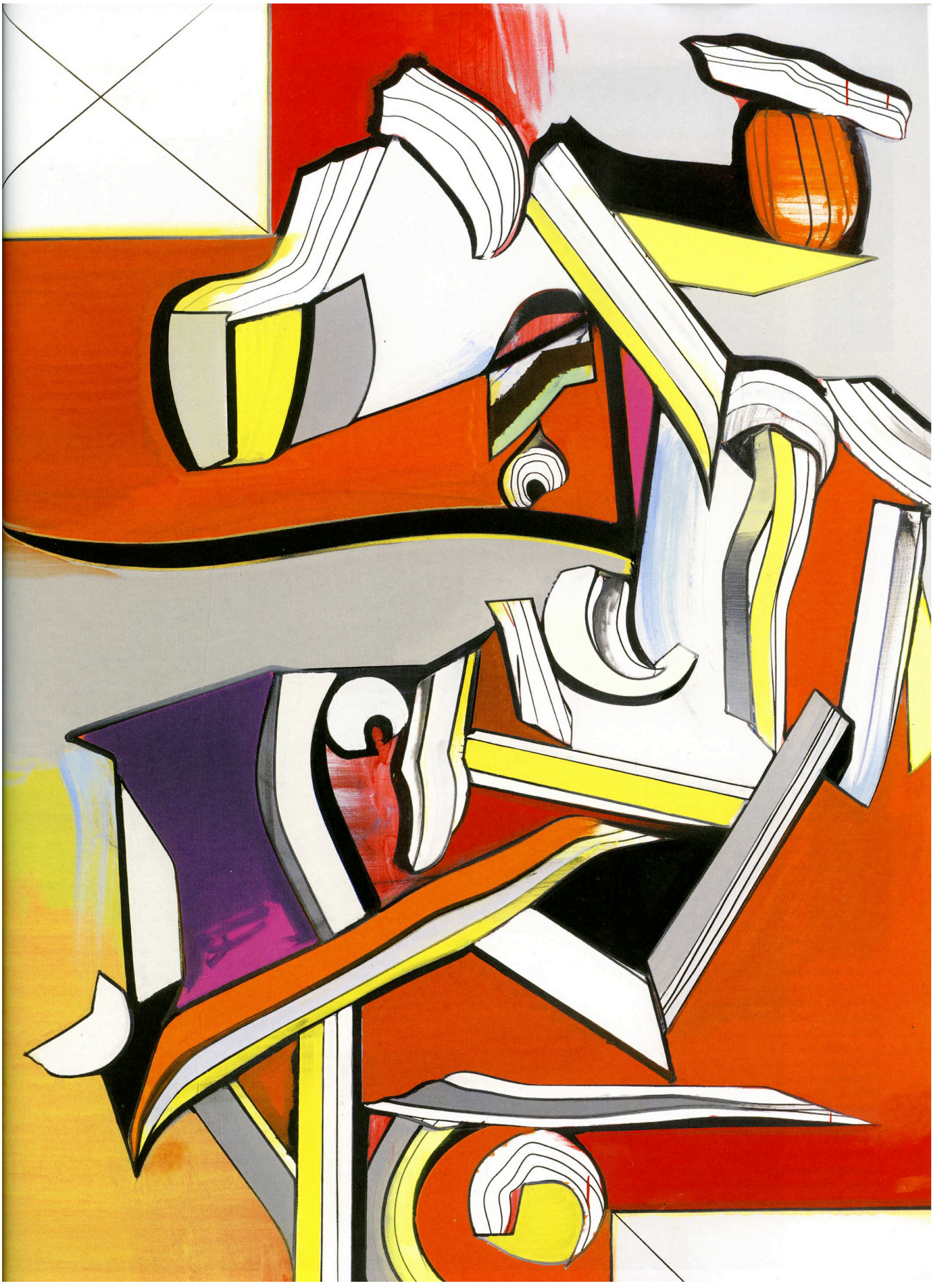
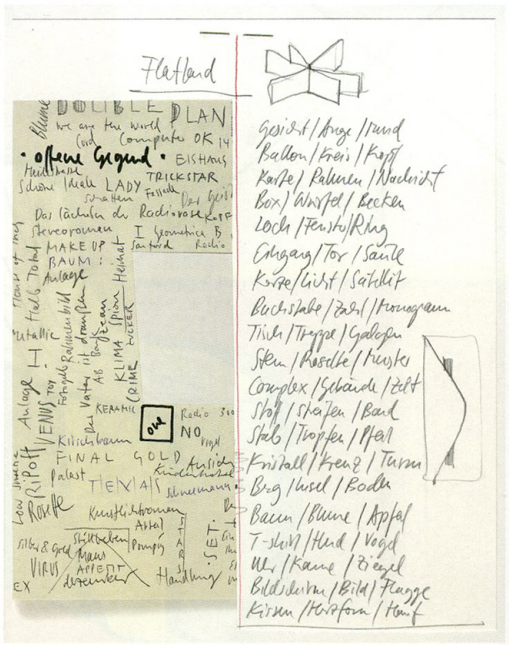
The hermetic, inventive world of Thomas Scheibitz
by Kirsty Bell

Code Maker

La Horde (detail), 2012,
oil, vinyl, pigment marker and varnish
on canvas, 2.8 × 1.8 m





1
Hal Croves, 2012,
cardboard, paint and epoxy resin on canvas,
2.7 × 2.5 × 1.1 m

2
Drawing, collage, 2012, a collection of titles and terms, mixed media on paper
28 × 22 cm

3
John Tennil, 2012,
oil, vinyl, pigment marker and varnish on canvas, 2.9 × 1.8 m

'One-time pad' is a puzzling combination of apparently obvious words. What does it mean? Is it some kind of obsolete, time-based analogue device? Or a note pad? An iPad? A crash pad? Or rather some oblique relation of the one-night stand? 'One-time pad' is, in fact, the name given to a type of failsafe encryption invented in the late 1880s and used extensively for intelligence communications during World War II and, subsequently, by both sides during the Cold War. A secret, random key (or 'pad') is used to encrypt a text, resulting in a cipher that can only be decoded by applying the password, which itself has the same length as the original text and may be used only once (hence 'one-time'). What you end up with is a pair of impenetrable lists of numbers or combinations of letters, grouped in five-unit blocks. The complexity of the task of combining these two cryptic lists to determine the original text is mind-boggling, to say the least.

As the title chosen by Thomas Scheibitz for his comprehensive exhibition of recent paintings, sculptures and works on paper at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) – which will travel to the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, in July this year – the phrase 'One-time Pad' operates in both of the above ways: as a combination of simple words that bears a casual allusion to several things, and as a tight-as-a-nut code to crack an oblique set of characters. The particular character of Scheibitz's paintings responds well to both of these approaches – approximation (through allusion, vague memories, the recognition of familiar images combined in unfamiliar ways) and the concrete (unlocking a precisely determined composition made up of several recurring figures by applying an equally complex key).

This exhibition of over 200 works by Scheibitz – who was born in 1968 in Radeberg in former East Germany and studied at the Art Academy in Dresden from 1991 to 1996 – gives one of the most comprehensive overviews yet of his highly encrypted practice. Spread out over the whole third floor of MMK's 1980s Hans Hollein-designed triangular building, his interwoven practice was divided into areas separated strictly according to media. There were rooms of large-scale paintings in his trademark palette of neon yellow, green or orange combined with a preponderance of grey, in which various forms assembled like building blocks coalesce, as if by accident, into urban landscapes, edifices, figures or schematic faces. One room was devoted to framed drawings on A4 paper depicting groups of forms or totemic figures, overpainted images cut from newspapers or magazines, or intricate compositions plotted out in detail to be used as the schemata of a large-scale painting. In the wedge-shaped gallery at the point of MMK's triangular building, a collection of Scheibitz's sculptures, each looking like a singular element extracted from the vocabulary of his paintings and expanded into three dimensions, were grouped together into a kind of wordless conversation piece or theatrical tableau. In another space hung a collection of painted works on paper (all standardized at 2.2 × 1.8 m), whose simple compositions and quick execution are in marked contrast to the artist's paintings on canvas, which are completed over a period of several years.

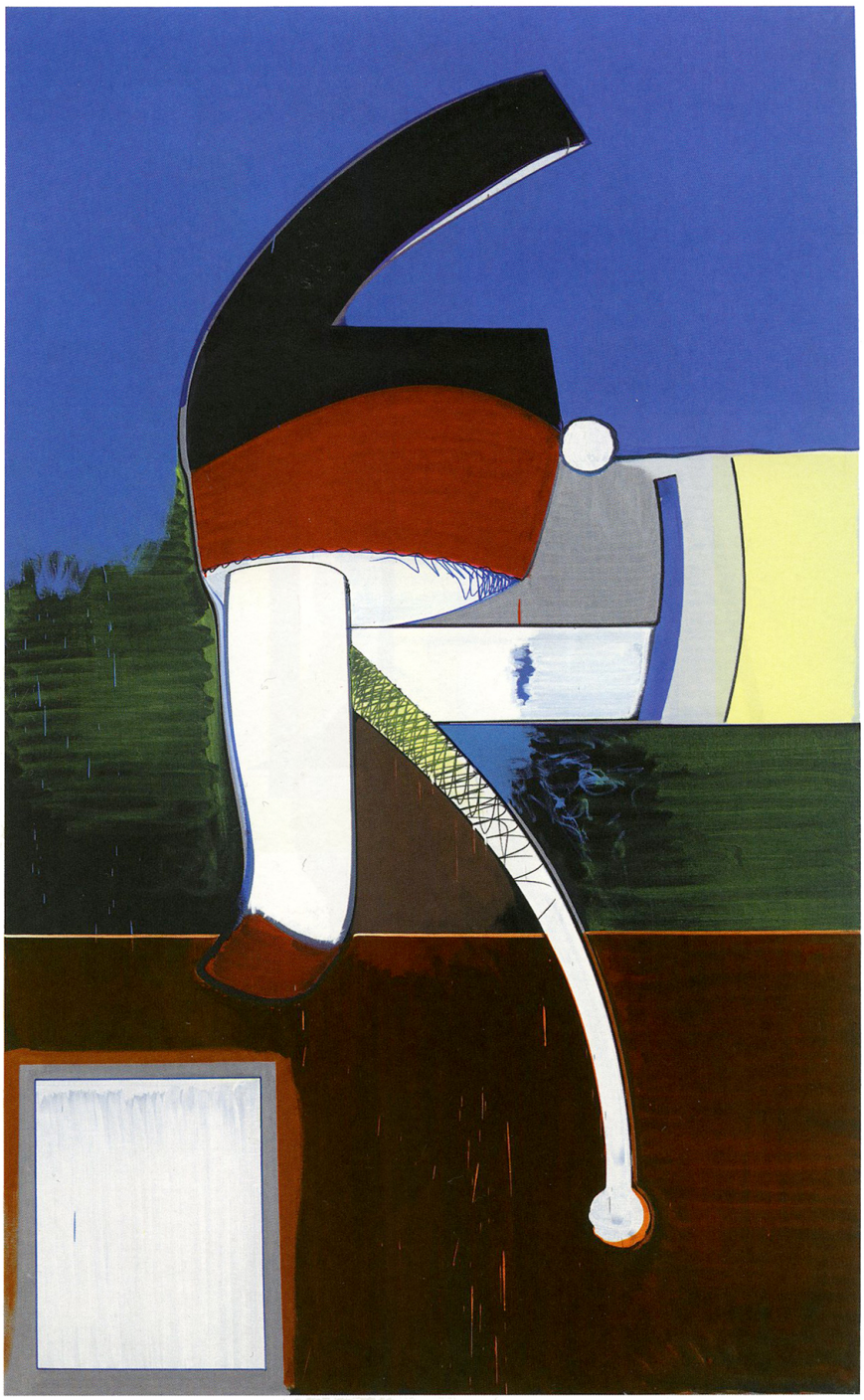
Most surprising, however, was the room dedicated to the source material that generates the distinct formal vocabulary of Scheibitz's works. Although this material has been reproduced in his many catalogues and artist's books, he has never shown it alongside his works before now. Designated an 'archive', it consists of many of the things that furnish the artist's studio as visual reminders or formal curiosities. Along with art works such as a face painted on the skin of a drum from the 1920s, or an allegorical engraving from the 1500s by Giorgio Ghisi, are pin-boards covered with images cut out of magazines or printed from the Internet and snapshots taken by the artist himself; vitrines displaying various plastic components, parts of tools, ceramic ornaments, or hand-made paper models; as well as small sketch books laid open on specific pages. All of this material seems to have been filtered through an eye in search of certain recurrent forms. Persistent tics keep appearing throughout the collection: shapes, curves, repetitions. It is hard to pinpoint just what their appeal is, but together they form an intrinsic, idiosyncratic geometry that undergirds the wide range of media. This is crystallized in a printed-out list of words that could be found pinned to a white column on wheels crowned with

several fluorescent tubes. Under the title *Lexicon #3 Things*, it lists 20 groups of terms such as 'Balloon/Circle/Head', 'Table/Staircase/Gallows' or 'T-shirt/Dog/Bird'. This self-constructed lexicon attempts to systematize the repetitive forms that, having been repeatedly chanced upon amongst the ordinary, are then borrowed by Scheibitz to be employed as vital components of his own compositions.

Presented at the MMK, this lexicon and the room of archival material seemed to suggest itself as the key to a singular encryption, to finally make sense of Scheibitz's complex works. The paintings' highly determined compositions, in which almost nothing is left to chance, can prove alienating for the viewer who is left little room for manoeuvre within their puzzle-like surfaces. They are so specific in formal vocabulary, tonal palette and scale that looking at them can feel like trying to read someone else's mind. Perhaps this privileged view into the artist's personal archive can offer a glimpse into his mind, providing us with the password with which to unpack the work's accumulated signs? Now we can read this hazy white burst as a 'Candle/Light/Satellite' or that perspectival form as a 'Complex/Building/Tent'. Even armed with this code, however, or provided with the original source for a sculptural form, our comprehension of the finished works remains patchy at best. Scheibitz's *oeuvre* is indeed a sort of 'One-time pad', fully comprehensible only a single time by a single mind: that of the artist.

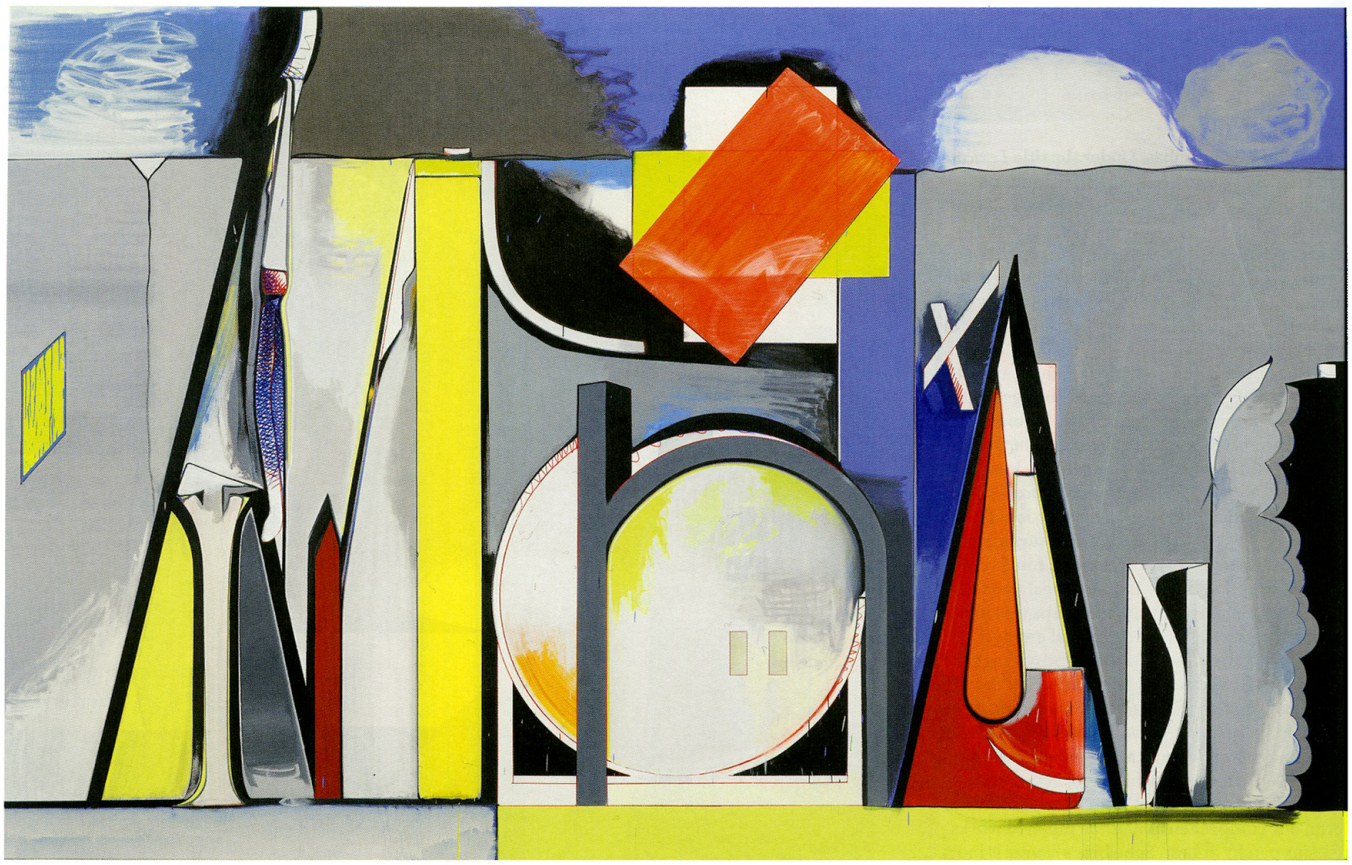
It was the curator's idea to include the archive, Scheibitz tells me when I meet him in his studio a couple of weeks after visiting the exhibition in Frankfurt. He is at pains to point out that, as far as he is concerned, this secondary material is by no means work, but rather just tools or, to translate the descriptive German term *Werkzeug* literally, the 'stuff for work'. The curator, MMK director Susanne Gaensheimer, had seen the material in his studio – objects laid out on desks and tables, boxes full of collected images, even the wheeled column with its fluorescent strips was one of three such self-made contraptions used by the artist as mobile lighting – and suggested including it in the exhibition.

The studio itself is an old garage behind a very official-looking building in central Berlin that houses the German federal administration. Scheibitz was offered the use of the space in 2005, when he was working on his contribution to the German Pavilion at that year's Venice Biennale, and he has been there ever since, despite persistent claims that the building will be imminently torn down. A date for the demolition has now finally been set for the summer, and packing boxes stand at the ready. Its two huge rooms, with ceilings several metres high, are strictly dedicated to the different areas of what is a highly regimented practice: Scheibitz keeps a clockwork schedule, coming to his studio every weekday between 10am and 6pm. The first room is divided into a mezzanine office for administrative duties and a workshop where assistants produce sculpture prototypes according to his drawings, while the prototypes themselves loiter in the remaining open space, a jostling crowd of misfits. The larger second space is assistant-free, however: this is where the planning and painting take place, solitary activities that cannot be delegated.



3

What makes Scheibitz's work distinct, he tells me, is its methodology, which is not to be confused with style.



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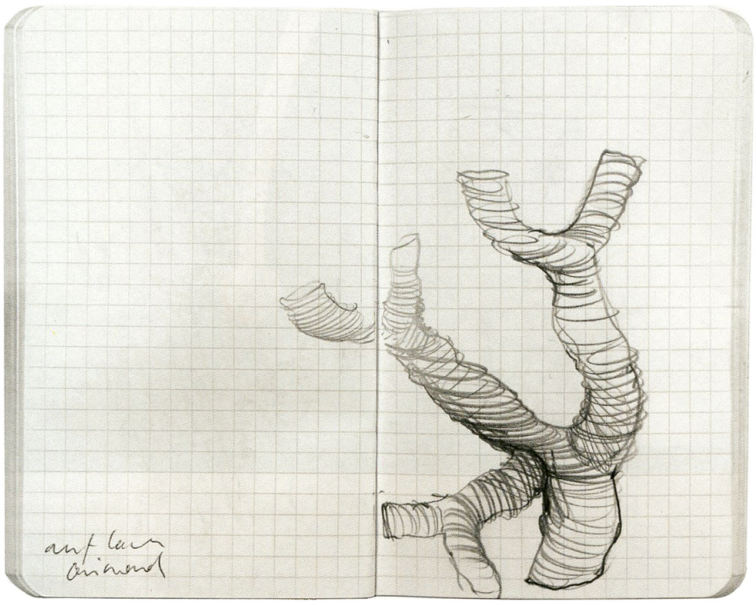

2

1
One-Time Pad, 2012,
oil, vinyl, pigment marker and varnish
on canvas, 2.8 × 4.5 m

2
Sketch book pages, c.2012,
mixed media on paper, approx. 21 × 15 cm

3
Relief 972, 2012,
wood and varnish, 170 × 55 × 10 cm

FRIEZE VIDEO
Thomas Scheibitz talks about his studio
video.frieze.com

As Scheibitz guides me through his working process, it becomes clear that not only are his different types of work spatially regimented, but their production itself also comprises a series of regular, tightly ordered stages. The artist has been honing this structured practice since he moved to Berlin on completing his studies in 1996, when he quickly began exhibiting work not only in Germany, but also in the US and the UK; his first institutional show, 'Low Sweetie', was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1998. What makes his work distinct, he tells me, is his methodology, which is not to be confused with style. As opposed to a style, which is made up of borrowed shapes articulated in a range of colours and applied to the surface, methodology provides an internal structure that underpins the composition of each painting. Scheibitz's paintings always begin with a sketch, followed by a detailed drawing to scale, which, if after careful consideration he deems successful enough, is then transferred to the canvas. The size of each canvas, he tells me, is determined by the dimensions of the initial drawing, each component of which has an intrinsic size that must be scaled-up for the larger version. The question of human scale or the intuitively 'right' scale doesn't come into it: it is all a matter of precise calculation, resulting in canvases which may be 305cm tall or 364cm wide. After an initial period of working on the painting, photographing it at the end of each day's work and using this image as a template for subsequent changes, marked in pen on a coloured print-out (something he has done since getting his first digital camera around 2005), he puts the painting away, often for several years, before pulling it out to continue working on it. In a similar process, Scheibitz's sculptures derive from initial sketches

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by means of which he determines if the form in question is more suited to two dimensions or three. If he decides to turn it into an object, he makes a detailed drawing from which his assistants construct a hollow cardboard prototype, which then waits to be worked on further, its surface painted or amended with various finishes or techniques, or the addition of a pedestal or other compositional elements.

These procedures have their opposite in Scheibitz's complementary practice of documenting his work. A spiral-bound book contains small black and white print-outs of all of his paintings since 1998, an ongoing self-made encyclopaedia which he uses like a memory bank to ensure that he doesn't repeat himself. A sense of *déjà vu* may often occur when looking from one painting to the next, or between a painting and a sculpture, anchored as they are in repeating fragments or pictorial devices that find their sources in his personal archive, but no two works are identical. Scheibitz's documentation of his work completes the circle of a hermetic yet highly inventive production.

The relation in Scheibitz's work between the archive (which may be taken to be the world as seen through the artist's eye) and the work (that is, his adaptation of it) is not one of appropriation but a rational process of organizing, re-ordering and encoding according to a self-defined set of principles rooted in structural, formal or mathematical considerations, and the problem of how things fit together. 'I like the phonetic aspect of a word better than what it expresses as language,'[1] Scheibitz once said in an interview. Similarly, he has claimed he is not interested in architecture as such so much as 'the architectural subheading of tectonics'.[2] The meaning of the real lies not in use-value or surface appeal, but rather in an abstracted formal or structural significance. Nevertheless, a compulsive picturing occurs in his work that returns us to the real again and again: an accumulation of shapes or geometric elements constructs a schematic face (*Henry Stand*), a figure emerges from a stack of rectangles (*Figur Staedler*) or from various cut-out curves (*Portrait of Tracy Berglund*, all 2012). In works such as *Studio* (2012), meanwhile, floating perspectives picture rooms within rooms, akin to those ambiguous bow-tie/butterfly pictorial devices that populate Dutch artist René Daniëls's interior paintings. The desire to recognize familiar, essential forms – a person, a place, a graspable entity – surfaces incessantly from within the didactic order of the Scheibitz system.

Stellvertreter – meaning 'substitutes', 'stand-ins' or 'deputies' – is the word Scheibitz himself uses to describe his works. There is certainly something prop-like about the hollow sculptures, made of painted cardboard, MDF or Perspex, which resemble something but never quite match it. The paintings, too, decisive though their conception undoubtedly is, function as proposals. In works such as the four-and-a-half-metre wide *One-Time Pad* (2012), which looks like a line-up of typographical fragments posing as characters, areas are roughly sketched in with paint, filled with provisional cross-hatching or seemingly left blank. Scheibitz's painting practice is not physical; it does not concern itself with notions of bodies and space, nor with problems of perception or representation. It is a hermetic and sedimentary practice, in which chance and emotion are ruled out and the universe is seen as a mental puzzle to be solved through artistic means. As the individual that occupies this universe-puzzle, he has the potential to both re-order and de-code its elements according to his own criteria, positioning his stand-in forms like pieces in a chess game of two dimensions. The rules of the game are the code, and its variations are infinite.

3

Thomas Scheibitz lives and works in Berlin, Germany. After its first instalment at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany, his solo exhibition 'One-Time Pad' will open at BALTIC, *Gateshead,* UK, *on 26 July.*

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1 Thomas Scheibitz in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist in *About 90 Elements / Tod im Dschungel*, Richter Verlag, 2008

2 Ibid