ALL YOU NEED – The pictorial concept of Peter Zimmermann

Peter Zimmermann's (born in 1956) artistic position is markedly characterised by a theoretical anchoring, which, under the catchphrase institutional critique, dominated the discourse during the 1980s in Cologne. With the emergence of new image technology—the so-called new media—both political and social as well as artistic paradigms were renegotiated with regard to visual systems, all of which occurring in conjunction with the question relating to the status of painting itself.

During the mid-1980s Peter Zimmermann's artistic production referenced the current question regarding an adequate construction and definition of contemporary art and its forms of reception. He deconstructs traditional pictorial concepts in his work by also opening himself up to commercial pictorial strategies. Zimmermann demonstrates the rhetorical composition of mass media images as they appear on advertising hoardings, in newspapers, magazines, on television and in the Internet and at the same time deconstructs recognised traditions or milestones in art *per se*. Cognitive knowledge about the multi-layered significance of visual structures resides at the heart of the matter here. By making this knowledge the starting point for his artistic endeavour, Peter Zimmermann makes reference to the defining cultural power inherent in visual pictorial practices and also prompts the question regarding his own artistic position.

Making Of

Zimmermann's artistic career, which spans a period of some twenty years, is characterised by two reflexive strategies: the early works from the mid-1980s to the start of the 1990s are predicated primarily upon the concepts of the cover version and that of simulation, whereas the numerous, so-called *blob paintings* originated since the mid-1990s are concerned with the mediatisation of motif, with the idea of remix. Perpetually centre stage here is the question regarding the actual physical composition of the paintings.

The introduction of the *pictorial turn* at the beginning of the 1990s effectively supplanted the *linguistic turn* from the 1970s as the central pillar of debate. Zimmermann's own positioning also changed during the 1990s. He describes his personal and artistic crisis at the close of the 1980s, which prompted his withdrawal from the ideological debate. He no longer regarded himself in his role as an artist as the aesthetic handmaiden of social utopia. From the mid-1990s onwards it is also possible to perceive a burgeoning distance in his artistic approach to the metaphor of culture as text. Textual signs are replaced by complex, multi-layered visual structures on the surfaces of pictures. On a formal level too, it is possible to speak of a something akin to ideological disarmament. The sensual, abstract, shiny surfaces of Peter Zimmermann's images are tightly married with a media-oriented pictorial method. By contrast with his early works it is not exclusively about exposing the attribution and function of meaning inherent in visual structures. Peter Zimmermann chooses to focus instead upon the fascination within the composition itself and upon the eventful nature of contingency.

The Pictorial Strategy: the Cover Version

The *Book Cover Paintings* are based upon the idea of deconstructing recognised cultural and scientific publications as representatives of a traditional concept of culture. The first examples of this particular series of book titles originated at the end of the 1980s. As the subjects of his paintings Zimmermann has chosen without exception well-known dictionaries, lexica, school reference books, travel guides and food books, the classical texts of art and cultural theory, as well as monographs on abstract painters. He transfers the book jackets in particular into the medium of painting, for example the universally recognised Dierke's *World Atlas*, which he painted in oils in a large format in 1987. The extensively realistic subject matter painted in heavy oils takes on the status of an object by virtue of the large format. The avoidance of every subjective form is a significant feature in the painterly execution; instead, the depiction of the print seems to be reduced to a merely anonymous reproduction. Zimmermann not only depicts the individual letters but also the individual forms of the reproduced pictorial motifs by means of

technical processes. He uses stencils on plastic foil cut from a plotter, attaches them to a grounded canvas and uses them as either positive or negative forms for the application of paint. Since the start of the 1990s, Peter Zimmermann has almost exclusively used epoxy resin, into which he mixes colour pigments. This is then poured onto the canvas and after it has hardened and the stencil has been removed, the finished painting is produced. In this way and through this procedure, Peter Zimmermann creates the shiny surfaces, which are so typical of his work and which seem to have been manufactured industrially, thus convincingly simulating the appearance of a printed finish within the medium and technical remit of painting. The concrete forms appear to have been simulated when viewed in detail, but lose literal meaning and transform themselves within the context of the composition into abstract symbols. With regard to the interpretation of the paintings, the transformation into the medium of painting takes on the guise of a demonstration. The use of letters means a verbalisation of the picture as well as a pictorialisation of language. Mere depiction itself proves to be a veritable divestiture of meaning. The titles of popular scientific publications are reduced to the status of representatives, to that of ideological "stirrups" of an imperialist cultural self-image.

The book titles, replete with large-format reproductions of works by Jackson Pollock, draw attention above all to the latter's relevance within the scope of art historical analysis. Zimmermann strategically marks out the discursive as well as the art-theoretical frame of reference to which he, too, as an artist is subject. The catalogue covers refer to the institutional and cultural power of museums, galleries and not least to academic publications, in which the evaluation of art is undertaken in socially and historically determined arenas. The art catalogues prove themselves to be important instruments within this powerful process of establishment, as proven means of the production of meaning and formation of values. The status and the evaluation of art unfold within the context of its reception. Zimmermann has presented his fascination for these mechanisms of reception using Jackson Pollock's work as an example in a total of eleven separate works. Pollock is not only regarded as one of the most important protagonists of Abstract Expressionism, but has been stylised alongside Andy Warhol as the US American artist most shrouded in myth. At the start of the 1960s Pollock's painting advanced to become an icon of American modernity, the status of which being duly cemented by Clement Greenberg's art-historical positioning. In Peter Zimmermann's doubled version, the preceding catalogue template, including the reproduction of a work by Pollock, is copied in detail. The transformation in to the medium of painting undertaken by Zimmermann reveals that the "all-over" *gestus*, itself redolent of informel, has progressed to become a production template of modernism, in which the myth of the creative predominates. Zimmermann deconstructs the myth of genius adhering to Pollock's personage by faithfully copying in minute detail the very uniqueness of this informel-style drip painting. By means of an intricate reproduction technique, he painstakingly repeats the multi-layered all-over structure using epoxy resin. Within the scope of his own concealed authorship, Zimmermann adopts a conceptual position that veritably breaches the myth of spontaneity and uniqueness of the original—itself culminating in the idealisation of Pollock the artist—using the means of reproduction.

In the cardboard objects and spatial installations created by Peter Zimmermann at the start of the 1990s, commercial systems within the context of art are made apparent. The famous Brillo Boxes by Andy Warhol not only thematised the status of art and commerce within Pop Art itself, but also raised the sensitivity for the design of utility objects in general. Peter Zimmermann produces boxes in the context of this network, which resemble industrial forms in their physical appearance. He convincingly simulates the forms of communication in the everyday world of retail. On a graphic and textual level he implies the language of the product and its marketing. However, this occurs with the notable limitation that he copies commercially familiar typologies, but notably not the text itself. He replaces this with fragments of text, which taken individually don't make any sense. It is only when arranged within the installation of different box objects that the meaning of the critical thrust emerges. The intended effect is a linguistic one, the reader/viewer is shown how decorative and manipulative design and language actually functions and how they can be instrumentalised. The artistic dimension reveals an aesthetic illusion by means of which its deconstruction is implemented. The project can only be designated art ultimately when the boundary with reality is drawn once more. Zimmermann pursues this principle by introducing disturbances into the simulation of normed elements of design, for example by exchanging the proportional distortion of the box with the letterings. The artistic content resides in the principle of camouflage in the dissimulation of non-art, the undertaken illusion is at once the basis of political subversion and enlightenment.

The Pictorial Turn – Evidence of the Visual

In 1992 the American theoretician W. T. Mitchell published the essay *Pictorial Turn*. Based on the insight that the dissemination of information as well as the exercise of power within our society increasingly occurs with the aid of visual technology, Mitchell postulates a more intensive collaboration between social scientists critical of ideology and image theorists. Mitchell's argument becomes controversial when he stipulates that the *linguistic turn* in cultural sciences has been supplanted by a *pictorial turn*. In so doing Mitchell is criticising the pre-eminence of a semiotic interpretational approach within the field of the arts since the 1960s that seeks solely to evaluate models from the realms of semiotics and linguistics as critical, progressive and avant-garde under the banner of the so-named linguistic turn. Mitchell doesn't doubt the fundamental authority and the critical potential of this approach, but he is sceptical as to whether the function and effect of visual media can be adequately and exhaustively encompassed with the aid of semiotic models. With the declaration of the pictorial turn, Mitchell associates the call to a more intense vigilance with regard to the specific, to the added value of the visual, that is to say to those aspects, which distinguish images from text. This demand is based upon the recognition that forms of looking (seeing, the eye, the fleeting glance, the practices of observing, surveillance and visual delight) represent in equal measure profound problems as to the different forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpreting, etc.) and that visual experience or the "visual capacity to read" (visual competence) cannot be completely explained in terms the salient model of textuality. Mitchell not only readdresses the ontological question regarding the substantive essence of images—what images actually *are*—but also and more importantly regarding the circumstance that a re-evaluation needs to take place in our estimation of visual media *per se*. Mitchell reproaches semiotic positions for yielding up an iconoclastic characteristic, that is to say the fact that texts are granted a greater privilege by contrast with the image. In the special *Visual Culture* edition of the American periodical *October 77* (1996), the American theorist Rosalind Krauss has taken incisive issue with the catalogue of stipulations put forward in the *pictorial turn*. In her contribution "Welcome to the Cultural Revolution", she defends the semiotic approach. In decisive passages of her argument she speaks out against the wholesale upgrading of popular visual culture. Krauss bases her rejection here upon Roland Barthes, whose theorems have to a certain extent established themselves as established dogmas in the discourses surrounding culture and ideological critique. At the close of the 1950s Barthes viewed culture as a network of interrelated systems of signs. On the basis of this it is possible to view social codes and all manner of cultural norms and stereotypes as systems of signs that govern the meaning, the value and status of people or things. The visual as such appears as a negative counterpart to the textual. While the text permits a complex and heterogeneous thinking, images evoke the illusion of the unequivocal by means of their *evidenzversprechen*, or promise of verisimilitude. The critique of the image takes place in this particular model in such a way that the semiologist unveils the lie in this verisimilitude by revealing the concealed signifier once more. By reading the image as a text, he veils the symbolic character of the coded and constructed essence of the picture and thus disrupts its power. As an image, the image is a lie. The truth of the image reveals itself only then when one reads it as a text.

The Pictorial Strategy Remix and Sampling

In his works from the mid 1990s onwards Peter Zimmermann concentrates upon a medialisation of the visual in step with the debate surrounding the shift from the semiotic to the phenomenological.

Zimmermann's anecdote about the further development of this strategy comes across as a hybrid game involving different levels of reality.

The poured, layered pictures originated in the 1990s using epoxy resin containing colour pigments are based upon an elaborate production process, the fundamental idea of which can be traced back to the work *Remix* that was exhibited in London in 1995. The image file of a poster wall piece was sent to London on a diskette where the data was to be "remixed". Something went wrong upon opening the file. The deformed file was printed in 6 x 2 metre dimensions and effectively exhibited as an "automatic remix" of the original image.

Peter Zimmermann uses scanned sections from his personal, so-named picture archive that comprises his older works, as well as material garnered from the Internet, television or other forms of information media. He subjects the respective work in question to further processing and treatment in Adobe Photoshop. He uses a variety of filters without adhering necessarily to a strict system and the images are duly defamiliarised until a satisfactory result has been achieved (as far as the artist is concerned). The fact that computer-generated images are formulated as two-dimensional matrices makes it possible to subject them to mathematical operations—the Photoshop filters are no exception here. A large proportion of the pictorial specifics of photography or painting, once formulated, can be simulated virtually as filters. The computer as a universal machine has literally imbibed the greater part of all preceding pictorial media.

The dot images from 1999, 2000 and 2001, which are made up of primary and secondary colours, are suggestive of the offset printing process. At first glace they appear as though they are massively enlarged sections. The colourful, partially overlapping circles distributed across the surfaces take on the appearance of Benday dots in industrial reproduction technology. This grid appearance made up for the most part from regular pixels is thus a technically necessary mode of communication. The photographic items chosen from the archive of images are modified by Zimmermann using Photoshop filters and the command "colour halftone" in the pixelate section, so that the respective image is transformed into a rough grid of tones. By using this technical method Zimmermann translates the concrete image template into an abstract technical repro-template, from which he processes specific sections still further. Seen in this light Peter Zimmermann's re-appropriation of the computer image through painting is an act that follows the logic of sampling and which in turn permits computer media the possibility of simulating almost every other medial form by the processes of sampling and formalising (digitalising). The artistic process of composition in Peter Zimmermann's work is predicated thus upon scanned, that is to say, sampled, digitalised images that he has subjected to image processing. He uses image processing to dereferentialise the sampled data and material and to transform it into an abstract aesthetic event. Zimmermann adheres to the logic of selection, itself typical of modern computer software, whereby he legitimates the abstraction of concrete signs as a consistent technological consequence. He draws upon a form of authorship, which he applies correspondingly to the Book Cover Paintings that can equally be regarded as abstract images with regard to the strategy of simulation.

Hereafter Peter Zimmermann modifies the grid-like structures of dots, that is to say circles, to seemingly organic forms. The amorphous, partly kidney table–like forms—which Hubertus Butin calls *blobs*—are placed in different layers relief-like on the surface of the canvas, glowing with intense colours and distributed in a regular, all-over across the surface of the painting. The colour settings produce an irregular, complex system that simulates technoid structures and in which there are no discernible formal design principles. The confluence of the layers of paint in epoxy resin give rise to the highly glossy, iridescent effects, whose contours the viewer's eye is unavailingly at pains to chart. At times the archipelagos of colour on the surface of the painting cohere more harmoniously, at times the contrasts are bright and stark or perhaps the structures occupy more of the surface, only then to become more linear, dynamic or ordered once more. The collection of pictorial material reveals differing types of structures ranging to and fro between wide-surface colour compositions and linear colour structures. From 2004 on Peter Zimmermann has been generating increasingly geometrical structures that subdivide the surface of the painting in raster-like format and look every bit the product of commercial design. Within the overall structure of the numerous paintings an experimental openness has emerged, which in turn presents diverse pictorial structures in various forms. In the most current paintings it is possible to discern an element of formal design reminiscent in part of traditional compositional patterns of modernism.

The Pictorial Strategy Contingency

Eigentlich könnte alles auch anders sein ["And then again everything could actually be quite different"] is the title of a comprehensive publication published in 1988 on Peter Zimmermann's work. The artist considers this book to be a substantial contribution to the exhibition, but not only in the sense of a catalogue or a reader, but as a concrete object within the exhibition itself. By alluding to the poetics of the accident, he avoids any declaration of intent defining his work as the outcome of an event, which seems to render obsolete any quest for meaning. The aesthetics of the aleatory also implies ultimately the rejection of those vestiges of individual and artistic decision-making that in turn result necessarily in the suppression of alternatives. Anyone deigning to bestow the aleatory a voice of its own seems to be beyond any sense of blame.

In the light of this, materiality and the sensual nature of the forms reveal themselves as elements of rebellion against the imputation of meaning. The artistic production in this sense no longer represents a

meaningful order, nor an orientation in the world, instead places the compositional focus upon the results of technical processes. On the level of pure viewing as an activity, it would appear then that the shift from the culture of meaning to that of presence has been duly navigated in paradigmatic fashion. One's attention is drawn to the phenomenology of the accident, the model of "presence culture" renounces explanation or interpretation.

This development has also been subject to theoretical critique. Within the framework of the shift in perspective, cultural phenomena have been able to establish themselves which, in the model of the culture of meaning, are duly regarded as trivial, kitschy, low-brow or possessing a tendency to "dumb-down", i.e. intrinsically inferior elements aesthetically speaking. In so doing, an argument is engaged regarding the way cultural items are able to be defined in this context. It is maintained that presence structure is predicated upon a sensory appropriation of the self within the world. Art is said to lose its political function—with which it is endowed in the other culture-of-meaning model— as an instance of elevated insight here, appearing as the site of intensive experience of the world and of self. The aesthetics of the event is perceived thus as the logical reaction to the experience of a philosophical, that is to say, art-theoretical paradigm shift, contingency is revealed as basic category of modernity. Within courses referred to alternately as Visual Studies or as Visual Culture, the opening up i.e. extension of traditional visual systems is favoured in concordance with the gamut of audiovisual production and thus the boundaries between classical pictorial disciplines are suspended. A great deal of scepticism was voiced about the formation of new picture theory on the part of critics. The interdisciplinary project Visual Culture was thought to favour a concept of the visual that adhered to capitalist logic without offering any resistance. The new leading category "image" was perceived as being independent of respective medial and material vehicles. The "image" oscillated between the "virtual spaces of the exchange of signs and phantasmical projection". In this way it was deemed to have become somewhat adrift, instrumental and corruptible. Ultimately the editors of *October* neatly summed up the ideological function of visual culture as a capitalist-friendly training centre. The loss of a media-specific notion of the picture has lead to the supposition "that visual studies have contributed in their own modest academic way in producing subjects for the next stage of globalised capitalism".

The Pictorial Strategy of the Handmade

Zimmermann's paintings represent a medial compositionality. The concept of the image follows the logic of the computer and technology; it is digitally produced, whereas its implementation appears to be hand-made, indeed doubly so: in the shimmering polish and the glowing colours of the surface, a form of artificiality is simulated, which makes the motifs in the compositions appear as though prints of a futurist super printer. However, the opulent, sensual materiality of the surface makes it evident that we are dealing with a computer-generated product. In the intensely colourful, layered, plastic character of the compositions, a quality emerges, which cannot be achieved via digital media. The technological application of the computer serves the sole purpose as a preparatory instrument, ultimately as an aid to painting. By comparison with photography, network, film or video art, the finished picture is by no means media art. The production is not by means of a machine but through the hand of the artist who successively applies the colours to the canvas. By stressing this particular, it is by no means a case—as is true of Jackson Pollock—of turning the subject of the artist into a fetish. The application of paint is a characteristically skilled enterprise and the structure of the painting resides in the predetermined conception of the stencil shapes. What is more decisive however is the fact that the artistic picture retains its genuine painterly quality through the transference of the digital, computer-generated motif on to the canvas: the object character of the canvas, the relief-like, almost haptic quality of the surface made up of layers of paint, the specific, intense sheen of the epoxy resin the extensive transparency of the iridescent layers of colour, as well as their clearly incremental construction. By means of the transference into the realm of painting, the computer images regain the very thing that all images lose when transferred into the virtual—namely materiality; and that means the material "co-presence" of all pictorial points that distinguish painting and photography from screen images: this friction loss of electronic storage and digitalisation is evidently suspended in the case of the tactile object that is a painting. The beautiful image that computers simply cannot bring about remains resplendent as a unique specimen.

The separation of concept and implementation is the prerequisite of a conceptual understanding of art based on "objectivisation" and which renders the artist anonymous to a large extent. The production of subjectivity stops being an instrument of social control and becomes directly productive, targeting the construction of consuming-communicating subjects, who are themselves "active". This immaterialisation of production through the interplay of computerisation and culturalisation creates in the best case new subjectivities and collectives that are able to recognise possibilities for a social practice in the altered situation, which might be more than the mere affirmation of neo-liberal world order. Within the framework of their pictorial strategies, Zimmermann's paintings represent the predominant *zeitgeist*. Computers and the possibilities inherent in software programmes form a common denominator connecting the technically-minded audience with the artist. The consumers of popular visual culture command an essential competence when using media. In today's media society the question is justified as to whether there is such a thing as a "naive" consumer of an image. The fact that images are manipulated is now generally accepted as a received wisdom. A traditional pictorial concept oriented towards painting could not appropriately represent the potential of the computer image. The release from its social and technical conditions of production elevates the disposability and malleability of the image. What is meant here is not merely digitalised images, but also images emanating from the psychic order of the imagination. Individuals can identify with these phantasmical images in order to become images themselves, which can be circulated unfettered by the materiality of the body. This experience is immediate in Peter Zimmermann's walk-in, spatial installations. Computers and the possibilities of software form the basis for design and production of three-dimensional objects. Virtual sculpturing permits the completely free design of a virtual body with virtual tools. The idea of an industrial object is produced in artistic simulation. In the concrete act of looking, this regenerates in turn the impulses of nerve cells of a living subject and thereby produces an aesthetic authenticity. The combination of the hand-made and sampling of sections can also be perceived in a pan-cultural context as a spontaneous open reaction to leaps in technical innovation, which take place with increasing rapidity and in whose wake enormous insecurity is unleashed in society. Evidenced in Peter Zimmermann's artistic practice and duly integrated into his designs are not merely the new technologies and their effects upon artistic production, but also those new conditions of production they engender. Without doubt a lasting shockwave in the understanding of art and thereby the role of the artist has resulted from the development of digital technology and means of communication. Zimmermann reacts with all the means at his disposal within this manifestly unstable relationship between technology and art—with design experiments, which on the one hand pitch the hand-made against the virtual and which transform the immaculately smooth form of digital production into an immaculately smooth mode of painting. His hybrid design concept naturally combines the handcrafted with digital elements—an approach for the future perhaps? The unique specimen readily stands out against the impersonal, industrial mass production and artistic quality is achieved by means of manual processing. The "handmade experience" appears as a topical form of self-assurance in view of permanently changing conditions, which are interpreted anew and differently today—as the definition of a whole generation's position, which self-evidently has recourse to digital technology. Thus we are not essentially dealing with an oppositional attitude to digital processes inspired by handcrafted expertise in the case of this artistic process. On the contrary: the application of the purely handcrafted is the direct result of a relaxed relationship to new technologies. It is precisely the mixture of handcrafted technique and industrial high-tech processes in Peter Zimmermann's art that exemplifies a free and masterful handling of all the technical and artistic means available, leading ultimately to a new hybrid aesthetic. Of two-fold importance here: the artist's inspiration and the element of experimentation with the moment—a spontaneous hand at a high-tech rudder defines the new authorship in the field of art. This is all you need!

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