

‘Paintings’ “Surface”: Thomas Scheibitz meets Deleuze

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“The signs of art, finally, give us a time regained, an original absolute time which includes all the others”¹.

This quotation expresses something very complex and which I hope to demonstrate (at least in part) in the conclusion of this paper. It’s not immediately clear how it’s possible to discuss painting, a static form of art, in terms of time. However, a painter’s interest in painting is never as a static form but in it as a form of *life*. Any engagement with this life must discover how to maintain that life in a new context; another form of life; a painting, a discussion a piece of writing and so on. This paper treats specific paintings, not as illustrations of ideas but as problematic structures; by which I mean that what is interesting about certain paintings is that they create something unrepresentable.

The focus here is on the work of the contemporary German painter Thomas Scheibitz chosen simply in response to the sensation of being confronted, at a recent exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, by very knowing works and yet works which seem to suggest that such knowledge and sophistication serve only to mask something more interesting and intangible. These paintings are very large, typically about 9ft high. His work has been described as exploring ‘the elusive boundary between figurative and abstract’ and it’s true to say that there are suggestions of recognisable figures and spaces as well as references to the tradition of abstract painting, with it’s emphasis on explicit brushwork, colour and the flatness of the support, amongst other things. However, what is at stake in this discussion is, not that the ‘figurative’ and the ‘abstract’ are fixed and clear conceptual identities that would determine interpretation but that Scheibitz’ paintings, *as the creation of a new form of sensibility*, necessarily re-figure these key terms. The implication is that, if interpretation is to maintain the life of the work in a new context, it

¹ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p24

must also operate as the creation of a new form of sensibility, or, to put it another way, emit signs in the translation of the paintings' signs.

For example *Portrait Dana* (2007): there is a clear sense that the painting refers to the genre of portraiture. However, it is as if we repeatedly enter the painting and never arrive at a firm conclusion about what the painting is. There is the same sense of confusion with *Stilleben* (2007): a portrait, perhaps, but with this work the imaging consciousness is frustrated by the lack of allusion to even the most disguised of forms. Yet through this search for narrative synthesis which, standing in front of the work, I felt compelled to repeat, there emerges not simply the sense of incomprehensibility that this lack of synthesis causes and which we seek as if the painting were a puzzle that with the right information we could solve; but the kind of incomprehensibility that could be associated with what the Deleuze scholar Keith Ansell-Pearson terms the 'radically new'. I say this, not because I've never seen anything like it before but because that sensation of incomprehensibility felt to be located in the work itself and not in some external solution. In his book *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* Ansell-Pearson describes this new not as a matter of judgment but of a new kind of thinking that 'springs from intuition'. It is distinguished from what can be recognised by the intellect as new (fashion, for example) which is satisfying because within the new there is the security of recognising the old. Instead, the 'radically new' elicits a new kind of thinking from within an initial incomprehensibility, not an inability to comprehend because of a lack of understanding or knowledge but in the more affirmative sense of an incomprehensibility that is an encounter with what cannot be grasped from the point of view of recognition and common sense². As he goes on to say;

...although [the radically new] strikes us initially as obscure we discover, by undergoing a new kind of thinking, that it also 'dissipates' obscurities and problems which seem to us insuperable dissolve either by disappearing or by presenting themselves to us in a different manner.³

² For a discussion of this idea refer to Daniel Smith's essay 'Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality' in *A Deleuze Reader*, ed Paul Patton (Oxford, 1996)

³ Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life*, (London, 1999), p32

A concept of the new is significant for a discussion about a traditional form of art such as painting, which for many has been replaced by new forms of art which use new digital technologies; forms of art which are new because they are different from what we recognise as old; i.e. the traditional forms of painting and sculpture. However, the implication of Ansell-Pearson's argument is that the creation of the new is not relative to anything else that we could recognise; it does not involve comparison and judgment with the past as a fixed set of co-ordinates. But, if the 'radically new' begins with incomprehensibility then the question remains of how this work relates to a tradition about which much has been written and comprehended? It cannot be the case that the available critical and interpretative vocabulary becomes redundant because that vocabulary is an inescapable part of the discourses that are entwined with painting as a cultural activity.

Given this, we could at least begin by saying that Scheibitz' work exemplifies a tendency in contemporary painting to operate outside the 'abstract' and the 'figurative'; the dialectic that has conditioned so much of the painting that has been made since the advent of abstract painting at the beginning of the 20th Century. This advent was inseparable from the modernist project which, as the art historian Yve-Alain Bois has pointed out, anticipated the death of painting from its inception. It was the essentialist and historicist nature of modernism which meant that the 'end' of painting was the inevitable conclusion of Modernism's pursuit of paintings' essence through an historicist process of formal innovation. However, as I hope this paper implies, painting avoids this fate, not by rejecting abstract painting but by re-figuring it. For paintings' death can only ever be a projected future based upon a fixed idea of the past, in Modernism's case a narrative of increasing optical purity and self-definition as a negation of impure tactile associations. The 'end' is only a problem when it is seen as a future determined by what has gone before. However, the 'radically new' does not involve comparison and judgment with a past that is fixed. Consequently, if 'the radically new' elicits a new kind of thinking, at the heart of this is the thought that Scheibitz' work does not form part of the modernist/postmodernist narrative but instead re-figures its terms and examples.

Having established that the terms ‘abstract’ and ‘figurative’ are not irrelevant to Scheibitz’ work we can see that the more seemingly abstract paintings of late were preceded by more overtly figurative works. This painting *Untitled* (2002) includes type images of buildings, landscape, flower or sun put together to form a surprisingly airless, solid surface. We could expect a discontinuous and fragmented space but, although this is signified by what we recognise in the inconsistent motifs, scales and perspectives, the solidity of the surface, its very corporeality seems to intervene to deny the representational ground of overly used terms such as ‘discontinuous’ or ‘fragmented’ as criteria for judging the work. It is as if the work affects a disjuncture of the material corporeal surface and the incorporeal graphic functions which refer to facture, diverse systems of visual representation as well as to the sensible world these systems encode.

Hence this suggestion; that the work functions as two parallel, heterogeneous series; on the one hand, there is a series of *incorporeal effects*; not of proper names (a building, a flower, a rock and mountainscape) but of verbs which move across their surfaces; “to show like this, to schematise like that, to make picturesque in this way, to use graphic devices and pictorial conventions, to imply a narrative structure or a pictorial genre”. On the other hand, there is a series of *corporeal bodies*; colour, brushwork of a certain speed or precision, edges, thickness and the happenstance of a drip. The catalogue essay written to accompany the recent exhibition at Camden attempts to pin the work down by listing a repertoire of images Scheibitz uses in his recent work; for example, star, heart, ‘stick figure’, neo-Cubist face and so on to make the point that Scheibitz draws images from an inclusive range of contemporary social practices as much as from past paintings. However, this superficial analysis remains tied to a linguistic conception of the sign; one which reads the paintings by associating images and observing that Scheibitz combines the discernable image of figuration with abstraction’s explicit declaration of paint and surface.

Alternatively, we may draw on Deleuze’s non-linguistic account of the sign in order to shore up the suggestion of the disjuncture I’ve described. One aspect of this is that we are

prevented from taking the image at face value (which would be the case if the painting were an illustration or piece of graphic design for which the surface and stuff of paint were not of structural importance). What is engendered by the image(s) are not clear and distinct reference points or meaning-coordinates but, we could say, imagined images that de-form and re-form in the imagination. In his essay 'Deleuze and Essence' Keith Faulkner examines the nature of mental images and how they differ from those we see in the world. He points out that the mental image does not appear in space but rather in a *spatium*; it does not have dimensions that can be measured or compared with anything else. Using Sartre's example of the Pantheon Faulkner details its significance in the following way:

To imagine oneself looking at the Pantheon one would have to change the image to include a representation of oneself looking at [it]...In the imagination there is no perspective on this object...This is because the image has no extensive features; instead it is an *intensive* and *complicated* image. It lacks the structure of perceptions because, in our imagination, there is no possibility of an Other who can look at the *same object* from another perspective.⁴

If we were to see the real Pantheon, under whatever contingent lighting or weather conditions there may be, we would recognise it as that which corresponds to our mental image. However, the mental image cannot be the trace of a past real-image because it does not have the structure of a perception; it is seen from no perspective and is not relative to the contingencies of time and place; it is intensive, rather than extensive. With reference to *Proust and Signs*, and Combray in particular the essay then goes on to articulate how two moments in time resonate, not through the association of two empirical or extensive elements but involuntarily through 'the third element that internalises the differences between the first two'. This intensive, third element, or mental image without perspective, is 'not an "individual" image but a local image.'

It is this notion of the local image as complicated essence which I want to appropriate for my argument and get away from the idea that the images represent objects or operate as

⁴ Keith Faulkner, 'Deleuze and Essence' in *Pli* Volume 16 (2005), Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick

rhetorical ideas about painting i.e. copies of an original model. The point is that the ‘imagined image’, which has no perspective, is somehow engendered in the painting, not as an act of “subjective” imagination that compares one past moment with a present one, but as an Idea which, like the imagined image of the pantheon, includes all the possible perspectives upon two images that differ in time by internalising the difference between them. All possible perspectives does not mean a finite number of possibilities, which would exist in the domain of representation and imply a static and fixed transcendental position but the differential point of view which includes the observer who is transformed and deformed by his point of view. In this case not of any image in particular, but also not images in general; it is a ‘localised’ essence in comparison to Modernism’s pursuit of a universal essence which is an Idea external to the work. The imagined image contains the vestiges of many other images; rather like the generative process that the celebrated artist Matisse describes when he develops a sign in the context of a new painting which brings with it a lengthy process that takes place before the painting is made, the memory of which is transformed or even created in the context of the new work. As he says:

One must study an object a long time to know what its sign is. Yet in a composition the object becomes a new sign which helps to maintain the force of the whole. In a word, each work of art is a collection of signs invented during the picture’s execution to suit the needs of their position. Taken out of the composition for which they were created, these signs have no further use.⁵

The disjuncture of the corporeal and the incorporeal in Scheibitz work, a disjuncture of the causal relation that would synthesise image and material, is a condition for the imagined image because it liberates the literal image from functioning as a proper name whose identity we would recognise and instead allows ‘verbs’ to frequent the surface. These are infinitives: ‘to cover’, to brown, to drip, to draw, to image, to communicate, to schematise and so on. Beyond representation from a subjective point of view, these ‘infinitives’ internalise all possible perspectives and necessarily belong to an involuntary memory.

⁵ Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, (New York, 1978), p137

On the other hand, the liberation of the corporeal from the act of visual recognition evokes what Lyotard has called a figural space. We can contrast this to textual space which is the space of reading that requires the recognition of signifiers and, according to the structuralist model, are arbitrary and unmotivated. Within the structuralist grid, as a *closed* system, a letter or a word functions purely in relation to its opposition to the rest of the disembodied, virtual system to generate meaning. Whereas textual space is unmotivated in relation to the body of the reader, the line which forms the letter has a plastic function; it is *seen* rather than read in the act of reading ‘it functions by an appeal to corporeal resonance rather than to the code; it is a figure on a ground rather than an arbitrary mark’⁶ and is therefore motivated. When the line creates words to which concepts are matched the inscription itself, in the act of seeing, creates a figural space which, by definition, can have no concept, it is purely plastic. Thus the act of mental representation depends upon forgetting the line which, however, remains as a force that cannot be contained as a relation of difference in opposition; ‘for Lyotard the line marks a figural space, it has the quality of a trace of the unrecognisable; it evokes an unreadability that is constitutive of the very possibility of recognition’⁷.

This is consistent with Deleuze’s distinction between the figurative and the figural, which he ultimately distinguishes on the basis of the ‘pictorial act’ (p97) as he says at the beginning of Chapter 6 in his book on Bacon: ‘The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head...’⁸.

How does the figural operate within a formal order; particularly a seemingly static form of artwork such as a painting?

The emergence of a figural space and the evocation of an imagined image operate within what can be described as the ‘open system’ of the work of art. A closed system, on the other hand, would extract the image to incorporate it into a new whole, a new totality; a

⁶ Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, (London, 1991), p18

⁷Ibid, p19

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, (London, 2003), p34

clear and distinct meaning or *permanent outside from which we can stand and from which we can make our observations and give our opinions*. The figural, however, works dynamically to transform the textual space. Within the empirical habit of identifying images, conventions, and associations that would link together to form possible meanings there emerges a different kind of synthesis which is not representational. This space is not a permanent outside but a relation with the outside and could be thought of as *the genesis of sensibility itself*. The implication is that the genesis of sensibility, as an affect of the figural and percept of the imagined image, happens in the event of incomprehensibility; as an encounter that is not limited by the formation of a common sense. As Daniel Smith explains in his essay on Deleuze's Theory of Sensation:

...each faculty is made to confront its own differential limit, and is pushed to its involuntary and 'transcendental' exercise,...such is the use of the faculties put forward by Proust: a sensibility that apprehends and receives signs; an intelligence, memory and imagination that interpret them and explicate their meaning, each according to a certain type of sign; and a pure thought which discovers their essence as the sufficient reason of the sign and its meaning'.⁹

As he goes on to note this implies that a 'conscious perception must be related, not to a recognizable object situated in space and time, but to the minute and unconscious perceptions of which it is composed'.

From this we might think of the work of art operating as a form of life evolving dynamically in relation to its environment from the perspective of Maturana and Varela's concept of autopoiesis¹⁰ which makes no distinction between cognition and life. Contrary to a Darwinian perspective, in which the organism adapts to a pre-given, fixed and objective environment the autopoietic system creates new forms of sensing the world so that the genesis of a species is not an adaptation to a given environment but simultaneously the creation of a new environment. For example, a wasp and an orchid may inhabit the same spatial region but they create different environments according to what is important or significant to each species.

⁹ Daniel Smith 'Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality' in *A Deleuze Reader*, ed Paul Patton, (Oxford 1996), p34

¹⁰ Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, (Dordrecht, 1980)

Autopoiesis (or self-creation) was developed to distinguish between living and non-living systems. Significantly for this discussion the attempt to define a system *as* autopoietic cannot rest on the observation of formal structures, for that would be to serve the interests of the observer and not to define the system from the point of view of the system itself. Rather the living system is defined in terms of a dynamic unity or ‘network of relations’ that produces the components of the system which they call its *organisation*. These (virtual) dynamic processes actualise the living system as a machine; not a machine with a purpose but a structure which determines the system’s *relation to the outside*.

Thus, to analyse Scheibitz’ painting as a form of life, as an autopoietic entity, it is necessary to be able to think about its ‘organisation’ rather than to start with observable, formal aspects, or components; those aspects that the painting presents to empirical experience and are limited by a common sense. In other words it is not the observable characteristics that allude to the ‘figurative’ or the ‘abstract’ that can account for the work but the virtual organisation which, as a process of self-production, construct a relation with the outside. If that relation with the outside is an initial incomprehensibility, consistent with the ‘radically new’, it is also described by Ansell-Pearson as ‘the experience of time as it *imposes itself* upon us.

What might this mean in terms of using the available interpretative vocabulary? - for it’s true to say that the ‘abstract’ and the ‘figurative’ do not disappear in our response to the work. If the notion that we ‘experience time as it imposes itself upon us’ implies that we experience the past as held apart from the future then this is an experience in which the terms ‘abstract’ and ‘figurative’ cease to represent an empirical, fixed past in terms of purely conceptual dialectical opposites. Instead, in the genesis of sensibility, these external ‘environmental’ signs are repeated as a form of difference according to the different temporalities with which they are associated; not remembered by common sense but internalised as differential essence. We might conclude, then, that instead of ‘exploring the elusive boundary between figurative and abstract painting’ as the catalogue essay suggests, Scheibitz’ paintings create an *interface* where two temporalities are brought together to occupy a flattened space of non-contradiction. On the one hand,

the temporality of 'reading' the narrative of figurative painting and on the other, the temporality of Modernism's instantaneous synthetic moment (what Michael Fried called 'presentness'). This implies that the event of Time imposing itself upon us creates a perspective on variation – from the event or 'Time imposing itself upon us', which holds apart past and future 'prevents' the different temporalities operating as differences in degree or representations of empirical experience to create instead a perspective on variation; a pure event at the surface; one that can only be felt or sensed; that begins with incomprehensibility and elicits a new kind of thinking.