

CONTEXT AND TEXT  
AN ARC OF THOUGHTS ON AMBIENCE AND WORK  
Peter Panyoczki, January 2004

For some time I've been haunted by the thought that we've drifted into a no-man's-land extending over wide areas of our real life.

We have abandoned firm, static social structures in which *Weltanschauungen* were more clearly defined, where space and time, traditions, values, hierarchies, forms of political and social behaviour rested on the foundation of a binding canon, and we are turning to an opportunistic, flexible way of acting in which individuals, couples, and portions of the economic, political, and social landscape join together in short-lived, loose groupings for a particular purpose. An age has dawned that distinguishes itself by an absence of visions and points of orientation. We are observing a definite tendency to a form of common life that can only be described as flowing: The sustenance that nourishes us is an undefinable mush in fermentation. We're returning to the gas-ejecting protoplasm from which we once emerged.

The current art scene, whose immanent characteristic is to function as a deciphering seismograph, reflects this state of affairs to a T. Doesn't the way some contemporary artists succumb to the seductions of the virtual media anticipate our possible future condition as gas-formers, a posthumous disembodiment, and at the same time manifest our growing alienation from the "real" world?

This distancing ourselves from the material world goes along with a miniaturisation and reduction of means. Paul Virilio poses the question: "Up to what point does it hold that less is more? Up to virtuality, that image, that virtual reality that is finally more decisive than the thing of which it is the mere figuration?" <sup>1</sup>

In the present cacophony of art styles and forms of expression, anything goes. Nothing is regarded any longer as a point of orientation. This confusion is only drowned out by the voice of those self-appointed dictators of the media and forms of perception who, when put in a tight spot, sometimes here, sometimes there, following their own whims, dip their strainers—calibrated for their specific quality criteria—into the stew and draw out the biggest, newest, and showiest chunks for the art market.

What now do I personally, as an artist, make of this mess?

In any case, I'm allowed the greatest possible freedom. But freedom for what, to go where? Yes, I may invent meaning and purpose myself. Courageously, I play blind man's buff in the dark, strike a match now and again on myself, and afterwards reproduce on canvas what is left in me as a flickering echo. I thus create my autistic art world and, if I'm lucky, then other autistics, observers of these propositions, will fall in behind me.

Freedom also exists in the choice of means. It is simply a decision that one takes. It can be elevated to a principle or also be considered as a temporary station in a self-modifying process. My choice fell on the use of matter, on the direct, bodily, haptic dialogue with the imaging process, in which as few mediated, instrumented, middle terms as possible should be interposed. My body, I myself am medium enough.

The *materia prima* of the material unfolds on canvas under my at times manic assistance, and often to my own astonishment, into enigmatic constructions that don't betray their meaning to me right away. That is the pleasure of this métier: One can create an evenly matched, but usually superior dialogue partner in the form of a work. An almost golemesque dimension.

When I paint or sculpt I try to orient myself. Artistic activities become methods with which I navigate in a field of relations embracing space, time, and psychic condition, by means of playful new arrangements of material on, for example, canvas. They are instruments for a cathartic self-mirroring through which, if successful, it becomes possible to see oneself from the side, from behind, totally differently and in new ways. They also give information about my position at the time, but also hint at new sites and possibilities or anticipate these. The sand, the earth, the ashes, the cement and pigment, to name a few materials, represent tangible realities to me and embody my own state. They convey certainty to appearance, and dealing with them turns them into familiar partners. In this approach, at the same time, I easily and repeatedly fall into the danger of losing my orientation. The balancing act of art on the tightwire, high above the abyss of everything negated, moving toward an aimed-at but never altogether reachable goal is what makes up aesthetic motivation. Aesthetics is reconciled but not eliminated tension and nourishes itself from this deficit: from the insight into the powerlessness to overcome the gap between the here and now and the distant, aimed-for ideal; at the same time, it holds a stubborn faith in this very possibility. As in the rhythm of respiration, we shuttle back and forth between knowing what to do and not knowing, in the search for brighter lights on more distant shores. From the oceans of the canvases I can sight these.

ON THE WORK CYCLES  
TERRA INCOGNITA – SEDIMENTS – ARCHEOLOGY – FAR SO NEAR

I shall now try to describe not my work itself, but rather the context in which I believe I'm operating and out of which my production has emerged. The general tenor of the—really unanswerable—basic questions, which has spurred me on to my artistic activity and runs through all my previous work so far, has established itself over the years firmly in me. It amounts to the following two questions, which keep my sense of wonder alive: *How is it that being is, and what is the meaning of this existence? That is: Why is what is and for what is what is?* These two questions, in the light of which my artistic activity will always stand, can be fanned out to reveal all the others.

*“Doing away with distance is fatal.” Rene Char*

I've already used this quotation once at the beginning of an exhibition text. It haunts me, for the statement touches an aspect of our *conditio* as important as it is topical: the problem of nearness and distance in space and time.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that I landed on this side of the world almost a decade ago and built my new home here, or because on my annual trips around the world I myself experience these dimensions in the flesh. But the fact is that I pay even more attention to space and time now than I did in the past.

For some years now, space and time have figured in my view of the world as mere parameters of our consciousness which have no validity outside us. Admittedly, this view is a matter of faith. The philosophical position of the omnipresence of being was already championed, for example, by Parmenides and Zeno. Augustine, too, tackled the subject, and mystical traditions have recorded experiences which attest to universal oneness.

It is certain that in my perception—definitely based on the physiological preconditions of *Homo sapiens*—the size, respectively the duration of these dimensions fluctuates strongly. For instance, I experience my very body space as dynamic at times, above all in a state of meditative contemplation: sometimes infinitely small, sometimes expanding *ad infinitum*. Just as variable is the impression of external space or of the objects around me. The microscopically small can appear in gigantic proportions, and enormous objects, depending on the vantage point, as miniaturised. Nearness whisked away into unreachable distance; the far distant rushing into us. It is a commonplace that our perception is *per se*

relative. The discussion of this subject has recently gained new relevance, which fits in with my own interest in it.

For in point of fact, we're observing today the increasing disappearance of time and space due to the introduction of electronic devices, telecommunication, and the development of aeroplanes that take us from one place to another, far distant and at high speed. We experience events simultaneously, live, in direct telecasts, and we can transmit data with the velocity of electromagnetic resp. light waves.

To explain theoretically what space- and timelessness, the omnipresence of reality are is one thing, but to live and experience them is another; this latter undermines the accustomed choreography of our steps on firm ground and confuses us correspondingly. The shrinkage taking place today no longer affects just the field of movement and productive activity; it also has particular repercussions on the body of our urban contemporary, overly fitted-out with interactive prostheses to control the environment without his changing position physically. Reacting to this, he also feels a kind of standstill, a shrinkage of his body occurring right on the spot.

How abiding these influences on our perception, behaviour, indeed our very being will be, we can't yet say. How strongly are our perception and ability to act subject to inertia, which apparently, in contradiction to our better knowledge of physical occurrences, militates against greater insight into our place in the universe? Can we free ourselves at all from the patterns of looking at things that have been branded onto us? Is the fear that predictions of a new genus of humanity arouse justified? In the final analysis, neither Galileo Galilei nor Copernicus was able to make us *feel* in everyday life that the earth revolves about the sun. Nor was Einstein able to pull down the bell towers that proclaim the regular flow of time, and all Gandhi's influence did not suffice to transform human beings into altruistic pacifists. The sun still rises every morning, and the earth doesn't turn toward it!

Despite my scepticism about the possibility of an essential change in the basic furnishings of our physiological sensorium, I'd still like to suggest an approach to some speculative thought processes which are being debated today.

Since the perception of our space-time co-ordinates is changing due to the increasing proliferation of electronic media, the nature of our visible horizon is also changing, insofar as we consider it through tele-optical screens. The visible horizon, for example, that to a certain extent represented the stage for the drama we call "world", gave the nomadic human being the illusion of perspective, of graphic art since the Renaissance, the code of effects in space. The interfaces, in contrast, of the forms of direct communication of far distant phenomena which contemporary

media make possible—and through which volume and depth of action can get lost—now determine the extension of the world.

In Virilio's opinion, this leads to a deterioration of the "liveliness of the subject and" the "agility of the object (...) in that it allows distance to wither away until it becomes useless. A serious handicap that results at the same time from the loss of the locomotive mode of the passenger and TV viewer as well as from the loss of the firm ground, the earth's surface, the field of action on which the adventure of the identity of the human being in this world takes place." 2

The problem of individual identity is tied to that of meaning, acquired through a slow, lifelong growing into the world of experience, which presupposes a fine palpation of the possibilities and limits of body and spirit as well as the shadings of personal interactions. All these preconditions are endangered: More and more, we experience everyday life as a staccato of accelerated, simultaneous events; further, we have less and less possibility of direct human contact, since communication is often merely virtual and fleeting.

Will now Western culture, with its technological achievements, necessarily generate a future mutant with qualities of perception different from our own? If the cacophonous and optical congeries of information, natural catastrophes, terrorist attacks, advertising, entertainment and political debates continue to be celebrated as they are today, will the remnant of human capacity to feel, e.g. compassion, vanish altogether? Not to mention the capacities to act and to feel responsibility, which are moving toward a complete standstill?

I'd like to quote a passage by John Berger, to my mind outstanding, which describes this state of our world very accurately on the basis of Hieronymus Bosch's Millennium Triptych: "In Hell we find no horizon. There is no continuity between acts, no pauses, no paths, no patterns, no past and no future. ... There remain only the groans of the present, which is falling apart. Everywhere surprises and excesses, but leading to nothing. Nothing flows; nothing falters. As though space were suffering from delirium.

"Let us compare this space with that offered by an average commercial, typical CNN news, or a random commentary in the mass media. We find something similarly fragmented, a comparable jumble of the most varied states of excitement, a similar frenzy.

"Bosch's prophecy refers to the world picture that the media present us with today under the pressure of globalisation and that knows nothing else but the mindless

duty to keep selling. Bosch's painting and the media images are like a puzzle whose pitiful pieces no longer fit together." 3

His conclusion: "Our culture is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed; it is the culture of globalisation, which like Bosch's Hell doesn't permit even the most fleeting glance at a SOMEWHERE ELSE or an IN ANOTHER WAY. The now existing closes on itself like a prison. And given such limitation, human intelligence narrows its scope to sheer greed." 4

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In the face of such analyses of the present, it's not especially easy to maintain some positive faith or other in the future, neither as an individual, nor—specifically—as an artist. But to create art means to put up resistance, to undermine ways of seeing, to open new horizons, and by doing so to enlarge the space of perception. To poke holes in the Hell described by John Berger, to cast illuminating projections on its walls.

Here, in art, claustrophobic space once again becomes multidimensional and displays a whole new array of perspectives. Maybe, in this homeopathic way, tiny aesthetic agents can be funnelled into us that will change our consciousness and perception. This is the (illusory?) hope of every artist!

For the time being, I am moving in the real world of things and arming matter for its rebellion against the endless stream of virtual media. Though this brings with it the risk of being labelled as marginal, I'm still full of resistance at this point.

In this essay I have not spoken directly about the contents of my pictures or tried to "explain" them. Perhaps it is better so. Otherwise I would have got myself into the paradoxical situation of having to speak about something that lies beyond the categories of speech. The titles of the work cycles can serve as hints toward possible lines of interpretation. Maybe we can only really grasp the essential by looking away a bit and concentrating on the surroundings. The way we often only perceive a shining dot in the night sky when we divert our gaze slightly, avoiding our blind spot. Another's opinion can also be helpful, insofar as we take it seriously.

1 Paul Virilio, *Fluchtgeschwindigkeit*, Hanser/Akzente: Munich-Vienna 1996, p. 77 (Original title: *La Vitesse de Libération*: {The speed of liberation})

2 *ibid*, *op. cit.*, p. 53

3 John Berger, *Gegen die Abwertung der Welt*, Hanser: Munich-Vienna 2003, p. 160ff. (Original title: *The Shape of a Pocket*)

4 *ibid*, p. 165