

Mercury's own script

Axel Malik's installations in context

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Mercury actually had no message of his own. The messenger of the Gods brought their news and instructions to mortals, duly transported their recommendations, but never commented on these or spoke in his own name. Script as the written word has the task of expressing and communicating contents by means of a conventionalized system. In his drawings Axel Malik has consequently stripped it of the cumbersome duty of conveying legible messages. Mercury speaks; the messenger is en route on a path to self-expression.

If one divests script of its semantic function, then all that remains are a few apparently formal features, lines, type area, the writing and the sequence of the writing taken for the signs: promises of order and thus meaning. The code of the signs or characters itself is reduced to the movement, the moment of actual writing, where script expresses nothing other than itself. Each of the code's signs is different; there is no other code, however ciphered; and no sign is repeated. Once the script is liberated from the need to capture and encapsulate the statements of speakers, it remains only as the unintentional, powerful and intensive expression of itself. For, to return from the comparison with Ancient Greek mythology to Christian Europe: "All men are liars," said the psalmist (Psalm 116).

It will come as no surprise that specifically people who are involved in the media in some way find Axel Malik's in-scriptions appealing. After all, part of the everyday experience of newspaper makers and printers, graphic artists and designers, not to mention librarians, museum staff or gallery-owners, along with their readers and visitors, is that form threatens to detach itself from content and exceed the latter in terms of weighting and referential power. Often enough, a perfect design, a special font, or expertise in drawing set the yardstick so high, that the mediocre, superfluous or even ideological content is no longer able to measure up to it.

Script comes under suspicion the moment it lays claim to meaning. Truth can then only be grasped as an intellectual metaphor, and can, moreover, only be expressed as a reference to the unknown.

The visual arts have for some time now reflected on the expression of ever dwindling certainties. Seen from the perspective of art sociology and conceptually, it would seem

obvious to compare Malik's oeuvre with the works of Roman Opalka. ¹ Since 1965, Opalka has been enumerating the time left in his life, programming his own physical disappearance by lightening the color on which he places the numbers – somewhere beyond 7,000,000: white on white. He does not lend special shape to his columns of figures and instead simply writes them, and his figures are the philosophical-mathematical expression of time and motion, are autobiographical and yet completely detached from his own biography owing to the abstract quality of the signs chosen. The accumulation of (numerical) signs in the biographical context hinges on the hope that patterns will emerge, tension and fissures, in other words on the hope that a rhythm will be set that promises “genuine” meaning, transcending his own person, and the many ensnarements to which every person is subjected. This hope is legitimate in light of the artist's existential commitment, by the unreserved investment of the time of his own life. Solely through philosophical meditation can the tension be resolved between the supra-temporal social claim of the abstract, universal signs, on the one hand, and the human yardstick, namely the individual life time of the artist, on the other, which is by virtue of the context necessarily fragmentary.

Chinese artist Xu Bing takes a similarly critical approach to the opportunities and limits of conventionalized human communication.² He even on occasion designs his (printed) characters to be illegible. While his work often has a satirical side to it, and also deliberately plays with cultural differences, in particular his installation “Book from the Sky” presented formulations that have overtones of the installation Axel Malik developed between 1999 and 2003 for the Hildesheim Cathedral Library and put on show there. He has now taken them one step further in his current Freiburg project.

The Hildesheim Project showcased a broad variety of the elements that go to make up Axel Malik's script art. The initial source of inspiration here was a 13th-century Latin bible written on parchment in a minute pearl script which can only be read by a well-versed paleographer. Malik considered the probable time taken to write it of possibly a year to be a real challenge. It prompted him to likewise background himself ascetically to the task at hand while also using the hours of his own life in a similar biographical vein. The project does not initially use the Bible as a text to copy. For he takes up and updates the Medieval script(ural) tradition only in the sense that the monastic scribe addressed an object that essentially always remained the same, namely the bible and its liturgical textual forms. Certain of its unadulterated validity, the scribe was able to step back from the actual text proper and endeavor to do justice in the form to the veracity of the content. The idea was thus not to certify the text, but to celebrate it by means of an aesthetics that arose from trial, tribulation, and artistry. In particular, the frequent biblical and liturgical copies were often not so much the text of a work to please God, but instead an ascetic subjugation to the decidedly arduous task of the scribe. Famous is the lamentation of the 8th century

scribe, passed down in this or similar form on countless occasions: “He who does not know how to write will not believe just how much work is involved. Oh how difficult is writing: it dulls the eye, crushes the kidneys, and tortures all the limbs. Three fingers hold the quill, but the whole body suffers.”³

Long since disappeared is the self-evident meaning attached to the work by virtue of the certainty that the text being written was the truth. The secularization of the content means all hopes are now set in the act of labor itself and the truth of the form where it obeys its own laws. What remains is the tortuous act of writing in order to assist in the renewed breakthrough of a truth that is no longer or not yet known – through the life-long accumulation of signs.

These interpretations leave me on somewhat wobbly ground. Axel Malik himself terms his work “the scriptural method“, which probably also covers the way it references the past, while also pointing up the linguistic distance to any overly rarefied missionary zeal. Everything he makes is supposed to remain well-rooted in reality, to reach out to the everyday world. And yet the fighting refusal to include a message or biography when purifying a medium that has classically always been placed in the service of message and biography, can be placed in the context of its countervailing use in society today. The function of the artist’s work and the tradition in which it is to be placed take the stage here alongside his actual intentions.

In terms of the effort, concentration and textual abstraction he brings to bear, not to mention some of the shapes his scriptural work takes, Axel Malik repeatedly joins forces with the tradition, without seeking it out or reflecting on it as forms of script that have been passed down. In so doing, he brings the past together with modern metaphors for epochs. One example would be the writing project “Black Forest 2002”, which combines the twisting sequence of Roman ornamentation of columns with an experience of nature and aspects of an ecological ethics. Another would be the scripturally expiring architecture in the “Lido di Venezia 2001”, which takes up the functions of inscriptions such as run through the history of architecture. Here, the involuntary recourse to history affirms the autonomy of script, which throughout history has repeatedly seemed appropriately represented in specific forms.

The “Hildesheim Project 2003” arose in direct confrontation with tradition. For the Hildesheim Cathedral Library, Malik spent one year creating a 10m-long band of cloth, covering it in writing made up of small signs. Particularly when viewed from a certain distance, they reveal variations of shaded density, clear sequences of carefully set shapes, as well as brighter passages attesting to especially concentrated speed of application. As with the diaries that Axel Malik has been filling since 1989 with his incomprehensible signs,

time and motion are the expressive means he brings to bear: he concentrates, bides his time, and then suddenly involuntary motion erupts in the disciplining framework of lines and type area; there are pauses between setting pen to canvas, or a carefully premeditated speed-script races across the paper.

Aural or audiovisual documentation of the work of writing confirm the motion taken by Malik's own means and his own emphasis. The scratching of the pen, the arduous breathing, the beat of the pen against the canvas when he writes swiftly or the unintentionally documented sound of a train passing by outside during the preparations of the Freiburg Project in the abandoned rooms in the railway station all emphasize the transitory nature of the signs – biographically, as a pulsating sign of life between real presence and becoming history.

Each sign is set individually. Each sign lays full claim to the particular moment, claims the artist's full attention and care. The individual sign and its positioning in a row in a chosen format, on the one hand, and the arrangement of the format in an architectural and cultural frame, on the other, are mutually defining. Each detail thus legitimizes the interpretation of the context.

The especial success of the Hildesheim Project derived from the way Malik addressed the context, namely a library. Conditions for this were favorable: the modern architecture of the Cathedral Library, built in 1995-6, which offered generous space and light and diversity yet geared to a calm symmetrical concept for the interior.

Imagine: someone writes something illegible, which placed in a prominent position lays claim unconditionally to its perception in a setting that for some 1,200 years has existed in order to preserve things legible, texts and content, and to pass these on to further generations. All possible languages, living and dead, are preserved here in the form of textual testimony to them, written witnesses all imbued with the wish to convey their authors' insights or ideas down through the centuries in a more or less comprehensible manner and communicate them by means of a written script. Among these silent witnesses, library users read and work, themselves absorbing things legible and, more recently, producing the same. For the duration of the exhibition, computers are installed at some of the desks in the Reading Room, with keyboards that no one touches, and yet across their screens runs Axel Malik's scriptural work, virtually with all the actual sounds entailed. One of the library's studies has been converted into an aural room. Through the door, left ajar, we hear the sound of writing, and gain the impression that someone is sitting inside and is hard at work writing. Axel Malik's works incessantly comment on the authenticity and benefits of the books collected in the Reading Room, remarking silently on the interest and opportunity the readers and scholars working there have in acquiring

knowledge. However contradictory and tense the relationship must be between the readers and library users, on the one hand, and Axel Malik's signs, on the other, they nevertheless remain receptive to his attempt to critically return written signs to a status as autonomous expressions, thus paying homage to the value and independence of script.

Another aspect of the context should also not be ignored, namely the fact that the Hildesheim Cathedral Library is a church library. It is embedded in a setting carefully nurtured since 815: that of a clerical, religious way of life whose central elements include annunciation; annunciation in the rhythm of the signs performed as the liturgy, preaching by words and scripture. The above-mentioned band of fabric hung suspended from the gallery, and was stretched in a slight curve across the floor of the Reading Room, illuminated by the extensive skylights above: akin to some almost archaic scroll with its illegible signs it defines the surrounding space. The signs were there to be read, and read they were as a critical inquiry into the Church's practice of preaching and as a mystical/philosophical stimulus compared with the (theological) desire for veracity and knowledge. After all, the Church customarily taught that scripts, and first and foremost among them the bible, be examined to uncover some fourfold meaning. The exhibition's title "On Scriptural Meaning" stems from the scholastic doctrine, one that had long since existed by the 13th century, when the written Bible was made which Axel Malik took as his model. Just as old is the school verse used as a mnemonic to remember the doctrine: "Literal meaning teaches what has happened. Allegorical meaning teaches what we believe. Moral meaning teaches what we should do. And anagogical meaning teaches us to what we should aspire."⁴ The elements of such a method also offer a way of approaching Axel Malik's work: (life-) time and the promise of meaning, instructions on how to act and utopia all in one.

The Freiburg Project in the Südwestrundfunk Radio Station Building in 2004 had just as many facets to it and likewise made use of references and critique at various levels. It consistently advanced the notion of a critical discussion in and with the particular context. The signs/characters on the fabric band suspended there are larger, less ascetic and more a vigorous contrast. When taken in connection with their context, the emphasis in the installation shifts. While the suspended fabric band had clear philosophical/religious connotations of an "above" in the church context of Hildesheim, in Freiburg it more strongly stresses and expresses authority and rulership. There are few institutions comparable with the public radio stations that influence everyday life so strongly and our experience of everyday reality. In this context, the economic and structural constraints, biographies and journalistic tools are almost indiscernible and instead masked by the claim to objective reporting. Here, again, Axel Malik's written signs comment on the self-image, power and social importance of a mass medium whose founding journalistic ethic hinged on conveying truth and reality by way of undistorted information. In Axel Malik's installations

we find an inquiry into intrinsic regularities, claims, responsibility, and values – with differences in emphasis, as seen in Hildesheim and in Freiburg. This brings us back to the image of Mercury, who does not make the news, but merely conveys it.

- 1 Franz Joseph van der Grinten and Friedhelm Mennekes: *Abstraktion – Kontemplation. Auseinandersetzung mit einem Thema der Gegenwartskunst*, (Stuttgart, 1987), pp.133-147. For a discussion of the work of Axel Malik more from the viewpoint of art history and aesthetics, see Burkhard Brunn: "In No-Man's Land. Somewhere between Writing and Painting," in: *Axel Malik*, (Freiburg, 2003), pp. 16-23 and Helmut Herbst in the exhibition catalog *Axel Malik. Die skripturale Methode*, (Waiblingen, 2004).
- 2 Uta Rahman-Steinert: "Xu Bing in Berlin. Sprachräume," in: *Museums-Journal*, 18/2004, no. 3, pp.61-63. See also Mark Siemons in: *Frankfurt Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, no. 30, July 25, 2004.
- 3 Wilhelm Wattenbach: *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter*. Quoted here from Vera Trost: "'Drei Finger schreiben, aber der ganze Körper arbeitet...'" Zur Buchherstellung im Mittelalter," in: *Schreibkunst. Mittelalterliche Buchmalerei aus dem Kloster Seeon*, (Augsburg, 1994), p. 122 (*Veröffentlichungen zur bayerischen Geschichte und Kultur* 28) A.
- 4 Augustine of Denmark, around 1260, quoted here from *Historischen Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8, (Basel, 1992), column 1434.