Thomas Fischer – "Fischertechnik. Volume 1"

BRICOLAGE

Searching, collecting, linking – Thomas Fischer's art develops comparable to a modular system. In a creative experiment, using different substances and various methods of applying paint, the artist forms a structure which eventually present a complex unit in terms of format and composition. With regards to the construction of the surface, however, the painting visualises an open process, which touches upon a multitude of references in content and structure. On one level, the painting is created through an additive method, where various fragments of abstract and concrete forms are combined. On the other hand, Thomas Fischer marks off interfaces and fractures, which again and again question which of these fragments should join and fuse and therefore make new structural links possible. In reference to this approach – self-mockingly alluding to his own name – the artist coined the expression "Fischertechnik" (Fischer technique).

Fischertechnik is the name of a popular toy unit constructions system made in Germany, not only used by children but also popular with teenagers and even adults. Advertised by its producers as "a construction system for life", it teaches technical thinking and logical combining of practical connections. Its modular system, though based on a fixed grid, encourages the user to search and experiment because of a multitude of possible combinations and thus enhances creativity, variability and flexibility – today highly valued attributes in a person's private and professional life.

As a result, the term "Fischertechnik" evokes qualities which can also be thought about in philosophical and artistic terms. The principle of constantly new possible combinations can be related to the concept of "ars combinatoria", first discussed by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his essay of the same name in 1666. Leibniz developed the idea of an 'alphabet of human thought'. Starting with a specific set of simple foundations he wanted to record all concepts and ideas like a mathematical system. By dissecting the human imagination according to strict scientific laws he tried to define a 'scientia generalis' as the basis and precondition for all individual sciences.

The initial aim of 'ars combinatoria' was to break off symbols from their usual context and combine them in such a way that a new, previously unknown, dimension

is revealed to ones consciousness. Everything that 'ars combinatoria' records already exists but is thrown off its course – as if directed by a magnet – and made "unfamiliar" so it can be combined differently.

Jean Paul described this process as "metaphorical will-o'-wisp association"; tearing apart the familiar structure of the known only to generate something new. More recently, the idea of 'ars combinatoria' was picked up by Jacques Derrida in his theory of "Deconstruction", and the idea of the "Savage Mind" by Lévi Strauss. In the "Savage Mind" Strauss speaks of the "bricoleur", someone who puts together pre-existing things in new ways, approximating the mind of the 'savage', who – contrary to the engineer, who works with a scientific mind and creates new materials and tools if necessary . The work of the "bricoleur" knows no rules; his aesthetic activity resists any predefined methods. Only through experimentation, going back and forth between initial design and reflection, spontaneous action and pre-mediated intervention, a picture of how the various elements fit together slowly emerges by seeing how they mutually relate to each other and what their dynamics are.

Another example of the influence of "ars combinatoria" is the "Mnemosyne-Atlas" by Aby M. Warburg. He created a series of pictures which he entitled 'Mnemosyne, A Picture Series Examining the Function of Preconditioned Antiquity-Related Expressive Values for the Presentation of Eventful Life in the Art of the European Renaissance'. He attached photographs with different scenes, such as reproductions from books and visual material from newspapers, on wooden boards covered with black cloth. Warburg then arranged them in such a way that they formed a line according to one or several theme. The images could continually be combined into new configurations, each time illustrating different aspects of the iconographic history of style. Through this multilayered tableau of images – artistic as well as from everyday life – a memory of Occidental culture was created. Because of the interchangeability of the images, the brittleness and ambiguity inherent to this dynamic atlas of pictures, a political, ethical and cultural frame of references was created, which still has relevance today.

BLOW-UP

Thomas Fischer begins his work process by collecting and archiving advertisements. At the same time, he takes photographs of ordinary situations in his personal surroundings he notices in passing: a 70s retro style caravan, the sterile fences of a post-war suburban house, a seemingly grotesque collection of party tents, or an abandoned building site with sand heaps and tarpaulins. The pictures are always devoid of human life. Their frame and focus is chosen in such a way that the image moves as closely as possible towards the viewer; but simultaneously because of the austere, artistic construction of the composition he is excluded from the situation touched upon in the image. The everyday banality of the object depicted clashes with the peculiar angle of the snapshot. The interplay of form and colour inherent to each picture bring the individual scenes into relation with each other; they draw their narrative potential less from the repetition of particular motives and stories but from the power of opposition and attraction between structural similarities.

The term "Blow-up", a freely associated reference to the film of the same name by Michelangelo Antonioni, describes best this kind of processing of reality. Similarly, the strategy of the film's protagonist, the fashion photographer Thomas, is to arrange reality into aesthetic compositions in order to gain further insights into life with the help of coincidence. Reflecting on the mechanical reproduction methods of photography and film, and their actual truth content, the photographer's interest shifts from the snapshot to the attempt of comprehensively reconstructing reality. The concepts of reality in an apparently contingent snapshot, further processed and set into a different context, can be understood as an experiment which – claiming to be a documentary – continuously moves closer to an objective image of the truth.

Similar to the "Blow-up" method, through Thomas Fischer's gaze a given situation is transferred into a painterly system of images, which derives its tension from the design of the surface and spatial effects, opposite impulses of direction, and demarkations that set spaces apart. Thomas Fischer creates entirely new situations from the pictures he collected and thus builds up his personal "Mnemosyne Atlas" to which the viewer can make his own contributions through playful association. Heterogeneous objects are linked because of their structural similarities and are released from any time-place orientation system. Beyond any functional relationships a symbolic framework is revealed, which resists any desire for utilisation and

categorisation through anarchic subversion.

The undirected and subjective course of action of an individual snapshot is intensified in connection with the other images, all of which are linked together in ever new constellations. The intensity of the visual experience is similar to that of watching a film. However, the cinematic analogy is neither one of linearity nor of following an action with a destination in mind; but it is the experience of the wandering eye. The combination of conscious and unconscious perception, intuitively sensed or conceptual ideas, experiences – barely touched upon already passing by – give insight into the artist's personal realm of experiences through a collective memory of images. It is a memory which is permanently fed with new images – disparate and contradictory – through the pictures generated through film, advertising, art and the everyday. By confronting and comparing scenes which are structurally related but unrelated in content fractures appear, which allow the viewer experience the process of metamorphosis and transformation in intervals. Ones perception is led from the conceptual definition of an image towards a dynamic perspective where the developments are unpredictable.

THE COLOURFUL WORLD OF ADVERTISING
For years Thomas Fisher has been archiving advertising cuttings which are viewed and organised regularly and reappear in different aspects of his work. Again and again focusing on different segments and reorganising the individual parts into different groups the artist explores scenarios of gestures and actions through which common behaviour, value systems and desires are made visible. In this way the codes and manipulative strategies of advertising are accentuated and their latent effectiveness is analysed. But since the picture fragments are split from the actual advertising message manifest in a particular product they speak to general human, more emotionally coloured, levels of perception. The repetition of particular motives, structural patterns and basic geometric forms cause the artist to define individual groups. Because of permanently newly created contexts the initial advertising message is lost in an entirely new framework references with different symbolic meanings.

This becomes for example apparent in a group of works which focuses on women's hands in ever new ways. In choosing the detail Thomas Fischer stresses

the expressive potential of the human gesture as a component of non-verbal communication. Comparing a large number of advertising fragments it becomes apparent that the same gesture has a new meaning if shown in a different context. An uninterrupted glance across the picture clippings is already suggesting a wide variety of actions: showing, opening, closing, hiding, holding, stroking, posing, supporting, pressing, pulling, lifting, stretching. The driving impulse behind a gesture – the dynamics of loosening something or pausing – a didactic or authoritative claim can be expressed through a gesture. In addition to values and behaviour patterns one can glimpse psychological moments between confidence and insecurity. Through a combination of gesture, accessories, the prevailing mood of colour, and the context of place a scene is roughly outlined. And a space for dialogue visually opens up in front of the viewer. A pleated skirt, for example, can once be interpreted as the epitome of a securely led life without change, which is rigid and unalterable. However, if the light falls slightly differently onto the skirt and the hand's gesture is subtly modified so that it sits supportively on the hip – a gesture which shows more openness, perhaps even suggesting the woman's coquettish awareness of her own body language – the same image is transformed into a symbol of elegance and seemingly affected femininity. a hand that grabs, tightens, or checks a bed sheet or piece of fabric may evoke a household action, but the sensual experience of touch is communicated visually at the same time. Thus the blanket pressed with both hands against a woman's chest becomes a symbol for longing after warmth, security and intimacy. The promise inherent to the advertisement is here reinstalled as a basic human feeling. But by reducing the performers of these scenes to hands, or the torso at most, the distance between the rosy world of advertising and everyday reality is intensified, even so much so that these categorical differences can actually be felt. Condensed into gestural abbreviations and reflexes, the remains of utopia shine through in this group of works.

SHINY MIRRORS AND VEILS

Thomas Fischer prefers to use lacquer paints. As underground for the paintings he often uses simple plywood panels, reinforced by wooden frames, or sheets of aluminium. By applying the lacquer paints with different methods the painting gets the character of a sample palette on which the various reactions of the material to the paint are made visual. Because the glazing is added repeatedly a homogeneously closed surface, smooth like a mirror, is created. Reworking the paint adds cracks to the composition that are fading towards the edges. Dripped paint takes on dynamic – more or less delicate – structures. Paint that is poured onto the surface seems to make the composition break apart and destroys it in parts. Sharp edges where different fields of colour meet accentuate the surface effect of the piece. The variations in colour intensity and degrees of saturation next to each other, drawing-like design elements – gestural and painterly – allow one to imagine the spatial without an actual suggestion of space in perspective. It is the combination of differently shaped structural levels which leads one eventually to visualise places and scenes.

These, for example, can be relatively concrete topographical places – a sample house ("Findet Nemo"/ "Finding Nemo", 2006), a park-like piece of landscape ("Zwei" / "Two", 2005), a newly created cemetery ("Stadtlandschaft mit Blumen" / "Cityscape with Flowers", 2005), a modernist apartment block ("Betrieb Versand" / "Mail-Order Business", 2006). Or, on the other hand, in a more abstract, veiled manner, an object – which cannot necessarily be defined – is only hinted at. In one painting the viewer may think some shapes closely resemble glazed apples, yet these can also be attributed as eyes to a peculiar bulge which, due to its leopard pattern, also provokes sexual feelings; then again, inspired by the title, one can imagine a monster-like figure a la King Kong ("King Kong Karneval" / "King Kong Carneval", 2007). Elsewhere, a three-dimensional piece of scenery could be identified as architecture because of perspective and the surface design. However, at the same time, a painterly designed piece pushes in front, erasing this kind of interpretation and negating it in its physical presence ("Mitte" / "Middle", 2005).

If ones point of view changes, the organisations of colour and form can always also be apprehended in their actual appearance – apart from any kind of narrative reference. The rounded edges of a painting's underground emphasises its presence as material so that the sense of composition is derived from the autonomy of form and colour in the end. Ultimately, precisely this ambivalence – undecided and

resisting resolution – becomes the theme of the work. Even if parts of the advertising pictures are integrated into a painting it remains uncertain whether a narrative link is intended.

In the painting "Aufholen, Einholen, Überholen" / "Make up, Catch up, Overtake" (2007) the viewer is confronted with a huge vehicle which pushes into the painting from the rounded upper edge, only to bump into a number of heterogeneous particles of shapes in a radially organised composition that suggests movement. Fragments of nature, traffic and technology, reduced to ornamental pictograms, let the vague idea circle around that this could be an agricultural scene. But a grey shape, dominating the middle of the painting, leaving it blank, shows resistance: an irritation that cannot be dissolved. Like a barb this element disturbs the process of interpreting the painting and eventually cancels out any coherent meaning. Despite his desire to fill the picture with content, or even symbolism, the viewer is reminded of the unchangeable fact that he is simply dealing with the act of painting, which constantly recharges itself with new narrative and figurative references – overtaking continuously .

FROM "LITTLE I" TO "BIG YES"

In addition to the sign with his own name, a shape in form of a circle similar to a speech bubble, stamped with the hand written inscription "I" or "yes", is an ever reappearing motive in the paintings of Thomas Fischer. They seem to invade an otherwise logically formulated, coherent image like UFOs. These shapes – differing in size and expansion – as if pulsating, sound out the painting's depth, thus hinting at a place-time perspective. In a rather austere depiction of a modernist office block in a stereotypically designed garden these shapes act as an irritation which is irrevocable and cannot be ignored. On the other hand, pieces of scenery that were added and thrown together at random are offered a link through these shapes because they allow an association of the anonymous motive of the painting with a number of very personal ideas and content. The conflict between technologically driven, cold architecture and nature and the inexplicable presence of these speech bubbles cannot be resolved. Repeating the same exclamation obsessively, someone appears

to be hammering against a structure which refuses to take him in. Through the persistently called out "I" or "yes" a protest is formulated, which becomes the true design principle behind the composition and can be understood affirmatively.

Even if the name of the artist is mutating into a company logo, he himself appears to have been denied a place within the realm of the picture. Because of the blazing pastel colours of the logo it should be less understood as an expression of the artist's personality but like a company advertisement aimed at progress and optimism ("Little I", 2006). The "nondescript" name of the artist, which stands like an illusion in this programme dictated by market rules, of course helps. Only, the logo of his self in the foreground – the "I-logo" on a red background – is contradictory in the composition. It is like a flaw or, clearly outlined and set off against the yellow-grey shadow, a special aesthetic feature. This could either mean the artist is taking his position at a distance on purpose, or he is placing himself in this kind of reality like a parasite, or he simply turns his own outsiderness into an eye-catching dramatic effect.

In accordance with the impression of darkness and secrecy, the human figure is rarely depicted in the paintings of Thomas Fischer. However, in the painting "Little I, II" (2002) the viewer believes to meet two figures in the secure setting of a spacious, and comfortable middle-class terrace. But, if looked at closely, it is not the presence of humans which is the subject of the painting but again their absence since their faces remain mask-like blanks. Also looking at their hands and arms it remains unclear whether empty space or indeed physical presence are depicted. The black mass indicating uniform hair and clothes emphasises this strange impression of uncertainty and a non-physical presence. Further, the surrounding of the figures also mutates from familiarity into something strangely artificial; it seems the whole place in the picture is a collage of various decorative pieces of scenery and various semantic fields are introduced. The camouflage-style painted piece of sky that is visible does not only evoke cloud formations but also appears to expose the idyllic character of the scene. By means of ornamental encoding it becomes clear that the middle-class reality of the Western hemisphere is embedded in a continuum of violence, inequality and injustice. The part of the garden painted with impulsive gestures stands in this context less for a personally formulated idea of freedom but a cliché image of individualism. It is an individualism that expresses its uniqueness through the readymade industrially manufactured uniform decor of Ikea and DIY

markets. These pieced together elements of various realities are combined in such a way that they forma picture with a compelling structure. At the same time, the disintegration of this structure is introduced through a prominent oval empty shape at the lower edge of the picture. Although it can be identified as a table because of the two illusory seated figures, its mirror-smooth lacquered surface puts into question all aspects of the content of this composition and can be read as a radical negation that lets all objects grouped around it dangerously slide and sway. The scenery created from decorative fragments and pieces and the mask-like figures give off the impression of coldness and distance. However, this is broken up because of the points of fracture where the individual structural elements of the painting meet. It is particularly in these in-between spaces that "the little I" reveals itself. At the crossing point between quotations, references and surface design the artist's personal position can be sensed – as another perspective and manifesto to self-assertion.

IO IMPARO L'ITALIANO – COME STAI?

Thomas Fischer moves between symbols, language- and picture structures, which he sets into motion and questions their meaning. Next to picture puzzles with various compositional elements, surface structures and quotes from the world of advertising, processing his own photographs and personal impressions, the artist creates text images, which refer to mundane aspects of reality. A simple dialogue presented in two languages from a textbook, or a page of personal telephone numbers from a sketch book; transferred into the format of a painting the words and sentence fragments without much sense suddenly become meaningful, almost to the point of being irritating. The numbers and names take on the character of having a secret code, suggesting hidden connections and combinations or even a conspiratorial plot asking to be cracked. Like the structural elements, the stories of the pictures hinted at get lost in nothingness and remind of the emptiness of trained patterns of communication and codes of conduct. By illustrating this process in an ironic-subversive game, the words initiate communication about ones own manners and inability to judge speech and image.

　　Thomas Fischer's works let one reflect on the potential tensions between advertising and the ornamental; on the origins of quoted image and narrative motive; and on the autonomy of form and colour, composition and gesture. In an confident

game using different media levels for interpreting image and reality, Thomas Fischer not only demonstrates irony and scepticism but also openness and independence. Distancing himself on purpose from his own creations, the pleasure of experimentation, readiness to take risks and humour are central to a positive, affirmative understanding of his work: "Cin-Cin and Arrivederci".

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