

DURS GRÜNBEIN

THOMAS SCHEIBITZ OR THE ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF PAINTING

[Please skip the glossary]

A as in ANAGRAM, AMBIVALENCE
B as in BILD *
C as in CUT-UP, CEREBRAL
D as in DIAMONDPAPER
E as in ELEMENT, ENIGMA
F as in FICTIVE FORM, FILTER
G as in GEODESY
H as in HISTORY, HEDGE
I as in I, I-DOT
J as in JOKER
K as in KORRESPONDENZEN **
L as in LIST
M as in MULTIPERSPECTIVE
N as in NEUROAESTHETICS
O as in OST-WEST, OPTOSIGN
P as in PIGMENT MARKER
Q as in QUELLCODE ***
R as in RELIEF
S as in STANDARDODOLOGY
T as in TREASURE, TOLEDO
U as in UNDERGROUND
V as in VOCABULARY, VINYL
W as in WERKSTOFFKUNDE ****
X as in X
Y as in YTONG
Z as in ZUCKERKRISTALL *****

NAMES

No one will deny that the names of painters are the first things to tell us something about their work, something indeed that goes beyond the work. The magic of painters' names: they are like a code that opens the portal to the perception of the pictures, though we know it to be meaningless for their structural aesthetics. Names are the open sesame, but the artworks themselves are reluctant to be just a sesame that can be opened. The artist's name is something that initializes his works, as it were, directs the discourse about them as if with an invisible hand and, it should not be forgotten, also determines their market value. There was a certain Bosch: the stuff of his work was visions, emerging as if from the burning bush, another such was called Arcimboldo (also Arcimbaldo), and in the Italian one could already hear the arc and audacity in the name, synonymous with virtuosity in the grotesque.

Another was called Rosso Fiorentino, a redhead from Florence, with a fondness for using a specific red tone and a strictly tectonic structure in his pictures, the sum of the narrative painting of his time, based in Biblical sources and repeated thousands of times. And a certain Cambiaso, you can already hear the change, he too a master of formal composition, amazes posterity with his late drawings, sketches in a cubist manner, with figures anticipating the robot of the future, mechanical people.

Another again was called, succinctly, "The Greek" (El Greco), on account of his origins in Crete: in the Baroque period he embodied all conceivable techniques from the icon-painting of Byzantium to the Spanish West of the world conquerors: he was one of the first to emphasize the autonomous painterliness of painting.

And so on, up to the modern age, which first liberated the paintbrush, the theme and the subject, and then finally the composition. The modern age that broke the mold and threw all the parameters of painting up into the air.

De Chirico, who sets the canvas as a dream stage, and shows the city to be a metaphysical interior. Mondrian, the builder of pure color-surfaces, sophisticated stylist, Malevich, guardian of the smallest area in the form of a square, as a Suprematist the only true Bolshevik. Matisse, casual pastry-chef creating still lifes made of colors and form at just the right temperature. Warhol, the arch American from Bohemia, who invented fame as the ultimate panacea, beyond all qualities of the picture. And then, after so many revolutions, the German representatives of a modernity after the modern: Richter, Palermo, Penck to name just three. The one a strict adjudicator of the image; the other an exorcist of the tautology of the photograph, desperado of an ad-hoc minimalism; a cool high-flier who became a myth when he died young (as it is in all genres - in literature, film, and the art of living - the heroes of the hour) and the painter from Saxony who painted images of the system, a primitive cyberneticist, hidden behind the pseudonym of an ice-age geologist.

People's names, however, are not ordinary signs, they represent some-

thing singular. They are, semiotically speaking, an index that refers directly to a specific person. They resemble the characters of a secret script that spans the entire life of the bearer and represents it in abbreviated form as a synonym.

All of this goes back to the day that Picasso decided to call himself Picasso (and no longer Ruiz, *in nomine patris*). He switches instead to his mother, defects to the women. Just imagine: the notorious magic image of modernity, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, painted by a certain Pablo Ruiz - it would not have been the same.

And now Scheibitz: a Saxon place name, you might think, in the region of the Ore Mountains, or Upper Lusatia, perhaps? But then you immediately hear the hint of the technoid in the word, the silicon disc of the digital age, data storage, and a reference to lamination, the principle of layering, of partition.

"El Greco is at the top of my list," Scheibitz once noted. The painter as time-traveller of whom it was said that he had traversed the world on a ship of ambiguity. The description fits the working method of the painter Scheibitz to a tee. In his case the names refer only to a working principle, however. In this respect, the juxtaposition with someone like Picasso is perfect.

ENCRYPTION

Thomas Scheibitz plays with the possibilities of cryptography. "Restless anagrams," states one of the rare but pivotal texts that the elusive man deliberately likes to hide on the edges of his catalogues, "that is, on the complete transfer of a certain number of elements into a new context, those elements are particularly difficult to recognize, if they in turn re-establish connections of their own." (Quotation from "Masterplan\kino"). All clear?

Let us hold onto what is happening here: the artist gives us clues that he immediately encrypts again. It must be without use but with sense. The key is thrown away, the mystery remains. This much is certain: there are no helpful instructions for deciphering a Scheibitz painting. Each of his artifacts is ideally a "one-time pad." Who but Scheibitz,

among the contemporary conjurers of the canvas would have come up with the idea of taking this term from the practice of the secret service and making it into the title, not only of one of his (most important) images, but of an entire exhibition? The one-time encryption, I learn only from him, is a symmetric encryption system for the transmission of secret messages. This fits exactly: the key to be used is the same length as the message itself and only recurs in a self-contained loop. In other words, a Scheibitz image is only decipherable within its own parameters, of limited interpretability. *Watch it and leave the room. Lock the door behind you.*

The Red Telephone, the only link between America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War between the nuclear powers, also functioned in this way, above the heads of millions of potential victims, the populations of the two highly armed enemy systems. This is where the origin of the artist (born in 1968 in eastern Germany, with a breakthrough in the late 1990s in the West) may have played a certain role. Scheibitz experienced the delineation of separate political systems, with all their projections and double vision; he leaped the gulf between them; the mirrored view of the two camps all too familiar, the drama at the boundaries. But what does this tell us in connection with the interpretation of works of art and the substance of their expression? For some museum visitors, the deliberate mystification along with the simultaneous refusal to offer any kind of narrative approach may be frustrating. One's reception is disturbed, but that is exactly what this rare bird of painting has reckoned with.

Art historians slave away at fixing the intrinsic process of the artist. They visit him in his studio and establish references. The particularly meticulous ones come across the so-called "storyboards," in which Scheibitz, as he himself describes, compiles the sources for his pictures. He professes to be a collector, gathering clues to future paintings (or sculptures). The painter in the role of secret filmmaker, set designer, as "narrator," then after all (while the narrating instance always takes care to remain reasonably elusive). The painter as creator of encrypted narratives, only interested in the "stills," at the pregnant moments of his continued exploration

that appear frozen, and that only he is able, and compelled to, arrange and give form.

Like any serious arranger, he uses his own catalogue of forms. Meticulous archival work. Sketchbooks are one thing, something quite different is the painter's box (with which he, not without reason, likes to refer to Arno Schmidt, a non-specialist odd ball who paved the way for him in literature). A systematic approach, therefore, with workbooks and albums, in which newspaper clippings, comics, advertising photos, written and pictorial found materials of all kinds are collected and evaluated. The layperson will also immediately think of Aby Warburg, and his *Mnemosyne* atlas, which broke new ground for the newer, speculative history of art. For the first time, Warburg created an intuitive (and therefore for artists eminently utilizable) path through the great mass of human works of art, by ordering them according to models of expressivity, from antiquity to modern times, under the sign of the pathos formula. Thomas Scheibitz likes to talk about his storyboards, to him they are the pattern arcs for his future pictures. The selection principle seems to be completely arbitrary, that's what matters to him. It follows the chance that provides the idiot of the present with the templates that ideally become icons. But just as in the black glued picture albums of Aby Warburg, patterns become apparent, even at first glance, – pictorial sensations of the moment that can become new models of expression, human and animal gestures, oddities, that in their own way form an echo system, a depositary of forms for our time.

The artist alone knows how this becomes an archive of sources of inspiration, across all the genres, holding the media balance of x and y. In terms of film, the material results in an auteur-film, which the artist shoots alone in his head, but which, miraculously, creates an *orbis pictus* in the eyes of many viewers, at once familiar and, at the same time, also in part unfamiliar. In the unfamiliar, in the resistance to any straightforward decoding, lies the strength of the pictorial cosmos, associated with the name Scheibitz.

This is no small feat. To be sure it results in a kind of DNA of his thinking

in pictures, but it does not yet explain the personal constellation. All that remains, therefore, is a detective's-eye-view of the process. This always means a return to talk of layering, of an accretion of the pictorial elements that appear as part of the process, and which, in longer developmental stages (the process is captured in a series of discrete photographs), give the provisional final picture, as a result of its own *quod erat demonstrandum* (what was to be proved). A work by Scheibitz is made up of many disparate elements, it has its own chemical formula, and it can take some time until the explosion of knowledge takes place in the viewer. In a similar case among poets one speaks of the *poeta doctus* (and does not know what to make of it), the counterpart in the visual arts would be the *pictor doctus*. Is Thomas Scheibitz one of these?

In any case, delay in the reception, including targeted irritation, is not the least of the artist's intentions. And another thing is characteristic of his works: they like to dwell on the genre boundaries, roam freely through the terrain of popular culture, or make the general corpus of images dance. Images from all kinds of backgrounds, comics and science magazines, fashion journals and textbooks. An image is an image; just as a literary quotation in the text is just one of many parts of the fabric. Pictures can be anything in Scheibitz, the painter's collection. Pictures turn out to be objects or vice versa, sculptures as architectural forms, letters as sculptures, reliefs as objects, and so on. There are the pictorial-sculptures and the sculptural pictures. In his work forms, signs, are always on the move, and as on every expedition there are resting places, intermediate stops. With the big climbing expeditions, as in the Himalayan mountains, everything starts from a base camp. Scheibitz too has such a base camp. One of the rooms of his studio in a former machine hall in Berlin-Tegel is a depot, where the models and large sculptures stand marvellously jumbled together waiting for the upcoming retrospective – he calls it his "show camp," which he is happy to show visitors without letting go of his scruples as regards a definitive presentation.

The fact that his works oscillate between genres, leaping from two to three-dimensions and back, or

remain in an intermediate stage like amphibians, is a matter of conscious intention. Overall a certain model-character predominates, which allows for comparison between his various works and binds them together in groups. One could also speak of modules, prefabricated functional units, capable of being applied here and there across all genres, transforming themselves into sculpture, panel-painting, drawing, or architectural models. The culmination of this development was the large multi-part sculpture *Plateau mit Halbfigur (Plateau with Half-Figure)* (2019), shown once in the boiler house of the KINDL-Centre for Contemporary Art, a provisional summation, a magnum opus.

In addition, techniques like his favored image-within-an-image-method, or the space-within-a-space principle, presented in a painting such as *Kammer (Chamber)* (2018), or citing his own forms and formulas in the changing space of the image all work towards this multi-layered, multi-polar construction of his world of expression. There is no question that, despite the autonomy of his image variables, a window on the world is opened. Scheibitz works, in his own way, on a collective memory-bank of images, using all the possibilities of figuration as well as abstraction. Recently, his repertoire has expanded once again: collages combining archival images with his own pictorial elements, collages in so-called "Painting Versions" in the manner of *trompe l'œil* painting.

All these medial transformations serve the artist above all to distance himself from his own approach. But it is not only control, the self-monitoring of his work processes at stake here – compare the strangely paranoid-critical painting *Der Verdacht (The Suspicion)* (2019), reminiscent of production design – but rather the goal seems to be making something visible from as many angles as possible.

Perception itself is constantly thematized in his work: perception as a problem. This can only be hinted at here and would be worth a separate study. It is no coincidence that names like William James and Hermann von Helmholtz number among his permanent interlocutors, both of them pioneers of psychophysics, one of them

pragmatic and speculative, the other following experimental scientific practices.

With the growing catalogue of his works, the artist has thus crystallized his own formal and pictorial language, an unusually innovative aggregate of language and image, a personal *dispositif*, as the French would say. Don't think I am being ironic. For Scheibitz is one who has so far resisted all irony, precisely because he knows about the wheeling and dealing of white-cube installers in the current scene and is under no illusions. Like any of his contemporaries, he realizes that in the end everything lands on the rubbish heap of irony.

But he works stubbornly on the opacity of his art, also in this way bearing comparison to Picasso. Not all of his works, for example, immediately find a title: some like the early reliefs have to settle for numbers, and some paintings make do with ominous letter abbreviations like *GP 140*. There are the speaking titles and the reticent ones, including the tersely comic, like *Möbel im Tal (Furniture in the Valley)* (2016). And then there are the proper names – are they idols? *Gypsy Rose Lee* (2007), for example. So, you look them up: aha, the burlesque dancer, fair enough. But who the hell is this *Hal Groves* (2012)? Those now starting their painting careers, especially abstract painters (to whom Scheibitz has never belonged), number their pictures according to traditional custom or shift to the popular "untitled" – the number you dialled cannot be reached. As soon as the project picks up steam, though, titles are necessary, otherwise it all tends to tread water.

Even Picasso had to learn this lesson: it is said that his perhaps most famous painting had no title for a long time, except for that mentioned by a neutral newspaper report, when his poet friend Paul Eluard appeared in the studio and had the idea of calling the whole thing *Guernica*.

META-PAINTING

In painting, when it comes to the science of images, there are – to put it simply – imitators (mimeticists, illusionists) and inventors (methodol-

ogists, constructivists). In this regard, Cubism, in the wake of the maverick Cézanne, drew a first clear demarcation line. In light of this, it is only logical to juxtapose a contemporary artist who obeys the dictates of autonomous image-construction, with one of the pioneers of Cubism. Picasso himself, born provocateur and enemy of all fine-talking, never spoke of construction (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler) nor of invention; he called the result of his transformations a "heap of destruction."

To be sure Thomas Scheibitz is not one of the destroyers, but he is certainly one of the inventors. This species is much rarer in the realm of painting. Scheibitz conducts basic research, he sees himself as a constructor of realities. His aim is to renegotiate the conditions for image-making. In his work he attempts to formulate a linguistics of the visual, of the figuratively tellable with one internal caveat, it must never become garrulous. In doing so, his work draws on the reservoir of all that has previously been designed and made. As a skeptic as regards method, he is fascinated by paradox: the appearance of the known running counter to the generally expected.

A picture such as *Grammatik (Grammar)* (2019) illustrates the latest results of his experiments in this field. Here, lines, color-fields, handwriting and printing, grids, geometry, and form come together to produce a constellation that comments on the act of painting itself. Or, to borrow a formula from the philosopher Hegel, that dialectically brings together the object and subject of the viewing: it comments on painting "in and of itself."

One could also say: his painting seems to be in search of valid deformations. It positions itself on the shore of art history, before the ocean of everything that has become image. I suspect that even the archives are only reference points for him, hours of partial disappointment, when the depot of traditional image sensations seems to him to be too meagre in anticipation of the next invention. Until then, he must be content to dismantle the atlas of reproductions into its composite parts. He continues to discuss the problems of traditional painting until a new combination gives him some reassurance for a few blissful and unexpected moments.

Without using the big word himself, he participates in a project that will be pursued with him and after him by many who will one day have to reorient themselves in the field of painting after the crisis of painting. Few painters operate like Scheibitz, simultaneously interested in language, thought, representation and reality, and working towards a metalinguistics of painting.

Exceptionally, the term “metalinguistics” is used here in a figurative sense. It is thanks to the gifted American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who pointed out in his uniquely restrained way: “My own studies suggest, to me, that that language, for all its kingly role, is in some sense only a superficial embroidery upon deeper processes of consciousness, which are necessary before any communication, signalling, symbolism whatsoever can occur, and which also can, at a pinch, effect communication without language and symbolism (though not true AGREEMENT) without language’s or symbolism’s aid. I mean *superficial* in the sense that, for instance, all chemical processes can be said to be superficial upon the deeper layer of physical existence, which we know variously as intra-atomic, electronic or subatomic. No one would take this statement to mean that chemistry is UNIMPORTANT. Indeed, the whole point is that the more superficial can mean the more important in a definite operational sense. It may even be in the cards that there is no such thing as LANGUAGE (with a capital L) at all!”

That images are simply chemical surfaces by dint of their production and that visual communication is only a stroke of luck brought about by the physical operations (Euclid and the consequences), and that these are rarely successful, already abstracted from the ways and means of their representation and production, seems to be the modest precondition to Thomas Scheibitz’s painterly enterprise. Understanding an image, imagery as a means of understanding, is, with all respect for the profession, rather the exception and certainly the most secretive form of biological communication.

One may therefore ask: what interests this painter at the provisional end of the history of painting? The same question could have been asked of Picasso at any time. But from him comes the response: “Talking to the Pilot is forbidden.”

CUBISM

Cubism was also an invention. Like twelve-tone technique in composition or the theory of relativity in physics. Carl Einstein, as an art theorist, also himself on the way to a kind of theory of relativity of the arts, spoke of the quality of new vision. “The artist does not wish to express himself in the given, he demands form, quite separate from the multiple interpretations of the object. One discovers that the object is a node station of functions.../...formed from a cadence of tectonic surface shapes.” This is invention not as *creatio ex nihilo*, but a complete re-establishment of visual perception, breakthrough to a new spatial image, observation that moves towards transcendence.

In the case of Cubism, the patent engineers were Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Let us remember that Cubism, as defined by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, one of his first dealers and propagandists, was: “the quest to grasp the three-dimensional diversity of the outside world in the unity of the painting.” This required the limitation of the space of the image, the translation of real bodies into basic geometric shapes (cubes, spheres, cones, cylinders), the liberation of colors from the purpose of illusionistic directed lighting, and the rhythmizing of the resulting elements of the image. The artist sets the audience the task of achieving a permanent form by presenting the volumes simultaneously.

It has been said that a cubist painting relies on descriptive titles to facilitate the viewer’s comprehension. It needs distinctive objects (bottle, guitar, tobacco pipe) just as it needs the typical object designations of the cubist still life, whoever has attached them to the painting (not infrequently the art-dealer). Hence the somewhat pedantic, almost tautological titles such as *Violine (Violin)* (1912) or *Flasche, Absinthglas, Fächer, Pfeife, Geige, Klarinette auf einem Klavier (Bottle, Absinthe Glass, Fan, Pipe, Violin, Clarinet on a Piano)* (1911/1912). The painter Magritte will later make the famous comment with his depicting of a tobacco pipe in the painting *Der Verrat der Bilder (The Betrayal of Images)* (1929): *Ceci n’est pas une pipe.* (This is not a pipe.) To the delight of

the semioticians - with their doctrine of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, according to which the signifier only maintains an arbitrary relationship with what is signified, just as the word “dog,” unfortunately, cannot bark (William James).

A visual guide can also be useful for cubist portraits: *Mann mit Hut (Man with Hat)* (1909/1910) or *Sitzende Frau mit Gitarre (Seated Woman with Guitar)* (1912). A title such as *Der Dichter (The Poet)* (1911), one of Picasso’s overwhelming large-scale formats from the so-called synthetic phase of Cubism (Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice), is a little more complex. Here the synthesis of what is depicted, as in all other cases, is steered by a lexical “preset,” the rest is done by a few concrete details that function as an incentive or eye-catcher.

Scheibitz is no different when he calls an image that clearly contains fragments from his own catalogue of forms *Splitterbild (Fragment Image)* (2019). And at times, an allusion must also suffice to initiate the process of deciphering. An example of this would be the *Selbstportrait (Self-Portrait)* of 2014, where as an abbreviation for an identity in the sense of a self, a single letter is all that is given, in this case a T, initial of the first name of the artist, who, as a skeptic himself, honors his Christian patron saint. See Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601/1603).

Thomas Scheibitz is also familiar with the ironic allusion to positions in art history. Perfect for a posthumous dialogue with the great Picasso, is a painting from 1997/1998: *Kubistische Figur (Cubist Figure)*. It shows, against a Mondrian-like background of color-fields, a structure on a high rod, in fact simply the caricature of a polyhedron, in which, with the knowledge, or half-knowledge, of the so-called *petits cubes*, one can recognize the emblem of the revolutionaries of that time.

What is offered then are analogies. And this is where the idea of the exhibition begins: the juxtaposition of a painter-thinker with the work of a canonical master of modernity. And not with the work of just any old master, but that of the undisputedly greatest, and most versatile one to date: his majesty Pablo Picasso.

Interestingly, Scheibitz, our contemporary, did not hesitate for long and bravely responded to the challenge, like someone who wants to recreate the fable of the tortoise and the hare. The arrangement of the exhibition excludes any idea of competition and directs the view instead, with utmost objectivity, to the problem of selective perception. The viewer can relax and surrender themselves to this, roaming back and forth like the reversible pictures, that are used in neurological experiments to illustrate the eye-brain paradox. Whether a rabbit or a duck becomes visible first is immaterial.

No fear: true works of art enter into relation with one another as puzzle images as if automatically, no critic will be able to disturb the true dialogue.

PS: what is accepted by art-history is, historically speaking, a special case. We know that the critical spirit of that time has been defeated along with the fighting cocks, it has definitively gone quiet and shifted instead to the appropriation of what was once unknown (even “degenerate”). In art, the processes are cyclical, unconsciously following their own tides and not the historical times. Picasso, the much-maligned, the whizz-kid, is now a deity in the art business, not only because of the proceeds that run into millions at international auctions. The Museum Berggruen collection is itself a testament to the right instinct when buying through the thick and thin of history. (The persecution of the Jewish journalist and later collector by the Nazi authorities, his exile and return can only be mentioned here.) So it is that an assiduous collector saved this item of unique cultural value from destruction during the catastrophe of the murderous 20th century.

STONEMASON

His father was a stonemason like his grandfather and great-grandfather. The Bildhauerei Scheibitz, a family business near Dresden (Radeberg), has been in existence since the 1920s. Stone tablets, small sculptures, grave monuments, sculptures of mourning: death is always good for business. The painter Erberhard Havekost (1967-2019), who died so suddenly, a Dresden friend of the painter and fellow student (under Ralf Kerbach), had also completed a

stonemason’s apprenticeship before embarking on the adventure of painting.

“During my apprenticeship, I studied the wonderful subject of material science,” says Scheibitz. This immediately foregrounds the question of craft, as in the painting of old-style advertising signs or the technical drawings in an architect’s office. In his father’s workshop, Scheibitz learned drawing as a “perspective of meaning,” the sketch of ideas as a precursor to sculpture itself. In the traditional sense of a guild (the painters’ guilds of the Renaissance and Baroque, for example) he is able to master his craft in the workshop of the stonemason. He grows up in an “environment of figures”; is confronted with questions of form from childhood on as a matter of course; learns plan-drawing, outline and cutting, encounters the rules of stonemason geometry, learns the expressive values of the different typographies. Inexplicably, he is fascinated by the aesthetic effect of stored stone formations. The fact that here, with the cemetery in mind, everything is designed “for eternity,” strictly according to the commission of the bereaved, contributes to the atmosphere of contemplation, in light of which art especially appears as an act of commemoration, of making material in the service of the dead. For all the delight in color, the dynamism, of his later works inspired by Pop Art, Constructivism, color-field painting, a certain cool seriousness remains undeniable, and reveals itself in an increased sense of the structural aspects of things and the volumes. One could speak, with a further *contradictio in adjecto*, of a cheerful melancholy in this artist’s creations. A work such as *Via Appia Antica* (2012) confirms the film of a life that takes place in its own inimitable way.

DESCRIPTION OF A PICTURE

Someone could describe his pictures in an exemplary literary manner. But how do you encounter an artist whose work is always concerned with the synoptic eye? An artist who repeatedly outmaneuvers the person attempting to describe him as a systematic tortoise and an intuitive hare. Like a stop sign, a painting such as *Auge (Eye)* (2017) signals the rules governing the right of way of visual stimuli and their interpretation. What if such a descrip-

tion were merely a re-iteration of the visible in the medium of language, as subjective as one of the ridiculous interpretations of a concrete poem? What if he still likes to walk sometimes through his studio at night and start a new piece in his bathrobe?

Translated by Karen Leeder

- * image
- ** correspondences
- *** source code
- **** material science
- ***** sugar crystal