

Invaders.

A monstrous carpet invasion in the realm of the Old Masters

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In a normal context high quality carpets serve to lend private rooms a high-end note. If you only have modest rooms at your disposal, and would like to lend them a touch of sophistication, high-profile flooring does at least recall those times when it was good form for every middle-class household to unroll more or less precious carpets.

At first sight the intervention by Schmidhuber is unsettling, produced as it is by covering the bare and generally little-heeded floors in the rooms of the Old Masters collection with carpets. It is a double disturbance as it were because the artist is not content to simply lay out existing carpets. Rather, he alters them by adding gestural painting and text fragments, so that the simple floor covering morphs into a canvas for a new type of artwork, indeed becomes a new genre of sorts. In this way, Schmidhuber evokes various levels of association.

Firstly, he reminds us that it was nothing unusual to fit out the floors in the 19th-century museum galleries with carpets to enhance visitors' enjoyment of art. The occasionally somewhat grandiose furnishing of the display rooms was very much in tune with the museums' concept of being seen as the new "temples of art", where the artists were the new saints. Museums made ideal places for strolling around, buoyed by the pride and joy of belonging to a cultural and social elite.

How different the appearance of today's so-called white cubes in numerous museum buildings around the world, by contrast. They blatantly display the change of attitudes in the art world, which has experienced a radical rejection of anything

extraneous in presenting artworks. Today, rugs or carpeting are only to be found in arts-and-crafts museums in the role of exhibits, stripped of their original function.

This is where Schmidhuber's intervention in Museum Wiesbaden really starts to unsettle things. It clearly illustrates to what extent the manner of presentation and accordingly the perception of art have altered over the course of time. The minimalist style of the architecture and the entire setting are intended to focus people's attention very much on the essentials.

It is precisely at this point that the artist distracts us, diverts our gaze away from the pictures on the walls, and towards the floor, to the carpet paintings. They come across like intruders who insist on being observed, and consequently compete directly with the works displayed on the walls. Moreover, the manner of their presentation gives the carpet works another advantage: They can be walked on, occupied, touched and upend, indeed disturb the aura of the artworks, which can be looked at, but not touched.

Consequently, Schmidhuber occasions an imbalance in the existing relationships: he breaks the strict rule regarding the physical sanctity of art. How outrageous! And he does so in the rooms housing the Old Masters, where rope barriers and the like rule supreme, and wardens scrupulously ensure the viewers' wish to be close to the paintings can only be satisfied long-term by keeping them away from the object. Yet now, finally, the visitor is allowed to do something really gross! He is allowed to walk on the rugs, which after all are the actual works of art, he can sit, stand or lie down on them. Through this action Schmidhuber evokes an altered physical sensation in the room. And it is not only this newly gained physical liberty which opens up a new sensation of the space, as the space itself changes. In having artworks on the floor, the latter itself becomes a presentation surface for art, and a symbolical opening or expansion of space takes place. Simultaneously, it closes down into an overall space, an overall body for art. The floor space, something previously neglected by the viewer connects up with the remaining space through its new function as a presentation surface for art.

In this sense, the artist can be said to be taking up the ideas of Minimal Art, which from the 1950s onwards has made a point of covering gallery and museum floors with modern materials so as to illustrate the common bond between viewer and overall space. While Carl Andre once used lead panels removed from a totally different context, today Schmidhuber relies on an old medium, namely "artistic" rugs, which he transforms into walk-over paintings. In doing so, even in 2017 he reveals the break in the classic observation of art. And he progresses wildly with this break with present circumstances.

While the paintings by the Old Masters stand for a canon in the overall history of art and can, thanks to their style, content and quality assert themselves

as the lawful occupants of the museum, Schmidhuber's carpets are the complete opposite. Owing to the gestural manner of painting and the addition of text fragments these valuable Oriental rugs, some of which are over a hundred years old, look as if they had been subject to an artist's anarchistic actions. It is only at second glance that you realize the aim was not to willfully destroy the rugs, but rather to take them to another level, an artistic level. This is where the actual intervention lies: The artist has taken the liberty of transforming an already existing work.

This transformation appears all the more clearly by virtue of the presentation of the altered works in the rooms housing the Old Masters; in a setting where prior to their treatment they might possibly have fitted in quite harmoniously, this break with the existing, "true" works of art on the wall appears especially brutal through Schmidhuber's attacks. It is precisely due to this abrupt intervention that in a very unusual manner the works by the Old Masters are now subjected to a different manner of viewing, receive an altered standing. It almost appears as if they had been deprived of their protective historical cachet and now have to gain sway at a totally different level.

If you consider that the text fragments on the works by Schmidhuber are artistic statements, then the respective paintings by the Old Masters must also each represent a statement. As they no longer only stand in their own context, but are confronted with a particularly radical form of contemporary art, they are lent greater scope for interpretation. With their coarseness and impurity Schmidhuber's carpet works are quite consciously provocative, meaning that at first sight it is not easy to recognize the destructive and rebellious elements intrinsic to them. The decorative ornamentation is destroyed by the artist's intervention, the break with a glorious past is complete. The destruction that has taken place here is transferred to the room and the works of art it houses.

In view of such a radical change the question arises as to the radical nature in the work of the Old Masters. Did they themselves not also evoke upheavals in their day? Were their paintings not also artistic reactions that sought to elicit an altered perception of reality throughout? Did their works not also question existing forms of art? Accordingly, masterpieces from the Italian Renaissance could be a radical response to an art style preceding it. Artistic changes have always been critical commentaries on the existing situation. Of course, the works of the Old Masters came about under completely different circumstances, and of course the artists of that time worked under completely different rules and regulations, and yet when juxtaposed to the painted carpets their works are nonetheless perceived differently.

This feedback loop helps afford the works by the Old Masters a new freshness. Now they are no longer merely representatives of a past era, but defend

themselves very fervently against the invaders in order to secure their point of view and assert themselves confidently. The carpets act as a kind of leitmotif and make viewers want to investigate what is portrayed in the masterpieces. And in the process they may make diverse and positive discoveries both concerning the technique employed, but also the content of the works.

Naturally, Schmidhuber's works, which have infiltrated this space like viruses, constitute a provocative disruption. Yet they unsettle us in a sensible and illuminating way, because suddenly the old no longer seems quite so old, and the new is possibly not as rebelliously new and different as it might initially appear. So it quickly becomes clear that the old masterpieces need to be seen against the background of permanently changing social conditions. Artists were repeatedly confronted by the need to respond to the diversity and heterogeneous nature of forms of life within their respective setting.

Schmidhuber seems to lock onto this – quite literally – when he re-works an old surface for art. By confronting his new/old rugs with the Old Masters he takes the risk of putting his floor-based works to the test: Can they assert themselves, withstand confrontation? It is no longer a matter here of what is sadly seen all too often, namely a harmonious juxtaposition of old and new art, or the often desperate search for a common denominator. Rather, two forms of art that are seemingly truly irreconcilable collide here in order to develop their own special charm.

The fact that there might be unintentional intersections when say a carpet appears on an old painting or carefully presented letters clash with the text fragments in Schmidhuber's works, lends this clash a special pizzazz. Finally, both separate, appeased, as old and new tolerate each other, with each having preserved its respective stance.

