

"The highest principles, Clarice: Simplification! Look up Marcus Aurelius! Every single thing raises the same question: What is it in itself, what is its nature?"<sup>1</sup>

And what if the thing is painting? What is it in itself, what is its nature, what are its intrinsic characteristics? Does it exist as a matter of course; is it of absolute significance to the world; or in order to establish a new and proud certainty of method, does it have to constantly doubt, criticize and question itself? Despite the continual proclamations that painting (seen as an eroded, historical practice of culture) has reached its end, artists persist in the use of this "conventional" medium of art more than ever. After all, many "last" paintings have been made which have put off the so-called "end" of the medium again and again.

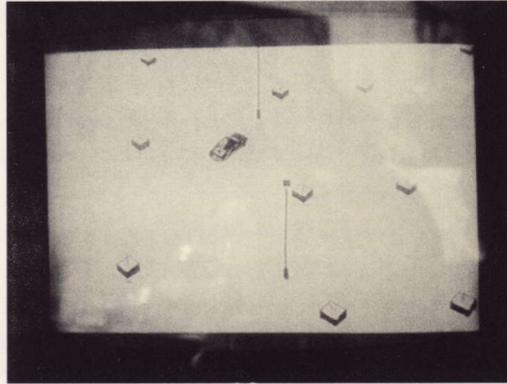
In an essay, the American art critic Arthur C. Danto, the prophet of "art after the end of art", puts forward two reasons responsible for the "end" of painting.<sup>2</sup> It is not the end as it were of the medium itself, but rather the last chapter of a certain story, of a particular narrative, represented by a mental showdown that commenced at the beginning of the 20th century. According to Danto, one of the reasons is technical in nature, namely the invention of the moving picture. Film replaced painting as the sole factor of representation, even more than photography. The other reason is more a cultural and philosophical one: the shaking up of ideals for the true representation of reality, gave rise to a cultural challenge. One of the reactions to this, says Danto, was *abstraction in art*.

The two factors that in Danto's opinion mark the end of a story, namely film and abstract painting, are the turbo-charge in Hubert Scheibl's method of work. He manages to fuse Abstraction (which has been losing relevance since its establishment in America in the fifties and sixties) with what one could regard as *the* art form of the 20th century: Film, a seemingly incompatible combination. With the smallest common denominator of both mediums: light and color, to be found in an abstract-symbolic sense not only in Scheibl's paintings but also in countless lengths of film, one can identify one of their many canvas-related affinities. Besides this aspect of "surfaces", Scheibl is much more concerned with what is behind them – in the sub-texts, in what one develops when one shuffles anew the pictures of reality and underlays the (painted) surface and its messages with apparently unrelated contents. Scheibl's present work is thus concerned with testing the elasticity of his medium and examining the flexibility of the discrepancies and congruencies in various forms of artistic articulation

"The Lady from Shanghai", "What is it in itself, what is its nature?", "Can you hear me?", and "Fargo" are the titles of his pictures, inspired by films such as Quentin Tarantino's "Reservoir Dogs" and Jonathan Demme's "The Silence of the Lambs". Scheibl, the painter of empty spaces, of radiant chromatics in shades of Viennese gray, loads his pictures with new associations. Scheibl, a sharp observer not only in cinema but also in reality, acknowledges the cineast in the viewer who is permitted a glimpse of passion for the length of a frame. He allows, for a brief moment, the recognition of how a painting could exist in and of itself and at the same time be a part of the world.

1 Hannibal Lecter to Detective Starling in: *The Silence of the Lambs*

2 Arthur C. Danto: *Art after the End of Art* in: *Artforum*, April 1993, p.62



He conceals indications and hints of his *private obsessions* in the concentration of color in the latest pictures as possible, strategic points of departure for painting. The titles serve as an instruction manual that is often only meant for the cineast amongst the art experts. Once one has solved the puzzle of the title, the sewing pattern on the painting "What is it in itself, what is its nature?" becomes a subtle allusion to Buffalo Bill, the serial killer in "The Silence of the Lambs", who flayed his victims and stitched the fragments together on his Singer sewing machine to form a new skin. The reason for this epidermal *haute couture* arose from a desire for change; a desire to create a new identity for himself along with a new skin. According to Scheibl, this is an apt metaphor for the potential inherent to renewal and transformation since a *lifelong* pontificate ceased to be relevant long ago.

The *quid pro quo* of charismatic genius and monster Hannibal Lecter is to swap the childhood memories of Clarice Starling for anagrams on the personality of Buffalo Bill by transforming Starling's police investigation into a psychoanalytical session. Clarice ultimately realizes who she has to look for at the end of the session, when the image of the murderer appears in exchange for her childhood image of screaming lambs. The deal between the painting and the painter, between the glazes and the layers of paint which reach beyond the limits of the canvas into cinemascope, is Scheibl's *quid pro quo*. It is a deal between that which emerges on the surface as totally non-objective and the inner core, the concrete storyboard of personal experience: Universality of painting as a model for the relationship between that what one sees and the hidden screenplay behind the visuals. The rigorous slashes in the black of the painting "Can you hear me?", are by no means the most obvious of painterly allusions to the brutal slash with which Mr. Blonde cuts off the policeman's ear in the warehouse torture-scene in "Reservoir Dogs." While the relationship between film



Fotonotiz 74/96

and painting should be identifiable, it should not impose itself. If there is anything Scheibl would like to avoid is subtitles for the subcutaneous; all too obvious analogies and visible parallels.

The myth of Tarantino's cult movie, its non-linear narrative structure, set against the conventional ways of seeing, its concentration on a specific site and its complex flashbacks are the basis for Scheibl's work – its mental trigger. The brutality of the action is abstracted to the maximum on the artist's homepage, the canvas. As a painterly gesture the brutality is merely suggested as is the gruesome conclusion of "Reservoir Dogs'" bloody mission. It remains invisible in both cases. The very moment that Mr. Blonde places his knife on the cop's neck, the camera swerves to top right and all one sees is a door and a lamp suspended from the ceiling. One hears the cop's agonized screams against a background of the Stealer Wheel's song, "Stuck in the Middle with You". "The sound creates an unambiguous connection to the offscreen space. In this, most brutal scene of the film, one witnesses something absolutely insignificant. Only the sound, the context and the imagination of the viewer contribute to the horror."<sup>3</sup> The next frame shows Blonde, holding the ear in his hand, screaming "Can you hear me?" into it. The camera follows him as he brings in a canister of gasoline. He pours it over the cop and flips his lighter on. At the same moment he is torn to bits by a hail of bullets fired by Mr. Orange, who remains unobserved because the camera has stayed focused on Blonde.

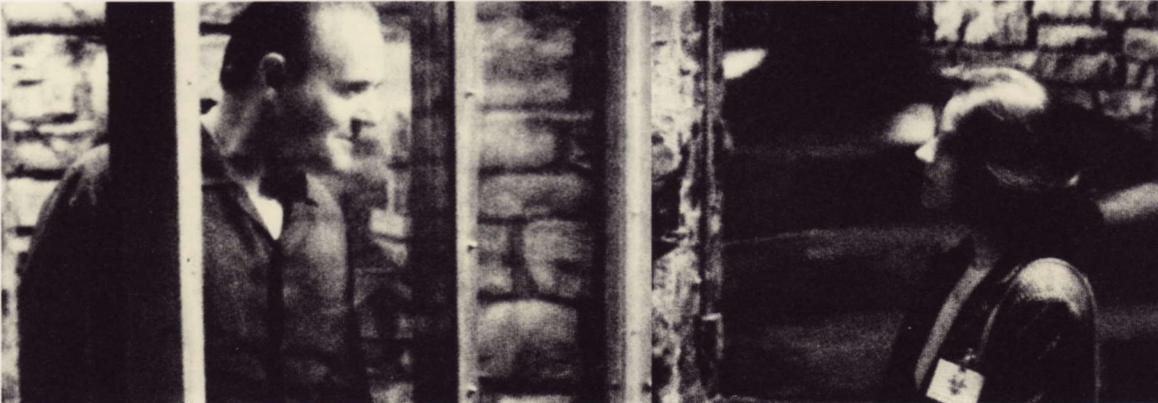
What Tarantino proves here is that what is not shown can be just as significant as that what is shown. Scheibl follows the same analogy in his paintings. According to him, the manifestation of a thought bound into the picture by the artist, as well as the viewer's imagination, are the main constituents of a painting.

By linking the element of color upon the canvas – the tangible – together with the activation of imaginary association, Scheibl underlays the visible with something new, something different than the text of the actual painting, some additional information, an unexpected *double bind*. Continuing on different tracks, he circles around the acquisition of films that provide the software, the material, the theme for painting. A painting that doesn't narrate or tell us anything; and that at a time in which the narrative and the autobiographical have again become so important in art.

When he puts his operational system of color into motion and builds up his tomographies, Scheibl reveals the underlying layers with smudgings and scratches, to then render them again with a further layer of color. He not only refers to the layering of color here but also to that of perception. "Fargo", for example, a large oblong canvas, seems to focus one's attention more on the visible. Scheibl uses a varied, rather dirty-grey palette of white in order to draw a reference to the foggy ice-landscape of Minnesota – to the snowstorm at the beginning of the film and the wide, flat landscape in "Fargo" where one vainly seeks a horizon that separates the wide fields from the hazy heavens. "Everything is white, just an empty field of vision", is what Joel Coen once said of the Midwest where he grew up.<sup>4</sup> One can also sense this gentle void in Scheibl's paintings. What also especially fascinates him is the ironic play on the theme of the 'homeland' in "Fargo", the way the Coen brothers employ colors of local speech without embarrassing their countrymen, the

3 Uwe Nagel: Der rote Faden aus Blut. Erzählstrukturen bei Quentin Tarantino, Marburg 1997, p.56

4 Peter Biskind: Brothers from Another Planet, in: Premiere, June 1996, p.48



bizarre ludicrousness of the figures, as well as the violence lurking behind the idyll, the rhizome of failure, of lofty plans hidden below the surface.

Hubert Scheibl is a globetrotter and is always on the move. He finds the images for his paintings on his many travels – for instance, in Brazil, in Réunion as well as in his hometown of Gmunden. He often disappears for a couple of weeks, withdrawing to a sort of spiritual self-confinement. He then goes on long treks to replenish his repository of memories and to lay a stock of collages in his mind which later inspire his paintings. They serve as testing grounds for reformatting his images of reality and his own memory. This leads to the conclusion that memory and remembrance are different functions of the brain which function together in contrapunt. Furthermore, consciousness and memory can work independently of one another and remembrance can then 'define' memory as in Sigmund Freud's Wunderblock concept, that sees memory as a sort of transcribing device of the mind, on the surface of which lasting traces get engraved. These tracks can, in turn, be covered up or even blotted out by new impressions.<sup>5</sup>

Hubert Scheibl's method of applying, removing and reapplying layers of paint etched with a scattering of symbols which are then eliminated (Cy Twombly called his scratched-in paintings the descriptive term "writings"), concurs with Sigmund Freud's thesis which has been interpreted by film theoreticians as cinematographical. This leads to a further connection for Scheibl to dock in with: with Chris Marker, who has become the synonym for the European avant-garde film.

Marker's distinct process of cutting text and image, of transforming text by giving it a new meaning through contradicting images, became a significant source of inspiration for Scheibl. The method became an incentive to yet again filter through both the motive and the reason for his painting style and to examine whether the film bacillus could contaminate, clean or perhaps

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wetzel: Die Wahrheit nach der Malerei, Munich 1997, p.285

even immunize painting. It could however be stated, says Scheibl, "that the many layers in my paintings and the multiplicity of Marker's film tracks have a common pattern and reflect the same archetype: they are both a montage of reality, which one can see and doubt at the same time."

Producers of images are 'professional' fetishists and like Marker, Scheibl too gives inner images the status of fetish. For Marker, the quality of film lies not in movement but in the duration (of a single frame), quite the opposite of what the medium apparently characterizes. In Scheibl's case, the painterly cannot be summed up by the captivating moment, the technically well functioning perception. The picture is much more a space for reflection and should resist the grandiosity of a visual spectacle. Scheibl's new rhetoric of abstraction appears to echo the images of Chris Marker, who is considered "one of the most radical exponents of an image's capacity to resist being visually comprehended by the world".<sup>6</sup> It is, after all, not about a documentation of reality but about the construction of the 'real'.

6 Ibid, p.264

Through the artistic short-circuit between film and painting, Hubert Scheibl breaks from the legacy of Modernism: from the supremacy of the pictorial surface. He shows us that the area occupied by the visual has shifted and reacts as a painter to the world of images of a technical medium. He marks the place where idioms intersect, because he is aware that the codes of painting are a process of change. David Reed, who extols cinemascope through his painting strips and film rolls, once said, "that we see paintings in a different way now because of film and video". The visual has created new contexts. Instead of an uncompromising insistence on the autonomy of painting, or surfing between color, form and plane, Scheibl resumes the dialog in questioning the very nature of the visual. If the concern at the beginning of the twentieth century was to convey representation in a new form, at its end artists are called upon to question its position in the world of multimedia. They are as informed about the history of representation as they are of the versatility of the world of images and the parity of all visual media. As Hannibal Lecter would say, "Some of our stars are the very same."