well change in the course of this. I think that the layer beyond coherent narrative or figuration is probably informed by a feeling of displacement (we spoke about my dream or fainting). What surprises me is that the experience in my dream or the fainting was not pleasant, whereas the paintings have something positive about them.

**KS** This is an improbably beautiful painting. Or beautiful and improbable. It is very funny that you tried turning it on its head – this pull of opposites, as you say, makes sense and is an easy back and forth between two plausible

images. Turning the painting 90 degrees feels quite different. Firstly it gives a sense of motion – the horse moving, as in your painting *Sprung* (Jump) [2008].

Maybe it also relates to something else – the reason why the headspace in these paintings is so present and so emphatically in the round, so three-dimensional. It is a space we can be inside, despite the fact that people always talk about images as if they were entirely flat. Yes, paintings are flat, but why do images have to be spoken of in this way? If an image is in your mind, however you produce that image, why must we conceive of that mind-space as if it were a piece of paper or a flat screen TV or computer? That is possible, but not necessary. I had a cello lesson last week before I left NYC, and my teacher was talking about how notes are spherical – not a line or point, but with their overtones and undertones, spherical. This is the way I think of three dimensions, not as illusion and not solely as concrete reality. As in *Listening to Colours* [2011] (pp. 50 | 51), with its sense of turning (a second kind of motion common in your work), and the continuity and enormous range or fullness it implies in each seemingly small sensory experience. That range and roundness that here seems expressed as non-flatness. In *Horse and Rider* [2012] (pp. 22 | 23), we see from more than one perspective as well, which further opens things up – and, as you say, suspends them in an unresolved state. This is another sense of motion in the painting, the pulling or tension.

Turning the painting also mutually reorients image and viewer – the thing seen and the thing seeing – further underlining the lack of stability or traditional purchase we have in front of a canvas. The riverside moves, as well as the river. This contingency is a criterion of empathy with the object, something the subject can have, to use Adorno's words, 'only where, fearlessly passive, it entrusts itself to its own experience. In places where subjective reason scents subjective contingency, the primacy of the object is shimmering through...'7 The fluctuation of other possibilities is a kind of interference: messages come from genuine contact with the exterior world, made possible by turning down the signal of one's own certainties. Plessen sometimes finds this openness to contingency, this almost literal passivity, in states of being prone. He describes such a state and how it reveals the crucifixion hidden in the picnic: 'It's an aspect one can only see when knocked off one's feet, falling to rest on the horizon. Floating

in accordance with gravity's pull on the surface of the ocean. Seeing with one eye how the sun rises, and with the other how it falls into the sea. I have taken the place of the tanker ship, which I used to see from the beach, curving the horizon, clockwise.' It's not an accident, perhaps, that Plessen was born in a port city; several of these paintings are infused with invented and remembered experiences of looking out to sea, and then, in another subject/object exchange, imagining seeing himself from the boat, a boat itself moving along a horizon line or in a curving arc.

Having a foot, riding a horse, looking out to sea – these are all physical experiences and memories that Plessen draws on, reactivating them in the course of making a painting. The play of imagination also extends remembered experience, even creating new physical realities. One such scenario is a recurring dream that he is flying; a common enough dream, though for Plessen the feeling of flying is (less commonly) not magical and transcendent, but full of bodily exertion. This dream's content is not that of a disembodied image of himself or a feeling of lightness, but rather an intense sensation of pressing down and up with his feet and lower legs. A dream that he once would have looked at with a psychological eye, seeking



*Sprung* (Jump), 2008

7 Adorno, op. cit., p. 506

(So, in your recent work, the presence of heads, multiple heads, are a fusion of object and subject, outside and inside – and less as portraits as in the earlier work.)

You say your work now is less tied to direct perceptions, and I have also been thinking about how people writing about your work (and many of them are good) want to separate perception or phenomenology and imagination. This seems wrong to me, but I wonder how you felt about it. I have been thinking about how there is no reason why the autonomous picture, the painting about the experience of painting, must be abstract. This seems silly, like the idea that the image is flat. A mistake of modernism. And so your paintings – like Cézanne's – can be autonomous, a parallel experience to the rest of life (and are also part of life in that way). But also it seems that perception and imagination share the same 'platform' – that is, according to neuroscientists and psychologists, the two sources of information are very difficult to distinguish, and we often misidentify whether we perceived or imagined something, as it all happens in the same consciousness. So why insist on separating them, as in philosophy? A truly astonishing painting, like this one or *Picnic*, lets us rest with the experience and not worry about whether it comes from 'life' (that strange category), a photograph, or from something we dreamed up.

I wonder if this sense of the image in the round, or the painting that holds more than one image, refusing to resolve, relates to

that layer beyond narrative you are beginning to touch? Is it some fusion of sensation and imagination, or something else? A sense of possibility? I am always interested in an expanded present and the possibility that things might be more than one way, more than we perceive them to be.

I also wonder about the material – is the brown paper here part of the process or the final work?

p.s. As an aside, the same day I received your email, I read a recent interview with Dana Schutz, who also spoke of Nauman's work as an important way into the physical sensation of a painting of hers.

**MP** It is interesting that you write about imagination and perception sharing the same platform. Possibly a painting is a manifestation/materialisation of this platform, showing the effect (this is probably the wrong term here) of perception and imagination when you do not distinguish between what is real and what is imagined... I would like to add that possibly something has to happen to bring this platform, in all its potentiality, out in the open and keep it alive and active in this process. I would like to tell you about a dream that I have sometimes. It's a dream about flying. In this dream I know that I can't fly but I feel that I can do it. It takes a lot of effort to lift my body off the ground. It's a combination of willpower, that I tell my body that it will fly, and an actual physical up-and-down movement of limbs, which results in a

from the bottom to the side or top of paintings. Thus the real enters the image as a 'memory or trace'; it grounds the image in substance, 'but also shows how to overcome physical restrictions', as something familiar – a bowl of fruit, a head – behaves in new ways. The infra-thin glass pane of the Phantom Zone is a nightmare of pure subjectivity, disembodied, and cut off from all (other) objects. The metaphor of the balloon resonates because it restores spatiality, materiality – the 'objectness' of the subject – and also the imagination necessary to take that physicality into such an improbable space.

As he has opened possibilities for painting, Plessen's paintings have visibly loosened. If the painted bars of the ground held inlaid objects like wooden marquetry in earlier work, now the bars move in different directions, spread outward, or disappear completely, supplanted by washes of paint. Expanding space (Bergson's balloon filling with air), like rotating space, implies the element of time or duration as well as volume, and Plessen's canvases of the last several years not only rotate but are also animated by fragments of colour flying in different directions. Oscillating between matter and image, or image and next image, these fragments can signify mobility itself. Bergson again: 'If you abolish my consciousness [...] matter resolves

to unlock unconscious meaning, is now freed from the imperative to be explained, and the constituent elements that, when conscious, would be in tension – labelled impossible – coexist easily.

For Plessen, dreams, things we barely classify as things that lie at the extreme of immateriality we associate with images, are in fact physical. This is also true of things he imagines. One side effect of dismantling the subject/object dichotomy is the similar reconciliation of perception and imagination.<sup>8</sup> His earlier paintings sought to make an image 'real', manifesting the visions of his mind's eye through indexical construction and measure. These recent paintings take the objects and scenarios of his everyday life and place them in conditions that are made-up, and, nonetheless, concrete; as he puts it, the natural forces that govern these paintings are unfamiliar but plausible. Bodies turn and disperse, water bottles surface in torsos, feet move

sensation of pressing against a strong resistance, culminating around my feet. The taking-off phase is hard going and could fail – though it always works out – and I take off slowly. There is a ceiling that I reach and I rest there, up in the air. The distance to the ground is filled with a downward pull. It's a weird feeling and it's a little bit like a triumph. I am doing something that is not possible, but it's not free and light, how I would imagine a bird feels in the sky. I find it strange that I include the feeling: I am doing something in my dream (a space of unlimited possibilities), that I can't do in the real world, and I think that I no longer have this sense of limitation in my paintings.

**KS** What happened to the sense of touch or index formerly indicated by your interest in photography and in the one-to-one 'measuring' with tape? Where is the touch now? How does it feel or manifest itself?

**MP** In older paintings, I thought of my imagination as a space enclosed by the palpable world. Imagination and reality were divided by the photographic image and had to be fused by the idea that I could touch objects simultaneously in reality and in my imagination, with my brush. I should add that the space inside me was often in contradiction with the world outside, which created a feeling of intense friction in my mind. If you think of this as movement, I was searching the space of my imagination trying to find parts in it that could be linked back to real things. What strikes me, with an eye to our conversation in my studio,

is that the action here, in these earlier paintings, aims to refit imaginings to the outside world. We also spoke about the self, a self that is without a defined position in the world, like that which was established during the Enlightenment. As the space of my imagination in past years was enclosed by the outside world, only one degree removed from it, it was less objective and less real. My aim was to objectify the space of my imagination. The dissonance between inside and outside created or projected intensity within and objectivity without. It was frustrating as the tension was not relieved in this process of objectification, and the friction became a state of being.

The direction today seems to be the opposite. I am bringing objects that are easily recognised into an imagined space, to explore this space further.

**KS** Can you say anything about the large hands that appear to be on sticks or bars, and are welded throughout the work?

**MP** The arms don't belong to a person that one could know. They are made active by holding something or pushing or resting on something. I think they help me translate what I see in the painting to a sensation that I have experienced with my own body, and in this sense they relate the painting back to life. The feeling of touching something is still present (for instance, the man's legs in *Horse and Rider*), but not so directly linked to the brush or index finger.

tells me that pretending to know is far more exhausting than intuitively reacting to an ever-changing environment.' The new quality of his paintings is not the extension of a gambit in the progression of avant-gardes – not an attempt to introduce a new concept in art, or a new necessity into painting, yet another phase of the discipline's late-modern professional development. While the artist absolutely offers new possibilities in painting, he also offers the insight that all experiences can have this quality of newness, as we meet a changing world by extending ourselves to it, before it, within it. Plessen's paintings hold out to us, in Bergson's words, 'greater joy because the reality invented before our eyes will give each one of us, unceasingly, certain of the satisfactions which art at rare intervals procures for the privileged; it will reveal to us, beyond the fixity and monotony which our senses, hypnotized by our constant needs, at first perceived in it, ever-recurring novelty, the moving originality of things.'<sup>12</sup>

Katy Siegel

<sup>8</sup> Bergson does differentiate perception and imagination (in *Matter and Memory*), but his version of memory enfolds imagination and the memory of past experience. His concept of the virtual is close to what we call imagination, the multiple potential ways for things to be.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (Zone Books, New York 1994), p. 208

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, p. 168

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 86

I thank Eric Banks and Paul Mattick for their insightful comments on this text, as well as Leonhardt Bartussek for his discussions of impulse and overtone in Baroque music. Most of all, I am grateful to Magnus Plessen for our extended conversation, which has been exhilarating. KS

**KS** And where do you think your interest in rotation comes from? Or if there is nothing as simplistic as a source or cause for it, could you describe the sensation or the effect you wish for? Could you describe what you and [your wife] Sarah like in the Tintoretto painting at the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice that seems to rotate?

**MP** I imagined that light shapes a lot of things. I thought that light could just be there, filling an entire space, but it could also make a plant grow through photosynthesis. It is energy and form. This led to the thought of a spiral line made of light moving through space. Sometimes curving more intensely in one area to draw an object and then moving on. I think this line assumed a round form naturally and provoked movement, rotation.

The painting on the wall in one of the spaces off the main hall in the Scuola di San Rocco is the scene of the crucifixion. The painting is massive and fills the entire wall. Christ is in the centre of the painted space and the world turns around him. It feels a little like a carousel or a turning stage; a lot of different activities take place around Christ being crucified, some guys gambling, for instance. Most of the people in the painting are indifferent to the historical and social relevance of the crucifixion.

This [*Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2012] is the painting that I felt uneasy with when we spoke in the studio. It has developed further and I think it is interesting how the two heads avoid eye contact...

Anonymous, *The Ascension of Christ*, from the series *Travels and Wanderings through the Holy Land*, ca. 1481  
Courtesy of *Cabinet Magazine* (above)

Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto, *The Crucifixion of Christ*, 1565  
Oil on canvas  
211 x 482 inches (536 x 1224 cm)  
Courtesy of Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, Italy / The Bridgeman Library

**KS** It's fantastic what has come out of the painting. Now the interpenetration of the spheres seems meaningful, found. Again, turning the painting makes you see things so differently. But I am especially interested (and writing right now about it), in the way that often a single head or two heads (especially in works from 2009/10) seem to intersect or turn. Is the head in profile with the sharp nose yours? Duchamp's? Is there an ambiguity sometimes as to whether we are seeing one or two figures?

**MP** I think it's much easier to imagine that two people share the same body than to imagine them sharing the same head/mind. This doesn't mean it's not possible, it's just difficult. I think that in a way most heads of the period 2009/10 are Sarah and I; I remember people saying that these paintings are very personal, and I never really knew what to say. It is true that when I think of a woman and a man I always think of Sarah and myself.

**KS** I have also been thinking about the Tintoretto *Crucifixion* [1565] vis-a-vis the Eliot quote about the still centre you mentioned earlier. With your single figures shown in NYC, and also *Eis* (Ice) [2012], are the figures ever turning as well as the world/space around them turning, or are they fixed/still? I am trying to think about the subject in motion as well as the world around being in motion. I was also looking at early images of levitation and liked this small one. It reminded me of your dream.



**MP** In my last painting with the two heads avoiding eye contact [*Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2012] (pp. 34 | 35), the heads remind me of a boat moving along a line of longitude. The movement of the boat is not confined to the borders of the canvas. If you imagine that someone looking from outside the space grabbed the line of longitude and made a circle of it (not around planet earth but in open space), the ship would still be there, but without a point of reference.

I have been thinking about the illustration you sent me, of Christ's feet and the trace/imprint of his right foot on the rock. The drawing helps me to answer your question about the index in earlier works and what has happened to it, more precisely than I have before. The relationship between the feet and the imprint on the rock is still very active, but it's also clear that the feet are moving away from the rock. The feet without the rock and the imprint of one foot would just be silly – the feeling of departure and flying would not be there. As it is only the imprint of one foot it's almost like an amputated index, which again points to another world and makes a sense of correctness or completeness, which is so important in the physical world, redundant. I think the index here functions more like a memory or trace of the physical world in the mind, allowing us to enter other worlds. It is not the factual index of photography, where every point on the negative represents a point in reality and therefore makes the image point back to reality. The index here is an index within the image:



*Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2012, before

it brings the physical world into this image (touch) and fills the distance to the feet with gravity, but also shows how to overcome physical restrictions.

I will try to talk about the turning of the paintings and the point of view question... It's somehow difficult for me to answer this question; something makes me base my answer on what I see now that they are finished and I have some distance.

When I did the *Untitled* (yellow) [2011] (p. 56) and *Untitled* (blue) [2011] (p. 59) paintings that were shown in New York, I wanted the centre of the image to be in the middle of the canvas, and it not to be the viewer looking at the painting from outside. You said to me then, looking at these works, that this is 'painting without a viewer', and I think that is absolutely correct. Looking back at these paintings, I feel anger or frustration. I would love to send the construction of these paintings to outer space and leave them to turn there forever. Do you remember one of the first *Superman* movies? I think it's the one with Marlon Brando. In this film a bunch of villains are on trial, and their sentence is to be captured in a square mirror. The mirror is then sent to outer space, where it turns without direction, endlessly.

**KS** The description of the foot's trace and levitation is perfect – I have been thinking about the way that perception or physical reality and imagination come together in your work in such an unusual way, and this describes it so well.



*Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2012, after

Very funny, the *Superman* image (it was called the 'Phantom Zone'). Doomed to rotate in a pane of glass forever! The thing that Nauman tried to do in *Body Pressure* [1974]: to press himself through (originally, I think) a pane of glass, although sometimes it is a wall in a gallery. Here is Marina Abramović re-performing the Nauman piece – she looks just like a *Superman* villain! (p. 20) The text of the original instructions is interesting I think, especially with respect to your earlier work, and the issue of being in front of or behind the picture plane. What isn't quite clear – whether the blue and yellow NYC paintings enact something like this turning in a pane of glass – like the revolving door – or whether you wanted to sentence them to the Phantom Zone, and why you were frustrated with them. Would you mind just a word or two of clarification? And have subsequent works rectified your frustrations or done something different?

**MP** I think the Phantom Zone is a good way to describe my frustration with the yellow and blue New York paintings. Or more generally, with a painting as both object and image. And also the Nauman (which I didn't know and I am very glad that you showed it to me) is so interesting in this context. Speaking from my perspective, in this performance of *Body Pressure*, the canvas is replaced by a pane of glass, and an actor tries to enter it by exerting pressure. It's much like this that the physical world meets the sphere of imagination, by making visible the border between worlds as touch and memory.

In the *Superman* movie, three-dimensional beings are trapped in a two-dimensional space, and then this space (a pane of glass), is sent into orbit and turns there eternally. This process transports two-dimensionality back into three-dimensionality in such a beautiful way. Like in the Nauman, I would argue it goes from three to two and back to three-dimensionality.

I am not sure if the following makes sense, and I would like to hear your opinion on it. My frustration could spring from realising that the conflict between three and two-dimensionality is not released or transformed back into three-dimensionality – like in the Phantom Zone. The eternal turning in my painting takes place within the canvas, not the canvas turning out in orbit. But the wish to send the painting there was what made me think of the Phantom Zone. Part of the frustration is the feeling of contradiction that comes along with these paintings. In my mind the painting is a container, a vessel. Inside this vessel the turning is taking place. All of this feels very real and three-dimensional, and yet the positioning of the figure is still central, adjusted to the edges of the canvas, and in this sense serves the concept of a painting as frontal flat space.

It is a little like blowing up a balloon in a painting, making a knot to hold the air in the balloon and attaching it to the stretcher to keep it in place. The balloon only enters the image flat, by pressing it hard against the surface of the canvas. Once in the space of the image, it's no problem to blow it up. To get it

out again you would have to release the air from it and reduce the original pressure from the balloon's flattened surface.

**KS** The Phantom Zone/balloon reply was so good it made me rewrite the first paragraph of my essay. I loved those two images, of flatness and fullness. The attempt to press into and through the glass – the point where Nauman stopped, always wanting to show the impossibility of things. And you just pressed through, balloon intact.

Marina Abramović re-performing  
Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974)  
*Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005  
Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York

