

## A Disordered Space

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As with all his publications Thomas Scheibitz gives this catalogue, and the exhibition it accompanies, a title that provides some insight into the history of ideas behind the broad ramifications of his art system. The title *Der ungefegte Raum* (literally “The Unswept Space”, but interpreted here as “A Disordered Space”) creates a link with the tradition of ancient *trompe l’oeil* painting and the 2nd century BC Greek mosaic artist Sosos of Pergamon. His innovation was to decorate mosaic floors with remains of food, as though left over from a lavish meal. This went under the name of “The Unswept Floor”, and was imitated for over four hundred years. Scheibitz transforms this term into “A Disordered Space”. Replacing floor with space takes us straight into Scheibitz’s mental and pictorial worlds. By substituting the space for floor, which in mosaic art literally is a floor, he is making the leap from two to three dimensions, from a surface to a space, which is in turn occupied in a number of ways. It is defined by width, extent, length, breadth and depth, and also stands for available space and the possibility of situating something within it. In his philosophical theses, the phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz defines transitions from directional space to locational space, which are determined by the turning of the body and become intelligible through pairing combinations on both sides. Intervals, distances and positional relationships are laid open to experience in this way. “The surface starts the alienation of the space from the body [“Leib”] and thus offers the opportunity of an orientation, of detaching oneself from the entanglements of bodily dynamics and bodily communication, including being seized by feelings, of putting them aside, in such a way that everything in the space that leaves objectification behind ... can be evenly objectified and made available.”<sup>1</sup> By using the antiquated German word “Leib” for “body” in the above text, rather than the modern “Körper”, he is implying not just the body but subsuming within it the human being with all its dynamic senses and instincts – prerequisites for sensitized perception and for interpreting a whole variety of spatial categories that we move between every day.

As in the exhibitions called *Ansicht und Plan von Toledo* (View and Plan of Toledo, 2001) or *about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* (Death in the Jungle, 2007/2008), a painting with the same title is behind the current presentation *Der ungefegte Raum* as well. Like all the paintings, sculptures and collages illustrated, this leitmotif image is juxtaposed with a black-and-white photograph. The photographs work as visual doubles; they are representatives and mirror images that lead from the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Schmitz, “Der Leib, der Raum und die Gefühle” (Body, Space and Feelings), Ostfildern near Stuttgart: 1998, p. 74. In the chapter “New Phenomenologies” he states: “By the *abstraction basis* of a culture I understand the tenaciously powerful layer of things allegedly taken for granted that form a filter between involuntary experience of life on the one hand and concepts, theories and evaluations on the other,” p. 7.

real world into the abstract sign world of art and at the same time present a contrast with it. For years now, Scheibitz has been filling his store of visual ideas with photographs, drawings, newspaper cuttings, notes, pages torn out of books, alphabets or objects that he treats as information, making no value judgements, which can be called up at any time, filtered and abstracted, in order to act as building blocks for the construction of his paintings or sculptures. They are never models, but things and pictures that provide stimulus for structural elements in the works, that define reality but undergo a transformation process via mental and formal detours. They are used to design a creative cosmos that follows its own rules and its own vocabulary. If a comparison is made between the mosaic, the photographic double and the painting, then in each case three-dimensional forms are seen strewn loosely over a surface and entering into a dialogue with each other. Despite formal similarities they all address different spheres of space and perception and illustrate crucial differences: the mosaic consists of many tiny parts that form an illusionistic image on a plane, the photograph shows real objects in various contexts positioned next to each other on a surface, and the painting in its turn crystallizes to form a synthesis that translates what has been seen into an original pictorial language, connecting three- and two-dimensional aspects in a new way. If it is scraps of food in the mosaic, in Scheibitz's work, it is substitute parts, details and marginalia of social activity and thinking and their artefacts that make a creative idea. He designs parallel worlds of seen and invented things and forms that he translates into the language of basic geometrical forms and that function as ways of thinking in his work. "It is precisely the sum of the resources that I use in order to be able to spend time in the objective or the figurative sphere without having to be realistic."<sup>2</sup>

Scheibitz did not choose the association with a mosaic at random as a starting point for the painting and the exhibition, but uses the concept of mosaic technique in a complex way to refer to his own artistic strategy, the direction of his thought and his perception of the world. The fact is that the mosaic technique that the writer Arno Schmidt introduced into literature, for example, consists of representing simultaneity without following a strict narrative. Lines, surfaces and points are brought together to form extracts. Developments freeze into splinters and nuances, details into moments. Fragments of experience, momentary images, impressions of nature metaphors, language games and word play, circumstances and ways of thinking form pictorial structures like static, sequence-like prefabricated parts and meet against a common background.

Scheibitz's work emerges from pictorial, intuitive thinking and addresses current orientation systems or the value of mediating signs. Each stimulus is welcome and can be placed in new contexts: whether it is Adidas's symbolic stripes, contemporary architecture, art historical pictures, typographies, films or comics. His book *Spielfilm, Musik und Roman*<sup>3</sup> (Feature Film, Music and Novel, 2005) points out that he draws his resources above all from things that are exact opposites to his fields of painting and sculpture. In the same way, figuration is precisely the opposite to his abstract approach, in other words in a field that concerns and challenges him. He has

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Scheibitz in an Artnet interview with Sven Drühl, "Das Auge zuerst", 01.08.2009 in: <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/thomas-scheibitz-im-artnetgesprach>, (24.08.2010).

<sup>3</sup> The book *Spielfilm, Musik und Roman* (Feature Film, Music and Novel) was published by British artist Damian Hirst's Other Criteria Press in London, 2005.

approached this questioningly for a long time now. "Lacks and excess / radicality of content is a question of form"<sup>4</sup> was Scheibitz's handwritten comment on a printed graphic work that was not described in any more detail; it consisted, like pictures by the Mannerist painter Arcimboldo of fragments of animals, men and women. Round smiley faces with big eyes, of the kind we are familiar with from Japanese Manga cartoons that can also distort themselves into grimaces, are reinforced in painting and graphic works by coloured areas, lines and tectonically structured forms. Titles that include people's names or are simply called "Portrait" also sometimes suggest that personality profiles can be concealed behind the pictorial thoughts. The artist reproduces atmospheres under the heading of portrait that define the subject from a number of perspectives. A painted sphere hanging from the ceiling, a form which carries a high symbolic charge in art theory and is constantly cited by Scheibitz as a metaphor, is identified as a *Selbstportrait* (Self Portrait, 2009/2010). It is reminiscent of a globe, but is looking out into the exhibition space with a futuristic eye. Scheibitz very deliberately designs his art canon as one that does not stray into the illustrative, but nevertheless uses abstract means to focus on the world and its social phenomena, which can be grasped only visually.

If the story of abstract art – for good reasons after the Second World War – is marked by dissolving everything figurative and representational in order to arrive at metaphorical interpretations of the world, Scheibitz approaches the question the other way round. How can resources of abstraction be used to portray human beings again? "The human figure is still one of the most difficult subjects of all; I can move there only via detours, with the help of representatives."<sup>5</sup> He – quite unlike his colleagues from the new figurative painting field – addresses this theme from a new point of view. His ideas, which have some influence on current sculptures, which for the first time are no longer built by tectonic, but by human standards, are based on a body scheme that orientates itself, if at all, only on the extreme fringe of the classical human figure. His invented forms run along complicated, well-thought-through byways and seem to take their measure from the formal possibilities of physical expression. The Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, for example, addresses physical feelings and sensations in her self-portraits by drawing a biomorphic skin over geometrical abstractions. These are works distinguished by a kind of cultural wit, as though she were caricaturing the archaic and primitive.<sup>6</sup> Above all in her early work she comes close to a grotesque formal vocabulary that also interests Scheibitz. Mannerism, cubism and later surrealism have put physical forms to the test and also declined various perspectives visually. Here it is all about formal distortions, undue lengthening, foreshortening, absurd twists of the body, allegories, overdrawings always associated with locating and analysing the human being both in his physical existence, but also in his secular or spiritual contexts. Forms of the grotesque, the burlesque and the comic orientate themselves to the human scale, foreshorten, double or exaggerate it, with something always happening inside the body. If figures mutate into shovels, goblins and gnomes à la Goya, or into shadows, they are present and absent at the same time.

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4 Ibid., n.p.

5 Thomas Scheibitz, cf. note 2.

6 Cf. Robert Storr, "Ave Maria", in: cat. *Maria Lassnig. Das neunte Jahrzehnt* (Maria Lassnig: The Ninth Decade), Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, 2009, pp. 61-68, p. 63.

In the context of Scheibitz's oeuvre and his most recent sculptures, it is particularly revealing to follow his statement that "something always happens inside the body" and that "the approach to the figurative can only succeed via "avatars", via hollow bodies and via symbolic, sign-like formal language. The form that one finds or gives to a thing reveals something about the object depicted."<sup>7</sup> His sculptures are three-dimensional hollow bodies, made from light cardboard packaging. They seem to translate physical movements such as standing, sitting or lying, sometimes reminiscent of twisted yoga positions or medieval figure alphabets, into geometrical, formal principles, and combine with pictogram-like signs such as the arrow from contemporary orientation logistics, reminiscent both of Paul Klee and the fantastic 18th-century "Bird of Self-Knowledge".<sup>8</sup> In contrast with earlier works, as seen in the sculpture area of *The Goldilocks Zone* exhibition (2008), there is no longer a frame of reference with architectural or floral associations. The coloured surfaces of the sculptures, painted in a characteristically crude style, are kept at the same kind of temperature as the paintings, and also acquire a strange presence by the use of shadow colours. The colours are all taken from the RAL colour palette and enhance the forms. They disturb, especially when the artist uses the shiny metallic paint that we recognise from the car industry, but at the same time they lend a new identity, both visually and in terms of content. Each individual sculpture emerges on the basis of a dense reference system, in which Scheibitz also indirectly discusses the fundamental question of material and effect, as raised, for example, by the insight that ancient sculpture was painted in colour.<sup>9</sup>

*The Unswept Floor* mosaic provides an approach in terms of motif for the exhibition *A Disordered Space* and metaphorically illuminates the range of questions within which Scheibitz operates: between the conceptual fields of illusionism, mimesis and interpretative revelation he sharpens his formally austere pictorial cosmos using linguistic or pictorial set-pieces and wide-ranging associative frameworks. This cosmos questions artistic rules precisely and Anna-Catharina Gebbers appositely equates this with a cool atmosphere.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Studio conversation with Thomas Scheibitz, Berlin, 08.03.2010.

8 "Der Vogel Selbsterkenntnis" (The Bird of Self-Knowledge) is a mysterious, allegorical image of a bird whose rump represents a human face and that is effectively holding itself by the nose. It is a symbol of reflecting and brooding. There is an example in the Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum, Innsbruck.

9 In 2004, the exhibition *Bunte Götter. Die Farbigkeit antiker Skulpturen* (Coloured Gods. The Colour of Ancient Sculptures) at the Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek in Munich addressed the theme exclusively.

10 Cf. Anna-Catharina Gebbers, "Headbanging", in: *Thomas Scheibitz. ABC – I II III. Skulpturen 1998 – 2003*, (ed. Anna-Catharina Gebbers), Cologne, 2005, pp. 115-124, p. 123 f.