

Now or Else

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When French poet René Char writes of a character named Artine who is able to predict which of her comrades will die in battle, the poem enacts a sort of mythological inheritance whereby fighters seek comfort in her augury. Char describes the surreal space Artine occupies within the minds and ears of her listeners as an "absolute awkwardness on both sides," akin to the precarious moment when a spectator offers a glass of water to a jockey hurtling down a racetrack.²⁾ This double-sided awkwardness is a fitting metaphor for encountering a Charline von Heyl painting: in the first ten seconds one is caught within the paradox of seduction—held fast in the intense grip of desire, much like the rushing acceleration of horse and rider, and repelled at the same time.

The stance of a jockey crouched on horseback brings to mind the figurative pose of von Heyl's WOMAN 2 (2009). A dense black body outlined by a

The poet has slain his model.

—René Char, "The Hammer with No Master"¹⁾

thin red highlight occupies the central territory of the canvas, initially implying the secondary status of a shadow or a silhouette only to assert the depth of its appearance. The one-armed buxom figure brandishes what appears to be the alchemical sign for woman, while a muted pink and blue diamond pattern pushes through the figure's legs and torso—background literally forcing its way into foreground. Here is a trickster, a harlequin court jester holding her mock scepter (a bauble in medieval times), wearing the red and white of a jester's drooping hat, traditionally connoting the ears of an ass. Instead of a face, two vertically stacked mirror shapes confront the viewer, blankly refusing representation. Here is the fool of folklore whose significance remains elusive, delivering messages that deny translation. Here is the figure that playfully taunts the viewer: there is no return of the self-reflexive gaze, no mirror to meet the eye, no eye to meet the eye—only trickster space and non-reflection.

To "play the fool" for von Heyl is to embrace the fearlessness of continually doing the things you aren't supposed to do, to upend, invert, and fuck with the terms of abstract painting. Directly exposing interiors, flipping background with foreground,

CHARLINE VON HEYL, *IGITUR*, 2008, acrylic, oil, charcoal, and pastels on linen, 82 x 74" / Acryl, Öl, Kohle und Pastell auf Leinen, 208,3 x 108 cm.

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and offering up symbols and signs without direct reference is a risky and distinctly feminine act. Poet and classicist Anne Carson notes in her essay "The Gender of Sound" that by mediating signs through the exterior system of logos, patriarchal culture dissociates what might flash directly inside out, favoring instead a controlled outward appearance. Masculine sophrosyne, the classical measure of self-restraint, becomes the sound of codified meaning but also a method of censorship.³⁾ IGITUR (2008) further establishes von Heyl's approach as one of destabilizing oscillation between interior and exterior. Named after a Stéphane Mallarmé poem whose title character moves through the inverted chambers of midnight, memory, and insomnia, von Heyl proffers instead an almost figurative form, cut open and exposed to the eye like a gutted fish or a freshly bisected animal. Her cleaving gesture reveals internal glossy shapes in iridescent jewel tones—orange, blue, and royal purple alongside translucent dull browns, all reminiscent of dumb organs collapsed together, still shimmering, still warm, still moving. Along the edge of the outlined figure is a series of graphic symbols: a cross, an X, an oval, and a staff. Untethered from context, the rough symbols of IGITUR stand against the imposition of logos, no linguistic network to fall back on, no semiotic read. The lavender background, clearly an underpainting, likewise shamelessly exposes itself.

Von Heyl is addicted to constructing such moments of stunned attention, creating images that shuttle restlessly between content and form and demand to be viewed on their own terms. Heightened recognition is vital to von Heyl as she has often described herself as having a supreme lack of visual memory.⁴⁾ Her compulsion is to assemble an image vocabulary capable of holding onto the present moment, imagery made so contradictory and strange that it imprints itself on the mental image—what art historian and theorist Georges Didi-Huberman defines as "marking" memory by using visual distortions to "draw the eye beyond itself."⁵⁾ In bringing together seemingly disparate tactics—optical flips of back-

ground and foreground, extreme color contrasts, textural marks alongside cartoonish graphics—von Heyl disturbs the image and extends the duration of initial impression. Within our image-saturated culture, the attempt to stop viewers in their tracks becomes a radical act, the ultimate objective for paintings that do something.

Behind the clumsy form that fills the canvas of DEHANDS/DEFEATS (2011), for example, is an image you want to get to but can't. Straining to see through spidery legs you can only glimpse anterior fragments: bright turquoise washes, pink gestural lines, vertically stacked orange circles and gold squares. Similar colors and patterns appear in LAZYBONE SHUFFLE (2011), where bold yellow shapes are cut through by an unruly striation of white, turquoise, gold, and purple. Von Heyl drops the remnant of an allover design on top, that is Dubuffet-like in its assertive looseness and humor. Smears, drips, and scratch marks interrupt and withhold. And yet the garish yellow geometry pushes through to compel and irritate the eye, entreating the viewer to follow its imbalance. Destroying the desirable image and leaving behind evidence has become a signature method for von Heyl in pursuing what she calls the "brutal detachment" of her process, actively killing a composition by forcing "some other element into it or over it, something that refuses to fit until it is a fact."⁶⁾

Painting is not simply about making seductive images, something von Heyl does with ease. It is a charged entry into a strange mental and visual space, a pushing past, as if painting itself is the racehorse, blowing through the finish line, temporarily unaware of boundaries and intent only on the unfolding present. Her work occupies and preoccupies, seizing the viewer's attention and not letting go. In this von Heyl also represents a resistance to the "bad painting" dialog prominent in Germany in the 1980s at the time of her studies and early career.⁷⁾ Having learned how graphic design principles can infiltrate and complicate a canvas, von Heyl nevertheless keeps things unsettled largely through dismantling her own signature motifs. Technique is always active and to be acted against—constructed, repeated, undone.

In the end, detachment is an essential part of taking parody seriously. Valorizing inversion and rever-

CHARLINE VON HEYL, *BLUE HERMIT*, 2011, acrylic and oil on linen, 60 x 50" / Acryl und Öl auf Leinen, 152 x 127 cm.

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sal, parody is an investment in the thing it undoes. Von Heyl's style of undoing is a para-dynamic, positioning variation alongside the initial reference. It is an in-between place of adherence and accumulation that re-combines. In IDOLORES (2011), for example, self-reference takes a parodic turn—the sharp-edged kingly crown of P. (2008), and the checkerboard swatch-pattern of YELLOW GUITAR (2010) (a painting which contains another self-reference to the spiked woven enclosure featured in FRENHOERIN, 2009) all seem to warp beneath the sharp weight of a black frame dropped upon the image. This is a moment of parodic self-recognition where past motifs re-assemble. The apparitional figure beneath the crown seems to stare out with mismatched eyes and a monstrous scar one moment, only to appear like a chess piece in profile the next. Von Heyl's doubles have not only been killed; they have survived the killing, advancing zombie-like yet held back by the comic distortion of the impeding black bar. This is not death and killing as failure: this is destruction in a mythological sense, reinvention through repetition and parody, creating over and anew signs, shapes, acts, and images, in version and variation. For parody is both tragic and wickedly funny. It is the moment, for instance, when Orpheus, still mourning his beloved Eurydice, is torn apart by the Thracian Maenads and plunged into the river, his severed head bobbing along, still singing all the versions of both his origin and his fateful demise.⁸⁾

In the detachment of Orpheus from himself all the different versions of the Orphic are gathered together and compressed, the moment of looking back in the underworld, the condemning of the beloved at precisely the moment of possible reprieve, and the songs that follow. Von Heyl's practice enacts this paradox of the mythological, where version, sign, referent, and content constantly collapse, revise, reshape, unfold, and contradict each other; or as philosopher and literary critic Roberto Calasso writes:

*No sooner have you grabbed hold of it than myth opens out into a fan of a thousand segments. Here the variant is the origin. Everything that happens, happens this way, or that way, or this other way. And in each of these diverging stories all the others are reflected, all brush by us like folds of the same cloth.*⁹⁾

Von Heyl's approach is both reckless and decisively edited in a way that de-emphasizes the utility of the image, enacting visual paradox as a form of renewal and potentiality. Again, von Heyl's is a para-practice that undoes as it reveals. Hers is a contradictory symbolism, emphasizing both content and non-content at the same time. Von Heyl thrives in between the immediate and the emptied out, providing a singular example to artists interested in creating hybrid vocabularies via abstraction, gesture, and the iconic.

1) René Char, "Artine" in "Le Marteau sans maître/The Hammer with no Master (1934)," *Selected Poems of René Char* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1992), pp. 2-3.

2) Ibid.

3) "Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside. The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that (as we have seen) divides humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot." Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), pp. 129-130.

4) From an interview with Shirley Kaneda, "Charline von Heyl," *BOMB*, No. 113 (Fall 2010), p. 83.

5) George Didi-Huberman writes of Fra Angelico's 14th century fresco techniques that "the best way to impress something on the mind or imprint an image in memory consisted in subjecting the figure to the play of strangeness, disfiguring it a bit through the purely visual mark of a disconcerting coloration." Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico, Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 9.

6) As von Heyl wrote in a recent e-mail: "I always fall in love with what I'm doing or have done in a painting, and then I have to detach actively to be able to kill it... disrespect its most seductive quality, not listen to its siren song. There is definitely an Orpheus element in that again and again. Kill what you love to be free."

7) After studying with Jörg Immendorf in Hamburg and Fritz Schwegler at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, von Heyl actively took part in the Cologne art scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s before moving to New York in 1996. Her dialogue at the time included conversations with Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Jutta Koether, Cosima von Bonin, Michael Krebber, and others. However, her work finds equal resonance with a far-ranging group of influences, from Sigmar Polke and Robert Rauschenberg in the use of analogue print procedures and Wols and Jean Fautrier in the use of stain and built-up pigment, to the graphic design of Dino Buzzati.

8) For an in-depth consideration of the "paradox of the mythological idea" read Carl Kerényi's "The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis" in Carl Jung and Carl Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 1-30.

9) Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 136.

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CHARLINE VON HEYL, P., 2008, acrylic and crayons on linen, 82 x 74" / Acryl und Farbstift auf Leinen, 208,3 x 188 cm.

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