

Stefan Ripplinger, a talk “on tomas schmit”, Kunstbibliothek, 22 October 2009

I would like to introduce you to this book. It has no title on the front cover and neither a half-title nor title page inside. On the back cover are various particulars about the print run and ordering address and plans for a subsequent volume that, incidentally, never materialized. The last letters of the respective lines of this paratextual information together make up the title on the book’s spine: *tomas schmit erster entwurf* [first draft].

The book dates from 1989 and has 156 pages, illustrations included. On the last page are these four sentences:

i perceive
i perceive this
i perceive that i perceive this
i perceive that i perceive*

That is the book’s subject: perception and the awareness of perception, i.e. senses and consciousness. And from this formulation of the subject comes the book’s unofficial title, the name it’s generally known by: *erster entwurf (einer zentralen ästhetik)* [first draft (of a central aesthetics)]. The book is Tomas Schmit’s aesthetics. Because in the strict sense of the word, aesthetics means “perception”. It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who introduced this word into philosophy. In his early writings on the subject, aesthetics initially means a turning toward the senses, a “science of sensory cognition” – and here, by the way, he expressly includes imagination and anticipation or “sensory presentiments”. From the awareness of perception grows knowledge, an epistemology. Only on the basis of this epistemology can we adequately appreciate the arts.

So we must clearly distinguish between two concepts of aesthetics. First, Baumgarten’s literal term that denotes perception and the cognizance of perception and second, aesthetics in today’s prevalent sense of the word, which essentially goes back to Kant, for whom aesthetics is the theory of taste, aesthetic judgement. The first asks: how do I see something? The second asks: is what I see beautiful? One might say that whoever wants to pose the second question should answer the first one first.

On a poster announcing *erster entwurf*, which he reproduces in his third catalogue, Schmit has differentiated these concepts in exactly the same way. He writes that the plan for his book goes back to 1970, when he wanted to classify sensory processes.

i wanted to start with an aesthetics in the strict sense of the word, that is, a description of our perceptual apparatus, and that should transition – seamlessly, of course – into an a[esthetics] in the classical sense. (...) what remains of that stuffy old plan is to start off with a detailed presentation of the organs through which the world is present to us, our so-called five senses. (...) and it quickly became evident that those kinds of considerations were for me more important and interesting than, say, whether and why polke and richter are good (that's debatable), or whether and why baselitz and kiefer are bad (that, we probably don't need to talk about). art doesn't come up. i stick to more elemental, central things.

Art doesn't come up. On one hand that's true. Visual art almost never appears in this book. Even when Schmit wants to illustrate his discussions of sensory physiology with an example from the arts, he almost always thinks first of music. On the other hand, the exceptions are telling: at one point, he describes the effect of a large monochrome, a so-called ganzfeld, on the eyes. Also he repeatedly inserts drawings such as the *kleiderschrank für philosophen* [wardrobe for philosophers] or poem-like texts such as *ich nehme wahr ...* [i perceive ...] cited at the beginning. In so doing, he forges a link to his drawings and writings. Anyone who is familiar with even a few of the drawings, or one of Schmit's catalogues or quagga-heft notebooks from recent decades, knows that the questions of perception, the senses, stimuli and reactions, forms, evolution, the interconnection between living in the world and perceiving the world, etc. are his major theme. So although art is almost never mentioned, the book still concerns art, namely the works of Schmit, at least those that came after Fluxus. This book is absolutely indispensable for anyone who does not merely find Schmit's drawings cute and droll, but really wants to get involved with them. And beyond that, I think that art is a "present absence" in the book in still another way, namely, as an antagonist to the functional world it depicts. Some speculation on that at the end of this talk.

But first back to the book's contents. Schmit wrote that it included the following, among other things:

motor, sac, juice, balance, skin, tongue, nose, ears, eyes; nerve cells; synapses; zings; afferents and efferents; pulfrich's pendulum; adaptations; from the history of consciousness I to V; efferent copies; sense and persistence; wardrobe for philosophers; size constancy; illusions; switches; something stands for something that it isn't; holography; amazing beeing; pavlov and the temporal dimension

So the book concerns perception not in a phenomenological sense, but rather in a biological and physiological sense, which from time to time is augmented with findings from cognitive psychology. It is not a textbook. Schmit wrote it not for us, but for himself. He wants to know: Why do I see the world just so, and not otherwise? How does my picture of the world arise? To find out, he relies not on theoreticians and natural scientific postulates, but solely on himself. He considers only that which he himself has thought through and clearly demonstrated with the simplest possible experiments as provisionally tenable. Such thinking for oneself constitutes the book's character, makes it sometimes difficult to read, since you are not fed conclusions like pap. Instead you're given food for thought, inquiries and observations. That's what makes it amusing and provocative. One example will have to suffice:

"when i lie in bed and read," Schmit writes,

i always lie on my side, either one side or the other, never on my stomach or back. and when I get to the bottom right of a right-hand page i'm reading, i always find myself turning quickly over to my other side instead of turning the page of the book!! .. -: the patterns, 'turn the page over!' and 'turn over!' definitely have many mosaic pieces in common – 'turn' and 'over', to take it linguistically for now – , so it can happen – since both actions are logical and normal in bed and the mix-up does no harm at all – that in an early-morning not-quite-rightly-controlled twilight state, the correct command turns into a closely related, in large part identical, incorrect one.

This example, a reclining slapstick, so to speak, confirms what I've already maintained: first, that Schmit writes down what he has directly observed and independently thought through, nothing else. Second, that certain perturbations of the usual chains of perception and reaction provide information about the functioning

of the brain. That's why Schmit also deals with many cases of optical and other illusions. Third, that perception and behaviour are always considered in a functional, pragmatic context.

From this follow some appraisals of the natural scientific – epistemological position that Schmit adopts here (which I've discussed in more detail in my article "What makes us" in *Are Humans Capable of Thought?*, the catalogue of the Cologne and Hamburg exhibitions in 2007 and 2008). Schmit is no behaviourist, who only looks at stimuli and reactions and excludes anything mental and constructive. But neither is he a constructivist, who well appreciates the brain's capacity to construe reality but would disregard the world and its bloody necessities. How I perceive the world depends substantially on what the situation requires of me. And which senses human beings developed depended to a large extent on what constraints nature placed on them and what resistance they had to overcome. Schmit jokingly called himself an "evoluzzer" [in German, a would-be revolutionary is a "revoluzzer" – trs.]. His aesthetic thinking has a biological, natural scientific, pragmatic bent. But biology, natural science and pragmatism are not all there is to it.

And so I come to the speculation mentioned earlier. Just as perturbations in the mechanics of the perceptual apparatus show how it works, they also testify to the fact that it doesn't always run smoothly. And often enough, it produces splendidly useless stuff. Think about dreams, think about intoxication, think about illusions. But not only are there incorrect and misleading perceptions, there are also surplus ones. Schmit's prime example is colour vision. It seems to have no evolutionary necessity and, significantly, it is an ability that some insects have, but most higher vertebrates do not. From the standpoint of evolution and pure functionality, colour vision is elective, not compulsory. Unless someone were a chameleon and needed to know the colours of the environment in order to dress accordingly.

Tomas Schmit often enough emphasized that art is *not* a necessity of life. It is surplus, a sensory illusion, an irritation, nonsense, a joke – but it is also magnificent. It's part of everything that does not fit into the functional Darwinist world Schmit elucidates in *ersten entwurf* and, like colour vision, it is a sidetrack or a detour of evolution. It may be that art sometimes explains to us how we know something. But in any case, it's also part of what we don't need to know. Anyone wanting to go on a stag hunt doesn't need to be familiar with Rubens's *Diana and Her Nymphs*. And

anyone wanting to be a judge or a dentist doesn't need to become engrossed in Schmit's drawings. That's a luxury one indulges in. It's a sidetrack one savours.

So two spheres confront each other: nature – but also society – both of which are ruled by necessity, and art, which is subject to no external imperatives. When it comes to the notion of functionality, they clearly diverge. Function, as Jan Mukařovský defines it, is the aptness of an object or a living thing for a specific aim or particular purpose. This is exactly how Schmit explains vision, hearing and perception. They are faculties adapted for a particular purpose. For example, the vision of someone who lives in open countryside is calibrated differently than that of someone who lives in the mountains.

But what are the drawings of Tomas Schmit adapted for? They serve a great many functions, can be looked at and laughed at, they can be puzzlers à la Kōpcke, but they can also induce wide-ranging epistemological and aesthetic reflections. They *can* do all this, but they mustn't. They have no compelling aims or purpose. But they are not a game. In their own way, they ponder and poke fun at the raw world of necessity. I think that Tomas Schmit, with his aesthetics, wanted to make us vividly aware of this, too.

*in other words:

i sense

i sense this

i perceive that i am sensing this

i perceive that i perceive

[Like “to perceive”, the German verb *wahrnehmen* (*ich nehme wahr*) does not clearly distinguish between physiological and cognitive aspects of perception -- and incidentally, “wahr”, also conveys the ring of truth: *ich nehme wahr* = i take it to be true or real, so to speak. Author's/trs. note]