

It's always about dynamics

Prologue:

“Music is not a picture, music is thinking about pictures”, wrote Heiner Müller in *Traumtexte* (Bibliothek Suhrkamp, 2009). For the painter and sculptor Thomas Scheibitz, who lives in Berlin, music plays a central role in his art production. The references and associations from the world of music that are quoted and taken up by Thomas Scheibitz range from Heiner Müller, who worked with *Einstürzende Neubauten*, to the Melvins, and Led Zeppelin. For years now, Thomas Scheibitz and Max Dax have been engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the interrelationship of music and art — in the *Galerie der Gespräche Berlin*, in the *Me Collectors Room Berlin*, in radio broadcasts in Los Angeles, and in *Spex* magazine. This dialogue is now materializing in two large-format paintings specially painted for the *Hyper!* exhibition and a central sculpture entitled *Regieraum/Masterplan-Tisch*, which is an abstraction of a studio/work situation. On the one side is the singer or musician with their vocabulary of possibilities. On the other side is the producer at the master plan table, also known as a mixing console. The two are separated by a glass wall. With this work, Thomas Scheibitz very specifically reflects his own contribution to the *Hyper!* exhibition and his relationship with the curator.

Max Dax: Music is immediate — yet that isn't necessarily the case for art. I would like you to explain how you see it from your perspective — especially because music is such an important source of input for you.

Thomas Scheibitz: Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo that he assumes that a picture is usually only granted attention for a few moments. How long do we really consider a work of art in life, unless it is in our direct environment? The decisive factor is the amount of time spent in front of a work of art, as well as the fact that we are actually standing in front of it. In that respect, for example, pictures can be very direct. The immediacy in music is different. We've been together at the *Berghain* to see the Melvins — a nice seismic shock wave. There we stood for an entire two hours, letting ourselves be shaken by the volume.

We were invited to the concert because we had previously conducted an interview for the *Spex* with Buzz Osborne, the singer of the Melvins. You told him: “The Melvins enjoy the highest respect in the art world! The song *Shitstorm* sounds like it's being played backwards. I then asked myself: ‘What would happen if an abstract image could be played backwards? Would it then become objective again?’ Those kinds of thoughts help me to progress with my painting.” Is this a typical approach for you?

Beneficial contemplation starts at the moment when music helps one to answer the question: How understandable must art really be? Art may be expressly difficult to understand, abstract, conceptual. Music is usually not like that. Considering music — then thinking in terms of a kind of exchange of mediums — can lead to new insights. I'm also a fan of Lemmy Kilmister, who always said at every concert: “We are *Motörhead* and we play rock'n'roll!” But his audience actually consists of heavy metal fans — not rock'n'roll. That's a nice game to play with categories and expectations. My assistant recently printed out a diagram of all rock music styles and their respective exponents. Neither *Motörhead* nor the Melvins were listed in it. That somehow was a relief to me.

Both cases exist: On the one hand, there is the commercial dissolution of genres in music, where there are only a few genres left on iTunes, while in a record store like the Space Hall in Berlin almost every of the many browsable sections in the shop has its own subgenre of its own subcategory of electronic music. The Melvins were recommended to me back in the day by my professor at the Academy in Dresden, Ralf Kerbach. I instinctively liked their music right from the start, yet I wouldn't have been able to say — like a music journalist — whether they are exceptionally new compared to other bands, or which genre they should be assigned to. But they invite you on a train of thought. I also always assumed that music has the advantage that, unlike painting, you can turn it up louder. Buzz Osborne then gave this idea a new twist in our conversation, with the sentence: "It's always about dynamics." And he's right. In painting, and thus in the visual arts in general, it's always about dynamics!

In part, music and painting even have an identical vocabulary. There are terms that apply to both disciplines, where both the painter and the musician understand what is meant. Or how do you see it?

It's always about things like vocabulary, poetry, dynamics and grammar.

I notice that there are huge amplifiers and towers of speakers here in your studio — how consciously do you listen to music when you paint?

The big speakers have the power to play music with great presence, although for a while now I've been listening loud much less often. I've been more into audiobooks for quite some time, and often only play music in the studio at the beginning and the end of the day.

So particularly powerful music does not result in a particularly powerful picture?

No. Never! It's never been like that. However, I occasionally notice that my pictures and sculptures, if they are presented in conjunction with very loud music, can somehow be perceived more intensively. Then it's like being at a heightened level of euphoria. And when the music ends, the picture also goes down a bit again — as if you yourself or the pictures were under the influence.

You describe the effect of loud music like a euphoric drug experience.

Loud music is an upper, a booster drug. And that's why you mustn't allow yourself to be manipulated by loud music. Seen soberly, every picture has to work for itself autonomously and should not necessarily be enhanced by special lighting or the use of intense music.

Just now you spoke of vocabulary and grammar, as if painting was a language. In your large exhibition Masterplan\kino at the Kunstmuseum Bonn in 2018, there was a huge sculpture in the central area of the exhibition space consisting of five tables, where you exposed the source code of your vocabulary and grammar in a way much like Joseph Kosuth did in 1968 with his work Information Room, which laid out the DNA of his path into conceptual art.

In addition, a blue-and-white ballpoint pen with four different-colored ink cartridges was suspended from the ceiling above the arrangement of tables, marking the cardinal points, a kind of compass. In the Hyper! exhibition, there will be a variation of that work, Regieraum/Masterplan-Tisch [Control Room / Master Plan Table], in which I address music. On one hand, I've long maintained a large collection of shapes, prototypes, and things that I'm not actively looking for, yet find. On the other hand, I collect materials — a sort of material library containing various semi-finished products and raw materials. There is a form of grammar expres-

sed in these collections, which I process in so-called lexicon drawings. I make drawings almost every day. It's an endless series, in which things repeatedly turn up in different permutations and transformations. In turn, these are drawn compilations about topics that find their own image through my vocabulary of forms.

Drawn brainstorming?

It's more like consciously contrasting juxtapositions or exhibitions of commonalities. The common factor in these lexicon drawings is that there are always compelling, instinctive cross-connections. It's difficult to describe, but that's also the beauty of it — that it can only be described through seeing it.

Are the lexicon drawings of your vocabulary materialized in this sculpture?

I basically show the tools that I am using, which was actually very gratefully received by the viewers in Bonn as one, if not the central, work of the exhibition. For me, on the other hand — as the one who collects and uses these things and requires them as a necessity for my work — these tables are not the actual exhibit or artefact.

So is it a reflection of your relationship to music as a painter?

More so. And there is also a glass wall, like in a recording studio, which separates the specially built Regieraum from the other tables. The work is a kind of overview, which helps to make things easier to do, clearer to see, to describe everything in a more understandable way. These are the two sides of the same coin, because it's not art, by definition. Yet it wouldn't work without it.

It's your source code. And at the same time, quite nicely, it has something very clear, concrete, poetic.

It's actually like an overview situation, where one might also like to work. It is a form of idealized communication, from two sides. We could have an office together where I always sit on the right, you're always sitting on the left, and the glass is sort of a physical partition, though it allows us to see through it. With the Joseph Kosuth piece: Could people actually take and read the books and writings?

I think so. As Information Room ages, however, the work has become less accessible, because its components have meanwhile become irreplaceable.

With mine, nothing is allowed to be taken out. People are only allowed to view my masterplan table. But that's enough to comprehend it all.

Two very big paintings of yours hang around your Regieraum/Masterplan-Tisch installation. You made them especially for the exhibition.

They are both the result of an exploration of music in general. For me, everything is made up of basic forms, for which I have a certain affinity because they correspond to my point of view. Together, they comprise my world of forms. I try to present things as accurately as possible — but at the same time with the greatest generality. And the greatest generality is our collective memory. When dealing with objective things, one works on the one hand with his personal memory. On the other hand, everything could be understood through the filter of the collective memory. And depending on which context one comes from, they might consider an orange surface, for example, as a wall or as a landscape, or as a sky. These are the basic iconographic conditions when it comes to finding an image or wanting to be on the verge of an invention.

Let's zoom in on your picture compositions: Over and over again, letters appear in your pictures. And in your music pictures, also notes. The note is clearly part of the vocabulary of the music, it is not just a figurative mark, but it has a function, rhythmic as well as melodic. In the videos of the band Kraftwerk, the note repeatedly appears as an iconic reference — then the notes also dance.

I am familiar with scores and notation. There were two pianos in my parental household, and we had mountains of notes on the table. Although I can't read music myself, I always found it interesting that Bach's score looks quite different from that of Liszt or Schubert. So I have always seen notes as an appealing graphical network. On the other hand, I also wanted to have a sign for a note that is recognizable in its outlines as a note, but its function is exactly the opposite. And I found the form for the note by chance. There are notes that are stamped on ecstasy pills — and the stamp is smudged by the baking or pressing so that the note is almost reminiscent of a brutal hatchet or a small bomb. I found that interesting. I don't take ecstasy, but the aesthetics of this note-pill appealed to me. The pill was lying there, and I immediately noticed this detail that others perhaps overlooked. So that's the category on the edge of the invention. Of course, a note has something subtle, it's like a letter of an alphabet. If that kind of quotation of a note appears in a painting of mine, then it only has little to do with a note on a score sheet.

Your two new paintings that deal with the topic of the exhibition — mutual influence — in different degrees of abstraction. From the image, which can almost be described as representational, entitled Apokalypse, it goes into the abstract aspect of music. What does your Apokalypse have to do with music, and what does music refer to?

Apokalypse relates to my personal history. My first record, which was brought over to me from the so-called capitalist abroad by my grandmother, was a double album by Led Zeppelin, IV. My grandmother went to a record shop in Hamburg and asked the seller to recommend a record for her grandson. I had to look for it on the cover for a long time until I discovered the name of the band. When you open the gatefold, the viewer sees an almost apocalyptic nocturnal scene, where a guy who looks like a dwarf is holding a lamp over a valley. Viewing this cover was in some ways my first lesson in art, record covers, contemporary musical atmospheres and illustration. I translated the words later. In retrospect, when faced with this mysterious object, I became aware of how one can use things graphically to describe something, yet not to illustrate it, but to actually give it a boosting function. It was not until much later that I then dismantled the motif iconographically for myself — then soon landed with Hans Baldung Grien and with things that are pictorial translations of a concrete situation. The second album, which similarly fell into my hands years later, was Haus der Lüge by Einstürzende Neubauten — the cover with the pissing horse.

The cover with the Grien horse was designed by the Hamburg-based Fritz Brinckmann. The stream of urine looks as if the horse is pissing his brain out onto the ground.

Because the cover fascinated me so much, at some point I actually bought the woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien. And the fact that the piss looks like a brain, of course, is related to the technique of woodcutting and the question of how a woodcut can portray something that is flowing. The motif, the "wooden" flowing form, reappears as a monstrous wave in my Apokalypse painting, and originates from a Japanese woodcut about a tsunami — the Japanese version of the Apocalypse. ~