

Out of Disorder

Sortir du chaos sans effacer le chaos?
Gilles Deleuze

In one of the texts that has influenced the theory of art and image most in the 20th century, *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), Wilhelm Worringer develops a system based on the idea that the opposition between figuration and abstraction is the same one that exists between the organic and inorganic realms, or more precisely between everything that is life and everything that is not. We can allow ourselves to widen this principle by adding that figuration, if anything, serves to give a new form to everything that surrounds us, which is already *recognizable per se*, through the medium of painting. Recognizable, and therefore also reproducible: a face, a tree, a stone, an imaginary creature, a chair. Abstraction has a different task, aiming to grant form for the first time to everything that does *not* surround us, that is not recognizable. In other words, abstraction serves to construct worlds beyond the “organic” world of Worringer: based on “images without resemblance” – as Gilles Deleuze, a great reader and interpreter of Worringer, would put it during a famous lecture in 1981 to his students at Université Paris-Vincennes.

To create images that resemble nothing: this is a formula that allows us to effectively sum up the essential functioning of abstract art. This mechanism interests us even more in an era marked by a return to figuration. Such as the time of Deleuze, with the rise of Neo-Expressionist movements in Germany, France and Italy, respectively known as *Junge Wilde*, *Figuration Libre* and the *Transavanguardia*. Ours too is such an era, first of all due to a question of generations: the artists approaching painting were born and raised under the influence of images absorbed in constantly growing quantities from comics and cartoons, television and advertising, the Internet and social media. Today there is a palpable impulse to reproduce those images, or to use them as material for the creation of constantly new figurations. Nevertheless, abstract art has never stopped finding its way into the ongoing flow of *images having resemblance*, at times generating interruptions of the frequency, or more precisely outbreaks of dissimilarity in which the recognizable world momentarily ceases to exist. Almost.

This is the situation of doubt addressed for at least 15 years now in the painting of three great European exponents of abstraction: 108, Eltono and Erosie. Not because the images they produce have an ulterior aim of blurring the boundaries between abstraction and figuration, alluding to recognizable forms: quite the contrary. Their abstract painting keeps faith with itself and its “inorganic” character of dissimilarity, but it also harbors traces of a shared path originating in graffiti, along which at a certain point the letters stopped functioning as letters and resembling themselves, imploding or exploding, breaking up or merging, dissolving or solidifying in other, new, unrecognizable forms. The seeds of this process, after all, were visible from the early days of graffiti writing, and in the golden age of the New York subway: the tags and the letters that formed them began to lose their alphabetical legibility very early on – the clear perception of the name of the writer – in favor of a more interesting stylistic legibility – namely the recognition of the style of the writer – giving rise to what in jargon is called *wildstyle*. The process that has led 108, Eltono and Erosie to erase any traces of the original lettering has been even more radical, culminating in abstraction, fulfilling a paradoxical form of *cupio dissolvi* that was probably always present in the history of graffiti itself. Perhaps it was there even in the primal gesture of writing one’s name or pseudonym on a wall, long considered a simple act of assertion of ego and existence, in banal terms.

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There is something unprecedented, however, in the transfiguration of tags into purely abstract objects, to the extent in which the objects, on walls, behave in the same way as the tags from which they stem, namely not as ornamental additions, but as true agents of chaos: they invade surfaces like weeds, imposing their own rhythms on spaces and works of architecture, and with their presence alone they permit the spaces on which they operate to exist anew, in the form of *place-works*. This is precisely what happens with the three artists in this show, in a process that from the letter to the pure form – but also from the wall to the canvas, without ever wanting to abandon one or the other – has allowed them to assert themselves, along with others, as exponents of a new, original type of abstract mural painting.

The works in the exhibition offer a sample, mostly on paper or canvas, of the latest evolutions in the styles of 108, Eltono and Erosie. Every piece seems to be symbolically breaking down and reassembling the world in keeping with a morphogenetic process that – to return to Deleuze – winds up becoming a vector of “inorganic life.” The striking vitality of their forms lies in the way they are imprinted on the surface of a sheet of paper, a canvas, a bas relief: infesting it with large vaguely biomorphic black marks, alternating with inlays of color or graphic elements like arrows and numbers (108); scanning it with angular and serial pseudo-geometries, almost architectural in nature, obtained through generative processes (Eltono); or disassembling and reconstructing it in vaguely pictographic blocks of color, which intersect and overlap in reciprocal “staining” (Erosie).

But, more concretely, how can we describe this process of symbolic breakdown and reassembly of the world, or – to use the words of Erosie – of authentic “world building”?

During his lecture, Deleuze rhetorically asked himself and his students how painting could “pass through chaos” without erasing it. This task, of course, was assigned to abstract painting, the only one capable of transforming the chaos of the unrecognizable, without erasing it or rejecting it, into a cosmos made of new forms, inorganic but nevertheless fully vital in nature. Great abstract painting, to all effects, is a way to enclose disorder inside a form, to measure it, and to produce images that resemble nothing, and precisely for this reason have the gift of being universal. Taking this path, the abstract painter has the obligation to relinquish part of the control exerted on material, to let themselves be led by the material outside the disorder of the world. This momentary loss of control can be glimpsed inside the works of each of the three artists: in the lightness and freedom with which Erosie lets himself be guided by his forms to deconstruct and reconstruct a new graphic order; in the way Eltono delegates part of the creative process to generative tools, thus obtaining a new geometric order; in the meditative and deeply spiritual approach with which 108 produces liquefied and spectral forms, capturing chaos inside a new metaphysical order.

The fact that this happens within the limits of a wall, a canvas or a sheet of paper does not alter the principle that governs the works of the three artists, which allows us to bring together the universe of graffiti and that of great abstract art: both are languages capable of stemming and governing chaos, without ever denying it or rejecting it, but instead contributing to its assertion by means of forms that always seem new and alive to us.

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