THE EXOTIC IS HERETIC

The project for a painting is to be itself. The existential project for a person is to be him- or herself. Just as every person carries within the history of the entire human past, both the one of which they are aware and that of which they are cognitively unaware, so too a painting or a sculpture has to contain the entire history of art-making, from the imprint of hands on the walls of caves to the internalization of the media in recent decades. Otherwise, what is missing in the work is not so much the link to a past, but specifically a sense of history.

Der Fluss und seine Quelle: The River and its Source. The title of this exhibition by Thomas Scheibitz broadcasts a description of his working method. The artist is the *flâneur* who observes, cuts out, and collects in his *carnets de curiosités* the icons that attract him from the throng of images and objects circulating in the department stores of contemporary mediopolitan information. Walter Benjamin quoted Baudelaire: "*palais neufs (…) / vieux faubourgs tout pour moi devient allégorie*." Scheibitz absorbs as sources of the river of art the flow of forms that runs through the everyday life of experiencing, from the temples of Greece to a television show. Internalizing this flow, he equates it to a preconstructed subconscious, to a sediment of signs that the artist elevates to magma and directs toward painting.

The insistence on architectural motifs in Scheibitz's early canvases was already a symptom that he was searching in (pre)constructed structures—modern or modernist objects and buildings—for a response to what a painting should be, to how to build the picture into a construction of

elements that, while being two-dimensional, also allude to volume and which, in their appearance on a surface, contain a need for architecture.

Of course the real question was: Why still painting? Why still the search for an invention of painting?

The symbiotic relationship between paintings and sculptures in Scheibitz's working method is not unlike that existing in the work of Cy Twombly. Twombly builds up his three-dimensional pieces by assembling into abstract constructions devoid of monumentality found forms which are converted into alien, self-referential objects. Just as the American artist covers his objects/forms with plaster and paints them white—a visual correlative of the wall's allegory scribed and scribbled with psychomantic signs of his canvases—Scheibitz also paints the surfaces of his medium-density fibreboard (MDF) sculptures with lacquer colors that are analogous to if more intense than the hues seen in his paintings. And just as the disparate shapes that are agglutinated in the oblique images of his paintings, so the cubes, spheres, cylinders, and polyhedrons of his sculptures—however articulated like limbs of a human body or blocks of an architecture—descend from the same vocabulary of prototypes that the artist compiles from his reconnaissance of the city and of history.

Parallel to the compounding of shapes drawn from the lexicon of images that art, advertising, industry, magazines, and newspapers provide to his iconographic notebooks, Scheibitz evokes in the titles of many of his works references to multiple experiential fields, reflecting in them the *Fluss* ("river" and "flow": permanence and movement) and the *Quelle* ("source"

and "spring": quotation and invention) of signs converging in the painted or constructed image. On the canvas, signs are transformed into a personal semiosis, into a sort of visual Esperanto. And since the canvas is first squared, in the classical manner, the icons there inscribed are filtering from an invisible grid where the two-dimensionality of a geometric abstraction is joined with the deep perspective of the Renaissance stage where plurality is forged into a unity.

But the initial question remains the same: Why painting, why still the reinvention of painting?

In *Missing Link in Delphi*, one would search in vain for an evocation of an historical time or place. Only the painting's tectonic layout eventually quotes the symmetrical features of a Greek temple. The long, narrow upper section of the painting, clearly defined and separated by the underlying main image, may allude to a landscape, to a sky at dawn, to a mountain range from which peaks emerge—a small, pyramidal, violet one in the foreground, a larger one, white and rounded in the back. Four primary and two secondary figures occupy the stage of an uncertain abstract drama: to the sides are two identical, perspectival primary structures in the shape of a mutilated **T** or an inverted **L**—that on the right turned 90° from the one on the left. They also bring to mind elements of furniture, a mason's square, a gallows; they frame two, also symmetrical, red-orange quasi-typographical forms, two **P**—the one on the left upside down—with their stems exaggeratedly flared and the bowls painted blue. These two alphabetical characters function here almost as theatrical characters, the protagonist and antagonist of a pictographic drama played in an arena whose plan is suggested by the icon of a double

circle, black and green, resting against the corner of the semi-**T** on the left. A primordial water in the drama may be symbolized by the goatskin shape hanging from the horizontal bar of the letter/gallows.

Scheibitz's *Delphi* is not a visual *logos* on the oracle, but a mental place; it refers to a category of the spirit. In the historical Delphi, two ritual presences were indispensable to the birth of the inner vision: the laurel tree whose leaves, moved by the breath of Apollo, uttered in earlier times the oracular response and that in a later epoch instead the Pythia chewed like a coca leaf to facilitate the prophetic Word; and the *Omphalos*, the umbilical stone that joined the incantatory power of the tantric *Om* to the sexual power of the *phallus*, generator of life.

Associating in the work's title the Delphic evocation, the name of the Austrian group *Missing Link*—Viennese architects who, in the 1970s, proposed "an architecture of silence, that rejects sensationalism"—and the missing link in a biological evolution, in any explanation of Existence, Scheibitz identifies the plurality of memories that words evoke with the multiplicity of signs that structures his work.

Modus paratacticus. The artist juxtaposes icons on the canvas like actors living a text, reciting it almost as if it were a direct emanation of their own personalities: they advance to the front of the stage or, on the contrary, place themselves in the background, but it's always the author's voice, his construction, that speaks through them. Scheibitz's perspectival inscription may invest single elements of the painting, never its entire image: in this, he has internalized the geometric allover of Mondrian. So there is no

hierarchical order among the icons of *ECLECTICA*; they are conceptually related but there is no narrative, no interaction among them. The dispersal on a pictorial plane, on a spatial/ideological field, of objects, figures, allegories, symbols belonging to a single, coherent figural microcosm yet not subordinate to any visual syntax, has a long track record in history, even if it seems to be a constitutive feature of the "*mentalité primitive.*" One can see it, for instance, in liturgical bas-relief from the Ninth century, in the basilica of Santa Prassede in Rome; in the ritual furnishings of the Temple of Solomon as represented in the Catalonian "Solsona Bible" from 1384; in the *Ichiji-Kinarin Mandala*, from the Nanboku-cho era (Fourteenth century), in the Daigo-ji temple, Kyoto; in a miniature of the pseudo-Lullian *Opera Chemica*, circa 1470; in a ritual Tibetan scroll from the Nineteenth century; in works by Cy Twombly such as *Triumph of Galatea*, 1961.

The eclecticism of *ECLECTICA* conveys not only the variety of sources of the icons that always convene in Scheibitz's work, carried by the river of signs that the imagophagous *flâneur* constantly gathers, but also their wide crossing of different times and places, finally intersecting, contaminating each other's shape and meaning on the painting's surface. Each of those forms is indeed a composite of details of many other sub-forms which, grafting onto a primary figure, render it unrecognizable, while transforming it at the same time into a further letter of a novel alphabet. As typical of Scheibitz's method, intersection and contamination are already signaled in *ECLECTICA*'s title, where the reference to past ages of philosophical and religious activity or ideas (we are still in ancient Greece) is associated with the name of a notorious high-risk hedge fund. Thinking and believing (or painting) are no less risky than investing.

As on the wall of Plato's cave, the artist projects onto the canvas his memories of history, his *Schaubild*, and translates it into a shadow theater, a *Schattenbild*—but colored by the solar brush of the mind…

The icons crowding on the eclectic stage/image define it as an infinite tale, the allegory of a semiotic and informational Babel, given the number (at first count at least twenty-five), provenance, visual weight, dimension, modalities, crossbreeding of its *Ideen* or *Gedankenformen* which range from the totally flat to the highly perspectival, from the referential to the abstract, from the geometric to dripped pigment (oil or casein).

Heart-shaped forms, broken arrows, a double peen hammer, a spiral structure, drops, a fortress' merlon, two spheroids, various polyhedrons—the whole bunch surmounted by clouds, perhaps. They are like shadows of the Platonic cave projected onto the canvas. Meanwhile, the eclectic surface unfolds into four compartments, three large ones, at left and center, which are parallel, and a fourth to the right which is diagonal, to the picture plane. It's a disjointed *théâtre célibataire* in which a *stoppage étalon* encounters the mechanism of a *broyeuse de chocolat*, in a version that has coopted the *roulette de Montecarlo* and the *Roue de bicyclette*.

From Delphi to TV: the theater of images follows the entropy of the spirit which over the centuries has seen the transition of man's self-definition (thought of as: he/she who knows how to scale the depths of his/her own inner self) from tragedy to soap opera. In *VT-Bühne*, Scheibitz extends the inscription of three-dimensional depth, sometime accorded to a few elements, to the entire space in which the objects/icons act. The

structure of a television set appears here like a stage designed according to the rules of Renaissance perspective, but it could also be a pop or soap version of the sets for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Into this hyper-perspectival space, the artist introduces a sort of Triadic Ballet whose main characters, **V** and **T**, are the very initial of the medium referenced in the title, but a role in the composition is also assumed by some of the shapes that were circulating in the eclectic cave (hearts, drops/tears, spheres, cubes). While various curvilinear, vertical, and horizontal bands or cords have the function of spatially counterbalancing the preponderance of vertical and diagonal straight lines, in this abstract theater Scheibitz introduces a further element of visual playfulness creating the illusion of depth for some icons by simply repeating them enlarged like their *Doppelgänger*.

The recurrence in Scheibitz's paintings of the same icons, though with figural variations, might imply their incremental turning into a virtual alphabet. In *Missing Link in Delphi* and *VT-Bühne*, alphabetical letters are already leading characters on a pictorial stage; in the latter picture, the letters **V** and **T** are even functioning as active subjects in a space hugely marked by perspectival depth. A further step brings the artist to *Astor*, a sculpture not unlike several other ones the artist has produced in recent years, but that tantalizingly alludes, if not exactly to a letter, at least to a hieroglyph of a language in the process of self-invention. If we didn't know that every Scheibitz icon is the product of a combinatory process, the agglutination of disparate details of variously complex forms, we might think of *Astor* as the re-figuration of a Chinese or Japanese or Korean ideogram created with stems, bowls, and crossbars of an impossible alphabet. That such sculptural para-object may further allude, in addition to being a potential character in a

latent alphabet, to a comical or dramatic character should be inferred from its title. *Astor* is a male name, possibly associated with *astore*, a type of hawk. Because of its multiple consonances, it also brings to mind the musician Astor Piazzolla, the Astor cinemas, Mary Astor—the actress in *The Maltese Falcon*—and Astor Place in New York. Scheibitz's works don't derive certainly from verbal suggestions, but with the designing of their titles he completes the process of semiotic aggregation through which they take form.

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translated from the Italian by Marguerite Shore