

DENYS ZACHAROPOULOS

(11 April 1950)

“Try, for example, to paint what you see when you close your eyes!
And yet you can roughly describe it!”

L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour* (III, 257)

(Athens, spring 2004)

[1] Adrian Schiess takes a voluntary approach to painting. Already, in the 1980s, appearances oriented the reception of his work towards the installation, the object, video and photography. And yet all he cares about is painting. His work inaugurates a magisterial concern that is inherent to the definition of painting, at a time when everyone feels sure that they knew what painting is and what it is that we call painting.

[...]

[3] His work embodies an obdurate approach to the possible nature today of space, surface, colour, light, the support, the tableau and the image, and defines an exemplary angle of attack by including the beholder and the gaze well beyond any impressionist position. In two decades, it has covered a more than considerable spectrum of means, aspects, perspectives, formats, techniques, experiments, materials, series, nuances, expressions, projects, materials and natures. Over time, Schiess's work has become ever more complex, personal and impressive.

[...]

[5] Throughout this exploration over time, the specific space of his work has remained extremely limited, rigorous and strict. Based on immutable theoretical foundations, the space of the work absorbs the philosophical kernel, the rational definition, the historical consciousness, the analytical dimension, the operational concept and the specific nature of art in a single element, capable of founding, without any metaphysical complacency, what can poetically be called “painting” and, politically, “painting itself.”

[6] Schiess's photographic works and videos belong directly to what we can designate as the work of painting, and, in their unexpected and personal way, form pictorial works in the strict sense of the term. The dimension of the image is complex and, ultimately, just as un-abstract as in Cézanne or Gauguin, Mondrian or Strindberg, Rodchenko or Barnett Newman, Georgia O'Keeffe or Sigmar Polke, Brice Marden or Agnes Martin.

[7] In addition to the mental construction and thought behind the work, there is a direct relation between the painting and the photography or videos, one which has is not in the nature of imitation or technique, of ideas or images. As with Bonnard or Boccioni, with Brancusi or Duchamp, with Moholy-Nagy or Man Ray, with Richard Hamilton or Dieter Roth, photography, cinema, video and painting are pursued in parallel and at the same time, like a series of possible relations to space, to light, to the surface, to the gaze. Adrian Schiess also makes paintings out of everything and, above all, makes all things into a possible relation to the work that moulds the available resources to the specifications of the means of the gaze and of pictorial means.

[...]

[10] For contemporary painting, for Adrian Schiess, photography does not play the role of technical tool. Rather, it occupies what is the privileged terrain for the elaboration of the work. This terrain is located at the point where the limits of codes of representation meet those of the work process and artistic practices, and at the same time indicates their mutual and incessant transgression.

[11] The return of the notion of “reality,” which is frequently encountered in art these days, is founded essentially on the assumed recognition of the documentary content and power of direct reality of the photographic image within the pictorial field. This kind of postulate reintroduces the sense of the conveyed message, the expectation of witness and iconographic variation as the privileged referents of the artwork. The systematic reference to this kind of practice and need has reached a terrifying level of banality which systematically falsifies the achievements of our period’s finest painters and photographers. That we will look at images rather than try to see how the artist has worked, is the danger implicit in any reduction of art’s possibilities and in the subordination of painting to the uses and limits of ideological products and the circuits of trade and merchandise.

[12] As for experience, in the case of the finest artistic propositions since Richter or Hamilton reality is a construction and not some set of commentaries on something that stands in for reality. In the same way, a linguistic sign refers to the reality of language and is at the same time an integral part of it; it does not simply designate some kind of designation, distinction or symbolism the way a sign, a sceptre or coat of arms do. Art’s subject does not legitimise reportage. Using means that are at the same time the building blocks of reality and experience, it projects a density that is given either politically or poetically, independently of any kind of immediate recognition. It thus opens up the specific space of artistic work which is located at the limits of meaning and at the limits of all ideological codification. This space in Adrian Schiess’s work forms a field that locates experience in the same construction as what makes reality, and it is made at the same time as that reality. This transient, precarious and sometimes even precarious reality is implicit in artistic work. It is given to see only as a construction in which, as Tristan Tzara put it, all there is of painting and photography – neither being a technical fact or ideological postulate – is the poem or pamphlet.

[13] As in all painting that sets out to be just that, in Adrian Schiess’s work the pictorial image is in the nature of an appearance, and is in no sense distinguished from the foundation of the visible. It is the image “in the strict sense” – politically or poetically – with which, or within which, the mental and the physical, the real and the virtual are differentiated only “pictorially” (just as, in poetry, they are differentiated only linguistically”). If there is a separation, it is one with the very nature of the visible, which is in essence reversible. Image and painting are one and the same thing, something which includes the visible and contains it either as a resonance of the space of the world, or as that moment of time that brings it into the realm of existence.

In: *Capriccio – Adrian Schiess, l’Œuvre Plate, analogues*, Arles 2004, Translation from French: Charles Penwarden