

## Artificial worlds

‘My point of departure has always been that I can only make a painting by placing it in an artificial world.’ This statement by Thomas Scheibitz, from an interview published in the catalogue for a 2001 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, responded to a question regarding the paintings he refers to as ‘landscapes’. Scheibitz’s interest, as he puts it, is in what he terms a ‘second nature’ nature, that is, in an environment that has already been manipulated and designed, and which he subjects to further transformations in order to make his own.<sup>1</sup> The proprietary artificial world to which he was alluding in his comment would appear to be that evoked, or constituted by, the individual painting, and contained within its borders. More recently, however, sculpture has come to play an increasingly prominent role in his practice, and his solo exhibitions have taken the form of ever more elaborately staged orchestrations of works in different media, as well as architectural modifications of the fabric of the gallery or museum space. In light of these developments, ‘an artificial world’ might now be taken to refer also to the self-contained environment created by the meticulously planned exhibition-installation as a whole. Given the significance Scheibitz attaches to exhibition catalogues - he is the designer of most his publications, and the publisher of some of them - we might even take the further step of considering these, either individually or collectively, as constituting a carefully constructed ‘world’ in their own right. (He wryly describes the exhibition monograph as ‘the ideal solo show’<sup>2</sup>) At the very least we should be especially attentive to the presentation of his reproduced works within their published settings, sometimes juxtaposed with extraneous material, and to the insights such presentations afford into the relationship between the world of the work and the wider world it draws upon in such a self-consciously mediated fashion.

The title of his exhibition at Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Camden Arts Centre, and that of the accompanying catalogue containing this essay, *about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*, offers a useful point of departure from which to approach Scheibitz’s practice as an artist. This involves reading the work from the outside in, and considering certain of the means by which he chooses to frame it. In comparison with some of the elaborately abstruse, self-invented typefaces he has previously employed, both in printed publications and as motifs in various drawings and paintings, the sans serif fonts chosen on this occasion are austere, the very model of clarity. Nevertheless, the disparity between the two typefaces strikes a mildly jarring note, even in this age of typographic indulgence, as does the use of capitals for the German phrase *TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* (Death in the Jungle). These choices deepen the sense of disjuncture, in language, meaning and tone, between the English and German moities of the composite title. Convention and common sense dictate that we should read this title as principally referring to the contents of the exhibition, which does indeed prominently include a large landscape-format canvas, measuring 182 x 365 cm, called *90 Elements* (2007, FIG. 11). This painting features a disorderly pile-up of box-like shapes, though far fewer than 90 in number, flatly rendered in a shallow pictorial space against a seemingly ‘unfinished’ painted grey ground, in a manner that undermines the viewer’s perception of these forms’ putative three-dimensionality. The exhibition title also appears on the catalogue cover, superimposed on a colour photograph of a jumble of Scheibitz’s paintings and sculptures, seen piled up in a corner of his studio, in various stages of apparent

incompletion. This is worth noting, as the carefully staged discordance this photograph exudes is not all that different from the disjunctive, non-hierarchical compositional strategies Scheibitz often employs in the execution of individual works, and indeed in the installation of entire exhibitions. Read at face value, the English phrase *about 90 elements* suggests - simply, if somewhat obscurely - a large number of constituent parts forming a loose mechanistic collectivity, while the German *TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* indicates the more dramatic scenario of a fatal encounter with a naturally formed, bewildering complexity. Scheibitz has offered revealing glosses on this latter phrase, to which we shall return in conclusion. A key to the former phrase, however, may be found in a drawing reproduced toward the end of this catalogue (P. 204), depicting the standard periodic table of the elements familiar to most of us from the physics classes of our schooldays. In this particular version of the periodic table, the boxes in which we might expect to read the abbreviations of the Latin names for the atomic elements are blank. The majority of these blank boxes have been coloured in blue and the rest in pink according to an apparently random system of distribution.

This idiosyncratically customised periodic table is emblematic of an aspect of Scheibitz's work that has been present almost from the outset: the misleading semblance of schematic presentation, the suggestion and subsequent negation of systemic order. This is evident in several paintings clearly derived from maps, plans or charts, whose original function of systematic explication has been wilfully annulled by sundry distensions, distortions and obliterations, much as Scheibitz's invented typefaces tend purposefully toward illegibility. The title of his first museum exhibition, at Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 2001, was *View and Plan of Toledo*, after the painting by El Greco from c. 1610 - 1614, a title he also appropriated for one of his own works. *View and Plan* emphasises the uneasy co-existence of otherwise mutually exclusive modes of representation, the panorama and the map, while also drawing attention to the play between two- and three-dimensionality, which is crucial to Scheibitz's paintings and sculpture alike, and to the relationship between them. His paintings are notably depthless, in terms of both illusionism and psychology. In spite of the proliferation of jagged forms and zig-zagging lines, the rowdy clashes of colour drawn from his unmistakable palette, and the occasional passages of busy brushwork (usually confined to clearly delineated quadrants of a given work, especially in the larger paintings), his imagery is firmly fixed in a shallow pictorial space. Figuration, when it appears, is highly stylised and voided of psychological depth or affective resonance; the deployment of the figure might almost be described as heraldic. No matter how complex the composition, the paint somehow appears to be stretched across the canvas like a thin skin in a manner reminiscent of the markings on an emblazoned shield or painted mask. The sculptures, despite their increasingly substantial size and sometimes considerable volume, appear to have little mass. They always seem hollow, even on those rare occasions when they are not, which partly accounts for their occasionally being compared to theatre or film sets. It may come as no surprise to learn that Scheibitz, the son of a monumental stonemason, began his studies making 'simple, rough plywood sculptures and reliefs'.<sup>3</sup> His return to sculpture as a mature artist again involves producing a model in paper, card, plywood or other such laminar material, before passing it on to a fabricator for scaled-up construction. Pleating, folding and the superimposition of flat planes are prominent strategies, producing topologies that have something in common with origami, but also with certain forms of architecture and architectural detailing. In spite of the complicated and vivid colour schemes of many of the sculptures, painted colour is

emphatically additional, indicating a two-stage process in which the pre-constructed sculptural form is treated like a convoluted three-dimensional blank canvas.

While Scheibitz's formal inventiveness is remarkable, sculptural form and painterly motif alike are almost invariably derived from pre-existent shapes, forms and details, which are gleaned from a vast compendium of images he has collected from disparate sources over the years. (His colour, on the other hand, seems to come from somewhere else entirely.) He is by no means unusual among his peers in assembling such an array of 'research materials', nor is he unique in his decision to include a selection of this imagery in some of his catalogues. The presentation of this material is nonetheless revealing. Despite the profusion of heterogeneous images, it is the evident care with which these images have been collected, edited and juxtaposed, as well as the recurrence of certain image-types, that tease the viewer into imagining that they might be subject to some underlying logic or typological order. Based on the images in this catalogue alone we can imagine a partial categorisation of images culled from Scheibitz's capacious scrapbook that might look something like the following:

- The isolated fragment, as well as the dispersal of fragments, apparently random and never arranged in such a manner as to invite ready recombination
- The newspaper cutting or book excerpt (technical or discursive, rather than narrative fiction)
- The striking, or strikingly odd architectural detail, rarely a whole building (a bombed-out shell is not whole), and always buildings that tend towards the complex rather than the monolithic
- The façade, in which frontality and shallow depth is stressed, even when largely composed of transparent glass
- The ruin or wreck
- The pattern, invariably bounded rather than suggesting its infinite extension
- The mosaic
- The rotated image (usually right-rotated) and the image-pair (usually disjunctively associative)
- The slice of nature, inevitably infiltrated by artifice
- The typographic set
- The scientific chart
- The heraldic device or display
- The logo
- The art-historical image, usually containing elements which tend to propel it out of, rather than fix it in, its proper historical time-frame
- The studio, viewed as a deserted theatre, film or photographic set, never as a site of active labour
- The list, especially the 'list of contents', always incomplete and/or devoid of context, and thereby functionally compromised...

Given the obvious temptation to relate these proposed image-categories somehow to Scheibitz's finished works, the following is a crude list of recognisable recurring forms that may be discerned in his recent paintings:

- The star
- The heart or, when inverted, the spade, as in a deck of cards
- The capital letter A
- The plant
- The rudimentary 'stick' figure, with a large circular head
- The capital letter S
- The table
- The round, cartoon-like or 'neo-Cubist' face
- The capital letter Y
- The house
- The scaffold

If we add to this list the flowers, trees, birds, picket fences and sundry recognisable landscape features - all motifs from the earlier paintings that have all but faded away in recent years - we come to realise that what we are presented with, both in the motifs that find their way into individual works and the vast image-bank from which they are sourced, is a decidedly asystemic typology of forms drawn from divergent, if not incompatible visual domains. What Scheibitz's art hypostasises is a kind of exuberantly faked semiosis in which individual signs, rather than taking their place within an intelligible sign-system, are invariably orphaned and unstable. Specific signs, in spite of their recurrence and apparent significance, seem to have no consistent meaning. Which is not to say that such signs do not solicit, and receive, attention, even when they veer towards illegibility. Thomas Scheibitz is perfectly attuned to a world in which the unveiling of the proposed logo for the 2012 London Olympics can cause a national outcry, as it did in England earlier this year; just as he is an artist happy to admit that, despite a quite traditional art education, he is inclined to scrutinise the latest Coca-Cola advertising with the same degree of forensic attention to form he would bring to bear on a work by Michelangelo.

We may return, in conclusion, to the exhibition title, *about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*. In the version of the periodic table current at the time of writing there are 118 elements. One of these, however, is apparently unconfirmed and therefore still of dubious status, subject to the ongoing research of nuclear physicists synthesising tiny amounts of such recently 'discovered' elements in their laboratories. Our planet, on the other hand, is made up of some 90 elements, of which 25 are used in the make-up of living things. These, then, are the building blocks of the natural world, as opposed to the artificial worlds conjured by the work of Thomas Scheibitz. Turning to the second phrase in the title, we find that, contrary to appearances, *TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* may ultimately refer more properly to the world of culture than that of nature. While Scheibitz borrowed the phrase originally from a magazine article on an ill-fated venture by the maverick German filmmaker Werner Herzog, he admits to being recently delighted to come across a statement by the East German painter A.R. Penck, made some time after he had moved to the West, which declared that 'The East is a desert, the West a jungle'. As it happens, Penck was refused admission to the Dresden Art Academy a generation before Scheibitz studied there, and long before his move to the West. There Penck came to prominence in the 1980s as one of the *Neue Wilden*, while continuing to deploy the elaborately idiosyncratic system of

pictogrammatic signs he had initially proposed as a potential ‘universal language’, Standart, in the early 1960s. The political landscape of Europe has, of course, been subject to seismic shifts over the course of the past few decades. Scheibitz’s encounter with the febrile proliferation of signs and objects, which once typified the West for those of Eastern origin, differed radically from that of his predecessor. We may take the painting *Kapital II* (2007, FIG. 6), as exemplary of Scheibitz’s continuing negotiation of that ‘forest of signs’, which, by the late 1980s, was widely seen as emblematic of a fundamental crisis in representation.<sup>4</sup> That was then and this is now. As whole empires of signs meld under the sign of Empire, the memory of Marxist analysis and doctrine suggested by this painting’s title dissolves into a mirage of floating, reified signifiers: a capital S, a few capital Ys, maybe some As, and perhaps even a reversed and tilted capital L. Shuffled around like so many colourful shards in an impossibly complex and skewed kaleidoscope, the myriad elements that constitute the artificial worlds of Thomas Scheibitz delight and fascinate the viewer precisely because of the momentary illusion of order they repeatedly create, collapse and recreate.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, September 2007

1 Thomas Scheibitz, *Bannister Diamond*, exh. cat. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 20-22.

2 All quotations from the artist, unless otherwise indicated, are from telephone conversations with the author, September 2007.

3 Thomas Scheibitz, *Bannister Diamond*, p. 13.

4 Cf. Ann Goldstein, Mary Jane Jacob, Anne Rorimer and Howard Singerman, *Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Boston: MIT Press, 1989).