

Plutarch /
Life of Themistocles

The speech of man is like
embroidered tapestries,
since like them this too has
to be extended in order
to display its patterns,
but when it is rolled up
it conceals and distorts them.¹

With his „Carpets of the Forgotten“, Schmidhuber shows himself to be both a self-confessed contemporary and a Romantic at the same time, as the text fragments featured in the series are lifted, albeit not exclusively, from his own early literary output. They are steeped in the verve of rebellious and youthful energy; and, as the author was born in 1970, also in the raw, rocking tenor of the Beat and Punk generation. Schmidhuber’s current works can therefore be said, among other things, to have anachronistic traits. It can be assumed that true to form he deliberately combines contradictory forms of expression here.

Text, carpet and abstract-gestural intervention are brought together in an irritating yet seductive imago, which further gains a fabric-like character referring back to the support of the work and merging with it – as layer is placed on layer and the colorful weave sinks into and forms a crust on the textile structure. And if we are to believe Plutarch, there certainly are plausible reasons for this with a view to the affinity between word and fabric.

Schmidhuber addresses a modern phenomenon (writing or lettering in combination with an artistic activity) with a prestigious traditional crafts material. Yet his messages emanate by contrast from the mentality of a songwriter; they are “street poetry”². The text fragments have been lifted from drafts, memos, poems, letters, in short, from a broad variety of notes jotted down by the author that are actually the result of highly personal experiences made over the course of considerable periods of time, during study visits and journeys to New York,

Iceland, Israel, Poland and Spain for example. Jotted down then and pulled from the artist’s archive at a later date, transformed in the change of context and robbed of their original destination, they now turn towards new connections as though this had been their natural fate all along. Word and sentence fragments of alarming urgency, with an immediate impact, short, precise, memorable, now settle on the hand-woven, in part very old, Persian rugs collected by Schmidhuber himself.

Passages of text, explanations and statements have played a part in narrative tapestry for many, many years. In art, this alliance took on a powerful, catalyst role during the avant-garde period, if not earlier. The alliance with the word resulted in the emancipation of painting and sped up the process of abstraction: “... writing had positioned itself in 20th century art through Cubist painting and has not relinquished this position since.”³

Much has happened in the meantime. If the typographic flood beginning to engulf everyday life and urban environments at the time stimulated a change in perspective and required a different way of looking at things, then its persistent and ubiquitous presence in the age of electronic communication is an inevitable consequence of the inexhaustible bombardment with absurd messages devoid of meaning. Art has long since drawn its conclusions from this. The discussion about the relationship between image and text no longer takes center stage. The demarcation lines have simply evaporated. Word, image, symbol and cybericonology interact freely with each another, whilst sounding out their own potencies and meanings and introducing these into the context. Thinking, writing, painting and drawing have all attained an equal status⁴ and are increasingly interchanged within their respective systems, as Roland Barthes and others have confirmed. The latter stated that the “change of medium” could serve to “escape the restraints of a medium felt to be historically compromised.”⁵ In recent decades, numerous artists have sought this sort of strategy to liberate and recapitulate aesthetic possibilities. It is more de jour than a closed art form which still takes its cue from time-worn hierarchies.

For the moment, Schmidhuber’s newest works now stand at the end of this development and profit from it. He is accustomed to oscillating between “high” and “low”. His recent work has addressed this a number of times. Neither design, nor fashion, digital aesthetics, vestiges of popular contexts are taboo, but enjoy a fruitful, even essential function as a matter of course in his decidedly “open” program. On the one hand, Schmidhuber’s approach is a decidedly painterly one, for in contrast to numerous other conceptual authors he allows for a lively interaction between the text and the rhythmic gestures carried out in paint. On the other hand, he undermines tried and tested concepts with gusto and precision: When, for example, his sentences are able to hold their ground against the ornamental

supports and jaunty linear structures. Or when the text fades into the background and as it were prompts the content and atmosphere of the piece in question from “offstage”.

Schmidhuber creates tension and produces innovative fields of activity. He nurtures the subversive fraternization between his visual agents; he cultivates the sometimes dramatic migration between clear, imperative appeal and suggestive obscuration of the relations in the coordinate frame of our understanding and construction of images. The same is true of numerous of his previous works taking their cue from concrete objects, in which the subject matter recedes behind a veil of colored pigment or even – as is the case in the Brentwood work series – disappears altogether from time to time. The painter is a master of this type of camouflage – he veils his photographic material in crystalline hues and orchestrates his subject matter poised between dissolution and sensual tangibility. He has dedicated himself to this “research” on things on the threshold of emergence and dissipation for quite some time now. It is as though he had specifically aimed to establish his operational base for further artistic undertakings at precisely this point of intersection, in order to report on a balancing act paralleling and fulfilling our changed viewing habits and aesthetic expectations.

But back to „Carpets of the Forgotten“: the text in the fabric refers historical antecedents. Yet the way in which word, image and ornament meet bears witness to the disintegration of conventional modes of interpretation and to the emergence of an artistic “combine” in the sense of a “polyphonic concerto of styles”, which continually stirs up the recipients, the audience anew.⁶ Schmidhuber fuses baroque sentiment and post-conceptual handling between object and imagination. According to the motto: if everything seems arbitrary, it will be poetry that succeeds in instructing humanity – as Hegel had predicted. And as French philosopher Jacques Derrida postulated, writing now ranks amongst general compositional practices. Josef Beuys saw writing and speaking as “plastic forms”.⁷

Text itself can therefore gain an ornamental character as a compositional element and blend into the image. Married to and interwoven with the rest of the surface by Schmidhuber. Visual experience, cognitive performance and remembrance work interfuse. But Schmidhuber pays reference to all of these creative suppliers, which after all ultimately represent the nourishment feeding into his artistic production. The letter does not replace the painterly gesture, and neither does the choice of coloring dominate the rest, but the individual ingredients of the works remain separate yet interlocked in dialogue. They retain their own character while at the same time giving themselves to each other, with a varying degree of intensity and significance.

But in the end all of these factors turn into signifiers. And in doing so, they are relieved of their individuality, their specific quality. Schmidhuber's paintings are abstract ones, drawings.⁸ Their common denominator: the line. It is the line that leaves its mark on his entire oeuvre. Yet it is less the “graphic or linguistic automatism”⁹ that takes center stage here, as one might think in view of the spontaneous, impulsive compositions, but rather – and this is typical for Schmidhuber's work – the question after the rules, contingencies, secrets inherent in a painting and their being anchored between abstraction and reality. Which is why a “meandering reading” lends itself well to the works, as it also does, for example, to the works of Raymond Pettibon, to name but one other example.¹⁰ What this means is a roving about, swinging and drifting from one level to the next, from one layer to the next. Free circulation rescinds contrasts and transports the original conditioning of the individual words into a different materiality.¹¹ Image-text-structures contain a moment of transgression as a matter of principle; they practically embody the metaphor of transgression per se.¹² The same holds true for Schmidhuber's work.

If we are now to turn towards current art historical discourses, we will notice an increase in attempts at handling the symptoms of this inability to assign things to categories. It is certainly true that intermediate spaces have formed beyond the traditional genre groupings. “In the early 21st century, genres act to advanced art as bags of sand do; those who want to rise, in order to make out that which has not been observed in the distance, need to jettison them.”¹³ Schmidhuber joins this departure. Yet not without remaining on firm ground. For his reflection revolves around the problematization of artistic self-renunciation. Ultimately, what he is concerned with is the linking of yesterday and tomorrow, of the critical examination of historical premises and their revision. Texts hereby serve as programmatic idea and artistic protest. But they are embedded in the solid material making up their image partners. This is why Schmidhuber cannot lose his footing and why his works do not hang in a faceless space. Instead, they are built on a solid foundation, one that speaks of profound knowledge and conscious creative action.



1 Quoted from Jerry Brotton, "Penelope's Labour. Weaving Words and Images," in: Penelope's Labour. Weaving words and images. Ancient tapestries and carpets from the Giorgio Cini Foundation and private collections with contemporary tapestries and embroideries, exh. cat., Adam Lowe & Jerry Brotton (eds.), (Venice, 2011), pp. 7-21; p. 7.

2 Magie der Zahl in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, exh. cat., Karin von Maur (ed.), (Stuttgart, 1997), p. 3.

3 Dietmar Elger, "Die Mitverantwortung des Betrachters. Die Sprache erobert die Kunst," in: Wortwechsel. Alighiero Boetti, Alexander Braun, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Alex Hanimann, Ulrich Meister, Peter Zimmermann, exh. cat., (Munich, 1997), pp. 5-17; p. 8.

4 Cf. on this also Renate Kroll, "Text-Bild-Beziehungen. Methodische Vorüberlegungen zu einem historischen Streifzug durch die europäische Literatur und Malerei," in: Wie Texte und Bilder zusammenfinden, Renate Kroll, Susanne Gramatzki & Sebastian Karnatz (eds.), (Berlin, 2015), pp. 11-16.

5 Cf. Petra Metz, Aneignung und Relektüre. Text-Bild-Metaphorphen im Werk von Marcel Broodthaers, (Munich, 2007), p. 10.

6 Harald Tesan, "Form ohne Wissen – Wissen ohne Form. Die Schrift, das Bild und die Unmöglichkeit absoluten Denkens. Nebst Überlegungen zur Ordnung der Dinge bei Maciunas, Beuys, Derrida," in: Wissensformen. 6. Internationaler Barocksommerkurs. Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin, Einsiedeln 2005, Werner Oechslin (ed.), (Einsiedeln, 2008), pp. 282-311; p. 290.

7 Ibid, p. 295.

8 Cf. Brigitte Reutner, "Zeichnen und Schreiben als ein Fest-schreiben von Gedanken," in: formuliert. Konvergenzen von Schrift und Bild, exh. cat. (Linz, 2009), pp. 6-14; p. 7: quoted from Justus Schmidt, who notes on Alfred Kubin, that text was looking to achieve a "simplification of the object to be portrayed". He saw it as laying down a marker ("ein Zeichen setzen"), which he equated, in the history of the word, with the mark-making of drawing ("Zeichnen"). In: exh. cat. Alfred Kubin, (Linz, 1947), p. 7.

9 André Breton 1941, quoted from Regine Prange, "Schrift & Bild. Von Paul Klee zu Henri Michaux," in: Jenseits der Grenzen. Französische und deutsche Kunst vom Ancien Régime bis zur Gegenwart. Thomas W. Gaehtgens zum 60. Geburtstag, vol. III, Dialog der Avantgarden, Uwe Fleckner, Martin Schieder, Michael F. Zimmermann (eds.), (Cologne, 2000), pp. 110-126; p. 115.

10 Reutner, op. cit.: p. 8.

11 Cf. Prange, op. cit.: pp. 121/122.

12 Susanne Gramatzki, "Zu komplementären und kompensatorischen Text-Bild-Bezügen," in: Kroll & Gramatzki & Karnatz (eds.), op. cit., pp. 155-161, p. 158.

13 Bernd Scheffer, "Vorstöße ins Unbeobachtbare. Experimentelle Literatur und multimediales Zusammenspiel von Schrift und Bild," in: Beobachtungen des Unbeobachtbaren, Oliver Jahraus & Nina Ort (eds.) in collaboration with Benjamin Marius Schmidt, (Weilerswist, 2000), pp. 137-147; p. 139.