

Thomas Scheibitz: The Independent Variable.

by Glenn O'Brien

Huh?

We are used to not knowing what we're looking at when it comes to contemporary art. We don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows, but we often need a team of art critics to know why what looks like a publicity stunt or a random collection of everyday objects is, in fact, an artwork of great value. We have come to expect work that doesn't stand on its own, functioning only in a presumed context. Most contemporary artworks require a supporting brief to have any effect on the viewer or, perhaps more significantly, any commodity value at all. If you encountered a piece of work by Thomas Scheibitz cold and un-briefed, you might not know exactly what you were looking at, but you would recognize it as a significant artwork, and you could take a great deal from it unassisted by explainers. What you might not know is where it came from or when it was made, and that almost mysterious independence is something I find most alluring. The paintings and sculptures of Thomas Scheibitz stand alone in a way that's rare today. Scheibitz is an independent.

Movements are for weaklings. Groups are for musicians. Stables are for horses. Art is individual subjective vision captured and made objectified. An artist should be a solo movement. Vision is not a trend. That's why strong artists may upset the eye at first. It takes time to see what's going on. I recall hearing the Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" for the first time. Weird! Now I know it's a good sign if my first instinct is negative. WTF, as we say. It's always the people you hate at first that you come to love. It's the same with virtually any act of original creation. Strange things rub together and beget another. Not understanding something alien is threatening to the observer. But when the senses relax and take over, reason kicks in and improvises a new ratio. Pure pleasure takes over and something new lives among us. It could be beautiful.

What It Looks Like?

Today's best cliché? *It is what it is.* Well, I'm sure I saw something familiar in him. Something Lichtenstein-ey there. And Legér, yeah, him too. Legér in a minor key. But really what I thought about when I met Scheibitz in a book, and then on a gallery wall, was Wyndham Lewis. And when I met Scheibitz personally at his big, packed-to-the-rafters studio just down the river from the Reichstag, I told him that my first impression of his work was that it was strongly reminiscent of the paintings of early Wyndham Lewis, with whom Scheibitz was not familiar.

I wasn't surprised that Scheibitz hadn't heard of him, even though Lewis was once himself a Berlin boho. Wyndham Lewis is still in the art historical doghouse for political reasons, and besides, English painters have rarely led art's charge into the future. Lewis's painting career stretched

from 1911 until 1949, when it was halted by blindness, but his impact was mostly early and his output was severely limited by his serious engagement with literature. (T.S. Eliot called him "the greatest prose master of style of my generation.") Between 1922 and 1932 he painted very little; it was mostly novels and philosophy: *The Art of Being Ruled*, *Time and Western Man*, *The Apes of God*.

But when Lewis did paint he was great. (Walter Sickert called him "the greatest portraitist of this or any other time.") In his youth he was an abstract painter — the leader of the Vorticists, the English modernist movement analogous to Cubism and Futurism. Vorticism, especially as practiced by Lewis (but also by David Bomberg and Edward Wadsworth), was a sort of architectural cubism. Scheibitz paintings like *Konigsplatz* (2002) have a strong resonance with Lewis works like *The Crowd* (1914-1915) or *New York* (1914). Compare *Ansicht und Plan von Toledo* (2000) with Lewis's *Workshop* (1915). Compare *Portrait Dr. Rey* (2009/2010) with Lewis's *L'Homme Surrealiste* (1929). There is an obvious stylistic similarity, but beyond that, I think I see in both artists a process that Scheibitz calls translation, which derives from a positive philosophy of abstraction. Abstraction is usually seen as a reductive or even negative process. "To abstract" usually means to withdraw, to take away, to purloin, to derive, to disengage, to withdraw from the concrete — but in the work of Lewis and Scheibitz, abstraction transposes an essence or energy from one medium to another, extending and enhancing it.

In 1915, when abstraction was still in its infancy, Lewis declared: "Everything is representation, in one sense, even in the most 'abstract' paintings." Of course at that time abstraction would have to play itself out, exploring the possibilities of painting freed by photography from the function of realistic depiction and objectivity. Lewis didn't see abstraction as an end, but as a means. Eventually, Lewis's abstraction became subsumed in an overtly representational style, viz. portraiture. That these painters have a resonance doesn't imply any retro aspect to Scheibitz's practice. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Scheibitz said: "For me, the concept of translation is the most appropriate term; in my case it's important to work in a field where I couldn't make the things I make with any other means or tool. The medium of drawing, sketching or painting means so much to me if only because all of the things that occur to me, or which I try to put into practice, actually possess the greatest possible independence in that particular medium. That's the most important thing for me — being independent and having a forum that enables me to translate it all." Scheibitz's independence seems to include a conscious self-distancing from the pervasive progressive notions of art history that allows him to work in ways that are visibly related to cubism. For some, his work must seem perplexingly atemporal. In 2011 it is rather daring to resemble 1911 — but Scheibitz is never anachronistic. His atemporality is compelling and attractive because it's so obviously out of step with the idea of a current, or even post-modern, look. There is something tough, even daring, about work that engages, with a fresh eye, the problems of plane and perspective that engaged painters of earlier generations, that doesn't seem to feel the need to take it a step "further."

If Not Now , Then When?

But the real connection between Lewis and Scheibitz is not so much the occasional appearance of an architectural cubism in their work, their fondness for the black line, or their overlapping palettes, but their rugged independence from the idea of progressive art. We can easily see in Scheibitz that he is not particularly interested in the appearance of being advanced, and that he feels no particular urgency to evolve his own style. He appeared as an artist rather fully formed, and if one looks through the volume in his studio in which photos of his paintings appear, numbered consecutively, it is clear that his style and process are rather remarkably consistent from 1 to whatever number he is on at the moment. The work has surely evolved, but it seems that this evolution is less a function of changes in Scheibitz the artist or the man, as much as it is of changes in the world around him, the architecture of his environment, the info flow that penetrates his notebooks, and the prevalent color spectrum of the media he observes.

Although he was one of the prime movers of Modernism, Wyndham Lewis fought fiercely against the notion that art

is progressive. Lewis addressed this problem in *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (1955), in which he lamented that art is mistaken to be progressive in the sense that science is progressive, and that there is a notion of advanced-ness involved in art. Lewis wrote: "Extremism = contemporary. I do not see how you could get nearer to the meaning of contemporary than that. Although one thinks of extremism as something perpetually moving forward (violently progressing), that is an illusion. Extremism may be doing that, but far more often it is stationary. Or there may be some inconsequential movement, just enough to create the illusion that something is happening, although in reality nothing is happening."

Art is cumulative but it is not progressive, and to make it seem so is to transform it into fashion, and to put an artificial pressure on artists to move ever onward in a war against obsolescence, where the new is new only for the sake of newness. Lewis declared that art pursuing the agenda of progress was bound to arrive at "the point beyond which there is nothing." In that regard, I find this remark on Scheibitz by Beate Ermacora particularly relevant: "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." (Beate Ermacora, *Thomas Scheibitz: A Disordered Space/Der ungelegte Raum*). Scheibitz's consistency through his painting, drawing, and sculpture not only displays his confidence in his method, but it also allows him to function as a sort of fulcrum, remaining still and grounded in his method while processing the image stream as it comes to him. It is as if he is translating the ephemeral, the fleeting, the high velocity, the crumbling, the eroding, the pulsating flow of image and data content into eternal, or at least coherent and persistent, terms. Of course no painter is composing in a truly literal mode, but the visual processing of images seems to be a vital and redemptive analytical and even narrative process now, as the quantum advances in global digital transmission seem to be accompanied by a simultaneous decline in literacy and even rationality. Far more than most artists, Scheibitz deals in a personal yet accessible visual language capable of translating complex input into a concentrated, negotiable form. Although it is coded, it is not cryptic. Although it is privileged, it is not arcane or mystical but sensorial.

Logos to Go.

Language was the first abstraction, but the effectiveness of any language is tied to objectivity. Without agreement and use, language is dead. But anti-intellectual "populism" now seems to challenge the readings of even the simplest and most basic communal morphemes. The mass transmission of images and words can be used to accrete power or to dilute it, depending on the "spin." Perhaps by abstracting or drawing out the essences from words, letters, and images on the network that still carry an electric charge, Scheibitz and other abstract representational artists are storing that charge away for future reference or propagation, the way a farmer stocks the seeds of heirloom tomatoes. (How's that for a wacky metaphor?)

Languages do disappear, whether by act of God, through neglect, or the destructive actions of men. Nearly 100 American Indian languages are now extinct. The Mohegans once had a language, now they just have a gambling casino. Without a common language a culture dies. It's not simply a matter of a system of communication falling into disuse; even its mechanism may be lost.

Hieroglyphs were once thought to be purely figurative or allegorical and not phonetic. Now we know they are at once figurative, symbolic, and phonetic. How was that forgotten? Who knows? But we left no Rosetta Stone unturned. Will today's languages go the way of the Egyptian? We see in today's politics the fulfillment of Orwell's prophesy of the death of language through mass media use of buzzwords, clichés, or predigested stand-ins for ideas that operate like music, emotionally rather than rationally; words that pass through the cerebrum straight to the limbic system. It's called pushing their buttons. It's beyond words. When old languages die, new ones replace them. I think

that we still know how to do it. Artists made the hieroglyphs, the ideograms, and the logos. They can do it again.

In the Bible, "logos" is the word for the word that was God. Today, logos are the things that stand for corporations. Corporations are immortal persons, something like what we used to call gods.

Today God, the destroyer of language at the Tower of Babel, may be dead to intellectuals, but he's still inspiring the destruction of language among true believers. God told Sarah Palin to "refudiate." God told George Bush he had been "misunderestimated." God told the mayor of Boston that "metal detectors" should be placed in schools. And everyone, from the intellectuals to the true believers, knows about the logos. That's how they know how to shop and who's running the show. But we see in the work of certain artists, like Scheibitz, that logos can be created in two and three dimensions that are powerful, abstract, and unassigned. Perhaps the introduction of pure, unattached logos into the system can provide wild cards, words and freelance symbols ready to step up and download meaning, ideas for alternative corporations capable of combat with the immortal titans of commerce. Think unassigned hieroglyphs. Think of a metaphysical argot with aesthetic ESP.

The Graffito of Esmet-Akhom.

"La science, la nouvelle noblesse! Le progress. Le monde marche! Pour quoi ne tournerait-il pas?"

In the standard translation by Louise Varèse, that passage from Rimbaud's *Bad Blood* is translated: "Science, the new nobility! Progress. The world marches on! Why shouldn't it turn?"

Paul Schmidt translates it thickly: "The world moves..."

And why shouldn't it?" But I think Wallace Fowlie was right: "The world marches on. Why shouldn't it turn back?"

Even better, I think, is: "Why shouldn't it turn around?"

Or: "Why shouldn't it about-face?"

The abstraction of Scheibitz is about putting back together what has been taken apart; reconnecting the dots. Painting may have about-faced. Having reached the point beyond which there is nothing (and I think we can assume that the utter dissolution of representation in abstract expressionism was ground zero, the tip of the cone of the vortex), art has begun to spin back the other way. If you can believe the yoyo, it's bound to speed up.

According to Dave Hickey, that's why Warhol hated Abstract Expressionism. When he did *Campbell's Soup*, he was putting the soup (AbEx in hipster lingo) back in the can.

Scheibitz is making something out of nothing, putting the kid back in the picture.

Every Day I Write the Book.

Most good artists are great collectors. I have had few better tours than walking through Donald Judd's buildings in Marfa looking at his furniture, his Indian baskets and rugs, his library, his Japanese clothes. I could happily spend a day in the bank vault where Richard Prince keeps his rarest books and manuscripts. I still have the catalog from the auction of Warhol's incredible stash. And what fun it was to flip through Scheibitz's clipping book, the trove of cuttings from magazines, newspapers, posters, and books; mostly photos but also articles, lists, and typefaces – all fodder for the imagination. He shares bits of it with us in *About 90 Elements* and in *Film, Music & Novel*. And we know the studio has a stereo. For every output there's an input, and for every input there's an output. This is the artist's situation today. He's an image banker, storing significant images and living on the interest. Scheibitz's imagination inhabits his notebooks, and in the choices he has made in collecting these images from various sources, we can see how Scheibitz sees. Form is also a language. Humanity, having passed from calligraphy and hieroglyphs into languages composed of symbols completely (or apparently) disconnected from literal meaning, forgets that letters and characters mean too in their own underhanded, subliminal way. And, as we are living in a time when words are becoming estranged from their meanings, language must be continually reinvented.

If you are a close observer of the news, you know that language is being deliberately and systematically destroyed. Slang is co-opted, politicians talk in doublespeak, and classical rhetoric has been shattered into a broadcast of collaged

buzzwords and sound bites that conjure shared misunderstandings.

Truths are strangled by crafted misinformation.

The Bible tells of a time when all people spoke the same language and gathered in the land of Shinar where they aimed to build a city with a tower "with its top in the heavens...lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the Earth." In the Old Testament, God, being very cranky, decided to fuck them up for their ambition, saying: "They are one people and have one language, and nothing will be withholden from them which they purpose to do." So God, the jealous control freak, said: "Come, let us go down and confound their speech." As if the flood wasn't enough.

From God's use of us we may assume that he was bragging to Satan again, just like in the book of Job.

But the fall of the Tower of Babel is nothing compared to the destruction of logic and language now in progress.

The high-rise hive mind of electronic media broadcasts endless streams of tales told by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Anti-words are cobbled together from buzzwords, network bricolage, clichés, ambiguities, and malapropisms, into sound bites that create communal misunderstandings and open-ended, indefinable terms. This present communications disaster was man's own deliberate doing — even if God is still occasionally invoked — creating a mass-destruction of logic and language out of the oldest motives of all: control and profit.

The only alternative to this meltdown of meaning is in networking the solo voice, the subjective renderings of the objective. The artist who stands by his word, searches for the mot juste even if he has to invent it, and he communicates in backchannels of independent voices. Scheibitz's paintings are renderings of words, or word prototypes; characters stripped down to pure shape and divorced from meaningful context — distilled vowels, absolute consonants — where we can meditate on their angles and trajectories. It's *Wheel of Fortune!* Would you like to buy a vowel? A brand new vowel?

It's in the notebooks, in the collection of images, cut out of newspapers, magazines, and books that we see how Scheibitz sees. Ancient ruins, antennae, comic books, mosaic floors, spare parts, desert rocks, bricks, and graffiti. Form is also a language. Having passed from calligraphy and hieroglyphs into languages composed of symbols disconnected from literal meaning, we forget that letters and characters mean too. Here they are in Scheibitz's paintings, stripped down to their shape and divorced from meaningful context — pure vowel, pure consonant — where we can meditate on their angles and trajectories. If we live through our word, then language is architecture. But it must be continually rebuilt because it is continually eroded.

Note on the Notebooks.

A vast collection of images, assembled by his mind's eye, is the artist's ammo, his mess hall, his neuron recharger, and his motley muse. Through the variety and volume of images that he is drawn to through an unpremeditated magnetism, he gets a rich feel for the world as it sighs, heaves, and reshapes itself. The ivory tower is plastic now, and its plasmatron energy source is capable of tuning the most rarified and unstable frequencies.

On that note, here's a reprise from Wyndham Lewis: "The whole Cubist formula, in fact, in its pure state, is a plastic formula for stone or for brick-built houses. It may be objected that all the grandest and most majestic art in the world however has rather divested man of his vital plastic qualities and changed him into a more durable, imposing, and in every way harder machine; and that is true. This dehumanizing has corresponded happily with the unhuman character, the plastic, architectural quality, of art itself...It is natural for us to represent a man as we would wish him to be; artists have always represented men as more beautiful, more symmetrically muscular, with more commanding countenances than they usually, in nature, possess. And in our time it is natural that an artist should wish to endow his bonhomme when he makes one in the grip of an heroic emotion, with something of the fatality, grandeur and efficiency of a machine."

Artists used to work from nature. Now that nature is in a subordinate, threatened, even shattered position, relevant artists seem to be at work to put nature, or Humpty Dumpty, (Brahmanda or the World Egg) back together again. We're picking up the pieces and working on a big puzzle. We lay

claim to and repossess the world, which has been bought and sold beyond our reach, snatching it back in pieces by seeing its essences and translating these essences into our own personal terms. When we are gone, the best of those terms will remain, as our deeds to the Earth.

Addenda.

Cubism is not finished. Expressionism is not finished. Surrealism is not finished. Pop is not finished. Abstract Expressionism isn't even finished. But allegiance is finished. We have to think of those like dances — *the Twist, the Jerk, the Boogaloo, the Moonwalk*. Artists need modalities and moves, not art movements.

The style of Scheibitz is loose precisely because of its precision. It's his form of syncopation or funk. It's not rigid if it's got rhythm. In fact, his current color palette seems derived from the kind of felt markers used to underline texts. (Another brave independent choice, since these are not haute couture, decorator colors, but the vulgate spectrum.)

But our condition is about the color of the moment. And Scheibitz is, in a way, a text underliner. His doodley sketchy manner of executing hard-edged shapes is a humanist strategy. It's akin to the departures from pure geometry in North African rug weaving: a deliberate departure, an apparent error as a way of keeping the devil out.

Few artists have been equally accomplished as both painters and sculptors. Scheibitz is one. Another is Roy Lichtenstein, whom Scheibitz counts among his favorite artists. What do they have in common? Both celebrate the common colors of the commercial world. Both love the transgressive black line. But most of all, both have a Masonic love of geometry; you can see in their paintings the almost erotic urge of two dimensions to beget a third or more.

Text by Glenn O'Brien in catalogue: Thomas Scheibitz, *Lineage ONE/Stilleben & Statistics*, Jarla Partilager, Berlin.