

Wilfried Dickhoff

Soap Bubble Thinking

Non-Identity

The best in the *new* corresponds to an *old* need.

Paul Valéry

When Jiří Georg Dokoupil entered the art world in the early 80s, it happened in an impressively free and *non-identical* manner right from the start. From exhibition to exhibition, he showed series of paintings, which differed so much from each other that a consistent approach as a leitmotif was neither seen nor felt. But this was not merely about stylistic change, such as how Francis Picabia changed his style like shirts, while maintaining his presence as a consistent artistic personality. In Dokoupil's work, it was not only the style that changed, but also the whole artistic attitude. From series of paintings to series of paintings, the artistic position changed, as well as its ambition and the concept of art associated with it. Each of the series appeared as if painted by a different artist in every respect, such as in form, content, distance, nearness, perspective, composition, concern and even in the organized chaos of the pictorial diagram.¹ It is a non-concept of painting that radically changes visual identities, countersigned by an "Ego" that Dokoupil no longer *is* at the very moment of the completion of a series.² As soon as a series starts to form a harmonic concept and a coherent identity, he already gravitates towards something else, following what Michel Foucault called the "theatrical multiplication of the Ego." Freed from the bondage of selfhood, Dokoupil enters a *trivial position*³ regarding the doctrines, isms and stereotypes of seemingly consistent aesthetics and artistic concepts, opening up to the inconsistency of the artistic subject itself.

This wholeheartedly open artistic position traces back to the time of Dokoupil's emigration from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968. At the age of 14, he had fled to West Germany with his family, escaping the Soviet tanks that crushed the "Prague Spring" movement in favor of a suppressive regime installed by the USSR. His personal loss of national, social and personal identity, his apostasy concerning ideologies of any kind and his suspicion of the questionable nature of politics as a policy of social responsibility⁴ as well as a kind of art that is committed to external politics, all formed the unconditional conditions for his decision in favor of an art of manifold non-identity. Since then, Dokoupil's non-identical art eludes identifications and categorizations, without falling into the trap of an ideology of the anti-ideological, always differently refraining and distracting from what is considered

¹ cf. *Das letzte Abenteuer der Menschheit—Georg Dokoupil im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff (The Last Adventure of Mankind—Georg Dokoupil in conversation with Wilfried Dickhoff)*, Wolkenkratzer Art Journal. (Frankfurt, 1984), p. 6-10.

² cf. *Georg Dokoupil—Arbeiten 1981-1984 (Georg Dokoupil—Works 1981-1984)*, Wilfried Dickhoff, ed., (Cologne, 1984).

³ Roland Barthes points out that "'trivialis' is the etymological attribute of the prostitute who waits at the intersection of three roads." (Roland Barthes: *Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France*, in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader*, (New York, 1982), p. 467.)

⁴ "Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them." (Paul Valéry: *Tel Quel 2*, (Paris, 1943), p. 41. (translated by SE))

art in respectively modern or postmodern, art-ideological or ideology-critical terms.

Freed from moral pressure, Dokoupil follows an ethics of art without bad conscience and with a no-holds-barred openness towards emptiness, such as the emptiness of meaning and sense. The truth of art is not a sense but rather *a hole in the sense*. In other words, there is a desire to feel irreducible and not reducible to a meaning or an identity, a desire to feel in compliance with a truth that no sense, no knowledge, no salvation, no established meaning and no unit can sublimate. Out of this desire comes Dokoupil's potentiation of artistic attitudes, positions and concepts, which is a disclosure of sense in the sense of security, identity, certainty, guiding principles, belief, myth and an opening towards art sans sense, in the sense of affirmation of life and in stark contrast to non-sense or insanity. From a lack of meaning, it constantly and persistently produces an overabundance of multivalent meaning, an overflowing of sense beyond the signs⁵, which, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, could open our ears and eyes and everything about us that can be open and opened.

In such a way, Dokoupil's distraction of the subject executes a permanent deterritorialization of what currently applies to painting as an art form, in terms of the discourse, and institutionally, but takes a fresh stand with every pictorial invention, with the intention to capture forms for something unexpected. Thereby, and this is crucial, Dokoupil always jeopardizes everything for a distinct pictorial invention, namely for the invention of a non-autonomous painting: Starting from scratch with each series and each painting, with the causeless reason of a self-standing, self-assertive, and self-justifying painting, he renounces any theoretical backing. For more than thirty years, manifested in the form of currently about 137 series of paintings, Dokoupil risks this journey into the unknown with everything necessary, such as a specific thinking via sensations and sensations of concepts, but also a necessary blindness, naivety, fearlessness, wholeheartedness and frankness—all in ever changing configurations. Each of Dokoupil's series of paintings is the experiment of painting-as-thought, of a unique logic of sensation that moves away from itself in order to commit to an opening into the unheard-of and the unforeseen.

Each of his pictorial inventions is nevertheless an artistic *statement*, an affirmation of a visual claim, and an assertiveness of a freely respiring form without which there is no interesting painting. Such pictorial formulations are naturally constructions of image-identities in light of a sensual presence that resembles a glance precedent to any imagination. But these identities do not serve for their self-adulation, but for the non-identity of a *subject-like presence*. For Dokoupil, it is always about "the Münchhausean trick of carrying out the identification of the non-identical."⁶ His paintings resemble the non-identical precisely because he is pursuing their self-contained identity within themselves—an impossible autonomy and, regarding the hole in the sense of art, a *creatio ex nihilo* that is as (im)possible as it is necessary. Therein, Dokoupil is akin to Andy Warhol (actually Andrej Warhola), whose family stems from the north-eastern part of what is now Slovakia and who formulated the core of his mission in his *Philosophy of Andy Warhol* as: "It doesn't mean if you don't believe in nothing that it's nothing. You have to treat the nothing as if it were something. Make something out of nothing."⁷

This is precisely Dokoupil's commitment. The impossibility of this commitment is clear to Dokoupil as it was to Warhol, but it does not change the need for the desirable impossibility of an art that is all about generating possible images of an (im)possible freedom in the midst of complete determination; a freedom anticipating itself in the forms of these images. "It's all about making something that is not doable," as Dokoupil says. Amid the immanence of the so-called markets, as well as our global culture

⁵ cf. Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Ground of the Image*, (New York, 2005), p. 48.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London, New York, 1997), p. 32.

⁷ Andy Warhol: *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, (San Diego, New York, London, 1977), p. 183.

of indifference and interchangeability of absolutely everything and everyone, it is all about generating images of a *non-positive affirmation* that indicates a *transcendence in immanence*. The more there is no outside of this world, the more it is about the real presence of (im)possible images, which are able to be outside of the world while inside the world, greeting another life in the midst of this life.

Spheres

Syntax is a faculty of the soul.

Paul Valéry

The estimated 137 series of paintings, which Dokoupil has created since the late seventies until today, differ from each other in everything that constitutes a painting, such as in artistic approach, attitude and ambition, in painterly diagrammatics, pictorial logic of sensation, varying implicit concept of art, polyphonic non-composition and much more. Accordingly, the series also vary in their amount of individual paintings. There are pictorial inventions that materialized in only a few paintings, sometimes in only one, but also extensive series that have developed over a long period of time and thus have manifested in different forms within their framework of invention and their method of realization. For instance the *Candle Paintings*, out of which Dokoupil always gets new aspects and amazing variations, and especially the *Soap Bubble Paintings*, on which he has been working for over twenty years and which he has currently developed into a new stunning presence are an excellent example of Dokoupil's endless journey into the unknown and the unforeseen.

Herein he is, above all, an inventor of a technique for creating images, an image scientist, specifically an alchemist of (im)possible images. The *Soap Bubble Paintings* are the result of many years of continuously varied experiments that are based on refined experimental set-ups of chemical compounds. The aim is to develop a method for the creation of original paintings, the beautiful paradox of a technologically mediated production of paintings that are not reproducible. Besides, the *Soap Bubble Paintings* do not consist of painted bubbles. Dokoupil does not paint soap bubbles, but he creates abstract paintings *with* real soap bubbles. Using metal bubble wands, he makes large soap bubbles, which he pulls over the canvas in a way that makes them burst and leave colorful traces with a surprising formative tendency. These traces consist of soap-lye enriched with pigments, which accumulate in the form of two molecular layers inside and outside of a thin dipolar film of water, forming a membrane that results in a mostly spherical bubble—a soap bubble. The special mixture of soap-lye and pigments remains Dokoupil's secret. I only know that among other things, so-called pearl-luster pigments are involved, which in a complicated process have been coated with metal platelets, and also a soap that is no longer manufactured.

In this regard Dokoupil's soap bubble technique involves what the romantic naturalist Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge called the „formative tendency of substances.“⁸ From experiments with chemical compounds he won the insight that there is a tendency of the substances to autonomously develop images in the form of multicolored pictorial structures. The formation of the image coincides with the

⁸ Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge: *Der Bildungstrieb der Stoffe, veranschaulicht in selbstständig gewachsenen Bildern (The formative tendency of substances illustrated by autonomously developed images)*, Berlin 2014 (first published Oranienburg, 1855).

formation of colors: "Chemistry produces pictures."⁹ he said, and went so far as to speak of the "painterly masterpiece of Chemistry."¹⁰

A certain life of its own also exists in the soap bubbles, which form the pictorial structures in the *Soap Bubble Paintings*. Dokoupil has developed a method of creating images by their own accord, as he lets the *self-will* of the chemical processes (occurring as the bubbles burst) have its own way. It has always interested him to refrain from individual expression, personal perspective and apparent authenticity of the artistic subject within the framework of his concept of non-identical painting. Regarding the *Soap Bubble Paintings* this is part of his composed decomposition, whereby the constellations of soap bubble traces on canvas first of all become a painting. In this way, Dokoupil stages dynamic areas of tension between chemistry and art, between non-subjective gestures and scientific methods, between calculated spontaneity and a calculation that is undermining itself, between flat formality and spatial illusion and between dissolution of forms and shaping of forms—a painterly thinking through sensations, creating possible third terms beyond binary codes, like form and content. The *Soap Bubble Paintings* are due to this logic of sensation that spreads in the form of endless patterns, oscillating between being formless and becoming form—an *informal* thinking in soap bubbles on canvas.

Dokoupil's *soap bubble thinking* cons the stereotypes and codes of compositional patterns, however, without yielding to the "conformism of destructions."¹¹ *Soap bubble thinking* is always in search of a fascinating dissonant harmony and of a calculated non-calculated composition, obtained from an exceedance of the aesthetic with aesthetic means, beginning again and again with each single painting. Dokoupil's logic of soap bubble sensations turns compositions "gauche," thereby creating unique *non-compositions*—formless soap bubbles becoming form as an abstract painting. There is always a little "gaucherie" in intelligence, as Roland Barthes remarked.¹²

The results are impressive and in fact exactly what is at issue for Dokoupil, namely fascination that finds its fulfillment in the enthusiasm of the viewer. The material event of the *Soap Bubble Paintings* is pure fascination—they are fascinating *beings of sensation*. Their complexity also lies in the fact that Dokoupil displaces the chemically induced colorfulness of the bubbles on the canvas in a way that makes them polyphonically appealing, with their colors changing with different incidences of light and visual angles. In mere passing, a matte and linear beige-gray turns into a shiny green metallic surface, a white bubble turns into a purple bubble with three-dimensional illusion, a cold blue turns into a warm phosphorescent turquoise. The colors are not only shimmering and not only doing so in complementary colors, but they sometimes change completely, including the composition, atmosphere, possible associations, basically the entire painting. A soap bubble painting is many paintings, a poly-phonic non-identical composition, inviting the viewer into a visual *polylogue*.

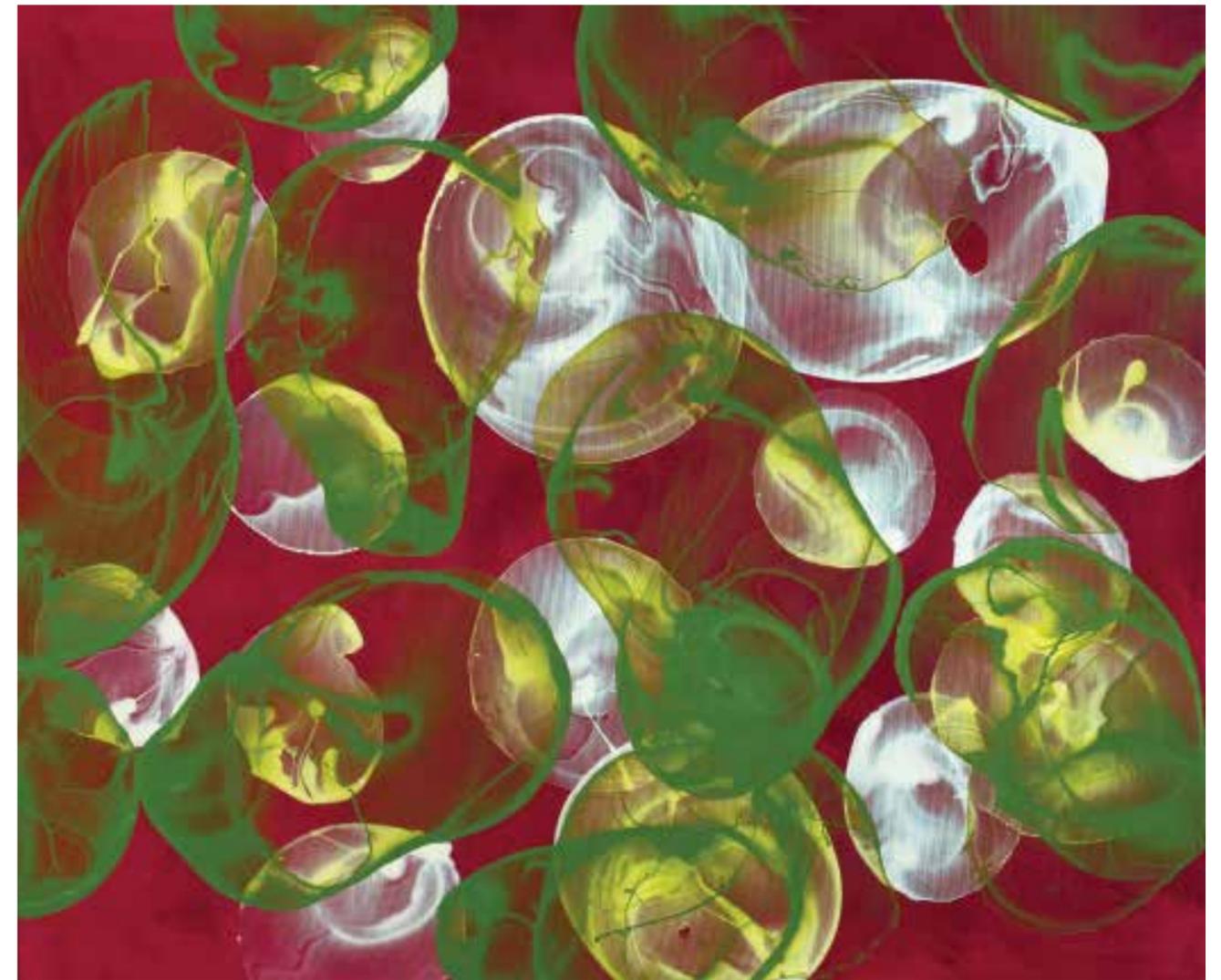
The *Soap Bubble Paintings* are clearly designed as strict non-figurative abstractions, but they are also open to the entire universe of associations, which is suggested by the phenomenon of the bubble with its complex colors and formal structures on the canvas, which depend on the incidence of light. The universe of associations includes constellations of synapses that the *soap bubble thinking* has left behind, colorful underwater worlds, planetary flurry, micro- and macrocosmic structures, faces that appear briefly and then disappear, glass spheres in which one likes to imagine the future and of

9 *ibid.*, p. 108. (translated by SE)

10 *ibid.* (translated by SE)

11 *ibid.*, p. 174.

12 cf.: Roland Barthes: *Cy Twombly: Works on Paper*, in Roland Barthes: *The Responsibility of Forms*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), p. 157-176.



Untitled - 2013-2015
Soap-lye and pigments on canvas
95 x 115 cm - 37 3/8" x 45 1/4"

course any imaginable bubble, starting from the bubble of love in Hieronymus Bosch's painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1485-1510) to protective covers of any kind, the bag of waters and other shared interior spaces and associated elemental senses of home, origin, the sensation of birth and the reinvention of life that is called love. Besides, the molecular composition of the soap bubbles' membranes is similar to biomembranes, which is why a quasi organic quality is rightly attributed to soap bubbles, which also immediately suggests itself regarding corresponding associations and feelings in an actual physical way. Since the soap bubble was invented about 5000 years ago by the Sumerians, it is of course one of the most popular visualizations of the universe—imagined as an infinite space of transcendence in immanence. From this point of view, the *Soap Bubble Paintings* sometimes have the hint of a cold distant gaze, considering the ontological indifference, the indifference of being.

But as much as these paintings are able to evoke all this, they also withdraw from all that again, letting it appear and disappear. In the end they are nothing more and nothing less than non-autonomous abstract paintings that are not connectable to the symbolic order. However, this does not alter their fascination, on the contrary, their fascination exudes precisely from this oscillation between distinct abstraction and evoked association. What accounts for this fascination, is the moment in which that what we see, looks at us. "The image makes an image (fait image) by resembling a gaze."¹³ This is exactly what happens here: the visible presents itself as seeing; an image is looking at us and develops a pull into the imaginary. "They invite you to dream" as a mother standing in front of a soap bubble painting with her daughter told me with a dreamy look. They invite you to trust in a state of slightly enraptured absence, this absentminded mood that is called *lost in thought*—a latent existential attitude, of which Jean-Paul Sartre said: "Man is like leaking gas, aspiring towards the imaginary."

The *Soap Bubble Paintings* have a great attraction especially for children, and exceedingly for the child in all of us, evoking memories of the fascinated being-in-the-world of childhood. For example, the experience of skipping stones that create circular waves by bouncing off the surface of water or the event of floating soap bubbles, which contain our breath for a short afterlife outside our body, letting a part of us float in the space of (im)possibilities in the form of fragile, ultra-thin, colorful globes that are the "medium of a surprising soul expansion."¹⁴ Peter Sloterdijk describes it very aptly: "In enthusiastic solidarity with his iridescent globes, the experimenting player plunges into the open space and transforms the zone between the eye and the object into an animated sphere."¹⁵

In moments of their fascination, the *Soap Bubble Paintings* are able to evoke memories of this animated sphere that shines into our childhood, akin to what the late Walter Benjamin referred to as aura in the *Arcades Project*, namely the memory of a lost human touch. But like all possible associations, this auratic experience would not exist without the simple presence of these paintings as mere images, traced back to the fact of a self-standing, non-figurative abstract non-composition without reference, consisting of traces of burst soap bubble molecules. Yet the more consistently Dokoupil has focused on the material presence of painting within the frame of an imaginary rectangle, the more of a deframing happens nevertheless—a deframing opening up a threshold: There is more than what there is. "Art wants to create the finite that restores the infinite."¹⁶ Art creates intense, inspiring levels of composition, passing on beings of sensation that the viewer is invited to adopt and to take elsewhere. This is exactly what works in the *Soap Bubble Paintings*. With the help of candid viewers, the paintings open up their gaze

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Ground of the Image*, (New York, 2005), p. 87.

¹⁴ Peter Sloterdijk: *Spheres Volume I: Bubbles—Microspherology*, (Los Angeles 2011), p. 18.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: *What is Philosophy?*, (New York 1994), p. 197.

and develop an animated zone between the traces of burst soap bubbles and our eyes, transferring their gaze—the material event of painting as a being of sensation: a transcendence within the immanence of painting.

All this is accomplished and disappointed by the *incommensurability* and *incommunicability* of these paintings, because the goal of painting is indeterminate. That is why we will never get to the bottom of its most beautiful results. This is the reason for painting's discreteness and the condition of its beauty, assuming that it is a presence of beauty without embellishment. A good painting is characterized by the intensity of a visual presence, a power that deprives the painting of homogeneity by deflecting, differentiating and rupturing it, a power that enables the painting to dart a gaze of the non-identical at the observer. In this way, visual presence evokes a notion of difference regarding the nameless and the unforeseen. And let us not forget: "Fascination is the gaze of solitude."¹⁷ Opening up to this, one ultimately opens up to the inconsistency of anything that is regarded as truth and reality. That is where the existential seriousness of the *Soap Bubble Paintings'* playfulness can be encountered. For an "opening up to contingency can only happen in a playful way, because it is an opening up to a world game that lacks a final determination."¹⁸ In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche: "We have art so that we do not perish from the truth." Art that exposes itself to that is a *strong game*, which in contrast to the frivolous playfulness of a weak game, is characterized by an "amusing, capricious excitement"¹⁹ that comes up when a game has found a form that parries the abyss of ontological contingency. Jiří Georg Dokoupil is one of the artists who delight us with pictorial inventions of a strong game and lets us forget the abandonment of game in contemporary art—for moments of an *art of parrying*.

Melancholy facing a burst soap bubble usually only lasts a second, until the urge to play resumes and a new bubble ascends. Shattered hopes give rise to new attempts. This is what soap bubbles represent, also relating to art, because the effort of a new beginning is intrinsic to art. Art is the childhood of its thinking. To invent different images of difference and thus to claim art is subject to the call for a return to a childhood of thinking via sensations. Initial talking of an eternal new beginning, considering the usual case of failure: That is the beauty of a responsibility of forms, supposing that it is a "non-violent synthesis of the diffuse"²⁰ and that it presents itself as *an ability to respond* before there is even a question, as an answer to questions that have not yet been posed. For example, a constellation of burst soap bubble illusions becomes form as a response-able *Soap Bubble Painting* radiating non-indifference for the other and enabling a miracle of giving—to see, to feel, to face, to think. In this sense, a good painting is a non-indifferent gift. Just like here.

But see for yourself, what *Soap Bubble Paintings* can do.

¹⁷ Maurice Blanchot: *The Gaze of Orpheus*, (Barrytown, NY, 1981), p. 75.

¹⁸ Marcus Steinweg: *Inkonsistenzen*, unveröffentlichtes Manuskript (*Inconsistencies*, unpublished manuscript), (Berlin 2014). (translated by SE)

¹⁹ Georges Bataille: *Spiel und Ernst (Game and Seriousness)*, in: *Das Spielelement der Kultur (The Game Element of Culture)*, Knut Ebeling, ed., (Berlin 2014), p. 88. (translated by SE)

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London, New York 1997), p. 197.