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Painting and the Metaphor of Discourse[i][1]

> 'Could there be a form of analysis whose aim was not to capture painting in the net of discourse but rather to allow oneself to be educated by it…Is it possible to escape the descriptive illusion in any way other than by denouncing the representationalist hypothesis from which it proceeds, while retaining the rights to an analysis that's not *about* painting but rather proceeds *with* it'.[2]

Hubert Damisch's question is especially pertinent from an artist's point of view where there is an interest in critical writing that is not so much about an exchange of discourse between a community of experts and more about how to expand or amplify an encounter with art as integral to an on-going creative project. Indeed, to be educated by art implies that the analytic apparatus available cannot be taken for granted; for that would risk imposing a structure that belongs to interpretation rather than discovering something of the order or structure that belong to the work itself.

The implication of Damisch's question is twofold, for in the act of analysis there is also the creation of a form of analysis. If neither work nor methodology is clear to begin with then both become defined through a dynamic process that must be invented each time. The problem of knowing where to begin and how to proceed is suggested in Bois' introduction to his collection of essays *Painting as Model*, where he cites Roland Barthes - that 'one does not "apply" a theory; that concepts must be forged *from the* object of one's inquiry or imported *according to* that object's specific exigency; and that the main theoretical act is to define this object, not the other way around'. [3]

This essay will begin with the work of Thomas Scheibitz who typifies a certain contemporary attitude towards making art that is not medium specific; working simultaneously in painting, sculpture and photography. His paintings have also been described as 'exploring the elusive boundary between figurative and abstract'[4] and, if we look at them it is plain to see that there are recognisable motifs

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[1] The title refers obliquely to that of Barthes' essay 'The Metaphor of the Eye', written in response to Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (Penguin, London, 1982).
[2] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective,* (The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1995), p262-3
[3] Yve Alain Bois *Painting as Model*, (The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1990), pxii
[4] Emma Dexter, File Note #28 Thomas Scheibitz: *About 90 Elements/TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*, Camden Arts Centre, 22 February to 20 April 2007

(more graphic than spatial, perhaps), allusions to volumes and body parts, the suggestion of various pictorial tropes from landscape to portraiture. On the other hand there are drips and brushstrokes and a sensitive and forceful organisation of colour. Spatial ambiguities abound. However, although it may seem straightforward to highlight an 'elusive boundary between figurative and abstract' it doesn't mean very much beyond a reference to certain observable characteristics of the paintings. The awkward nature of the phrase is, perhaps, indicative of the problem of how to discuss this widespread tendency in contemporary painting to work in ways that are outside of the dialectic of abstraction and figuration; a dialectic that has organised much of the critical discourse around avant-garde practice since the emergence of abstract painting and remained so, if less visibly, ever since. Undoubtedly, there is an inescapable reference to both idioms in Scheibitz' work, that cannot be reduced to post-modern irony or, in fact, to that idea of "an in-between" two heterogeneous spatial systems. Therefore, I would re-state the problem as one that belongs to discourse to the extent that we are obliged to use what terms and concepts are available but at the same time allow the work to re-figure these terms according to how it operates. This is to say that in the event that the available interpretative structures strain to say anything meaningful it is not the case that the answer can be found in a solution from the 'outside', as it were. To the contrary, it could be said that the problem of articulating something, or sense of 'incomprehensibility', is located inside the work.

With the aim of defining this problematic 'object' as the main theoretical act, the first concept I will import[5] is that of the 'radically new'. This is a term used by Keith Ansell-Pearson in his book *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* to draw attention to a distinction between what we usually call the new, which is actually a new arrangement of pre-existing elements, and the 'radically new' which begins with incomprehensibility but from which a new kind of thinking emerges. My appropriation, however, is not simply to call incomprehensibility by another name, as if it were a quality that belongs to Scheibitz' work. It is, instead, to introduce the beginnings of a philosophical underpinning for this 'dynamic' process of interpretation which Damisch's question implies. The 'radically new' is a concept that is a function of Bergson's method of intuition. As Ansell-Pearson explains, its converse, the relatively 'new', satisfies the intellect because it is able to compare the new with what it recognizes as the old (fashion, for example) and for this to happen objects of perception must be represented as static things - effectively "bracketed out" of the flux in which they operate. As Ansell-Pearson says 'Intelligence, therefore, cuts out of the (virtual) whole – out of

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[5] Bois' asserts what could be described as a 'right-to-store-up policy'; whereby theoretical concepts are brought into play in part or whole, not according to what is fashionable or current, but only according to how that theoretical model elicits insight into the object of enquiry. *Painting as Model* (The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1990), ppxiv-xv

a becoming – a thing and makes of this thing a substitute for the whole'[6]. To the contrary, the 'real' or 'radically new' refers to the creativity of intelligence that is without the security of judgment. This notion of the new implies, not recognition, but the creativity of cognition[7] which happens only in the flux of unpredictability and chance. It is significant that this new is associated with Bergson's investigation of how experience emerges from within duration instead of the investigation of experience as if it were a fixed and stable form.

This suggests that the concept of the 'radically new' could also open up the possibility of thinking about a relation that painting has to its past that is more creative than one based upon comparison (with the old). In practical terms this could help as a way to think about how Scheibitz' work engages with "the abstract" and "the figurative" as terms that are not only significant within a critical discourse about painting but also inextricably bound to painting's past. The problem of methodology is clearly evident for when we talk about paintings 'past' or a history of painting it is usually assumed that this is based on a formal taxonomy. So, for example, when I refer to Scheibitz' painting in relation to abstraction and figuration I can describe certain features of the paintings; such as explicit brushwork, drips, flat, solid surface but also motifs and volumes and so on. However, the limitations of a descriptive analysis are obvious as we are then forced to use these descriptions as the basis for analysis, which is to fix the painting as a stable form. In fact descriptions will only ever account for what can be attributed to concepts such as "abstract" and "figurative" as they operate in relation to empirical experience or history as a taxonomy of examples. The idea of the 'radically new' suggests that analysis must begin somewhere else, in Deleuze's terms to 'go beyond the state of experience toward the conditions of experience.'[8] The only alternative is for these terms, if they are to be used at all, to become purely theoretical in the sense that, rather than being linked to observable characteristics of the work they are understood to be its generative principles. In practical terms such an idea presents a considerable challenge because it puts into question the 'truthfulness' of the relationship between painting and the writing which 'proceeds *with* it'. Without the requirement to 'prove' an argument using observation as evidence the prospect is that the latter becomes mere fiction. However, although that may not in itself be a problem, what Damisch's question implies is that some necessary *relation* with writing and painting is at stake, so that painting is not simply a starting point but becomes fully entwined in a process of writing and a process of reading.

Autopoiesis and Contrapuntal Relations

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[6] Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*, (Routledge, London, 1999), p32
[7] For a discussion on the creativity of cognition see F. Varela 'The Re-enchantment of the Concrete', in *Incorporations* (eds.) Crary and Kwinter, (Zone Books, New York, 1992)
[8] Gilles Delueze, *Bergsonism* (Zone Books, New York, 1991), p27

In order to meet the challenge of a mode of analysis that enquires into the genetic conditions of experience rather than begins with empirical observation, the second concept I will import is "autopoiesis" (or self-production) which was developed by biologists Maturana and Varela as a logical method to distinguish living entities from non-living ones[9]. Instead of beginning with the observable formal characteristics of the organism as a fully formed entity, their aim was to develop a method capable of analysing the genesis of that entity as a *living* form; that is from its point of view and not from the observer's point of view. *A theoretical framework, in other words, that is not based on empirical observation but on logic.* The living organism is not examined in isolation but in its dynamic relation to its environment. Their method is significantly different from a Darwinian perspective, in which the organism is understood to adapt to a pre-given, fixed and objective environment. On the contrary, the logic of autopoiesis insists that the genesis of a new species is also the creation of a *new form of sensing the world* so that there is the simultaneous creation of a new environment. For example, a wasp and an orchid may inhabit the same spatial region but their genesis actually creates two different environments according to what is important or significant to each species. By examining a species from the point of view of the species itself the autopoietic model resists the authority of Darwin's transcendental position which applies the logic of competition and telenomy to all species.

It is important to note that to import this concept of autopoiesis is not to make an analogy or to understand the artwork metaphorically. Although a static form, painting is a temporal phenomenon in so far as it is only the act of judgement by the fixed and static subject that turns the life of aesthetic creation into a representation by comparing it to a prior reality. Damisch's methodology implies that the work of art is a form of life and as such is engaged in a dynamic process of creating a new way of sensing the world and differentiating a new environment, so that analysis from the point of view of painting is effectively the creation of such a new environment. Therefore, instead of adopting a fixed and stable position outside of the work writing must instead create a dynamic relation to it and, in so doing, affirm the life of that work in the new context of interpretation.

As investigative method, the purpose of autopoiesis is to 'understand the organization of living systems in relation to their unitary character'[10] ; a unity that is a dynamic 'network of relations' which the authors call its *organisation.* These (virtual) dynamic processes actualise the living system as a machine with no other purpose other than to "create itself". As the defining feature of the living organism the organisation is the object of analysis not the observable components of the system, which are merely its products. Similarly, an analysis of painting must also attempt to understand the

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[9] Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, (The Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, 1980)
[10] Ibid, p75

nature of its virtual, invisible 'organisation' as that which generates its visible form, through logic not observation.

If we look at a painting such as *Stilleben* (*Still Life*) the challenge is to say something about the organisation that creates, not simply the image but the relation the painting creates with the outside; arguably a relation of 'incomprehensibility' with respect to the language of critical discourse. Preparatory work shows that to begin with there were two distinct areas and an illusory space; a helmet form to the foreground and a flat triangle that decorates a flat plane behind. In the final painting the space has been flattened by blocking out the ground with brown paint, removing the overlap so that the figures read in the same plane. The helmet loses its curved contour at the bottom and itself becomes a ground in which various motifs draw the viewer in to follow spatial passages that seem to shift between the concave/ convex, graphic image/ volumetric form, the outside surfaces of things/ their insides, difference of scale – a close-up/a distant perspective. Binaries proliferate to the point at which it is impossible to settle on one set of co-ordinates. This effectively holds the viewer at the threshold of recognition and amounts to a proliferation of viewpoints which nevertheless implicate one another. Of course, these are merely descriptions of 'components' and effects of components which the organisation produces, as if there remains a more significant question about the nature of that organisation that we can never know empirically but which we may be able to know 'theoretically'.

As an investigation of a dynamic relation that happens between evolving organism and environment, the work of the 19thC ethologist Jakob von Uexkull is instructive[11]. He also viewed environment as a species-specific 'objective world' or Umwelt and understood the form of a living organism to develop through its 'contrapuntal' rather than causal relations with other organisms and its physical habitat. As the environment is not pre-given but is differentiated at the same time as the form of the living organism develops, the process is one in which that organism only responds to what is important to it. In other words the organism interprets its environment through 'significant sign relationships' and not as a passive object subject to a given environment and the forces of natural selection. The field of biosemiotics[12] has developed von Uexkull's work in relation to contemporary scientific understanding of genetics and has put forward the idea that genetic material is not a blue-print for formal development but is interpreted in new and complex ways in the process of development; a dual process of interpretation (of a genetic code) and selection (of actual difference from the environment). The number of potential differences that surround the system is infinite,

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[11] For an informative discussion see Paul Bains, 'Umwelten', in *Semiotica* Vol. 134 (2001), pp137-167

[12] See, for example, Hoffmeyer and Emmeche, 'Code-Duality and the Semiotics of Nature' in *On Semiotic Modelling,* Anderson & Merrell (ed.s) (Mouton De Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1991)

however, so that for difference to become information that can be interpreted these differences must first be selected by some kind of 'mind'; the recipient system. Therefore, information is conceived of as *difference that makes a difference to the recipient.* This relation between organism and environment is not a causal one but is a dynamic process of interpretation.

The idea that painting, as a form of life, does not have a *causal* relation with its outsides is significant. It is commonplace for interpretation to seek the cause of an artwork in the genius of the artist or in the influence of other artist's works or as a representation of social relations etc. However the idea of contrapuntal, rather than causal relations, re-orientates the terms of a discussion significantly for no such (representational) hierarchy is implied. To the contrary there are two aspects: the receptivity of the system and the 'news of difference' which that system can interpret and which are inseparable or 'folded'; each creating the other. In a consideration of the relation of Scheibitz' work to "abstract painting" and "figurative painting" it could not be said, therefore, that these two identities are causal (however, they are defined). According to the idea of contrapuntal relations they become 'news of difference' that is interpreted by the paintings' 'organisation' to produce a proliferation of viewpoints as components of the system. The "abstract" and the "figurative" can only be understood as both 'news of difference' *outside* and as its virtual 'organisation' *inside* if the dialectic ceases to operate as a universal or general difference of opposition and operates instead as 'pure' difference, in which case, paradoxically, both terms are allowed to co-exist at the same time. This is because the dialectic has been 'internalized' or, to put it another way, there is no longer a transcendental position from which the terms can be compared or judgment made. This implies that paintings history/discourse (through the ciphers of "abstract painting" and "figurative painting", in this case) is created by the work; so that history/discourse is 'present' but is not as something we would recognise. Accordingly, history becomes a creation[13] of the work, rather than the work being taken as an example within a pre-existing narrative.

Thus, in proposing a dynamic relation between the work and its outsides, the autopoietic model implies that this dynamic must be there from the very beginning. In seeking the genetic conditions of an encounter with incomprehensibility the model seems to lead us to the conclusion that this is an encounter with a paradox in which contradictory elements co-exist in a space of non-contradiction; a flattened or simulacral space where the representational structures of discourse are not able to organize experience. This is not an attribute of the work but introduces the idea that there is an encounter which is of an order that is not accessible to experience defined as conceptual recognition.

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[13] See Varela 'The Re-enchantment of the Concrete', in *Incorporations* (eds.) Crary and Kwinter, (Zone Books, New York, 1992) for an understanding of cognition as creation in contrast to history as re-cognition.

Differential Relations and Heterogenous Series

The methodological difficulties (that nothing can be taken for granted) can be illustrated in an attempt to say something about the specificity of the paintings. The most obvious characteristic of these paintings is that the viewer is held at a threshold of recognition. It is as if there is an invitation to recognise the image as a portrait, or landscape, or still-life, or narrative but then the viewer is denied the opportunity to complete the picture. Is this a negation of the figurative image or an affirmative picturing of different tropes that have developed in the Western (figurative) pictorial tradition? Documented preparatory work, as well as earlier work, shows that the trajectory of Schiebitz' development is from overt figuration towards obfuscation of the recognisable image. It would be simple to say that this tendency equates to the removal of a content from its form so that the form of content, or trope now becomes content itself and that this in itself creates value. However, the removal of the recognisable image per se is no guarantee that anything interesting will happen and it would be a false assumption to believe that a lack of recognisable imagery per se is where analysis must begin. After all, it would amount to an historicist argument if all painting that contained recognisable imagery were condemned for that reason. It could be the case that within the recognisable image there are subterranean forces (the organism's 'organisation') which undermine the security of recognition. Where we really need to begin is with the encounter referred to above as the folding of inside and outside; a folding of discourse so that terms defined in opposition (such as form and content) 'outside' the work become folded 'inside' that work to co-exist as genetic principles.

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze says:

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*…its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition. In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived.[14]

This is an encounter which will not allow writing to begin with recognition and it is significant that the object of a fundamental encounter *can only be sensed.* This 'being of the sensible' cannot be recognised, not because it is unfamiliar, but because it is imperceptible from the point of view of common sense. Rather than being limited to making a contribution along with the other faculties, to

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[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* (The Athlone Press, London, 1997), p139

form a common sense, sensibility becomes free to 'find itself before its own limit'. Such a disjunctive synthesis already implies a folding of inside and outside because what 'can only be sensed' is neither an object situated in time and space outside the subject (an object of recognition) nor does it have the identity of a subjective mental object as it refers, not to a general idea, but to an encounter which, in its specificity, requires a body. The object of a fundamental encounter depends upon an understanding of the genesis of perception as processual, beginning with the body rather than the reverse which begins with abstract mental concepts applied to what the body senses. This is crucial because it allows us to think of differential terms as generative of perception rather than attributes of what can be perceived. For example, according to a system of understanding that begins with perception, the colour green is green because it is not red etc. On the other hand according to a system of understanding that seeks "the laws that produced the object"[15] green is determined by the differential relation of yellow and blue. The differential relation is not a mixture of colours or the difference between the two colours but marks a different way of thinking about what presents itself to perception. In the common conception, green is a colour because it is different from red, so that, difference is relative and external to green, for it is the overarching concept of colour which organises actual relations of difference. The alternative is to think difference as, in principle, internal to green. The Idea of colour is not, in this case, the general idea of which green is a particular example but an Idea that is actualised each time in different ways.

By the same logic we could think about the Idea of pictorial space, for example, as an Idea actualised each time in different ways. It is orthodox to think of pictorial space as a general concept which includes various different manifestations, from the purely optical space typical of abstract painting to the illusory, tactile space typical of figuration. Accordingly, interpretation involves identifying a particular example of pictorial space from the different choices available. The alternative is that interpretation approaches pictorial space, not as a general concept which pre-exists what is said, but as a concept that includes difference; that includes, for example, the purely optical space of abstraction and the illusory, tactile space of figuration. Thus, the terms co-exist not as a mixture but 'virtually'. An objection could be raised that the terms refer to complex conceptual frameworks that are relative to the context in which they are used rather than virtual intensities without spatio-temporal co-ordinates. However, *what is significant here is only that they are dialectically opposed* and are, therefore, no more than ciphers for all those dialectical terms which are structured by difference through opposition and which operate in discourse 'outside' the work (terms such as pictorial space/architectural space, internal/external and so on).

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[15] Samuel Bergman, *The Philosophy of Solomon Maimon*, (The Mages Press, Jerusalem, 1967) p59

What does this mean in the practice of interpretation? This implies that the work is not a totalising unity. As a form of life the work emits 'signs' as it interprets 'signs' from the environment it creates. As 'news of difference' these signs are not identities but an intensive product of differential relations. Consequently, it makes no sense to identify aspects of Scheibitz paintings as particular examples of general concepts. Instead, the aim is to demonstrate how differential terms generate the sense of the work in specific ways. It may not seem problematic to claim, as recent exhibition publicity does, that Scheibitz' paintings are about 'the elusive boundary between abstraction and figuration', but, actually that is to assume that these are symmetrical terms within a concept of history that organises relations of difference from a transcendental position. To the contrary, if a concept of history or the past is understood as a 'differential Idea' then it ceases to operate as a general concept that can be recognised in particular examples and instead becomes actualised in specific instances. This is the meaning of the 'radically new' which Ansell-Pearson describes as 'the experience of time as it *imposes* itself upon us'[16], which is also the moment when the past becomes re-figured from 'a local, temporal standpoint'[17]. My proposal is that what is actualised in Scheibitz paintings is the asymmetry of the terms abstraction and figuration (understood as differential terms) and that this generates heterogeneous series which create the sense of the paintings. In a significant way the paintings are about an object: discourse. Not, however, in the sense characterised by the irony of post-modern painting, exemplified by artists such as Fiona Rae, who combined motifs from different visual systems (abstract painting, figurative painting and imagery from popular culture etc.) homogenising them in an eclectic mix of signs. Scheibitz' paintings are 'about' discourse at a structural or differential level. Thus, it could be said that the self-consciousness of abstraction generates a signifying series (the 'said' of painting) and figuration a series of signifieds (the 'seen' of painting). This amounts to a series of relations between terms that repeatedly cross over to create their characteristic sense of Scheibitz' work; of ambiguity and of a proliferation of viewpoints.

For example, the trope of the portrait characterising *Portrait TM* is not used to depict a likeness. Figuration as the 'seen' of painting inheres in the image but has become a rhetorical figure, or a 'said' of painting. The larger 'head' becomes a screen through which an eye seems to look back at the viewer. But this is ambiguous for it is not clear what is surface and where illusion lies. The drawing and the drip signify the artifice of painting but an 'aesthetic of the unfinished' alludes to the immediacy of expression. Another painting *Kapital III* also plays with space. The circle is diagrammatic, a picture on the wall perhaps, but it's not certain, for what reads as a surface then

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[16] Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*, (Routledge, London, 1999), p32

[17] See Christian Kerslake, 'Transcendental Cinema' in *Radical Philosophy*, 130 March/April 2005for an extended discussion of Deleuze's reading of Kant's conception of time and the paradox of inner sense.

becomes an object. The diagram is a figure, not figurative but, in the sense of a rhetorical figure which alludes to complexity rather than stating anything definite. The colour is at once schematic and keenly felt. In paintings such as *Apollo Residenz* and *90 Elements* illusory space and the narrative time and space of figurative painting is evoked but the way this is painted in a seeming hurried and casual way evokes the immediacy of a modernist temporality (what Fried called 'presentness'[18]).

Of course this analysis is brief and no more than a beginning but what I have tried to establish with this essay are some methodological principles that get away from what Deleuze calls 'The Representational Image of Thought'. Consequently, the problem of what constitutes painting and where its boundaries lie, either in relation to other forms of art or in relation to its own historical narrative, have become irrelevant. To the contrary, what has become important is an acknowledgment that if writing is to *proceed with* painting rather be *about* it there is no ready-made set of tools that would apply in general to particular examples but that with each specific instance something new has to be invented in writing; something that affirms the life of the work; that emits 'signs' as it interprets 'signs'.

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[18] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (The University of Chicago Press,, Chicago, 1998), p168