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Shared territory: crossroads of languages, space for reflection

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

Abstract: Contemporary painters like Mark Tansey and Michaël Borremans include photography and film in their artistic practices, reflecting, in shared territory and in a self-referential style, the undeniable technological mediation in which we see ourselves submerged. This article aims to analyze, inside this crossroads of languages, how a space for reflection is established.

Keywords: Painting. Photography. Film. Self-reference. Representation.

INTRODUCTION

As we know, during the 20th century, photography was increasingly present inside painters' studios, and today, even though it is becoming a commonplace practice, it still seems to expand and question the art of painting. Contemporary painters like Mark Tansey (1949, San Jose, California) and Michaël Borremans (1963, Geraardsbergen, Belgium) include photography and film in their artistic practices, reflecting, in shared territory, the undeniable technological mediation in which we see ourselves submerged.

It would be possible to say that these artists are part of a post Gerard Richter generation. They are artists who question painting by their ability to produce images of images, however, their work does not show any concern of hyper-realistic nature, in the same way Americans do. These painters are more concerned with translating the material qualities into painting or with the conventions of the means of technical reproduction than with the aspect of likelihood of the images. From my point of view, for Borremans and Tansey, it is not about doing a *picture with the hand*, but to determine a kind of shared territory where we find a confluence of conventions, which seek to demonstrate and maintain the expressive force of the materiality of painting. A shared territory founded and fueled, most times, by self-referential procedures.

The notion of shared territory should be understood here as not only a zone of crossing languages, but rather as a reflective space in which the artist puts into question the very language that it uses, discussing the mechanisms of representation and the status of the image. When, in shared territory, do photography or film become part of the process of creation of the painter? What new kind of questions they bring to painting? And the dialogue between these means would raise which kind of questions?

1. MARK TANSEY: A SYSTEM OF OPPOSITIONS

The self-referentiality of art, the awareness of the limits of painting and, consequently, the limits of pictorial space speak of the intrinsic issues to the Western language of painting. Expressive metapictoral procedures can already be seen in the 15th century,[1] when the single frame easel appeared. Over time, these questions become principles and are heavily used as the basis by the avant-garde modernists. Since the end of the 1950's, through the hybridism of languages as opposed to the dogmatic purity of the previous period, such questions continue to be unfolded and discussed in a number of ways, however, in a critical and analytical fashion. The question about the limits of painting, of the real and the illusory, of the presentation and representation, of the manufacture and mechanical reproduction, of rhetorical and narrative potential of language, of the historicity and the prolific dialogue with other means are very present in painting nowadays. In this sense, the work of Mark Tansey seems exemplary.

Tansey, son of art history professors, began his studies in painting as a teenager in the late 1960's. In the 1970's, he studied with other painters and started working with illustration. At that time, while many critics and artists were skeptical about illustration, Tansey realized this area could be an opportunity for his painting. Furthermore, having attended classes with Rosalind Krauss, he was introduced in the serious theoretical dispute between structuralist and poststructuralist (DANTO, 1992, p. 23). According to Taylor (1999, p. 4), Tansey was intrigued by the issues raised by these theories and quickly got absorbed and acquainted with their complex ideas. According to the author, to appreciate Tansey's painting, we need to be aware of the philosophical debate which dominated literature and art criticism in the 1970's and 1980's. It's through this bias, and mainly through Derrida, that Tansey will discuss representation. When Mark Tansey began painting in the late 1970's, bringing his experience as an illustrator to painting, he was concerned with restoring the figurative image and redefining the work of representation (Mönig, 2005, p. 10-40).

Tansey uses a traditional system of representation to discuss the production of images and the possible interrelation of the various means of reproduction of these. Through a subtractive method, adding oil and pigment to the canvas, he brings out images by scraping these substances until he regains the brightness of the white support. As the artist says, the presence of monochromatism in his

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1. Metapictoral procedures are found in ancient times but have been used in a more expressive way since the 15th century. See: GÁLLEGO, J. *El quadro dentro del quadro*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1984.

paintings derives from the relations it establishes with the photographic image, as well as the conceptual framework that it operates.

> At first, I was attracted to the monochromatism – black and white – because everything I liked was in it, from reproductions of Michelangelo to scientific illustration and photos of the *Life* magazine. This simple, but versatile syntax, was shared by the art, fiction and photographic reality, it made it possible for another level of pictorial fiction where aspects of each one of them could unite. A painting no longer had to pretend to be non-fiction, it no longer had to be a cage for the real, making it possible to think in terms of a tentative field or place of investigation. The frame could work with a hybrid form equidistant between the functions of painting, illustration and photography. In my first paintings, my primary concern was to find out how to combine image and idea. I started with simple oppositions: male/female, artificial/natural, static/mobile, mythical/scientific, present/past. I found out that oppositions of light and dark could act as an formal analogous to conceptual oppositions. (Tansey, 1992, p. 128).

Tansey's painting poses numerous questions: tactile perception and memory as opposed to visual; the scrapings and the marks as an indicative manner of signification; temporal disparities and juxtapositions; interrelation between painting and mechanical means of production of images; realism and representation; the alliance between conceptual and formal. In light of this, the technical procedures of the painter are closely linked to the conceptual framework of the work being that the materiality and the specific features of the referential photographic image generate new strategies for painting.

Most of the artists gather a range of images or objects around themselves. Some of these artists are more attentive and organized with their collected material. Tansey refers his *documents* as an *image library*, where he gathers methodically a wealth of heterogeneous images that, as has been mentioned, range from reproductions of paintings of the great masters to scientific illustrations and photographs taken from the *Life* magazine. For the artist, "collecting images is to accept, as a resource, representations of human experience of many cultures and times – as well as our direct and indirect experiences" (Tansey, 1992, p. 128).

Tansey uses a photocopier machine, which allows a great freedom to cut and assemble his collages, which will serve as reference to the paintings. In the same montage, he brings together figures, textures and landscapes of distinct origins, however, when translated into the painting they assume a homogeneous character. We find in the preparatory procedures of Tansey similarities with

the procedures employed by the American realist painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), who, at the end of the 19th century, made great use of photography and mixed glue drawing to draw up his paintings. In the case of Tansey, besides all the rhetoric relation built through playing with images, the artist transposes to the painting, for example, the old coloring of the pictures and illustrations in magazines and newspapers of the 1950's.

There is a reason for the temporal reference to 1950's, much of the rhetorical content of his works deal with the criticism of postulates of Clement Greenberg and the New York School. There are many paintings in which he brings together characters from the universe of art from different eras. See *Mith of depth* (1984).

In *A Short history of modernist painting* (1979-80), we find a collection of images from the most diverse origins. At first sight, such painting can present itself as mere patchwork of images. However, a closer look at the matter reveals a chain of meanings built by the artist. According to Sims, the reference images used in this painting were taken from various magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*, *National Geographic*, military journals such as *Soldier of Fortune*, film magazines and the already mentioned *Life* magazine. According to the author, Tansey was particularly attracted by the pictures of *Popular Mechanics* because he felt that the magazine's ideology, based on the "do it yourself", "on self-improvement, progress and troubleshooting corresponded directly to the modernist dialectic" (Sims, 1990, p. 12). The artist divided the square structure of *Short History...* in two colors: some in a range of shades from white to black and other in sepia tones. The reference image was composed of 51 photographs cut out from magazines and, later, glued side by side, in tracks, forming a square structure. For each horizontal line, Tansey has determined a concept for the images. "Starting at the top, the seven tracks were organized around the following subjects and themes: window, door, obstacle, establishment of ground, surface and support, self representation and analysis, the target and glance" (Sims, 1990, p. 14). Themes and issues that allegorize, in a metapictorial manner, the historical discussions about painting and representation.

The monochromatism and the temporality printed in the reference pictures, when translated to the painting, are indispensable elements for the construction of Tansey's narrative. Some of the examples are the paintings *Action Painting* (1981) and *Action Painting II* (1984).

In *Action Painting* we see a painter in a quite dated outfit (amateur, maybe) doing a painting from observation, at *plein-air*,

of an automobile accident. Here we have a series of collisions of meaning and interpolations of time. First of all, starting with the title, the assumption of *action paiting* was to abandon the model. The action, gesture and spontaneity were its foundations. Here lies the irony in the conduct of the action of the painter to the action that is contained in the subject observed. At the same time, what we see is the temporal structure of the painting colliding with the temporality of the event observed. The extended arm, that we know so well, seeks measures and proportions. It attempts to interpret the model at a speed which is incompatible to the accident. This "decisive moment" into which record could only be captured by photography or other mechanical device. As the artist himself declares,

> This triple-encoded structure brings together photographic time (his own accident seen in a separate action); the time it takes to make an image by hand (the painter who registers the accident); and the time that I took to the paint it. The point here is not to celebrate the absurdity or have fun with the surreal, but to look for relation between structures and the limits of various means of representation. (Tansey, 1992, p. 128).

It would be possible to say that this painting puts in question not only the temporal specificities of the various means of image production, but the support that one mean of production brings to another in the discussion about representation. As spectators, we are placed also in self reflective position in front of the painting, because, the *mis en abyme* of the frame within the frame, added to uneasiness that brings us to the temporal collision, makes us reflect on the own mediation in which we see ourselves constantly subjected. Mediation always crossed by its own conventions.

The work of Mark Tansey, inserted into the "photographic culture" and in dialogue with this contingency, opens a vast field of meanings that go beyond the elements taken as "fundamental" to the pictorial language (the plan, the gesture and the color). In shared territory, the artist rehabilitates and upgrades the old functions of painting in a critical and provocative manner.

2. MICHAËL BORREMANS: REPETITION AS STRATEGY

Michaël Borremans (1963), lives and works in Ghent, in Belgium. He began painting in 1993 and today is considered one of the most important contemporary painters next to his fellow countryman, Luc Tuymans. About his subjects, unlike Tansey, we didn't find a conclusive narrative. His paintings are enigmatic. They resemble codes that we can't decipher. His figures inhabit undefined spaces or are represented, for the most part, on solid color backgrounds. Such backgrounds refer us to the infinite backdrops of photographic studios or cut out figures from Manet, whom he refers indirectly. Let us recall here *The fifer*. Many authors try to link it to the Belgian surrealist tradition, mainly referencing Magritte. This approach can be fair, mainly with regard to self-referential propositions which put mechanisms of representation in check. As Sardo would have commented,

> In fact, there is a possible connotation in relation to surrealism in the paintings by Michaël Borremans, but it does not come from a dreamlike relation of sense, but from the use of repetition as a device, present in the recursively manner that the same situations arise in drawing, painting and now, in the movies. This repetition is used in two ways: by the recurrence of the gesture represented (moulding, digging, organizing, moving, sorting), but also by the successiveness of situations that migrate from support to support, contracting or dilating the temporal structure. (Sardo, 2007, p.37).

I'd say that repetition is put in details that characterize his figures. Both in his paintings as in his films, most of them appear dressed in de-personalized uniforms; workers from who knows where are involved in mechanical and repetitive actions, lacking any meaning. The feeling is that we are facing scenes from a society of automata, always under control. It reminds me of *1984*, by Orwell, and *Alphaville*, by Godard. Another important aspect, dating back to some procedures of surrealism, is the presence of the double as a constant in his work. Figures make ex-votos of themselves or carry simulacrums of their own bodies on their laps. The awkwardness and discomfort caused by his images are linked, among other things, to all that evokes in us the image of double. As Rogiers would have stated regarding the twins, while they cause us extreme fascination with their identical appearance, "they embody the torment of identity, the uncertainty of being truly yourself" (ROGIERS, 1998, p. 7). The *disturbing strangeness* described by Freud got its foundations there, that is to say, on the ambiguous relation that we maintain with our own image.

The repetition in Borremans doesn't happen only in the sphere of representation, but also in the way it articulates and explores the properties of the means it uses, as well as in the form of presentation of all the works in the exhibition space. Bringing together drawings, paintings and *tableaux vivants* (as his films are called) in the same space, the artist intends to show how the different languages intercommunicate in his work process. In his retrospective *Eating the bread,* in Stuttgart in May 2011, we could detect the folding between the painting *The Skirt*, 2005, the film *Weight*, 2005,

the cartoons *Drawing*, 2002, and *Skirtsculpture*, 2005. Due to this folding, you can see how the language of painting is crucial in the creation and result of his films. The repetition of the grounds is also held in a same language. One of the strategies of the artist is to work in a series of paintings that correlate. In a sense, the strategy deals with the sequential nature of the frames.

At first, Borremans' reference images were taken from magazines, postcards, movies, images downloaded from the internet, and other images. In the documentary *A knife in the eye*, when questioned by the interviewer if photography was required as a starting point for his painting, the artist responded:

> Well, there is a tradition to it since the origins of photography. As soon as it appeared, the painters started to make use of it. In my case, in the beginning, I used to work with materials that I found and recovered, but, I added stuff to the image or distanced myself from it. I never copied a photo, I always manipulated the image in terms of light, color or composition. Even if you, knowingly, don't manipulate it, when you paint you always manipulate it, whether liking it or not. (Borremans, 2011).

In 2002, Michaël Borremans begins to make his own photographs from images taken from the TV screen. This experience led him to build a photography studio in his painting studio, thus, starting a new process of creation, photographing models in a neutral environment, now being able to have control over the image, determining the quality of light and the whole *mis en scene* that will be translated into the painting. In this case, he determines the quality of light often from references coming from the history of painting, like the light from Caravaggio, Velázquez and others. The scene to be photographed is carefully composed according to what the artist wants to paint. The costumes, objects and accessories are made especially to compose the scene and express the concept behind the image. Thus, the representation of the representation, recurring aspect in Borremans' work, seems to assume even more strength.

The film, in turn, has played an important role in the work of Borremans. If at first the artist used film images for his paintings, most recently he has created films impregnated with pictorial beauty and silence. In an interview published in *Art in America* the artist comments:

> What I try to do with films comes out of the paintings. While painting, I had the feeling that I needed a different element of light or movement. My interest in film has always been there since I was young, so I started experimenting. *The Storm* [2006] is a 35mm projection of a live image. But the work is still more painting than

film—the medium is film, but the way I approach it is like painting. (Borremans; Coogins, 2009)

Borremans says he prefer films in 16 or 35 mm instead of video. He said he's interested in the granulation of the image, because it feels closer to the pictorial qualities. In addition, he claims to be interested in what the film language provides, for example, the possibility of the image in and out of focus. Michaël Borremans isn't interested in exploring in a pure manner the specificities of the means he uses as the basis of an idea of delimitation of territories, on the contrary, he investigates their specificities to better interchange them with the intention of questioning and expanding their boundaries. Is the concomitant use of the various means of production and, also, in the crossing of these means that Borremans addresses issues about the representation, the resemblance, the uniqueness and multiplicity, the originality, the authorship and repetition and other estimate points to the history of painting and, why not say, the history of knowledge.

The film *The Storm* is a great example of the influence of painting on the photographic medium, as well as an example on the investments undertaken by the artist in relation to the characteristics of the filmic language and what we expect from it. The film, projected in a large area of wall in the exhibition space, has 1 min 07 s and is placed in *loop* as all of his films. It is a single and circular scene. The scene features three black men sitting, dressed in bright white satin costumes, absolutely motionless. They're just there, sitting, uniformed, breathing. The feeling of waiting in the scene is the same that hits us. Before a film we hope movement, action, sound, narrative, however the artist thwarts our expectations. The only element that acts in the scene is the light slowly and intermittently blinking, making the image appear and disappear. The light here assumes the role of paint. In the projection room, what we hear is the sound of the projector that comes with the breathing of the characters. As Borremans comments (2009, p. 2), "the rhythm of the film is very important. It has to be as slow as the breathing".

As for the form of presentation, *The Storm* is one of the few films showcased in a great projection, because, for the most part they are showcased on a flat LCD screen, in small dimensions and framed by wooden frames. This strategy, combined with the similarity of color and light employed in various languages, brings them even closer to the paintings and upgrades an artistic and entertainment genre popular in the 18th and 19th century Europe, the *tableau vivant*. The *tableau vivant* is a porous genre of art about the borders that delimit it. It is located at the intersection between theatre and

society games, painting, sculpture (and, later, photography), being as much as from the field of social history, the history of theatre and art history (Vouilloux, 2002, p. 24). According to Bernard Vouilloux,

> This show was the exact representation, with the help of animated beings, but motionless, of paintings or groups of very well known and famous sculptures. For the paintings, the characters were dressed in costumes in which details and colors were reproduced with the utmost care; for the sculptures, they were all covered with swimsuits and white draping fabrics. The groupings and poses were naturally observed with strict accuracy and, when the curtain raised on a painting of this genre, the effect was stunning. This effect was noted, in particular, for the sculpture, which could appreciated for all its aspects since the characters were placed on a spinning surface that moved slowly under the eyes of the spectators. (Vouilloux, 2002, p. 26).

From my point of view, Borremans reaches the full crossing of languages and the upgrade of the *tableaux vivants* in his work from 2005, *Weight.* The movie originates from one of his drawings of 2002, titled *Drawing*, which derives from a photograph found in a knitting magazine[2] and that will also have ramifications in other languages such as painting and sculpture. From that drawing, the artist goes in search of a model, in the same age group, reproducing its garments as it appears in the photo. In his studio he builds the whole *mis en scene* that will be filmed in 16 mm to subsequently be transferred to DVD. In a small flat screen (15" LCD) placed vertically, a girl slowly turns, with eyes fixed on the infinite, seated on a black spinning podium in which her legs disappear completely. Like the sculptures of the *tableaux vivants* from the 19th century, the girl becomes a statue. The stiffness and immobility of this body, whose legs are amputated, strikes us violently. This image, which has dubious duplicity between animate/inanimate or, as Sardo has pointed out, "this kind of ghost of death lurking in the category of the *doppelganger*",[3] closely linked to the idea of automata, shakes

our vulnerable certainty of identity and freedom. In shared territory, through the circular motion determined by his riddle-images, Borremans creates a space for playing, investing on model-images that unconsciously accompany us.

CONCLUSION

Michaël Borremans and Mark Tansey are figurative painters who revisit the history of painting, dialogue, question, and use various means of production. The continuous traffic between languages establishes a space for reflection, in both the ways that the term can incorporate. This space, which I call shared territory, has as its main function to discuss the mechanisms of representation and the political dimension that the images bear. In the work of these two artists, we can find multiple layers of information: what you see is not just what you see. Tansey discusses the representation and criticizes the regulatory systems of art. With great insight, it puts in check our vain attempt to apprehend reality, demonstrating that this would be the main function of the representation. Borremans, in the other hand, is aware of the historic weight of painting. He developed an undeniable technical ability, being compared by critics to the great masters of the past. He understood Velázquez and Manet without settling into mere virtuosity. The artist refers to the history of painting and discusses the power of the image in the present day. Through different means, his riddle-images discuss the language that at the same time configures and puts in question the history and the social and political setting of his own home country. They are images in which the strangeness leads us to think about the organization of powers to which we are subjected.

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2. "This representation of a young girl adopting a majestic pose, with hands on her back and staring straight ahead, has its origins in a photograph found in a knitting magazine. Borremans, however, modified the reason of the knitting. In its place, he drew the Flemish Government logo twice, once in the usual sense (right-facing) and again in the reverse direction. If the presence of the two beasts on the pullover accentuates the heraldic and emblematic character of the lion (Flemish), it also makes it lose its pride. " In a statement, the author comments the ironic use of this detail because of a requirement imposed by the government to insert the coat of arms in any graphical material and dissemination of art projects subsidised by the same. See Martens, 2014, p. 34.

3. "A German term for a double or a counterpart of a character, a kind of soul mate or even a ghost chasing an individual, mingling with its own personality. The name *Doppelganger* originated from merging the German words *doppel* (meaning replica or duplicate) and *gänger* (walker, itinerant or someone who wanders). [...] The *Doppelganger* is never seen by anyone except by its bearer. You don't see it in the mirror, it doesn't show up to anyone but our most disturbing self-

awareness. The idea of a ghostly double or counterpart may not involve a relation so intimate between the *doppelganger* and its bearer. In less abstract terms, we can talk about this relation when a character inserts itself in the story with a name that already has a tradition, and that presents itself as a always bothersome ghost." See *E-Dicionário de termos literários de Carlos Ceia 2010* . Available in: <http://www.edtl.com.pt/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=viewlink&link_id=765&Itemid=2>. Access in: Sept. 2nd, 2012. The *Doppelganger* is a term that became notorious in 19th century German literature. In the popular legends, the vision of your own *Doppelganger* was a sign of a bad omen. Sign of your own death.

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