

“Not a novel with artificial light. We’re in an open area. A quarry and parts of figures, youth and beauty as a study, [...] the joker and his angular models [...] as cohesion, intuitively or economically applied to the totality by the engraver. A satisfying imprecision along with ongoing precision on the factual level.”<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Thomas Scheibitz, touching on many fundamental aspects of his work without explaining them, may serve well as a beginning for this text, which endeavours in turn to approach the artist’s work without imposing a straight-jacketed interpretation on it. His oeuvre doesn’t tell a story: it is, after all, not a *novel with artificial light* – even if text and the textual always play an important role; as does a *light* that is not of this world. This light thrusts itself, coolly and artificially, in front of and behind things, never forgetting the shadows they cast, which are integral to it. The *figure* appears only as a *part*, a fragment; it has definite need of a *joker and his angular models* in order to generate out of the *quarry* of objects and forms what is ultimately an *intuitive or economical totality*. The handling of the lines, colours and edges assures a captivating *precision* whose glassy hardness can in turn only be endured because we find ourselves *in an open area*, a terrain that comes into such sharp focus only because of its *satisfying imprecision*.

Scheibitz is the most precise artist of imprecision that one can imagine. All of his work in painting and sculpture, which is based on a constantly growing archive of images and materials, presents a repertoire of recurrent, varying forms, entirely in the manner of a quasi-objective, orderly system of signs, albeit one that deliberately renounces legibility. His work creates the “momentary illusion of order”, so to speak – only to destroy it in the next moment.<sup>2</sup> And it operates with rare consistency and serendipity in a “space between observation and memory”, where the focus is not only on freeing the real fragments appearing in the picture of their traces of reality to the point that they become autonomous entities “on the edge of an invention”.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Scheibitz’s work endeavours to intertwine the structurally flat two-dimensionality of a painted picture with the fundamental three-dimensionality of a sculptural volume to such a degree that this dichotomy gives rise to a new, independent reality.

In this context, an important role must be ascribed to Scheibitz’s relationship to El Greco (alongside that to Blinky Palermo, on whom more later). It is no coincidence, after all, that Scheibitz not only named his early, important exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur (2001) after El Greco’s *View and Plan of Toledo* (1610–1614), but also gave this title to a painting (p. 115) from the year 2000. This piece of El Greco’s is the unchallenged highlight of the various views of Toledo the artist painted late in his life. Shortly before his death, he here brought to fruition an understanding of

the image by which the depiction of an urban panorama becomes a complex discourse about representation and symbolic abstraction. El Greco brings together the panorama of the city, shining with a spooky whiteness, in the background of the picture, with a map of the same city in the foreground. The two-dimensional cartographical abstraction appears to make an equivalent claim to reality and exists in the same pictorial space as the spatially elaborated view of the city, which, for its part, is structured not with an eye to actual reality but solely according to compositional considerations. Thus El Greco departs in a double sense from the requirement of faithfulness in mimetic representation, which is still apparent in Adorno’s dictum that art consists of “mimesis and construction”. *View and Plan of Toledo*, on the other hand, fundamentally insists that the view itself is the consequence of a constructive impulse, to which the abstraction of the map is not contrasting but complementary.

This conceptual treatment of reality and the possibilities of translating it onto the levels of sculpture and image is also the motivation for Scheibitz’s work. The complex process of developing images and objects – which leads from the visual scanning of diverse archival material to initial sketches to precisely elaborated drawings and only then to become a painting or sculptural object – always searches for the point where what has been seen becomes a form that references something external even while disavowing it. In order for his work to continue successfully on this knife-edge – (hence the title of this essay) – the material from which Scheibitz derives his pictorial inspiration must initially be freed of its contents. Regardless of what the artist works with – architectural forms, letters of the alphabet, playing cards, houses, birds, landscapes and so forth – everything is interesting solely as form or as raw material, but not on the basis of its references to an external context. As a pure form and pure raw material, it can be used as an alphabet that has been freed so as to operate within its own logic, to make sense only on its own terms. This gives rise to a storehouse of sculpturally or pictorially elaborated forms that, like actors portraying themselves, are assembled and repeatedly re-arranged upon the two- and three-dimensional stages of the artist’s work.

Scheibitz has spoken of these forms in terms of their being “representatives” – an apt description of their status in that a representative is not directly linked to what he or she represents but instead stands in for something else, occupying its position. In this sense, all of Scheibitz’s works deploy an idea of similarity, which is to say are ultimately informed by the structure of a comparative act of vision. This generates the synapses and correspondences between objects and forms that can, in terms of content, be quite removed from one another. Scheibitz basically turns back to a fundamental condition of our visual appropriation of the world, whereby an act of vision consists not in defining a succession of isolated visual events but in establishing connections based on acts of recognition. The artist, however, makes

use of this anthropological constant only to immediately undermine it in a dialectical way. *EX* (1998, p. 198), for example, presents – in front of a background arranged into fields of yellow, green and brown, interlaced with branch-like structures – a grey oval form upon which six red rectangular forms have been distributed more or less symmetrically. Because the two rectangles in the upper section of the oval form are filled in with dark paint, and because a further rectangle in the lower third of the oval has itself got an oval painted around it, it is almost impossible not to interpret the form as a head with eyes, nose and mouth. The problem with this reading, however, is that there are two additional rectangles on the oval, which work against the association with an abstracted face, making one think of a building instead. The artistry in this work, as in many others, consists not in resolving but instead in maintaining the tension between these two levels of the visual, thereby imbuing painted forms with an autonomy that situates them far beyond the historical dichotomy of figuration and abstraction.

As the artist himself once put it, the space within and from which his paintings and sculptural objects arise is “the intermediate space of direct observation”.<sup>4</sup> This notion of “intermediate space” in turn brings to the fore the interesting dialectical principle within Scheibitz’s work: namely the intensely tectonic, constructed, object-like structure of the pictures on the one hand; and, on the other, the forms he gives his sculptures, which are clearly oriented towards their pictorial qualities. For Scheibitz, painting is neither the designing of pure flatness nor the opening-up of illusionistic space; it is above all a tangible event – just as, on the other hand, the sculptures themselves never make a secret of their proximity to pictures. Asked by Isabelle Graw in an interview about what he found attractive about painting on canvas, the artist explained: “I’m interested in the object-like quality,” and a little later: “What I am basically interested in [is] that one can combine [...] things in order to find something new.”<sup>5</sup> But this does not mean that the ensuing pictures are simply two-dimensional versions of sculptural forms or, conversely, that the objects themselves merely represent the three-dimensional version of pictures. In both cases it is about acts of transformation that lead further, into an “intermediate space”, where the status of picture-objects and object-pictures can no longer be determined through a simple process of deduction, but builds its significance through the interactions of the elements of a work of either kind.

The thesis of the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who saw meaning not in individual words but in the connections among them, accordingly applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Scheibitz as well: The emancipation of the picture/object, its transformation into an autonomous work, occurs on the basis of the multivalence of its individual elements working in combination.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the endeavour to liberate painting and sculpture from the traditional constraints

of these mediums, and to redefine them within their own “intermediate space”, bespeaks a clearly recognisable proximity to Blinky Palermo. And it is precisely the simultaneity of the sculpture-like object and pictorial composition as formulated by Palermo, together with his search for the self-defining work of art, that links Scheibitz to this erstwhile student of Beuys, who died before his time in 1977.

Scheibitz’s project is, however, based not on constructive and minimalist reduction but on a voracious appropriation of everyday subject matter and references. Ranging from architectonic forms, still lifes and landscape elements to figurines or portraits to logos, comic strips and typography, this visual world feeds upon an almost infinite stream of sources and ideas from the artist’s archive. Almost all of the catalogues, which are as a rule designed by Scheibitz himself, bear witness to the importance of this raw material for the final works – as well as making it clear that these archival materials always serve “merely” as purely visual, formal catalysts for the aforementioned idea of the combinatory self-generation of the work of art.

As “semantic groupings of indistinctly idiosyncratic elements”,<sup>7</sup> all of his works function as ambiguous images in that they can be read in more than one way. Endowed with a peculiar life of their own, they replicate a realistic cohesiveness that they on the one hand repeatedly pursue with great determination, only to deliberately render it null and void thereafter. Many aspects of Scheibitz’s work engage in such a dialectic of revelation and withdrawal, of decoding and encoding.<sup>8</sup> The bright, sign-like palette and the precisely delineated forms and the elements of the alphabet that the artist has used frequently since the end of the 1990s make his works striking like a logo, suggesting they have an obviousness and legibility that then invariably comes up against its limits when one tries to decode them in a symbolically unambiguous manner.

The importance Scheibitz assigns to the balance between orientation and disorientation is also evident in his proposal for the central exhibition space of the show in Bonn. In the centre of the room is a three-by-four-metre table upon which are collected many objects from the artist’s archives. They are, however, arranged in a deliberately disordered, almost chaotic way, and as such undermine the putative system of order that might otherwise underlie such a mode of presentation. This “anti-master-plan table” is framed by four enormous paintings (each 280 × 460 cm) mounted on the walls of the gallery; the idea was that their titles would indicate the four cardinal directions to which they were assigned in a direct reference to Blinky Palermo’s *Himmelsrichtungen* (Cardinal Directions, 1976), which the artist realised for the 1976 Venice Biennale in the context of the exhibition “Ambiente/Arte”, curated by Germano Celant. Palermo’s work, which was reconstructed for the 2009 Venice Biennale, consisted of four large glass panels framed in black steel, painted from behind in mono-

chrome and respectively installed diagonally in the corners of a room. Red was assigned to the west, yellow to the north, white to the south and black to the east.

Palermo's act of artistic translation, through which colours become the defining coordinates of an abstract but indispensable geographical system of orientation, served as a guide for Scheibitz in his painterly operations in the central exhibition space in Bonn. But in comparison to Palermo's strictly monochromatic works, he has significantly heightened the charge of these pictorial events. Scheibitz's four pictures seek to outdo each other with their virtuosic interconnections of extremely divergent elements and pictorial levels, which are joined together like backdrops and exist in complementary or contrasting relationships to one another. The intensification of complexity striven for by these large-format works finds its mirrored in the titles which Scheibitz has given them: West-North-West (*WNW*, pp. 106/107), North-North-East (*NNO*, pp. 146/147), East-South-East (*OSO*, pp. 166/167) and South-South-West (*SSW*, pp. 126/127) appear on first glance to signal a meticulous further specification of the very broad-brush clarity of the four cardinal directions. In reality, however, they formulate exactly the "satisfying imprecision" of Scheibitz's entire oeuvre. And beyond that, they point, in the sense of a fundamental uncertainty principle, towards the impossibility of any fixed system of coordinates.

Regardless of where viewers begin to wish to get behind the cool, smooth surfaces of these object-forms, they are inevitably pushed back to the surface. The referential element that both the sculptural objects and the paintings seem to express with such broad-chested insistence is in fact pure camouflage, because here the link between signifier and signified simply no longer exists. Their objecthood refuses to allow them to be interpreted in terms of content; instead, they are evidentiary solely on the basis of their surfaces, which "should feel something like skin – not dry, but also not moist or greasy".<sup>9</sup> This suggestion that they are like skin is interesting in that it implies a living, breathing and haptic tangibility that stands in apparent contrast to the cool hardness with which these works confront us. With their bright colours set against a cold, merciless white, they create an artificiality that

is, in many pictures, further intensified by their stage-like composition.

Regardless of who it is who is performing on this stage – guided by brushwork that effortlessly combines hard-edge rigor with felt-tip-pen graphics, and matter-of-fact, house-painter monochromatism with post-gestural streaks of paint – they have stepped into a world that no longer obeys the criterion of mimesis; in its place is the logic of the picture itself. Still, however, the yearning to touch and be touched proposed in the skin metaphor above demands to be taken seriously. In a certain sense, it articulates a mannerist legacy that uses an exaggerated artificiality to seek a new form of pictorial authenticity and truthfulness, at whose centre is the overcoming of nature through art.

In this sense, something Scheibitz once said about the five versions of El Greco's *Maria Magdalena* also applies to some extent to his own works. They likewise leave the sense of a "satisfying artificiality" through their "frozen, cold-painted" palette. Here, too, "elements from the picture's background story come to painterly expression on the same level as its foreground"; and the "highly varied, atmospheric 'neon lamps' in conflict with the most artificial materials in the world" backlight all components of the picture in such a way that it seems "as if we were confronted with a filmstrip that has come to a stop within a projector".<sup>10</sup> In the cosmos through which Scheibitz moves, the chilling, freezing and transformation of what has been seen is the precondition for their ability to matter, for the viewer, as pictures and objects. In this hot-cold world, the precision of the line serves above all to lead that which has been delineated back to itself, and thus not to explain or clarify it, but to reveal the reality of its own order. And correspondingly, the light which is cast upon these stage-like pictures and objects does not illuminate the things themselves as much as it reveals the shadows they cast, and makes it clear how these shadows in turn can attain a ghostly objecthood of their own. This is a pictorial world that establishes proximity through distance and, in its vitreous nearness-farness, reaches that narrow knife-edge of invention in which what was previously known but has not yet been recognised in a meaningful context<sup>11</sup> comes together – in a unity of disparate elements.

1 Thomas Scheibitz, *TEXTE NOTIZEN SZENARIEN*, Berlin 2016, p. 46.

2 Caoimhin Mac Giolla Léith, *Artificial Worlds*, in Thomas Scheibitz: *about 90 elements / TOD IM DRSCHUNGEL*, exhibition catalogue, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Camden Arts Centre, London 2007, p. 16.

3 *The Pitfalls of Research-Painting. A conversation with Thomas Scheibitz by Isabelle Graw*, in *Thomas Scheibitz: ONE-Time Pad*, exhibition catalogue, MMK Frankfurt and BALTIC Center for Contemporary Art, Cologne 2012, p. 245.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 245, where »ein Zwischenraum der direkten Anschauung« is translated as »an interstice of direct visual perception«.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

6 Cf. in this regard: *Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, in Thomas Scheibitz: *about 90 elements*, (fn. 2), p. 129.

7 Beate Söntgen, *Layering: On the paintings of Thomas Scheibitz*, in Thomas Scheibitz: *ONE-Time Pad*, (fn. 3), p. 250.

8 Thomas Scheibitz himself has alluded to the theme of coding and decoding, for example with the exhibition title *ONE-Time Pad* for his exhibition at the MMK Frankfurt in 2012. The title refers to an extremely secure method of encryption in which the code must be selected anew for each individual message.

9 *The Pitfalls of Research Painting*, in Thomas Scheibitz, *ONE-Time Pad*, (fn. 3), p. 248.

10 Thomas Scheibitz, *El Greco. 5 x Maria Magdalena*, in *TEXTE NOTIZEN SZENARIEN*, Berlin 2016, p. 27 ff.

11 Cf. Thomas Scheibitz, *TEXTE NOTIZEN SZENARIEN*, Berlin 2016, p. 9.