

“nicht immer alles dazusagen!” (no need to always give all explanations!)

Well, that’s where it starts and where you’re also right in the middle of it, already.

Writing a text for an exhibition that is called: “nicht immer alles dazusagen!” (no need to always give all explanations!) (# 502). This text could very well end right here with the following piece of advice: “Just go to Cologne, into the Michael Werner Gallery, Gertrudenstraße 24-28 and have a look at the drawings of Tomas Schmit yourself. Read the catalogues raisonnés written by him, meanwhile four in number (the fourth is being published just as the Schmit Exhibitions are on in Cologne), meet sundry girl- and boyfriends at the “Bieresel” (his favourite pub in Cologne in 114 Breite Straße, just around the corner from the Michael Werner Gallery) and talk about the drawings or anything else!” I believe Schmit would like that! Behind all this, you will find a clear approach to art that is feasible to anyone and contains a wonderful insight, namely, that anyone who wants to be is included.

Including anyone interested in art is one thing and it makes an introduction to Tomas Schmit’s world and thinking about his work easy for me, as well as for you. Moreover, the “no need to always give all explanations!” makes a considerable aspect of his art clear, namely, that you cannot and do not have to explain everything all the time and that thinking about the things in life, in human doings, as well as questions of evolution and our perception, does not always have to result in conclusions which upset the world. Thinking should rather be a playful ordinary human activity that is fun and may, of course, also result in considerable conclusions. The credo of many people, that only the one who can provide solutions is qualified to ask the questions, particularly aroused Schmit’s suspicion. Solutions, however, are not crucial, but in fact, the approach from many sides is, the “Scharren am Zaun” (scratching the surface) as he once called it in one of our interviews in 2005. He preferred the multi-faceted and also contrarian sudden inspirations on the path of questioning a thousand times to the one solution which then has to be the measure for all things. The playful questioning and approaching can be found in almost all his drawings and particularly beautiful examples can be seen in this exhibition. More about them later – now to the other.

If drawing is the one thing, writing is the other. Drawing and writing to him were both, affair of the heart and vital necessity at the same time. Both were essential as each of them can accomplish something the other cannot. Playing with a pencil or playing with words are the two spheres that appealed to him the most. And the connection of the two that he cultivated is, again, what is hardest to describe (but luckily you don’t have to be able to describe everything, either). Maybe, it was exactly this complex and sometimes puzzling aspect of the connection between language and drawing that enchanted him and, just like drawing, writing gave him the possibility to creep up to

the questions of human doings. Not only was his searching stalk, in order to get through to the essential things, crucial to him, it also gave him great pleasure.

Concerning the writing about Tomas Schmit, the “no need to always give all explanations!” may seem quite programmatic, even though he had generally not been into programmatic things. Nevertheless, I still very much like it here as a motto because, this way, free thinking, pondering, the potentially possible and the possibly impossible become the programme. (What a luxury, seeing that usually everything is already served half-digested!) You just don’t need to feel intimidated to look at the drawings of Schmit, unhurriedly: you’re allowed to laugh, smile, think, doubt, ponder, have light bulb moments or not do any of this. Well then, let’s go!

There are various topics in Schmit’s work that run through his entire oeuvre and which he approached in the most manifold and exciting way – just like in the works exhibited here. One more thing needs to be said about them in advance: All of them date from the years 1999 and 2002 and were made for the big solo shows that took place in the Marlene Frei Gallery in Zurich in those years. All of them are 43x30.5 cm each, pencil and coloured pencil, sometimes ink, on paper. All of them, again, is not quite correct as the so-called “zürcher zeichnungen” (zurich drawings) would be 77 drawings (43 in 1999 and 34 in 2002) which for various reasons cannot all be shown at the Michael Werner Gallery. As typical for Schmit, the drawings were always made in the months just before the respective exhibition which explains their inner coherence or certain topical focuses. This way of working, always drawing for a concrete event, also explains that every single exhibition is based on an own concept. That is why this exhibition is so special. All the work from 1999 and 2002 is shown again, bundled in one place and it is the ideal opportunity for all those (myself included) who missed the Swiss exhibitions, to catch up. Besides, this unusual exhibition revival contains a leap in time (!) – Schmit would say a “Zeitwinkel” (time-angle) and be happy as this brings us right to one of his favourite phenomena.

To keep it simple, a time-angle is a phenomenon/thing/idea that is repeated in some way, often with a considerable period of time in-between. Time, memory and doublings in content with more or less coincidental overlapping are disproportionate, though. It was the coincidences and incalculable things and, especially, the reunions that made Schmit think about these phenomena. For instance, on his first invitation card of the Werner Gallery in May 1972, you could see his angle-piece – it showed the angles of the word “angle” – and in his drawing “siebzig vorder- und 35 hinterfotzige zentimeter” (seventy front- and 35 back-stabbing centimetres) (# 569) of 24.4.02, so exactly 30 years later, he is tempted to redo the same piece in a modified form. Even though the drawing will, unfortunately, not be shown in the exhibition, it is a very suitable example

because it actually includes two time-angles: the time-angle of the angle motif and the time-angle between Schmit's first and last Werner exhibitions.

Well, yet another example for a time-angle: the two drawings "das können ameisen auch" (ants can also do that) (# 549) and "das können ameisen besser" (ants can do that better) (# 550) are time-angle-pieces because they were made according to a method which Schmit repeatedly used in the course of his works. In both pieces, he deals with the question whether one can draw a simple diagonal on a piece of paper. In doing so, he compares the diagonal to the lying posture of the human being which actually changes human perception, considerably. The upright and horizontal line, in contrast, is dominating and implies order, just like the upright position of the human being. It is at this point of pondering that the game starts as it is not just about drawing a diagonal but drawing it in the following manner: "here in order, starting from the bottom left: a pencil squiggle, blue-coloured / next squiggle, purple-coloured / next squiggle, blue / next purple / and so on: the permanent change of pencils achieves that every new squiggle really is a new decision and prevents the whole thing from becoming some kind of routine or even an instinctive sweep. – and lo and behold: bent and askew, even with several sweeps instead of just one... ."

A concretely experienced phenomenon of perception becomes a question to Schmit and by means of an experiment on himself, he follows the track. He takes the two drawings with the ants even further as he complicates the test arrangement of the second one (# 550): "again a diagonal has to be produced, but this time a in a pseudo-order, in accordance with the middle/middles/middles-principle: first of all, both end-squiggles bottom left and top right, left blank. then – of course, without any means of help – i looked for the exact middle of this 'line' and marked it with a red squiggle (i should have known that you place it just this little too far to the left and quite a bit too high up; well, and that's exactly what happened). then, marked the middles of each of the two arisen lines with a yellow squiggle. then four middles from green squiggles, eight from blue ones, 16 from purple and 32 from magenta ones – : also bent and askew but really different from # 549!... . ants, i suppose, can walk in straight lines, pretty well. they can, however, – in certain respects, like in this drawing, – calculate paths!" This way, you can see how – at least in this case – titles can come into being, namely in association with the result of the drawing.

Already in 1979, drawings in accordance with the "middle/middles/middles-principle" have been produced (within the series "rauschebaum und zeisigkeit" ("rushing tree and siskinity"), # 217). Here, the time-angle comes into the game again. In certain respects, the time-angle has a very practical function. It serves the memory and jogs it and, thus, it is a means of realisation and reflection. Maybe, the reason that Schmit remained true to himself throughout his life is that he constantly took a close look at himself.

The aspect of his way of working which I just called experiment on himself, this kind of getting through to things (cognitions included) by doing them, is a central point in Schmit's art. He calls it "sachen machen" (doing things). That is what not-only-talking-about-things means, it is a being-on and being-into things that are important to oneself. Schmit explores his ideas, thoughts and questions through the act of drawing and his drawings are the results of his exploratory trips. Or, to put it differently: idea and realisation of the drawing coincide in the process of drawing. This is the special thing about "doing things" and this can be found in a lot of Schmit's drawings. The drawing "no need to always give all explanations!" (# 502) shows three heads of chameleons with forefeet and three mazy, string-like tracks. In accordance to the title, in his catalogue raisonné Schmit only wrote about this drawing "das wird beherzigt!" (it's taken to heart!), meaning, he deliberately chooses not to write a text that would explain the drawing to the beholder or provide him with any suggestions. Here, you can/are to speculate and research as the whim takes you... well, why not go on a little stalk.

To Schmit, the chameleon is an extremely exciting contemporary. Some of the central texts and drawings in which he deals with the topic of mimicry (another topic that could and should get me talking) reveal this fact. In them, the chameleon's gift to adapt its colour to its environment is varied in the most affectionate ways. Apart from this talent, it moves through the world by swaying for- and backward! It moves one foot in front of the body to a certain extent but then does not pull it back to the same extent but while pulling itself forward, it also pulls itself a little bit backward, at the same time. This kind of staggering forward movement which looks like swaying is even part of the mimicry as it melts the contours of the body into its environment. The staggering, irregular element can clearly be seen in Schmit's three tracks that were created according to the "doing things"-principle. The rather theoretical side of these dizzy facts is represented by the heads and feet of the chameleon, as well as the sections A-B-C.

In the exhibition you can also see a lot of dice pictures which are, again, based on the principle of "doing things". I call them dice pictures, for they could only develop with the help of dice and as here, too, the result could not have been predicted beforehand. Before Schmit starts, he frames a few rules as is common practice for a real game: the numbers one to six are matched with colours by means of rolling a dice. A further so-called directional dice decides on the course of direction of each section. Furthermore, you have to make up your mind beforehand what will happen when you hit the outer edge of a sheet, i.e. whether you are then allowed to go backwards again or not. Once everything is decided, off you go! Schmit truly enjoys these kinds of games and we are thrilled by the results. The "zurich drawings" "john cage's fahrrad, tauchend" (john cage's bike, diving) (# 566), "john cage's fahrrad, fliegend" (john cage's bike, flying) (# 567) and "der

diesjährige nobel-preis für chemie geht an: die salpetersäure.” (this year’s nobel prize for chemistry goes to: nitric acid) (# 568) were made in that way. And he did it in one go as it gave him so much pleasure and as there is attraction within chance. Letting chance decide on the products of your work, isn’t that a wonderful way of knocking art off its “socle”?!

Neither did Schmit want to produce symbolistic nor expressionistic, let alone academic art. Since his Fluxus days, this had been essential to him and in this respect he felt attached to Fluxus until the end. In 1982, in his important text “über f.” (on f.), he described what he considered the essential as follows: “the f.-way was, to avoid all symbolistic, feuilletonistic, expressive, or any other showing-off gimmicks as much as possible, and to come up with things as simple, concrete, f o r m f r e e as ever possible – whereby the socle on which they take place (podium, announced event) and the aura (“avantgarde!”) wouldn’t really be abolished but, however, sort of exposed to open, hearty laughter.”

I do not know any other artist who put words into action in such a light but nevertheless consequent way when it came to shaking all “socles” of art and sneeringly laughing about its various forms!

Moreover, Schmit was highly interested in biological, evolutionary and perceptually-aesthetic phenomena. Why? Because, by watching his own body and his environment closely, he came across dubious, unsettled and blurry matters that he wanted to explore. In his drawings and texts, he tried to approach these phenomena, suss out their secrets or (if impossible to solve) state this lack of an answer. However, he definitely shares his amazement and thoughts with us.

A great deal of his thoughts concerning science flow into his book “erster entwurf (einer zentralen ästhetik)” (first draft (of central aesthetics)), self-published in Berlin in 1989. Within the art scene, this book has so far seen little appreciation, if not none at all (– I say so far as the text by Stefan Ripplinger that has just been published in the supplement of “katalog 4” (catalogue 4) is the beginning of a long-desired serious reception). It was only when Schmit, due to various alterations in the imprint, started drawing originals onto the backs of the books that a few Schmit collectors woke up a little, although, this had probably little to do with the content of the book. Even though, the book contains so much of what a lot of his drawings are about, for example: how do our senses come into being and how are they connected, how come we see colours, how does our consciousness work and what is it to do with evolution. After all, the cyberneticist Valentin Braitenberg saw the sharpness of this book and wrote an extolling review in the „Spektrum der Wissenschaft“ magazine. To Schmit, this one review was worth more than all forced attempts by the art world to mention the book but, at the same time, only underrate it, anyway. Admittedly, the “first draft” is heavy going and Schmit’s catalogues raisonnés might gain a much higher score

when it comes down to the amusement factor. However, it contains almost all the material that many of his drawings are based on and it does not come as a surprise that Schmit happily agreed to the title “philosophic evolutionist”.

In order to get into Schmit’s world, it is certainly easier for many people to start by looking at the drawings and then work their way through to the “first draft”, rather than the other way round.

Anyway, when looking at the drawings, you are confronted with numerous phenomena: for example, with the drawing “ob das nun wieder alles stimmt?” (could all this be right again?) (# 490). In it, he deals with the laterality of human beings. Who has not noticed that you prefer one to get there and the other to go back, whenever there are two possible ways to reach a destination. Or that it makes a difference whether you have a slope to your right or left. There are many things that anybody could think of. This phenomenon prompted Schmit to make a drawing and write a crunchy text well worth discussing under the same name into his catalogue raisonné.

In his drawing “was wir haben” (what we have) (# 489), it is slightly more complicated but also more fundamental. Here, he deals with the five different departments of human activity that he matches with five colours. In the drawing, you see how these departments: existential orientation (brown), perception (red), imagination (purple), behaviour (green) and language (blue) are connected with one another, namely, each constitutively with every other. That makes it complex and difficult which, heaven knows, is no reason to stay away from these topics, though. Scientists chew on them, too, and often do not even manage to make things clear to everyone. Really, that was the biggest credit the scientist Braitenberg could do Schmit. He recommends the book to experienced and prospective physicists, brain scientists, psychologists and suchlike. He writes: “It obviously took a poet to comprehend the charm of the material approach to psychology, the enjoyment of self-critical accuracy included. For this reason, this book is exactly antipodal to what so often annoys us: the belittling of results and concealing of problems which popular science uses to curry favour with the people. Thus, it only shows, though, how little it appreciates its audience. If you were to make propaganda for the scientist’s mentality, you would be better off bringing the pleasure in puzzling across just like Tomas Schmit did.”

Well, when you talk about Schmit, the most important thing is simply that it is not the answers to the problems that are to be sold, but the problems themselves and many an offer for an answer, as well as plenty of food for thought. He refers this demand to “high” science, as well as “fine” art. Concerning riddles and the unravelling of them, Schmit has a great deal to offer. In his “very simple rebus?” (# 516), the question mark sets the direction. Well, it is not at all simple and years later it even takes him whole days to suss out his own unravelling tactics. Even more often, he deals with the riddles of nature (animals and human beings included likewise). Schmit has a particularly soft spot for mimicry. In the drawing “was wir haben, z.b. diese hawaiiische raupe”

(what we have, e.g. this hawaiian caterpillar) (# 491), he introduces us to the hunting methods of the animal: disguising itself as a stick, the caterpillar snaps whenever an ant falls for her stick trick. And what are such mechanisms to do with our human brain? Well, exactly that interaction between existential orientation, perception and action.

And there are many other things worth marvelling at. Standing on the balcony of his long-time Berlin flat in Bleibtreustraße smoking, discovering amazing things: “i’m standing – around – on the bleibtreu-3-balcony (4th floor). down there, a fruit of a lime tree helicopters by which i only notice, though, as it settles on a tree and – is a butterfly !!! namely, a so-called camberwell beauty, colour: dark underneath, very dark, almost black on top – apart from a very pale yellowish-white strip on the edge of each of the wings.” What is so special about this kind of mimicry is that a Camberwell beauty butterfly does normally not at all look like the fruit of a lime tree, it is only when it is flying that it bears a striking resemblance. Schmit might even have discovered something that had not been known among biologists. Anyway, he drew a three-way series (# 551) on this particular mimicry phenomenon in which he reproduces the different aspects of this transformational effort and the moments of optical illusion for the human being and the swallow bird.

He himself described this way of working-on-a-matter as “researching by drawing”. Approaching things/the world by drawing and writing in order to get to the bottom of them! This is one of the many possible nutshells Schmit’s way of working can be put in.

In addition to these fundamental things, there is plenty more that Schmit puts onto paper. In doing so, he is happy not to think much of exaggerated seriousness without wanting to shift everything to an uncouth fun level. The topic of humour is a difficult one and if you want to say more than that there is humour in his drawings (as, to his regret, often happened) you will start stammering. Not only because there is nothing less funny than writing about what makes an artist’s wit but also because it is a difficult thing to grasp what is so amusing and pleasurable in all its depth. That for Schmit language is something to do with humour is one thing, the connection between the drawn sign and the entitling sign (for example picture and title) is the other thing which contains the one. To make generally meaningful statements about the humour in Schmit’s art was not even possible for himself. At last, probably because it is a bit like explaining the punch line and, thus, spoiling the joke.

“art (“art derives from nonsense”, i stick to that) is to do with spirit, spirit is to do with humour and humour is to do with – completeness!” Schmit wrote (in the George Brecht catalogue of the Ludwig Museum) in 2005. He finds this completeness in events by George Brecht or Karl Valentin and it is in many of his “zurich drawings”. For instance, in “zur gewichtigkeit von

rätself

rätselfn” (about the importance of riddles) (# 511), or in “ich nenne sie schlaufen, paule lovens nennt sie taralli (fatti a haegue, lineal ed mano)” (i call them loops, paule lovens calls them taralli (fatti a haegue, lineal ed mano) (# 564), or in “entwurf eines integrierten nicht- und raucher-schilds fürs semiotische institut der uni grünkohlia in lodenmantella” (sketch for an integrated non- and smoker-sign for the semiotic institute of the cale university in lodenia) (# 559), or in “die ballettruppe »halbe fahrstühle« schwänzt die documenta-platform »zum genom des nichtraucher-schilds« n i c h t ” (the ballet group »half lifts« does n o t skip the documenta-platform »about the genome of the non-smoking sign«” (# 560), or for me the most beautiful one, in “platform 3 (st. leninsburg): kann die zweideutigkeit des »bitte nicht füttern«-schilds in dreieinhalb-deutigkeit gebracht werden, und wenn nein, was kostet die wolle?” (platform 3 (st. leninsburg): can you find three and a half meanings in the ambiguity of the »please do not feed«-sign and if not, whatever it takes?) (# 563). And just along the way, in this drawing as in a few others (# 559, # 560, # 570), Schmit is ridiculing the overly theoretical outpourings of the documenta 2002.

On # 560 you can see non-smoking non-smokers and smoking non-smokers and non-smoking smokers and smoking smokers and I consider it an excellent example for the fact that completeness has something to do with the paradox and that Schmit’s humour often develops through playing with the such. As is generally known, a deep truth hides within the statement of the paradox when you closely look at it. What are drawings like “bitte von links nach rechts betrachten” (to be looked at from left to right, please) (# 485) or “bitte im uhrzeigersinn anschauen” (to be looked at clockwise, please) (# 486) or “wie viele arten von unterschieden gibt es?” (how many kinds of differences are there?) (# 501) or “ein stückerl wenn man so will für nein gegen die nato” (a small piece if you like for no against the nato) (# 519) all about?

There is a lot to discover, think and talk about in Schmit’s drawings and it looks like your meeting at the “Bieresel” is getting more and more beery and stimulating. Also a lot in order to get to know Tomas Schmit, even after his death if you only feel like it. On drawings like “beethoven hören und etwas ‘drawing on nothing’ betiteln wollen...” (listening to beethoven and wanting to title something ‘drawing on nothing’ ...) (# 518), or “das sind die burschen” (that’s the fellows) (# 541), or “tunst!” (# 510) or “portrait of the artist as tadsch-mahal oder auch baldiger hampelmann“ (portrait of the artist as tadsch-mahal or early jumping jack) (# 495) or “darwinist sein heißt nicht nur bügeln und singen” (being darwinist does not only mean ironing and singing) (# 555), he introduces himself to us – sometimes affectionately sometimes self-ironically – and it is on us to react.

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