

The power of things and the promise of the pictures

On René Wirths von Thilo Billmeier (translation Jack Altman)

Exposing things to a total visual record means on the one hand to experience how these things back away into more and more aspects, facets and nuances of their concrete definitive form. On the other hand, the objects looked at in this way petrify and lose the elasticity of a living observation, the change of light and the transitions in space; to a certain extent they congeal into a symbol of themselves. In the process of what we may imagine to be a second look, both experiences fuse into an ambivalent effect of growing alienation and growing fascination with the prospect via this second look that we may lose contact with reality.

Indeed, it must be said the first glance exists just as a possibility, although a possibility which in the background of our normal experience of the world is constantly present and acts as a guarantee of that normality. In this way the border is defined which René Wirths uses as a theme in his pictures. It is the border between on the one hand the reality that is visibly accessible in a “normal look” and on the other hand the possibility of its loss in an “objective look” that is simultaneously fluid and concrete. Wirths’ treatment of this border brings into play, in addition to the presumably normal and presumably objective look, another, third look. This look does not fix the object but conceptualizes it and is thus as constructive as it is receptive. From looking at the pictures, then, it can become clear that even the two reality-related looks, the normal and the objective, not only describe visual phenomena but also always embrace actions and attitudes. Just as the look at a pair of spectacles as depicted is directed at the fact of the painting, at its contemplative contact with a visual appearance, so it is in the nature of the normal look to take a practical and circumspect interest in the things and in the nature of the alienated and averted objective look to feel a loss or the bond of an Élan that had originally created a context.

With Wirths, the look at the picture for its depiction or interpretation does less to express than to respond to the objective look at the subject-matter. The face that the things turn towards us in his pictures is therefore something other than the one they show to us when we just observe them. The response becomes possible by the mere fact that everything in the picture is fundamentally and unavoidably belied by that network of interpretation and meaning which the isolated object would otherwise resolve with its perception. But even the subject-matter of the objective look, rendered meaningless through the simple fact of its portrayal, is once more provided in a second movement with a sense that it bears as a symbol or idol. Thus it is turned as a picture of itself into the symbol of death or, as an objectification of itself, into a fetish. Some pictures by Wirths do exactly that. In the light of the painting it becomes understandable how sense points to the history of its creation – and precisely to the history of death and desire that preceded it as a dark prelude.

For Wirths, the construction of a relationship between the picture area and the picture’s subject plays a role in the grammar of the answer and the “aboutness” which the picture presents. Some pictures give the impression that the objects which they depict lay down the formal dimensions of the picture area (for example *The Ladder and Chair*). The fact that in this way the explicitly created picture area remains a level area activates the concrete “thing-ness” of the depicted object so that every graphic conception (e.g. *The Stapler*), every surface realization (e.g. *The Hi-Fi Cassette*) and every indication of plastic volumes or spatial placement of one element behind another (as in *The Sewing Machine*) becomes a pictorial event. Correspondingly, whatever is happening in the interior of these forms remains largely pure painting. In order to have a perception of the density of the visual object, the picture must itself become pictorial in the dense sequence of its surface classifications. Where that failed, it would become immediately evident: the picture would then resemble itself too little. One could identify this “densification” of the pictorial surfaces as a downright liberation from the presence of the object, at any rate as a liberation to be earned only in passing through all its aspects – both for the painter and for the observer.

The pictures on display in Paris reveal themselves to be even more dense in their surface than Wirths’ earlier work. Just as dense, too, are the references which link the pictures created specifically for this show. That applies immediately to the colour choices which in all cases go for greys, browns and blacks. Priority is also given to an analytical interest in the conjugation of possible references to the picture area (surface, linearity, plasticity, frontal treatment, clamping together rather than foreshortening, among other things). As for content, in their juxtaposition the chosen objects evoke the situation of the studio: the stapler is a tool used for fixing the stretched canvas, the brush for painting the picture, the painter’s spectacles represent his viewing of the objects, while sewing machine, Vélosorex moped, wheel and audio-cassette set out the objects of the pictures themselves. The artist remains as absent in this setting as he is for himself when at work. In precisely this way, however, he is also present as a reflection on the cassette, on the Vélosorex and on the brush (in which size and form incorporate the shape of the whole body). In a similar manner, the spectacles may be read as a kind of self-portrait of the artist. Not entirely absent within the orbit of these studio artefacts are the pictures being created in

the studio. Thus the reflected image on the Vélosorex also reveals the picture of the Vélosorex on the studio wall. And the bicycle wheel which defines the studio space as a workshop space may also recall another bicycle wheel created in 2007 and exhibited at the time in Berlin.

The reciprocal references between the pictures unfold even further against these backgrounds. In the process, further formal aspects play a role, such as the multifaceted reflections and transparencies of the surfaces or the motif of the circle, which links the wheel with the Vélosorex and with the cassette, with the spectacles and the reflections on the brush. However, other associations in content are also important. With Motobécane's Vélosorex, France without a doubt stands centre stage in the exhibition. Perhaps the German-manufactured paintbrush should be placed by its side. Clearly closer to the Motobécane, however, is the Singer sewing machine. Both machines are classics whose design has today given them cult status. Wirths picks up on this status through the almost impeccable condition of the machines and works it out through the blending flow of light on the surfaces. In its monumentality, however, the sewing machine evokes associations to naval cannons and anti-aircraft guns. It is no accident that the objects of desire now meet as monuments of a history of death. It can rather be said that a perspective is being realized here which surrenders neither to the magic of the fetish nor to the exorcizing power of petrified time. In fact, it counteracts them through the examination of their historical associations. The beguiling effect of each of the pictures rests above all on this promise.