

A new figuration in visual culture!

How Esther Tielemans brings the artistic image to reality, shakes up the visual economy, and why this is so unique and relevant.

Representation is about demanding and giving attention. Fortunately, not every image attracts our attention and we don't give our attention to any image whatsoever. We would go crazy. Companies sell products by way of attention, people are happy when their friends give them attention, appreciate their work, and so on. Visual culture is an instrument: it is this culture that we deploy every day to get attention. To get this attention, we need to demand attention. We do so through media: it is within media that our visual culture manifests itself. This visual culture – which we live – is therefore a visual economy; we need to sell our attention through media: both culturally and commercially, socially as well as personally.

Representation, being part of our visual culture, is communication. Representation is a cry for attention. Something is demanded: an opinion, a relationship, a purchase. Whenever something is displayed, the other is confronted with something. Something is being 'presented.'

The images that we are ignoring are on standby; they don't communicate (yet). When it's given attention, the image awakens from its standby mode. Without attention, an image is a worthless, unopened envelope.

The visual economy is a disco of visual communication. Within this disco of the visual economy, different motives dance their own choreography: our social need for attention for ourselves and others, our

personal need for authenticity and uniqueness, and the commercial need for turnover. Of all these choreographies, the commercial one is the most prominent. Commerce knows perfectly well how to create 'fashionable & customized' images and has the most resources of all to do so. We have called this dominant 'fashionable and customized' visual economy 'pop culture.'

Visual economy deploys the most powerful colors and shapes in order to demand attention. Artists rightfully question this dominant culture. That's why I like to call artists 'unsolicited advisors.' As such, Esther Tielemans's visual communication / art proposes an alternative to the disco of the visual economy. Tielemans wraps these powerful pop-cultural resources in a painterly tradition. She does so by

using established painterly techniques, more specifically, techniques from landscape painting and abstract monochromes, in her own contemporary style.

Painting has a rich history of landscape painting: composition and perspective techniques provided a view of human, sublunary reality and as such offered the opportunity to portray the human dimension visually. Through this image, people were able to recognize a shared experience of their position in the world in an intersubjective, shared image.

While painting this landscape, the author was also able to make people larger or smaller, more or less important. Accentuating the figure of a child with light gave it a divine touch; a spotlight on the master (aristocracy) gave additional status. Thus, by the skillful application of technical possibilities, painters were able not only to represent the reality of man and nature, but also to construct and refine it by literally aligning or spotlighting social or religious discrimination.

Because of their complete visual abstraction, monochrome panels demand an abstract reflection – because they are separated from figuration – and symbolically represent the cultural color configuration of their times, like logos.

Kazimir Malevich's black surface was a huge statement, carried by his suprematist ideology that combined social revolution with a sublime aesthetic experience of a new, visually and politically charged icon. His work 'White on White' can be considered

to be a forerunner of minimalism, in which the formal properties of Malevich's formal language were implemented.

It is possible that the formal language of both minimal suprematism and the exploited minimal from minimalism were constructed, theatrical languages of an art clique – as art guru Michael Fried more or less claimed. Perhaps even more abstractly, formalistically theatrical is the work of hard edge painters like Ellsworth Kelly who contrasted even more distinctively by excessively marking the qualities of the color fields. Hard edge painters depicted a presentiment expressing an unfolding, highly cultural, modern American culture based on experience, which manifested itself even stronger in minimalism, maybe even as an elitist, vulgar pop culture.

All of these forms of abstract formalization served as an intellectual appeal to authority of what was at the time called modernization. By dismissing and intellectualizing the simple action of abstract painting as modern, it became exclusive and elitist. That was possible in the second half of the 20th century. It was called modern. In the aftermath of class society, this visual economic exploitation was still possible.

Already 25 years later, during the rise the postmodernism of the 80s, the authority of the visual representation of the elite started to crumble away. Now, at the dawn of the post-political times of the early 21st century, each image must prove itself in an instant pitch of an instant experience. What is placed as a landscape

is not naturally accepted as reality. Everyone is editing pictures on the computer, everyone has an avatar: everyone has the artificially created image of reality at his or her disposal.

Also, the visual expressions of the elite, their abstract play of forms, are crumbling away: a monochrome is a nice image but remains, despite all its formalistic reasons, a simple image ('my son could have made this'). Moreover, the monochrome, as a colorful symbol of its time, can no longer compete with the logos of the highly technological, rapidly circulating visual economy: every football club has a logo that is every few years updated by the local designer.

Above all, the spirit of the times can no longer be conceptualized as a current: globalization has torn down all walls between currents and increased communication and mobility have brought down on man a complete democratization of identity and representation.

Tielemans too presents monochrome panels in sensational colors. She too exceeds the formal possibilities of past generations of abstract artists both by covering them in shiny, transparent epoxy resin and by pulling the panels into space. The intense, even color panels are pimped in a glossy way and, like decorative panels, break loose from the wall and are increasingly more often standing on their own in space.

Tielemans uses the qualities of traditional landscape painting. The horizon becomes a stage. The subjects on the canvas, the cow and the church, have become separated mono-

chrome panels. She places these separate canvases or panels in reality in a 'painterly' fashion. Thus the exhibition space becomes a frame for her canvas, as all elements within this space enter within reach of her unique 'collage' of classical pictorial elements in a contemporary pop-cultural experience-logic context. Within the exhibition *New Scenes* at the Museum van Bommel van Dam, this tension between old painting and the new turn in the work of Tielemans become manifest: do you look at a work in a traditional manner – is there enough of breathing space (white) around the work – or does this white draw us away from our actual, relational position?¹

As we have read, landscape painting played the game of a specific social or religious perception of reality and the abstract monochrome may have staged itself theatrical for a highly cultural, abstract notion of taste. Art is a game in which the image takes position and demands from its viewer to take position vis-à-vis that image. It deals with the language of the image – what it says – and the language of the image within the viewer's experience.² The reality created by art lives through the artistic image. As a figuration of signs they demand nothing more and nothing less than a choreographic presence: a dance shared both by the image and the viewer and by the displayed environment and the viewer.

That is exactly what Esther Tielemans implements and affirmatively repositions. First, she challenges the viewer, seduces him to experience the sensational, abstract, and relational emptiness of her painterly social archi-

ture. In a relational game comparable to the game on the canvas of the landscape painting, the viewer is aligned to the elements of the abstract work. He is asked to position himself immediately within this abstract landscape.

Tielemans uses the painterly, technical capacity of abstraction as a sexy but nonetheless empty shell. The one who is confronted with the work has to internalize this shell, experience its presence, and align himself to it. The subject in this landscape is the visitor himself: standing inside the shell. Thus, the highly cultural concept of taste is put to the test now that it's empty and relationally placed in the forefront. Surprisingly, it's painting that is providing the stage!³

This powerful visual communication challenges us to position ourselves toward this slicks landscape: within the image. The authority of the author has been fallen away and the author – Tielemans – is merely a host of the economy of experience. This is a moment of paradigm adjustments: reality as we have known has relationally transformed.

The work of Esther Tielemans shows that the classical painterly theater is able to maintain itself within today's visual economy. Her abstraction becomes a democratic theater in which the public can determine its own sublunary position. It is in these types of scenes that the new figuration of our visual economy is aligned!

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In fact this is not surprising at all, as painting focuses on visual portrayal in its most elementary form.

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*The gloss of the new,
with the debris of modernity ...
Who will do the groceries tonight?
And then in the supermarket:
what packaging should we believe ...*