

*Gabriele Lutz* It was the end of December 2006 when Agnes Wyler invited me for a hike on the Üetliberg. We walked for hours, climbing from the cold mist into a sunny wintery world. Our conversations centered on the exhibition planned for the coming summer. The effort of the steep ascent was good, not only for our physical but also our mental agility; our conversations were of a lightness, meandering from crucial childhood experiences to preferences in literature, music, art, and in the process we discovered that we had quite a bit in common. \_\_\_\_\_ During this walk Agnes Wyler allowed me a generous glimpse into her world of ideas, and when we had arrived at the foot of the mountain once more she presented me on parting with a book—recommended reading. It had recently fallen into her hands again after many years, she said. In retrospect I think I recall her conspiratorial look. The thin paperback subsequently proved to be weighty reading: *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* by Italo Calvino.<sup>1</sup> In 1985 the Italian man of letters and writer put forward his plea for literature, doing so by means of five abstract categories, which, in his opinion, must be preserved in order to ensure the quality of literature: Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity. In the course of my reading I realized that with this book Agnes Wyler had handed me a key to the appreciation of her artistic work.

Agnes Wyler takes her painting to the interface of language and visual imagination. In her works, word and image enter into complex and highly individual associations—with its various levels of meaning, the name of this book, *Legend*, has a programmatic character and places painting in analogy to a literary form. \_\_\_\_\_ The artist studied philosophy and linguistics, French and Italian, at the University of Lausanne. She decided on art after her studies; at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston she acquired the theoretical and practical basis for her creative work. Agnès Wyler speaks six languages and moves with consummate ease from one idiom into another. The study of literature belongs to her daily experience and becomes part of her art, though not in the sense that language provides explanation for the paintings or, vice versa, that painting is in the service of illustration. Rather Agnès Wyler sets up the pictorial and conceptual as autonomous levels: image, word, and legend coincide.



**Lightness** In her painting Agnes Wyler avails herself of a variety of styles, and not only in the different work cycles. Even within a single work she alternates her visual idiom from objective representation to monochrome color field painting to geometric abstraction. A look at a recently completed work shows this. *La carte postale* consists of three canvases identical in size joined

by the artist into a triptych of epic width (428 cm). She chose figurative representation for the middle panel: a tree scans the gray-green, pictorially structured painting surface like a vertical axis. The tousled crown of foliage, painted in unmercifully generous brushwork, towers above a brushstroke-thin trunk. This tree is created entirely from painterly gesture that does not become lost in the exactness of detail. In the two outer picture planes the artist renounces references outside the image in favor of monochrome painting: vertically structured color surfaces, painted green at the right and deep blue at the left. In red stencil writing the words *EN GARE* are set into the dark color surface—an explanatory caption? A narrative structure is suggested, which admittedly is resolutely withheld—for Agnès Wyler is not conveying stories; via a large format she masterfully presents rhythmic paint layers that are to be experienced sensorially and which open out to color spaces. The pictorial scenes change like harsh cinematic cuts. The three panels remain in a mysterious constellation.

The triptych was once the stage for the promulgation of biblical stories of salvation. Later secular pictorial histories were displayed via triptychs as well, and at the beginning of the twentieth century the triptych was ultimately exploited for abstract subjects. As early examples, the triptychs by Sophie Taeuber-Arp (*Triptych*, 1918) and Alexander Rodchenko (*Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, 1921) deserve mention. The narrative tradition of the triptych form is cut short here via abstract geometric and monochrome painting respectively; nevertheless the different pictorial sections of these compositions remain integrated into a conceptual structure. \_\_\_\_\_ Agnès Wyler responds to this Western tradition with the practice of her art, which abstains from a syntactic linking of the three panels; with discontinuity and disparity she subverts the illusion of closedness, unity, relationality, even the hierarchy that is typical of the pictorial structure of the triptych. She is interested in the multilinguality of the visual forms of representation. “Ma peinture se refuse à prendre toute direction: elle n’est ni figurative ni non-figurative, elle est dans une position inclassable... elle suit le mouvement de ma perception de la vie.” Agnès Wyler consistently develops her paintings from the working process. This occurs in parallel to the thoughts and optical impressions that are in a constant state of flux, that do not follow a predetermined structure, and join together associatively. With this stance she has dedicated herself to a poetry of lightness; she formulates her pictorial stories as fragments, hints, ellipses. “Je cherche intentionnellement à ne pas mettre de poids sur aucune forme de peinture.”

**Quickness** The painting *Ton odeur de rose* tells of the fleetingness of soft particles of pigment—or of the view into a blustery cloudy sky? The painting cannot be fixed, neither as abstraction nor as figuration, and the range of associations goes well beyond a baroque sky or an impressionistic snapshot. *Ton odeur de rose* also brings a sense perception into play, which although it cannot be portrayed can trigger memories of emotional intensity and visual force—*Ton odeur de rose* as analogy to Marcel Proust’s legendary madeleine? *Ton odeur de rose* as a floating carpet of colors that leads into the world of ephemeral perceptions and intense feelings?

Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths / Enwrought with golden and silver light, /

The blue and the dim and the dark cloths / Of night and light and the half-light, /

I would spread the cloths under your feet: / But I, being poor, have only my dreams; /

I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams. \_W.B. Yeats<sup>2</sup>

Painting is movement for Agnes Wyler: “Les choses existent dans le mouvement. Elles flottent, Elles changent, elles se renouvellent sans interruption. Cette idée de flottement, de mouvement et d’interrup-tion est une constante dans ma peinture.” Movement is inherent in the paint surfaces through the animated application of paint, through a rhythmic, fluid, or cloudy paint texture. \_\_\_\_\_ Movement is also demanded from the eye, however. Only through the eye’s gliding action can the painting *Ton odeur de rose* be captured and grasped in its all-over structure. And finally the intellectual movement, the “quickness” of the viewer, is also addressed, for only it can mediate between pictorial content and pictorial text and make references. \_\_\_\_\_ Returning to the painting *La carte postale*: at the left, the deep blue night sky with its linguistic evocation *EN GARE* of a train just arrived in a railway station, in the moment of transition between final movement and definitive standstill, like a short cinematic sequence that can admittedly only happen in the imagination of the viewer and can possibly develop further. The tree follows as the next shot, rising up in solitude and taking root in abyss. Its wide fanleaf arms seem to quiver as if in shimmering heat. “Mon thème principal est contenu dans la question: Qu’est-ce qui fait qu’une image picturale parle à notre cœur et à notre âme?” \_\_\_\_\_ With *La carte postale* Agnès Wyler shows that she is practicing an economy of painting. Reduction and conciseness of the means of representation characterize this work and pertain to her current creative output in general: The tree becomes a sign, a cipher in painting. The painting’s legend, *La carte postale*, may suggest a narrative structure; the painting’s content speaks another language. The painting has nothing of the anecdotal; it unfolds, however, in the moment in which the viewer is ready for a painting experience that is a thinking and feeling process. In this sense *La carte postale* also aims to address the relationship between image and viewer, in the way formulated by Mark Rothko:

A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world.<sup>3</sup>

**Exactitude** Agnes Wyler has brought her painting from formally complex and compact pictorial structures over to a simplified visual language. She used to apply paint layer upon layer, with the separate motif levels remaining visible and combining visually. Photographically representational themes, collaged elements, templates, and abstract notations became interwoven pictorial structures in the process. \_\_\_\_\_ Today the artist extends her paintings into the horizontal—diptych and triptych accommodate this new conception—and the result is a rigorously reduced pictorial language. This process of simplification can be described as abstraction, as a striving for exactitude, precision. While the earlier works were characterized by a wealth of motifs, pictorial structures divided into small sections, and effervescent delight in details, the current paintings reveal a radical restraint with respect to the number of elements and the form of the rendering. Via the liberality of the painterly gesture, Agnès Wyler is able to bring impressions of nature perceived by the senses into abstract color field painting, as in the paintings *EDF/GDF* (*Electricité de France/Gaz de France*) and *Le renoncement à la victoire*. \_\_\_\_\_ In *paysage de dos* the subject is portrayed in linear clarity, the coloring is confined to two shades that are applied across an extensive surface inside strict borders, as in a collage. This language seems almost succinct in its simplification, especially as the mountain, the sky, the house rank among Agnès Wyler’s preferred motifs and because they also belong to the realm of elementary human



experiences narrated in children's drawings. This categorical refusal of technical perfection may cause one to think of Picasso, who once remarked that early on he could draw like Raphael but had needed a lifetime to learn to draw like a child again. This search for authentic artistic expression for sensory, cognitive, and emotional experiencing finds expression in paintings like *paysage de dos*. In *paysage de dos* (Landscape from Behind) a childhood question of profound seriousness for the artist is cherished: in a landscape, what is front and back? At the time this question remained just as unanswered as the one whether a stone is alive. Agnès Wyler finds her way to answers as an artist—her painting can certainly turn into philosophical investigation. Poetry and humor are also in good hands in her paintings. “Encore une fois, le but est de créer une profondeur avec des éléments simples et plats.”

The underside of the leaf / Cool in the shadow / Sublimely unemphatic / Smiling of innocence //

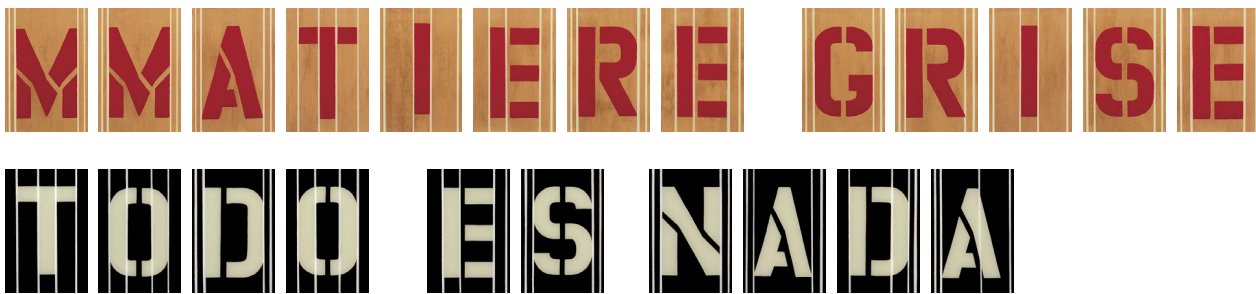
The frailest stems / Quivering in light / Bend and break / In silence //

This poem, like the paintings, is not really about nature. It is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind. \_ *Agnes Martin*<sup>4</sup>

**Visibility** The reproduction of direct visual impressions is not so much at the forefront in Agnes Wyler's paintings; rather it is inner images and ideas, an inner reality, which she formulates with her painting. It is fascinating to listen to her; her language is of a vivid expressiveness of her own creativity that catches you by surprise over and over again. She demonstrates her visual imaginativeness in her painting; it is there that she transforms her linguistic imagery into pictorial language. For example, she relates the surreal and enchanting poetry of the painting title *Toute la dentelle humaine* (perhaps to be translated as *The Filigrees of Humans*) to a two-part painting: executed in scrawly, deliberately clumsy brush-writing, the left panel shows a round dance of leaves—or are we looking at their dark shadows cast on the asphalt of the street? In the right panel, an abstract linear network, swelling and subsiding through the uneven brushwork, like a curtain or veil. “Une légende étant un texte explicatif d'une image, des milliers de légendes peuvent donner des milliers d'éclairages à la même image, comme des milliers d'images correspondent à des milliers de légendes.” \_\_\_\_\_ The diptych will keep its secret. No whisper, no glimmer will divulge it. The artist relies on a mystification of the image through the text and vice versa. In this way the evocative power of painting and legend is consistently maintained.



**Multiplicity** For several years Agnes Wyler has been making small paintings on wood in a convenient 21 x 14 cm format. Parallel to the paintings on canvas she continues to work on this on-going cycle. Over initial layers of paint and geometric patterns she applies a stenciled letter as the topmost layer in each work. She then coats the finished painted panel with epoxy resin, a procedure by which she lends the panel the weight of an object. Finally, the artist strings the individual letters together in serial sequence to form “word-paintings”. In such a way she places “concepts” into a space and delivers them to those viewing for visual implementation. In these works language becomes the pictorial content.



With what is in a way an encyclopedic approach, Agnès Wyler cross-references aphorisms and reflections in associative multilayered complexity. \_\_\_\_\_ **MMATIERE GRISE** is an allusion to Marcel Duchamp’s *Rose Sélavy*, and **OVER THE RAINBOW** evokes a whole host of references from Genesis, to Harold Arlen’s legendary jazz song, up to the present day. Despite the cultural and temporal context, the vision of a paradise on earth remains the constant. **STARS & SAND** is about the experience of infinity that comes to mind when looking both at the ground in front of us and into the distant sky. **TODO ES NADA** in turn continues to write the iconographic tradition of *vanitas* symbolism. **IN GOLD WE TRUST** can be read as an aperçu of the American dollar bill—as an unmasking of the legendary inscription *In G.d We Trust*. \_\_\_\_\_ The fascination emanating from these “word-objects” also lies in their material make-up. Their shiny surface lends them a seductive touch and with it the charm of an *objet du désir*. In this group of works Agnès Wyler openly adapts the aesthetics and iconography of Pop Art, and in **STARS & STRIPES** she shows her reverence for the American artist Jasper Johns and his flag paintings. \_\_\_\_\_ Agnès Wyler displays her wealth of ideas in aphorisms, joining them together unceasingly, like an inexhaustible torrent of thoughts. In the linking of verbal and visual language, which she conveys in the combination of conceptual conciseness and formal reduction, she finds her way to a distinctive visual expression that unites depth of thought and seductive force.

1 Italo Calvino *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Vintage 1996

Italian edition: *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Garzanti Milano 1988

2 W.B. Yeats *Selected Poetry*, Macmillan London Ltd 1962

3 *From Tiger’s Eye*, no. 2, 1947, p. 44, in: Mark Rothko 1903–1970, The Tate Gallery 1987

4 agnes martin *Writings/Schriften*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur 1992, p. 15