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CONSTRUCTED WORLDS

ON THE PAINTINGS OF THOMAS SCHEIBITZ AND PABLO PICASSO

An open area. Brilliant colors. Two oblong objects push themselves into the foreground, rising into the sky like urban architecture: a tapered letter “A” and a floor lamp of sorts. A water glass with a wide lid stands on the ground. Above it, floating almost freely in the room, the leaf of a tree, two intersecting beams, a sphere, various drops, and a white zigzagging band. We are talking about *Masterplan*, a large painting by Thomas Scheibitz. Yet it remains unclear if the painting can in fact be described in this way, for the artist has manipulated the outlines of the objects, altering them in significant ways – for example, instead of a light at the top of the lamp, he has put a black square there. Greetings from Kasimir Malevich. The result is that the gaze strays away from the motifs to form. Three primary colors jostle loudly for position in the middle. The background remains restrained, milky gray. Loose hatching and oscillating lines draw attention to specific details. Yet what is all this about? The title *Masterplan* provides little insight. There is no recognizable overarching order or system. The painting, which meets us so openly, with such visual radiance, remains oddly impenetrable. What seems particularly contradictory about this “master plan” is the fact that the painting appears to be rather provisional and seemingly “incomplete” in various places. Individual brushstrokes trail off on large areas of color, suggesting a “construction site,” an open process. This combination of a high degree of perfection and a rather sketch-like, brittle aesthetic suffuses the entire painting. There is no doubt that the medium is the extremely classic one of painting on canvas. However, much of what appears here and in other paintings by Thomas Scheibitz remains demonstratively open and ambiguous, eluding every attempt to define it.

Specifically in reference to his paintings, the artist himself has spoken of a “balancing act,” of painting that can no longer be grasped using conventional terms like “abstract” and “figurative.”¹ Motifs are

introduced that no longer produce a narrative, are always both figure and form at once. Pictorial spaces suggest landscapes or interiors yet remain incomplete. Motifs abruptly end nowhere. Meanwhile, suction-like perspectives, which are produced through long vanishing lines or color gradations, break off and tip back into the surface.

There is no doubt that the two-dimensional, in particular, occupies a lot of space in Thomas Scheibitz’s mind. The artist takes many photographs and draws prolifically; as he himself reports, he likes to translate motifs or slices of reality that already exist in the mind onto the surface.² With great interest, he observes how others before him have grappled with and perhaps solved certain questions of representation. In doing so, Thomas Scheibitz has a large archive to draw on, which he already began to compile as a student. Photographs of all kinds; clippings from newspapers and advertisements; posters and stickers; unusual fonts and typography; distinctive graphs, diagrams, and logos; caricatures; prints; Old Master reproductions – for years, Thomas Scheibitz has been collecting almost everything. In a fascinating way, he is interested in the concentrated visual power of depictions and forms of all kinds. He has collected and even catalogued – according to motifs or issues in painting – much of this material in binders. In many places, his studio is downright overflowing with these fragments of form and reality, which lie directly in front of the paintings or on the tables, half worked on, cut out, or painted over. It is details above all that fascinate Thomas Scheibitz and that make him decide to hold on to a given find; it might be a line, gesture, or graphic “jag” just as much as the color pattern of a logo or the arrangement of folds in a Grünewald or Dürer. Often, certain elements in these images are marked with a marker or Sharpie before they stray into his own work. In the end, the wide variety of originals remains very palpable in Scheibitz’s paintings, whose openness and ambiguity feeds on precisely the disparate materials he uses. And it is here, entirely at the compositional level, which for Scheibitz is rooted so heavily in contradictions, in combining completely different viewpoints and drawing styles, that one inevitably thinks of the great artist who himself stands so much for pluralism, for variations, and to whom in many respects we owe a new definition of painting: Pablo Picasso.

Of course, Thomas Scheibitz and Pablo Picasso intersect from a great distance. The myth of Picasso, his eminent role in 20th-century art, his many-layered life story, in which his work is so deeply embedded to this day – all of this remains unique. Yet, if one looks past biography and mystique to Picasso’s actual works, to his conceptions of painting, it becomes clear how strong the parallels are between the two artists.³ Picasso and Scheibitz share a very similar approach, including, for example, their passionate fight for the relevance of painting and sculpture, whose basic forms both artists do not want to abolish or abandon but rather to continue to develop within their own limits. Picasso, who succeeded early on in fundamentally innovating painting through montage and collage, never expressed the desire – despite all his experimentation – to truly break out of the framework of painting. On the contrary, Picasso’s artistic work, from the Cubist studies in the early 20th century to his late work in the late 1960s, is deeply characterized by the attempt to revolutionize painting within strict rules. Meanwhile, it is precisely within painting, the oldest artistic medium, which was repeatedly declared dead and irrelevant in the 20th century, that Scheibitz has succeeded in opening up new and very contemporary perspectives with his own, also very vibrant oeuvre, which now encompasses two decades’ worth of work. Doubts about the utility of painting are intrinsic to these paintings and are emphatically evoked through hard ruptures and changes of course within these images.

Thomas Scheibitz, like many painters, is a sharp observer. For him, as for Picasso, it is not a question of emotional or visionary exaggeration, but of translating real, visual manifestations. He operates a great deal with signs, with semi-abstract allusions, in order to invoke figures, objects, or scenes while at the same time keeping them open to interpretation. As a result, what he shares with Picasso above all is a similar approach – namely, the constant exploration of the question of what is generally possible or achievable with painting or sculpture. How can new pictorial solutions, new perspectives, new viewpoints be realized? How can paintings and sculptures emerge that show something, yet still elude clear definition? How can the limits of these paintings be expanded, new representations be achieved? In the process, similarly to

Picasso, Thomas Scheibitz always works with a rather limited circle of themes, which he continues constantly to develop and vary.⁴

CUBISM

The Cubist phase, in particular, is seminal to Thomas Scheibitz, as this exhibition shows. Scheibitz first came into contact with Picasso's art during his school years in Radeberg (near Dresden); at the time, it was above all the political motifs: the dove of peace, the 20th-century masterpiece *Guernica*, the Korean massacre painting. Later, as an art student at the academy, Scheibitz was able to expand his view of Picasso, thanks also in particular to repeated visits to museums both in Germany and abroad. Today, not only does Thomas Scheibitz himself own four very different graphic prints by Picasso but he has also made various studies that refer directly to motifs or paintings by him. To produce them, Scheibitz likes to start from media translations. For example, when he happened on a photo of a political mural in Madrid, which was composed of motifs and forms from *Guernica*, he used it as a starting point for a graphically free paraphrasing that internalizes both – Picasso's vocabulary as well as the gesture of an anonymous mural artist.

Meanwhile, Cubism, as developed by Picasso and his contemporaries in the early 20th century, is exceptionally important to Scheibitz precisely because it achieved a new definition of painting, which remains productive and viable to this day. Rather than continuing to conceive of painting as an illusionistic view through a window, the Cubists demonstratively employed the canvas as a surface on which reality can be represented in a very different way. In the Cubist painting, motifs, things, and life-worlds continue to appear only as fragmented entities circumscribed in multiple perspective, ones that can only be read and assembled into complete images individually, by the respective viewer. In a very productive way, Thomas Scheibitz builds on this, to-this-day radical notion of painting as translation, as construction of reality.

It is thus worth taking a look back, for example, at the eventful years of 1911 and 1912, during which Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque set out together

on the path from descriptive painting to montage and collage, reversing the disassembling, dissecting principle of "analytic" Cubism to turn it into assemblage. Picasso's large 1912 sheet *Violin* (from the Museum Berggruen collection) is situated at precisely this threshold. It is part of a long series of monochrome studies with which Picasso had already distanced himself considerably from the notion of a painting as a comprehensive representation, aspiring instead to a simultaneity of various viewpoints. On the sheet from 1912, the violin invoked in the title is presented only in depictive fragments; the abstraction is already very advanced. Towering, lighter and darker rectangular fields float side-by-side on the page, unconnected, just barely constituting a body of sorts in the middle. What finally reveals the violin is a series of signs like rounded contours, discrete hatching suggestive of three-dimensionality, a spiral, and above all two sound holes. This violin is one that has to be reconstructed more than "seen" in the image.

Picasso and Braque soon viewed the abbreviations and signs they created as immutable elements in their own right, which could be used now to construct images of their own. *Glass and Dice* (also from the Museum Berggruen collection) presents a very purist form of this montage principle. Newspaper and dotted paper are pasted onto the painting, generating – through forms that are flat yet also rendered three-dimensionally through hatching – a sort of double "shadow" of the water glass suggested further down in the image.⁵ A propos of this painting, Werner Haftmann wrote, "form is no longer [. . . achieved] through the disassembly of things; form is, and, with it, through construction and synthesis, the image is realized."⁶ With this focus on "being form," Picasso and Braque moved definitively away from the illusionistic idea of painting. Description was now replaced by the invention and "construction" of images. Cutouts from newspapers, wallpaper, letters, and scores evoke, in a shorthand way, contexts that go far beyond the painted forms and motifs, that make the image seem like a conceptual painting. This was followed by three-dimensional montages like the famous guitar sculptures made of paper, which Picasso and Braque now explicitly called "constructions."⁷ Photos show how these works achieved particular spatial effects or hung closely side-by-side on large walls, like architectural studies or

blueprints. Picasso coined the nickname "Wilbur Wright" for these constructions because the "scaffolding-like nature" of these paper sculptures, as he himself explained, reminded him of aviation pioneer Wilbur Wright's double-decker, which seemed just as assembled, just as constructed, to him.⁸ Artists as design engineers – in those years, Picasso and Braque were so steeped in this idea that ultimately even their clothing became an expression of their new artistic attitude. As contemporary witnesses report, Picasso and Braque demonstratively wore blue overalls⁹ in the studio, thereby underscoring their aspiration no longer to depict the world with paint but to assemble it, construct it.

In a comparable sense, Thomas Scheibitz can also be understood as a "design engineer." In his case, too, one can identify an external biographical context. For, as it happens, Scheibitz's current Berlin studio is located in an extensive old industrial building, rather similar in character to an "assembly shop." It is important to mention here that Thomas Scheibitz, in addition to the already mentioned archive of image forms and motifs, also maintains an equally vast archive of objects. This archive is organized according to material and form – that is, according to objects of interest to the artist because of their material or particular shape. Glasses, bottles, cans, cardboard rolls, metal brackets, pieces of plastic, packaging remains, and plastic foam, painted and unpainted, amorphous and geometric – Thomas Scheibitz likes to collect these items on tables, which, ever since his exhibition *One Time Pad* (MMK, Frankfurt), also regularly become part of his exhibitions, occasionally also appearing in the form of "display warehouses." Archive, display warehouse, store – Thomas Scheibitz's paintings are based precisely on these assortments of reality. Despite the fact that a long developmental process of sketching and producing studies precedes many of his paintings, the montage principle is preserved in the final images. Motifs, forms, and colors do not merge, but rather are brought together like set pieces. Unlike in Picasso's case, Scheibitz's "constructions" are not the result of direct observation, based on observational drawings of instruments or interior scenes. Rather, in his work, reality always appears filtered repeatedly, in the translation of previously found representations, which the artist takes up again and adapts to

his respective pictorial needs. This last transformational step, in particular, is decisive. For Thomas Scheibitz, it is not a question of direct, obvious quotation, as it is, for example, for the artists of Pop Art or the entire post-modern generation, in order to emphasize the effect and process of advertising and mass media. In Scheibitz's paintings, only fragments are preserved, debris of whatever he takes up – which also readily includes certain ways of drawing and styles. As a result, one can only rarely trace pictorial elements in his work back to concrete originals. And yet, one can speak of a high “reality content” in his images. What anchors these paintings so powerfully in the present is above all the technical, neon-like colors, rapid changes of course, and unconventional combination of legibility and exaggeration, directness and encryption.

Festival, a sort of “celebration” of signs, shows to just what extent Thomas Scheibitz has radicalized the idea of Cubism in the process. A heart shape, die, various drops, an architectural arch, and a fan of sorts – in this painting, everything appears side-by-side and overlapping, like in the logic of a collage: collected on a surface without connection or comment, merely transposed to the pictorial. The image can be understood as a clever construction of allusions and references, which are now evoked, now dissolved again. The elongated rectangles might call to mind towers, for example, even a cityscape, yet these readings are quickly thwarted in the painting, where they literally dissolve into nothing on the monochrome base. Once again, everything is rendered in an emphatically two-dimensional way. The canvas no longer functions as a painting, but rather as a sort of store, in which the selected fragments of reality seem to be reshuffled constantly under the strict watch of the artist. And yet Scheibitz very deliberately allows for a certain disorder, a certain anarchy, for which he himself once coined the lovely term “unswept room.”¹⁰ This conception of images as “unswept rooms” or as mirrors of our thoughts is in keeping with what Leo Steinberg wrote about collage in the 1960s, referring to it as a “flatbed picture plane,” a pure surface on which every sort of information – regardless of type or where it was from – could come together. Steinberg no longer saw the painted surface as an analogy of the visual experience of nature but rather as a translation of “operative processes.”¹¹

Perhaps it is precisely this that makes Thomas Scheibitz's paintings seem so contemporary: They reflect a contemporary perceptual process. The vast range of visual propositions in our materially and digitally overloaded industrial societies has drastically increased the speed and volume of information that we are used to dealing with in our everyday lives. The permanent presence of digital media has downright conditioned us to perceive many things simultaneously. In this sense, Thomas Scheibitz's paintings can be understood as flash-like snapshots or as the exposed memory of a computer, on which very specific information and data may just have been called up but can no longer be synthesized into larger stories or images. Individual themes, references, and preferences flare up, are to some extent visible on the surface of the image. Yet individual users are needed to make sense of or to find connections between them. In very recent works, which, by no coincidence, were created in the context of this exhibition, the principle of openness, of explicit heterogeneity has become even more pronounced. In these works, the artist starts from photomontages: Instead of uniformly priming the canvas, Scheibitz has printed various photographic motifs directly onto it, which are then reworked with paint in the next step. Everything overlaps with everything else here, ultimately resulting in complex feedback effects that can no longer be resolved or interpreted: a sort of final stage of painting.

LEXICON AND ALPHABET

Back to Picasso. In the course of the 20th century, there were numerous reflections about the degree to which historical Cubist art is based on a language of signs, from early observations by contemporary witnesses all the way to highly complex semiotic studies such as those of Rosalind Krauss.¹² Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was one of the first to speak of this art as a form of writing. He wrote that the Cubist painters' achievement was to “invent *signs* that, without imitating the object, allow the viewer to see it. The Cubists thus recognized the true meaning of fine art: it is a *form of writing* that is read.”¹³ The “spelling” of this painted writing, which is complicated increasingly by the fragmented motifs, achieves a particular doubling in Cubism through the letters, in their original font, that Picasso and Braque inserted – actu-

ally or as drawings – into their works. As fixed “icons” letters are *per se* unalterable signs and formally confirm the two-dimensionality of the image, similar to lines or hatching. Chains of letters – like “CORT” in the large *Still-Life on a Piano* (Museum Berggruen collection) – verge on terms, words, yet at the same time refer to a reality outside the image (in this case, the pianist Alfred Cortot).¹⁴ Yet Picasso and Braque deliberately avoid direct citation. Their letters remain, as in the case of “CORT,” fragmentary; in their abbreviated form, they no longer make sense, seem emphatically incomprehensible and “foreign.”¹⁵

It is precisely this that Thomas Scheibitz builds on. Obviously, writing and language also play a significant role in his work. What interests the artist about language is both its content and form. A small volume of material, which he himself published, shows, on the one hand, to what degree terms and designations become part of the artwork;¹⁶ on the other, there are the letters themselves: for example, the towering “A” appears not only in *Masterplan*, but in many other works as well. In the 2015 drawing *Lexikon (Lexicon)* (2015), a large “A” and an upside-down number “1” appear in the context of other, very different emblems and abbreviations, which are rendered sometimes architecturally, sometimes sculpturally, sometimes as two-dimensional signets, and sometimes as pure studies of form. The way in which they come together shows how closely intertwined textual and visual language are, to what extent the artist is also exploring here how references to reality are either produced or lost, depending on how highly condensed or overlaid with drawings the signs are. This testing out of linguistic images becomes even more apparent in a rather playfully rendered series by the artist on the 26 letters of the alphabet. Each image is dedicated to a single letter. Scheibitz uses unconventional fonts encountered in the current daily maelstrom of media and product advertising as starting points for two or three-dimensional constructions, into which he integrates the respective letter, thereby altering it. An emerging “A” seems to turn into the Eiffel Tower; an “S” becomes a broad question mark that is harnessed to a pictorial narrative through cloudlike hatching. What makes these small studies so appealing is observing precisely this shift from the original sign to the point at which, in dialogue with other forms, a new reality or picto-

rial quality emerges.¹⁷ The artist speaks of “elementary signs”¹⁸ (and, on another occasion, of “prototypes”), which can be reused in other works, like the symbols of an alphabet. Here, too, like in Cubism, the fragmentary plays a special role, as Thomas Scheibitz explains in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist: “The way we deal with writing today means that it can be pushed to the very brink, that something can be recognized as a logo or that altogether things are almost being used in a sculptural way again. If I take something and transform or decode it and use it in a different way, that is almost a sculptural process, and as a sign the writing or script is of course... How should I put it? It’s a quasi-reinvention of script in a distinct extra form.”¹⁹

In the exhibition, these lexicon-like “elementary signs” are displayed together with a remarkable sheet of drawings by Picasso. This superb early sheet from his student days in Barcelona shows just how preoccupied Picasso also was with the shape of signs and their legibility early on in his career. In keeping with those times, the focus was on representing figures, on details of the body like hands, heads, and faces, or on facial expressions and gestures. The sheet, densely covered with sketches, shows, among other things, a tin-soldier-like figure, cartoonish monkey faces, and various views of a clown. Faces and figures are overdrawn, depicted as caricatures, reminiscent of representations in popular magazines or picture books. The graphic intensification apparent here already heralds the enormous creative drive that would make Picasso so famous later on. At the same time, the sheet of sketches also represents an arsenal of forms he would be able to use later in larger compositions and paintings.

What such graphic intensifications lead to in Thomas Scheibitz’s case is apparent in the work *Möbel im Tal* (*Furniture in the Valley*), which, like a lenticular image, offers completely different readings. A very flatly rendered letter “K” has become a rough rectangular block here that visually dominates the image. Next to it, one can see a segment of a disk, which also seems solid – like a broken-off piece from a quarry. This reference to nature and landscape is reinforced by the view of a tree, which is clearly recognizable in the background, as well as by the descriptive title *Furniture in the Valley*. Yet, lower down in the painting, large objects balance, free floating, on a sphere, which in turn lies on

a green shelf, a narrow windowsill of sorts. Where is the furniture and what exactly is the valley that is mentioned? This makes us wonder if the image might not also be understood as an interior, with a view of a park or garden landscape. These questions expand even further when one compares the image with the paintings by Giorgio de Chirico that originally inspired Scheibitz’s work on this theme – namely, the eponymous works by the great Italian painter from the late 1920s and early 1930s, which actually do show sections of furnished rooms or freestanding objects in a landscape. Of course, Scheibitz has moved away significantly from de Chirico’s realistic depictions, which were often painted with extremely powerful depth and, for that very reason, have such a grotesque, surreal quality. Thomas Scheibitz has transposed the symbolically charged scenery, in which pieces of furniture stand around in the landscape like hikers, into an open field of signs and forms, which it is no longer possible to grasp representationally.

From letter to sign, from landscape to open stages – this process of abstraction is yet again very similar to Picasso’s approach, as the small, powerful work *Piano (I)*, for example, demonstrates. Here, too, the abstraction is based on a realistic scene: playing the piano. Gray, green, white, and orange surfaces that correspond to the spatial dimensions of a piano have detached significantly from the object and now float through the image as autonomous entities. In the resulting play of shapes, they form their own themes, which in the end we can barely still associate with a piano. The painted doubling of the frame using bands of color that run parallel to the edges of the painting can similarly be found in Thomas Scheibitz’s work. It is important to both artists to present painting entirely as painting, to emphasize always just how constructed their paintings are. At the same time, these painted translations serve as visual clarifications. In his free arrangement of surfaces, Picasso reveals his curiosity about how a spatially complex structure can be folded with such virtuosity into the surface. This searching, analytic streak is also characteristic of Scheibitz. In *Furniture in the Valley*, the schematic foreshortening and simplified stage-like space also serves to clarify – how the letter and disk interrelate in the environment, for example, but also yet again to what extent a letter can just barely still be read as a letter. The author Anna Catherina

Gebbers, who is very familiar with the artist’s work, writes that Scheibitz’s painting is also always about understanding, “about a shift in perception of the world that surrounds us through our interaction with it. [. . .] In the transfer, a new world emerges with its own existence, which can be understood on its own terms and can stand on its own.”²⁰ Painting as an emphatically constructed world that allows one to reflect on and better and “more clearly” understand one’s own existence – the knowledge to be gained from this kind of painting is something that both artists believe in: Picasso and Scheibitz.

TEST SERIES

Cubism’s fragmented worldview has been associated with Einstein’s theory of relativity, the invention of X-rays, as well as with human introspection and psychoanalysis.²¹ Historically, the shift away from a uniform, closed likeness to a multi-perspectival, multiple image was seen as a major turning point. People spoke of a disintegrating world that had become its own problem. Over a century later, this view of things hasn’t changed; it has only intensified. Radio waves and radiation, diversity and complexity, and human screening methods (both technological and psychological) have increased along with doubts about the reliability of images. In the digital age especially, images are viewed increasingly with skepticism, and there is much more emphasis on asking where certain views come from and how they are created than on the question of what exactly is depicted. In the age of virtual worlds, “analysis” and “deconstruction” – both key issues in Cubism – are more salient and necessary than ever. What is true, what is credible, what has been manipulated, augmented, or simulated? Only the dissection and questioning of digital images leads to potential evidence of originals, to reliable sources that we can maybe trust. To process and examine digital images, they are often zoomed into, dissected, copied, or transferred to other media – all familiar techniques of Cubism. Added to this today is an extreme excess of the material – not just as part of affluent society, but also in the form of a deluge of images that are available anywhere, anytime. “The world going off the rails – that is the subject of art,” wrote Bert Brecht in 1940 after the experience of war, coining a catchphrase. Since then, the segmentation and dissection of the visual has only increased, becoming the basis of

every Google search, database, and photo zoom. The disparate, the unmanageable, is perhaps the most distinctive and characteristic creative principle of the present.

This situation creates particular challenges for a contemporary painter. How can one react artistically to this exploding world of the visual? How can one capture a disparate reality in images? Already in the mid-20th century the attempt to bundle the striving, the complexity of modern life within highly compressed “masterpieces” was abandoned irredeemably.²² In the 1960s, industrial thinking gave rise to the idea of “serial art” or output no longer executed by one’s own hand but by assistants or altogether different players. In reaction to the instability of the visual in the present, Thomas Scheibitz, who does not want to abandon a subjective view, has chosen the path of variation. Fundamentally, his art is only comprehensible and coherent in the interplay of several pieces simultaneously. Almost nothing that preoccupies Thomas Scheibitz is expressed only once in his work. Rather, in a whole series of works – which he sometimes starts or completes at the same time, consecutively, or several years apart – the artist tests out new constellations of themes and subjects again and again.

One can certainly speak of pictorial test series. In large works on paper, which are on view in the exhibition, the artist has, for example, gone through every creative declension of a series of abstracted signs. In constantly new constellations, he juxtaposes amorphous and geometric signs on monochrome surfaces. At a far remove from recognizable realities, they float through the pictorial space like meteorites. In the painting *Figur (Figure)*, similar objects rise up from a solid foundation, the towering silhouettes here suggesting a group of figures. Meanwhile, the final room of the exhibition, which is the most explicitly dedicated to the theme of variation, includes further such spatial or graphic signs – energetically charged here with intense colors and each harnessed to boxy, stage-like spaces from which there is seemingly no escape. René Zechlin has spoken of a “migration of forms” in Thomas Scheibitz’s work: “In a perpetual process of abbreviation, simplification, and clarification, the forms become independent, detach themselves from the originals, take on a life of their own, become sculptural, and return to the images.”²³ This migration of forms can be seen throughout all of Thomas Scheibitz’s oeuvre, in particular in

the many sketches and sketchbooks that he produces parallel to every painting and gouache. It is here that we come full circle to the artist’s aforementioned archives and display warehouses: They, too, are part of a studio with an almost scientific approach, a sort of “laboratory” in which new forms of representation are tested constantly and in a vast variety of ways. Scheibitz’s entire output from the early 1990s to today can essentially be seen as an ongoing research project that aims to find descriptions of the visible world that are particularly viable and relevant to our era. Scheibitz undertakes this quest with his eyes wide open and mind on high alert – which is also what makes it so gripping and truly relevant to current events today: because it is aimed very deliberately at asking questions. The artist is not particularly interested in solutions; for him, they only lead to new questions.

The best example: *Guernica*. Thomas Scheibitz is extremely fascinated by the various phases that this 20th-century masterpiece went through, which were recorded in now-legendary photographs by Dora Maar, Picasso’s partner at the time. For years, these *Guernica* photos have been on display across from the final painting at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid. They not only illustrate Picasso’s long creative journey, how he transformed an originally exterior scene into an interior one, or how a sun in the first version became a glowing light bulb in a rather cramped interior; above all, the photos show that earlier stages of the painting would also have been “plausible” and viable, and to just what extent Picasso did not try to perfect a single pictorial idea but rather explored fundamental questions with each new variation. Numerous authors have pointed out the radical reversals and new interpretations that resulted from each switching of motifs in the *Guernica* process.²⁴ Here, painting no longer manifests as a purely artisanal process but rather as an extremely conceptual discipline, in which every decision seriously affects the interpretation of the events.

This principle of openness, variation, constant transformation characterized Picasso’s work in the period after *Guernica* and is a hallmark of all his later work.²⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, at the advanced age of his 70s and 80s, Picasso – starting from a small circle of motifs including portrait, painter and model, nudes, and Old Master themes – began to run through countless possibilities, both in paintings and

drawings. What resulted were constantly new paraphrases of the same scenes, some sketch-like, some fully formulated as paintings, frequently impressively dissimilar in terms of their formal solutions. In the Museum Berggruen, this thinking in terms of variations is especially apparent in the various portraits of Dora Maar, painted around the time of *Guernica*, which are sometimes only titled *Woman in an Armchair*. The pictorial parameters change considerably from one image to the next: the paraphrasing, poses and positions, as well as line, color scheme, and degree of abstraction.

Regarding the somewhat later *Sylvette* series from the 1950s, Christoph Grunenberg wrote: “With his method of ‘calculated improvisation,’ Picasso demonstrates [. . .] that he can basically do everything: Cubist and classical, representational and abstract, painterly and graphic, expressive and subtly detached – and every possible combination thereof.”²⁶ This pluralism was poorly understood in postwar Europe, which was plagued by existential hardship and suffering and was very much under the influence of French existentialism. Picasso’s late work from the 1950s and 1960s was frequently dismissed as weak and insignificant. There was talk of the artist experiencing a “creative crisis.”²⁷ This might look different seen from today’s perspective. For it is possible to discern a very contemporary attitude in this vital searching energy and in the fundamental attitude of seeing images as provisional solutions, temporary. Werner Spies, one of the leading authorities on Picasso, repeatedly identified precisely this quality in the artist’s output: “Picasso’s work is in a constant state of progression. Every form rebels against the previous one. Picasso defies definition. His work is flexible, it is ‘open’ work.”²⁸ Regarding Picasso’s very wide-ranging and multifaceted late work, Spies once again speaks of “test series”: “In them, he outlines a natural history of his own – form history. Nothing revolves around the totality of visual facts, around a preferably complete making-visible of bodies and objects anymore. [. . .] The notion of a definitive – and thus also assessable in terms of its content – solution is abandoned.”

“Constant progression” or the absence of anything fixed – this also very much applies to the work of Thomas Scheibitz. Motifs, signs, forms, color schemes, and ways of depicting not only meander from painting to painting but are also constant-

ly being recombined pictorially according to a collage-like compositional principle. In this way, similarly to late Picasso, Scheibitz refuses to adhere to just one style, way of painting, or series of motifs in favor of exploring the full spectrum of painting itself. Working and thinking in variations protects against concluding anything definitively. By being reused in the next piece, each depiction is immediately taken up again. In this way, each work in a series also inherently contains its own repudiation. And so the monumental, mysterious *Portrait Y.S.E.* (*Portrait Y.S.E.*), in the penultimate room of the exhibition, is no longer a portrait but merely invokes possible facets of a personality. Empty spaces in the image emphasize the fragmentary nature of the description; they represent a temporary attitude. At any moment, the painting could also turn out differently. On the opposite wall in the same room hangs Picasso's large *Version L* from the famous "Women of Algiers" series²⁹ – another painting with radical abstractions and daring empty spaces that attests to courage and tremendous freedom. Yet, while in Picasso the transience of painting is still explained entirely by the creative act, by rapid improvisation, in Thomas Scheibitz's work a self-assured calm and precision reign. The open and no-longer-legible have become givens. Apparently, we already feel very much at home in the world of uncertainties.

- 1 Conversation with the artist. See also texts by the artist, including "Farbe, Licht und Schatten" ("Between the traditional division into abstract or representational, I move on 'both' sides. . .") in Thomas Scheibitz, *Texte, Notizen, Szenarien* (Berlin: Diamondpaper Verlag in collaboration with Santa Lucia Galerie, 2016), 31, or the essay by Stephan Berg, "Der Blade Runner," in *Thomas Scheibitz. Masterplan\kino*, exhibition catalogue Kunstmuseum Bonn/Wilhelm-Hack-Museum Ludwigshafen 2018 (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018), 37–43.
- 2 Conversation with the author, November 2018.
- 3 See also the text by Dirk Luckow, "Picasso. Eine Jahrhundert-Rezeption," in *Picasso in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, ed., Dirk Luckow, exhibition catalogue Deichtorhallen

- Hamburg 2015 (Cologne: Snoeck, 2015), 24 (in particular).
- 4 Regarding Thomas Scheibitz, Stephan Berg speaks of a "reservoir of plastically or pictorially worked forms, which like actors of themselves are gathered and constantly rearranged on the three and two-dimensional stages of this work," in Berg, "Der Blade Runner," 38.
- 5 See Angela Schneider, "Glas und Würfel," in *Picasso und seine Zeit. Museum Berggruen*, exhibition catalogue Nationalgalerie Berlin 1996 (Berlin: Nicolai, 1996/2013), 80.
- 6 Werner Haftmann quoted in Cornelia Plieger, "Picasso und das Figurenbild im Kubismus," in *Picasso, Figur und Porträt: Hauptwerke aus der Sammlung Bernard Picasso*, ed., Evelyn Benesch, Kunsthalle Tübingen (Neu-Isenburg: Edition Minerva, 2000), 15. Quote translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 7 See William Rubin, *Picasso und Braque. Die Geburt des Kubismus* (Munich: Prestel, 1990), 26–28 and 370–384, and also Brigitte Léal, Christian Briend, and Ariane Coulondre, eds., *Kosmos Kubismus. Von Picasso bis Léger*, exhibition catalogue Kunstmuseum Basel 2019 (Munich: Hirmer, 2019).
- 8 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 9 See the chapter "Sorgues 1912" in the brilliant biography of Picasso by John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso Volume II: 1907–1917: The Painter of Modern Life: 1907–17* (London: Pimlico, 1997/2009), 235–258.
- 10 A Thomas Scheibitz exhibition in Innsbruck in 2010 was titled *Der ungefegte Raum (The Unswept Room)*. The term is derived from an antique mosaic entitled *Der ungefegte Boden (The Unswept Floor)*. See Beate Ermacora, "Der ungefegte Raum," in *Thomas Scheibitz. Der ungefegte Raum*, exhibition catalogue Galerie im Taxispalais Innsbruck 2010 (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 6. The term "unswept room" also appears in a drawing reproduced in Scheibitz, *Texte, Notizen, Szenarien*, 2.
- 11 Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria. Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 61–98.
- 12 For summaries of the extensive literature on Cubism see Lynn Zevelansky, ed., *Picasso and Braque. A Symposium* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992); Brigitte

- Léal, Christian Briend, and Ariane Coulondre, eds., *Le Cubisme*, exhibition catalogue Centre Pompidou Paris 2018 (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2018); Brigitte Léal, ed., *Dictionnaire du Cubisme* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Robert Laffont, 2018); Léal et al., *Kosmos Kubismus*, 298–304. Also see Susan Greenberg Fisher, *Picasso and the Allure of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 13 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Nachwort 1970," in *Der Gegenstand der Ästhetik* (Munich: Heinz Moos Verlag, 1971), 75.
- 14 See Léal et al., *Kosmos Kubismus*, 64.
- 15 Palau i Fabres in particular emphasized that alienation, or "being foreign," is a significant element in Picasso's art – and in modern art as a whole. See Schneider on *Violine* in "Glas und Würfel," 76.
- 16 Scheibitz, "Farbe, Licht und Schatten."
- 17 "In this way, the artist creates his own system of forms and colors, which are reassembled again and again into new pictorial worlds." René Zechlin, "Malerei als Möglichkeit," in *Thomas Scheibitz. Masterplan\kino*, 228. Quote translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 18 Thomas Scheibitz, "Tisch Ozean und Beispiel," in Scheibitz, *Texte, Notizen, Szenarien*, 45.
- 19 Thomas Scheibitz in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist: "Conversation," in *Thomas Scheibitz, about 90 elements/Tod im Dschungel*, exhibition catalogue Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin 2007 (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2007), 125–127.
- 20 Anna-Catharina Gebbers, "Headbanging," in Anna-Catharina Gebbers, ed., *Thomas Scheibitz. ABC–IIIIII. Skulpturen 1998–2003* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 118. Quote translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 21 William Rubin writes that we might possibly even owe the division into "analytical" and "synthetic" Cubism to Albert Einstein. See Rubin, *Picasso und Braque*, 50, Note 23. On the general historical classification of Cubism, see, for example, Joachim Büchner, ed., *Kubismus. Kunstrevolution, 1907–1914. Picasso, Gris, Léger und ihr Einfluss auf die europäische Kunst* (Düsseldorf: Schloß

- Jägerhof, 1972); Siegfried Gohr, ed., *Kubismus, Künstler, Themen, Werke. 1907–1920* (Cologne: Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, 1982); or Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
- 22 See Hans Belting, *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk. Die modernen Mythen der Kunst* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1998).
- 23 Zechlin, “Malerei als Möglichkeit,” 227. Quote translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 24 See the detailed account by Werner Spies, “Guernica und die Weltausstellung Paris 1937,” in Werner Spies, *Kontinent Picasso* (Munich: Prestel, 2003), 54–83.
- 25 See *Picasso: Die Zeit nach Guernica 1937–1973*, exhibition catalogue Nationalgalerie Berlin/Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung München/Hamburger Kunsthalle 1992/93 (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1993).
- 26 Christoph Grunenberg, quoted in *Sylvette Sylvette Sylvette. Picasso und das Modell*, eds. Christoph Grunenberg and Astrid Becker, exhibition catalogue Kunsthalle Bremen 2014 (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 29. Quote translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 30; or John Berger, *Glanz und Elend des Malers Pablo Picasso* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1973). See also the brilliant text by Armin Zweite, “Die Permanenz der Gegenwart. Picasso und seine Buchgrafik,” in *Picasso Künstlerbücher*, eds. Nina Schleif and Armin Zweite, exhibition catalogue Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen Munich/Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden 2010/2011 (Munich: Hirmer, 2011), 18–33.
- 28 Werner Spies illustrates this using the example of “Der Radierzyklus ‘Traum und Lüge Francos’” [“The Series of Etchings ‘The Dream and Lie of Franco’”] and with his description of the late work entitled “Das Psychodrama im Atelier” [“The Psychodrama in the Studio”], both in Spies, *Kontinent Picasso*, 43 and 84–93. All quotes translated from the German by Sophie Schlöndorff.
- 29 See, for example, *Picasso. Tradition and Avant-Garde*, eds. Carmen Giménez and Francisco Calvo Serraller, exhibition catalogue Museo Nacional del Prado/Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Madrid 2006 (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado/Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2006), 294–296.