

All Order Is Reversible: Process and Reflection in Blythe Bohnen's Brushstroke Works

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In her work, Blythe Bohnen embarks upon a fundamental questioning of the specific possibilities of painting, drawing, and photography. After moving from Boston to New York in 1967 to continue her studies, she initially devoted the ensuing years to an investigation of the process of painting that was as concentrated as it was idiosyncratic. The following considerations apply to this early phase of her work, which determined her path for later developments.

A painting such as *4 Brushstrokes* from 1971 (fig. 1) does exactly what it says on the tin: four brushstrokes. If one wants to describe the work in more detail, one almost inevitably has to retrace the process of its making: obviously a brush, the considerable girth of which can be seen from the width of the brushstrokes, was plunged into a pot of grey paint and then drawn respectively across the canvas in deliberate, arcing movements. The



Fig. 1: Blythe Bohnen, *4 Brushstrokes*, c. 1971. Acrylic on canvas.

order in which the four, more or less equal markings were placed remains open and ultimately insignificant, but Bohnen seems to have divided the canvas in advance into four equal zones by an imaginary vertical and horizontal grid, each zone of which was reserved for its respective brushstroke. Each brushstroke unfolds in "its" respective quarter and is oriented toward its own square. There is no overlapping, no competition, no fixed sequence, no hierarchy, and no superordinate whole, rather a juxtaposition of equal ranking. The slightly different course of movement in each case results in four different forms, each of which allows us to trace its own processes of bending and curving without forming an integrated or nameable unity. Attempts to read them as signs or as references to something beyond the painting come to naught. The four brushstrokes do not represent anything, but are present as themselves in their individual, quintessential "madness."¹ Inasmuch as the beginning, the direction, and the outcome of each brushstroke remain recognizable, the comprehensible process and the resulting form are mutually suspended—the painting can be understood thus as a process and a product alike.

Since what is painted reveals itself so emphatically as a document of its own inherent movement, the question of painterly gesture is paramount. In traditional painting, the gesture was integrated as a subordinate element in the overall composition of a painting, even though the rapid, individual brushstrokes received increasing attention in Impressionism and, subsequently, in Expressionism. It was not until the advent of gestural abstraction during the postwar period that the movement

of the brush and the painter's hand emerged as a topos in its own right, when, for example, elegant and seemingly virtuoso brushstrokes were celebrated in the works of Art Informel. Many of these gestures, however, remained strangely artificial in the mode of "as though," when, for example, Hans Hartung meticulously enlarged brushstrokes in his early painting that he had previously experimented with in small sketches.² With action painting, whose most prominent exponent was Jackson Pollock, the immediate physical movement of the person making the painting finally found its exposition in the work itself. The legendary series of photographs and films by Hans Namuth underscores the celebratory, heroic gestures that Pollock enacted upon the canvas, which was henceforward to be understood as an "arena."³

Bohnen, who closely followed the then-current developments in the field of dance and performance in New York, intensively dealt with the physicality of Pollock's painting and its reception mediated by Namuth. For example, as part of her work as an art educator at the Metropolitan Museum, she recreated Pollock's energetically-charged painting performance in dance in front of his colossal large-format painting *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* in order to illustrate the painter's physical involvement with his artwork. Her own painting, however, bears witness to an entirely different attitude and commitment. In a similar way to Pollock, and not unlike many other painters, Bohnen spreads her canvases out on the floor when painting. The formats are often a little bigger than the human form but just manageable by one person, thus relating to individual physical proportions and limitations. Whereas

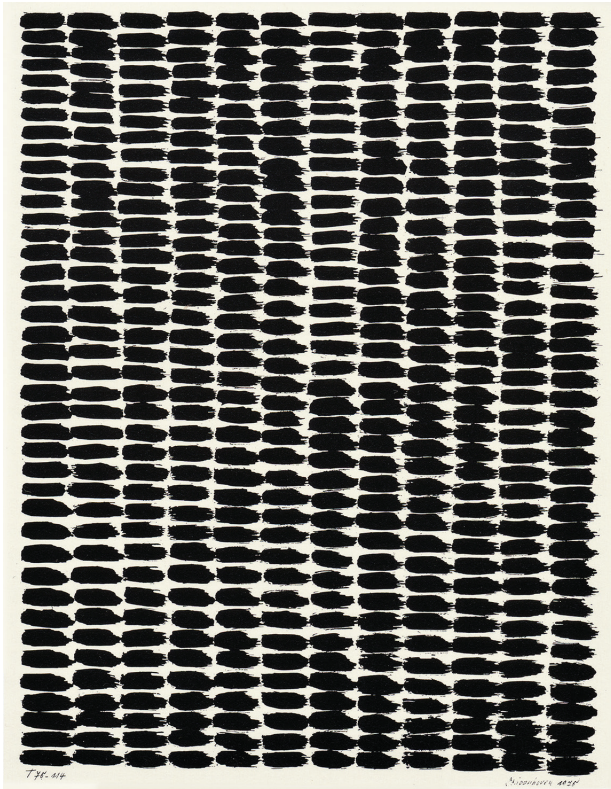


Fig. 2: Jan J. Schoonhoven, *T 75-114*, 1976. China ink on paper.
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Pollock relied on the expressive dynamism of his gestures and the force of the dripped, poured, and flung paint in an unbounded all-over, Bohnen's controlled brush paintings are characterized by an obvious desire to decelerate. Where Pollock was concerned with the unrestrained expression of subjective creative power, Bohnen seems to observe her own, deliberately decelerated working process in an almost detached manner during the physical act of painting. Entirely in the sense of Vilém Flusser, her painterly gesture is an "auto-analyzing movement," a "constant control and reformulation of its own meaning."⁴ This tendency toward self-analysis is perpetuated in later groups of works. When Bohnen photographs her hand in the process of drawing, for example, or captures

minimal, superimposed movements with long exposure times in her photographic self-portraits, this also fundamentally testifies to the willingness not to understand one's own perspective as central and solely binding, as well as to view one's own actions as if from the outside, from as many angles as possible.⁵

Should one want to specify Bohnen's work in more detail, comparisons with some of her contemporaries, who dedicated themselves to a similarly far-reaching, critical-reflexive analysis of the making of paintings, perhaps seem more obvious. A case in point, then, would be to think further about a constellation that arose in 1977 in the context of *documenta 6* in Kassel and was thereby one of the rare occasions to see Bohnen's works in Europe. Some of her drawings were exhibited at *documenta* in the section *Art about Art/Drawings about Drawing*, adjacent to works by Jan J. Schoonhoven (1914–1994) and Lee Ufan (b. 1936).⁶ Like Blythe Bohnen, both artists draw on the potential of elementary painterly and drawing media and processes, which they both reinterpret in their respective ways through patient inquiry. By concentrating on the basic painterly movements—point and line, brushstroke—the works considered here render it possible to trace the development of form and the making of the picture to an extent that, traditionally speaking, applied more to drawing; accordingly, Bohnen also speaks of "draw[ing] with paint."⁷

Jan Schoonhoven's ink drawing *T 75-114* (fig. 2), like Bohnen's acrylic painting on paper (fig. 3), shows brushstrokes carefully placed in rows and columns. In both cases, the endeavor to create similar forms from a simple, concentrated, repeated gesture can be seen, whereby each brushstroke, for all its homogeneity with the others, proves to have been both individually and uniquely administered. Whereas in Schoonhoven's drawing,

the individual ink strokes sometimes elide gently, Bohnen's lines—similar to *4 Brushstrokes* (fig. 1), mentioned at the outset—maintain a distance from one another. Especially when one considers Schoonhoven's drawing in the context of his serial white reliefs, it becomes apparent how effortlessly the individual shapes fit into a superordinate balance here—each individual element has its place and unfolds without restriction within an integrated, larger equilibrium. The act of discerning parallels to social structures—imaginable at least as an ideal—in such inventions of form developed over decades suggests itself here, facilitating the idea of equal coexistence on the basis of respect for the individual. Even if Schoonhoven himself was usually reticent about such specific readings, his philosophical interests, his sympathies for



Fig. 3: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, ca. 1969. Acrylic on paper.

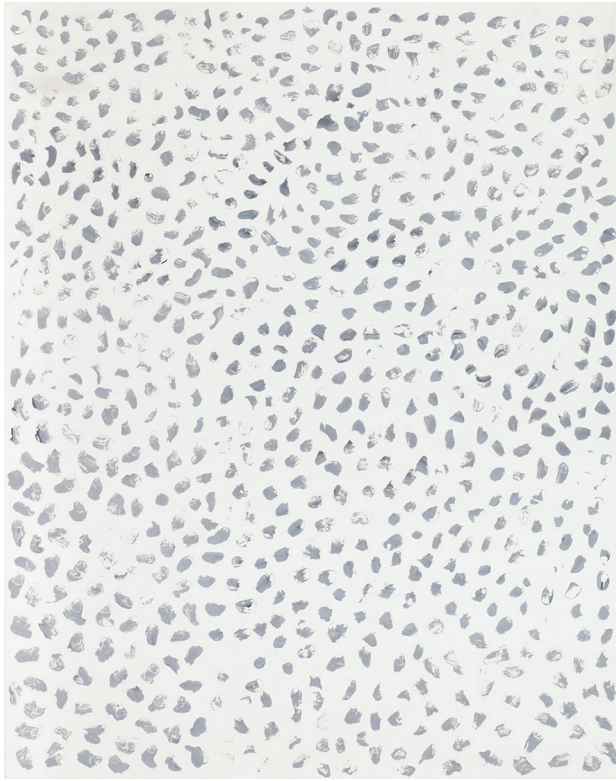


Fig. 4: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, c. 1970. Acrylic on paper.

socialist models of society, and his placid, lived humanist core attitude suggest that his work was about more than the execution of formal exercises using a paintbrush.⁸ Similarly, Bohnen situates her painting in a social context when she talks about serial procedures and structures:

It concerns isolation and relatedness...each element must be separate. But each must share in some common qualities with the whole. Mentally running through a series to find the commonality is interesting. While also sensing the irreducible uniqueness of each form. In a way I can't explain, I've always felt this was connected to being an American in a democracy. Each vote counts.⁹

The differences are—as in the comparison of two freely daubed works (figs. 4 and 5)—apparently only gradual, but they emerge in the context of the respective overall work: whereas Schoonhoven is particularly concerned with the balance between the individual and the general in his works, with an ultimately decisive tendency towards the stable unification of the individual elements of equal rank in a larger group, Bohnen emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual within an overall dynamic of identity and difference.¹⁰

The intensity of the application of paint also points in this direction: owing to the technique of ink painting, the brushstrokes in Schoonhoven's serial drawings, especially those from the 1970s, are usually equally saturated with a deep black. Bohnen's brushstrokes, on the other hand, appear strangely watered down to varying degrees. This impression is due to the special process to which Bohnen subjects her works. When the impasto application of acrylic paint has dried but is still a little damp, Bohnen washes off the water-soluble parts of the paint so that only the already completely dried waterproof pigment remains on the canvas or paper. The individual brushstroke thus remains recognizable as a trace of an action, but it seems deliberately anonymized by its partial erasure, which diminishes the individual gesture, at least to a certain degree. In a sense, Bohnen reveals the otherwise hidden structure, the basic framework behind the brushstroke; she exposes the brushstroke from the pigment to such an extent that the traces of the individual bristles emerge, "almost like traditional etching modeling lines."¹¹ The washing-out, usually implemented in the shower, leads to results that cannot ultimately be predicted, so that the previously controlled act of painting appears to have been rescinded, relativized.

The thinning or dilution of paint in the process is also an essential theme in Lee Ufan's painting.¹² In his works in the groups *From Point* and *From Line*, he uses a single load of paint to trace long horizontal rows of individual, gradually thinning brush marks (fig. 6) or long vertical lines that recede in thickness as the painterly gesture proceeds (fig. 7). Only when the residual paint has been completely discharged from the brush does a new movement begin with fresh paint, executed with the same precision. Whereas the cyclical

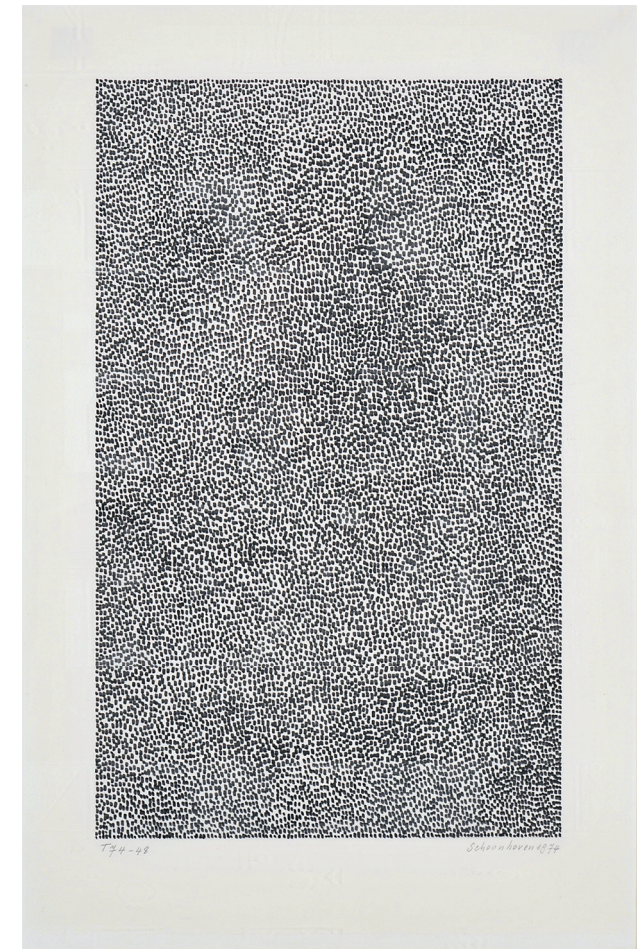


Fig. 5: Jan J. Schoonhoven, *T 74-48*, 1974. China ink on paper.
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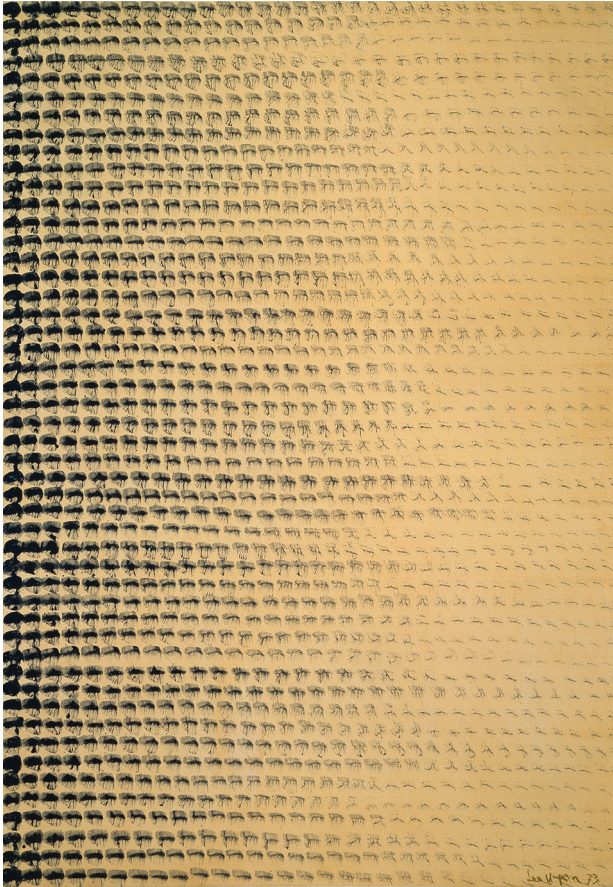


Fig. 6: Lee Ufan, *From Point*, 1973. Glue and mineral pigment on canvas. © 2022 Artists Rights Society, New York / ADAGP, Paris

repetition of the painterly action—invariably executed as identically as possible—is evident in Lee’s works from this series. Bohnen is clearly more concerned with differentiation. In contrast to Lee’s painting *From Point*, Bohnen’s painting (fig. 8) reveals less a sequence developed from repetition than a multitude of individual forms that present themselves to comparative contemplation through their isolated arrangement in the grid. “Generating many forms from one principle”¹³ is the guiding principle for works of this type. Each painting is thus based on a self-imposed rule or task that Bohnen implements in the process of

painting. Especially in paintings with a manageable number of brushstrokes, such as those in her *Brushstroke Series* (fig. 9), the relationship between a general rule and individual execution striving for variation can be clearly seen. Unlike Lee, who in the early groups of works considered here applies either straight lines or rows of brush marks to the canvas, Bohnen gives each brushstroke its own form through variously placed, twisting, and convoluted movements. While the number of brush marks or the exact length of the brushstrokes in Lee’s painting result from the process, Bohnen plans things down to the last detail. The fact that exactly forty-eight brushstrokes are evenly distributed on a surface measuring 6 x 8 ft. here suggests that their number and placement in relation to the canvas were determined before they were executed. Yet it is precisely through the self-imposed regimentation that an astonishing variety of different forms emerges, which ultimately can only be understood as a possible selection from an infinite number of variants. In this respect, Bohnen’s Brushstroke paintings—similar, for example, to Josef Albers’s paintings in the group of works *Homage to the Square*—resemble a research series that is as systematic as it is open-ended and ultimately inconclusive.

In the series *From Point* and *From Line*, Lee’s attention is above all directed to a developmental sequence that is invariably implemented anew—one brushstroke logically follows the next and has its place in an irreversible series. The creation of a painting also follows a ritual that is always organized in the same way, which Lee describes precisely, from the mixing of the paint to the placement of the canvas to conscious breathing and posture to the execution of the actual painterly gesture.¹⁴ Accordingly, an impression of the brush or brushstroke painting is also more than a painted form for Lee. The procedure of subsequent processing practiced by Bohnen is unthink-

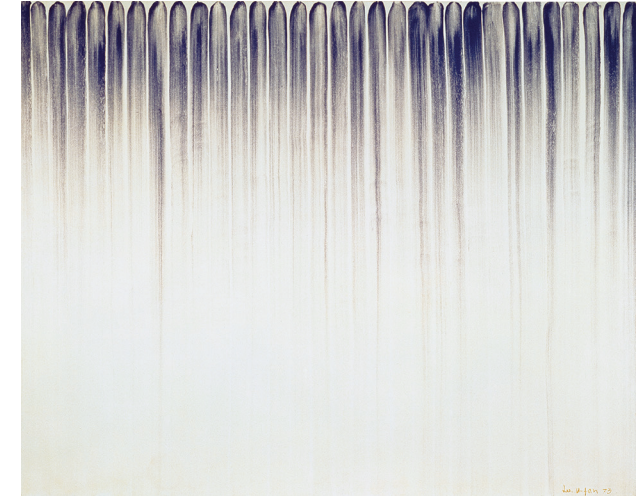


Fig. 7: Lee Ufan, *From Line*, 1973. Glue and mineral pigment on canvas. © 2022 Artists Rights Society, New York / ADAGP, Paris



Fig. 8: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas.

able for him: “Because each mark and brushstroke, which creates its own space-time, has a strong presence, I cannot be permitted to paint over or touch it up. Each moment of time occurs only once, but because everything is a continuation of single moments, it is necessary for them to repeat and resonate with each other.”¹⁵ Lee under-



Fig. 9: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas.



Fig. 10: *Brushstrokes Navigating a Quadrant Grid*, c. 1970. Acrylic on paper.

stands painting as a practice to be painstakingly cultivated, in which procedures of disciplined repetition enable a constant refinement of one's own actions. He is not interested in perfection in the sense of ever "better" results. Rather, he is concerned with the possibility of obviating oneself in the process of painting, of rebalancing activity and passivity. His aim is to let painting happen in the philosophical sense of "acting without acting"

and thus to allow one's own doing and one's own existence to coalesce within a greater, overarching context.

Whereas Lee's interest, especially in the early groups of works, is geared toward fluent sequences of development, Bohnen's brushstrokes, each in its own right, correspond to a limited event. By arranging the brushstrokes in imaginary grids, or, in some cases, grids suggested by lines, they actively resist a continuous sequence. Even though in some works Bohnen creates a strict grid with pencil strokes on the one hand and allows the brushstrokes to subvert, in a playful manner, the self-imposed order on the other (fig. 10), the visible or implicit grid ultimately remains the form of organization she uses most frequently. Accordingly, Bohnen characterizes her brushstrokes as "forms in movement but held, locked in place"; to a certain extent, they embody "stasis and movement at [the] same time"¹⁶—a theme that occupied Bohnen at a later stage in a different form in her photographic portraits. If, in the majority of the works, the brushstrokes suggesting movement submit to the stasis of a more or less obvious grid, the relationship between movement and standstill also raises the question of an experience of time.

The brushstrokes in the works considered here cannot be meaningfully understood as signs, symbols, or building blocks of a narrative but primarily as traces of a specific, self-contained action in each case.¹⁷ The contemplation of these paintings thus corresponds to an activity that can follow individual traces without having to derive references from them to an extra-pictorial reality or to a superordinate whole. Although, or more precisely, because Bohnen's painting is characterized by the discontinuity in the relationship of the individual brushstrokes to one another, it is precisely the stroke, which can be experienced as a single moment in each case, that can trigger



Fig. 11: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, 1968. Acrylic on paper.

an experience of temporality. In a similar way to a memory, which is often triggered by an association that may crop up abruptly, in this case the time the artist spent executing the respective painterly gesture is combined with the time each individual viewer spends retracing this very gesture. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that in the recollection of past moments, it is not the remembered moment itself that is actualized but only the act of imagination that is truly present.¹⁸ Just as a memory can only be experienced individually by each person, seeing also proves to be a subjective process connected to an individual's lived experience, which, moreover, can be understood as an interaction: we do not so much see the painting as an integrated whole or

a recognizable motif as we look into the painting and move along with it, invariably anew and differently.

Yet it is precisely the hesitant gesture that resists a quick, assimilating glimpse and invites us to linger on individual twists, turns, and curves of the brushstrokes. In early experiments, Bohnen sometimes worked with doggedly impasto pigments (fig. 11) or painted on strips of fabric that were not spanned on a stretcher and thus offered greater resistance to the brush than a conven-

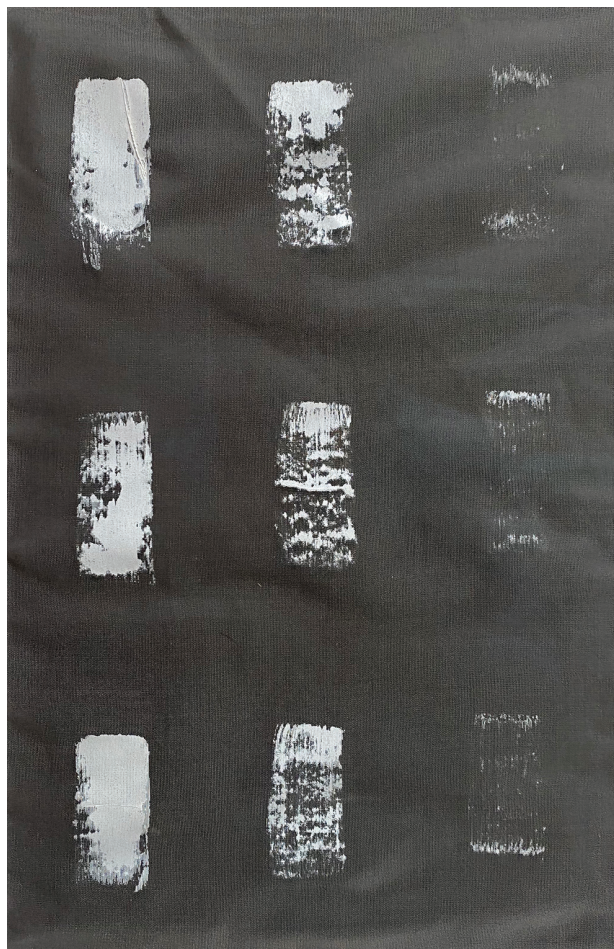


Fig. 12: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, 1969. Acrylic on nylon.

tionally prepared canvas (fig. 12). To all intents and purposes, she was looking for a counterpart in the respective peculiarities of the materials that at least partially resisted her actions and all but prohibited a smooth application of the brush. In a similar way to Lee Ufan, Bohnen is not concerned with mastering the materials she uses in a purely utilitarian way; rather, she seems willing to let herself be partially guided and surprised by their properties. Her artistic action, which is reflected in the respective visible gesture, thus resembles less a self-confident statement than a thoughtful question. This tendency intensifies with the partial erasure of the brushstrokes, which obscures her own actions and makes it difficult to trace them. Although the action as such remains visible, the details fade they are literally washed out, thin and thus less obviously legible. This resulting impediment to seeing thereby emerges as a precarious, disruptive event that ultimately only allows all visible things to be perceived and understood to a certain degree.

The gradual, more or less thinning out of the paint also intimates the possibility of complete disappearance. Thus, especially the paintings that have been washed out to a particularly large extent suggest less a process of creation and more a sense of increasing evaporation (fig. 13). The presence of what is visible in each case thus appears as a possible, but not necessarily, permanent state. By virtue of the fact that seeing these paintings—as a following of the traces of a past action that cannot fully be comprehended in terms of its ultimate outcome—is so forcefully connected with the respective experience of one's own presence, it is not only the permanence of what has just been seen that seems to have been called into question but also one's own very existence.



Fig. 13: Blythe Bohnen, *Brushstroke Series*, c. 1968. Acrylic and water-color on paper.

If one wanted to encapsulate Bohnen's artistic attitude, one could recognize, especially in the early works considered here, a tendency to critique a visible, only seemingly self-evident reality, without clearly defining it, because in the end "all order is reversible."¹⁹ When Bohnen inextricably links emergent visibility with the potential of disappearance, she lends a special significance to what is currently visible and the act of conscious seeing. By consciously not directing or predetermining the processes of appearance and disappearance to the *n*th degree, she shows, in addition to a critique of a focus on what can be made and the "made" per se, an openness to the new, the not-yet-seen, which is also linked to the question of how our perception and our knowledge of the living world is shaped. Awareness of the fragility of everything that is visible and tangible does not give rise to resignation but rather inspires the curiosity to see oneself and the world repeatedly in new and different ways, to begin again, anew. One might also call it a wise way of living.

Essay translation from German to English by Tim Connell, Verbatim, London

ENDNOTES

- 1 Anne Rorimer's estimation that "the Brushstroke paintings...represent brushstrokes, no more and no less" ought to be further qualified, insofar as Bohnen transcends the traditional concept of representation in her work; cf. Anne Rorimer, "The Early Work of Blythe Bohnen: Form Follows Gesture," in *Blythe Bohnen: Form Follows Gesture* (Wellesley: David Hall Gallery LLC, 2021), 1.
- 2 Cf. Fondation Beyeler Riehen Basel, *Action Painting: Jackson Pollock* (Ostfildern: 2008), 52–57.
- 3 Harold Rosenblum, "The American Action Painters," *ARTnews* 51, no. 8 (December 1952), 22.
- 4 Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (Düsseldorf: 1991), 116–17.
- 5 Bohnen describes her decentralized perception most expressively: "I see myself as phenomena (like wind moving clouds) that created the form—I was the function. Then I switched roles and became the spectator and analysed what I had created. But! then went back and created it only according to the rules I could rationalize." Blythe Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 6 Exhibition catalog *documenta 6*, vol. 3 (Kassel: 1977), 32–47. The works discussed below were not part of the documenta; I am merely taking up the encounter of comparable artistic positions that took place there. As far as can be ascertained, Bohnen never met her colleagues in person.
- 7 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 8 Cf. Janneke Wesseling, *Schoonhoven. Beeldend kunstenaar/Visual Artist* (Den Haag: 1990), 14–18, and Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, "System und Variation. Zehn kleine Reliefs (1962)," in exh. cat. *Jan J. Schoonhoven 1914–1994: Reliefs und Zeichnungen 1941–1991* (Bochum: Situation Kunst [für Max Imdahl], 2015), 85–91.
- 9 Bohnen, "Interview by Gail Livingston," unpublished self-interview, 14.
- 10 In her notes, Bohnen mentions her "respect for things (and people) as separate, integral, equal, unique + valuable." Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 11 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 12 Cf. Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other* (Göttingen: 2007), 73–106.
- 13 Blythe Bohnen, "Excerpts from Interview by Gail Livingston," 12–13.
- 14 Exh. cat. *Lee Ufan: Gemälde 1973 bis 2001* (Bonn: Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2001), 92.
- 15 Lee Ufan, *The Art of Encounter* (London: 2008), 202.
- 16 Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 17 Similarly, Bohnen also states: "All we have are traces, clues to reconstruct the reality of the past, the things outside us, other minds and feelings." Bohnen, unpublished notes.
- 18 "But these traces in themselves do not refer to the past: they are present." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London/New York: 2012), 479–80. Originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: 1945).
- 19 Bohnen, unpublished notes.