

## order by fluctuation

David Komary    Notes on the 'matrix of semiotic *particulars*' in Norbert Fleischmann's paintings

*"What opens up the difference between objects like a rupture can never be seen itself, because it marks difference. Rather, it begins by disappearing, and even as it opens up the space marked by oppositions, it leaves (...) a trace that does not point back to an origin" <sup>1</sup>*

A landscape painting composed in romantic diction? A second picture, a nineteenth-century style interior viewed from indoors? But then next to these an abstract picture that actively invokes the pop-coding of a camouflage pattern. And yet another neighbouring picture seems to draw completely on leitmotifs that reflect the picture's autonomy.

Norbert Fleischmann's painting always places opposites next to each other, things that appear at first glance to be impossible to unite, to be heterogeneous: an aesthetic system of oppositions. On the one hand, certain pictures display a contemporary use of pictorial conventions (romanticism), a kind of thematic revisionism. These are paintings that are imbued with the sheen of remembered pictures: a romanticization, retrospectively. On the other hand, thoroughly a-mimetic pictures are also to be found in Fleischmann's series. These are concerned with completely non-representative forms of depiction, with aesthetic moments inherent in the picture's autonomy, with 'things representing themselves', with categories such as the surface tension, space or corporeality of the picture.

All of this sounds confusing in the first instance. Let us turn to Fleischmann's work first of all as a whole, read as a polysemiotic texture, as a matrix of semiotic particulars. For Norbert Fleischmann's pictures are always designed as constellations. These constellations are put together out of individual pictorial events, almost out of painterly 'particulars', out of pictures with completely different aesthetic, or, more precisely, visual references.

His painting project forms a kind of semiotic sampler. Painting is understood here within a conceptual dimension, as a control centre for semiotic exchange, as a portrayal of portrayals. Fleischmann makes of the singular picture a model. He loosens the kinetics inherent in the individual picture that functions as a quasi-absolute unit, favouring instead a contextual reading. Under these circumstances, the individual picture stimulates or activates a semiotic, intertextual transfer between neighbouring pictures. They function on this textual level as visual data, as accessible material. Consequently, the picture's source, along with its representative capacity, is pushed into the background, the search for the original seems obsolete, and the original is necessarily "equated with the copy, the picture becomes a simulacrum of itself, becomes a thing amongst things",<sup>2</sup> it becomes a 'postconditional'<sup>3</sup> signature of itself. Its meaning now no longer resides in the way it points to something 'external' (to the text) – "il n'y a pas de hors texte"<sup>4</sup> –, but rather in its relationship to other pictures, to other symbols in the symbolic order of 'Art'.

Nevertheless, there is nothing arbitrary about Fleischmann's works. The 'particulars' in the pictorial structure "know what they want", they are in every respect figures of themselves, worked out within the medium of painting and its accompanying set of specific characteristics. They mark small, internally consistent aesthetic entities, semiotic sub-systems, so to speak. This is the dialectic inherent in the picture for Norbert Fleischmann: these are uniquely written pictures, even when many parts of them prove to have been borrowed or appropriated. Fleischmann explicitly demonstrates an interest and pleasure in symbolic doublings, in things (pictures) as reflections of themselves, as tautological, autological reiterations. His interest lies not in "bringing to the fore something that is hidden or different, rather in re-evaluating the familiar". 'Real' in this sense are not just the objects themselves, but far more the "hierarchies, the values of these works compared to other works".<sup>5</sup>

Put another way, Fleischmann's painting is composed of painterly 'fractals'. These possess – as already mentioned above – a 'source code' that can by all means be defined and decoded in each case. However, this code cannot (any longer) be projected on or reduced to a/the artistic subject seeking self-expression. This therefore begs the question: who is writing here? Does this painting signify a subject behind the work? And if this were the case, how can we conceive of a self, without falling back into ready-made projections and schemata – such as can be found in the romantic aesthetics of expression?

A further dialectical and apparently ambivalent relationship can consequently be discerned here – between a type of conceptual painting on the one hand and the concept of the picture's autonomy and painting's immediacy on the other. The painterly fractals accordingly point towards various 'subjects', to different authorial inscriptions, to lines of subjectification. Virtually implicit in this structure is an 'I am many' or (as relevant) 'I am another'.<sup>6</sup> If subjectivity is only the traces of codes that have traversed and created the 'I', then "the modern subject cannot be traced back to an origin, but rather (resides) in the constellation"<sup>7</sup> which characterises the field of modern subjectivity.

In this context, the artist deems painting's processuality to be the essential basis and condition for his pictorial juxtapositions. At/from this point, the author allows the grammar of (his) language, painting, to take over. Decentralised meaning, scattered references, semiotic decoupling and multiple contextualisations initiated by Fleischmann are the result of non-intellectually negotiated processes and decision making undertaken while composing the painting. "As for the loosening of the I, (...) it submits itself to a searching movement. (...) The fact that the I ceaselessly moves during the act of writing, that it never manages to find itself, keeps the writing process alive".<sup>8</sup> The way the pictures are juxtaposed evokes a mutual semiosis, leads to interferences between perceptual events. The pictures mutually write and inscribe each other with regard to the aesthetics of both production and reception; they are intertwined particulars of a questioning, or of a questioning examination, of the artist's line(s) of subjectification. Reading and writing(s) form two mutually conditioning aspects of one successive, simultaneous aesthetic process. The artist – and, on the level of reception, the viewer – is "operator and operand"<sup>9</sup> in one.

In the following, three concrete pictures from the 'particulars' series will form the basis for further consideration of Norbert Fleischmann's aesthetic strategy.

The painting 'distinguish' (2005) shows a man, a viewer, an observer at a window, gazing out into the distance, at an undefined, undefinable outside. The way vision is constructed or arranged here is a paradigmatic and constitutional prerequisite for the (romantic) conception of the subject. "Distance is the principle underlying 'the modern mood', which in 'purely optic' terms depends on 'peace and visibility'; these in turn form the basis for the romantic apprehension of nature. Apprehending nature in the nineteenth century became a bourgeois platform for experiencing the I and finding the self".<sup>10</sup>

Fleischmann's picture is therefore explicitly written in a neo-romantic style: a temporal-aesthetic import into the current pictorial constellation, so to speak. There are a number of specific things that could be said about this picture, but the most significant aspect is: the constellation of viewing. This refers less to the viewing (reception) of the picture, however, than to the viewing of viewing itself, or, to speak with Luhmann: the observation of observation, an 'observation of the second order'.<sup>11</sup> This is a kind of observation that knows and wants to know about its own processes. The man at the window in Fleischmann's picture becomes an observer of his own vision, a/his 'seeing', that from this point in time takes its leave from the naivety of innocent viewing, of the immediacy of perception and 'authenticity'. This amounts to an irreversible 'doubling of perspective, of standpoint'.

A further, different example from the series: a seascape, entitled 'follow the sea' shows a quasi-panoramic picture. It is another picture that deals with a form of far-sightedness, here now explicitly directed towards 'nature'. Now, arranging or directing vision in such a fashion is, as described above, a deeply romantic trope: configuring an observer who is placed in a far-reaching, survey position, provided with an 'empowered eye', and actively enjoys the self-image such an overview affords him. This is linked to empowerment, sublimation, even if only as a self-suggested moment. This aspect of the (nineteenth-century) panoramic shows the observer increasingly as a visual consumer; the subject 'advances' to the status of addressee of a new type of visual consumption, to a pleasure effect resulting from the visual accessibility (of distanced pictures) of the world. "The pleasure afforded by the panoramic as it fulfils the desire to be part of a greater order confers an additional political meaning on this new exploration of horizons".<sup>12</sup>

A different conception to that of the overview, the 'mastering eye' as just discussed with regard to the two earlier pictures, is formulated by the transition to the neighbouring picture entitled 'camouflage'. This picture modifies and at the same time breaks with the neo-romantic visual disposition described above. A clear link to visual culture, to a visual code, can be discerned here: the camouflage pattern stretches, as it were, the semiotic, referential frame in which Fleischmann's picture is constructed. Disguise or veiling here represents an opposing constellation; under the antipode of surveillance it relates what are effectively the inverse conditions of controlling supervision. Moving into the 'invisible' as a place beyond (?) visual control thereby marks the other pole of a controlled visibility which doesn't just decide how vision is to be ordered, "but also (provides) the space for negotiating what is (socially) in- and excluded, it couples visuality and politics".

The novelty of this difference, however – for otherwise we would merely be dealing with a neo-romantic revisionist or reiterative loop (called nostalgia) – lies in the way an 'outside' is discussed that can no longer be conceived of in such terms. A 'panorama' today, however it is constructed, does not point to any 'outside' or even – as was originally the case in the context of painting – to the beauty of nature. Rather, the panoramic has ceded ground to a synthetic, metapictorial overview position, which has long since abandoned the field of visibility. 'Overview' aims then at the intermedial, systemic crossover points, at their control and controllability.

Such reflection on parts of the (media-determined) visual regime leads, in Fleischmann's work, into the field of art itself, its archive. Foucault defines as an archive "neither the sum of all transmitted documents nor the institutions of their transmission, rather the system that rules the emergence as well as the continued relevance of what is conveyed."<sup>13</sup> It is no longer the analysis of one individual visual code – here painting – which proves rewarding, rather the interests and intents behind these readings of pictures and drawings, the crossover points, the instances of selection and control in the transfer process, that is to say: the rules generating discourse and the meta-hierarchies behind them.

In this sense, the romantic picture, the 'symbol of the romantic', stands for a diffuse concept of immediacy and 'authenticity'. The subject, however, now finds itself robbed of its creation, its construct. It experiences 'authenticity' beyond a dualistic scheme of representation/correspondence (subject/object, inside/outside), as a systemic effect, systemically processed as well as (re)produced. "In this play, the category of the original, or the authentic, is also dissolved. This is not to be found in objects, authenticity is not a category of reception: what the pictures (of objects) are supposed to deliver are imaginary systems of authenticity, of another authenticity, which is not supposed to be one of immediate access, but rather one of virtual admission, a foil for imaginations and projections".<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, it is precisely these systems of authenticity which Fleischmann is questioning. He observes his own mechanisms of selection, he questions the factors that determine how he sorts and chooses his pictures. He asks what, why and under what conditions is interesting (to him) or appears worthy of comparison. 'Interesting' is the operative word here, and ultimately provides the link to a consideration grounded in cultural theory. For what is 'interesting' forms the fundamental premise of any selection in the cultural field, and therefore also in Fleischmann's position.

And with this it becomes clear that this subjectivity that I have been talking about, a subjectivity that continues to express itself in Fleischmann's painting, cannot be questioned separately, as one pole of a binary inside/outside dichotomy. We are always writing on and about pre-existing texts, are always born a-priori into a language which structures us, or our thinking. 'I' is always already 'many'. "In these aesthetic communications the individual, determined by its indeterminacy, stages itself. It stages itself as an observer to whom no ultimate status can be ascribed. (...) Consequently, the observer is bound back again into the operations to which he owes his existence".<sup>15</sup> In this way, the archive, here more precisely the archive of art, also forms the prescribed framework in line with which (our) artistic signature styles are textured.

"The observational perspective doubles phenomena in order to observe them a second time and invite comparisons".<sup>16</sup> If Norbert Fleischmann is indeed setting up an observation of the second order, then not – this much is clear by now – in order to create one 'pictorial meaning'. On the contrary, in this questioning of the archive that is informed by the cybernetics of memory a/the relationship to an original (however construed), to a source or to any other kind of cultural 'origin' that is to be preserved, is not (any longer) relevant; nor indeed is the concept of 'correct' or 'false' pictures in the sense of some kind of explanatory system for art (cue: good or bad painting). For this would entail systemic-semiotic closure. Terminus – 'true values'. The aesthetic process in Norbert Fleischmann's painting is far more similar to a 'differentiator of the differentiated', a deregulating semiotic converter that aims to render 'structural variety' possible, because: "the memory of what has passed away allows variations of the (current imagined) future".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Florian Rötzer, *Im Sog der turbulenten Leere, Bemerkungen zur dekonstruktivistischen Ästhetik*, Kunst-Forum Bd. 108, p.110.

<sup>2</sup> Boris Groys, *Das leidende Bild*, in: ders.: *Logik der Sammlung*, (Munich, Vienna: Hanser 1997), p.193.

<sup>3</sup> See *Aufbruch ins Bedingungslose*, in Marc Ries, *reading in absence, catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the same name*, ed. by dreizehnzwei (Vienna: dreizehnzwei, Vienna).

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) (orig. 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Boris Groys, *Über das Neue*, (Munich, Vienna: Hanser, 1992), see p.12-14.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bürger, *Das Verschwinden des Subjekts*, in: *Fragmente einer Geschichte der Subjektivität*, hg. v. Peter Bürger u. Christa Bürger, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2001), p.204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.210, 224, 228

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.240.

<sup>9</sup> See *Ein semantischer Rechner*, in Dirk Baecker: *Wozu Kultur?*, (Berlin: Kadmos 2000), p.173.

<sup>10</sup> Irene Nierhaus: *Big Scale*, in: *räumen. Baupläne zwischen Raum, Visualität, Geschlecht und Architektur*, hg. v. Irene Nierhaus und Felicitas Konecny, (Vienna: selene, 2002), p.132.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Observation of the First and of the Second Order', in Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) (orig. 1997).

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<sup>12</sup> See 'Observation of the First and of the Second Order', in Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) (orig. 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Rumoren der Archive*, (Berlin: Merve 2002), p.16.

<sup>14</sup> See 'Von der Erscheinung zum Effekt. Paradigmen der Musealisierung', in Reinhard Braun, und *Das Buch zur Museumswelt und darüber hinaus* (Graz: Leykam, 1991), [http://braun.mur.at/texte/museum\\_0292.shtml](http://braun.mur.at/texte/museum_0292.shtml)

<sup>15</sup> See *Das Programm der Kultur*, in Dirk Baecker: *Wozu Kultur?*, (Berlin: Kadmos, 2000), see pp. 129-132.

<sup>16</sup> See *Kultur als Doppel*, in: *ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>17</sup> See *Kultur als Gedächtnis*, in: *ibid.*, p.159.