

Division of Place

by Doris von Drathen

“The Devil knows that he has little time.” Contained within this single-sentence myth is the entire mystery of intensity (1). The narrow confines of time are the root, not only of evil, but also of an enhanced joy of existence. The border contains a dynamic energy. As soon as the line of an “up to here and no further” is drawn, there may be sensed an energy which sets itself in motion and accelerates, intensifies everything lying behind it, so that it achieves a transformation into a space or a time of desire, or at least of curiosity.

But if this boundary runs between an occupied and an unoccupied space, for instance between sound and silence, or between the painted and the unpainted, then the question is altered: What is now to be examined is the extent to which abundance spreads out in emptiness and continues to vibrate there; and conversely, what radiance and impact emptiness has on abundance. Above all, it must be established how far a connection between the two can be maintained; in other words, it is a matter of savouring the energetic field of the border itself as a dynamic space.

Glenn Gould pursues the adventure of this arc to an extreme when, in his recordings of the Mozart Fantasies for Piano, especially in the Fantasia in C-minor (2), he expands the pauses more than any other performer had done before him. A wildly daring exploration gives rise to the intensity of a silence, which Gould elevates into a counterpart of equal value to the *cantabile* rendition of the main theme.

The risk-taking, which Glenn Gould makes audible becomes visible in the works of Ali Kaaf; and what is more, it seems to me that the fundamental motor of his entire oeuvre lies in this delicately tensed arc. The expressive world of this unusual artist opens up in the intermediate space between two borders, namely the edge of the occupied pictorial space and the greatest possible extension of an emptiness, which threatens to engulf this shaped pictorial space right up to an established border.

In order to work with a corresponding intensity - namely in a concentration on details without, however, losing the connection to an overall theme - I have refrained here from a comprehensive investigation of the oeuvre and instead will concentrate on only a few works of Ali Kaaf. The most important part of his oeuvre consists of works on paper. This term is more precise than that of "drawings," which is disrupted immediately by two exceptions: On the one hand, these works are executed with brush, Chinese ink wash, and sometimes also with pigment and binder solution; on the other hand, they consist of two differently shaped sheets which are placed one atop the other, so that they are limited not only by the edge of the paper, but also by the divergence between the two levels. The surface is divided, it diverges dramatically; its edge slipping into emptiness gives rise to the impression of a landslide, a gaping rift. The rupture draws forth three-dimensionality. In another series of the works on paper, the surfaces are so densely covered with pieces of thick, linen-like gaffer tape that here as well a haptically experienceable, authentic spatiality is created. Thus Ali Kaaf transforms - with a sudden sleight of hand, let us say - two-dimensionality into three-dimensionality, without ever renouncing the medium of paper.

But let us feel our way, slowly and searchingly, towards these large sheets of paper which, in the form of reproductions, scarcely reveal anything of their complexity as reproductions and which engage in a confusing puzzle-game with the viewer. A piece of paper delineates the borders of a pictorial space, which is almost entirely filled up by an innumerable gathering of black and white points. Their extreme density and the rapid rhythm, which can be directly surmised from the vehemence of how they are set upon the paper have created a connecting element. A cloudlike presence has been summoned up. A density can be discerned, perhaps an egg-form which, however, has no solid mass but instead hovers and breathes freely in space, tending more to resemble a moving, galactic manifestation, as if here we were witnessing nebulae or solar winds. The fact is that, although this surface consisting of myriad points of black ink - which, as in a rapid drumroll, are set in close array upon the white ground of the paper - coheres into this fog-shape, we nonetheless perceive the tiny, bright intermediate spaces as if they were the actual theme.

The works of Ali Kaaf derive their vitality from these reversals; one could have the impression that the unpainted sections, the emptiness, were the actual form-constituting element, perhaps even the sole inducement for creating the pictures. Further observation confirms this first impression.

For the egg-form, which we discern is a broken shape. A large trace left from burning has eaten a dramatic arc into the drawing; a fire extinguished the occupied pictorial space up to here - up to here and no further. The hole, which dug itself with a dramatically notched edge into the drawing is complemented, provisionally restored. Slipped beneath the first sheet of

paper is a second one on which the burned-away section is replaced, regardless of whether the contours of the new form correspond exactly to the extent of the original egg-shape. Both pieces of paper, however, are mounted with a small bar in such a way that an intermediate space clearly emerges. The emptiness which opens here transforms the "drawing" into a landscape just as if the trace from burning were nothing other than the dangerous edge of a crevice or a deep ditch, just as if we were standing at the precipitous edge of a quarry which, however, had long ago been filled up from below. The fine margins of ash seem like shadows to deepen further this edge left by the combustion, and they reveal the gaping of the surface all the more clearly. On a purely formal level one could think of Fontana, but it soon becomes clear what the difference is between their gestures of dividing the surface: Whereas Fontana is more inclined to seek the most radical path from the canvas into the space, for Ali Kaaf the gaping emptiness is a spatial substance, an essence of absolute space which is interwoven by a presence. A presence, however, which in his way of thinking refuses a designation of any sort.

The works from the series, which we are examining here have the title *Rift* and were all created during the years 2011 and 2012 with a similar technique. They may stand in an exemplary manner for the oeuvre of this artist. Ali Kaaf applies the points of black ink with an extremely fine brush and in a rapid rhythm, without interruption, in an almost trance-like state, which causes him to forget space and time (3). But not entirely, for at the precise instant when the points begin to outline a form, he pauses, lays down the brush, and interrupts the process of drawing. The brush is replaced by the flame. With a precisely controlled gesture, the artist

holds the paper in the air with his left hand and, with his right hand, which he calls his writing hand, he slowly brings the flame toward the edge of the paper and then, quick as lightning, traces out an arc of fire beneath the paper and, in the very second that this outlined part of the drawing has been burned, extinguishes the fire with a roll of cloth. The action, as he says, comprises neither a liberation nor a compensation. Only one thing is of crucial importance - an outright surrender to the exclusiveness of the moment. The concentration on the right measure, the marking of a precise border. Only after this trace from burning, in other words after the delineation of a boundary also on the piece of paper, does he complete the form, just as if he were to apply this "up to here and no further", this mystery of intensification, as a medium in order to cause the extreme abundance of these points to arise in their breathing movements. The contours of the form remain porous. No interconnecting line closes the shape; its pointed form remains open, what we see is a sort of manifestation in space. This porousness, however, conveys an impression of something woven, which plays a role in all of Ali Kaaf's works. As is the case for some other Arab artists, for instance for Mona Hatoum, there is a relation to the culture of the carpet, which in this world contains so vast a complex of meanings that it engenders the vision of a woven universe in the thinking of Ali Kaaf as well.

Drawing or painting with a flame could summon up comparisons with such artists as Yves Klein and his *peintures de feu*, which he called *états-moments du feu*, in other words "momentary states of fire". But Ali Kaaf is concerned neither with the heroic gesture of this colleague from the early post-war avant-garde, nor with the theme of fire and its traces.

The trace of burning, which he applies possesses a fundamentally different quality, for it is the edge and boundary of an emptiness. Ali Kaaf shows the absence of what has been burned. He shows the hole. He points to what is missing. But as an intensity, as an exact delimitation. The landscape, which he summons up before our eyes is a landscape of ruins. At the same time, however, it is also a landscape of rebellion, a site whose substance revives immediately and whose energy, one could say, lives on in spite of the ruptures, as if a bird with broken wing were to rise up and fly onward.

These works could perhaps be read in a different manner, however, if one were to attempt, in a rudimentary way and in spite of the danger of oversimplifying some elements, to take notice of at least this or that aspect of the culture in which Ali Kaaf grew up. The artist belongs to the small community in Syria of the Druze, whose conceptual world is related to the philosophy of the Sufis. One of the most important rules of the tradition of the spiritual contemplation which is the primary prerequisite in the instruction regarding the trance-like, whirling Dervish dances teaches this very equilibrium between meditation and return. This means the maintaining of the connection between a penetration into emptiness and the returning to the reality of concise designations and sharp borders between sunlight and shadow. It is this interconnection which first opens for the phenomenon of the border in the oeuvre of Ali Kaaf its actual dimension, and shows in how fundamental a manner this theme has been part of Ali Kaaf's thinking since the very beginning. Here he did not find an artistic-philosophical theme but, on the contrary, his artistic activity, his *poïesis*, is directly inscribed in the modes of thought within which he grew up - just as if his hands had intuitively written an

ancient text further. Proceeding from this world, it might also be possible to make a comparison between the division of places, which is formulated in these works on paper and the Islamic myth of a "division of the moon". This image comes from the text which offers an account of the wondrous acts performed by Mohammed and tells that he split the moon into two pieces and then joined them back together in order to convince doubters of the presence of the invisible god (5). It is repeatedly reported in these texts that Mohammed covered his face so that its radiance would not blind the others, and also that those who encountered him covered their own faces. It may be that from this point of view another perspective opens onto the works and the question arises as to whether the rending and burning of the surface could possibly be elaborated further, pushed to its very limits, namely as a ripping apart of this protective veil, in other words an encounter with the light which already burned the wings and eyes of Icarus and Phaethon.

But on the other hand, it is clear that the "division of place" undertaken by Ali Kaaf is repeatedly an investigation of space. Ali Kaaf does not represent a space but instead opens up the real space in which the viewer stands; he makes emptiness palpable. And yet the viewer will experience the space in which he stands not as emptiness, but as structured, constructed reality. This is what is truly amazing: In his works on paper, Ali Kaaf is able with a single stroke to open the other, unbuilt, unshaped space, the space beyond our reassuring constructions and conventions which carefully cover over each and every abyss. Hermann Broch would have spoken of the "empty space between the times" which must not be allowed to gape apart, for "without a break it must flow onward, at every instant

simultaneously end and beginning, formed time.”(6) In his pragmatic manner of speaking which at all times, however, is closely connected to a rich treasure of spiritual Sufi writings, Ali Kaaf says: “With my points, I am searching during the entire time for the depths.”(7) His concept of a depth of space or a depth of emptiness, however, stands in contrast to the "nothingness-abyss" of Hermann Broch. Ali Kaaf speaks of a filled emptiness, of an emptiness suffused by a spatial breathing - a concept, which is similar to the doctrine of the *pneuma* in ancient Greece. What dimensions lie in Ali Kaaf's simple term of “depth”, however, only becomes manifest when one listens more closely to the artist. He makes reference, for example to an early Sufi, Mohammed ibn al-Hassan an-Niffari, and his concept of a “path which leads to God on three levels - namely on the surface, in the depths, and in the depths within the depths.”(8) In this context, Ali Kaaf explains: “With rigorous logic, one could also speak of a path to truth. For with the Sufis, God cannot be grasped. If one were to attain the presence of God, one would no longer exist, and at the same time, language and path would also no longer exist. Therefore there is the concept of a “depth within the depths” - for this is no place, no space; here is where language breaks down. Here is where a delicate border is described, one which can be grasped neither in words nor in images (9).

The singular quality of Ali Kaaf's art is to give rise in the tiny surface-events of his works, which repeatedly take on another dimension upon being contemplated, to the intuition of a “depth within the depths”. A series of works on paper integrates the trace from burning as an equivalent graphic medium between the points of black ink set with a delicate brush and the shreds of gaffer tape attached to the drawing (10). Incongruity dominates between the

various levels of this work on paper. An extremely fragile sheet of paper, into which the flame has eaten a large hole, is composed underneath of the fine, hovering substance of the points of black ink, which unexpectedly reveal vistas, tattered rips, and holes. Here the ground of the paper, often a coarse and abraded paper, appears bright and white, as if its surface, its skin were scraped and injured. A strange reversal seems to determine this work on paper. The impression could arise that the cloudy lightness constitutes the basis, whereas the heaviness above this nebulous, scarcely graspable shape bears down and yet soars upward. The levels of the joined outlines are connected in an irregular and airy manner; areas without density open up, so that the lower, porous landscape of points of black ink seems to shimmer through, and the openings reveal vistas onto a white emptiness. One could have the impression that these levels were to substitute themselves for each other, as if the grains of dust were to whirl through the air just like the heavy, black squares.

This impression arises through the geometrically square or rectangular strips of gaffer tape ripped from the roll and attached to the piece of paper in a quick gesture, so to say with supple wrist and whirling fingers. In response to the question as to how he proceeds with his work, Ali Kaaf did not describe his method to me in words, but instead sent a short iPhone film. What is striking there is the rapid rhythm, the switching between flying application and vigorous removal of the gaffer tape. As soon as the surface becomes too closed-off, too thick, the artist pauses for a moment, then reverses his gesture, rips away a piece of the thick cloth binding here and there from the paper, regardless of the fact that he thereby tears not only the drawing, but also the paper skin. These outlines have a destructive and simultaneously

form-constituting power similar to the flame which eats its way into the paper and the drawing. Arising for the user, however, is a work on paper whose depth can scarcely be discerned, but whose expansion across the surface is limited by the traces of burning with dramatic clarity. We are beyond images, beyond drawings, and simultaneously beyond sculpture. For what Ali Kaaf ushers into existence is a surface which becomes an event in real space through the injuries inflicted upon the skin and edges, through the traces of paint and applied materials. These works do not confront the viewer with a pictorial space which opens itself to our gaze as an alternative world, but instead formulate a delicately delimited and hence intensified presence in a space which we share with these works.

They are neither representation nor illusion, but instead embody a pictorial event, the trace of an artistic action. Whereas in their living presence, however, they accomplish that rending of the veil, they also become the manifestations of a state of consciousness.

For the surface which Ali Kaaf rips open here is not just any arbitrary one. The rhythmical composition of dots, the points which simultaneously define place and instant offer a vivid reminder of our everyday endeavor to determine time and space, to create structures which close off that very gap between times and between our spatial constructions. It is as if it were a matter of walling ourselves off from the gigantic darkroom of our consciousness, about which philosophers such as Edmund Husserl teach that they contain within themselves the intuition of a "flowing presence of life"(11), the knowledge concerning a memory which is in no way limited to the experience of the extent of our own life, the knowledge that our being, our breath, our language are embedded within a continuum. The science of the capacities of

memory teaches that seven generations are the space of time covered by a young memory. As if in our Western culture there were a consensus requiring that this flow of memory into which we are born be blanked out, that we believe our limited stretch of life to be a world of experience in itself, so has the knowledge of the continuous "stream of life" entered into the philosophy of our era under the notion of "unbearable truth". And what is more: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and, in their intellectual context, the psychoanalytical school of Lacan have linked their definitions of madness to the "failure of the surface", in other words to a mode of consciousness that causes the breakup of all structures which exclude everything that is unfathomable (12). And precisely here, so it seems to me, lies the vertigo which we feel as viewers of these gaping surfaces in the works of Ali Kaaf. For as myths from all cultures teach (13), there is a necessity inherent to the border, the shield against remembering, the restriction of vision to a segment of the world. An artist who does not forget the generations of his predecessors will not be able to create anything; a person who sees his life solely as embedded in the "flowing presence of life" and who sings of the vanity of existence will succumb to lethargy.

This point of view, however, with regard to the fissure dividing the surface into two levels contains the explanation for their incongruity. The places, the times on both sides of the division cannot be congruent, just as little as world-time and lifetime are congruent, even when our Western culture strives repeatedly to make us believe this and endeavors to reduce the world-time, to shrink it down to and bring it into line with our lifetime (14). The rupture in the works of Ali Kaaf is a window onto this world-time. But how daring this border-

transcending viewpoint is, what sacred terror lies within it is only revealed to its full extent when we turn our attention to a few of his earlier works and at the same time give consideration to his cultural background once again.

Untitled is the name which the artist assigns in 2006 to a group of works which were all created in a similar format and with the same means. They are 150 cm wide and 230 or 225 cm high. The sheets of paper are painted with black pigment and binding material; the black-painted layer has repeatedly erased a layer of graphite applied to it until, after a long process of erasure and restoration, there remains a shimmering, silvery layer, at least as a fragment. The underlying, erased layers of these palimpsests, however, retain the power of their voiceless presence. The texture of these works conveys an intimation of their depth. What do we see? A layer of graphite brings to the fore a hovering, shimmering form which, rising high and resembling a house, almost entirely fills the pictorial space. The denser the application of graphite, the more silvery and bright the drawing becomes; the more delicate the application, the more vividly the dark, underlying layer emerges. This abandoned black can become an interior shape evoking a shadow or a curved, dome-like cloth, can project into the graphite surface like a spot on a wall, or can traverse the entire graphite form like a fissure, running through the formed spatial texture as a rift. But a few years later, in 2009, a comparable graphite work arises. Here as well, a form woven out of strokes of graphite is overtaken by an inner shadow which thrusts its existence right up to the edge. Upon longer viewing, however, there opens amid this shadowing an even more vivid black; a crevice of emptiness extends through the entire form. *Mihrab* is the name which Ali Kaaf assigns to this

work on paper, thereby confirming for the viewer that contemplative state of the soul which seizes hold of him in front of these drawings. For "Mihrab" is the name of the prayer niche in mosques which indicates to the faithful the direction of prayer. But Ali Kaaf does not draw any niches. Instead, with his woven graphite forms which are traversed abruptly by a vertical, axial rift, he approaches a state of consciousness. One could perhaps even speak of a "failure of the veil", of a moment of contemplation where a delicate border is opened and, through a fissure, there becomes perceptible a realm beyond our time and our space.

This theme of a gaping surface ultimately becomes the driving force for an experiment which Ali Kaaf was able to carry out last year in Seattle. With the local art-glass blowers there, he had the opportunity of actually realizing his investigations in space, and indeed with his own element, namely fire. There arose works between an incongruent interior and exterior, domed forms whose pores seemed to become elongated, as if tentacles were to grope their way through the space, or as if drops of dew were being transformed into rays. Thus points experience a spatial expansion and cause the surface to reach out into the surrounding space. Here as well, Ali Kaaf is fascinated by the workmanship when, in front of the ignited oven, he presses fine rods of glass onto the glowing mass of glass which has just assumed a shape, and then cuts off these rods. But what is striking about these works in glass is that, similarly to the works on paper, they possess something impalpable in spite of all delight in their materiality. In spite of their sculptural nature, they remain manifestations in space whose chatoyant light-events become so confusing for the viewer that he is scarcely capable any

longer of mentally grasping their surfaces. A vast stillness, however, also emanates from these works which, with radical logic, are reminiscent of the works on paper from the series *Rift*.

Viewed in context, one thing above all becomes clear in this comparison: The rift, the perception of the gap is connected to the immediate moment. Many works formulate domed forms and thereby recall the niche of a "Mihrab." The spatial and temporal delimitation transforms these divisions of place into the intensity of a momentary rupture. And that imbues these works with the quality of living presences; yet it is only beneath the inquiring gaze of the viewer that their existence begins.

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(Translated from the German by George Frederick Takis)

Annotations:

- (1) Hans Blumenberg, *Menschenzeit und Weltzeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 71.
- (2) Glenn Gould's recording of the Complete Mozart Piano Sonatas, 1969/1972, Compilation 1994 Sony Classical, including Fantasia in C minor, KV 475.
- (3) I am referring here to an unpublished conversation which I was able to conduct with Ali Kaaf in the presence of his works in September 2012.
- (4) In this textile symbolism, however, there may be seen a parallel to the thought of the philosopher of the German Enlightenment, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and his metaphor of the tunic in which he considered the entire universe to be mirrored. Cf. Horst Bredekamp, *Die Fenster der Monade, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' Theater der Natur und Kunst*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2004, p.16.
- (5) *Islamische Bildwelten und Moderne*, catalogue for an exhibition project of the sponsor TASWIR, Nicolai Verlag, Berlin, 2009; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Das Kleid der Ka'ba: Verhüllung du Entschleierung in den Bildwelten des Sufismus*, p. 153 ff.
- (6) Hermann Broch, *Der Tod des Vergil*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1976, p. .315.
- (7) Ali Kaaf, loc cit., footnote 3.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Strongly adhesive, black insulating tape which can be torn with the hand as is frequently used in stage- or film-work.
- (11) Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana Werke*, Vol. XI, p. 381, quoted in Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 11.
- (12) Cf. Michael Turnheim, *Das Scheitern der Oberfläche*, Zürich-Berlin, 2005, p. 137. (The title refers to the insight of Gilles Deleuze: " Corps-passoire, corps-morcelé et corps dissocié forment les trois premières dimensions du corps schizophrénique. Dans cette faillite de la surface, le mot entier perd son sens." *Logique du Sens*, Paris 1969, p. 107.) ("Sieve body, dismembered body, dissociated body constitute the first three dimensions of the schizophrenic body. In this failure of the surface, the entire word loses its significance.")
- (13) In representation for others, I would at least like to mention the "Angel of Oblivion": Martin Buber, "Das Vergessen," in *Chassidische Geschichten*, Zürich, 1996, p. 190: "[...] wann ein Kind im Leibe der Frau ist, brenne ihm ein Licht auf dem Kopf und es lerne die ganze Thora, wann ihm aber bestimmt ist, hinaus in die Luft der Welt zu gehn, komme ein Engel und schlage es auf den Mund, und da vergesse es alles. [...] wäre das Vergessen nicht, so müßte der Mensch unaufhörlich an seinen Tod denken und würde kein Haus mehr bauen und würde nichts unternehmen. So ist ein Engel bestellt, das Kind so zu lehren, daß es nichts vergesse, und der andere Engel ist bestellt, es auf den Mund zu schlagen und ihm das Vergessen beizubringen."
("... when a child is in the body of a women, may a light blaze upon its head and may it learn the entire Torah; but when the moment has come for it to go out into the air of the world, may an angel come and strike it upon the mouth, so that it forgets everything. [...] if there were not the act of forgetting, humans would think ceaselessly about their death and would no longer build houses or engage in any undertakings. Thus one angel is charged with instructing the child so that it forgets nothing, and the other angel is charged with striking it upon the mouth and teaching it to forget.")
- (14) Hans Blumenberg, *Weltzeit und Lebenszeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 80.