

Reading Meanings

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To speak of "reading" in relation to artworks is common terminology, but also refers to a particular, though not explicitly addressed aesthetic discourse. "Reading" implies an analytical approach to images or other aesthetic forms that attempts to decode and comprehend these as a discourse. As the term "subtext" suggests, the understanding of artworks as semiotic systems that one can read is connected to the idea of an interpretation according to the discursive rules of language, applied to phenomena that are not necessarily linguistic in a narrower sense. This does not automatically mean a translatability of art into a lingual description, as it may sometimes appear. Rather, the adoption of such terms infers a ranking order, which places ideas and the negotiation of artistic practice before the actual work. With the term "reading", images appear in this sense as formal coded documents of the intentions and the circumstances in which they were produced. Yet in direct encounters with contemporary art, moments of surprise and capacities for transformation count amongst its distinctive qualities. First through experimental forms of representation and "different thinking" does art achieve critical potential. This does not discredit the motivation to relate social factors, or the intention of the author as being central to the understanding of images or other cultural productions - however this understanding necessarily remains incomplete. This can be observed in the increasingly ubiquitous, explicitly interpretive texts and discursive programs of the last decades that became part of many exhibition concepts. In the best cases, texts and events were not intended as interpretive translations, rather as possible approaches and specific platforms, which developed an open interrelationship with other parts of the exhibition. But perhaps the presumption of a complete reading – a transparent relationship between image and meaning – is the actual problem, and the discovery that the figurative order of art cannot be grasped like this, opens the possibility of a deeper questioning of our concepts of the process of reading and understanding in a more general sense?

In retrospect, it seems of interest that the idea of "textuality" of cultural forms became popular at the same time as experimentations with the use of text in artistic practice, particularly in exhibition formats. The collection of essays edited by Richard Rorty entitled *The Linguistic Turn* was first published in 1967, the same year that a group of artists in New York, later to become the most influential representatives of Conceptual and Minimal Art, first began to organize exhibitions together, for example *Fifteen People Present Their Favorite Book*, organized by Joseph Kosuth at the Lannis Gallery in New York. In 1970, two comprehensive exhibitions took

place, *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art and *Software* at the Jewish Museum, whose purpose was to institutionally define and document a transformed conception of art in which the focus was no longer a series of masterpieces, but the usage and informational content of artworks. In these exhibitions, text directly became a focus of the presentation - they were exhibitions to be read, with sometimes overflowing amounts of information. On the level of singular works, the use of text could be observed in a spectrum of possibilities, from serial text works of Hanne Darboven to Lawrence Weiner's famous statement from 1968, which would become the basis of all his later pieces. In many instruction-based works, written information constituted the only material production of the artist, as in Douglas Huebler's untitled work (1969) in which a drawing comes about through the viewer's observation of the page, breathing, reading and then forgetting of the text. Since the art work is only realized through the carrying out of the instructions, reading here has a constitutive function - without the involvement of an active reader, and his/her power of imagination, the work would not exist. Many of the participating artists also experimented with the transfer of their work to the space of printed pages in books or magazines, the actual space of reading, in which we are used to engage our imagination in the development of ideas. This took form through interventions in established periodicals, as well as in independent publications of artist books or exhibitions that existed solely in printed form.

Another role of text occurs finally in conceptual works that operate with objects or images yet are linked to linguistic information, often in relation to the different qualities of image and text. Robert Barry's "Inert Gas Series" or the "Radiation Pieces" provide examples: they work with materials that are not recognizable to the naked eye, so that the photographic documentation, often the only material result, depicts an unspectacular landscape or situation, in which the eye begins to involuntarily search for some signal of artistic intervention. Only by reading the caption is the viewer informed that a litre of helium had just been released into the atmosphere at this location - what the image fails to indicate, is described on a textual level, while the visual information appears to substantiate the statement that the realization of the event indeed could have occurred at the indicated location and time. The levels of information complement each other, yet simultaneously expose their respective limits, so that the very process of reading contests the identified relationship. Even more subtle are works in which meaning production is tested amongst various images, such as the "Film Script" (1972) by David Lamelas, or Huebler's "Duration Pieces". In these works, a narration or a linear development is suggested through haphazardly arranged photographic documents, whose meaning is generated in the act of appropriation - of "reading" - by the viewer. Here, meaning appears as something that does not occur through the deciphering of signs, rather above all through imaginary processes, through a creative power of interlacing and connecting.

A discussion of Susanne Kriemann's artwork, in which reading and decoding images plays an integral role, could begin at this point. Her earlier works are based on extensive photographic collections, including her own photographs, but also from various sources that are found and integrated through processes of research. In all the complexity that the singular images have, is it the difference of the various sources and the way in which they are presented in combinations which underlines the central point: it is the connections between the images that become the focus of the works, through their spacial installations or through the publications that Kriemann realizes for almost every project. There have been, for example, two different exhibition versions of the work "One Time One Million" (2009): one in the form of a circular wooden display and the other in three metal rails, installed on top of each other within the exhibition space. Both installations developed a specific form dependent on the given space in order to show the photographs within the work - a series of relatively small format, uniformly framed images of various sizes. The heterogeneity of the images resulting from various strands of research, including a photographic documentation of an old Hasselblad camera, ornithological photographs taken by the entrepreneur Victor Hasselblad and aerial photographs of satellite cities in Sweden, is contextualized by the form of presentation and offer potential views to a comparative analysis. Also earlier works, such as the research of a bizarre prototype construction in Berlin, the "Schwerbelastungskörper" ("12,650,000", 2008) or the different locations of a statue of Ramses II in the urban space of Cairo ("The Future - Ramses Files", 2006/2007), operate with image collections according to a recognizable logic: they follow a building or object through various historical time periods and thereby describe an interplay of the duration of architecture and its contingent ideological and social contextualization. More recent works expand this operational approach in that the relationship of the image collection itself - its explorative, analytical viewpoint - becomes more speculative. In the combination of the images from the Hasselblad project, or in "Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory" (2009/2010), there is no longer a linearity that advances along a historical timeline. Rather, multiple levels and different historical planes intersect and are presented in reference to their subjects but also in specific visual languages. The precise installations in which Kriemann displays the images create a formal relationship where the spaces and gaps become visible. What lies between the images remains for the imagination of the subjective view. First through the process of culling the images do we begin to recognize a narrative, a possible story. "Reading" emerges here, perhaps in a more poetic understanding, as a process which itself produces meaning, which doesn't only decipher, but constructs information in a performative sense through one's own associations and ideas. We should start from this point, when we speak about the reading of images.

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