

*“A painting is more than a painting, and sometimes even more than the object that it represents.”*  
Paul Valéry

## **René Wirths’ Visual-Aesthetic Operations as Vocabularies of Perception and Cognition**

René Wirths’ artistic output is a reflection on the picture as a medium of perception and cognition. His oeuvre, rooted in a specific practice of painting, tests our faith in images along with all this faith’s epistemological and cultural aspects, thereby opening up a painting-related discourse that is particularly relevant in an era characterized by a flood of media images and by simulated images.

Wirths states that every one of his paintings begins with his desire to “first see the immediate environment as it is, without evaluating it.”<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the way in which he proceeds is similar to the process of phenomenological reduction, so-called epoché, as described by Edmund Husserl. This stands for a methodology of restraint and/or the deactivation of certain, particularly transcendental, phenomena and judgmental acts of positing. Stereotypical notions and preexisting bodies of experience pertaining to that in our world which is visible “as such” are largely excluded, allowing their replacement with a self-given thing-existence that emerges from the very thing itself. Wirths explains that this is also the approach that underlies his established form of imagery because “the phenomenologically visible [...] [conveys] itself not so much via the motif that I select, but primarily via the image that I paint. That is to say: I also then have to observe the image itself as it is, as its own reality.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the sometimes months-long process of intently observing a real, three-dimensionally existing object, and of that object’s subsequent transformation into a two-dimensional image, is one that, for Wirths, assumes direct and thoroughly subjective perception to be a conscious act – and this process also generates his personal realizations based on the effect of that which he paints. One feels moved to concur with English philosopher Bertrand Russell on the distinction between reality and appearance – in other words, on the difference between what seems to be the form of an object and what the object “really” is. In connection with these thoughts, Wirths shares with Russell the urge to acquire knowledge, aware of the fact that perception via information gleaned from the senses – such as the interplay of colors, shapes and (surface) textures – is defined in differing ways and thus reveals not truths of the world of things, but much rather pluralities of reality. Accordingly, Russell ascertains: “...what we directly see and feel is merely ‘appearance,’ which we believe to be a sign of some ‘reality’ behind.”<sup>3</sup> So Russell holds that the essential content of a thing is always relative; the objects therefore represent not realities, but rather – just like in Wirths’ compositions – model-like constructions that always seem to be missing something in terms of their depictability, and of their being perceived and comprehended.

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<sup>1</sup> René Wirths in a conversation with Erika Költzsch, in: *analog*, exhib. cat., Galerie Haas, Zurich, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Los Angeles, 2010, pp. 7–8.

Hence, Wirths' precisely done still lifes also exhibit breaks that arise from manipulations of depiction and of the gaze, breaks accomplished by employing various formal strategies. These can be seen in phenomena such as the monumental enlargement of an object, which – thus removed from its original dimensions – is alienated and thereby distanced a bit from reality. Such enlargement also negates a certain allusion to trompe-l'œil painting that one might be tempted to assume at first glance, since the chosen scale quite naturally precludes any optical illusion in the sense of confusing the object and its image. Wirths thus clearly rejects the dogmatism of Plato, who put the painted images of ancient times to the test by calling for the real objects and their depictions to be indistinguishable from each another – like in Pliny's tale about the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius.<sup>4</sup> Even so, Wirths' concentrated, strict frontal depiction of objects evokes fascination, not least because it plays with the disturbance of perception.

Above and beyond this, the artist completely eschews any system of spatial and/or temporal relations by presenting the painted object, depicted in apparent three-dimensionality, in an isolated manner, wholly objectified and devoid of any distractions such as there would be if the object were embedded in scenery or a story. The sterile white background, before which the objects are shown as if floating with no support upon which to rest, underlines the impression of spacelessness and timelessness and affects an appearance of ordered tranquility. There thus exists no narrative potential to distract from the physical, thoroughly haptic presence of that which is shown, which forgoes any illusionistic depth but still allows a deep plasticity to be sensed – albeit without even conceding the objects their own shadows. As familiar as these objects may seem, with most of them having been taken from the artist's everyday and/or working environment, they make an impression that is all the more unsettling in their having been deliberately removed from reality. But it is precisely this gap between image and depicted object, between real presence and fictional construction, that opens up the realms of imagination sought after by Wirths. And the artist uses this gap to critically question not only the concept of an image, but also the process of image construction as well as of visual experiences in general.

So in his obsessive devotion to the phenomenology of things, made visible through his painterly metamorphoses, Wirths' thus makes accessible a new dimension of visibility and perception not only for himself, but also for those who view his works. If one, for example, retraces his microscopic gaze upon trivial objects such as a ball of wool (*Wollknäuel*, ill. p. 35) or a breadbasket (*Brotkorb*, ill. p. 81), this focus makes it possible to penetrate a visualized sphere of being that, according to Henri Bergson, is what ultimately distinguishes an image as such: “And by ‘image’ we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing – an existence placed half-way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation.’”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Note: In the 35<sup>th</sup> book of his *Natural History* (*Naturalis historia*), Pliny the Elder (AD 23 or 24–AD 79) wrote of the contest between the two Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. While Zeuxis lured birds with painted grapes, Parrhasius succeeded in using a painted curtain to fool Zeuxis himself, who attempted to look behind this true-to-life curtain and thus lost the contest against Parrhasius.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Bergson, “Introduction,” in: Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, Mineola, 2004, pp. vii–viii.

Only by virtue of the fact that the world becomes visible does it also become imaginable. The event of “causing to appear” or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty called it, the miracle of appearance, is thus an act of showing or of visual speaking. A great deal of contemplation during the painting process and an elaborated process of reflective thinking enable the artist René Wirths to create paintings that are both analytical and sensuous, exemplifying the depictive power of painting just as much as they scrutinize the meanings of image and representation. And last but not least, they are an expression of the premises and experiences of Wirths’ times, the painterly visualization of these existential experiences of the world.

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