

The Discovery of the Act of Writing before the Writing Itself

It seldom occurs that an artist is able to remain hidden in the numerous galleries and on the exhibition circuit for any length of time without being discovered. Axel Malik is one of those rare cases when an artist only comes to light by chance – or if someone happens to mention them at the right time in the right place.

I saw my first Malik pictures in an office in December 2002, on the recommendation of a good friend. The impressive precision, clarity and steadfastness of the artist's pictorial *pensée* created a striking presence in the room, offering a basis for conversation, for discussion. As I gazed at the pictures, delicate black linear abbreviations, and parallel traces of lines of writing etched themselves ever deeper into my memory, as if, in the depths of recollection, they were permanently coming up against structural analogies. Following this fascinating first impression, closer examination then supplied additional, more individual confirmation of previously encountered, ostensibly similar yet by no means halfway as consistently formulated positions elsewhere.

Many 20th century painters have tackled abstract shapes and the abbreviations of script in a search for the roots of their formal expression and their aesthetic value. In so doing, the focus of their interest has always been on questions relating to psychoanalysis, to the theory of drawing or to symbolism. Most of these positions have been based on the pursuit of structural analogies in the world, i.e. the researcher's desire to get to grips with the rudiments of written, drawn or painted expression. Such explorations have often borrowed from foreign cultures, with the artists in question "going native" in an attempt to come closer to primordial forms of expression.

Comparisons between Malik's work and that of the Surrealists and, in this case in particular, the *écriture automatique* of an André Masson, fail to reveal any real similarities. Too many differences in the way the two sides respectively treat mood stand in the way. The outcome is similar if we attempt comparisons with the works of the Abstract Expressionists, such as that produced, for instance, by a Mark Tobey, who created a tapestry of comma-like linear abbreviations, metaphorically echoing oriental philosophies in a similar way to Julius Bissier in Europe. Attempts to find similarities with the works of French Art Informel and of Lyric Abstraction are also doomed to failure, since the core of the two approaches differs: Malik does not allow his vestiges of writing to become gestural signs but always opposes his spontaneously positioned linear abbreviations with rational, order-imposing elements. Here, at best, an inner relationship can be discerned to the script-like signs produced by Henri Michaux in the 1940s that, although they reveal the influence of oriental calligraphy, are, in formal terms, evidently fundamentally more self-reliant. To some extent, formal analogies with the linear faces of an Antonio Saura are

possible, but, in this case there is, without exception, an anthropomorphic/Surrealist origin. What is left is the positions adopted in the action painting of a Jackson Pollock or a Georges Mathieu, who use different techniques to express a similar physical expression of the sign, but both are also far removed from the vestiges of writing in Malik's oeuvre.

What is it then about Malik's images, with their diary-like structure (a kind of *leitmotif* running through his entire work), that makes them so different, so unique? It seems to me that it is the dualistic position of his work, the way he combines and confronts order and disorder, rules and freedom, the static and the dynamic. Malik's written images are structural networks of writing and painting, form and expression, the abstract and the concrete. Time is an inherent design factor in the same way that this is true of the obsessive artworks in writing created by Hanne Darboven. Time is recorded and becomes concentrated in the sum total of the linear abbreviations listed in parallel structures. For Malik, writing is an issue in its function as primordial gesture, as the identification of inscribed expression per se prior to all written meaning. We can almost feel the movement of his hand as it obeys his brain's wish to express itself. Malik's scriptorial abbreviations are the articulation of memory, body and hand, seemingly mechanically recorded primordial shapes, scripted cast-offs whose gradual progress paraphrases the way writing is produced.

Rolf Lauter, Director of Mannheim Kunsthalle