

FACETS OF THE FLY'S EYE

On structure and meaning in Kira Wager's painting

Åsmund Thorkildsen

In addition to the two large compound eyes, the head also carries single ocelli.

– *Salmonsens konversationsleksikon*, Copenhagen MCMIX

At times I have the feeling that I am writing about three or four different men, each one a contradiction of all the others. Fragments. Or the anecdote as a form of knowledge. Yes.

– Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude – A Memoir*, 1982

When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies.

– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

In traditional art history one distinguishes between two main aspects of a work, its form and its content. Although these are often discussed in isolation from one another, there is general agreement that in good artworks they are fused together, and that it is merely the demands of language that require them to be distinguished in discussion. Although the modernists had little enthusiasm for an artistic content that could be explicated in verbal or literary form,¹ they never denied that content was part of an artwork; they merely regarded it as something inexpressible or ineffable. In addition to the still valid and indispensable elements of form and content, in discussions on contemporary art we frequently have to add a reflection about how the artist uses the form to fix and convey a content. It can also be useful to ponder the way an artist's feelings about a subject influence the form or the structure of the expression. In addition to which we hear steadily more insistent demands for the responses of viewers –

¹ The standard works on the theme of modernism's rejection of literary content include Clement Greenberg, "Toward a Newer Laocoon", 1940, in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays, Vol. I*, Chicago and London, 1986, and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Toward a Theory of Post-Modernism, I & II", 1980, in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition, Representation, Power and Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1992.

how they experience a work from their vantage point – to be taken into consideration. Kira Wager’s art needs to be studied in terms of all these aspects.

Although form does not necessarily dominate in the experience of Wager’s art, it has to be considered in any analysis of her pictures. In fact, form would appear to offer the best approach to her art. Not just because the form is the first thing that strikes us about her characteristic paintings, where the format is divided up into stripes or a matrix of squares, and where a broad brush or scraper has been used to work the paint on the hard, white, smooth PVC foundation, giving it the appearance of an old, interpreted photograph.² But also because she uses the logic of the grid to show the differences between photography and painting. The degree of distinction depends on the distance from which the pictures are viewed. The further away, the more photographic, the closer, the more painterly.

Kira Wager’s work continues a project that was initiated by Malcolm Morley, Gerhard Richter and Chuck Close in the 1960s. For these artists it began with photorealism, in other words, with painting pictures that were all but indistinguishable from photographs. Richter, Morley and Close all developed their work in a less realistic direction, in which they made it clear that a photograph was being interpreted in the medium of paint. It is this trend towards something conspicuously painted that Kira Wager has taken up and further developed.

HERMETICALLY SEALED MEMORIES

A photo-conceptual painting has one particular advantage over expressionistic, naturalistic, romantic and realistic painting, namely it can exploit the **index**.³ Photorealistic painting cannot show the index, but represents it and thus reminds us of its function while unable to achieve its effect. For the index is in fact a characteristic of the photograph; it is the ray of light that travels uninterrupted from the subject to the film, leaving an immediate trace on the negative, which is then projected onto photosensitive paper in the process of making paper prints. This is one of the reasons why a photograph has greater sentimental impact than a painting – an insight described by Roland Barthes in his work on photography, *Camera Lucida*: “I had identified truth and reality in a unique emotion, in which I henceforth placed

² A remarkable number of commentators have pointed out that the foundation gives the paintings this appearance of glossy photographs.

³ See e.g. Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index, Seventies Art in America”, *October* (Spring), 1977.

the nature – the genius – of Photography, since no painted portrait, supposing that it seemed ‘true’ to me, could compel me to believe its referent had really existed.”⁴

The motif of a pure painting remains somewhat remote no matter how naturalistically it is painted, whereas photographs often strike us as touchingly close, as evinced by the care with which people preserve such images in albums, drawers, on mantelpieces and in their wallets.⁵ Such paper images can be held in the hand, displayed and commented on by those who know their motifs and share their background. Such pictures draw one into a world of recollections. They have a physical character of their own; they age and change over time, just like memories. And everyone has them. Like the super 8 films of the postwar years, they are hermetically sealed memories. The fact that, from a technical perspective, Kira Wager works with the transference of pictorial information by means of a grid (index converted to pixels) provides a formal explanation for how she is able to introduce such a strongly personal content into her paintings. The form suits the content and the content calls for a certain technique.

For it to function, this interplay between private memory, exhibited paintings and artistic experience presupposes that viewers possess certain characteristics on which the painter also depends: they must have a concept of what it means to be human, an ability to empathize with the images of other people’s memories, and, as organisms, they must possess a sensory apparatus and a brain that allows them to organise visual impulses into coherent images and

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Paris 1980, quoted from Richard Howard’s American translation, 1982, p. 77. Although Barthes does not use the word *index*, he is writing about precisely the same phenomenon as Krauss. The following quote from *Camera Lucida* is a good description of the workings of the index: “I call ‘photographic referent’ not the *optically* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.” *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵ This is true of conveniently sized paper prints of the 20th century, which make up both Richter’s and Wager’s supply. The digital camera and the data printer will change this situation, since pixels dissolve and break down the index. Digitalised pictures consist exclusively of a raster of gaps and homogenised pixels. They can be manipulated so as to obscure the seams that result from modification. Memories can disappear in digital photographs. One could say that Wager’s use of the grid in a traditional, pre-digital technology binds the unit squares to the material thus counteracting the ephemerality of the digital image.

to decode them as information that can be interpreted as meaningful by means of linguistic and visual culture and training. As Paul Auster has written about his father – whom he called “an invisible man” – it may be possible to create knowledge in the form of fragments collected in an anecdote, or in an allegory.⁶

Kira Wager’s artistry is rare in the high degree of maturity and enlightenment it showed even in the early stages of her career. With a knowledge of relevant prototypes and a talent that supplies the considerable practical skills required to interpret photography as painting, her graduation works for the academy were already conceptually finished and technically highly advanced. In tracing the development of Kira Wager’s art, it is best to consider both the form and the content of her work. A chronology is identifiable in changes in content and hence in the development of a technique that enables her to master ever new and more complex translational/interpretational tasks. It is through the refining of her technique that she has been able to express still more profound content.

KIRA WAGER’S CULTURAL SPHERE

Our understanding of what we are as humans also involves an awareness of our status as historical individuals shaped by the world into which we were born. This is especially true for artists, since artworks are created in a discursive and practical historical process. Kira Wager belongs to a generation of Scandinavian painters who were trained in a system where international influences and theoretical issues played a dominant role. The decade before Wager began her studies saw the entrance onto the American art scene of the *picture* generation. This was a group of artists who *worked primarily with pictures*, as opposed to painting or photography. This generation was characterised by solid academic and theoretical schooling, and practised *appropriation* of images that were already coded by film or

⁶ In the years when Kira Wager was studying, this kind of literary narrative structure was being widely read and discussed in journals and at art academies. People read Craig Owens and Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the fragment and allegory in the study of the origins of the German tragedy; people read Roland Barthes’ investigation of the *studium* and *punctum* of the photograph (which deals with the two temporal horizons of the photograph and the level of general cultural information relative to the individual, authentic discontinuities, which refer to the observer and produce gaps or wounds in the general), along with Walther Benjamin’s reflections on life and death on the photographic plate and on the loss of aura in the reproduction of images, and so on.

advertising; its members based their work on magazine pictures or on icons from art history and from the urban environment's jungle of logos and signs. Photography was a much used medium, in both its pure form, and as manipulated and staged images, as part of installations and as preliminary material for interpretation in painting. One aspect of this period was a sensitivity for the materiality and semantic structure of the photograph.

One major exhibition of *picture* generation and *neo-geo* artists at the Whitney Museum in 1989 was typically entitled *Image World*. These were artists who acknowledged that they live among a "forest of signs". The *picture* generation made use of impulses from earlier art, from photorealism, as mentioned above, as well as from pop art, film, advertising and conceptual art. The conceptual influence acted in the form of an interest in archives, the systematic collection of images and genre analysis. Critical structural studies became particularly important among the artists of the 1980s. Cindy Sherman worked with the appropriation of *film stills*, with the genre of the centrefold girl, with the peculiarities of fashion pictures, the style of cookbook photography, the arrangements of display windows etc. James Welling worked with structural studies in the field of railway and architecture photography, or he simulated nature by means of images artfully staged in his studio. Sherrie Levine photographed the photos of others, painted on the basis of other people's paintings, created installations and sculptures according to the forms of well-known paintings, and cut silhouettes of presidents from photographs taken from fashion magazines, while Richard Prince enlarged reprints of the Marlborough man to the point where the print raster looked like brush strokes.

The 1980s and 90s were also a heyday for German photography, with the Düsseldorf school of Becher⁷ students (Höfer, Gursky, Ruff, Struth, Hütte), while in Britain in the 1990s the new British sculpture of the 80s (Deacon, Wilding, Kapoor, Hoshiary, Woodrow, Cragg) was superseded by the work of artists such as Gary Hume and Julian Opie, who painted and created pictures inspired by the graphic style of the 1960s and the new stylistic elements made possible by Photoshop and other picture processing programmes.

This was also a new era for art theory. With the appointment of the learned Tom Sandqvist at the National College of Fine Arts in Oslo in the early 1990s, younger Norwegian artists received their first proper dose of Derrida. The significant thinkers whose texts were read and

⁷ Bernd and Hilla Becher, both professors at the academy in Düsseldorf, had made names for themselves with their structural analyses of building types and industrial sites.

discussed⁸ in this context included Walter Benjamin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Rosalind Krauss, Julia Kristeva, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp – and eventually also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Linguistic philosophy, formal logic and semiotics were read with zeal and little respect for their technical complexities. In such texts the art sphere found concepts and explanatory models for important issues such as the significance of gender identity, the dialogue of popular culture with and its significance for its audience, the relevance of the gaze in power relations, the function of the image in society, the potential and changing meaning of the picture, and so on. In other words, there was considerable interest in society's and history's pictorial archives and genres, and in how pictures influenced and were influenced by social power structures.

Theory was significant for practice as a key to the **Picture Archive** or **Atlas**, where the numerous standard images⁹ of our culture were stored – in private albums, documentation archives, cinema foyers, fashion magazines, porn mags, art history books, textbooks, sales catalogues, encyclopaedias, herbaria, criminal records, boxes full of postcards on flea market stalls, medical journals and every imaginable ringbinder ... For smart¹⁰ artists like Kira Wager there was no problem in distinguishing between the sign's *signifier* (the material, photographed or the painted form) and its *signified* (the content or meaning to which the form refers). Having seen and accepted the linguistic “gap”, it became both possible and necessary to work with fragments and translations, reconstructions, new combinations, the revitalisation of recollections, the confrontation of loss, etc.

The upshot of all this was that painters also began to derive models from photographic material. As early as the 1960s – when the so-called “linguistic turn” had already become a reality in the western world – Malcolm Morley was specialising in colour paintings of cruise ship sundecks and of postcards of luxury liners at anchor; Gerhard Richter drew on both the annunciation scenes of art history and on his family's photo album to construct his well

⁸ One place where these activities made their mark was UKS-Nytt (the journal of the Young Artists Society) edited by George Morgenstern and Stian Grøgaard.

⁹ See Åsmund Thorkildsen, *Standardbilder*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2004.

¹⁰ *Smart Art* was a term applied to the *picture* generation and their neo-geo successors. Just for once there was no disadvantage in being smart, even in Oslo. The word “smart” is used here in the sense it carries in New York City.

known ATLAS; Andy Warhol silk-screened his portraits of celebrities, pictures of road accidents taken from newspapers and of brand-name logos, while Chuck Close himself took portrait photos, which he enlarged and transferred unit by unit to paintings. In the 1980s, this was followed up in the work of, for example, Ed Ruscha, Michelle Zalopany, Troy Brauntruch and Joe Andoe, while in the 1990s further developments were seen in Hanne Christensen's paintings of old black and white photos and Torbjørn Sørensen's dive into his faded family album. Another notable influence came from the growth of *fan* art, which produced paintings that were not photorealistic but nevertheless based on printed images of pop stars and other celebrities. In this genre, the water colours, coloured pencil drawings and paintings of Elizabeth Peyton are superb examples, while Karen Kilimnick's paintings are no less grating. Moreover, in much of the so-called *slacker* art¹¹ it is evident that the artists have used tracing or projection to copy an attractive face or posture from a magazine (Tiril Schrøder), or it might be a comic strip box with speech bubbles drawn freehand with pen and ink or ink brush (Raymond Pettibon).

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT – STRUCTURE, MECHANISMS, “TRANSFER”

In rough outline, this was the artistic climate when Kira Wager began studying in Oslo in the mid 1990s.¹² The issues under debate and the possibilities were to prove highly conducive to

¹¹ On the subject of *slacker* art, see Åsmund Thorkildsen, “Tegninger som funker”, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Norsk Slacker tegning*, Drammens Museum 2002.

¹² All the artists listed here were familiar to anyone in the Norwegian scene who kept in touch by means of exhibitions, lectures, books, catalogues and articles. There were several major exhibitions that deserve special mention, since they would inevitably have made an impression on an artist with Kira Wager's interests: The Museum of Modern Art in New York arranged two retrospectives, one of Chuck Close (1998), the other of Gerhard Richter (2002), while in 1996 the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo showed a major exhibition of Malcolm Morley's works. A regrettable yet recurrent feature of most that has been written about Wager in Norway is that authors seem to think it sufficient to mention Richter, impressionism and abstract expressionism. But Wager's intellectual background is of course much richer and more varied, and here again we see how British and American influences are ignored in the Norwegian debate. From the 1960s right through to the 80s both Howard Hodgkin and David Hockney worked on exposing the grammar of pictorial composition and function.

an artist of her intellectual attitude, with her sensitivity to mood, her wealth of memory and her gifts in painting technique.

Her first ambitious attempts as a painter can be traced back to 1988. Her paintings from that time through to 1990-92 are concise. Her brushstrokes are bold and her use of colour abstract relative to the motifs. She seeks to convey dramatic scenes, romantic moonlit landscapes, urban scenes or images of goats with imposing horns. The pictures are unfinished. They demonstrate a competence and determination that are impressive in so young an artist, but still they are not entirely free or pursued to conclusion. The same concise attitude is found in her attempts to conceal the motif behind an abstract structure influenced by postwar French abstraction. Nevertheless it is worth noting that already in these pictures Kira Wager was working with fields of colour combined into a patchwork, mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, to form a painterly field that covers the entire surface of the picture.

In hindsight it is always possible to discover meaningful features, but when we see how rapidly Wager has developed a mature formal language, there is a certain significance in the fact that from the very beginning she had a tendency to paint *along* the picture surface; she does not place forms in front of and behind each other, but beside or overlapping each other within the surface grid.¹³ Her earliest works are bold trials that remind us of Anne Biringvad's way of working, or of Vibeke Tøjner's use of brushstroke and colour in her formally perspicuous pictures. But Wager soon chose a different path from Biringvad and Tøjner.

In 1993 she tightened her grip. The series *Dagar* consists of 40 relatively small pictures that show her interest in system. Using the same motif – factory buildings seen against a western sky – she investigates the possibilities for variation in light and colour as the day passes. The choice of motif is good, for the line of the horizon, the roofs and substance of the buildings, provide the horizontal lines and fields, while the chimney stacks and plumes of smoke provide the vertical. For Wager the things to be investigated are the diurnal rhythm and the shifting weather. The same motif is viewed in different combinations of light and colour, which create in turn a variety of moods. Kira Wager began as a realistic painter, inspired by

¹³ This demonstrates a modernist sensitivity to painting, backed up by an interest in the flatness of the picture and impregnated by the scale of the digital image. In digital image processing all information is formally captured in pixel rasters of varying size. Such rasters provide the possibility for a very broad field of view.

book illustrations and slides of paintings. These urban and industrial landscapes under Nordic light reveal a stylistically self-assured artist, a painter who has already studied the precisionist and new objectivist models of the 1920s.

Since the angle of this essay is to link formal development to the localisation of significant content, it cannot be ignored that Kira Wager's artistic breakthrough came when she put this more rhetorical approach behind her and created her own highly individual pictorial language in the two groups of motifs *Mannerheimvägen 29* and *Dåvits*. In these pictures the form is more advanced and the content more complex. The stages that immediately precede these works reveal a highly gifted student's assimilation and mastery of Gerhard Richter's method. Wager juxtaposed an abstract (hard edge) colour chart beside a photorealistic/photographically interpreted motif. This mimics the Kodak stripe intended for the repro photographer (something with which anyone is familiar who lays out art books) and which links Richter's photo-based paintings to his abstract grid pictures, the so-called colour maps. Her brochure pictures, her painted postcards, her tourist pictures of restaurant tables and cruet-stands – in which the picture is placed where there is no text and where the text is replaced by the blank aluminium plate on which the image is painted – all show that she has also worked through and digested the lessons of Richard Prince and Laurie Simmons.¹⁴

This first phase also demonstrates how she juxtaposed photography and *reconstruction* – the terms she prefers to use about her paintings. In this first period she also hung small pictures with the same motif but different degrees of abstraction beside each other. Here the grammar of her artistic way of thinking is clearly exposed. Her first breakthrough came with the photo paintings of her young father in a tight suit. These pictures, which were shown at Kunstnerforbundet in Oslo in 1999, consist of private motifs painted with varying degrees of abstraction and painterliness. One and the same motif may be painted in several versions.

Later the motifs of harbour areas were divided up into vertical fields, before she took the logical step of dividing the entire motif into squares. What happened with the pictures of *Mannerheimvägen* and *Dåvits* was that the grid divisions were not perceived as a rhetorical device. The paintings certainly appear fragmented, but the squares are put together in such a

¹⁴ Prince's so-called "Gangs" show expanses of photos surrounded by white areas intended for text. In the 1980s Simmons created a series of staged photographs with the title "Tourists".

way that the entire motif can be glimpsed between the “sutures”. The pictures are both complete and divided.

Although it is the family pictures that deserve the greatest emphasis here, the factory buildings, urban scenes and docklands continue to be recurrent themes in Wager’s work. Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki are all harbour towns on the world’s periphery, so the possibility of personal reasons for the choice of motif should not be overlooked. Her latest choice of theme is urban scenes with elements of graffiti. Neither is this an entirely arbitrary choice; as an adult Wager has lived in New York and other environments where graffiti is an important phenomenon. For her the challenge is to create a painting of something that is already a painted picture, even if the snapshot photo remains a useful tool. Graffiti consists of images of script, painted on the basis of prototypes that are in effect highly stylised forms of expression. Graffiti consists of free-style interpretations of logos and of carefully rendered script pictures, which have in some cases already been developed to high degrees of abstraction in the designer’s preliminary drawings. The challenge for Wager is to reinterpret such pictures, to scrub them out, to disturb the visual, but at the same time to ensure they are just as integrated and dissonant within her reconstructed paintings as they were in their original urban settings. This is more difficult than it sounds, but Wager succeeds thanks to her precision.

CONTENT – WHERE THE OPTIC NERVE MEETS THE SOUL

The pictures of the series *Dagar* (1993) convey the following phenomena: light and image, light and colour, light and mood, mood and memory; coloured memory. Already in these pictures she showed that even the most sober and objective formal language could still accommodate individual emotional states. Painters typically show great sensitivity to the moods of light and colour. Dawn, the bright light of midday, the melancholy light of late afternoon and the blue of dusk affect many people as forcefully as smells. A mere glance at the illuminated wall of a house or a landscape or a north Italian market square in low light can be gripping and arresting. In a particular combination – which can be very powerful – patches of colour can be perceived as the extension of an emotional state. The linkage between the two – the expanse of colour and mood – can have the same necessity as the linkage of the index to its source and expression. The sensory structure that shapes Kira Wager’s pictures is already present among those artists who evidently possess this sensitivity to mood. People remember the past by means of intensely loaded singular images,

phenomenologically dense units that are perceived as single “imaginary conceptions”, even though they involve the combined impressions of temperature, odours, breezes, voices, birdsong, the play of sunlight on rippling water, the sound of church bells and the like. Such imaginary conceptions are not static but form units that stand out from the continuum of passing time as clearly as a *punktum* stands out in a *studium* of a faded photograph.

For people like us – who have grown up in the age of the photograph – our recollections of things we have experienced personally are supported by and mixed up with film and photographic images. One remembers events from one’s childhood, is reminded of them by watching a super 8 film or by leafing through a photo album. Since Kira Wager’s project is to transfer the images of her memories into our consciousness, the information of photographs becomes an indispensable medium. Wager’s ambition is greater than the critic Harald Flor wishes to ascribe to her;¹⁵ she wants to make her work on memories universally applicable while at the same time showing the pictorial mechanisms that make it possible. Kira Wager guides us in search of lost time.

This *reminiscence-reconstruction structure* can be read from the composition of her paintings and their representational relation to their prototypes. But this structure also gives rise to a psychological/neurological and phenomenological chain reaction, which enables her paintings to communicate such complexities as the past and memories. The chain consists of the following links: the motif (selected and photographed at some moment in the past); the motif captured and preserved on a negative,¹⁶ the transfer of the captured past to a positive/paper photo; the paper photo provides a visual impulse that the viewer revives in memory; the memory creates an impulse to express the past like a projected, enlarged, transferred and interpreted slide (which becomes a new index) or a flash of recollection (which gives rise to a new nervous impulse) – on a painter’s substrate, where the fleeting traces of light and the cognitive *flash* are replaced by enduring brushstrokes of paint. The

¹⁵ Harald Flor: “Snapshots of festive assemblies of friends and relations are rarely interesting for outsiders. It is as if Wager has switched off the melody of memory ...” Dagbladet 2.4.2003.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin has analysed this in his *Short History of Photography* (1931), in which he writes that the past lives for a brief moment on the photographic plate. But no matter how long it survives as a parallel reality and double present, the negative has the potential to capture the past in such a way that traces from it can be preserved and transferred at a later date.

patch of paint is equivalent to the trace of the index, although, as already mentioned, it cannot replace it. The combination of coinciding patterns (made possible by the logic of the grid and the capacity of our brains) recaptures our attention and recreates the recollection. The linkage is so strong because the form (the *signifier*) and the content (the *signified*) are chained together.

In this attempt to link technique and formalism to the content of Kira Wager's art, a few elements should be mentioned that have not been very noticeable in the reception of her painting. Although interest in her work has grown steadily and its reception in newspapers and journals has been largely positive, there has been little analysis of Wager's use of the grid or of its linkage to analytic cubism or surrealism's use of elements of surprise and chance, or to certain undertakings in American art during the 1980s.

By covering up the other fields while transferring a certain square to the picture surface, the artist concentrates on the formal aspect, on the representation of one thing by means of something else that resembles it. This method of working has allowed Wager to excel in art historic quotations and improvisations. References to pointilism, impressionism and abstract expressionism become unavoidable, but not sufficient. The fact that the brushstroke is a **signifier** that can be perceived in isolation from that which is **signified** is a precondition of art in modern times.

Chuck Close, who builds on pointilism, is the immediate prototype for Wager in this regard.¹⁷ Morley, Richter and Close are formal prototypes for Wager, but none of them has divided the format of one and the same picture into squares each of which is treated in a different style (a map of alternative **signifiers**). This has however been done by Pat Steir.¹⁸ In the early 1980s, when she was commuting back and forth between studios in the USA and Holland, Steir carried out investigations into various styles. Against the background of Dutch masters in the still-life tradition through to van Gogh and Mondrian, she created a series of

¹⁷ Close's pictures also illustrate another insight of structuralist linguistics that was much discussed in the 1980s and 90s, namely what is called "the arbitrariness of the signifier". What a *signifier* refers to depends on the structural entirety in which the element of form is involved. Close shows this by means of transference via a grid. It makes little difference whether he fills the many squares with patches of pure colour, coloured paper pulp, hatched lines or fingerprints; when correctly combined (correctly in terms of the form of the face) they *depict* a familiar portrait.

¹⁸ Pat Steir's works were presented and discussed at art academies in Norway in the 1990s.

paintings that are similar in structure to Wager's grid pictures. Particularly relevant is her "Bruegel series". Steir gave this series the subtitle "A Vanitas of Style". This consciously verbal level was typical of much of the postmodern art of the 1980s. In one of her Bruegel pictures Steir divided the format into squares, and in the separate squares of what as a whole appears to be a luscious flower arrangement, one can distinguish stylistic quotations of Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann, Georgia O'Keeffe, suprematism, neo-plasticism and so on. Wager's pictures are less rhetorical and less calculated than Steir's and look very different, but the principle is the same.

By covering up the fields that are not currently being worked on, Wager introduces a psychological note. Like the surrealists who folded a sheet of paper so that four independent sections would collectively make up what was intended in its entirety to be an "exquisite corpse", Kira Wager introduces an element of chance and revelation. The surrealists were of course inspired by Freud. They might have said something like this: "Let us lower our spiritual defences and present the first best thing that occurs to us to see whether he (Freud and his heirs), who directs the 'talking cure', can put the fragments together into an 'exquisite corpse' or something else productive of 'knowledge' or 'meaning' about the repressed past." One could perhaps compare the covering of some of the squares to lying down on the psychoanalyst's couch.

There is some lack of agreement about the meaning of the content of Kira Wager's works. Harald Flor believes it is something disconnected, and she herself often emphasises that the meaning is in the formal aspect. This has to be regarded as a highly revealing use of the simple psychological defence: "Don't ask what I paint or why; content yourselves with noting how I paint". But in a few places she lifts the lid. Her motifs mean something to her. Concerning them she has said to Bjørn K. Bore of the newspaper *Dagbladet*:¹⁹ "Yes, they are a little loaded, and it is rather amusing that there is some residue there." In another newspaper interview the residue becomes a wound, a traumatic fissure, deepened by the cleft where "the real" comes to view – to paraphrase the Lacanian jargon so familiar to Kira Wager's generation. In a conversation with Per Eik Moen in *Dagsavisen* she says more about the pictures with motifs from "Dåvits", her childhood summer paradise in the Helsinki

¹⁹ *Dagbladet - Magasinet*, 5.4.2003.

archipelago: “I have a personal connection with everything that is lost. There came a day when we didn’t have that place any longer, and it left a wound in me.”²⁰

If we view this statement in the context of art history and as a published report from the real world, we see that there may be psychological and biographical reasons behind the division into fields, behind the fragmentation of the picture that Kira creates of Dávits. To bring out the fragmentary nature of the reminiscence it may be necessary from a purely technical point of view to make use of the facets of analytical cubism, which allows the picture to be experienced in a rhythmical staccato, as if seen through or reflected in the compound eye of a fly. In collecting the facets and parts together into a painting – which moreover resembles the entirety of a photograph – an allegorical and anecdotal method is used to reconstruct a lost time and to sew together the fleeting glimpses of something in a way that mimics the incessant temporal flux that is part of the experience of life. The divisions thus constitute a way of making visible the cleft, the cut, the loss, and the edge of the wound that separates the present from the past.

This kind of interpretation of what is traumatic about loss, absence and the disappearance of the past can seem strained, but it finds support in the following: the pain of a fragmented experience is cultivated in Dadaism’s use of the collage method. The photo and picture collages of Hannah Höch, John Heartfield and – above all – Max Ernst convey a distinct discomfort with the body. These works are in some cases based on impressions of the amputations, surgical scars and prostheses of World War I, and hence they may also express a certain despair about a world order that was in the process of collapse. In the art of the 1980s and 90s there was a renewal of interest in early Dadaism and surrealism. A forceful use of the collage method was apparent in, for example, the massive photo sculptures of the Starn Twins (Mike and Doug Starn). Such works emphasised the materiality of the wound.

On the level of private psychology, which is Wager’s starting point, the cut and reconstruction of photographs finds expression in a variety of ways. Everyone has heard some kind of story about the rejected person who cuts her partner out of their marriage picture. Such anecdotes are amplified by a story that Paul Auster tells from the history of his own family. Concerning a family picture from 1911-12 that he finds among the papers left by his father, he writes:

²⁰ Dagsavisen, 14.10.2003.

The first time I looked at the picture, I noticed that it had been torn down the middle and then clumsily mended, leaving one of the trees in the background hanging eerily in mid-air. I assumed the picture had been torn by accident and thought no more about it. The second time I looked at it, however, I studied this tear more closely and discovered things I must have been blind to miss before. I saw a man's fingertips grasping the torso of one of my uncles; I saw very distinctly, that another of my uncles was not resting his hands on his brother's back, as I had first thought, but against a chair that was not there. And then I realized what was strange about the picture: my grandfather had been cut out of it.²¹

For Paul Auster the family trauma consisted of a murder. What he didn't realize was that his grandmother had shot and killed his grandfather in the kitchen of their home in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on 23rd January 1919. For many years every effort was made to conceal this terrible event from the family. He got to know about it by an improbable accident. On a passenger plane one of his relations got talking to a fellow passenger who happened to be from Wisconsin and who linked the gruesome story to the name Auster. This knowledge, which was confirmed for the adult grandchildren when they were sent smudged photostats of 60-year-old newspaper reports, was the key to the torn image of the family photograph left by Paul Austers's father.

In analytic cubism the facets are indicative of ruptures in the continuous flow of time; for Auster the tear is the trace of a tragedy that someone seeks to obliterate from the photographic witness. For Wager the division into squares facilitates a reading in which the parts that are muddied over with paint, or where a face or a figure is rendered almost illegible, can be viewed as attempts to drag something back down into oblivion after an old photograph has refreshed the memory. Lars Elton in the newspaper VG has proposed such an interpretation. He has written that the manner of painting whereby the figures in some squares are rendered indistinct is suggestive of the "deliberate suppression of certain persons".²²

²¹ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, New York, 1982, pp. 33-34; quoted from the Penguin edition of 1988.

²² Verdens Gang, 30.3.2003.

Kira Wager's paintings provide no definite answers to such possible interpretations. But the point of referring to Dada, Auster and Elton is to show that in Wager's work the grid is far more than it is for the modernists. The grid lines refer to fissures in memory, gaps in language, the distance from the past, the edge of the wound, reminders of loss. These pictures are allegories and anecdotes composed in an exemplary manner that does not lead us on to a therapeutic interest in Kira Wager's life story, but gives us instead a possibility to reflect on some of the mechanisms that must of necessity underlie our own memories. If we view the allegory as a healing process, capable of gluing together fragments of lost meaning, it may also offer possibilities for each individual's encounter with grief.

THE TWO IMAGES OF THE IDEAL – IN THOSE DAYS AND SINCE THEN

Finally, grief and loss have little meaning unless what is missed is perceived as something good. Kira Wager and her viewers find exemplary shared reminiscences in Albert Edelfeldt's lyrical depictions of Nordic light and the impressionists' sun-drenched picnics and outdoor breakfasts. If Kira Wager had not been an artist who wanted to analyse memory and investigate the methods of painting needed to preserve and handle it ... And if she had been grown up as a child, such that she could have painted Mannerheimvägen and Dåvits without any thought for the future and its horizon of loss, then she could have painted these places like Fairfield Porter painted Long Island and Great Spruce Head, or Alex Katz painted Manhattan and Maine – or P.S. Krøyer painted Skagen and Thorvald Erichsen painted Holmsbu.²³ For family life in the centre of Helsinki and on Dåvits must have been just as idyllic. So, if it hadn't been for that ... she would have painted like Krøyer, Edelfeldt, Sargent, Zorn, Porter, Kavli and Katz. – No doubt she would have a talent for that as well. But then she wouldn't have been able to work on memory so publically.

²³ Gard Olav Frigstad in the journal *KUNST* 2003:2 is the only commentator who has addressed the sociological aspect. Several critics mention paradise and the idyll, but without particular analysis. Frigstad deals with the lifestyle of people who celebrate carnival in Mannerheimvägen and makes much of the outdoor life of summer residences. He speaks of the social self-assurance shown by the figures in the pictures (that which is found in the pictures' *studium*). This perspective can be expanded to point out that the Dåvits series shows a socially well adjusted family that has clearly defined leisure time and enjoys the good life at their summer home, inspired by the wealthy families that Sargent and Zorn painted and the good life such as it was enjoyed by the free, bourgeois impressionists depicted by Krøyer, Porter, Wold Thorne, Katz and Henrik Sørensen.

In another section of his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes gets to grips with the kind of post-structuralist reading that was so typical of Franco-American discourse in the 1980s. He distinguishes the photograph from the “picture”. Superficially, his critique might also apply to the method used in this essay. This is what he writes: “It is the fashion, nowadays, among Photography’s commentators (sociologists and semiologists), to seize upon a semantic relativity: no ‘reality’ (great scorn for the ‘realists’ who do not see that the photograph is always coded), nothing but artifice (...) This argument is futile: nothing can prevent the photograph from being analogical (...) The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code – even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it – the realists do not take the Photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art.”²⁴

This attitude has to do with Barthes’ emphasis on the role of chemistry in the developing of photographs, the fact that the ray of light is fixed to and has its effect via the photographic print. He goes much further than Walter Benjamin, who believed the marriage between the motif and the photograph was quick to wane and did so already on the glass negative. For Barthes there is a subjective, non-scientific reason why he could believe that the experience of life lived on, like something redeemed (“photography has something to do with resurrection”): his despair on losing his mother, with whom he had lived together all his life. He was unable to conjure up her essence and being from the many photos of her that he possessed. This changed when he found a picture of her at the age of five, when she had been photographed in a winter garden together with her brothers: “There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it.” He continues, “I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother (...) Something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this particular picture (...) I knew that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture.”

It ought to be fairly obvious that such a report can make no claim to linguistic truth. The essence of the experience described has only minimal potential for transference. Of course, Barthes recognised this himself, and added the parenthesis: “(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of thousands of manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; it cannot in any way constitute

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

the visible object for a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.)”²⁵

In these observations, where he finds his mother resurrected, Barthes builds unreservedly on what the deconstructivists call the “metaphysics of presence”. Obviously he cannot reproduce the photograph, since the index could never survive the printing process. Barthes sets up an opposition between those photos that do not capture his mother’s essence and this one that does, and here he is on much thinner ice than when he distinguishes photography from painting. And what makes the former possible is “the metaphysics of presence”. In the following sentence the “presence” is pointed out in terms of what has been (and which consequently endures): “What matters to me is not the photograph’s ‘life’ (a purely ideological notion) but the certainty that the photographed body touches me with its own rays and not with a superadded light.”²⁶ The fact that this is pure metaphysics of presence is evinced in the continuation: “... Photography offers an immediate presence to the world – a co-presence; but this presence is not only of a political order (...) it is also of a metaphysical order (...) Every photograph is a certificate of presence.”²⁷ In order to avoid the fundamental division and *différance*, Barthes had to take the scandalous step of deifying his mother.

Kira Wager’s photo-based paintings deconstruct Barthes’ reflections on photography. For like him she thinks: “Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth.” Myths are reconstructed representations of events and people from the past. Language is not “able to authenticate itself”, to borrow another phrase from Barthes. And in this essay language also means painting. But language and painting – no matter how fictive their natures – have one advantage over magic and the belief in a mother’s resurrection in an old photograph; namely they can be reproduced and discussed. The text can be written and the paintings can be painted. The problems of preserving memories can be shown. For it is only in acknowledging that something is lost that something of it can be remembered.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84 and 98.