

Arthur Löwen

touch me

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It says here: touch me

A blue feather had landed on the stomach of the Thing-from-Outer-Space. One of his tentacles reached out for it. His spiky fingers took a hold, and a hole opened up in his flesh, a greasy orifice. He turned the feather in his feelers and then stroked it in, direct, to the hole. He started to change. I wasn't sure which feather he'd loaded, but from the way he was moving his feelers I guess he was swimming with the Thermo Fish.

Jeff Noon, Vurt (1993)

Following the rhetoric of modernity, the painting's terms of existence have been questioned consistently. The canvas as painting's artistic border was deformed and cut up, violated, turned inside out, and set aflame. It became possible to create paintings as conceptual pieces that consisted in a single color, black, white, or transparent. Tarpaulin, film, and bomber jackets were painted on. Without having to consider the objective content of a painting, only the edges of the canvases, their corners, and the tenderly sprayed gestures came as an update to the outmoded stroke of a brush. The fractures and assaults of what has been formulated as a painting genre appear today as nothing more than the stimulation of a hedonistic desire. Or as it is summed up in the singular, repetitive line in the hymn of a nerdy macho fantasy: "push me and then just touch me till I can get my satisfaction."

In her book *Über die Liebe zur Malerei* (On the Love of Painting, 2017), Isabelle Graw inquires about the reasons for the vitality of a medium, which can depart from the here-and-now through its inextricable link to its past, its self-aggressive approach, and the new media used in its production. Painting could have long disappeared into a late retirement to be cared for under the stewardship of our cultural self-conception. Graw proposes that painting should be understood not as a genre of art but rather as a formation. The concept of a formation is borrowed from Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), according to which formations are historically accumulated constructs, which nevertheless follow specific and determinate "rules of formation" through their perpetual alteration. "With respect

to method, the premise of the formation suggests that painting or artistic works in general cannot be seen as isolated realities."(Graw)

To eschew all suspicion that painting does nothing more than maintain its former significance, it must, as a formation, preserve a degree of distance from its own history. Painting should take place without excess. Its subject should not be existential, its means not too exemplary, its radicalism fragile, and its manifestations incomplete. Let's say that a surfboard or a barely sprayed gesture that structures the emptiness of a frame is a painting's subject: they should be indeterminate references. Painting as formation is not about the inwardness of what is given in a painted picture. It is about expanding outward. A painting does not exist in and of itself. There is no essence. Its vitality is guaranteed only by its servitude within the formation of the painting. Painting is an engine of evaluation for the effective principle of contemporary art and the exclusive but also minimally risky participation in it.

Arthur Löwen's paintings are defined by symbolic handwriting on light undercoats of paint. On the front of the canvas, he applies a layer of color, which is covered by a final layer of white. While these layers of paint are still wet, he lays the canvas on an absorbent cloth, its backside facing up. He presses a line of writing into the absorbent cloth, which appears in reverse on the face of the canvas as a recess where the color of the light undercoat shows through. Through this circuitous formula that makes writing into a compositional subject, Löwen dismantles the act of painting into its component parts and lets new constellations emerge. Löwen's painting, *Index (ArthurArthurArthur)* (2017), shows the lettering of his first name repeated three times. As a result, the notion of the written-out name as signature fades into the background, becoming rather an abstract figure. To the knowledgeable observer, the work becomes a sign of longing for the now obsolete paradigm of the artist as genius and master of his craft.

Arthur Löwen does not break away from the painterly institution of the canvas. Without the medium's institutionally cultivated fragility, his artistic approach would not be legible as such within contemporary painting. In the paintings *Index (Lucio 1–4)* (2017–2018) he varies the name of Lucio Fontana. As the creator of the painting series *Concetto spaziale* (1958–1966), Fontana exemplifies the gesture of opening a space in the canvas and breaking with the notion of the canvas as a condition of painting. Indeed, Fontana radically slashed his canvases and thereby drew attention to the interdependence of painting and image-bearing medium. These openings, nevertheless, occur as variations. Fontana's radicalism was optioned as a compositional strategy within the practice of painting. He conceptualized his slash's radicalism by exchanging brush and paint for the knife. Fontana attacked painting as a genre in order to hand it that powerful tool for survival—the concept—through the bulging openings into space. By dint of the unconventionality of his creative process and the occurrence of the narrative's abstract, pictorial perspective from an uncommon angle, Löwen's specific method gives painting as formation another form. Kneeling on the back of the canvases of his Fontana-paintings, Löwen exchanges the signet of his name for the

elegant and well-sounding one, Lucio Fontana. By referring to Fontana's characteristic gesture, Löwen employs his exemplary canvas-opening as a concept within his own painterly practice, allowing the front and back of the canvas to visually and referentially coalesce. While writing out the name on the work, Löwen supports his body weight with his knees, which are, in turn, inscribed into the composition as an archaic type of signature. These twisted traces of his self-reflexive and corporeal activity later reveal themselves as an image on the front of the canvas. With his markings on the back of the canvas, Löwen leads the flat, coated, and always geometrically ordered front of the paintings to abandon their metaphysical expression and disappear into an antagonistic reality. It would be possible to imagine a viewer, who, standing in front of the canvas, looks through the canvas and observes the process of image formation. Or does the image itself act as an antagonistic reality that remains conscious of its own constraints? It looks at the specificity of the unspecified behind a possible viewer.

Löwen composes the subjects of his paintings through the dynamics of painting itself. He does not speculate about the potential of painting as formation through painting, but rather seeks out the openings in its conventions that always seem to be closing. The point of his paintings is not to be found in the images they convey, which deviate from his other work in their color, handwriting, composition, and narrow conceptual propositions. As a counterpoint, these paintings appear to invigorate a sense of being his "actual" work, because they refer to the possibility of every painting being a testing ground. The other emerges in Löwen's work through his formal fictionalization of the self as painter. In this regard, Löwen's painting relieves itself of the concept of painting as formation to a certain degree, in so far as he paints its specificity with a simultaneous de-specification as an exemplary portrait of the painting present.

Marcel Hiller