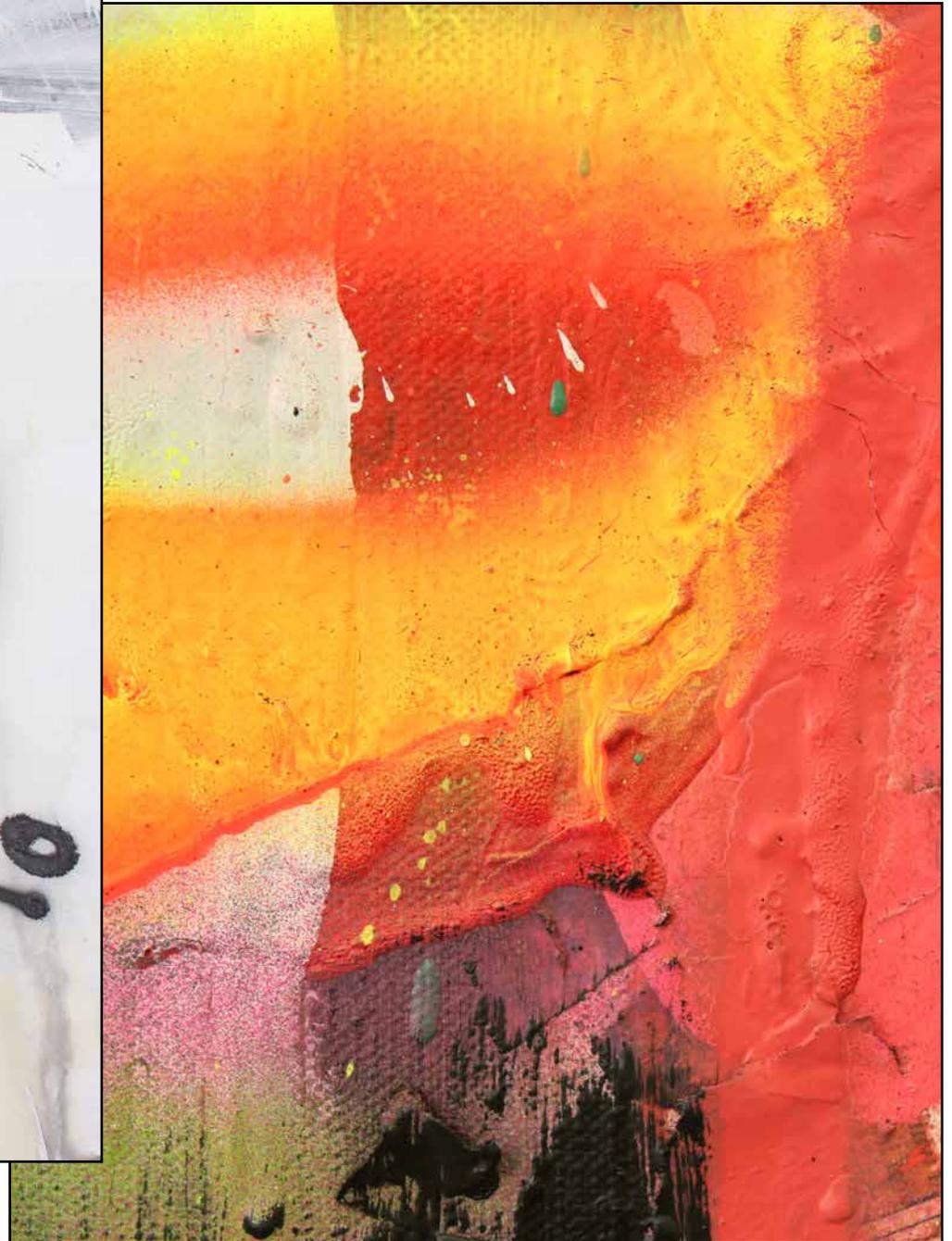


Emil Holmer



Parasites & Diagramme
selected paintings 2010-2013

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*In art it is hard to say
anything as good as:
saying nothing.* — Ludwig
Wittgenstein¹

Let us not speak of the futility of those obituaries invoking the death or end of painting. They endlessly repeat themselves and this repetition becomes the repeated admission of their futility. And yet perhaps there is no painting—no painting at eye level with the present—that does not touch on its own death, once and again rubbing shoulders with its impossibility.

Perhaps painting means to touch “the void in being and in the present.”² Perhaps painting today is, more than anything, opening to the crack in the continuum of being, affirmation of the inconsistency of reality. At the heart of every iteration, affirmation affirms itself by once and again negating its futility. There is a negative power of repetition—the power of negation—that draws its insistence from the affirmation of the impossible: of the impossible or the nothing, which is to say the void or the absence of meaning.

Marguerite Duras said the same of writing, that it is probing the void. In writing, the subject circles the primordial loss of meaning.³ That is what makes a document of futility out of every reiteration: the necessity of nearing the limit of manifest evidences as a means of opening the space of non-evidence,

the zero-point of reality. Jacques Lacan called this zero-point the *real*, Jean-Paul Sartre addressed it as the *hole of being*.⁴ What keeps painting alive beyond its death is the opening to a void that, rather than describe the non-existence of God, looks to the condition of its own possibility.

To touch on the boundaries of painting with its own means is something like continuing to live by not ceasing to survive—in other words, the process by which a person, as Derrida once put it, allows for the “complication of the opposition [of] everyday life.”⁵ Painting could be the practice of this complication or complicating, while it enters the scene of the debatable compossibility of death and life. In a conversation with Donald Kuspit, Louise Bourgeois said that “art is about life,” which also means that it has to do with “survival in everyday life.”⁶ To survive in everyday life is to survive in the indifference of reality, in what Albert Camus describes as the “benign indifference of the world.”⁷ This indifference is evidently nothing other than the same ontological void as a synonym for the absence of meaning. In the space left by this absence, painting arises as the index of its impossibility, as long as impossible means that everything always remains to be done, so that, in other words, to paint means to do without absolute meaning, inventing signs and techniques of a life form that can integrate the unlivable into itself.

Painting at eye level with today can only be painting on par with this ontological void, the emptiness indicating the fundamental feature of all realities. The opening to this void implies a certain resistance to facts. Facts are nothing but facts, certainties only certainties: art knows that knowledge isn't everything, that the responsibility of the artist begins with building up an affirmative resistance against all vulgar materialisms and positivisms, simultaneously suspending all idealisms that promise it a reality beyond this one (only to eventually completely de-historicize it later). Realism and idealism are pseudo alternatives — of the history of philosophy, of the philosophical aesthetic, and of art.

1.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch, Chicago: 1984, p. 23.

2.

Michel Foucault, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954 — 1984, vol 1, 1954 — 1969*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. James D. Faubion, New York: 2001.

3.

Cf. Marcus Steinweg & Rosemarie Trockel, *Duras*, Berlin: 2008.

4.

Is always about wresting the consistency of the work from a universal inconsistency, establishing a visibility devoid of any implicitness. It is because of this that the appearance of the work — its a surprise; because its evidence comes from the order of the non-evident. Art exists at the moment when this appearance tears a hole in the web of facts in order to darken the evidence of instituted realities, not through obscurantism or obscurity, but through clarity, through a surfeit of evidence.

5.

Jacques Derrida, *Living On in Parages*, trans. Tom Conley, Stanford: 2011, p. 19 — 116.

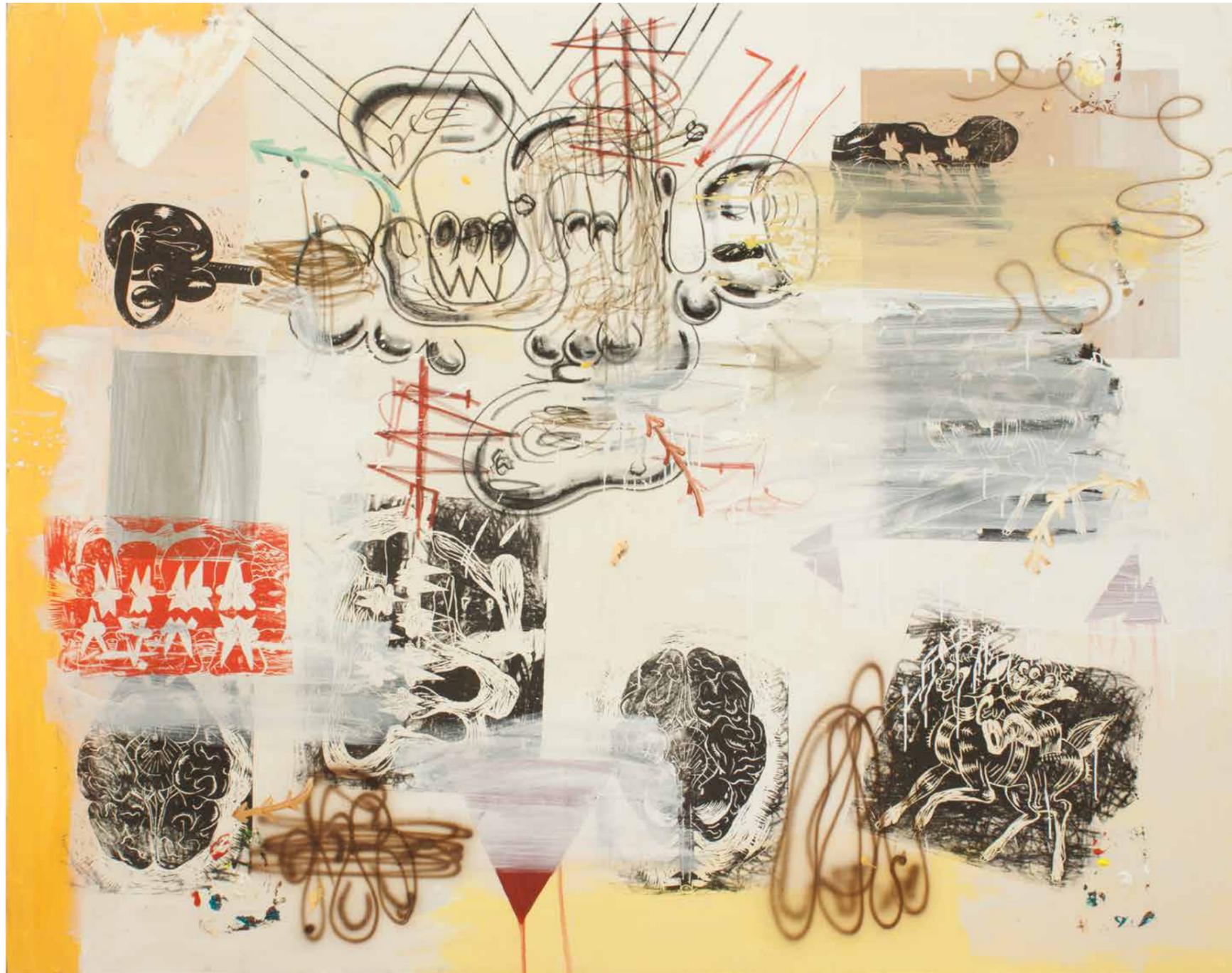
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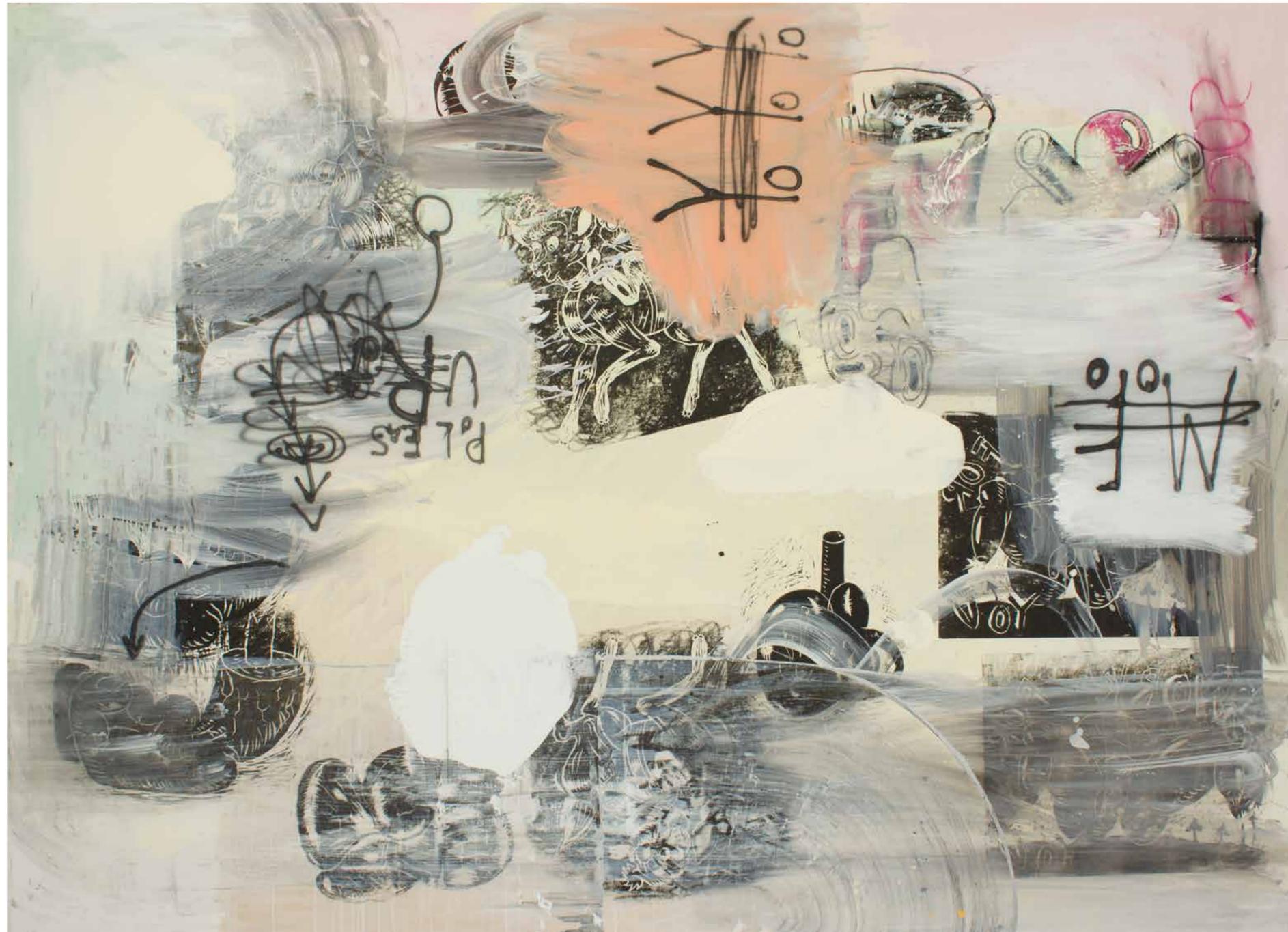
Donald Kuspit, *A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois in Bourgeois*, New York: 1988.

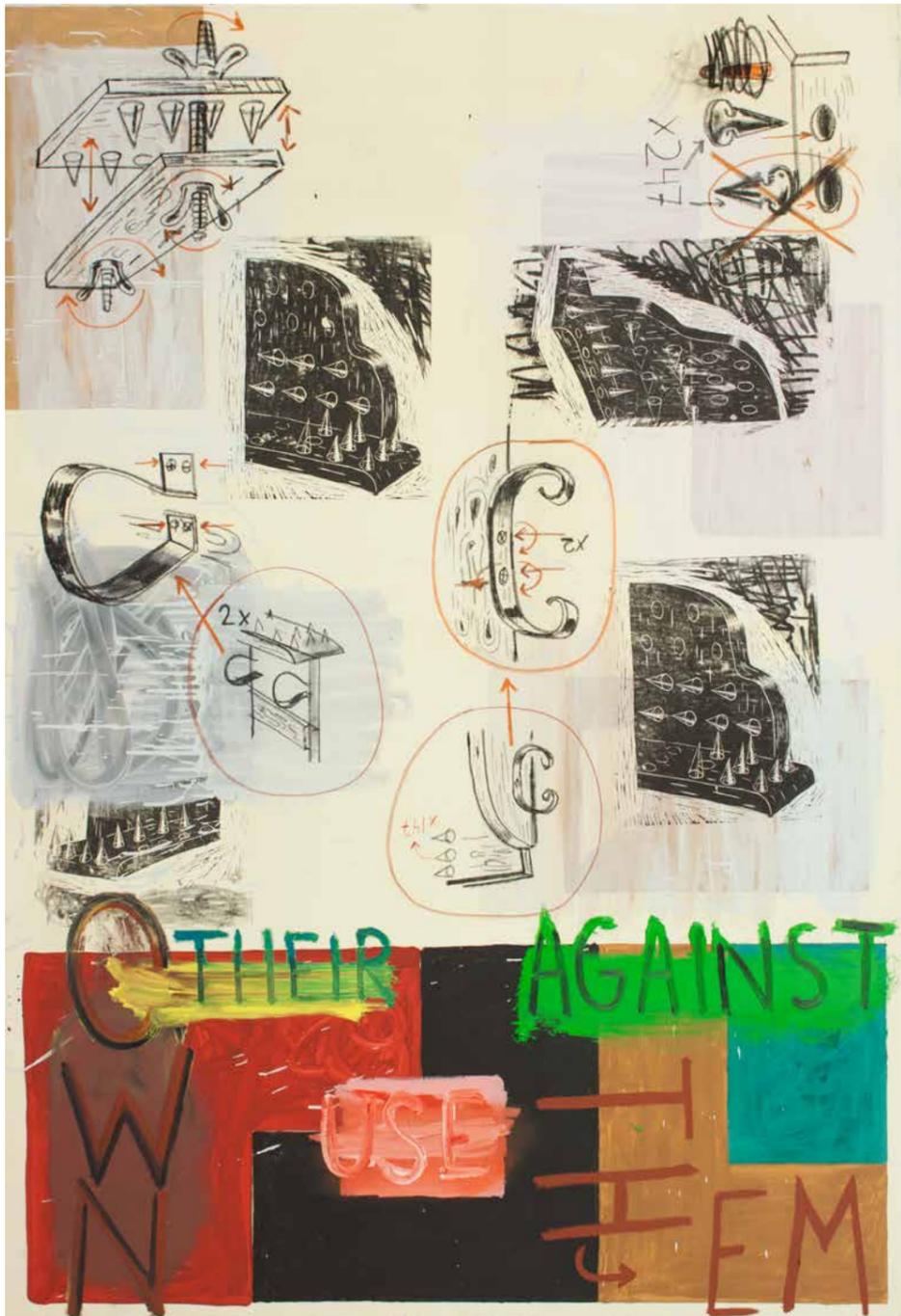
7.

Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*, Paris: 1942, p. 171 [author's trans.].







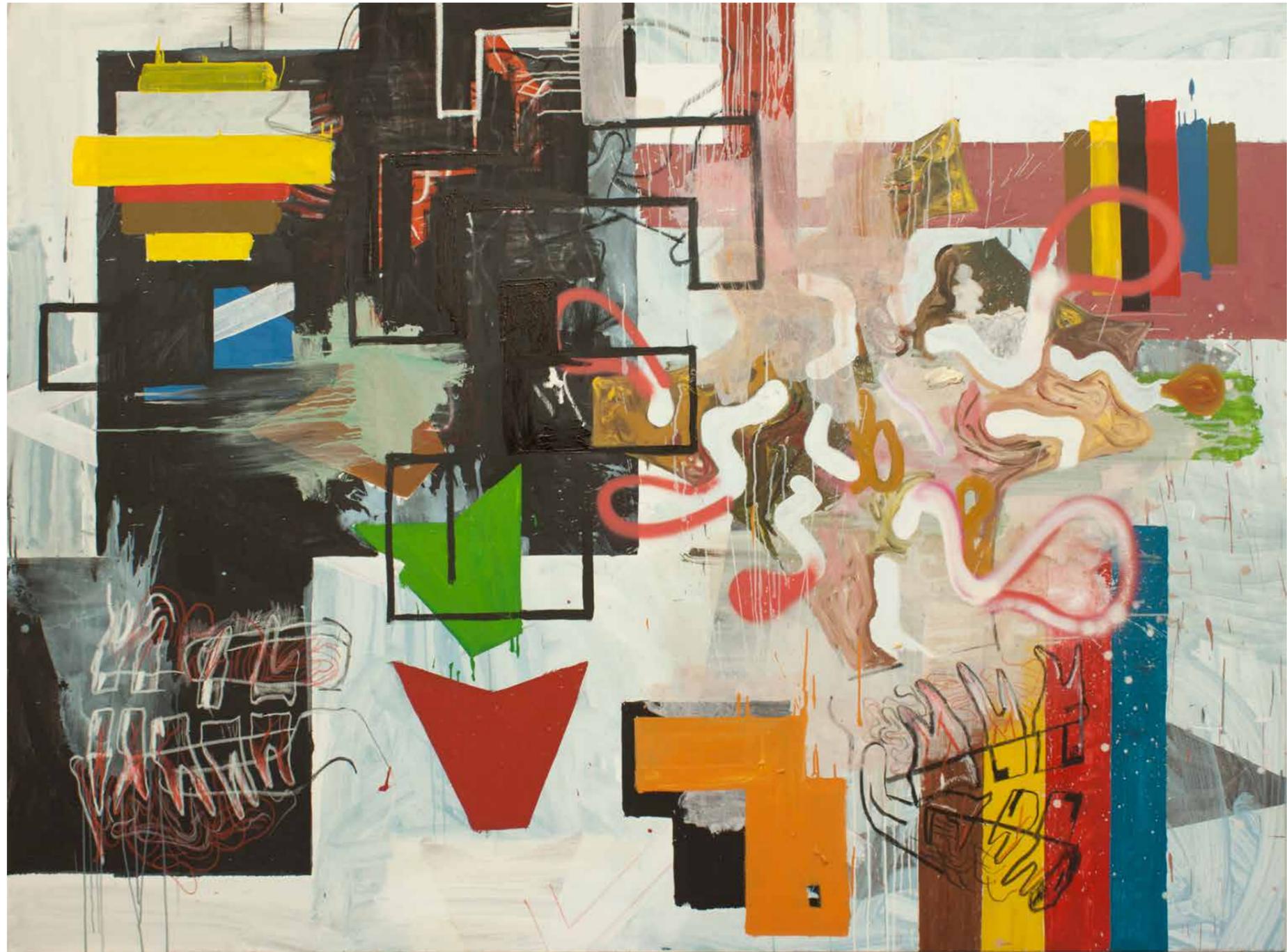










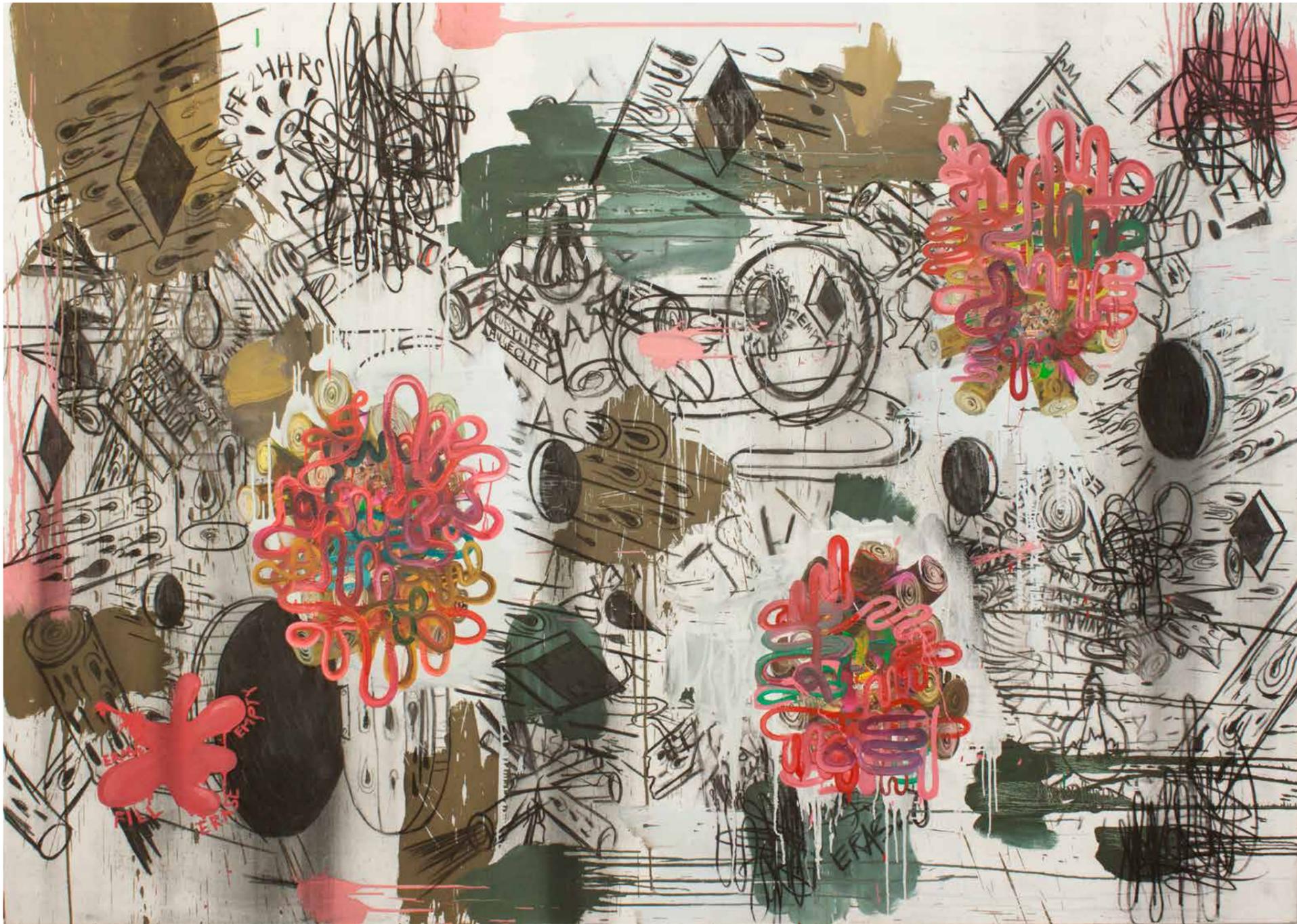














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In the summer of 2012 Emil Holmer figured in a dual exhibition at Norrtälje Art Gallery together with Veronica Brovall. Emil exhibited seven large canvases and six drawings.

Emil Holmer's paintings take me aback, in both the literal and the figurative sense. I am not only physically compelled to take a step aback, but also propelled into a state of astonishment. At the same time, however, the paintings entice me to take a step forward and enter their images. The forces acting in both directions are tangible. One step backwards, two steps forward. In order to come closer to Emil Holmer's art, I have to begin by evening out the potential energy and taking a step backwards. Let me commence with my astonishment.

The size of Emil Holmer's paintings is one of the factors at play in the relation between the work of art and the observer. The paintings that were exhibited in Norrtälje are around two metres in height and almost three metres in breadth. The format of the paintings is on the level of a human being. This has a significance for the artistic experience. The work of art takes as much space in the room as I myself do, and my observation of the painting becomes a physical experience that is impossible to avoid. I have to create a relationship to the work of art and cannot escape without learning my position in the room.

"There hangs the painting and where am I?" is the question that arises inside of me.

The proportions between the paintings and myself lead to a modification of the balance between presentation and representation. My power of reasoning tells me that a painting is a painting, a flat piece of cloth covered with paint and stretched out onto a wooden frame. I am also told by my power of reasoning that, when I observe such an object, I can see a picture which I can take in and interpret. Like all human beings, I have come to an agreement with reality that in language and art, the observed possesses several different meanings. In the case of Emil's large paintings, this agreement is altered and, since they are roughly as big as I am, they come closer to my normal reality. Normally there is a distance between the work of art and myself. The work of art, the painting, is something else which I look at and look inside of. In the case of these large paintings, the artistic experience becomes part of my ordinary reality. My normal relationship to that which is distance enters a state of unbalance. In this respect Holmer's paintings function more like sculptures and installations. The physical object of the painting assumes a different importance in the artistic experience. The painting is not simply a painting, but acquires its own intrinsic value, its own presentation.

In being taken aback one is determining one's position and taking one's bearings. The establishment of relations between proportions and realities is also a form of orientating oneself. The next direction and movement is towards and into the work of art. This occurs in my observation and does not take place purely physically. Having entered the paintings, I discover that a spatial uncertainty also prevails there. What is up, what is down, what is behind and what is in front of? The space in the paintings is constantly baffling me. I am searching for solid ground and support, but the focus in the paintings is continuously withdrawing and leading me away from comfort and stability. Old pictorial composition theory and dull central perspective are present, but are counteracted. They are present, but at the same time not present. It feels as if, on principle, contradiction has priority over confirmation. Spatial dissolution was the patricide committed by modernism on art and it provided the slashing-and-burning necessary to prepare the artistic ground for the future, even for the artists of today. However, modernism too met its Brutus in the form of postmodernism, and the openness of the latter artistic movement to the inconceivable is manifest in Emil Holmer's spatial dissolution.

However, now I find myself somewhere in the painting. There is space. It is not a question of a denial of the spatial, just a simple questioning.

Inside the paintings I see how Emil utilises several recurrent pictorial elements. One such element is parallel lines in bright colours which are reminiscent of routes drawn on a map of tracks. There are also jagged diagrams with similar lines. Lines and diagrams are abstract forms in painting, but they also, of course, possess a connotative value and provide associations with things which they resemble. The parallel lines in different colours lead me to think of subway maps, which, in turn, give me the feeling of a big city and urban life. The subway is a strong metaphor which can be charged with content such as energy, collectivism and outsidersness, undercurrents and organisation. The map image as such constitutes the clearest relationship we have between presentation and representation, the relationship of a reproduction to the reproduced, the relationship of one reality to another. A diagram is created through point values in a scale being connected with lines. It is the coordinates which create the jaggedness. Here too the pictorial representation corresponds to something else: sales in relation to time, temperature in relation to place, etc. Each position has a specific value. Here too there are concomitant associations which are included in the work of art. A diagram is an abstraction of a reality with the intention of creating lucidity, but the process of elucidation involves a simplification and the immeasurable is lost. Nevertheless,

if nothing else, the “subway lines” and the “diagrams” are just differently coloured rounded and jagged forms, respectively, with their own intrinsic value.

Another feature of Emil’s paintings is the graffiti-like organic forms painted with a spray can. Spraying paint onto a canvas is in actual fact a question of technique. Paint can be applied onto a canvas using different tools and methods, and using a spray can is one such method. One of the resultant effects is a vagueness of form which contrasts with the coloured lines and diagrams, for example. Sprayed forms and surfaces become more organic and irregular, like minute bacteria in a microscope. Moreover, the spray-painting technique inevitably creates a reference to graffiti painting. Through an interaction with the “subway lines” a further connection is made to an urban context. The connotative value of graffiti does not need to be described; graffiti is by definition an expression of outsidersness, at the same time as it expresses a dynamic energy. Graffiti painting is interesting in a number of ways, however. At the same time as it signals freedom from norms, it is cast in a mould which is not undergoing any appreciable transformation. If graffiti painting were to be liberated from itself, it would cease to exist. This contradiction fits well into Holmer’s aesthetics, seeking to escape from the self-evident without ceasing to exist.

Another pictorial element reminiscent of something from the so-called lower levels of culture is the pictorial features that resemble comic-strip characters. They possess the characteristics of drawings in American underground comics, in a style resembling that of Robert Crumb’s work: forceful line drawing with heavy black contours with a roughness of expression. Here too one has a connection to outsidersness and the will to achieve freedom. The technique and themes of Crumb are characterised by a forcefulness and tangibility which, as in the case of Holmer, are balanced by a sensitivity and a kind of tenderness. Comic-strip drawing in the 21st century is a field which has attracted many contemporary artists and where they have won a large and initiated audience. In Emil Holmer’s paintings, these elements also increase the pictorial dynamics. A window is opened to a narrative element, but this is much too insufficient for a clear narrative to develop. Here too our hopes are frustrated if it is solid ground we are seeking.

There is also a provocative grotesqueness in Crumb and the underground comics which has also reached pictorial art, as seen, for example, in the work of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelly. The morally outrageous is per se revolutionary; it rocks conceptual foundations. One is compelled to evaluate and perhaps reevaluate.

An additional deconstructive feature is the parts of the paintings which are in the form of overlaid layers of paint. The outer layer of paint is lying over other layers of paint. These overlaid parts not only have an intrinsic value in the composition, but also give a picture of something being painted over again and again, of something unsatisfactory being removed. This creates an element of temporariness. Whatever is to replace that which has been removed has not yet been put in place. The temporary is allowed to remain here. This also provides a picture of painting as a process and a physical reality. One can see that something has actually been physically painted.

While searching and orientating myself in Emil Holmer’s pictorial world, I receive some guidance from the titles of the works. Here one finds terms like machine, arcade, chronology and diagram, as well as parasite. A parasite is something which feeds on something else, and which derives its energy from something that can create or gather the energy which the parasite needs. Emil Holmer’s paintings are not parasites that derive their energy from somewhere else. Nor is it I as the observer who am a parasite in my experience of the works of art. The parasites are rather to be found in the internal circulation of the works of art, where certain pictorial elements are dependent on other pictorial elements for their survival. It is the transitions

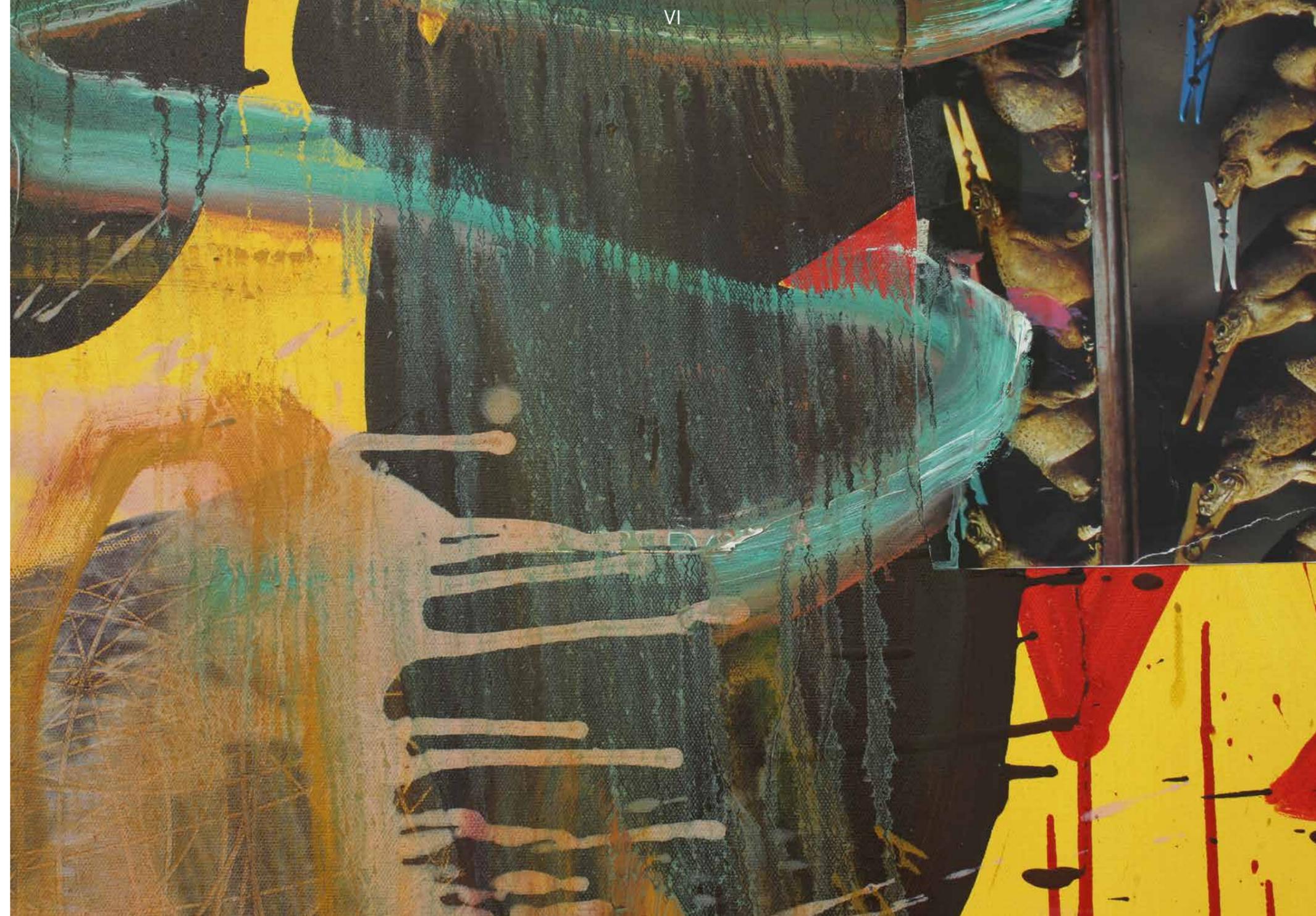
and transfers taking place which are a part of the energy being generated and emitted. Sometimes words and texts are to be found in the paintings too. Like the other pictorial elements, the letters function as forms, but the meaning of the words also provides an intimation of a narrative.

Power and energy are integral components of Emil Holmer’s painting. One can call his art abstract, and one can call it expressionist; one can thus also say that it represents abstract expressionism. These are ways in which we art historians divide our world up and make it a little easier to handle. When discussing Holmer’s art, one can mention some of his predecessors in the above-mentioned movements, for example Edward Munch, Emil Nolde, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf and Jörg Immendorff. Also invited to join are artists such as Mark Rothko and Frank Stella, with their single-coloured lines and other monochromatic basic geometric shapes, such as the rectangle, rhomb and triangle, used as hard-wearing accoutrements of the modernist tradition. Irrespective of the different terms and the divisions into different movements, these artists represent a heritage which Emil Holmer is using as a basis for his art. Order and chaos, concreteness and abstraction, computation and automation are pairs of concepts within modernism

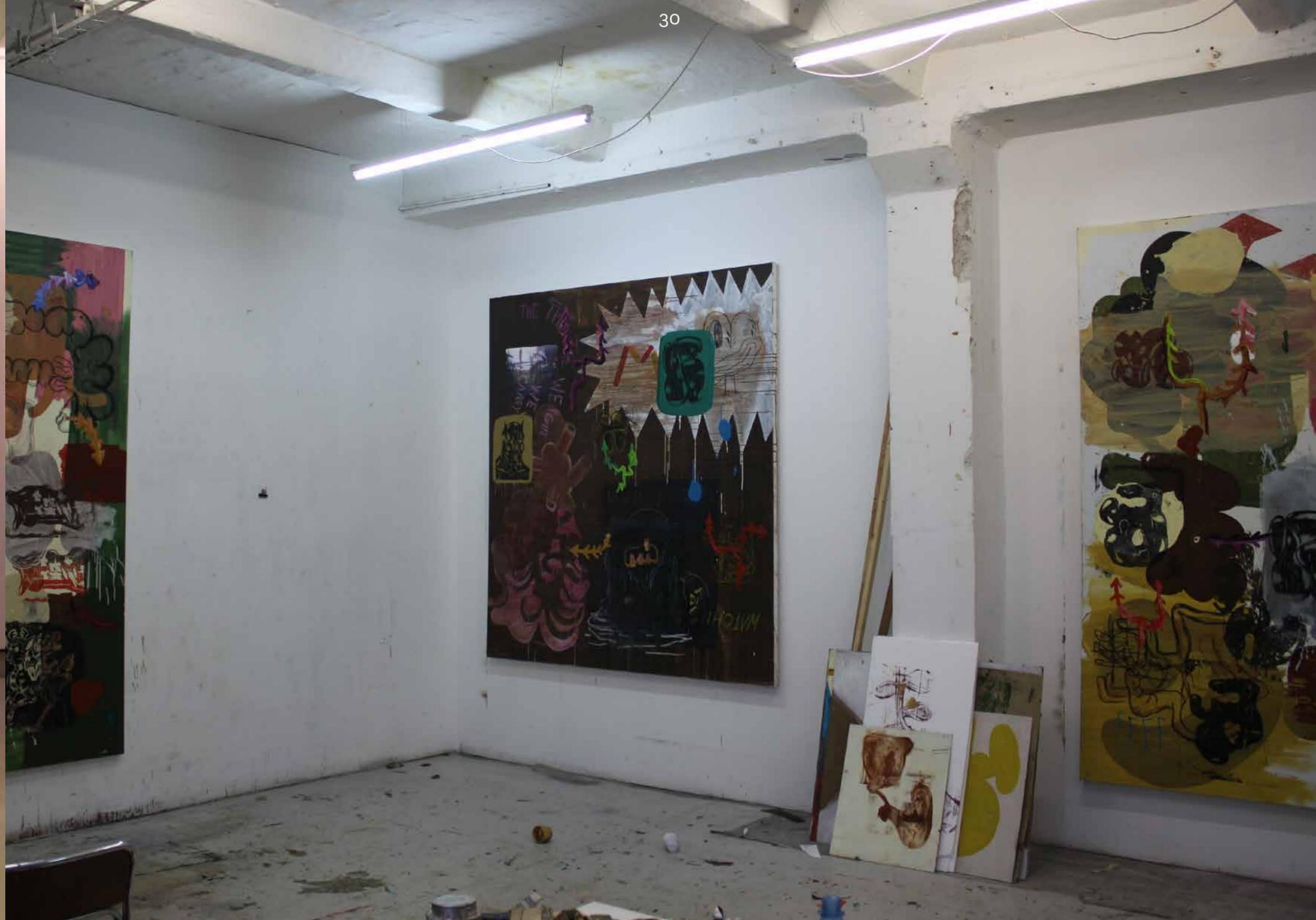
which Emil Holmer is problematizing further. Holmer's work is also accompanied by the "wild painting" of recent years, represented by Markus and Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Carol Dunham, Lee Lozano and Jutta Koether, and where struggle, conflict and free possibilities of combining different components of painting are now being exploited further. In his own generation Holmer finds kinship with artists such as Jukka Korkeila and Jyrki Riekkö, for whom too the act is a component of creating, art is part of settling a score with life, and the point of no return has been reached.

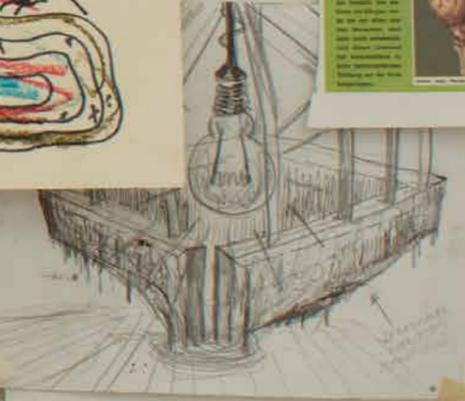
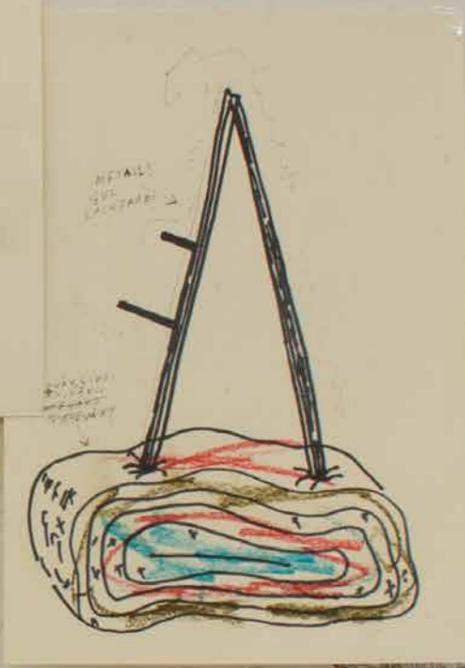
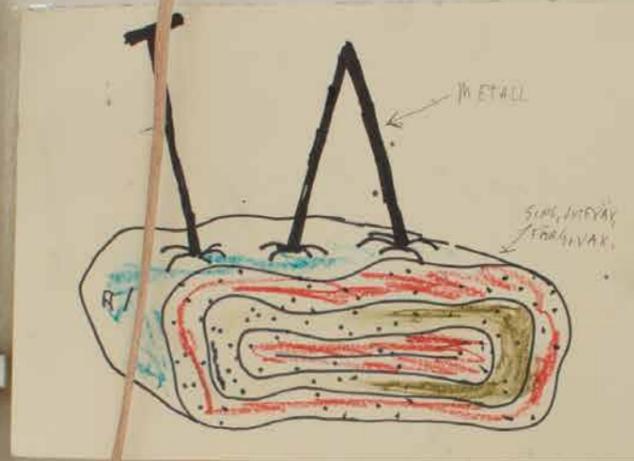
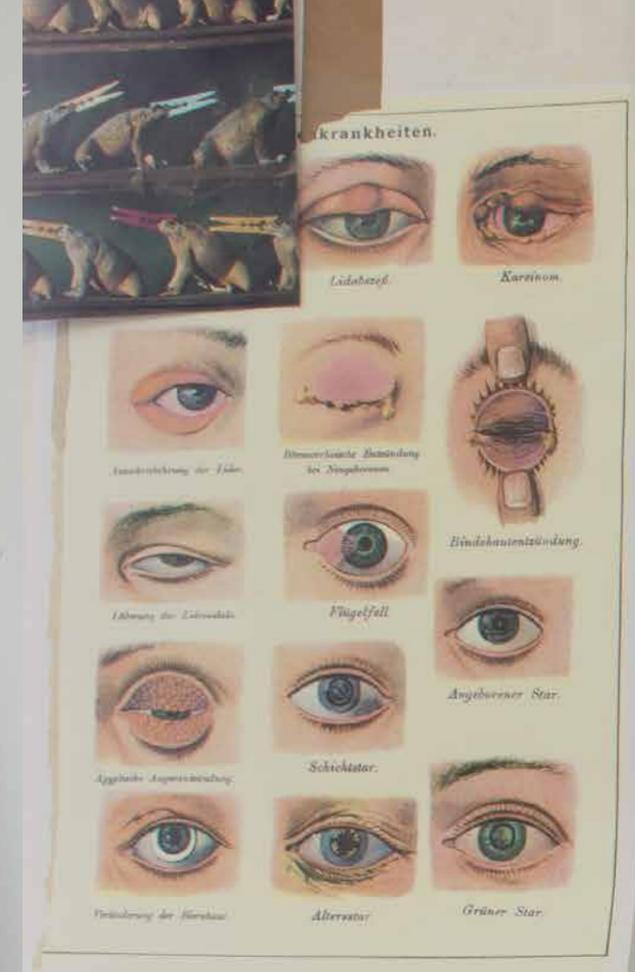
It seems to me that Emil Holmer is letting the autonomy of his art function as the place of enactment for his art. It is the internal processes in the painting which produce the results and the internal possibilities that create the external painting. The external circumstances which are re-encountered in the paintings are illusions of their own artistic universe.

It is an enticement, an attractive force, which makes me take a step forward and enter Emil Holmer's art. Disassembled and reassembled, it is with a sense of bewilderment that I make my exit.









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