# In the studio or
The void interval slipping forever through time

Stefanie Stallschus

What does it sound like when a brush applies paint to a canvas? It is a lot rougher, sharper than the soft bristles may suggest. Standing in the Octagon of Galerie Stadt Sindelfingen in the middle of the video installation *studio* (2019), is tantamount to following Peter Zimmermann to the place where he creates and then to explore it, not only with your eyes, but also with your ears.

Seven tablets spread throughout the space convey an impression of how the artist's new paintings are produced. On the small-format screens, in various forms, one sees how photographic templates are altered in a digital image editing programme. The starting images — some his own photographs, others found material — run through the application and assume, brushstroke for brushstroke, the appearance of impressionist paintings. The sound of the installation, on the other hand, reproduces another step in the process. We hear the sounds of a real brush from when the template is transferred onto Forex board at a later point, hand painted with oil paints and thus becoming a tangible image object. In this way, the installation links various visual and acoustic elements into a single occurrence, synthesising the actual successive steps into a heterogeneous simultaneity in order to draw attention to several aspects of the studio as a place of production: on one hand the mobile digital photo studio for the preparation of the motif, on the other the local atelier for the work's manual execution, and finally the gallery space as a temporary place of presentation, in which the conditions of the images' origins become the theme.
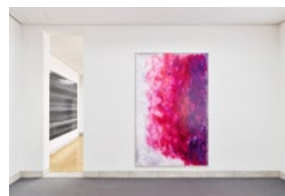
The almost haptic presence of a painting like *bougainville* (2019), which is among the most recent works in the exhibition, is mesmerising. At first glance it appears to be a non-representational image in the tradition of modernist abstract painting. Only the dynamic orientation of the short, clearly visible brushstrokes lends the organic form a fluffy materiality, which makes one think of fur, feathers or flowing corals. The seemingly pure visuality of the image thus opens up to figurative associations that are not random, but rather lie in the logic of the production process. There is always a photographic template at the beginning, whose figurative reference is minimised by its clipping, enlargement and further processing, but can still be sensed schematically in the composition, coming more clearly to light with the brush's movements.

This oscillation between different states of abstraction and real-world reference in the paintings is quite typical of Peter Zimmermann's conceptual approach[1]. One of their qualities is that they process a thematisation of their own pictoriality. They can therefore also be understood as what William J. T. Mitchell calls meta-pictures. However, their perception as meta-pictures, according to Mitchell, is conditional on the willingness of the viewer to relativise their own perspective and to question the boundary between the inside and the outside of the image. The structure of the meta-picture has similarities with a nested image, which reveals itself to be the exterior of another interior[2]. These self-reflective pictures appear early on in Peter Zimmermann's work.

One need only think of the series of painted book covers and travel guides, the printed packaging and compressed cartons, which thematise representation and reception processes between commercial display and autonomous image[3].

In order to be able to perceive Peter Zimmermann's meta-pictures as such requires a knowledge of image production and its media related prerequisites. It is the video installation, among others, that makes it possible to enter inside the pictures and to comprehend the underlying processes of reproduction, appropriation, of filtering and copying. The installation offers heavily staged, yet programmatically pointed access to digitalised image production. In this it conveys an idea of the structural complexity that a painting, intending to be contemporary, must master in light of image populations in the age of information. However, the complexity here is not so much the result of digital technology as such. Peter Zimmermann uses the mobile app Paint It, which follows the rules of the algorithm to divide the original image into individual clusters of colour and automatically fill them with swarms of directional brushstrokes, until the facture complies with the general idea of an image painted in the style of impressionism. The result is as schematic as the operation of the algorithm and demonstrates the extremely limited functionality of the software.

The relationships between elements within the image populations, the permeation of the digital with everyday material culture, schematised experiences and historical set pieces, which arise as their own themes in Peter Zimmermann's paintings, are, in contrast, complex. This becomes clear through the functional context of mobile applications within digital image culture. They are advertised as practical tools to lend photos an extraordinary look, making them stand out from other images shared in social media. In this respect, they provide an answer to the competition for attention in the face of ever larger volumes of circulating images. But what is an extraordinary look in the digital sphere? It goes without saying that there is no generally valid answer, as it depends on the respective context. A central strategy in the digital era is, however, the rediscovery of things that are allegedly old, as expressed for example in steampunk, retrogaming, technology nostalgia, DIY, digital crafting and comparable phenomena. Image editing softwares also update a historic past with the filters they implement, by breaking down artistic movements and positions, like impressionism or modernism, into recognisable "painting styles". This is particularly strange in the case of impressionism, because the impressionist visualisation of paint application as an indexical mark already constituted a conscious strategy to differentiate

it from the smooth immaterial surfaces of photography. Such image filters are a vivid example of the objectified form of reception of artistic traditions, which transfer historic information into operationalised forms.

In light of the digital remix culture as a mass phenomenon, which is based on an excess of available images, texts and sounds, the relationship between old and new, past and future seems to fundamentally shift. The past is no longer seen as a small appendage to a significant, big future. The past appears much more as an infinite and repeatedly multiplied reservoir of possibilities, in which future changes are already laid out. This cultural saturation brought about by the explosive increase in available cultural artefacts is seen as the biggest challenge for the arts — the pressing task is no longer the creation of new forms, but rather the clever management of existing image populations [4].

The American art historian George Kubler was convinced that all fundamental technical, formal and content related artistic possibilities have already been outlined thoroughly at some other place and at some other time. In his book on the history of things he recommended, towards the end, dealing with this realisation in a relaxed way and advocated, with a view to the art of his time, a sensible filtering of useful historical information [5]. It should not be forgotten, however, that Kubler's diagnosis was published back in 1962, so he could not know of our current digital image cultures. His concept of art history — inspired by the mathematical approach of Claude Shannon among others and based in information theory — is informative for other reasons. Kubler outlined a media theory of art history that, on the basis of culture handed down materially, problematised the construction of history as an interminable process. He was not so much interested in the symbolic function of individual artefacts, rather the meanings that things develop in their relationships with one another.

According to Kubler, time only makes itself perceptible as such—beyond direct experience in the moment of actuality—in signals. Awareness of the past is based on the transmission of signals, sent in the there and then and received in the here and now. So Kubler put forward a media theoretical concept of history and stressed, with terms borrowed from message theory, the mediated character of any cultural tradition. Signal transmission is a process full of conditions and in a certain way also

prone to failure due to the multiple conversions on the way from sender to receiver. Moreover the receiver of a historical message can become a new sender, a process that Kubler compared with the functioning of a relay station. In this perspective, history resembles a media technological device for transmission and translation.

Historic transition, according to Kubler, is not the result of singular events, but based on many changes and discoveries that gradually modify the structuring pattern. In this respect, ingenious design is only a small tile in the large mosaic of innovation. More important for artistic work is entry in the appropriate sequence, the awareness of options in the given set of series and patterns. Kubler describes cultural developments as processes of differential production, which are, in principle, without origin and open in their results. Although he is looking at macrohistorical structures, counterparts on the level of individual art production and its experimental configurations can be found[6]. With Peter Zimmermann it is the visualisation of continual drift in image populations and the interruption of potentially infinite transformation processes in the singular work, in which the historicity of the digital becomes tangible: "Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time: the rupture between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real. It is the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events."[7]

1   Hubertus Butin, *Peter Zimmermann. Painting* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 75-78.

2   William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35-82.

3   See: *Peter Zimmermann. Temporäre Architektur. Präsentation von Schachteln* (Zürich: Ringier, 1997). Exhibition catalog.

4   David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). The fact that Joselit's position is not without its problems in regards to neoliberalism has already been remarked upon repeatedly.

5   George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1962), 123-126.

6   Stefanie Stallschus, "A Theory of Experimentation in Art? Reading Kubler's History of Art after Rheinberger's Experimental Systems," in *Experimental Systems. Future Knowledge in Artistic Research*, ed. Michael Schwab (Leuven: University Press, 2013), 15-25.

7   Kubler 1962, wie Anm. 5, p. 17