



# *Alf Löhr*

*Objective Emotion*

Correspondences among a small number  
of imagined elements  
120 x 150 cm, ink on paper, 2008

# Introduction

***Walking in the woods, I raised my hand to greet a bird and as I was doing so, I felt the shadow of its presence in my palm.***

Peter Handke

Light exerts a multitude of effects, from revelatory to blinding. In Western culture, light is heroic, fighting darkness at the behest of convention and power, while Eastern culture celebrates absence that leads to a sensual and spiritual inner sphere.

Western culture gains access to this spiritual state by eliminating all outside interruptions. Even in the finest cathedrals, the light never fails to fall from the top, but must be muted as it reaches the worshippers, as the inner is regarded to be completely secluded from any worldliness. The Asian perception of inner space as a form of absence, so eloquently drawn asymmetrically, with flat appearance, muted colours and blankness of space, is, like meditation, a light that pushes you towards another consciousness. Much of the traditional understanding of abstraction is based on this immateriality, but this leads my viewer down the wrong path.

The subject matter I paint is invented, not adapted or related. If you can invent your subject matter you might as well do so in an abstract way, as any form of narration is restricting and narrowing down the possibilities that are open to a form of thinking that is not based on exclusion.

No painting is convincing if it is not also an internalised translation and no internal translation is in any way convincing if it is not at the same time personal. Everything that is experienced refers to the paintings not as a metaphor or invitation to contemplate, but instead it brings an autonomous presence to the world. This autonomy allows the viewer to discover her/himself in the painting, as the several layers and levels articulate an internal space.

The inner space I create through my paintings is one of focus, not meditation. Only when light comes to a standstill can we see another space that is not determined by presence or absence. I often watch this happen when the paper, like a sponge, softly absorbs the light to slow it down and bring it to a halt. This other space has been observed through the centuries, once thought to be the ether, and now called zero point field. All of energy is contained within it, and we create our many different existences by dipping into this pool and fashioning it in an infinite variety of ways. It is part of us, and we are part of it.

The painting is the final chord that maintains an openness right to the end, defying simplification and revealing new qualities over time. It represents the act of painting without depiction or illustration, as a dynamic event that designates us more than we designate it.

As Mark Bartlett puts it in the following essay: Once we escape from naïve realism, an “objective emotion” is one that originates in the world, not in the psyche of the viewer. It is one that is shared by all, but must be revealed in order to fulfill its potential. The vastness of day and night gives way to the vastness of the invisible exterior, of which the painting attempts to contain only the smallest part, for the briefest moment.

**Alf Löhr**

# *In the Night of Matter Black Flowers Bloom*

## *A Philosophic Reverie on the Paintings of Alf Löhr*

By Mark Bartlett

*... double meanings, these triple meanings, are exchanged in correspondences. Double, triple, and quadruple associations would have a better chance of being created if we could strengthen and prolong our impressions by following the reveries of material imagination based upon two or three or four imaginary elements.*

*In the heart of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; in the night of matter black flowers blossom. They already have their velvet and the formula of their scent.*

Gaston Bachelard

Of course one recognizes in Bachelard's use of the term, correspondences, a triple set of allusions and their philosophical associations central to modernism – Baudelaire, Benjamin and Brecht.



Black Flower  
280 x 230 cm, canvas, 2007

*Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance  
In a deep and tenebrous unity,  
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,  
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.*

William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil*  
(Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)

The concept of material imagination, like the alliteration that sonically coheres this constellation of aestheticians, is at the heart of the exchange between them - as Bachelard has put it with perfect succinctness: "... the object designates us more than we designate it..." Art history has yet to benefit from this kind of critical attention so thoroughly attended to in the sciences, which takes the form of an epistemological critique of naïve realism, the belief either that our perceptions deliver a perfectly transparent world in pure immediacy; or, that between our perceptions and the world there exists only an impenetrable veil. In other words, both realist representation and pure formalist abstraction, in art historical terms, are both naïve traditions. This is an epistemological crisis of representation that art history and theory have yet to engage, and consequently, they have never become modern; their aloofness, one could say provincialism, has meant that they remain alienated from the scientific and technological material conditions that have shaped the imagination of cultural modernity so thoroughly. As Brecht put it: "Our life as human beings in society – i.e. our life – is determined by the sciences to a quite new degree." For Brecht, this new degree required that he create a theater "for the scientific age." Benjamin's view is no less fundamental: "Men," he tells us, "as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology a physis is being organized..."

Thus the age-old philosophical problem of the correspondence between imagination and things in the world has never taken root in the critique of art, except among philosophers and critical



theorists, or, among artists themselves. Today's art historical discourses thus remain antiquated, concerned only with their own self-referentiality, and only with the establishment of canons based on the forces of market valorization. But artists are sometimes exactly those who ignore the very canons that dominate art history, which is another way to put art history's utility in great doubt. It is thus imperative that other critical modes of thought be brought to bear on art, in order to release entirely other possibilities of both significations and effects. Thus these comments begin with a philosophical reflection in order to reorient the reader's attention to concerns that typically lie outside the perceived set of concepts germane to art. It is only through attention to the typology of correspondences that we can come to recognize the artwork not as an object, but as a dynamic event that designates us more than we designate it, that allows us to sense the velvet and scent of the black blossoms of matter.

The remarkable thing about Bachelard's black flowers is that not only do they immediately annihilate the mechanistic model of science, asserting instead a vitalist organicism at the very heart of the material world; but that they establish the very principle of the material imagination. The imagination has already been produced, in the external world, by the material formulas that produce sensation in us – we are objectified by matter and its formulas, we are materialized by it – it is not that we, objectify matter. But there is another aspect to this principle. The function of the material imagination is to strengthen and prolong sensation through a sustained reverie, or contemplation of, a constrained network of correspondences among a small number of imagined elements – as for Baudelaire, between perfume, sound and color. Thus, the material imagination materializes consciousness, but in such a way that it produces powerful sentiment as a duration in time as it transforms with each transition to each new element. As Deleuze comments: the eye also has a tactile function, which requires that sight be



transformed at the level of skin. This reversal of aesthetic effect then becomes an instrument with which we may re-examine any work of art.

Alf Löhr's paintings have been the inspiration for this brief revisiting of the aesthetic thought of nearly a century ago. It is not that this thought is necessary to buoy Löhr's very significant achievement, but just the contrary; his work revitalizes the concerns that drove them. There can be no question of painting illustrating the theory here because the art completely reorients the theory around Benjamin's restatement of the Bachelardian reversal with which we began: "...which reality is inwardly convergent with truth? Which truth is inwardly preparing itself to converge with the real? Only he who clearly answers these questions is 'objective.'" Löhr's paintings attain this clarity because they don't capitulate to naïve realism, and thus must be

approached not through the art historical discourse of formalism and the art-about-art self-referentiality that delimits it, but through the double dynamic and relativity of truth preparing to converge with the real, at the same time as, the real is preparing to converge with truth. In other words, if we deny that Löhr's painting can be found in the theory of abstraction, and if instead we shift registers to theories of concrete correspondences, then the critical question about Löhr's work is: is it painting for a scientific age? Just what status does its 'objectivity' have?

Löhr answers this question with a paradoxical term – "objective emotion" – that describes the effect he strives to achieve. We must immediately recognize in its apparent paradox, Benjamin's distinction between the supposed autochthonous "Man," and an emergent "mankind" struggling to discover itself in the physis that technology is continually revolutionizing. For what would an objective emotion be when by definition, emotion is primarily considered a subjective state? Once we escape from naïve realism, the

answer is ready to hand; an objective emotion is one that originates in the world, produced inwardly in those who experience the emotion – the emotion does not originate interior to the psyche of the viewer. Löhr's paintings then do not seek to evoke an emotional response from the viewer, but to produce one. His painting stands to the viewer as do technologies to the physis they construct; in both cases, some new aspect of mankind is produced that transforms the formerly static man, adapting it to new relations of correspondences. Baudelaire's unity of perfume, sound and color, against the vastness of day and night, are still of the order of man because his unity still assumes a physis not yet revolutionized by technology. Löhr's work recasts the black flowers of matter as correspondences among tensions produced between a restricted set of marks, forms, and structures, which hold disunity, or dissonance, and abandon any pretense to harmonious, visual singularity. Surfaces and depths simultaneously occupy a plurality of scales, just as the marks are the effects of a plurality of speeds. The vastness of day and night gives way to the vastness of the invisible exterior of which the painting desperately attempts to contain only the smallest part, for the briefest moment. Shapes rarely cohere, and are radically subordinated to collisions among forces and events of which the marks are only an index. Löhr's work is witness to the dominance of event and action, to speed,

to the kaleidoscopic mutability that characterizes the technocultural sphere of this historical moment. Today's technological physis yields itself up only to apprehension – never revealing more than a part of itself, the implied whole to which it belongs is absolutely excluded from appearing. Comprehension, the view that experience or the world can be circumscribed in its entirety, is abolished. Each of Löhr's paintings, then, is the product of such apprehension, each a member of an infinite set of partial elements forever barred from adding up to a whole, and thus they are an objective depiction of the correspondence between mankind and the fragment-world that is the only world, today.

***But this [when a gest is not allowed to rise above the animal category] is precisely the common tendency of art: to remove the social element in any gest. The artist is not happy until he achieves 'the look of a hunted animal.' The man then becomes just Man; his gest is stripped of any social individuality... the social gest... allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances.***

Brecht

Not only has Löhr challenged the material imagination in philosophical terms, but like many before him, he has challenged his own trade through the elimination of many of its tools and material conditions – the infinite forgiveness of oil and acrylic have been replaced by the unforgiving immediacy of water color, and the durability and transmutability of canvas by the profound non-mutability of paper. If, we were to assimilate Löhr to an art history category, we would call him an actionist, but the comparison would be only minimally productive in those terms. The conditional is used here instructively to set him apart from a naïve modernity reliant as it is on naïve realism, and relate him more to Turner, in terms of an empiricist abstraction of the medium, but more to Goya in terms of the



Between colour and sound  
230 x 200 cm, ink on canvas, 2008



I need more grace than I thought  
150 x 120 cm, ink on paper, 2007



Drawing you closer  
150 x 120 cm, ink on paper, 2007

expressiveness of the medium. Only a gross form of analysis would relate him to Pollock or the Viennese. Though, his difference from them reconstitutes the significance of both. Philosophically, a comparison with the Gutai Group is less grotesque, though quickly runs aground on the profound aporia in cultural and historical terms between the “east” and the “west.” Yet the philosophical link is unavoidable because of the material constraints that govern both – since no mark can be erased, time is compressed, condensed in the performance of the “painting-act,” which ensures the continuous, reciprocal exchange between the painter, the audience, and the world since everything is, literally, on the surface where all three meet. In Löhr’s case, the opposition between elocution and execution, is foreshortened – not unlike Mantegna’s Death of Christ – so that the contrast between the speech-act and the painting-act takes on a particularly Brechtian significance. Mantegna shocked precisely because of the way in which it broke through the clichés of painting-viewer expectation, drawing the latter into the realist intimacy of observation that until then had been limited to conceptual symbolism – Mantegna produced the objective death of Christ for first time. The theme of reversed objectivity has anticipated this claim. The alienation effect so famous in Brecht is nothing else than the aesthetic effect of non-identification between actor and audience, of throwing both back on

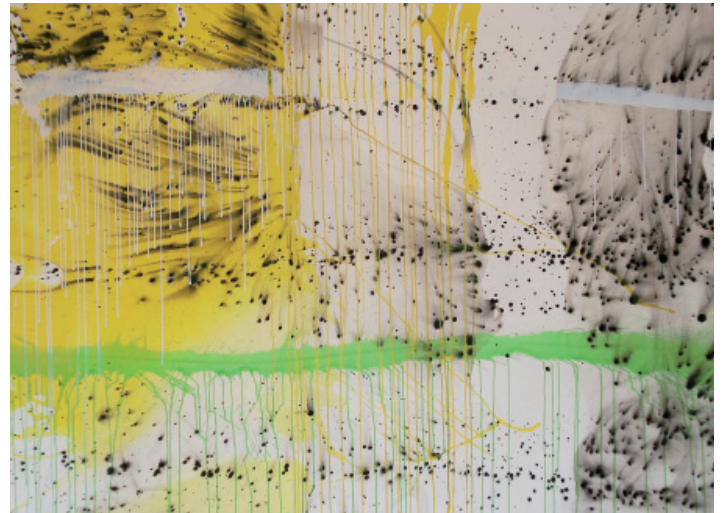
themselves in objective form, so that the subjective is self-alienated in order to realize its own aesthetic and empiricist limitations.

Such is method. But all method relies on tactic. The tactic that Löhr revitalizes in Brecht is that of the *gestus*, (*gestisch*), which in English comes to mean in substantive form, both ‘gist’ and ‘gesture.’ What, we must ask, in the above citation constitutes “conclusions?” May they not be as emotional as rational? Not only may they, but they must, if we reveal that the phrase, – “to be drawn” – is as a metaphor by definition also a *gestus* – logical conclusion depends linguistically on the act of drawing, and vice versa, demonstrating exactly how gist and gesture form an inseparable bond between subject and object in the synthesis of any material imaginary. The *gestus* of the painting above reverses the animalistic artist’s dominance as locked into the constraint of Benjamin’s “Man,” and through its gesture, produces a ‘gist’ that is stunning in its restoration of the social, because it prolongs the duration of the material imagination, so that it extends all the way to 911.

We now know that the social originates in the material imagination. Without it, the social cannot exist.



Beauty is rarely worn on the outside  
120 x 150 cm, ink on paper, 2008



Different ways of measuring time  
120 x 150 cm, ink on paper, 2008



**Alf Löhr**

**born 1957 in Bochum Germany**

**Education**

1985 – 88

**Ph. D. Royal College of Art, London**

1979 – 83

**Kunstakademie Düsseldorf**

**Selected Exhibitions**

2008

**Broadbent, London**

**Bias Bond, Melbourne**

**Galerie Jones, Cologne**

**Muka Gallery, Auckland**

2007

**Victorian Tapestry Workshop**

**Broadbent, London**

**Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Sydney**

2006

**Adam Gallery, Cork Street, London**

**Einblicke VI, Galerie Witzel,**

**Wiesbaden**

**Quite strokes of a night swimmer,**

**Residency Gallery, London**

**Close in Value, Broadbent, London**

2005

**Broadbent, London**

2004

**Gallery at the Residency of the**

**German Ambassador, London**

**Slow Art, Broadbent, London**

2003

**Herbarium der Blicke**

**Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der BRD,**

**Bonn**

**Kunstverein Rastatt**

**Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall**

**Battersea Park**

**Firstsite, Colchester**

2002

**Pumphouse Gallery, London**

**Firstsite at the Minories, Colchester**

**Goethe Institute London**

**broadbent**

25 Chepstow Corner Chepstow Place London W2 4XE  
T: +44 (0)20 7229 8811 M: +44 (0)7768 082249  
info@broadbentgallery.com www.broadbentgallery.com

The feminine monarchy  
120 x 150 cm, ink on paper, 2008