

A journey into the interpenetrational

Art is the moving of the mind. As shown in the Record of Music (*Yueji* 樂記), when the senses come into contact with external things, the mind is moved. A piece of art does this in a special way because it is intended precisely to move the mind, while other things make it easier for the gaze to slide on, from one thing to the next, without lingering on anything or allowing the mind to move or travel within itself. A piece of art draws the mind to it. While doing that, Andres Koort's works, however, are also modest; there are no imposing colours or shapes: the colours are pastel earth colours and the composition is abstract. So, with no provocative anchor points, the gaze can at first easily slide over them. Something of a counter-measure is the size of Koort's works: many are larger than human scale (i.e. 3.2 or 2.2 metres high). So that, having ventured into the picture frame, the gaze drowns in the painting before it manages to slide out across the opposite side of the frame. And then it is a good thing that there are no obtrusive, recognisable colours or shapes that immediately take hold because these would otherwise start shaking the gaze and the mind to and fro within the picture frame at a single level of meaning, that of colours and shapes. In Koort's paintings, however, the gaze can sink deeper. It can travel, like in a Chinese landscape painting. In this way it moves to the more fused, interpenetrational levels of the mind and the world. I need to explain this a little.

Generally speaking, everything has two ontological sides: juxtaposition and interpenetration. For a thing or event to be identifiable as such, it must be present somehow; it must constitute some kind of juxtaposition of parts of space and succession of moments in time (the latter can be seen as a juxtaposition of moments on an imaginary timeline), otherwise it would not be distinguishable from anything else. On the other hand, these parts and moments must be somehow related to one another. And the relationship cannot be external, so that A and B are related through an intermediary *a*, for this would beg the question of how *a* is in turn related to both A and B, and the relationship would in fact not be explained at all. The relationship, then, must be internal; the parts and moments must somehow interpenetrate, or fuse, into one another.

It is the interpenetrational side of a work of art that we fix upon when we look at the work *itself* instead of letting our gaze slide over it onto the next thing – not only its present-side but

also its self-side. At the same time, we also, in a way, attend to our own self-side – not thematically and explicitly but spontaneously: when we are drawn to the present-side of things, to colours and shapes, in our daily lives, this means that these carve out the corresponding "present-sides", the counterparts of things, within our selves; this is what Zhuangzi (in Chapter 12) calls the "mechanical mind" (*jixin* 機心), which hooks us into the world-machine and will not let us be as we are. Generally, a piece of art is not directly harnessed to serve a purpose – some immediately present, intermediary or ultimate end – and in its limited instrumentality is made, as a final end and an original or present intention. Accordingly, through a piece of art, we can unhook ourselves from direct, immediate and limited objectives and win some self time. What is helpful about Koort's paintings here is the fact that there are no oppressive colours and shapes that would attach the gaze to the juxtapositional and sequential; they allow the gaze to move to the interpenetrating. That is to say, they do not cause mechanical movements within the sphere of art that they open up and instead allow our minds to sink deeper into the interpenetrating.

What, however, does the selfhood of a piece of art, or the mind, consist in? We saw that selfhood has an interpenetrational as well as a juxtapositional side, a self-side and a present-side; in other words, presence and selfhood are different faces of the self in a deeper sense. This self is not some "third" element added to the two sides; instead, it is this arrangement of sides with the present-side at one end and self-side at the other. What, then, does this arrangement of sides involve? It has two aspects: life force (*qi* 氣) and veining (*li* 理). Generally speaking, every thing and every situation is, on the one hand, articulated (or "veining") and, on the other hand, possesses some energy or power ("life force"). Articulation or veining may be on the present-side, that is, juxtapositional and sequential: the object or process being observed has certain parts and a way of unfolding in time. The hydrogen atom contains a proton and a neutron. A hurricane has an eye and an eyewall. The human body consists of the torso, limbs and organs, which in turn contain tissues, and so on. The idea that I am expressing here is manifested through words and letters. And all these processes have their sequential quality, which is measurable on a microscopic scale like hydrogen, and on a macroscopic scale – in hours and days – like a hurricane. The temporal horizon of an individual human body is roughly a century and in turn comprises processes with a more limited temporal horizon (with respect to either myself or my body parts: my plans for today,

my digestive processes, cell metabolism and so on). It has taken me some time to write down my idea here, just as it will take time to read it.

Alternatively, articulation or veining may also be on the self-side, contracted or interpenetrating to a greater or lesser degree; the present-side is simply the greatest degree of unfolding or expansion. However, articulations must also be fused: a thing or situation only has duration by virtue of its juxtaposed parts and successive moments in some way interpenetrating into one another. The structure of a hydrogen atom and the way it unfolds in time exist in an interpenetrational mode on its self-side. The same goes for my body or an idea that I have. Even a hurricane has some interpenetration, although its duration is shorter than that of an atom or a human body. With a complex system like the human body, there can also be movement between levels of interpenetration, one can expand or contract oneself. For example, on the one hand, my idea for this piece of writing exists in complete interpenetration, so that its articulations fully interpenetrate into one another, remaining obscure even to myself, although I do "sense" articulations within that obscurity. On the other hand, I expand this idea, laying it out in smaller topics, and embody it in words and sentences, whereby these articulations become clear to me, despite the fact that they fail to fully capture that interpenetrating idea, just like recounting a dream, even if providing an overdetermined interpretation of its content, does not fully capture the meaning of the dream. And, of course, this presentation of the idea changes the idea itself; in the process of presentation, the idea constantly changes, also in its interpenetrational mode.

The fact that parts and moments of a thing or situation interpenetrate into each other shows that they have life force, energy or power. Every thing or situation has a certain force for being, persistence and endurance – it has power. In physical terms, this is manifested in the equivalence of mass and energy: a thing "is" only by virtue of "doing" something. Its being and doing ultimately coincide (despite the fact that phenomenologically they are decidedly different, which is precisely what allows the sensible world to exist in the first place). This "doing" means that it has the power to compose itself or keep itself together (throughout its spatial articulations and temporal successions), while relying on separations through articulation or the fact that the different parts and moments are kept apart and do not coincide. In this way, we can understand veining in a narrow, empirical sense, whereby it works like the Pauli exclusion principle does for fermions (or "constituent particles"), by not allowing two

particles to occupy the same quantum state to be "in the same place" (thereby precisely creating "place difference" and "two-ness"). We can also understand life force in a narrow, empirical sense, as not being subject to the Pauli exclusion principle, just like bosons (or "transmitting particles"), for example, when bosons transmitting colour charges between quarks also transmit their own interactions, so that there is a virtual infinity of them in "one" place. Or to take this to the human level: I have a certain force by virtue of which my body acts as a whole and I throw myself into the future, while keeping the past at hand. The unfolding of my idea has a certain energy and power, which opens up the future for itself and maintains the past.

Life force, energy or power in a broad sense exists in two dimensions at once: on the one hand, it manifests itself horizontally, so to speak, through juxtapositions and successions on the present-side, as the force by which these juxtapositions are maintained, spread out, recreated and unfolded in time. On the other hand, it acts vertically, as it were, between the present-side and self-side, the juxtapositional and interpenetrational; without interpenetration, the juxtapositional would diffuse and nothing would exist at all. The ontological structure of a being or situation as a whole – its present-side and self-side, juxtaposition and interpenetration, veining and life force, the ability to keep together and to keep apart – may be called its potency. Potency covers both structures and powers that interpenetrate and exist in potency and those that are juxtaposed or successive and exist at hand.

The reason why I made this detour is to present and self-extract an ontological interpretation of Koort's art, to unravel its metaphysical meaning. This is a presentation in the sense that it lays out certain ontological aspects and a self-extraction in the sense that it points to the relationship between the present-side and the self-side, between the juxtapositional or sequential and the interpenetrational. This latter is self-extraction in the further sense that it dislodges the empirical self, which is constructed upon certain symbolic-imaginary forms and contents (and, in that respect, is part of a person's present-side), and moves to self-extraction, which means a more open and inclusive selfhood, rather than the removal of the self.

Now, generally speaking, the ontological dimensions described above come into play when one engages with Koort's work. His paintings, in a certain way, draw attention to the interpenetrational, the self-side. I said earlier that this is something done by art in general, by suspending the ordinary movement from these colours and shapes to those, and that Koort's

work has a special way of doing this, by being even more decisive in guiding the viewer to the interpenetration through the absence of imposing colours and shapes, using pastel colours and diffused shapes. Let us now take a look at some more aspects of Koort's work in which these ontological dimensions are embodied.

In many of his paintings in recent years, Koort has used glue to attach a veil to the canvas, which leaves wrinkles and bubbles on the surface as it dries. This may be seen as a reference to interpenetrating differences and articulations, which exist in potency; this is the interpenetrating veining, the unfolding of which reveals the juxtaposed and sequential world-at-hand. However, the wrinkles and bubbles are not just a symbol for an interpenetrating veining, but instead are also embodiments of certain articulations and processes in the world. In particular, the drying of the veil glued to the canvas, a process involving the veil, glue and canvas, their microscopic articulations in space-time and temporal transformations, which in fact involve their own "subjectivity", self-referentiality and interpenetration: these substances and processes are also in a kind of relationship with themselves, interpenetrating or "surviewing" themselves (for otherwise they would pulverise into non-existence). The way the glued veil dries reveals to us something about its self-referentiality. To be more precise, the fact that the artist has arranged the veil, glue and canvas in a certain way and perhaps has even somehow intervened in the drying process already brings into play the self-side of the materials and the artist himself. This process is not completely guided "from the top down", so as to embody the artist's idea (or "form") in "matter", but it is also not a spontaneous, self-contained physical process somewhere hidden from our attention. Instead, it is interaction between two systems – the veil glued to the canvas and the artist – whereby, on the one hand, the artist certainly "surprises" the matter, by arranging it in this way, but on the other hand, the matter surprises the artist, by forming particular patterns. Here is how the artist himself describes this interaction: "The rhythm and nature of the material should become one with my world-painting (*maalim*) [sic].¹ If there is this resonance, the painting will be good. You must not impose your will on the material (the picture) too much when painting. Ideally, you get the right feeling when you are able to fuse into the process and go along with it, then the picture

¹ As if in a dream, the artist's *lapsus linguae*, "maalim", blends together the Estonian words for world ("maailm") and painting ("maalimine"). And indeed, through painting, Koort opens up the world, showing its genesis. As he puts it thematically in the sentence: the materials become one with the painting. This is 'matterialism' that goes beyond materialism and idealism, both of which operate with things already at hand (physical and metaphysical, respectively), while matterialism shows the process of coming into being, whereby materials, through their articulated singularities 'above the form' (形而而上) come into being-at-hand as juxtaposed states of affairs 'among the forms' (形而而下).

itself will 'guide your actions'." (From private correspondence, 12 April 2018.)

Another very important recurring component in Koort's work is something I have already mentioned, the use of earth colours. One consequence of this is that – as I already said – the paintings are not garish or obtrusive, but instead self-absorbing, so to speak, reposed in themselves, calm, porous and deep (rather than superficial). They invite one to look into and through, rather than "at" them. Moreover, they are of the earth or soil, bringing earth itself into the painting and painting back to earth. This, however, does not mean reterritorialisation as in Heidegger's interpretations of art, which move dangerously close to a *Blut-und-Boden* mentality: a peasant's shoes, the work and the days hidden within them; gods and mortals, heaven and earth, and so on. Earth is not a tangible given here, something that would support exclusions. Instead, it is (1) matter with its own self-side and present-side, its life force and veining, bringing into play its very own articulations and inclinations similar to the veil and glue; and (2) a surface not in the sense of a basis or solid foundation but in the sense of ground, earth and soil as a generative environment, a place for things to be brought into being-at-hand because this cannot happen just like that – it needs to find "fertile ground". In this way, the earth colours in Koort's paintings are a fertile ground for germinating the seeds of thought, which in turn are certain forces and articulations of our own bodies. Furthermore, Koort has kept some of his canvases buried in the ground for a long time and allowed natural processes to act on them, leaving behind their articulations and patterns of force.

To be sure, painting is not merely a "static" art and it is not only about veinings; it is also about life force, power and energy, and these at various levels. First, it incorporates microscopic energies (the veil, glue, earth colours and so on), endurance and being, or "statics", of which is itself dynamic, a certain manifestation of force, a throwing forward or projection of itself, being-toward-the-future. Everything else, after all, is based on these microscopic forces. Second, macroscopically, the constellations of elements and colours on the canvas are themselves a kind of manifestation of force; they, too, have certain inclinations and urges. Third, these inclinations and urges naturally move the viewer's mind. And as it is not tied to imposing shapes or colours, it can move all the more freely, being at the mercy of purely pre-individual forces, and move not only "horizontally" but also "vertically", to higher levels of interpenetration or contraction, to the pre-individual. Fourth, it is quite obviously a manifestation of force by the artist or rather, as I said before, a joint manifestation by the artist

and the materials; it is as if this contained compressed creative energy, a prepared specimen of an implosive, or inverted bomb, which can go off again and again, each time drawing in new viewers.

Another type of preparation of veinings and life force are the works where Koort uses layers of plaster mesh glued on top of one another. These are, again, finished with earth colours, which produce a brilliant, intense effect on the surface, almost like oil paints, and have a special glow. As the layers of plaster mesh are not exactly aligned with one another, they create impressions of movement, so that appearing or looming through the metrically juxtaposed structure (a set of measurable, equidistant parallel grooves in the mesh and another set perpendicular to these) is a non-metric, interpenetrating space-time. The homogeneous plaster mesh with its 90-degree symmetry is like the antithesis of "the natural", completely artificial. And yet, when prepared in a certain way (layers, colours, framing), it comes to life, forms a self-side, begins to transform (indeed, one of these works is titled "Muutuste raamat" (The Book of Changes)).

Emerging from Koort's earlier work is a style or manner that could be described as rust-sadness (*roostenukrus*). The term was introduced into Estonian by Rein Raud, as a translation of *sabi* 寂 (or *wabi-sabi* 侘寂) in Japanese aesthetics. *Wabi-sabi* has to do with the beauty of impermanence and imperfection, the peace of old age and natural simplicity. Koort developed a painting technique that gives the impression of a rusty surface. This in itself invites one to apply the concept of *wabi-sabi*, or rust-sadness, although more important than an outward similarity is the mentality that goes with it. That is not just nostalgia, a longing for the past, or simply melancholy, a pensive sadness about the present, but an attitude of a completely different kind, whereby rust is not destructive and sadness is not (just) sad. Although the attitude is sentimentally loaded, and the mind moves, it does not move for things past, present or future; it is like a longing for actualisation or "coming-to-hand" itself. Rust-sadness means a kind of delicate distance from the actual colours and shapes (it is "rusty", hazy), making the viewer more receptive to the self-side and actualisation or "coming-to-hand". These rust-sad works are also a good key and start pointing towards Koort's later paintings.

As a rule, Koort's works are nonfigurative. Figures have, as it were, dissolved in his work over time. The fused landscapes of the rust-sadness period have continued to fuse. However, an important exception, also present in his later work, are the footprints left by the artist

himself walking on the canvas. A footprint, of course, is a kind of figure, indicating the absence of an actual figure, the fact that the person who left it has already gone. We see on the canvas that "somebody has walked here", be it in a straight line or criss-cross. Broadly speaking, all painting is traces of some kind of (creative) activity. Of course, rather than simply a non-being who has passed by and remains in the past, the person who left these traces, or footprints, is here as a has-been. He is here precisely as someone who *is* a has-been. It is through traces that the person or thing that left them takes shape and becomes identifiable, delineated, "a being"; it is precisely through traces that we can establish that such-and-such was there at that time (even if this reference remains somewhat vague). It can be a bubble chamber for detecting elementary particles, a trail of footprints on a beach or just any entity in space-time, given that the juxtapositional present-side of any thing or situation can be seen as its own footprint, an imprint on its surroundings, something distinct from the rest. The "self" that leaves behind the traces, on the other hand, is something different: it is what leaves the traces *behind*, as products of sorts. We should not think, however, that what is "present before" the traces is the real thing, the original. The thing that leaves traces – for example, a person walking on a beach – is in fact also a trace of itself and there is nothing "present before" this; a trace as the present-side is merely one of the sides of potency. In this sense, the footprints on the canvas in turn point to the self-side and the potency of the emergence or coming-to-presence.

Koort's work also involves a separate linguistic-semiotic layer in its own right – the titles of his paintings. According to the artist, sometimes there is a title before there is a painting, but sometimes the title comes after or the painting is subsequently renamed. Sometimes the titles organise paintings into series (e.g. "Murmur" or "T"). The titles often refer to the pre-individual, the interpenetrating; for example, "Puhas väli" (Clear Field), "Eeter" (Ether) or "Murmur". In the Western tradition, this last title – an onomatopoeic word that means a low noise or whisper in English and Latin – relates to Leibniz, one of the most astute observers of the tiny and pre-individual, who has a famous analogy of the roar (or murmur, if you like) of waves on the beach: within the perception of the roaring waves are fused a vast number of tiny perceptions (*petites perceptions*) of the noises of myriads of water particles, which we cannot perceive individually, but only as interpenetrating parts in the "large" perception of roaring. However, these water particles and the sounds they make are only blurred for us, in

our macroscopic perception, which contracts and fuses; in themselves, they are completely distinct. It is just that this distinctness remains obscure for us. Now, it is through Koort's work that we begin to grasp this obscure murmur, this bustle of tiny differences – distinct if indiscernible – in a clear field or "ether".

Another recurrent theme in his titles relates to time, movement and change: "Muutuste raamat" (The Book of Changes), "Rajaja" (By the Way), "Minu T" (My way / Minute), "Koguaeg" (Constantly), "Kestev minevik" (Continuous Past) and others. When a piece of art moves the senses and this is the movement of the mind, then it brings us into the temporal flow and transformation. It lifts us out of objective time, which is measured with a watch, and at first brings us to subjective time, the duration of which we experience, but then, with the help of the artworks, moving on into the interpenetrational, we discover an even deeper constitution, in relation to which that subjective time, too, is merely a contraction or general impression. This is the world of murmuring, of bustling pre-subjectivity, from where subjects and their corresponding objects are scraped up. Like landscape paintings that, instead of simply depicting the empirical, show their ontological ground of genesis in interpenetration, Koort's works offer a way of travelling into that world, and a better one at that than LSD.