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## Timelessness and Contemporaneity in Kurt Kocherscheidt's Art

One could not claim that Kurt Kocherscheidt was particularly concerned with indelibly writing his position into the art of his time. Even the course of his life history indicates the unconventional approach, which allowed him to seek his own way without entering into the kind of compromises imposed by institutional or aesthetic commitment. His decision to leave the city for a longer period after a very well received first appearance in the Vienna Secession in 1968, where he presented work as part of the artist group 'Wirklichkeiten' [Realities], is characteristic of this. From September 1969 till December 1971, he lived in London, only to set off a short time later, in May 1972, on a journey through the South American sub-continent which was to last almost a year. These years of travel honed his artistic profile. Above all, the 'romantic undertaking' of his tropical journey, as Kocherscheidt himself formulated it<sup>1</sup>, would be decisive, though with it he certainly fulfilled the childhood dream in which he imagined himself as a travelling natural scientist. Yet, a look at the drawings which were made during and just after the journey, as well as the photographs taken at that time, show that the journey to the source of the Amazon also became a journey into the heart of darkness. Kocherscheidt was looking for a way to flee his previous artistic praxis—and he succeeded. The immediacy of the experience broke through the exotic, slightly bizarre mental imagery of the 'tropics' that Kocherscheidt, 'relying on Brehm's *Animal Life*'<sup>2</sup>, had placed at the centre of his pictures up till that point. In the middle of an uninhabited nature of puzzling forms, he stumbled on resistance from a nameless and senseless present that was foreign to his previous artistic production—that 'translation of the translation' and 'caricatures of allegories of the worst taste'<sup>3</sup> which mixed the stimulus of a Hans Makart (who was committed to eclectic historicism himself) with touches of fantastically coloured Pop art. With their ironic decadence and a technical brilliance which can be seen especially well in the prints, they fitted, perhaps only too well, into the specifically Viennese art atmosphere of an extended fin de siècle. In the real tropics, however, he was overcome by a crisis related in equal parts to the subject and to art: 'I played with the idea of changing my identity,' Kocherscheidt wrote, describing his state at the time. 'I could not find an adequate form to represent things. Thrown back and confronted with nature itself, I began to break away from a literary image of painting.'<sup>4</sup> After he had returned to Vienna only to spend more and more time in his newly acquired farm house in the remoteness of southern Burgenland, darkness, solitariness, and silence would never again be absent from Kocherscheidt's art. They would be carried out in a way that favoured the raw and friable above any artistic virtuosity. The harvest from the South American journey was not exactly the light-hearted abundance that inundated Cy Twombly, for example, during his encounter with Mediterranean Europe and which then allowed that congenial commentator Roland Barthes to interpret

his art in the light of a global culture of writing and symbols. So Kocherscheidt's pictures became—more and more decisively as time went on—the opposite of conversation pieces that seem to initiate discussion by themselves about themselves. By attempting to answer the dark experiences that had become imprinted in him artistically, he set off on the unconventional path which had as one of its consequences the fact that for years his art was almost never accorded appropriate attention nor was it discussed.

Reception of Kocherscheidt's art was made more difficult by his decision to remain true to the old mediums of drawing and oil painting. Within the modern pressure for ever newer artistic paradigms, media, concepts, and definitions of art, the status of painting became increasingly precarious. Whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the leading medium involved in the process of art becoming autonomous, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde it became a means of expression increasingly often under suspicion of being antiquated notwithstanding that, in particular, non-representational painters such as Piet Mondrian, Yves Klein, the American Abstract Expressionists, or early Frank Stella were partially successful in setting the tone of modernism. Kocherscheidt's painting remained—at least considered superficially—representational, dedicated to depicting nature and continuing to uphold the traditional artistic craftsmanship, in short, did not present art conceptually and appeared instead to be predisposed to the traditional task of depiction, and thus had, of necessity, an outsider's position in the 1970s when Kocherscheidt returned from his travels. Even with his first exhibition in 1968 as a member of 'Wirklichkeiten' he was concerned with a negative referent, namely in defining, with his simultaneously trivial and eclectic pictorial content, the boundaries relative to the established field of informal/abstract artists which had formed around the Galerie (nächst) St. Stephan. As Kocherscheidt put it, 'The distinction from the painters around Monsignore Mauer was to be made clear.'<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, the situation became even more acute. What was causing a stir now were gestures relating to leaving the picture behind, dissolving the borders of art, whether by means of interdisciplinary happenings and performances (with its specifically Austrian form of Viennese Actionism which had already reached its climax in the 1960s) or by using the new media (with the Austrian examples of Peter Weibel and Valie Export). In 1975, while the artistic zeitgeist was engaged in overcoming painting, Kocherscheidt began again to paint more extensively—an enterprise which in consequence must have appeared to him to be 'a little like reinventing the wheel'<sup>6</sup>.

As the 1980s saw the easing of a compulsion towards permanent revolution and, in particular, also the triumphant return of figurative painting, the environment created was more favourable to Kocherscheidt. The result was a series of first museum presentations, and he became a leading figure for a younger generation of Austrian painters although less because of his formal agreement with them than because of his personal and artistic integrity. Once again the artist's strong-mindedness showed through; an artist who had never sought wide acceptance but who nevertheless felt its absence. From 1982 onwards, when expressive gestures with the brush, forced representation, and subjects with a wealth of allusions had been cultivated, Kocherscheidt began along a path in exactly the opposite direction, which led to his best work. To outline this self-positioning clearly, it will now be described in more detail.<sup>7</sup>

While the neo-expressive painting of the 1980s was based on conventional, representational depiction, Kocherscheidt now pursued the goal of suspending the difference between the picture as a sign and the picture as an object. What was intended was not to be depicted, as had been the practice up to this point—even by Kocherscheidt himself—but rather to become present by being embodied. In his 'Säulen' or 'Leiber' the picture became a place where a single, picture-filling object appeared in such a way that the work could still be considered as a depiction of an object but its presence, however, could unfold as a picture-object. Between the picture and the viewer, a directly physical confrontation was established over and above the visual. Shortly thereafter, works were made which increased the object character of the pictures even more by using irregular outlines. This was not due to irregular pictorial contours but the fact that the pictorial surface was constructed from many differently dimensioned canvases. This tectonic picture process anticipated a decisive change. In 1986, Kocherscheidt began an impressive sculptural work that did not just come into being parallel to painting but which developed out of the specific issue. Thus pictures and sculptures shared decisive formal qualities—in particular the contrast of clear forms against a monochromatic ground—but translated them differently respective to their specific mediums, e.g. when the clearly outlined forms in the paintings became sawn-out holes in the sculptures. That the pictures and sculptures were variants of the same pictorial thought can best be seen from the pictures gaining a sculptural character by Kocherscheidt staging them as picture objects, while, on the other hand, the sculptures assumed pictorial attributes by the fact that—with few exceptions—they did not stand free in space but leaned on the wall like pictures in a studio.

In the two final years of his life, Kocherscheidt's painting finally broke through into a radicality that was almost unsurpassable. At the same time, it completed a circle with the influential experiences in South America twenty years earlier. Less and less restrained, an amorphous, inert mass of colour began to spread out over the surface. Whereas the neo-expressive painters of the 1980s had a preference for acrylic paints that dried faster, Kocherscheidt valued the older medium of oil paint, which stayed soft longer and thus allowed further manipulation. In addition, the work on a picture underwent a number of phases in which some layers of colour might completely cover up others. At times, there were anthropomorphic echoes, for example a faceless head. However, the pictures might lose all form so that the mainly brown or black pigment appeared to be a glutinous, primeval matter between mud, earth, and excrement—a visualisation that related less to the designation of an object and much more to a particular state. The final works pushed this characteristic to a degree of almost irreducible elementariness. Spirals and circles appeared; archaic forms that were first and foremost colour shifts. What the picture showed became increasingly congruent with the process of its creation such as when the inert oil colour was applied with a palette knife, spiralling inwards until it could go no further. In any sense of referring to something outside of the picture, there was no depiction any more. It was much more concerned with an unleashed and simultaneously dull colour that first and foremost articulated itself—its density, stickiness, smell.

If one casts a glance from this end of the work back to the photographs which had been made twenty years before during the South American journey, it can be seen that Kocherscheidt came across exactly those phenomena that his last pictures did not even attempt to depict mimetically but which, as material objects, simply *are*. The photographs show nature of an alienness and unruliness which is as fascinating as it is disturbing. It does not appear to have developed from the formless to the formative but to roll aimlessly, to congeal in clots, and then to open up again with a yawn. It must have been equally disturbing, in the midst of all that unformed nature, to be referred back to the characteristics of one's own uncontrollable and dark physical nature. By means of vague anthropomorphism as well as the artistic process which staged the picture as a relict of an in itself recursive painterly movement, Kocherscheidt succeeded allowing exterior and interior experiences to flow into one another in the guise of the unformed and raw. The last pictures, each of which appears to insist on remaining in a condition between formation and deformation, touched on the boundaries of what Kocherscheidt himself called a 'pictorial derailment'.<sup>8</sup>

Although Kocherscheidt's works defy categorisation under a stylistic label or a particular -ism, they were equally misunderstood as the epitome of artistic otherness of their time. There are two aspects above all which link them to a broader tendency, which has been observable since the 1960s and tentatively discussed under the heading of anti-form. In this context, we are dealing with a specific view of artistic praxis that can be articulated in quite differing ways and in divergent mediums. We find it not only in visual art but also in music, theatre, dance, or in literature.<sup>9</sup> This praxis accentuated the processual, which can be taken to the point where the doing becomes the substantive content of the artwork. The work then coincides with the performative act or physical action that produces it; these acts are non-referential—they do not allude to something pre-determined, a substance, or even a being they wish to express because according to this view the fixed, stable identity they could express does not exist. The expressivity is replaced by a performance that does not express a pre-determined, given identity—of the portrayed or portraying subject—but first creates that identity in the artistic act. An action of this nature is characterised by inducing dichotomised terms such as subject/object, inner/outer, material/form to lose their dividing sharpness. Even an apparently conservative medium such as oil painting can become a dramatic event under such conditions. It is exactly this that we can observe in Kocherscheidt's later pictures. They become the site of the persistent repetition of particular gestures which constitute reality just as much as they are self-referential.

The second aspect linked to the tendency towards an anti-form and also decisive for the way Kocherscheidt's works appear is related to the increased material presence of the artwork. The point, however, is not simply to shift attention to the material from which the artwork is made but much more to allow a flash of illumination as an instant of non-sense in the unformed and wilfully presented materiality. It is precisely this negative moment which feeds the experience of the presence of the artwork under consideration. Here, the relationship to the world does not generate sign-based representation but an act of material contact which is left in the work as a trace or impression. This, however, refers less to the artist than to the moment of touching itself. In semi-otic terms, the iconic is replaced by the indexical. Just as the performative moment of the above-mentioned artistic praxis is not intended to express a prior identity, the material presence effect is not aimed at the empathy of the viewer who should then paint a picture of what was going on in the artist's psyche. What lies at the bottom of the short statement Kocherscheidt wrote down in December 1991 is precisely such a performative aesthetics of presence. He spoke neither of the artist's self-expression nor of representing external nature but about a moment of pictorial

self-referentiality which—if successful—detaches itself from external bonds: 'Completing a picture is much more difficult than beginning it, in fact, it is impossible. [...] The moment when a brief loss of control occurs, a little turn is taken that interrupts the paralyzing fixation, in short, when the picture gains independence, finding an opportunity to strike back, is a good moment to stop.'<sup>10</sup>

It is in the nature of this artistic praxis—described here with the auxiliary designation anti-form—that its history cannot really be written in terms of style or a developmental context. It does not allow itself to be fitted so much into a narrative of the developments in art over the last forty years but rather designates a field of singular positions which are only linked to each other through a particular sensitivity. As soon as one sees Kocherscheidt in the context of this domain which was opening up in the 1960s, it becomes clear that his art bridges very different layers of time. It opens up an experiential space that appears primordial and outside time, articulates it in the traditional high art medium of oil paint and wooden sculpture only to immediately use them in a way that runs parallel to the most advanced artistic developments of the last forty years. Finally, the great strength of Kocherscheidt's art lies in this merging of timelessness with contemporaneity.

- 1 Kurt Kocherscheidt, *Das fortlaufende Bild. Erinnerungen* [December 1991], in: Kurt Kocherscheidt, Salzburg/Vienna 1992, pp. 12–14; p. 13
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 12
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 12
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 7 For an extended version cf. Michael Lüthy: 'Ein Lob dem groben Schritt, dem brechenden Rand und der Bildentgleisung.' Kocherscheidt – Sartre – Rihm, in: Brustrauschen. Zum Werkdialog von Kurt Kocherscheidt und Wolfgang Rihm, ed. by Heinz Liesbrock, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 28–53
- 8 Kurt Kocherscheidt, *Das fortlaufende Bild*, op. cit., p. 12
- 9 With regard to fine arts, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss attempted an overview in an exhibition and an accompanying catalogue (including reference to the theoretical basis): Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L'informe. Mode d'emploi* (exhibition cat. Paris, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou), Paris 1996.
- 10 Kurt Kocherscheidt, *An Stelle eines Vorworts*, in: Kurt Kocherscheidt, Salzburg/Vienna 1992, p. 5