

Oswald Oberhuber = geschriebene Bilder, die lesen = Peter Noever (1932), USA
und New York

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Discursive Images (1999)

Oswald Oberhuber's Written Pictures as a Paradigm of neo-modern Practices

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Paintings are looked at, writings are read. Thus runs the simple distinction between literature and painting. A distinction too simple. That writings are read is a platitude. Yet, a platitude on which the theory of literature is based. This platitude is only surpassed by the theory that paintings are looked at. Apparently, the art of looking and the art of writing are different genres. Within the horizon of such platitudes, it seems to be a contradiction when paintings are read and writings are looked at, when pictures are written and texts are painted. But it is exactly this contradiction that modern art, i. e. modern literature and modern painting, lives on as Roman Jakobson has proved in his essay "On the Verbal Art of William Blake and Other Poet-Painters" (see *Linguistic Inquiry*, 1, ed. by Samuel Jay Keyser, Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

Since the days of Cubism and Futurism modern painting has been characterized by removing the ban of the verbal in pictures. In 1911, Picasso started to paste real objects like newspaper on his paintings, and since then letters and words have played an important part in his pictures and collages. Georges Braque's work reveals a natural development in the same direction. Carlo Carrà and Giacomo Balla followed Tommaso Marinetti's call for "the liberation of words" and began to create collages and paintings with word compositions in 1912. The Russian Constructivists (e. g. Ivan Puni, *The Flight of Letters*, 1919) and the Dadaists (compare Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbilder* from 1919 onwards) pursued this modern approach.

With the employment of the collage technique, letters, words and texts have become an integral part of the pasted or painted picture. Actually, including the verbal in the field of the visual has to be regarded as a crucial element of modern painting. The verbal, the vocal and the visual have become part of the canon of modern art from sound poetry to image poetry. Conceptual art has made these elements absolute and, emphasizing the radical character of neo-modern art, substituted the priority of the verbal for the priority of the visual, the registers of the verbal for the registers of the visual. This is why excluding the verbal from the picture may even more clearly imply an anti-modern trait. Conceptual art has extended the space of writing in the picture through its *linguistic turn*. It did not content itself with ready letters and texts, with ready-made texts, but for the first time also employed texts written specifically for the picture, be it by hand, with a brush or painted with a stencil. The construction of the visual by means of verbal elements was not only based on the fact that lines and colors shared the area with words found and appliquéd from the real world on to the pictorial surface but on the writing itself. This is why a picture does not have to be painted, it may also be written. And the artist's handwriting may play a certain part. This is a significant aspect regarding the development of modern art, an achievement of neo-modern art. The collage legitimized the presence of the verbal through its technique. Yet, the gap between image and text was still obvious. A picture of painted letters or written words, however, *a priori* represents an integral whole comprising both image and text. A written picture is no technical affair any longer but a conceptual matter concerning the question what an image is and what its contents are. Letter and writing pictures are radical consequences resulting from the logic of modernity.

Oswald Oberhuber was the first and perhaps the only Austrian painter who was able to radically follow this logic to its end after 1945. In the course of about fifty years, he has drafted a visual universe based on the principles of both *skopein* (see) and *anagnoskein* (read). His written and painted writing pictures are looked at and read. A revolutionary change. By having transformed the picture from a site of looking into a site of reading, from a site of the visual into a site of the verbal, he has transferred it from the sphere of visual thinking into the sphere of conceptual thinking.

Instead of looking at a picture, you read letters. First of all, this is a negative approach, the negation of a classical function. The traditional character of a picture is annulled. The picture suddenly ceases to be either likeness (of the world) or autonomous image (of a world of its own). The picture loses its status. The classical pictorial language collapses, and the language of the word takes its place. The indefiniteness of the image brings forth new meanings and pictorial functions. But as the picture is something written, it is still controlled by the hand (a reminiscence of hand-controlled brush painting). The form of the picture still depends on the axiomatic nature of the hand. Yet the meaning of the picture is controlled by the consciousness, is based on the grammar of the brain.

Here, the gestural which is otherwise crucial in painting and often suspected to be something reactionary is just a spin-off from the brain. It becomes a secondary aesthetic effect of a semantic investigation – as everything aesthetic might well be only a secondary effect. From the very beginning, Oberhuber's written pictures are conceptual pictures, works of conceptual art. If it were necessary to prove that Oberhuber is to be regarded as one of the few modern Austrian painters, his written pictures would completely suffice as evidence.

As for the relationship between language and image, Oberhuber combines several levels of subjective and objective realities. His "subjective" writing generates "objective" pictures, pictures as objects. This is how he relativizes the independent value of the various realities. By eliminating the distinction between image and writing, between description and writing, between world and world of its own, between emotion and sign, Oberhuber transcends the codes of the pictorial and the written. Following Picasso, he weakens the autonomy of the picture by including writing. And he impairs the meaning of writing by including the visual, i. e. by emphasizing the pictorial character. Both sides become mere signifiers within the discursive space.

Oberhuber was essentially involved in the historical achievement of neo-modern art after 1945, in the opening up a new discursive space – a space that became linked with the work of Bruce Nauman and Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari and Gerhard Rühm, Lawrence Weiner and Ben Vautier, Roman Opalka and Hanne Darboven, On Kawara and Remy Zaugg. Within this discursive space, the crises of representation, which the dawn of modern art brought about, is aggravated through a criticism of the visual in neo-modern art. The visual loses its primary role, its status as a *conditio sine qua non*, and becomes an aesthetic category among others. The denunciation of the visible deprives art of its ontological status. Art turns into a code of signs which can be changed and retrieved any time, a repertory of signs the meaning of which depends on the social consensus, a linguistic game in Wittgenstein's sense. Such art has no room for subjective expressiveness. Singularity becomes a quality pertaining to the code of signs, a random element, a stochastic product, a case within the theory of probabilities. In neo-modern art, this understanding results in an obsession to hold on to one's singular existence against the objective data of space and time, of geography and history (compare On Kawara's date pictures and telegrams as well as Hanne Darboven's linking-up of her biography with numbers and historical dates). The condemnation of the visual is accompanied by a renunciation of the individual and the singular. This reveals that art is no unhistorical transcendental category but a social process within controlled zones of signs. For decades, Oswald Oberhuber has investigated the various forms and formulations possible within these neo-modern zones of signs with his written pictures. In these works, he has not only attacked the priority of the visual but also undermined the historically organized

mechanisms of meaning. His writing pictures destroy historical fields of sense and break down meanings. The pictorial field turns out to be a vast expanse, as Freud used to call the territory of the soul. By including not only the mirror images of writing but also numerous new materials and methods, Oswald Oberhuber has expanded the pictorial field like no other artist in Austria. Especially with his writing pictures, he has succeeded in developing and establishing a new pictorial discourse transcending the discourse of the visible within this field. He has revealed the limitations of the visible as the limitations of our culture, our culture of writing as well as our culture of images. His written pictures are writings articulating a critical and emancipatory practice in a media world in which individual subjects realize their identities only by experimenting with the media. His pictorial texts are paintings of a subject that strives to break the power of the image in an age determined by the universal pornography of the visual culture. The resultant de-aestheticization of images and de-semanticization of letters enhance the discursive character of things. Oswald Oberhuber's written pictures are discursive pictures, pictures opposing the pictorial, thinking pictures demystifying man's comfortable accommodation in the world of signs as well as in the world of objects. Exactly since they have been written by hand, the pictures signify no expression but a realization, the end of anthropomorphic art. De-aestheticization, de-semanticization and realization constitute an iconoclasm, stages of a critical practice, which, based on the insight into the fundamentally linguistic character of all statements in art, have opened up a new articulateness for art in the age of post-history.