

Holger Schmidhuber - artistic variations on the invisible

The series of paintings featured in this publication is entitled “unseeable”. Specially coined by the artist, the title indicates his desire to adequately describe a phenomenon that contains elements of the familiar concepts of “visible” and “seen”. Though they exist, unseeable paintings cannot be seen by the eyes, but that does not mean they cannot be perceived as we shall shortly realize.

Naturally, when our eyes are closed we no longer see anything of the world that is outside our bodies.

Vision is the only sensory perception humans can consciously deactivate – by closing our eyes.

Indeed, the eyelids both connect us physically to and separate us from the images constituting our world.

What does it mean when paintings take shape?

I am reminded of a tragic story from the art world, which though it might sound incredible, actually happened. When he was persecuted at the hands of the Nazis, artist Emil Nolde created what he called “unpainted paintings”, because he was only able to realize them after the dictatorship’s collapse. For years, Nolde stored his paintings in his memory, and even when they had taken shape, they still had to carry the burden of vagueness: leaving them unpainted is like saying they should never have been painted!

Painting is an intellectual process culminating in a creative performance. It is an encounter between a person and the material of the world. Undoubtedly, painting is a highly “primitive” act. If pointing with the finger to symbolize the indirect connection between the Self and the world was the first act, then painting was in all likelihood the second act of man’s civilized consciousness that sought to leave a trace in this alien world, as scratch drawings and charcoal smears on the walls of primitive caves. By grasping physically, man grasps intellectually. Simultaneously, he intervenes in a finished system, which he alters through his action. As such, painting is a massive intervention in two senses. Firstly, it creates a highly improbable, unnatural thing, secondly, it re-classifies things, removing them from their original context and placing them in new, strangely artificial frames and surfaces. Accordingly, every artist and image is instrumental in increasing the number of improbable surfaces in the world. This immediately gives rise to the question of whether the world and its inhabitants truly benefit from it. What is the real purpose of such an action? Paintings are designated or defined surfaces that provide pleasure because they are so sensorially different from everything else that exists in the world, and from everything we, as human beings, can perceive with our eyes. Of course, this distinction and difference is necessary for us to experience a sensation. In other words, we have to regard the paintings as something apart, and distinguish them as something different from the chaotic diversity of things around us. Arguably the reason for our deriving pleasure from looking at images is that the world of images has a structure and a system of classification. Consequently, they relieve us of the difficult task of using our eyes to create order in the world, a prerequisite for our survival. Images

simplify things for us, since they provide us with previously structured and classified, strictly-defined areas that serve to reflect our thinking. As such, images reflect the very thinking that was in progress during their conception. Can we conclude from this that images are derived from what is seen? Of course not, since the materialized artifacts, which for want of a better word we refer to as “images” likewise represent all those phenomena that only occur in the imagination. Seen images, images encountered again, images we have never physically seen, not to mention all those impressions with a visual element: all are united in the process of painting. They are realized during the painting’s evolution.

Paul Cézanne used to say that he “approached the subject” when he stood in front of the landscape to paint it. But when referring to painting itself he called it “realizing” to indicate it was not his intention to produce a replica of what he had seen on the canvas but rather to create a new artifact from individual visual impressions composed of hundreds or thousands of individual dots of color. Cézanne analyzed the topic and created it anew as a pastiche of individual flecks of color alongside and on top of one another. A carpet of colors woven into a composite visual impression, which was nonetheless much more than the reproduction of a landscape or a still life.

Holger Schmidhuber likewise creates paintings from images that appeared before his eyes, but this statement needs to be amended somewhat, since another person could never see these same images in nature. Accordingly, his realization is unlike that of Cézanne. Today, we are in an age of transition from the analog to the digital age; as early as 1936 Walter Benjamin made an observation in his famous “work of art” essay that has relevance for Schmidhuber’s painting process: “For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.”¹ At the start of a new epoch, which flaunts the immaterial as a model for emulation, every serious artist must ask himself how his medium can respond to this challenge. Schmidhuber finds two responses, which at first sight seem to be mutually contradictory. On the one hand, he scrupulously avoids the painterly signature, as we call the brushwork, and the traces left by the application of paint, only to instill his presence all the more intensely into the untouched surface – this is the material aspect of his art and the first response. The second is the daring attempt to establish an iconology of self-referential sensory stimuli.

Atlas of neurons

This series of paintings is the beginning of an atlas of views, which from the medical viewpoint are nothing but physical or chemical nerve impulses, whose cause nobody will ever investigate. Indeed, the question even arises as to whether the artist really did see the images or whether they are not pure hallucinations. The fact that he uses a sketchbook to capture at least the general impression of these highly fluctuating, fleeting impressions, would seem to support my

¹ Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1977), p. 242

assumption. In scientific terms Schmidhuber depicts nervous impulses produced by him closing his eyes. We may refer to all the tiny temporal fragments involved at the moment of blinking, but of equal importance are the threads and streaks that seem to move before the eye when we are in a state of exhaustion. We could touch on the medical topic of eye defects, and discuss borderline phenomena such as the consciousness of the unconscious but that would go beyond the scope of this text. In terms of sensory physiology the perceptual theories of Gustav Fechner from the first half of the 19th century are most relevant. Fechner's so-called "night image experiments" demonstrated that perception must always be regarded as a chronological process, and that an observer's sense impressions are always determined by the preceding sequence of stimuli. But even this knowledge is of little help since we still don't know which stimuli the artist was exposed to when he realized his paintings.

Nevertheless, Schmidhuber does not produce images he could not see – this would be banal, since every Surrealist and every Romantic has already done so – instead, he paints images that appeared to him, which his nervous system relayed as sense impressions. They do not appear as text or music, but as very specific visual patterns, and we have no choice but to call them images or visual impressions although they are something completely different, for which we have no name. As such, the delicate materiality of the color surface stands in contradiction to the immateriality, which underlies its evolution. Perhaps the term "un-representable" comes closest to the phenomenon I seek to describe. An excerpt from French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's essay on the immaterial is also instructive: "It is not possible to portray the absolute – that constitutes our dissatisfaction since we know it must be portrayed and that the wealth of sensations or images must portray via what we perceive with our senses (the image) what reason can understand."² What Lyotard sought to say is that the eye sees and reason, in other words the intellect understands, but Schmidhuber's art demonstrates that the reverse is also feasible, namely that the intellect sees and the eye comprehends. Consequently, the discrepancy between authenticity (originality) and reproducibility becomes evident.

Schmidhuber's paintings are the opposite of photography as they cannot be reproduced using technical means. They require the confrontation of the direct, the visual experience of the direct, specifically the intellect, which penetrates the surfaces and succeeds in capturing the microscopic section from the flow of images that bombard the mind.

Surfaces, fallen off

Though the artist uses a classic fixative, namely linseed oil, he does not brush it on, but sprays it before sieving the pigments on top of it, layer by layer. The pigments remain on the surface. I am reminded of colored particles from insects like those on a butterfly's wings, for example. Their pigments also adhere to the surface, and they also exude an inner brilliance when illuminated by the sun. Finally, they also have a dust-like quality: if you touch them you injure or even destroy the insect, and it dies. Such pigment images are fascinating creations; shimmering or velvety surfaces with a

² Lyotard, Jean-Francois et al.: *Immaterialität and Postmoderne*, Berlin (Merve) 1985, p. 99

sense of depth that make us want to touch them, though if we did, we would destroy them. They are simultaneously near and far: near for the eye, but distant for the hand. In this they differ from sculptures since the latter require tactile intervention. Schmidhuber's works are realized in the appearance of the surface that has to bear not only the considerable weight of the complex conceptual subject but also the formal aesthetics.

When the pigment is applied, large amounts also fall off as waste, and only the pigment dust that binds the oil, adheres to the surface. We are reminded of snow that falls silently, even of dust, which every day falls to the earth by the ton without our noticing it. If we accept that dust is both a symbol of the untouched and simultaneously of past times, these paintings could be said to symbolize the deposits of time.

Deceptive landscapes

Do these images really look like something else; can we compare them with objects familiar to us? In short: what are they similar to, so that we at least have a means of gaining the safety of familiar ground. But we need to exercise caution here since using similarity as a yardstick can prove misleading; who, after all, decides what counts as similar, and what not? It is better we do not pose this question but turn our attention instead to the composition.

In terms of composition, if we can speak of this at all in the classic sense, all the paintings are structured from horizontal strips layered on top of each other. Between these strips of varying widths different colored lines are drawn that separate the strips from each other. In some paintings the strips appear as striking, clearly visible bars, in others they are drawn so finely as to be only visible at second glance. We are accustomed to associating pictures divided horizontally with the topic of landscape for the simple reason that the horizontal line running parallel to the picture's lower edge is associated with the idea of the horizon. This horizon line not only marks a precisely defined viewpoint in the context of Leon Battista Alberti's invention of central perspective in the early renaissance, it also constitutes an imaginary visual space that clearly distinguishes between back and front, in other words near and far. This system of composition has become such a dogmatic visual dictate that it even functions when the subjects depicted are not specific objects, but merely abstract areas of paint.

In this mimetic sense, Schmidhuber does not really portray anything – and yet his horizontally structured compositions nevertheless repeatedly evoke, indeed even provoke landscape. Admittedly, they are imaginary landscapes of the kind that every graphics computer program and computer game is capable of generating, yet for all that we imagine we can see waterfalls, reflections, deserts with sparse vegetation, areas of snow speckled with clumps of grass, Steppe fires and volcanic eruptions. It is the artificial horizons that make us experience his art as spatial, indeed as having a considerable depth. Naturally, this false impression arises from our making false associations, from our compulsive need to recognize something we can name that provides us with a basis, a connection to that world we

know, and which we live in. But nothing actually relates to the portrayal of material things. Quite simply, these paintings are non-representational.

Another art historical context in which we might place Schmidhuber's paintings is that of color field art, as practiced by the great American artists Ad Reinhard or Mark Rothko. Naturally, Expressionism since the late 1940s, informal art, lyric abstraction and Tachism, the entire legacy of this art history of painting automatically come into play when similarities are detected as the paintings in this line of tradition are world famous. However, Holger Schmidhuber's paintings are not monochrome color fields, but could more accurately be described as color volumes, suggesting a greater affinity to the Gotthard Graubner's cushion paintings rather than the works of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman. The other American artist, who occurred to me when I first saw the drawn or scratched lines, scribbles, and engraved lines is Cy Twombly. Not that Twombly makes such incisions in his canvases, of course – he writes words on them, draws awkward looking figures and coded shapes that are only in part legible or intended to be decoded. A phenomenon I also detect in Schmidhuber is precisely this tentative, tender touching of the painting's surface, performed in the knowledge that every intervention can irrevocably determine a painting's success or destruction. At this point, we are reminded of the sculptor, who in creating something, removes part of his material. He cannot add anything else to the stone, what is chipped away is lost for ever. It is equally impossible for Schmidhuber to remedy his actions – every line, every movement of the scraper or another fine tool is engraved immutably and irrevocably in this form into the transitory color surface. His action is like a reversal of tattooing, since the color is not injected into the incisions but rather removed from its surface. At this moment, the image leaves the two-dimensional realm and becomes an object – a sculptural figure with the properties of a carved or stone relief.

Let us once again analyze exactly what it means when the hand performs its work. It encounters a surface created in many arduous steps and stages, and which could already be considered complete in its present form. The surface as yet untouched by hand in the truest sense of the word is injured, an image that brings to mind the concept of a wound. The incisions and scratches, which the artist effectively produces a gaping wound you avoid looking at because it reminds you of pain, so that you never look at it with pleasure. Holger Schmidhuber's "visual wounds" are the scratches and gaps through which you can look below his paintings' surface. This glance into the exposed surface offers observers a unique opportunity to discover the underlying layers. What was overlaid and concealed by the brilliant, shimmering surface, which thrusts itself into the foreground, and claims to be everything, now emerges as the essence of the painting and another picture emerges altogether. At the same time, the act of scratching reveals how the painting evolved. Consequently, it can be compared with the work of the archaeologist, who digs and scrapes, removes the layers and deposits of time that have taken on material form in order to reach his finds. It goes without saying that the find is the sensation the explorer hopes for. Holger Schmidhuber is also an explorer of sorts, who anxiously waits to see

what his excavation will bring to light, since there is an element of arbitrariness involved in where, with what tool and with what intensity he works.

Misleading passage

Recalling is a process of the conscious, but the images that Schmidhuber would like to evoke, are at most present in the memory for a few seconds. It would be more correct to call them traces of images, visual fragments, short flashes from another world – another spatio-temporal dimension, which were nonetheless present in our world with and through the artist's body. These are not delusions, neither optical illusions nor hallucinations – or are they? At any rate they are images the eye cannot see, and which never passed from the outer to the inner world. The passage through the aperture of the pupil and the diffractions of the eye's lens produce the impression of an image of the outside world, but Holger Schmidhuber's images have never had to negotiate this passage.

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