

Wolf Gradendorf, Seeing even

A story ...

It all began with giving up painting. Usually, completing an education means proceeding to employ what one has learned in one's profession. However, Hartwig Bischof started at the beginning again and headed in a new direction – at least, this is what the first impression conveys: paintbrush and oil colors took the place of camera and computer. It did not take long before he had the first works in his studio which displayed all the formal characteristics that he would develop in several directions later on. The method of reproducing, rotating, mirroring and lining up a photograph in a continuous stream of repetitions until it has turned into a seemingly ornamental structure has remained to this day an integral component. Yet the effortless bridging of the once historically rather arbitrarily introduced dichotomy between the “abstract” and the “realistic”, which he had already achieved with the early black and white examples similar to photocopies, did not suffice. That is why each of these tableaus bears another photograph that Hartwig Bischof wove in by hand. He thus induces a further bridging, namely that between the operating principle of a modern computer and the age-old craftsmanship of weaving which both use the grid as the underlying concept.

In these works – seemingly diametrically opposed to painting in a technical sense – the familiar love of painting will nevertheless come to light if one considers the challenges of the pictorial inventions. In his contribution to the catalogue of the year 1997, Herbert Muck, who taught as an art historian at the *Akademie der bildenden Künste*, the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (Hartwig Bischof's educational institution) during Hartwig Bischof's university years, writes, “This principle encompasses a type of appearance of the ‘painterly’ that was produced with precise craftsmanship in a downright geometrical and, concerning the carpet, material-dependent way. Yet when taking a closer look, that which seems so very geometricized is actually composed in a loose, painterly way right down to the last element. The dense, pulsing web is interspersed with large areas of darkness; on other spots the hardness of the structure is blurred by concentrations of light.” The picture “Ein ganzes Dorf” from 1995 shows this method of linking a modular photograph to a structural image which follows clear directions when it comes to its parts, yet the result cannot be confined to a system. It is a calculated tangle that turns into an image on a meta-level. The pictures engage in dialogue with one another, communicating exclusively by the means that only pictures have access to. The language – and its imagery in written form – follows behind, whether in conversations in his atelier and during exhibitions, discussions or in texts on art appreciation.

The turn of the millennium brought on a small change with a big impact for Hartwig Bischof's working method. He decided to lift the self-imposed restriction to black and white and to allow all colors into his works (cf. *Hochsommergrazien verpackt*, 2002 and *Hutuntersatz*, 2002). Thus, the alienation effect that dissolved our colorful world into innumerable shades of grey went lost. In its place, Hartwig Bischof won new possibilities to polish his concept of subverting the image of the world that had been construed by the perspective dictated by the camera. At the same time, he began working in cycles. On the one hand, this would help him go through all variations systematically. On the other hand, this served him as a “certain self-reassurance”, as he stated in an interview with Cornelius Hell in the magazine “Schriftzeichen” in 2004. The diversity of the results allows one to draw conclusions for the further development of his subsequent art production. With the help of the pictures of chameleons incorporated into each single piece, Hartwig

Bischof questions the mobility and changeability of works of art as well as their potential to deceive in the cycle "Sieben Werke der Kunstherzigkeit" (cf. Grundbild von Kunst, 2003 and Grundsatz und Bodensatz von Kunst, 2003). In general, this method of working allows him to run through human perception from A to Z and to separate it from mechanical perception as induced by the perspective and the camera. He thus performs the anthropological turn as was done in painting starting from Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato* all the way to the epoch-making innovations of Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse. Usually, people see the world through two eyes, resulting in two images, and not through a single lens as dictated by the perspective of the camera. Furthermore, people are constantly moving, no matter how slightly, even if the movement is confined to the eyes – we always see the world in many sights. In addition, each sight is – in a purely optical sense – upside down and must go through a further stage as opposed to the camera: we always think whenever we look. A great number of upside down sights is constantly being condensed into a single sight that is immediately completed, enhanced or replaced by the next. Hartwig Bischof reenacts this perceptual process artistically; each step of the process alluded to above can be found as elements of his works. Of course the fundamental difference between sight and picture remains intact. The sight constantly wanders off and collects a whole carpet of sights as material for the pictorial invention. The image breaks through the flood of sights, highlights one or several interconnected segments, examines them and with them "realizes" the reality of the image in Cézanne's sense; out of freely floating optical stimuli, merely present in an insignificant way, a world arises.

The cycle "Ahnengalerie" shows how important Hartwig Bischof deems the legacy of painting. In these works he constructs his ornamental structure out of an example of a "master" which he regards as especially relevant. This structure is disrupted by a self-portrait of the concerned artist, woven in by hand. Fine nuances of the displayed area that is to be interpreted become apparent here as well. The modular photo amounts to a tautology by means of its mere repetition. The repeated modular photo undergoes a further repetition and results in a tautology of a tautology. Yet if this tautological repetition is performed with the consistency characteristic of Hartwig Bischof's work, the result will not be a mishmash of the ever similar, but a structure will emerge that presents something wholly new. This also goes for the engagement with the creative solutions of earlier artists. Concerning the "masters" of the weaving technique and the template of Henri Matisse's "La desserte rouge" combined in Hartwig Bischof's work, Eric Alliez says the following in his text of 2004 (cf. Was die Malerei anrichtet, 2004): "Bischof plays with the mechanical possibilities of this 'master' in order to transfer the possibilities of photo-numerical replication to a different level from that of the cliché. By doing this, one can grant him at least one merit, namely transporting Matisse to a contemporaneity after Warhol. And that is no small thing." In addition, this cycle shows a twofold kind of acquaintance with a painter: Primarily there is the much more widespread type in which one is familiar with the artist's work. And then there is the one that links the likeness to a resemblance similar to a passport photo. As is often the case, Hartwig Bischof proves to be a special kind of bridge builder because both variations are brought together since the "passport photos" are also painterly works.

Aside from the purely pictorial engagement with possible interpretations of the world, there is also a multilayered body of work in Hartwig Bischof's oeuvre that can be attributed to visual poetry. On the one hand, this certainly has something to do with the contemplation that becomes necessary when faced with the accrued works. On the other hand, in a conversation on the occasion of the exhibition Motiva in the Austria Center in 2005 (to be conferred in the catalogue "Schreibbilder"), he points out that his "first publications were poems" and that he felt indebted

to linguistic conciseness since his early youth. In several series, image and language are not merely related but are incorporated into one work in such a way that they determine, complete, fight each other instead. Thus the ornamental structure in the “y-series” is disrupted by an elevated letter y that poses the question “why” in light of the images of violence used (cf. plop eye y, 2005). The texts in the cycle “Schweigen im Reigen” are woven into the ornamental structure as graphic characters, whereby the characters consist of the same ornament-carpet, so that the writing, similar to the modular image, is almost completely hidden (cf. Rest Aura Tor, 2006). The writing, in the form of light boxes, stands out from the ornamental base by means of a slight shift of color (cf. Ex Citation, 2010). In the same interview, Hartwig Bischof declares that he treats image and text as equals: “I do not produce patterns for the sake of the patterns, rather the patterns undermine themselves. They are photo-realistic ornaments, which is a nonsensical affair in common usage because a pattern always entails a reduction, in most cases a simplification towards geometry ... Similarly, I oppose the plentiful chatter that surrounds us all with the language I use. This I do with the simultaneous presence of hermetic concealment and obviousness in one word.” The ambiguity is manifested in the language as well; the letter y turns into the interrogative why, “Ex” hints at the extract Hartwig Bischof uses just as “citation” emphasizes the quoting quality: when read jointly they become “Excitation”. The following combination of words is similar: “Rest” hints at the working method; “aura” is an allusion to the long discussion initiated by Walter Benjamin of the loss and retrieval of aura where mechanically (re)produced images are concerned, and then the German word “Tor” connotes both idiot and gateway. Again, when the three terms are put together, they become “Restaurator”. It is a clear self-definition since it is the only work that contains self-portraits of Hartwig Bischof. With the “Blues Boxes”, also visual poetics, he conquers space. The boxes are reminiscent of the *camera obscura* but they combine it with the modern technique of the superposition of performer and background in film (cf. vide!, 2005). The entire inner surface is overlaid by an ornament which forces the object back into the plane while the perspective is unmasked as an illusion. The writing on the back wall, “vide!”, oscillates between the Latin “look!” and the French “empty!” without allowing a decision between the one or the other in view of the composition as a whole. For the entire inner surface is filled with an ornamental structure yet at the same time one could use the whole box as an empty container.

The West-Eastern Divan (West-Östlicher Diwan) is a further example of Hartwig Bischof’s space-conquering works. Each half of the divan is overlaid with an ornamental structure of which the modular photographs relay a motif from the eastern and western hemisphere, respectively. The two structures overlap in the middle and are woven together by hand, thus forming a kind of zipper. The photo-realistic ornaments shown on the exemplary photo from the exhibition in the *Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten* (Cultural Center of the Minorites) in Graz (cf. West-Östlicher Diwan, 2010) come from a sheet of the Indian Mughal Hamzanama manuscript on one side, on the other side from Tintoretto’s “*Der Heilige Georg kämpft mit dem Drachen*” (St. George and the Dragon), both references dating back to the same time period. The divan is already fundamentally ambiguous because as a piece of furniture it encourages the beholder to relax and have a seat on a network of well-known, yet still partially unfamiliar cultural patterns. But at the same time, being a work of art it excludes this comfortable aspect and prompts a profound discussion instead. This impression is enhanced by the diptych of visual poetry installed behind the divan. Both parts are adorned with a central term of each culture written in the respective original characters – in this case “christos” (in Greek) for the West and “dao” (in Chinese) for the East – which are themselves overlaid with an ornamental structure composed of a modular photograph from the other realm.

The installation *Limitation de l'imitation*, first displayed in an exhibition in the museum for contemporary art in Admont in 2009 (cf. *Limitation de l'imitation*, 2009), presents itself with an equally strong concept which dissipates into painterly lightness in its execution. In the exhibition space there is a transport crate containing several pictures. A further picture leans on the outer side of the box, a third one leans on the wall, the rest have already been hung up. Whether they are to be packed or unpacked remains unclear. Every single picture shows an ornamental structure with the impressed writing "LIMITATION DE L'IMITATION", be it a disturbance or an addition. The phonetic assonance of "limitation" and "l'imitation" describes the program of the approach in Hartwig Bischof's works: they are the last possible refinement of normally unspectacular single images and as such they form the endpoint of all justifiable reproduction. In interpretational excess, the modular photographs all show motifs of nature, thus putting the interface between nature and culture in a visible interrelation.

From 2009 onwards, in some works the visibility of the ornamental structure in relation to the woven-in image shifts and is balanced out or even turned around. The ornaments are made of the same photo as the motif filling the area. Because they now share areas on the same image plane, auto-referential – if not even auto-constituting – images emerge (cf. *Art of noise at ease*, 2009 and *Atelier des trois églises*, 2009). The "Lichttätowierungen" (light-tattoos) are a further innovation of the recent past. Here Hartwig Bischof projects the ornamental structures onto heads – and in the works of the most recent exhibition onto tailors' dummies – and shows a veritable world of patterns in a subsequent photographic reproduction (cf. *Versammlung der besten Köpfe II*, 2010 and *Wächter*, 2011). In the "Reliefs of reality" Hartwig Bischof has two parallel projections of ever slightly changing pictures running, similar to a film sequence (cf. *Le temps qui reste*, 2010/11). The stills produce a movement that is suggested by the light revisions. Yet, at the same time, enough sudden transitions remain to force the illusionary quality into the background, favoring the analysis on a semantic level. The works from the cycle "Verwandtschaftsbeziehungen" (cf. *Wer es sich leisten kann*, 2011 and *blue palm*, 2011) can be seen as individual studies which, in the form of a triptych, show hidden similarities in color or structure.

... that goes on

Even though Hartwig Bischof conceives and creates his works as optical sensations – and also wants them to be understood that way –, they are full of starting points for a theory that feels indebted to its pictorial origin, similar to how Paul Cézanne's working method feels indebted to the motif in nature. So we return to painting which Hartwig Bischof values so much and as whose representative he still considers himself. Three important fields seem to require a few remarks. The first concerns painting and its distinction from photography. A further starting point questions the possibilities of serial art; finally, one must turn one's attention to ornamentation with its long history.

At first glance it seems curious that Hartwig Bischof contends to work as a painter despite using a camera and a computer instead of a paintbrush and a palette as tools. However, his works prove that for him the challenge does not lie in the photographic depiction of the subjects. One must rather structure the chosen picture plane with single territories and the corresponding color values so that it results in a balance of power between the single areas in the form of a composition. By doing so, Hartwig Bischof acts within the classic frame of painting and its task.

This is further supported by the fact that the camera's operating method is put to use for the production of the foundations but is disrupted or rather further developed by the means of painting. The camera, being a machine, perceives the world in a way that is mono-focal, thoughtless and trapped in immobility. Hartwig Bischof's works bid farewell to this perception. It is replaced by the poly-focal sight of painting which is constantly in motion and which mentally links the optical stimulus to a long tradition of pictorial inventions and images at the same time, if not even in advance. The last point might also be appropriated by photography since the camera always needs someone to use it, but the only anthropologizing measures that remain are the choice of image detail and the staging of subjects. This crossover of photography to painting is manifested in several aspects. When Hartwig Bischof reconstructs postcard views of "picturesque" locations as self-referential and self-generating pictures (cf. Martigues, 2014 and Senanque, 2014), a traditional way of seeing as was put forward by the all-invasive advertising industry is transposed to a new visual experience. Hartwig Bischof's reference to specific examples of painting belongs here as well, for example when he reconstructs a still life to such an extent that the single objects of the original picture are replaced by ornamental structures composed of the respective object (cf. still alive, 2014). In other examples (cf. Land schafft, meinetwegen, 2014 and plage débordée, 2014) Hartwig Bischof only takes over the composition of a picture and replaces the single territories with ornamental structures that come from completely different motifs, thereby stirring up shifts on a formal and, surprisingly, semantic level. Or otherwise the motif is repeatedly disrupted or rather completed as it happens when several layers of color are applied (cf. Schüttung, 2014) in order to attain that compositional harmony that painting has been striving after for millennia or to achieve a rhythm that makes the picture's surface vibrate and that chimes in to the diverse rhythm of the human body.

Hartwig Bischof's work also exhibits a certain nearness to a strong tradition of the twentieth century known collectively as 'serial art'. Moments of addition, reflection and combination can be detected in these works. The strict rules that have been put forward theoretically tend to break up the picture's status with their intended closeness to language. This goes for a few important representatives at the very least. The simultaneity attributed to the realm of the picture and the visual is to be replaced by a linear, one-by-one decipherment characteristic of language and writing. When making his ornamental structures, Hartwig Bischof follows a fixed concept, bringing him close to serial art. Yet this ground rule is not raised to the only principle but is rather limited by the further interventions in the ornament – like the woven areas (cf. grad schad, 2014), a further projection onto a 3D object (cf. Doppel Trio, 2014 and Monsieur Vincent, 2014) or the slashing following the example of a barcode (cf. Bare Trenched Coat, 2011 and Têtes, 2014) – to what it actually is: an auxiliary device when making pictures.

For Hartwig Bischof it is not about replacing that which is visual nor about pure objects that do not refer to anything – which does not distinguish the works of historic serial art either –, on the contrary, he proves to be a bridge builder once again. On the one hand, his works are characterized by the representational rendering of the subjects, for all modules show an object that remains visible, recognizable and linguistically nameable. On the other hand, the observers behold autonomous works of art that leave any linking or referential quality behind and become an independent piece of the world with their sheer presence. This can also be related to where the objects in public space are concerned (cf. Blindfenster, Litfaßsäule, Wandverhang, Obelisk, all 2014). The flat works reveal the building that lies right behind the spot where they are installed; this duplication, however, is instantly taken back by the addition of ornamental structures that are themselves composed of the respective building. In addition, the 'Blindfenster' (false win-

dow) puts the old idea of a picture being a window onto the world in a paradox situation because the depicted subject functions as a frame for the picture *in natura*. The obelisk duplicates a possible referential quality, firstly showing the motif of the ornamental structure, then reenacting its Egyptian inventors' idea of it being a sunbeam via interior lighting. Still, it faces the observers as a work of art just as a tree on the side of the road faces an approaching car.

Hartwig Bischof's works show a striking affinity to the ornament and its ambivalent history. Yes, the ornament has existed as an essential element throughout the ages, yet at the same time it was degraded to a superfluous addition to the true artistic artifact, if it was not even regarded as a crime. Recent research suggests an utterly affirmative approach, referencing Alois Riegl's interconnection of the ornament with the 'Kunstwollen' or Niklas Luhmann's identification of the ornament as the infrastructure of every work of art, even of a representational kind. The ornament alone thus fulfills a truly uninterested aesthetic pleasure because it overcomes the demand of mimesis for a most accurate rendering of nature. In many individual studies, that which is ornamental in the sense of a mode of formation is brought out as a structuring principle for works of art, whether concerning Pollaiuolo's paintings or photographs from the last turn of the millennium. The novel viewpoints of older works of art that have been put forward theoretically in recent years have been preconceived by Hartwig Bischof *avant la lettre* in his artistic works. Without great intention but merely due to the willingness to create pictorially and the necessities immanent to pictures, Hartwig Bischof's work reveals itself to be a new merging of several branched lines of development in the history of art. That which is ornamental was the structuring principle of each of his works from the beginning; it was never just a pretty playing around with patterns. It can be called new because his ornamental creations – in contrast to all ornamentation up until now – can do without an abstraction in the sense of a simplification. His ornamental structures are rather composed of photographic images and thus dissociate the historic juxtaposition of "realistic" and "abstract" from their validity. The accumulation of self-similar images escapes the reduction to a mere making-use-of the new technical possibilities of reproducing images. Instead, each accumulation generates new forms, or rather: formations. Becoming a form in this manner leaves any and every boring redundancy behind because the process of this formation must be continued by the observer – the way the works are made does not allow any other option. The circle is completed having reached painting, albeit with new means serving as an integral characteristic of Hartwig Bischof's work. Because painting is not so much about a form, but always about formation.

Translation: Diana Thun-Hohenstein