

If you come to a fork in the road, take it

What is most notable when seeing Willem Vermeersch's recent work is the occurrence of a distinctive yet unruly form of handwriting: a multifaceted scribbling and erasing characterized by willful agitation. There's a continuous contamination between the brush strokes of the painter and the marks of the draughtsman, which is employed to escape the usual breakdown of categories like painting, drawing, photography, animation and video. In terms of method and speed of execution there are similarities with the work of Arnulf Rainer and Cy Twombly. However, Vermeersch's handling of paint and support seems to emanate from a more immediate kind of unrest. The handwriting is the primary expression – primary in the sense of unmediated, unfiltered, or, more precisely, filtered by temperament.

Consider also the source material: Vermeersch seems to surround himself by proto-images hovering on the edge of his consciousness, constantly moving in and out of focus. In this zone, there's no particular hierarchy among the eerie emptiness of a blank canvas, a close-up of a woman's face on her death-bed, and series of photos of a trek to Istanbul. (It's not unhelpful to learn that Vermeersch was a competitive snowboarder in his youth, nor that he spent several months at a time trekking through different regions in Europe.) In such a specific headspace, the interaction between paint and support is about libido, provocation, (with dark reflections of violence), destruction and decay – exorcism could be the word one is looking for, but the initial intensity and ecstasy don't necessarily lead to spiritual liberation. The working and reworking of layers doesn't happen like we are used to in abstract painting, the guise of a heroic balancing act between opposing forces. Rather it's a constant shuffle and reshuffle of elements – as if the artist is merely signaling that there's really no rest for the wicked, in this luring jungle of signs.

The works of Willem Vermeersch clearly refer to today's collective visual experience that is largely dominated by screens – and also, more indirectly, to our thoughtless interaction with them. 'An artwork is a corner of creation seen through a temperament', Emile Zola wrote in the nineteenth century, with a fierce undertone of defiance towards the tired *Académie*. In the twenty-first century, it seems the tables have turned, as the corner of creation which appears in front of our eyes today is no longer filtered through an individual temperament, but through the quantitative mechanics of an algorithm – an inanimate creature that feeds off the many involuntary reflexes of our fingertips. This kind of reciprocity is anything but revelatory. What it shows on the screen often feels like a customized replica of a dream, for all its repressed intentions and desires, and it hardly offers any real insights – as even the most inveterate Instagram junkie will admit.

So, it's no coincidence that the emphasis in Vermeersch's work so heavily lies in handwriting – the marks and tears left on a page, a photograph or a canvas. How fragmented or opaque they may be, they clearly testify to the corporeal – the bodily knowledge and experience that's largely excluded (or may I say: exempt) from our interaction with the screen. The repetitive and unruly marks that he makes on the multitude of images that surround him can be understood as a way to restore that disconnection. They are a celebration of all what's visceral about us, but at the same time, they genuinely seem to retrace the corporeal origins of our memory and imagination. In art as in athletics, the body has often been treated as an unwilling instrument in a choreographed search for excellence. Willem Vermeersch's work reminds us that it is first of all the vehicle of a large digestive system, that ruminates and discharges – and – if we were to look for the feeding ground of our imagination – it's actual *locus* might be much less cerebral than we care to admit. Art, so it seems, easily permeates the basest levels of experience – and the artist clearly makes no attempt to cover up the finding.

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