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## Transgressing Categories – An Approach to the Work of Eva Koethen

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## Transgressing Categories (M. Ranta)

### – An Approach to the Work of Eva Koethen

Any attempt to describe and to interpret visual works of art is, for natural reasons, faced with numerous practical as well as theoretical difficulties, e.g. concerning the artist's conceivable meaning intentions, the context of their production and reception and, not least, the problem of translatability. The relationship between picture and language is by no means an uncomplicated matter, despite our intuitive conviction according to which pictorial meaning (more or less easily) might be "spelled" out, or even substituted, by means of verbal expressions. One partial explanation of that assumption can probably be found in the common sense view on the nature of meaning as the *referential* function of signs, whether pictorial or verbal. According to such referential, denotational or "pictorial" theories of meaning, signs exist on an ontologically seen secondary level compared to the primary level constituted by the "world"; both pictures and words can share the same meaning if they refer to the same worldly aspects, to the same "things-in-themselves" (and to these things' relations to each other). Such a view is not only widespread on a common sense level, but comparable ideas have likewise been systematized and elaborated by numerous language philosophers. Equivalent meaning theories concerning pictorial signs may be traced back at least as far as Classical Greece, where the imitative or *mimetic* function of objects or activities (such as dance, theatre, music, painting and sculpture) had been stressed.[1] While verbal signs may be meaningful due to a *conventional* relation to the world, mimetic signs are characterized as being *naturally similar* to certain perceptual aspects of the world.

Now, these theoretical positions have, not surprisingly, been a matter of standing dispute in academic circles concerned with the nature of language and/or the arts during the last few decades. When it comes to pictorial signs, the notion of similarity as the crucial or essential link between pictorial sign and the world has been much debated. Especially the philosopher Nelson Goodman's intricate discussion according to which pictorial representation should be seen as a special form of *conventional* denotation, and by no means constituted by natural similarity, has received considerable attention.[2] Moreover, pictorial signs, in contradistinction to verbal ones, often deploy other forms of reference, where perhaps the most characteristic, as Goodman has argued, is *exemplification*. This means that works of art, such as pictures and sculptures, not only denote, but they typically refer to some of their own properties as well, that is, they are self-referential. Put in another way, works of art are *about* something (e.g. about the external world, the artist's world view, but also about other works of art), they have a meaning, a content. At the same time, they direct our attention to their style, their way of expressing or embodying the content, the features they possess.[3] *What* is said depends on *how* it is said. Within traditional art history, iconological methods of interpretation, such as elaborated by e.g. Erwin Panofsky, are well-known and prominent among art historians. Still, this approach has by no means been accepted unanimously, but has been criticized for a number of reasons. Most notably, perhaps, it has sometimes been claimed that iconology as a method generally gives a one-sided account - and evaluation - of artworks because of its tendency to reduce them to something like verbal messages, thereby neglecting their





formal qualities.[4]

This leads me to the works of Eva Koethen which, I believe, clearly revitalize some of the theoretical considerations above. Indeed, their very character defies any attempt to describe and interpret them by verbal means, and her work certainly challenges strict category structures. We may note, though, that her works seem to consist of two quite distinct groups of installations.

First, there is a group consisting of photographic images placed on the floor. These pictures are joined together into mosaic-like arrangements, which, however, do not really fuse optically in the eye of the spectator (except perhaps from a very far distance). Each photographic section has a visual and semantic autonomy of its own, and thus these floor installations create a rather heterogeneous impression (even if in some cases the colour or other pictorial elements function as obvious connecting links). From an "aesthetic" point of view, many pictures could legitimately be presented as autonomous works of art, framed and put on a wall. Their composition, colorization and semantic ambiguity in themselves give them an almost seductively beautiful appearance. Although the segments undoubtedly depict facets of the external world (such as flora and fauna, the human body, natural formations, architecture, water...), thus being mimetic in the sense outlined earlier, it is not always clear what exactly has been depicted. Numerous of the photographs are close-ups or cut pictorial fragments seemingly torn out from a wider meaning context, thus hinting at a more comprehensive or definite identification. Moreover, their semantic identity is further complicated due to their simultaneous presence and (to some extent) symbiotic coexistence. While the various sections have an autonomous content, their fusion together creates new semantic relations and a connotative interaction. Because of the meaning gaps and tensions between them, a semantic void arises which almost spontaneously creates a need of "filling in" on part of the beholder, thereby producing associative relationships or connotative links (which, though, not always can be fixated, but rather remain in an oscillating state of flux). As a result, the spectator is challenged by a play of differences and assumed connections, changing overlaps of meanings, a multi-layered web of interpretative paths presented in form of a visual carpet.

Interestingly, the very fact that these floor installations appear as something like carpets gives them a further significant dimension. Actually, the beholders are expected, even invited, to walk on them, to touch them physically with their feet. Quite obviously, such an encounter with a work of art deviates radically from common forms of aesthetic per-

ception where rather an attitude of distanced, reflective and contemplative disinterestedness (alluding to e.g. Kant's conception) is required. The perceptual contact with an aesthetic object is expected to occur visually or acoustically, but usually not tactilely. Here, the concrete act of stepping on these floor pictures, that is, as partly perceiving them with our "lower" (lowest?) sense organs (in both a factual and value-laden way), appears as an almost disrespectful approach towards fine art. On part of the beholder, it can easily be experienced as rude, inappropriate and even uncomfortable; we become shy... Furthermore, this tactile, physical aspect enhances their semantic complexity. We are on the one hand confronted with photographic, pictorial representations, mimetically referring to and resembling external objects in the world. On the other hand, these representations are themselves material objects which we encounter physically. Thus they could be interpreted as simultaneously *referring* to as well as *being* "things-in-themselves"; they *exemplify* and point to their ontological status as representations as well as material objects. Last, they modify, perhaps even increase, our awareness of the spatial and contextual surrounding, by directing our attention to a normally neglected part of a room, where the walls usually function as exhibition surfaces, dominating as the defining elements of the space. In numerous other cases, Eva Koethen has actually been working explicitly site-specific, thereby adapting her floor installations thematically to the spatial, contextual situation.[5]

In all the above mentioned respects, then, her floor installations clearly problematize and transgress aesthetically significant categories such as mimesis, exemplification, meaning, aesthetic value/attitude, and picture/object/space. These aspects are further emphasized in a second group of installations which at a first glance seems to be quite different. In these cases, we are encountering stage-like sceneries, consisting of two white canvases (lying and standing respectively!) placed directly on the floor, which immediately give them a character of material concreteness. Instead of being mimetically depictive, these tableaux display rectangular-like colour patches or samples, spread over (and visually connecting) the surfaces in dynamic arrangements, almost as being in a state of arrested, frozen movement. Despite their abstract and semi-geometrical shape, their irregular forms and unforeseeable interaction with each other create an impression of liveliness, energy and instability. In addition to these spatial, three-dimensional settings, which, however, at the same time retain painterly qualities of flatness, also unprocessed real objects (or "ready-mades") have been incorporated, such as wire nettings, iron scraps and cables, or wooden







elements. In some cases, these irregularly shaped objects seem to continue the organic movement of the painted structures; sometimes they are heavily rusty and corroded, thus being in a process of change or decay. All in all, then, this group of installations extends category boundaries between two- and three-dimensionality, between painting, sculpture and architectural structures, between representation and mere existence. While the painted structures give them an unmistakable pictorial appearance, they expose at the same time also non-figurative fragments of reality as such, as well as being spatial segments of potential rooms (within the exhibition room).

Both groups of installations, taken together, seem to contrast with each other: sculptural, spatial objects versus flat photo installations – abstract visual patterns versus mimetic representations. On a deeper level, though, they actually can be seen as complementary constituents of an artistic as well as philosophical approach to fundamental questions regarding category structures as those indicated. They presuppose our active participation and attendance and trigger reflective processes by visual-sensual instead of verbal means, thus giving rise to “knowledge by acquaintance” rather than “by description”. [6] A fuller comprehension definitely demands our physical presence and interaction, and any text – such as the present one – can at best be seen as a, hopefully fruitful, verbal guideline as how to appreciate the intricacies of Eva Koethen’s installations.

Dr. Michael Ranta, art historian and philosopher, Stockholm, Sweden

[1] For a discussion concerning the concept of mimesis, see Michael Ranta: “Mimesis as the Representation of Types - The Historical and Psychological Basis of an Aesthetic Idea”, Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2000. For a detailed examination of ancient, especially Greek, views on the conception of mimesis in relation to art and images, see e.g. Göran Sörbom: “Mimesis and Art - Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary”, Uppsala: Svenska Bokförlaget - Bonniers, 1966.

[2] See e.g. Nelson Goodman: “Languages of Art - An Approach to a Theory of Symbols”, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976, esp. chap. I.

[3] For a similar point, see also e.g. Arthur C. Danto: “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - A Philosophy of Art”, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.

[4] See e.g. Otto Pächt: “Kritik der Ikonologie” (1977), reprinted in Ekkehard Kaemmerling (ed.): “Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem 1 - Ikonographie und Ikonologie”, Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1987 (1979), p. 355 (my translation): “[One]...treats the picture or work of art as if it were an emblematic mosaic, a pictorial writing...Art is seen as a procedure...for wrapping certain messages for the purpose of transportation...The task of the art historian...is then to remove the kernel from the shell...For this way of thinking the ranking of the artwork is inseparably connected with the value and the content of the message which it transports. Art is here...a means for achieving some ends, not an end in itself, and could in principle, when its task has been accomplished,...be dismissed.”

[5] For example, her exhibition “Walking on Water” (2001), on the “Artship” (a real ship) in San Francisco (2001), showing an installation with water motifs; her installations/performances in two Baroque churches in Dresden (1999; 2000/01).

[6] Cf. the distinction proposed by Bertrand Russell: “The Problems of Philosophy”, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 (1912), chap. 5.

## Fluxus - Fließen im Mühlenkeller

Yam-Festival, Neuwagenmühle, 2004

Jeder Bildboden zu einem Thema ist anders, lebt von der Inspiration durch den Raum und die Atmosphäre des Ortes.



Mühlenkeller





## Eva Koethen

geboren und Schulzeit in Heidelberg; Studium an der Kunstakademie in München und an der Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Berlin, anschließend Studium der Kunstwissenschaft; Promotion in Bochum; Assistentin an der Hochschule der Künste Berlin; Klassen für Malerei und Collage an der Internationalen Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst Salzburg (Atelier del Sur)

Arbeitsaufenthalte in Japan, Frankreich, Norditalien, La Palma / Kanaren; Gast im Künstlerhaus Salzburg

Foto-Aktionen im Landschaftsraum; Beschäftigung mit der Ästhetik der Mikro-Chips, Konfrontationen mit Schrottmaterial; parallel entstehende Text-Stücke; Installations- und Bodenbilder: Objekte und Malerei im „aufgeklappten Raum“, Begehung großflächiger Fotoböden

seit 1992 freischaffend

seit 1996 Professur für Bildende Kunst, Kunstwissenschaft und Ästhetische Bildung an der Universität Hannover

## Auswahl der Ausstellungen und Aktionen mit Tritt-Bildern (E = Einzelausstellung)

1998

- „Berlin – construction sites“, Foto-Transaktion im Innen- und Naturraum, Pierhouse, San Diego, USA
- „Berlin – a construction to walk on“, Fotoboden, Malerei und Audio, Parsons Gallery und Goethe-Institut, New York, USA (E)

1999

- „Berlin – a construction to walk on“, Fotoboden, Malerei und Audio, Goethe-Institut Washington, Washington D.C., USA (E)
- „Spurensuche im Bildraum“, Fotoboden-Installation (mit Bärbel Kasperek, Performance und Emy Abo, Gesang), Dreikönigskirche Dresden (5. Theatertage der Kirche)

2000/01

- „Brüche in Zeit und Raum am Beispiel der Permoser-Kanzel in der Hofkirche Dresden“, experimentelle Fotoboden- und Video-Installation (Aufzeichnung des Bayrischen Fernsehens zum 300sten Geburtstag von Balthasar Permoser)

2001

- „Körperräume überschreiten“, Fotoboden-Installation, Stiftung St. Matthäus-Kirche im Kulturforum, Berlin (E)
- „Walking on water“, Fotoboden-Installation, ArtShip Foundation, Oakland, und Goethe-Institut San Francisco, USA (E)

2002

- „Über das Wasser gehen“, Fotoboden im Tischbeinsaal und Malerei im Grünen Salon, Museum im Schloss Bad Pyrmont (E, im Rahmen der Sommerausstellung „WasserRäume“ in Innenräumen und Außenanlagen, mit M. Gülzow, U. Stelter u. M. Rust)

2004

- Fluxus-Fließen: „Übers Wasser“ im Mühlenkeller und „Verbrauchte Fische“ am Gehöft, Fotoboden- und Objekt-Installationen, Neuwagenmühle (im Rahmen des Yam-Festivals 2004, Kultursommer Rheinland-Pfalz)

2005

- „Baden gehen ! Bodenbilder, Bildobjekte – ausgesetzt, zurückgekehrt“, Fotoboden- und Malerei-Installation, FluxusFreunde Wiesbaden, Pariser Hof, Wiesbaden (E)
- „Berlin – Baustelle betreten“, Fotoboden, Malerei und Audio, Forum Galerie des TÜV Rheinland Japan, Yokohama / Tokyo, Japan (E)