

The Truth of Semblance

The belief that a painting or sculpture should emulate nature has been a topos of literary discourse on art since Greek Antiquity. And if one reads the many tales of stallions attempting to mount painted mares, of sparrows trying to peck at painted grapes, or of the fright Philipp II got when he mistook a portrait painted by Titian of his father, Charles V, for the man himself, it is easy to understand how such mimetic deception of the eye sparked criticism of art and artists. The key argument in the criticism of the representational image was provided by Plato, who asserted that the painter was an imitator of appearances, that painting was removed from the truth (Republic, 597) and for this reason should be banned from the state.

One cannot help thinking that Peter Rösler must have had Plato's verdict on the untruthful nature of painting in mind when he decided to paint mirages in Namibia and thereby give the spiral of argument surrounding the criterion of mendacity – not just of the medium but of the painted object – a further twist. For what could confirm Plato's view more effectively than a form of painting that is not only itself visually deceptive, but also takes as its subject phenomena that are the result of optical illusion – as if nature had devised them specifically for the purpose of convincing the last remaining doubter of the fact that the world we see around us is a world of appearances rather than one of truth?

An essential part of Peter Rösler's "Fata Morgana" project was to make the actual journey to the Namibian desert and to attempt to capture the subject en plein air. In the period that followed, the process of creating a painting became disengaged from the work directly in front of the

subject, whose transient nature and dependency on rapidly changing lighting conditions made it almost impossible to capture. It turned out that while the experience of the light, the heat, the anything but romantic desolation and expanse of the desert was required in order to be able to paint these pictures, working directly in front of the subject was by no means the fundamental condition of their authenticity.

One group of works on canvas that were made in Namibia, all of which have the same format and almost identical surface arrangement, features empty landscapes: broad, almost featureless sand-coloured expanses beneath a pale sky; flat plains on which hills appear like floating islands, or on whose horizon mirages shimmer in pearly light. While these paintings seem like evocations of emptiness or chromatic investigations, in other works Peter Rösler makes a radical break with this concept. Suddenly a rally car seems to be racing towards the viewer in a cloud of light and dust; a cyclist crosses the desert against a background of shimmering banks of light; and, shouldering the white monoblock chair – an incunabulum of globalization – a man sets off towards an unknown destination.

Time and again in these pictures, a vision of nature which it would be tempting to describe as being removed from history and civilization, unspoiled by any human intervention, is combined with subjects that are immediately identifiable as contemporary: the car wreck, the rally car, the lonely biker in his leathers who – perhaps following an accident – seems to be setting off on foot to the next service station, against the biomorphically rising backdrop of a range of hills.

Bringing together on a formal level what are in iconographic terms apparently conflicting elements – nature on the one hand, civilization/culture on the other – in order to visualize the paradoxical simultaneity of

these heterogeneous factors, without creating the illusion that the differences are in any way reconciled, is an artistic strategy pursued rigorously by Peter Rösler and evident in almost all of his works since 1991.

In “Walen” (Whales, 1991/1992), a project comprising several hundred single images assembled into blocks of twenty, Peter Rösler painted the four phases of the leap of a humpback whale onto the metal surface of flattened beverage cans. The contrast could hardly be more pronounced: the image of this almost mythical, age-old sea mammal which has become the symbol of endangered nature, is set against the glaringly inessential character of the tin can – the epitome of modern society’s trash, permanently visible in piles by the roadside, on sunbathing lawns and in parks. However the formal combination of the two elements clearly shows that this is only an apparent antinomy: mankind’s almost reverent worship of whales is the product of the very civilization that produces such huge amounts of waste. It is part of the same civilizatory act to stylize animal species into icons of our endangered planet and at the same time push ahead with the developments in technology that cause this precise threat. Joachim Ritter described this phenomenon as an “Entzweiungsstruktur” (structure of dichotomy). Just as stepping outside the context of nature was the precondition of the technological exploitation of nature as a resource, and the reification of nature was the precondition of its aesthetic appreciation as a landscape, so every turn towards nature has nature’s loss as its precondition: “One cannot therefore take one side or the other.”

What Ritter termed the ‘structure of dichotomy’ can be observed in almost all of Peter Rösler’s series of works: in “Wandbilder” (Wall Pictures, 1994), for example, he used a power drill to make pictures of fields of

sunflowers in indoor spaces – a pattern of holes that together formed the image of a Central European mountain landscape. What is important here, besides the reference to impressionism in the form of colourless pointillism and the ironic quotation of an extremely popular subject among amateur painters and on the art market, is the fact that the subject matter is precisely not an unspoilt heroic landscape or a palm beach at sunset, but instead a quite unspectacular cultural landscape with softly outlined hills. The method used, however – drilling holes into a surface – provides the greatest possible contrast to the gentleness of the subject matter and makes it almost brutally clear that this desire for the exteriority of nature is indelibly imprinted on our culture.

The combination of heterogeneous elements to form an inherently contradictory image reappears in the ‘pot plants’ Rösler has been producing since the mid-1990s, which are made out of sewn-together pieces of police uniforms. The perfect mimesis these artefacts seek to achieve is a reciprocal repetition of the commissioning of nature as a feature of interior decoration, as an element of civilizational activity that can be observed in the corridors of government offices, on office window ledges and in the spacious halls of shopping centres.

What Peter Rösler demonstrates throughout is that there is no perspective other than the civilizational one, neither in terms of the view of nature nor that of civilization. What appears to be a depiction of unspoilt nature is itself already the result of a civilizational process, the process of aesthetic transformation whereby nature became landscape and was subsequently turned into an image. It is simply a matter of increasing the degree of sharpness with which the proposition is made.

To return to the “Fata Morgana” series of paintings, it is significant that

their titles do not divulge the name of the particular area, hollow or ridge of hills shown, but instead simply state the GPS data outlining the precise location of the artist when he began working on the piece. It is therefore made clear even on this level that the painting makes no claim that what it depicts actually looks like this, or ever did look like this; it merely asserts that someone was there who saw it like this. It is a well known fact that in the history of landscape painting the degrees of adequacy between image and object vary. Peter Rösels "Fata Morgana" paintings stand out for the fact that the artist rejects the claim of objective truth and instead takes as his starting point the viewpoint dependence not just of visual perception (which would be banal), but of all cognition. The decisive volte-face, however, lies in shifting the cause of the unstable relation between object and subject to the object itself; in other words, it is not only the cognitive faculty which may be fragmentary and flawed, the object itself may possess semblance character. Which brings us back to Plato.

The insertion of human figures and objects that clearly derive from a contemporary context merely serves to increase this basic doubt concerning the adequacy between the cognizing subject and the cognized object. It undermines any possibility of the paintings being received as depictions of nature as a whole, unencumbered by civilization and oblivious to present reality. The biker trudging through the desert wasteland becomes the accomplice of our eye which, as a result of its conditioning, projects rather than perceives its object, conceptualizes rather than discerns it.

In keeping with the paradoxicality in Peter Rösels strategy is the fact that he presents the relationship between perceiving subject and perceived object as having been intermingled from the outset, and that precisely

this starting position results in the formulation of a fundamental and insurmountable alienation between the two.

For his work “Chott el Djerid” (1979) Bill Viola filmed mirages through extreme telephoto lenses adapted for video. Viola considers mirages to be “hallucinations of the landscape”: “It was like physically being inside someone else’s dream”.

It is precisely this hope of a correspondence between ‘landscape’ and ‘inscape’, which is dashed by Rösler. He does not believe that becoming one with nature can be achieved simply through greater empathy and sensitivity, leading to the celebration of a pantheistic reconciliation. There is no escape from the structure of dichotomy.

The reference made above to the authenticity of the artwork introduced a category which is more than questionable, having become contaminated by a long tradition of subjectivism and expressiveness, and thus to a certain extent rightly discredited. Authenticity, understood as an honesty and purity of emotion and its expression, is not a category that can be applied to art unless it is made clear what the intersubjective importance of that emotion and its expression in the form of an artwork is supposed to be. Landscape painting that posits the semblance of non-heteronomous immediacy is anachronistic and dishonest in that it negates not only the structure of dichotomy but also the general mediatedness of all experience.

To an even greater extent than it is mimesis of nature, art is mimesis of the world of imagery. This is made clear in Peter Rösler’s work, from the whale paintings through to the “Fata Morgana” series, by his repeated use of images drawn from the media. The whale’s leap is not something he has personally observed but rather an image that is frequently

presented in magazines, just as the strange people and chrome-trimmed vehicles making their way through the desert are taken from the more or less universally accessible pool of images; the selection of images from this pool is however a question of artistic decision-making.

Nevertheless, the combination in Peter Rösels paintings of actual experience of the landscape and a recognition of the fact that this experience is complemented by mediated, pre-formed images of equal value, does not imply that truth is no longer to be found within these pictures; nor does it give cause to fall back onto discourses of virtuality. For the media of visibility with their suggestion of truth only undermine the hope of authenticity from the point of view of those who believe that truth is waiting to be revealed in the floods of images; the images do not conceal the truth, they are our truth. The work which takes this fact into account is authentic, whereas the work which asserts the immediacy of sensation and representation is not. "Today immediacy of aesthetic comportment is exclusively an immediate relationship to the universally mediated."

If this reflectedness upon the heteronomy of the artwork and the experience which precedes it can be understood as "objectivated mimetic comportment", then Peter Rösels paintings can equally serve as visual models for the fundamental, insurmountable alienation towards what we customarily term nature; as expressions of a desire, yet with no claim being made as to the possibility of its fulfilment and, at the same time, no resignation.

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Cf. Ernst Kris/Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch.* (Vienna, 1934), Frankfurt/Main, 1980, pp. 89 ff.

Joachim Ritter, 'Landschaft – Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft' (*Schriften der Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität zu Münster*, issue no. 54), Münster, 1963, pp. 7–56, here p. 30.

Ibid., p. 32.

Friedrich Kaulbach, *Philosophie des Perspektivismus, Part I (Wahrheit und Perspektive bei Kant, Hegel und Nietzsche)*, Tübingen, 1990, Introduction VIII and IX. This has less to do with 'Perspective as symbolic Form' (cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (eds.), 2nd edition, Berlin, 1974, pp. 99–168), than with a fundamental dependency on perspective, as described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Attempt at a Self-Criticism. *KSA I*, p. 18.

Bill Viola, exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Ostfildern-Ruit, 1999, p. 27

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds.), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London, 2004, p. 285.

[*Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1970]

Ibid., p. 366.