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PAINTING AS POSSIBILITY

"Masterplan\kino" (Masterplan\cinema), the title of Thomas Scheibitz's exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Bonn and the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, is a reference to the world of film.[1] This implicit analogy may come as a surprise, given that the artist's pictorial compositions appear to have little to do with the movies.[2] But this is only true if one reduces film to its plot. As Gilles Deleuze describes in detail in his analysis of avant-garde films of the twentieth century, however, the history of cinema has long involved more than a plot, specifically the filmic portrayal of a situation that he calls the "time-image". This form of cinematic image is abstract, since it does not contribute to the plot but, on the contrary, precedes, concludes or interrupts it. In these cinematic images, the plot of a film is temporally condensed – in terms of both narrated time, the contextual time of the film, and the viewer's here and now. The film pauses and makes room for associations and interpretations.

Deleuze inquires into the various types of "time-images" in the history of avant-garde film. In his discussion of the work of the influential Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu (1903–1963), whose films are rich in such "time-images", Deleuze points out that empty spaces, empty landscapes and still lifes are recurring motifs in his work. These motifs also play a major role in Scheibitz's oeuvre. The analogy is not solely be understood in formal terms, of course, which would then more likely be a coincidence. Rather, it is the relation between abstraction and the object, the recurrent use of subject matter drawn from everyday life and the compression of a sense of time that make cinematic "time-images" – including but not only those of Ozu – so interesting for Scheibitz's work. One of Ozu's recurring motifs is, for example, laundry hung up to dry. In the black-and-white film *The Only Son* from 1936, the vertical and horizontal rods on which the laundry has been hung up to dry combined with the mullion and transom of the cross window at the left edge of the image, as well as the surfaces of the clothes, make up a geometric composition of squares and rectangles. The different interpretations cannot be separated from one another: the viewer reads the scene as an everyday situation in the plot of the film and, simultaneously, as an abstract Constructivist composition that alludes to De Stijl. Ozu also builds a scene with laundry hung up to dry into the film *Good Morning* (1959): a red pullover that is suspended horizontally by the sleeves is a direct formal counterpart to the Y-shape of the white clothesline post in the same image. Making a sculptural abstraction of the pullover in the shape of a wooden stand is something that might also have come to pass in Scheibitz's pictorial world. In the 1953 film *Tokyo Story*, meanwhile, Ozu's cinematic gaze condenses the grids and blinds in a Japanese apartment with the objects in the fore- and background to create a two-dimensional composition in which the individual components can hardly be held apart. Here, too, one finds analogies to numerous pictorial arrangements by Scheibitz in which abstraction and the object are inextricably connected and familiar symbols and signs engender into a new pictorial language. Deleuze refers to these pure optical images in film as "opsigns". They are of two kinds, he writes: "reports [constats] and 'instats', the former giving a vision with depth, at a distance, tending towards abstraction, the other a close, flat-on vision inducing involvement."[3] Unlike photography, however, this kind of cinematic imagery never stands for itself. Even if it does not contribute to the storyline, it can only be understood within the context of the film overall. It appears only for several seconds, is generated by the film, and immediately dissolves in the succession of scenes. It is a possibility, a thought that is clearly visible for a brief moment, only to vanish again.[4]

Landscapes were the starting point of many of Scheibitz's pictorial compositions (for example, *Offene Gegend* [Open Area], 1998, p. 208) until the early years of this millennium. In these works, he was not interested in landscape as such, or even in a specific landscape, but rather in opening up a pictorial space in which individual pictorial elements interact. Even though the pictorial elements are recognisably modelled on buildings, they attempt to liberate themselves from figuration. The overall composition makes them dissolve into two-dimensionality and pushes them towards abstraction. In later groups of works, landscape disappears as a reference to pictorial three-dimensionality and is replaced, among other things, by stage-like "empty spaces". The artist often dispenses with any perspectival pictorial three-dimensionality, however, and instead lines up the pictorial elements at the bottom edge of the picture in the manner of a still life, or piles them on top of one another so that they thwart any view into the depths behind them. Scheibitz thus creates his own pictorial space and space of reference that has broken free of any spatial reality outside of the picture.

It is no accident that Scheibitz quotes René Magritte in the introductory words to this publication. Magritte's famous picture of a pipe above the words *La trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [The Treachery of Images], 1929) established the possibilities of a modern pictorial language. By this point in time, artists had been questioning the objectivity of perception and developing subjective forms of representation for several decades. But Magritte's semiotics-based picture – in which the painted object is not to be equated with the object itself but at most as a reference to it – also led to the insight that a painted object possesses its own, independent reality. If one does not see this line of thought as abstract theory but takes it by its word, the interlacing of different realities

as well as any reversals of picture and what is depicted are possible. Popular media such as advertising, comic books, animated cartoons and feature films have eagerly taken up these possibilities, with the result that we are more than familiar with these kinds of moves.

But can an imaginary and abstract form also achieve a reality that is independent from us? Constructivism is based on this idea, of course, and helped define the development of twentieth-century abstract painting. But Scheibitz goes still further. He puts the viewer, and again and again himself as well, to the test. Realities and correlations incessantly blend and reverse in his works. Is the sculpture entitled *Gitter* (which can be translated as "Grid" or "Fence", 2017, p. 88) an abstraction of the shape of a fence, or is it the abstract stripes from the painting *James Hall* (2006) that have achieved a new reality and now face us, as a sculpture, in the gallery space? Scheibitz's sculptural work is, in other words, a necessary consequence of his painting. His intense investigation of forms of appearance couldn't but lead to forms actually freeing themselves from two-dimensionality, departing from pictorial space, and bustling into real (exhibition) space. *Kanne* (Jug, 2003, p. 158) looks like a building; the piece of a puzzle in *Kapital VIII* (Capital VIII, 2017, p. 82) assumes the form of a figure. Painting and sculpture are subject to an incessant to-and-fro. But our own conventions of perception are also permanently put to the test. Does *EX* (1998, p. 198) depict a head, a mask or a building? Is this depiction the original or the model for the central, schematic form in *SSW* (2017, pp. 126/127)? A continuous "migration of form" takes place among Scheibitz's works, which, as Stephan Berg explains in this catalogue, have their origins in a wide variety of everyday subject matter. Their forms assume a separate existence, in what Scheibitz calls a constant process of "reduction, simplification, and clarification". They break away from their sources, acquire a life of their own, become sculptural and return to the pictures: a dynamic form of abstraction that continuously scrutinises itself and is thus never a result or an answer but always a question.

The migration of forms, the process of finding and transforming them, takes place not only among individual works in the artist's oeuvre but is part of the production process of each individual painting. Scheibitz takes a picture of the current state of a painting every day and combines all of the documentation into a "manipulated index". Although the foundation and composition of the paintings is recognisable from the very beginning, the individual pictorial elements change continuously. Some of the elements disappear, return in a different form or become two-dimensional only to then become three-dimensional again. And yet this search for a new, self-contained pictorial world must be understood as constructive, albeit in a different sense to the narrow one of the Constructivists in the mid-1920s. With their aesthetic systems, which were based on mathematics and architecture,

they wanted no less than to shape the whole world: the artist as creator and architect of the world. Scheibitz makes a clear reference to this approach with the integration of the primary colours of red, yellow and blue with a Mondrian-like, black border at the upper edge of the painting *Paolo entkleidet Francesca in offener Gegend* (Paolo Undresses Francesca in an Open Area, 2017, pp. 186/187), which, like a safety curtain in a theatre, reveals an unreal composition. He does not limit himself to existing geometric systems, however. His form of construction more likely corresponds with Wassily Kandinsky's conception of it. For Kandinsky, construction is the creation of a unity through the combination of individual parts, their external form and their internal necessity.[5] He does not see abstraction and figuration as opposites but as two poles between which the artist moves: "Between the realism of purely abstract and purely realistic composition lie all the possibilities of combining abstract and real elements within the one picture. (…) The combination of the abstract with the representational, the choice between the infinite number of abstract forms and those forms built out of representational material—i.e., the choice between the individual means within each sphere—is and remains entirely according to the inner wishes of the artist."[6]

In his work, Scheibitz questions the relationship of abstraction and figuration over and over again. Is, for example, the painted letter "A" abstract or representational? Letters of the alphabet are abstract signs, but Scheibitz lends them representational form by making reference to a reality outside the work of art. The artist creates his own system, made up shapes and colours, which are time and again assembled into a new pictorial world. This constructed pictorial world is simultaneously, however, the object of painterly scrutiny, which plays an essential role within it. Scheibitz responds to any developed shapes, however clearly defined they are, by filling areas of the canvas with paint in a subjective, gestural manner. Elements of a picture that are structured by a strict geometry and sharply drawn lines are countered by casual-seeming brushstrokes. Layers of overpainting reveal several possibilities of colouration. The last version of a composition that has undergone numerous intermediate stages thus appears as only one possibility of many. The presentation of his sculptures as *Schaulager* (visible storage areas)[7] also relativises the specific form one encounters. The singular, space-displacing presence of an individual sculpture is returned to a chaotic mass that creates its own space, which, like Schwitters's *Merzbau*, can continuously expand and transform itself. For Scheibitz, art is a mode of thinking in whose aesthetic thought he allows us to participate. Scheibitz's works are thus "opsigns" in the Deleuzian sense: they bring us into "direct relation with time and thought" through their capacity "to make time and thought perceptible, to make them visible and of sound".[8]

1   One also finds references to film in the catalogue title *Film, Music and Novel* (2005) or *storyboard*,
    the print of a sketchbook in the catalogue *ABC – I II III (Sculptures 1998–2003)*.
2   That is, aside from how his work could be described in contemporary colloquial German as
    ganz großes Kino: a great cinematic experience.
3   Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta
    (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 6.
4   In his film *Hana-Bi* in particular, the Japanese director Takeshi Kitano so admired by Scheibitz
    (cf. *Thomas Scheibitz in conversation with Max Dax*, in *TEXTE NOTIZEN SZENARIEN – Thomas Scheibitz*
    [Berlin: Diamondpaper Verlag, 2016]) worked with extreme shifts between rapid, brutal action and slow,
    romantic film images. By the same token, with Kitano, images of extreme brutality achieve a form of distanced
    abstraction by means of their aesthetic representation.
5   Wassily Kandinsky, *Painting as Pure Art*, in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds.,
    Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 348–54.
6   Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Question of Form*, in ibid., pp. 235–57, esp. p. 254.
7   For example, *SCHAULAGER 9.44*, Bureau Mueller, September 14, 2016–August 5, 2017.
8   Deleuze 1989 (see note 3), p. 18.