

Lucas Gehrmann

When is an image? Notes on the analytic-synthetic practice of Joseph Marsteurer for the construction of a new aesthetic theory.

In winter 2004/05 Joseph Marsteurer invited me to a deserted church in Mödling (close to Vienna) to see his latest work – an over 14-metre-long “panel painting” that stood on the floor leaning on a wooden scaffolding parallel to the polygonal supports of the room. The light fell directly onto the painting through the window in the south wall of the building – and right through it, if one observed or inspected it with a slightly bent posture from the nave of the hall. From here, it did not look like a mirror image but presented itself as an independent and in any case a different picture. True, a few broad brushstrokes, black lines and text came through on the “reverse side”, but above and below them were other picture elements that could only be discerned by close observation from the “front”. In the context of the weathered building furnished with secco painting, I initially thought of a reference to palimpsests, that is, the once valuable parchment grounds that were newly “illuminated”, that is, painted on, by the monastic workshops in the course of the transformation of the “period style” by scraping off their earlier images and which we can nowadays largely reconstruct technologically as they were nevertheless irretrievably inscribed in the hide¹ and thus display a relationship with the wax “miracle block” as Sigmund Freud used it as a metaphor for the engraving of recollection in human memory (in the unconscious). Marsteurer however had neither scraped off his canvas nor overdrawn it, but he has laid down several translucent image grounds (cotton) over one another so that in the light from the front primarily the upper layer became visible and in the light from behind the other layers simultaneously. As interesting as I found this possibility of a treatment of the question of the saving of “time” or “signs”, what was “drawn” on these layers initially remained puzzling to me: a mix of gestural “virtuoso” (multi-layer) painting, pure geometric constructive “disegno” and marginal data notes on sizes and colour mixtures. The 14.5-metre painting certainly had an “aesthetic” for me, both of the surface(s) and as an installation in the room, but this aesthetic seemed extremely stubborn in comparison to habitual forms of seeing, which seek formal or content relations, communications or counter-positions of image signs. Marsteurer’s signs are indeed here united alongside and on top of each other through their image grounds, but at the same time are as it were themselves sufficiently isolated from each other, because they are linguistically incompatible with each other: the geometry draws its lines over the surface with linearly rational certainty (without revealing the logic of their function), the gesture shines with colour-sensual appeal (without revealing an internal or “purely” painterly context) and the statistics are convincing through the accurate colour and index value data (without imparting in more detail what they refer to). And just as the language

characters collect on the picture panel in “complacent” autonomy, so it stands in the surrounding room: in its multi-layeredness it reports on the processual, temporal sequences and its conditionality on light, the room and the standpoint/view and perspective of its observer, but in no way makes itself dependent on its specific (in-situ) surroundings. It “functions” in a white cube with artificial light just as much as in patinated walls with daylight variations.

“It functions” means: the picture/installation may indeed not tell us any stories, but it graphically “lists” the ingredients the picture contains and who or what involves/contextualises it from outside in order to make the image as such “visible”, readable, interpretable, declarable as an art work – in short: Joseph Marsteurer arranges results of a comprehensive analysis of the image concept on an image ground, that is, allows what is in the picture to become the picture. This “arrangement” is for its part a synthetic play whose components are individually serially ordered, i.e. in image-analytical categories: *brush stroke*, *paint spots*, lines, etc. each respectively labelled with statistical details of their content (weight and name of the colour material used, length and date of the job), gather in the artist’s archive, accurately and electronically inventoried. As existing aesthetic components that have not yet been formed into an image, they can each be taken out of the archive, unrolled, unfolded, combined or used for various functions (the paint spots, for example, as headscarves, place mats or folded paper aeroplane models). They are each “a form of raw material out of which something can be prepared that contains the potential but does not go beyond it,” says Marsteurer. The artist thereby creates not least a thus-far hardly so precisely articulated differentiation between two main components of artistic/poietic articulation: of the free, open, “coincidental”/chance (that is, not rationally, consciously guided) characteristic style here, and there combination, arrangement, contextualisation (an in any case image language/consciously testable “logic of design”). This means, as far as I am interpreting it “correctly”, that neither a pure automatism, i.e. a primarily subjectively generated articulation/sensation, nor an expression of the category of “art” based primarily on scientifically logical rationalist thought is satisfactory – even if both poles may use an “aesthetic” formulation. “Aesthetics”, says Joseph Marsteurer, “is the intersection between sensual perception and analytical recording. The aesthetic factor is not in the sensual perception but in the structures that facilitate or frustrate a sporadic linkage between two poles.

Back to the “raw materials” again: these are, per se, not yet what they could be if they are combined together. In the traditional picture we hardly notice these raw materials as such, they subordinate themselves to the “higher” order of the picture. In art history, at least since early classical modern art, there have been (and are) tendencies to treat the individual elements of the image structure in isolation, that is to distil out particular “materials” and with them to create new, so far unseen images. A kind of big-bang function for freeing such picture components, as particularly carried out in early

cubism, was the breaking up of the mimetic view held together by the perspectival (photographic) view of things. Whole -isms were based on the formal cubist fragmentation technique of “real” appearance (Suprematism, De Stijl, Orphism, Kinetism, etc) or used it to optimise their intentions (cubo-/Futurism, Constructivism). Paint, surface, line, transition, light, sound etc. etc. could now be independent image “themes”, which not seldom were further declined in other media (sculpture, object, photography, film, architecture, etc.). If one observes the art of the 20th century only from the perspective of such distillates, then a nevertheless astonishing spectrum of results of a large “image analysis” is apparent.² This “analysis”, however, did not occur without a common fundamental aim of the artists involved or a common theory, and it occurred above all also primarily with the medium of artistic language; it can thus also only be described retrospectively as an “analysis”. If Joseph Marsteurer, on the other hand, works with scientific methods in revealing and archiving pictorial “raw materials” and at the same time carries out an aesthetic practice, he seems to be developing a new method to approach the “art phenomenon” – a method that not only unites the sensual with rational “thinking” but also practice with theory.

In analysing the changing artistic practice (above all in the course of the development of new media) Peter Weibel once pointed out the deficiency of existing aesthetic theories and made the following proposal: “For me, only particular parts of [artistic] practice could be harmonised with [critical] theory. The other possibility would be, instead of historical theory undertaking a purely technical description, to shine a light on the operative process of the art work in the technical societal dispositive.”³ Joseph Marsteurer may also be concerned with that: not “alone”, that is, not what is immanent in the image, but above all about the question of aesthetic perception in relationship to (changing) society, because: “aesthetic norms of a society also provide insight into its self-image as a society” (JM). We can look forward with excitement to the further discoveries that Marsteurer’s artistic research work will bring!

1 As I later read, , Vitus H. Weh had even earlier associated Marsteurer’s multi-layered works with palimpsests: Vitus H. Weh, *Joseph Marsteurer*, in: *Kunstforum International* vol. 149, Jan.-March 2000, p. 404

2 A comparable attempt at an presentation that was an alternative art-history practice was made in 1991 with the exhibition *Bildlicht ...*, s. Kat.: Wolfgang Drechsler, Peter Weibel (eds), *Bildlicht: Malerei zwischen Material und Immaterialität*, Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna 1991

3 Peter Mahr in discussion with Peter Weibel, in: *mahr’s vierteljahrsschrift für ästhetik* 4, No.2/September 2001, s.a.: <http://h2hobel.phl.univie.ac.at/mahr%27svierteljahrs/012f4-2.html>