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**The Incomplete Transparency and Reproducibility
of Phenomena – On the Epistemology of Alois Lichtsteiner's
Birch and Mountain Paintings**

*There are people who tell me that there are objects out there in the world that are painted red – and it is this fact of their being painted red that triggers my perception. But I am prompted to ask in return: How do we know the objects are red? And they reply: Well that goes without saying, we can see them. Which is to say: They make conclusions from what they see about what is supposed to be out there. That is the mental image.*¹

Heinz von Foerster

Viewers of Alois Lichtsteiner's Birch and Mountain Paintings are faced with a problem.² It seems to me to be the challenge of making visible the eloquent epistemological concept that is hidden in them and revealing its conceptual structure.³ Whilst Heinz von Foerster⁴ unmasks the linguistically indicated and trivialising metaphors of human observation,⁵ in epistemological terms Lichtsteiner's artistic approach is far more convoluted. Lichtsteiner's oil paintings depict something (birch bark and mountains covered in firn), but they refuse to entertain any reference to what they present. Through this curious quality of an inner dialectic of images and mediations, Alois Lichtsteiner's work experiments and ponders on "painting" as a medium and its relationship to the "real". Vilém Flusser's words: "Pictures present, but by presenting they present themselves before what they present – they *misrepresent* what is presented",⁶ seem to convey the problem most aptly. And his statement is not only highly explosive for contemporary visual studies. It has a fundamental bearing on the work of the artist and the understanding that a picture as a depiction of a live natural spectacle is imbued with the character of abstraction, or indeed of a lie.⁷ Thus for instance

- 1 Heinz von Foerster, Bernhard Pörksen, *Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners. Gespräche für Skeptiker*, Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, 1998, pp. 20–21.
- 2 I first encountered Alois Lichtsteiner's Birch and Mountain Paintings several years ago at an exhibition in Lucerne.
- 3 I also view the epistemological problems that arise from Alois Lichtsteiner's paintings and that are examined in this text as a means of critically examining a number of the substantialist concepts in our occidental culture, such as mind, language, symbol, etc. At the same time I hope that my reflections will also open up various approaches for a broadened cultural dialogue based on the necessity of communication between the sciences and the humanities, as C. P. Snow put it in his lecture on *The Two Cultures* some fifty years ago. Snow regarded 'science' as one cultural activity among many, and placed it alongside of art and religion – as being indivisible from society's political, ethical and moral questions.
- 4 Heinz von Foerster (1911–2002) introduced epistemological doubts to cybernetics and in this way confounded the mechanistic ideas held by early cyberneticists. I was impressed by his legendary enthusiasm and unforgettable vitality during public lectures, as I was fortunate to witness in 1992 on the occasion of the conference in Berne organised by Gerhard Johann Lischka "Der entfesselte Blick". See the publication: *Der Entfesselte Blick. Symposium, Workshops, Ausstellung*, (ed.) Gerhard Johann Lischka, Benteli, Bern, 1993. In this text I shall not look at the problems surrounding the changing political economy in the sciences and humanities in face of the increasing transdisciplinary forms for the production of knowledge, which also entail a clarification of the aesthetic autonomy of art. Interesting in this context are the findings of Michael Gibbons and a number of other authors on transdisciplinarity and the production of knowledge in the sciences and humanities – see Michael Gibbons et al, *The New Production of Knowledge. The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London, Sage, 1994, p. 7.
- 5 Von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, here p. 114.
- 6 Vilém Flusser, Gerhard Johann Lischka, *Intervention. Gespräch zwischen Vilém Flusser und Gerhard Johann Lischka*, Compact Disc (67'), Dierikon, Luzern, Neue Galerie Luzern, <http://www.neugalu.ch> (formerly Neue Galerie Schöslössi Götzental, Dierikon, Schweiz), 1991.
- 7 This insight I have taken word for word from the text by Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl, who connects it with the problem of making observations in a live context and the lack of an encompassing context of discovery. Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl, 'Epistemische Topografien. Fotografische und radartechnische Wahrnehmungsräume', in: *Verwandte Bilder. Die Fragen der Bildwissenschaft*, (ed.) Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel and Achim Spelten, Berlin, Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007, p. 264.



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the scientific production of images also demonstrates a paradoxical constellation. The reference to an outside, to a referent of reality is quite simply elided, and its place taken by the non-significant concentration of measurements or the chance product of constructions created by the media.⁸

So the “quality” of the Birch and Mountain Paintings relates, with their powerful presence, at first to a “non-representational” way of seeing and knowing – or that at least is their theoretical claim. The substance of this series does not derive from the appearances of things, but “from a division of the visible from what they ‘really’ are”, as Ulrich Loock writes.⁹ The question that would be anything but easy to answer at this point might well be whether Lichtsteiner’s art really does obey the philosophical demand for “realisation as purely a possibility of the real”¹⁰? The historical uniqueness of *the desires to take possession of nothing at all*¹¹ that Roland Barthes attests to in Cy Twombly’s work seems to demonstrate a certain similarity here.

It seems more worthwhile to me to examine Lichtsteiner’s Birch and Mountain Paintings as a contribution to an epistemological plateau located in the context of what nowadays are rather marginal *educational processes*. Which concept underlies the claim to *education* as insight? And what might be its task in the sense of a formative *education*?

Alois Lichtsteiner’s Birch and Mountain Paintings set store by the incomplete transparency and replicability of the phenomena. They seem to be the opposite for instance of Jan Vermeer’s studies on perception or Joseph Wright of Derby’s work on volcanic eruptions, where a painterly approach was taken to get to the bottom of natural phenomena.¹² Lichtsteiner’s concept seems to correspond more to Heinz von Foerster’s epistemo-critical doubts about an “invented”, “calculated” and “recognised” reality: it is not a question of the passive reproduction of what is there, but always of creative and vital procedures in which something is *engendered* and *formed* – and not *found* and *discovered*.¹³ Evidently this allows the bounds of communication and communicability, of genesis, contextualisation and order to be discerned. It is precisely these, I would venture to say, that are the fundamental characteristics of Lichtsteiner’s *contemplations* on *painting* and on a figure that speaks from it and is very difficult to grasp conceptually. Or to put it another way, an open epistemology, as it were, that levels a critique at realistic thought. With this an attitude is questioned which assumes that the observed phenomena as a whole are transparent and may be simply replicated – in the sense of the naïve realist mindset with its trivialising metaphors, as Foerster construes them.

Nowadays the human brain is compared by means of some highly dubious imagery with a machine or computer, just as the memory is regarded as a container in which information is stored.¹⁴ For, as science tells us, the human retina does not provide us with an image of a reality that, as we often unthinkingly assume, exists outside of our

8 Ibid., p. 264.

9 Ulrich Loock, ‘Die der Welt zugewandte Seite’, in *Alois Lichtsteiner. Birken und ein Berg. Birch Trees and a Mountain*, Lucerne, Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2001, p. 8.

10 To my mind there is something problematic about the *realisation* of a synthesis of ideology and poetry that, in keeping with Roland Barthes, is called for in this aphorism and would thus be imposed on art. See op. cit., pp. 10–11.

11 Roland Barthes, “Cy Twombly ou Non Multa sed Multum”, trans. Henry Martin, in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, Schirmer/Mosel Publishers, Munich, 2000, p. 101.

12 Martin Kemp, *Visualizations. The Nature Book of Art and Science*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 32–33 and 54–55.

13 Von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, p. 20.

14 Ibid. p. 114.



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sensory organs in just the same form as that in which we see it. In the same breath the claim to an absolute correspondence between the arenas of perception and science is put more precisely to say that the visual stimulus that affects the retina is “actively processed in numerous ways”. Once transformed into an electrical impulse, these stimuli arrive in primed areas of the visual cortex, where they are further dispatched as electric signals to millions upon millions of other brain cells. We humans are, according to von Foerster, strictly visual creatures. What we see and what also interests us then at virtually the same moment stimulates every region of our brain. No other activity simultaneously activates so many areas of the brain as seeing.¹⁵ This digression into human visual perception is on no account aimed at questioning the potential of neuroscience for new insights, but I would like to recall here that a scientific perspective of this kind on the complex functioning of the eye and brain would be unthinkable without the devices that are now available – equipment whose scientific visualisations simply hide and gloss over the blind spot in the technology. The epistemology of unknowledge extends into the realms of the visible that today depend on the use of the electromagnetic spectrum.¹⁶

Art similarly presents itself in a self-designated perceptual realm in which artists show their artworks to the beholder as an open but structured field. Martin Kemp has forwarded a number of vivid examples to demonstrate this realm in his book *Visualizations*. By contrast, science appears to exclude subjective impulses from its modes of presentation, from its explanations and its models.¹⁷ Alois Lichtsteiner’s epistemology points with its subjectivity to the realms of our unknowledge, and to my mind this can also be seen as a critique of the rhetoric of science and its explanatory models. For it questions the correspondence between world and perception that is championed as an absolute – that dubious existence of an integral whole which Heinz von Foerster expressed in the words “How is one supposed to know that something is already there when actually what one first wishes to do is verify its presence?”¹⁸ Seen in this way, the open epistemology in Lichtsteiner’s painting also alights indirectly on the underlying assumptions of knowledge and its processes. In particular it points to the unquestioning ontologisation of concepts that we use for our observations. Observations that do not show things as they are “as such”, but as they appear within the framework of the premises that we have erected.¹⁹ It seems to me that what we term ‘observations’ – whether prompted by ‘science’ or by ‘art’ – also bring about a basic contradiction with regard to the problems of knowledge that have become central here. This contradiction lies in our basic ignorance, subtly recognisable in the scientifically based realms of the visible and also as a characteristic of the epistemology of Alois Lichtsteiner’s Birch and Mountain Paintings. To speak with Vilém Flusser, these paintings represent something and by refusing to entertain any relationship with what they represent, they nevertheless produce cognitive resonances in a certain way. While our picture of the world as something transparent and predictable rebounds as it were from this, its metaphors point to unpredictability and creativity. The paintings



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¹⁵ Rainer Wolfgang Heckl, *Gehirn und Kunst. Zur Biologie des Schönen*, cited in a talk given at the Teleakademie, SWR television, 7.3. 2004.

¹⁶ Visibility, as Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl argues, is always something provisional because the range of the visible as mediated by the sciences (e.g. by x-rays, infrared, sonic waves, electrons and other subatomic particles – author’s note) is surrounded by a realm of the invisible; Grevsmühl 2007, pp. 263, 266, 278, 279.

¹⁷ Kemp 2003, pp. 5-7.

¹⁸ Von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, p. 21.

¹⁹ Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Über Grenzen des Begreifens*, Bern, Benteli Verlag, 1996, pp. 7 & 34.

produce mental states. For von Foerster, they contrast blatantly with the efforts to educate and form that ultimately trivialise humankind.²⁰

Education, as Karl-Josef Pazzini writes, denotes a relationship and forms a texture, an ethical position that takes into account the impassibility of the lack of and the boundaries to the Other. Education as a relationship has consequently real, imaginary and symbolic levels that at times are directly accessible to consciousness, and lives from what Pazzini calls *impressionability*, *stimulability*, and *poise* if not *style*.²¹ Lichtsteiner's artistic poise reveals itself through its style of thinking, which materialises in and can be experienced through painting, having as it does nothing to do with conventional naturalism and its notion of the artist as a witness.²² With that the artist's strivings create a separate realm of reality for art. The unfolding creative potential of a pure, painterly gesture opens up a view of art as an independent means of exploring hidden worlds of the spirit and of matter, such as have only been touched on implicitly by naturalism.²³

A further characteristic of Alois Lichtsteiner's strangely perplexing epistemology in his Birch and Mountain Paintings seems to me finally to lie in their *self-sufficiency*, to speak with von Foerster, they set store on the knowledge *that* we perceive – nothing more. The deep structures of visualisation bestowed on us by nature and nurture, or the projection of inner patterns on the outside world, which are usually based on mutual corroboration,²⁴ are irrelevant to this knowledge about our perceptions. Decisive is, in keeping with Alois Lichtsteiner, simply that which can be experienced through the surfaces of the painting (and of the world) – much as when touching a skin.²⁵ On the epistemological level one could also talk of *correlations* between feelings and the totality of neural processes, which give rise to the incredible wealth of our perceptions.²⁶ Whether the perceived world which we call “table”, “dice” or a “beautiful girlfriend with red hair” might possibly depend on these correlations, as Heinz von Foerster states,²⁷ is meaningless however for the perceived Birch Paintings and Mountain Paintings. As the outcome of a creative process of deliberating on painting and its relationship to the “real”, they stand for the boundaries of what can be imagined and communicated – and for the exploration of the unknown realms of the mind.



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20 Von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, p. 65 ff.

21 Karl-Josef Pazzini, 'Suche nach Zusammenhalt', in *Kontaktabzug. Medien im Prozess der Bildung*, Vienna, Turia + Kant, 2000, p. 203.

22 In his *Visualizations*, Martin Kemp points in this connection to the fact that artists have striven towards an aesthetic autonomy that obeys its own set of unfathomable laws – “whether these were seen as residing in the mind or in the greater forces of the universe, or both in concert”. Kemp 2000, pp. 4, 6.

23 Ibid. pp. 6-7.

24 Ibid. p. 1.; von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, p. 21; as well as Viktor Bedö, 'Landkarten als Werkzeuge unseres Denkens', in Reichle, Siegel, 2007, p. 239.

25 Conversation with Alois Lichtsteiner in Murten on 26.8. 2007.

26 Von Foerster, Pörksen 1998, p. 21.

27 Ibid. p. 21



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Birken und ein Berg,
Birch Trees on a Mountain,
Kunstmuseum Luzern 2001