

„The blue light that keeps us awake at night“, 2019
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In 1336, the Italian poet and historian Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) wrote his letter, The Ascent of Mont Ventoux, and in doing so, for the first time, gave account of a mountain hike that was not a necessity but was based solely on the urge to „see this exceptionally high place.“¹

On the threshold of modern times, Petrarch's narrative documents a new kind of landscape experience, which is characterized by a sense of the world and attaches an integral value to the aesthetic of the natural—motifs that still involve a fascination with supposedly untouched regions of the world. Today, Petrarch, who is considered to be the founder of alpinism due to his undertaking, is succeeded by lines of mountain climbers on Mount Everest, a demonstration of sporting ambition, hunger for adventure or need for validity that borders on the absurd. At the same time, the images of the experience they are chasing have long since become ubiquitous; every PC has a range of pre-installed desktop backgrounds in which deserts, waterfalls and, last but not least, remote mountain regions shine in overwhelming splendour.

Anne Wölk has taken on the special magic that emanates from this type of depiction and that especially has a “glow” emanating not only from the depiction's impressiveness.

Rather, certain stylistic devices—efficacious colourfulness and lighting—are what give the feature an outstanding brilliance, making it appear even more desirable yet unreachable. In times of social media, such image manipulations are ubiquitous as filter functions, their existence is well known to contemporary viewers and their use is almost demanded—where photographs are less true than ever, they must at least be spectacular to survive in consumer society. Image competition in digital modernism is characterized by high-contrast staging sharpened in colour by the light of the screens, captivating us.

In the paintings of her body of work, Virtual Infinity (since 2017), Anne Wölk seizes the impetus of the virtual and uses specific painting techniques as well as narrative picture elements that create astonishment in the face of fantastic scenarios. The artist lets extremes meet: Impressively illuminated, attention-grabbing foregrounds—the jagged rocky landscapes of snow-capped mountain ranges, views of the earth's surface—are presented simultaneously with the hypnotizing deep blue of space, where individual stars and entire nebulae sparkle.

The virtual infinity mentioned in the series' title corresponds to the reality of the firmament—among other things, the artist uses images transmitted through the Hubble telescope for her pictures, which provide visually abstracted access to places that cannot be physically reached. Wölk is not concerned with creating perfect illusionism, but rather with equipping her pictures with a certain atmosphere that responds to the radiance of digital realities. The artist is fascinated by science-fiction literature and its ability to have predicted our present in many aspects.

In his pioneering neuromancer trilogy (1984–1988), William Gibson coined the term cyberspace, an immersive virtual parallel universe as it exists today in the form of the Internet. The idea came to him when he watched two children engrossed in a video game and got the impression that they not only wanted to control the game but wanted to be part of it. Against the background of the incipient

ubiquity of personal computers, Gibson sensed that someday everyone would want to also live their lives in digital space: „Everyone is going to have one of these [...] and everyone is going to want to live inside them.“²

In works such as *Multiverse* (2018) or *Virtual Light* (2017), Anne Wölk creates plateaus in light neon gradients that are reminiscent of computer game background images—visually appealing and yet vacuous, they invite you to dwell on the elements clearly arranged on top of them. In Wölk’s works, these in turn derive from an earthly and original living environment: Next to slender birch and pine trunks are simple shelters that look like remnants of a civilization that once aspired to the „cosmos“. While the mind first wanders into the distance based on an aesthetic inspired by game design—the pastel rainbow colour gradients, the promising starry sky in the background and the objects floating like dream symbols in the visual space—the emptiness and isolation that characterize the picture and its narrative content lend it a dystopian undertone.

Time and again, Anne Wölk sets the majestic and contemplative character of her works alongside moments of irritation, thus referring the viewer to the longing for the beautiful appearance in and of itself. In the work *Astral* (2019), the mountain and natural landscape is intersected by a grid, as can be seen in virtual reality spaces when you reach the limits of digital simulation.

This is known, among other things, from the science-fiction series *Star Trek*, in which it adorns the “holodeck”, which can be used to enter any virtual world. Here, the ambivalence between the vastness of the universe and the limited access to it becomes clear in a special way—even on a spaceship like the *USS Enterprise*, which is supposed to explore unknown areas of space, some things can only be reached virtually.

The universes that Anne Wölk conjures up in her pictures are reminiscent of escapism, a thirst for discovery and dominance of technology—not just on an interstellar level. For example, in the impressive mountain landscapes in *Milky Way* (2018), *Alpenglow I & II* (2019), *Scope and Vision* (2019) or *Day Break* (2019), floodlights and coloured fluorescent tubes can be found, disturbing the idyll and at the same time artistically illuminating it. As foreign bodies, they refer to a reality in which everything has been conquered by humans and designed according to their taste—their beloved glow effect is carried everywhere. Above all, it serves to set an example, to mark meaningfulness and to call attention.

Anne Wölk demonstrates in particular the attractiveness of coloured light, which makes the unique appear even more special—or that which has long been available or well-known but should still have a touch of uniqueness added. Last but not least, this effect is used by our virtual selves or avatars, those artificial personalities also described for the first time by science fiction, which represent a certain version of one’s self online. Among other things, they communicate what seems desirable to them and ensure the constant availability of captivating, well-staged images that leave their mark and remind us of the possibility of descending into other worlds.

Wölk’s works allude to the need for authentic experiences that is kept alive here, as well as to the perpetuated desire to lose or distinguish oneself in the face of something bigger—be it on a mountain or on the Internet.