

Perpetuum Mobile of Knowledge Terry Winters' Painting—a Charged Zone of Subject Matters

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Since the dawn of the modernity, science and Western art have been engaged in a highly idiosyncratic dialogue that spans particularly rich insights. Both fields are actually inconceivable without the other, although at times they may seem far apart. Especially in recent years, there have repeatedly been clear indications of a shared interest, to parallels in the way that art and science attempt to understand the world. While a few years or decades ago it was artists who turned to science, now it is increasingly scientific disciplines which are searching for methods and pictures in the realm of art to explain those worlds opening up to them in their research. So, for example, this collaboration has been practised for some time at the Collegium Helveticum at the ERT Zurich, a laboratory for interdisciplinary research; likewise at the Research Center for Molecular Medicine at the Austrian Academy of Science. Here the communication between art, design and science is investigated in various projects.

In recent years also the museum has constantly lent itself as a place of such encounters and dialogues. It was precisely in the Kunsthaus Graz, an innovative exhibition hall established within a traditional museum—the Universalmuseum Joanneum—that such arrangements were notable for their high quality. Primarily here we are thinking of course of artistic engagements carried out within the new media and processes, and refer less within this context to the traditional media to which painting would seem to belong. Yet in the person of Terry Winters we encounter an artist who derails such categorisations, demonstrating in exemplary fashion how artistic actions and the acquisition of knowledge can link up.

For the bicentenary of the Joanneum the group exhibition *Measuring the World*, 2011, in the Kunsthaus Graz selected and showed artistic positions concerning the issues mentioned above from very specific angles. Two large cycles by Winters were included in that exhibition. In his series *Local Group* (90 Drawings Including Title Page), 2004, one could admire his art of giving images to structures, whose episteme reveals distinctly cosmological dimensions. As the quasi-flipside of the same coin of insight, with *Notebook* (Selection of 90 Pages), 2011, we viewed a collection of materials which—ontologically, as it were—gathered images and thus created order.



Terry Winters, from *Local Group* (90 Drawings Including Title Page), 2004

The current exhibition project *The Painter's Cabinet* sets out to continue this approach and to explore Terry Winters' complex work in greater depth. It is an attempt to point absolute, as it were abstract painting back towards the concrete world and at the same time to extend the struggle for images with further dimensions.

Or—in order to open up the classic abstraction of Modernism and look in another direction—as it were to view the objective world from a non-objective world (we think here of Malevich) and enrich it with corresponding objects. This intention means developing a broad look backwards. Placed under the 'Kunsthau's' microscope and equipped with the magnifying glass of the modern-day artist, we install an experimental set-up, using the natural history collections of the Universalmuseum Joanneum as a 'specimen slide.' A new level is revealed which thematises insight *per se* and tackles the patterns of our thoughts when we question the world around us and wish to comprehend its substance. Terry Winters' pictures live from such processes of transgression between visual reference systems, superficially between the abstract and the representational, between the autonomous picture and all its references. The exhibition thus turns into a large laboratory experiment in visual insight; the present catalogue is also able to search for a language along with the pictures, one that can lend an extra dimension to this thinking.

Regarding the present method, it quite soon becomes evident how much everyday and scientific language and their corresponding images represent incongruent systems—a platitude concerning insight that cannot be emphasised often enough. For the author at least, in his introspection, this area of tension is also a location that can be seen as an engine of creative energy. This is an important, if not the most important, strand of Modernism in its striving to give the world valid pictures of knowledge and of the powers of insight—look at how Piet Mondrian, for instance, Kasimir Malevich or Barnett Newman opened up new spaces in this way. If we experience the new spaces which—as in the Kunsthaus Graz—open up new dimensions to us, we can also experience in the present case what painting can substantively contribute even today. This in a form, moreover, which understands how to connect quite simple human insight in all its diverse manifestations with spiritual experiences of art, too.

Thus both the exhibition and the catalogue operate on quite different levels: on the level of artworks, of pictures on a canvas, of drawings and of print graphics, on the level of a wallpaper and of a Pinterest page on which this wallpaper is based, and which was filled by Terry Winters in recent months. Moreover, the levels of objects from the natural history collection play into this, as do the texts and illustrations in this catalogue.

Given the heterogeneity and abundance of the material, Terry Winters has deliberately turned to a writer who in recent years has radically questioned the process of writing, and thus interpreted order differently: beyond his radical textual work, Kenneth Goldsmith has created one of the important archives of the internet with *ubu.net*, and it was from him that the suggestion came to gather together the wealth of pictures and notes in the context of this project into one Pinterest page. From this came a compilation of motives which in turn became the source of inspiration for Goldsmith's text. For the second literary text in the catalogue, too, that of Ferdinand Schmatz, it became an additional inspiration. That in turn resulted in quite different, new spaces of language that allow us to recognise differences

between visual orders and linguistic processes. From this, new structures and referential spaces emerge; a wide range of references continue to evolve. A veritable *perpetuum mobile* of systems of insight.

The Pinterest page itself expands into the exhibition as wallpaper on several walls. This information contrasts with the pictures, which are primarily abstract, or to be read as such. They extend the space of the objects from the natural history collections, which represent a central level in the exhibition as a permanent reference and counterpart. That all takes place in a space which in turn is drawn into the exhibition's theme in a variety of ways. On the one hand, Winters takes as his theme the biomorphic aspect of the Kunsthaus architecture both on the Pinterest page and in the selection of some collection objects. The walls with the artworks or the Pinterest wallpaper, the tables and displays with the collection objects turn into arbitrary settings at right angles to the non-orthogonal system of the biomorphic architecture. A difference which we find in Winters' pictures time and again: oscillation between the regular and the systems at right angles and the biomorphic forms of life, which are in turn made into themes with all their references in the Pinterest system, in the architecture, and the collection objects themselves.

How does all this converge? Perhaps let us first return to Winters' approach and then to his pictures, drawings and graphics: 'So much of the contemporary world is driven by abstract processes; whether it's developments in chaos and complexity theory or computers and scientific visualization, it all feeds new ideas about abstract imagery and the importance of the visual in conjunction with conceptual developments.'¹

For a generation of painters, who—in the words of Sanford Kwinter—in view of a 'legitimate crisis since the rise of primary—or minimalist—practice' had to take painting 'a step further',² questions of abstraction naturally arose differently than at the early stages of the non-representational.

These debates and the far-reaching shifts in painting are perhaps not fully understood as yet. Concerning the genesis of pictures, 'old' painting is still the leading medium and seems increasingly to be so once again—in the context of understanding media images on the one hand, and of explaining scientific images on the other. While Malevich spoke of various levels of conceptuality between the world of the academy and that of the Suprematists, we experience here, in various fields, extensions of pictorial worlds hitherto barely suspected.

In a field of this kind, entirely new aspects arise that inevitably alter the issues of an aesthetic practice: 'The organic versus the inorganic, nature versus technology, the geometric versus the amorphous, the retinal versus the intellectual,' as Kathryn A. Tuma writes in an essay on Winters.³ In this sense, Winters has in many respects been one of the most important representatives since the 1980s of a debate that lends new legitimacy to painting as a central artistic practice. It thus becomes a model of thinking that has Winters quoting Cézanne: 'Here ... the motifs multiply; the same subject seen from a different angle offers a subject for study of the most powerful interest and so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without changing place.'⁴

Other painters who interest us in such contexts are Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Michel Majerus, who sadly passed away far too early, Charlene von Heyl or R. H. Quaytman. Certainly, these are not positions that can be viewed from the

outside in a congruent way; rather they create subject matters, whose intersections allow a glimpse of these highly complex correlations, and which will determine the visibility of a new age of images shaped by the media. What characterises them all is that here art in general and painting in particular are embedded in broader fields of quite differing nature and significance. In the case of Winters, these are to be seen in relation to the sciences in their entire breadth:

'The starting point of much scientific thought is the question of how, and in what terms, to think about the architecture of nature and the behaviors of material things. Winters has been interested in both the experimentalism of science's "how" and the metaphoric depth of its "in what terms." Biology, crystallography, cyberotechnology, geometry, mathematics, mineralogy, music, physics, topology, and zoology have all flowed into the rich gene pool from which Winters has drawn out the metaphoric and pictorial potential of each field's figures. The stakes, however, are painting's alone, and Winters's driving question, following artists like Matisse and Pollock, has been how to make abstraction into a figural space without collapsing into an outmoded thinking about figuration.'⁵

Here other references enter the equation, too, such as those to music or literature, which work in a rather similar way in terms of structure, and which can open up further dimensions. In this context let us look at Winters' interest in notations in the screenprints *Atmospheres (1)–(12)*, 2014, after Ligeti:

'Fittingly the twelve separately numbered screenprints are united by the title *Atmospheres*, a György Ligeti composition from 1961 that embodies the composer's concept of "supersaturated polyphony." What this signified for Ligeti was a canonic structure so intensive that it resists penetration, as he once observed, "like a densely woven cobweb." It is also, like a cobweb, capable of stopping time, or rather movement, which the music historian Eric Drott has described as a "semblance of stasis".'⁶

Notes, structures, patterns, objects, significances—all terms that determine the fields of his abstraction, interacting within these fields. Mathematics and geometry—after or beyond Euclid—play just as much of a role as the reflections of natural forms, whose norms have time and again fascinated artists since reading such scientific publications as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917) and Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899–1904). A fascination which gradually continues, and with an artist like Winters does not come to a halt when engaging with the latest scientific material; which, in its visual power, also begins little by little to interest the sciences as they search for suitable images in the depiction of their increasingly abstract insights into the reality of nature as we find it.

It is this field of tension that becomes a subject matter through the artist engaging aesthetically in this way and that develops certain patterns into new problems of insight. Thus it enables thinking to take on forms, in order to quote Erwin Schrödinger with Kwinter: 'Life is a pattern in time.'⁷

Winters realises that painting can form only one subject matter, which however could develop with others into still more complex subject matters, so as to generate from that further meanings; for this reason, he insists on a certain universality, in which the fragment and the incomplete always resonate, of course. In this context, Katy Siegel cites in her outstanding essay on Winters from *A Pluralistic Universe* by William James: 'Things are "with" one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word "and" trails along after every sentence.'⁸



Terry Winters, *Atmospheres (12)*, 2014

⁵ Tuma, Terry Winters, 2008, p. 5.

⁶ Michael Semff, Elizabeth Finch, Francine Prose, Terry Winters, *Prints 1959–2014*, Munich 2014.

⁷ Sanford Kwinter, 'The Temperature of Things', in: Terry Winters, *Red Yellow Green Blue*, New York 2014, s. p.

⁸ Katy Siegel, Terry Winters, *Cricket Music, Testallant Figures and Notebook*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 2012. Cf. also William James, 'Conclusions', in: William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, New York 1920.

¹ Terry Winters, quoted in Jeffrey Kastner, 'An Energetic Imaginist Who Dances with Chance', in: *New York Times*, 19th August 2001, Arts Section, p. 29.

² Sanford Kwinter, 'The Temperature of Things', in: Terry Winters, *Red Yellow Green Blue*, New York 2014, s. p.

³ Kathryn A. Tuma, Terry Winters, *Knotted Graphs*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 2008, p. 11f.

⁴ Winters, quoted in Kastner, 2001, p. 29.

A painterly practice of this kind thus aims to be episteme and ontology in one: 'It is as if the painting replicates a feature of the visible world: that it is available to us on a number of scales, the micro-universe in fact informing and being responsible for appearance in the macro and yet at the same time phenomenally discontinuous with it.'⁹

In this way painterly structures arise which react to other structures with which we read reality, and which we are repeatedly tempted to apply in perception if we wish to have a notion of how physical and natural correlations function beyond our usual, day-to-day perception.

'The very absence of a culturally or historically affirmable absolute is precisely what allows the making of art to enter upon fundamental ontological terrain. We don't know what being is or what its limits are; therefore, artists working in the space of emergence bear an ontological pertinence and responsibility. For what emerges in art is not only the character of each work, but also the very nature of art and its relation to what is. In the end, what emerges will always turn out to be within a given historical epoch, but this does not alter its ontological possibility and responsibility: something unconditioned does emerge, the determinate nature of conditions of its emergence notwithstanding. Being itself may only yield relative and conditioned ontologies, and yet each emergent act bears on the question of Being.'¹⁰

Pictures arise which take their bearings from the arrangements of nature, which—in the knowledge that the visible world represents only a small extract—look for visual rules as to how the world beyond can present itself, and which pursue the patterns and methods that render such structures recognisable. The complexity that a practice of this kind demands and engenders is reflected in models that stand for a recognition which once again provides and develops categories of the aesthetic for those of scientific insight.

'The "withdrawal" from illusionism that constitutes abstraction can proceed in precisely the opposite direction from geometry. ... What is Winters' practice in this regard? His lattices and arrays of knots borrow forms from abstract realms par excellence: non-Euclidian geometries and topological systems that abstract even from geometry itself.'¹¹

That motivates us not to leave such painting solely in the gallery's or art museum's White Cube, but rather to introduce it into other contexts. Just as Winters' graphic works and links to literature last autumn turned into an essential contribution to the Louisiana Literature Festival, so we should be given the chance increasingly to see work of this kind in other contexts and in relation to other 'subject matters.' This approach not only contributes to the extended reading of this work, but also means a challenge, in this case calling for a different reading of the material of a natural history collection and the functions of an unusual exhibition house.

If we consider the world, we search for a mode to understand it as a unit. To develop such units as models has been the great achievement of cultures since time immemorial. Horst Bredekamp, in his wonderful text *Der Faustkeil und die ikonische Differenz*¹², describes prehistoric stone tools, which he regards as evidence of mankind's earliest artistic activity. It is no coincidence that we are dealing here with objects that cannot be assigned direct functions. Their particular significance lies far more in the fact that the creators of these unique artefacts have isolated and identified in an aesthetic way, as it were, clearly recognisable fossil structures—shells, sea urchins—comparable to modern-day fossil specimens. The craftsmen recognised these inclusions and lent them a significance, and they carried out this additional work for a specific reason—whether for aesthetic purposes or a yearning for insight that would only emerge some 100,000 years later in the history of

our modern science. The first deliberate fossil finds were also made at the outset of the natural sciences at the museum when it dawned on people that the earth's age exceeded many times the few thousand years given to it by the Bible, and that the logic of creation clearly diverged from those perspectives handed down to us in religious scripts.

And so it was always a matter of ordering the world through perception and research, whether in artistic or scientific terms. It was our proposal to present the varied cosmos of the artist and unique painter Terry Winters as an impressive demonstration of the interaction of such processes, with our ideas and research reflected and interpreted in figures that are grasped in a sensual, visual way. The exhibition and present publication bear witness to this.

⁹ Charles Stein, *Placing Space, Picturing Time*, New York 2015, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹² Horst Bredekamp: 'Der Faustkeil und die ikonische Differenz', in: Für Gottfried und Margret Boehm, in: Sabine Marienbergh, Franz Engel (eds.), *Das Entgegenkommende Denken*, Berlin 2015, pp. 105–118.