

A Single Stroke of the Brush

The singular brushstroke

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For the opening of Hyung Sook-Songs' exhibition at the "Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof" in 2006, Werner Hoffmann gave an introduction to the painter's work, in which he made clear that the work's roots do not lie in Europe. Hoffmann's introduction, however, was not concerned with this issue; he did not even touch upon the subject of Hyung's East-Asian background. He addressed Leon Battista Alberti's theoretical definition which stated, in 1435, that painting is a "finestra aperta", thereby setting forth "one of the basic principles of our (European) painting for centuries to come; painting saturated by reality, by matter, by impressions, until, in the late 19th century, there was an evolution in artistic mentality which (he turns to HS Song) - I would say - you mastered with ease. All of these arduous, painstaking processes of abstraction by which, for example, Cezanne only gradually distanced himself from what the "open window" offers in terms of material content; these are processes which you mastered - I have no idea how - marvelously. We Westerners, like Kandinsky, came to understand only gradually that a picture is not just a window, a hole in the wall through which to see all kinds of objects and information, but that a picture is a surface, like a membrane, upon which painting happens."¹

East-Asian painters have not perceived landscape by way of the "open window," as a wall separating them from the world. The linear perspective dominant in the West, which places the viewer in the room outside the painting on the canvas, was unknown in East Asia. Let's look at a painting by Shitao! (1641-1717, Qing Dynasty). When the East-Asian painter looked at a landscape, he saw himself as an integral part of that very landscape; and just as the painter Shitao felt himself to be one with what he observed, so does someone who immerses himself in his painting today become part of that which he observes. It can't be determined, however, from which standpoint the viewer should perceive one of Shitao's landscapes. There are no hints regarding his point of view. The search for such a clue allows various interpretations. Clarity is not the nature of painting.

European paintings are usually composed of a series of countless bits of color applied next to or on top of one another using a paintbrush or other tool. For many painters, the application of color, or putting a brush-stroke on the canvas, is not even visible. For example, in the paintings of Robert Campin (1406-1445), Vermeer van Delft (1632-1675) and Rene Magritte (1898-1967), brushstrokes are hardly - if at all - recognizable. In the 1960s, Gerhard Richter's method of smudging, with its consequent blurriness, purged paintings of brushstrokes entirely. We are familiar with the visible brushstroke in Europe thanks to Tintoretto (1518-1594), for whom the application of color to the canvas was an important aspect of the

work. In classic Modernity, there are traces of the brushstroke, for example, in Cezanne, Van Gogh and subsequently the Expressionists, the last for whom the application of color to the canvas - the emergence of the painting - was visible.

In the late 19th century, Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh turned away from what Hofmann, along with Battista Alberti, called "the view through the open window onto the material reality of objects in three-dimensional space." For these painters, the external world was no longer exterior. They no longer perceived the world through an open window from the vantage point of an enclosed space. They treated a canvas, stretched uniformly across a frame, as an entirely two-dimensional membrane; a presentational surface upon which they activated the forces of painting. Cezanne's brushstroke is "flat-and- dappled," with color employed to throw space into high relief or create depth. In Van Gogh's "The Plain of La Crau," the increasing intensity of color and the artist's brief, pulsing brushstrokes creates proximity (foreground), while the diminishing intensity of color and brushstrokes indicates distance (background).

European paintings in which individual brushstrokes are visible as part of the process of color application, such as in the works of El Greco, Cezanne and Van Gogh, only become coherent paintings by virtue of the structure created by these brushstroke. In East-Asian painting, on the contrary, the singular brushstroke - line and volume simultaneously - is the essential element; life is completely evoked by a single brushstroke. The characteristic style of a brushstroke, its singular expressiveness, was employed in East-Asia very early as a constitutive element. The Chinese poet and painter Shitao has already been mentioned. Singular brushstrokes are clearly visible in his work. In the interplay of emptiness and fullness, of roughness and delicacy, of dryness and wetness, of hardness and softness, expressiveness and transience, individual brushstrokes embody, at one and the same time, concrete and imagined landscapes.

The painter Hyun-Sook Song and the musician Isang Yun both created their work as emigrants in Germany. In Europe, the Korean Yun (1917-1995) found himself confronted with Western music as the Korean Song was confronted with Western painting.

Isang Yun said: "While European music lives from melody, whereby the individual tone can be relatively abstract, for us the individual tone is essential. You can compare our tones with brushstrokes.... Each tone is subject to change from beginning to end; it is equipped with ornamentation, suggestion, beats, Glissandi and dynamic changes; above all, the natural vibration of a single tone is consciously used as a formative element. A change in a tone's pitch is not viewed so much as an interval in the creation of a melody as much as it is for its ornamental function and as part of one and the same tone".⁷² In Asian music, particularly in ancient Chinese music (which is still nurtured and kept alive in Korea), it is the unfolding of a single tone's, like a single brushstroke's, manifold energetic powers which seems to command interest: the sound constitutes a center ceaselessly played about, expanded, fractured and put together again.⁷³

Disregarding the so-called "uncontrolled creative process" in Western Modernity, European artists generally painted on an upright canvas. Oil paint (and, in the 20th century, acrylics) made it possible to apply color on an upright frame covered by canvas. The application of color did not have to be definitive; a painter could paint over this as often as he wished to or scrape it off the canvas. A painting in oil or acrylics can be endlessly reworked and altered. Occasionally, artists work on a single painting over a long period of time. Some paintings are made out of brushstrokes thickly applied on top of each other. A painting is not finished by mere chance - the painter decides! The painter is the agent; he creates the artwork; the artwork is unequivocally the product of his endeavors.

Song's paintings are not uniform, structurally dense compositions made with a brush or other tool to apply swaths of color next to or over one another. In her experiments, the painter followed the syntax of East-Asian calligraphy, pushing beyond calligraphy's boundaries towards painting. With a relaxed wrist and a fully-immersed brush, the movement of a singular brushstroke - from the moment the brush touches to the moment it leaves the canvas - is completed without interruption or revision. The brush is saturated with a number of distinctive, co-existing temperas, next to or on top of each other or mixed together in the reservoir of brush hairs. Depending upon the way the artist chooses to hold her wrist and the pressure of the paintbrush on the canvas, the colors flow from the paintbrush hairs, combining and leaving a trace on a wet or dry foundation. The brushstrokes are made without retouching. Each individual brushstroke is a representation of the course of a movement. The canvas lies on the floor at the artist's feet. The painter virtually dances on the canvas, and each time, she "dances" for the first time. The artist does not interrupt the rhythm of her brushstrokes. Interruption is discontinuation

The numerical specification of brushstrokes

Using her wrist and a paintbrush, the painter made a singular brushstroke on the canvas. On this canvas, we can see, *simultaneously*, every brushstroke which the painter made *consecutively*. The canvas shows the brushstrokes, applied successively in time, as a static present. For every painting, the painter specifies the number of brushstrokes applied to the canvas on the back of the frame. For example, "13 brushstrokes", "Seven brushstrokes on top of 1 brushstroke", "Two brushstrokes", "29 brushstrokes and rat". The mention of a rat, a rabbit or a tiger has a numerical purpose. When the painter was asked, "when were you born?" she responded: "In the year of the rabbit".

Generally, a picture's theme does not provide the title for any of Song's paintings. ^{*4} To title a painting according to the number of brushstrokes strikes some people in Germany as an artistic quirk. However, the Korean art historian Tae-Ho Lee has interpreted the number of a painting's brushstrokes to mean that the painter is indifferent to the meaning or symbolic value of the objects presented, and this peculiarity is

specifically Asian. "Her 'painting titles' recall the Taoist or Buddhist questions such as: are visible phenomena reality or mere illusion?"⁵ It is left to us to decide if the numerical information constitutes a title or not. It does not refer in any way to the painting's theme. The number of brushstrokes can nonetheless help us approach Song's painting. When, for example, a painting says "Seven brushstrokes", the information behooves us to recognize and to retread the path. Recounting the number of brushstrokes leads to recognition of their succession; the succession of brushstrokes is the Way (Tao). "No matter how far you go, no matter how high, you must begin your journey with a simple step. Consequently, the single brushstroke embodies everything, to the furthest distance; there is not a single brushstroke among even tens of thousands of brushstrokes whose beginning and end does not lie in this single brushstroke...."⁶

If we tally attentively, we cannot fail to tread the artist's path. The various layers applied on the canvas provide a clue as to the succession of brushstrokes made by the painter, which follows a logic just as nature dictates nomadic life in the Steppe. As soon as the plausibility of the movement reveals itself to the observer, the brushstroke sheds the representational like a second skin. The brushstroke enjoys its dynamic power and does not seek to be anything else. This movement will not be credible to everyone because not everyone lets himself be led back to a painting's emergence. In this case, the number of brushstrokes becomes objectified, a thing to be identified.

But Song's painting rejects the "object"; it does not show objects. If the movement of a brushstroke traces the course of a potter's wheel, no object - a pot, for example - has served as a model. It is rather that the imprint of the brushstroke on the canvas, like the imprint of the pottery maker in the clay on its rotating wheel, reveals the power of a pot's coming-to-be. At the same time, the similarity of the potter's relationship to his material, the clay, and the painter's to her material becomes clear.

Painting creates its own space

Before the painter begins to paint, she turns her attention upon her material. The material of painting is not amorphous. The painter has a particular artistic affection for some of the paintbrushes; those which, after years of use, lost some of their hairs, like the bald head of some elderly people. She puts two large white plates on the table to lay her brushes in, as if she were expecting visitors. Just as the potter elicits a tone from his newly-fired pot in order to test its uniformity, so does the painter use the back of her forefinger to elicit a tone from the newly-stretched canvas to determine its homogeneity. This is how the painter focuses her concentration on the possible uses of her medium. The homogeneity of the canvas presents itself to the painter as emptiness. According to East-Asian thought, emptiness is not, as one might assume, something vague or non-existent; it is, indeed, distinctly dynamic and active.⁷ This does not mean that the canvas is a surface upon which to present something simply because the painter prepared

it with the intention of painting on it; it is rather that the canvas possesses a particularly unsettling quality revealing everything which takes place upon it, regardless of the painter's intention: every misstep, every uncertainty, every disruption or distraction in the rhythmic movement of a single brushstroke. Since the painter physically wields her paintbrush using her wrist, the painting creates its own space.

It is no longer possible to correct or revise a brushstroke once it has been applied to the canvas. The completion of a work is absolutely irrevocable. As said, this means that every misstep, even a minor uncertainty or brief hesitation, betrays itself in the movement of the brushstroke. How shall we describe it? The painter paints like a violin virtuoso who produces a pure tone by placing her bow upon the instrument; in the flow of her performance, however, there may be a "false" tone, a heterogeneous brushstroke. The more rigorously the painter developed her technique and pursued the syntax of her material, the easier it became to accept heterogeneous brushstrokes, since, at the moment the brushstroke is made, this very same brushstroke determines movement, rhythm, and gesture such that missteps, bumps and leaps are entirely absorbed in the brushstroke itself. Neither a hand guided by intellect nor an unerring machine could accomplish such a task. The vital brushstroke is the result of something other than the consciously-guided hand. The artist is subject to accident. Heterogeneous brushstrokes can only be perceived relatively, as traces of the human. They do not, however, play a minor role; they are the energetic force of non-organic life. Occasionally, when a painting struck her as particularly successful, the painter said: *"It wasn't me. I didn't make this."*

The so-called "uncontrolled creative process" characteristic of Western Modernity is diametrically opposed to the meditative practices of East Asia. And yet, East Asian meditative practices have been cited as the source for uncontrolled creative processes, such as those employed in Abstract Expressionism, Psychic Automatism and *art informel*. The forms which the works of Western Modernism have taken first arose, however, during or as part of the creative process, "emerging from the surprises of flowing color",⁸ while East Asian painting pursued a fully-realized concept.

The painter's approach requires a vision, without which there would be no motivation to confront the dynamic forces of the canvas. This confrontation follows immediately. As if the painter has suddenly forgotten the vision, she puts the paintbrush in her hand to the canvas, a microcosmic field. With each new brushstroke, the drive to create is imprinted upon the canvas. Even if the sense of whole work is alive in the vision, it falls silent when the brush first touches the canvas. Trained sense perception dissolves in the visual process of creation, in the confrontation with dynamic forces within the canvas' horizon, similarly to the confrontation with truth.

Before taking up her paintbrush, it is the painter's task to determine the canvas' horizon (whereby the painter is also dependent upon her imaginative powers), meaning the stretcher's format and the position of the first brushstroke upon the canvas. The canvas' horizon determines a certain form according to which the diagram of brushstrokes can be realized. Since the painter determines the format of the

stretcher, it becomes clear that there are other possible horizons according to which a diagram of brushstrokes could be otherwise realized. Two fields are created by a canvas uniformly stretched and the corners of the right-angled stretcher create a system of coordinates. Using a single dot of chalk on two corners of the right-angled canvas, the painter marks the position of the first brushstroke on the canvas. If she shifts the mark (up or down, right or left), the tension increases or decreases until an area is reached in which the relationship between the brushstroke and the horizon cease to exist. The canvas' horizon is thus extremely important. Accordingly, the painter has carefully determined the stretcher's format before affixing the canvas.

In order for the application of the single brushstroke to take place, a relationship of opposites needs to be created: fullness and emptiness. "Emptiness" needs "fullness" and vice-versa. Emptiness and fullness are completely dependent upon one another. Without the fullness of imagination (with which we are concerned), our hands remain motionless. Without emptiness, our joints remain stiff. The power of movement is the result of empty space. This tension gives rise to the creative impulse and the solution lies in the emptiness of the wrist (wrist is empty). Seen in this light, the logic of emptiness is constitutive. The painter's imagination attains fullness. When the power of imagination reaches absolute fullness, the impulse to do something emerges! Quivering like a star before its nova, the impulse determines the unique moment of its realization. In the moment in which the tension, which is directed outwards, loosens the muscles and the wrist abruptly yields to emptiness, the physical act occurs. In this moment, the painter begins, with the precision of her wrist, to make the first stroke with the brush on the empty canvas. What was previously inner fullness and now suddenly becomes solid material is the flow of color, following the dictates of gravity; perception dripping from the brush. This is something material, it seems to be something real without having any fixed relationship to the painter herself. The painter follows the syntax of her material, similar to a "generative grammar" arising irresistibly in the painting process and leading to perception.

A single brushstroke is identical to the horizon separating heaven and earth. The act of applying a brushstroke is what makes us human: the knowledge of that merciless boundary between what exists in the world and what doesn't; that we are born into the world and that death removes us from the world; the certainty that we are mortal. ^{*9}

Notes

1 Werner Hofmann, introductory speech for the opening of the exhibition by Hyun-Sook Song at the Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof on 20 January 2006. Published in "breath and brushstrokes, Hakgojae, Seoul, 2008.

2 Schmidt, Brennpunkte der Neuen Musik, Cologne, 1977

3 See also: Hans Zender in „Der Komponist Isang Yun“, p. 286f, Munich 1987

4 "13 brushstrokes over a mass of shoes, painted on 27.1.2005 on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, in remembrance of the forced prostitutes under Japanese dominion." / The painter made one exception in this painting:

5 "Breath and brushstrokes", Hakgojae, Seoul 2008.

6 Francois Cheng, Fülle und Leere, Berlin 2004, p.153

7 See also: Francois Cheng, Fülle und Leere, Berlin 2004, p.51

8 Kurt Leonhard, Michaux, S.5, Stuttgart 1967
Jackson Pollock's hand didn't heed imagination, either.

9 See also: Francois Cheng, Fülle und Leere, Berlin 2004, p.149)