

In No-Man's Land, Somewhere between Writing and Painting

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"I make the incidental, the unnoticed side to hand-writing the focus of attention." (18 Jan., 2001) From a distance, Axel Malik's works of writing appear like webs that float in an entrancing immateriality before a white surface. Their horizontal thrust first emerges on closer inspection. And from very close up the web reveals itself to be made up of minute traces of writing with a clear direction, something Malik terms "signs". He grasps them expressly as components of a script. What initially, if considered as a whole, appears to be an image and, if admittedly always black on white, in general claims to be such given the framing, the rectangular shape and the mounting, not looks more like a kind of banner bearing script, an impression reinforced by the formats, drawn out in length and breadth. Signs as written elements of course assume that legibility of some sort is intended, a fact achieved by the regular iteration of the same signs, say letters. But there can be no talk of that here.

The signs do not form a general script that remains the same in all the works. Neither do they belong to an alphabet or form a code. Instead, the most different of signs fuse to constitute the most different of languages. In this way, they do not form a text, but a texture. Even if there seems to be some affinity between the signs in one respective script, the relationship remains one of elective affinity in style and form, whereby the individual signs retain their individuality. In other words, Malik's works are neither pictures nor legible writing. They take place in no-man's land. The concept of sign implies a reference to something that exists outside it or can be imagined beyond it. It signifies something when seen together with other signs. Malik's signs, by contrast, signify nothing beyond their material existence as the trace of the movement of script. They signify nothing more than the movement of writing, that is their lively self: they are self-referential. *"The script must overcome this reality, which is so deeply contaminated by meaning if it is to get through to the reality of its real and unconditional movement."* (Dec. 5, 2001) The pure movement of writing has shed all customary signification to such an extent that it unequivocally refutes and effort to interpret it – unlike Cy Twombly's work, where *"letter-like structures and illegible scriptures alternate."* (quoted from Jutta Göricke: [Cy Twombly, Spurensuche](#)) In its self-referentiality, the artwork achieves the highest degree of autonomy, an extreme point of freedom from the world.

Axel Malik moves between image and script, in a terrain in which Asian calligraphers move, whereby their works, even where the result is an image, still remain script and thus transport signification. Just as abstract painting refuses to allow itself to be pinned to a

specific meaning, influenced by Western art Japanese calligraphic artist Yu-Ichi (1916 - 1985) turned his back on the legible meaning of the customary calligraphy. It was a great liberation from the tradition that ordained that the signs be painted expressively, i.e., depending on a prevailing mood, but legibly. Since Malik's signs do not signify in the sense of being legible, in keeping with the term "Abstract Painting" it is safe to say that they merge to form abstract, self-referential written images. The lack of signification and the serial, horizontally aligned writing distinguish Malik's work quite clearly from traditional Asian calligraphy, which (written vertically and at time only with a single sign) frequently express poetic contents and are often the result of meditative states of mind.

In Occidental calligraphy such as is found in Medieval books, in particular the first letters of the chapters stand out as large, artistic ornaments. Traditionally, ornament is the form in which script and image are intricately linked, whereas previously they functioned as coexistent mutual commentary or illustration. From the viewpoint of art, the ornament is impaired owing to this lack of independence, this subordinate position: here, as elsewhere, its function is merely to serve, in this case to serve writing. Specifically for this reason in art since the 1980s there has been a trend to use ornament as such, because it is above all suspicion of being a medium of signification. It cannot be interpreted. Ornaments are only decorative, i.e., purposively aesthetic. Malik's rows of signs have nothing in common with ornaments. For the signs are set coarsely, opposing all aesthetics, and thus fulfill a main criterion of modern art – they subvert social norms.

It might seem obvious to categorize Malik's work as belonging to "art informel" or Tachism or action painting, that genre which in the post-War years with deliberate irrationality endeavored to flee the trap of systems of social norms and thought by resorting to pre-conscious qualities. Such as in the wild, eruptive, not premeditated sweeps of the brush, such as Georges Mathieu made with great corporal verve, spontaneous in gesture and psychologically motivated. By contrast, Malik subjects his work to specific rules: he writes, in other words he creates signs in rows/sequences and in a pre-defined format - and here his work is reminiscent of the rows of numbers made by Roman Opalka or Hanne Darboven's typewritten pages. The movement of writing does not arise using the entire body, but is solely a matter of the wrist/hand, and is therefore small, the movement itself is not fluid and coherent, but pulsed and terminates foreseeably at the end of the last line. There are interstices. And Malik limits himself to black-&-white, meaning he quite manifestly distances himself from painting. Malik's columns of signs appear highly disciplined, quite unlike art informel, which with its grandiose painterly gestures celebrates subjective freedom. Conscious constraint is a typical feature of his work.

For the viewer, the fact that Malik writes in rows suggests the signs can also be "read" by line. Unlike with pictures, which consist of superimposed layers of color and shapes

(whereby the latter often cover the former), in Malik's oeuvre the work process can be followed with great precision. This is not possible when contemplating pictures, as they have no beginning and no end that we can reconstruct for ourselves. *"It is important to me that the person ... who wishes to read or view them has to move during the process."* (Feb. 8, 2002) This is most certainly the case with regard to the formats sized 2 x 4m, where the viewer has to stretch and stoop in order to follow a line. Should Malik actually make the many-meter frieze he has devised, then the viewer (as with texts by Joseph Kosuth) will have to walk along the rows of signs. Thus, a certain concurrence between artist and observer will arise when the latter follows the act of writing by reading – over certain stretches, at any rate, "reading" as the exact tracing of the complex lines drawn by pen is a quite arduous matter. Unlike contemplating pictures, the viewer, like the artist, sees the end of the signs coming, as the last sign draws ever closer. Then, the signs have been written completely, or seen to the end. With regard to his own work, Jean Dubuffet remarked, and this actually fits Malik's works better than his: *"The picture should not be seen passively,.... and instead its genesis experienced... If the knife cut the furrow in the surface, then the viewer will be able to feel the entire length of the movement... All movements the painter made are then felt in their iteration in the mind."*

In Malik's written pictures the movement of writing can indeed be experienced. The viewer can follow the process of their origination and the effort involved not only intellectually but quite physically, by following the loops and tangles of the traces of writing. Put differently, Malik's are easily accessible to everyone. The often quite justified prejudice that advanced art is elitist does not apply to Malik. The only condition viewers must fulfill in order to grasp his work is curiosity, something every child has.

If we look at the "signs" individually, we soon recognize that they are all different – but form a single family on one and the same terrain. The first sign is by no means the patriarch who defines the type of sign in the way the clef sets the tone. Often the first sign seems to be constrained in its movement, unable to move forward, vacillating on the spot, and the movement first becomes freer in the further course of the organized forward momentum – sometimes a procession, sometimes a march, sometimes a thicket. In actual fact, many of the signs bring to mind the grotesque figures of commedia del arte, for at times they seem to have legs. We can sense in the trace of the pen the movement that took place in such a small space: it was not regular, the speed involved varied, accelerated, turned on its own axis, slowed down, and got tangled up. It is the movement of writing to which the signs refer – they signify nothing other than movement and this in turn points to a more or less pronounced kinetic energy. Only for this reason are the traces called "signs".

The nature of this energy is, on the one hand, biologically universal and, on the other, individual, if biological: *"As enracinated in your individual biology and as unmistakable as*

your voice or thumbprint." (Jan. 20, 2002) In any case, you feel the kinetic energy behind the signs and can well imagine that the smallest compressed movements can suddenly explode the format set by the very first set like coils that had been pressed together. It then seems as if those before somehow prevent the next set of signs from living it up so excessively. In other words, the individual movements of writing interact, disciplining or socializing with one another. They take heed and care of one another as regards size, type, distance, basic lines and sequencing. The next sign is set with caution, making sure it does not tear off and with an overview of the signs already written and with a view forwards to surface still free and open to be written as well as the conclusion of the movement. Forbearance toward a movement that has not worked out right is another way of saying that Malik does not correct anything. The above-mentioned views are likewise characteristics of social behavior. If the signs are seen each as an individual form, in that each is the unique product of a completed movement of the pen, then the whole that they together constitute is a kind of social structure generated by their interaction, perhaps even a taming of natural impulses, for the uncontrolled movement of the pen presses forward as if it were a natural event.

That said, the procedure of writing a sign can also be viewed quite differently, namely as the respectively different result of one and the same effort, just as different people can always be construed as examples of one and the same homo sapiens. Yet in each instance, the same impulse dons a different guise. The signs are the result of ongoing iteration. Videos show how the pen closes on the surface, darting forward suddenly like a bird of prey, then curving along like a skater, sliding, losing balance, or racing on the spot. Malik writes the signs at high speed and (this is a decisive part of the underlying concept) without trying to shape things. The only exception being the way the sign heeds the way it is viewed. It follows that he does not correct anything after the event, as this would be to introduce a notion of beauty or successfulness in a conceptual sense, that is to say an aesthetic approach rather than that which obtains here.

It very much seems as if the artist has come upon something that is below the ground, a source or a seam, at any rate an energy potential that flows into his hand and moves the pen now this way, now that, now faster, now slower. Is this some potential that only Malik possesses as an artist, or a potential that we all have that only he has tapped to date? Are we all artists? Or is this perhaps some individual or a supra-individual ability? *"Something supra-individual seems to bubble up (in the writing, B.B.)"* (Sept. 10, 2001) says Malik. Could anyone do this? Is a matter of scribbling such as people do when phoning? At any rate, it is some subconscious ability. Axel Malik does not write, something within him writes. He says: *"You know that I do not overly rate my 'abilities' in my work and I cannot assume that it is something I can claim is mine."* (May 18, 2000) *"I am in the service (20) of the writing."* (Dec. 13, 2001) To this extent, Malik's method brings to mind *écriture*

automatique, that ostensible outpouring of the pre-conscious – under the influence of psychoanalytical theory, the Surrealists championed it, for it fitted their project, more radical than that of other artists, of undermining the rationalist systems for grasping the world. *"The key discovery was in fact that the pen or pencil when drawing simply runs along willy nilly and so thus weaves a highly precious substance,"* wrote André Breton. (see Göricke) Yet the concept innate in Malik's approach and the results do not concur with écriture automatique. Malik certainly does not ally himself with the clear and decidedly political claims the Surrealists made to having found some innocent terrain, as it were, in the depths of the human psyche, a territory supposedly not yet colonized by socialization and from which they could upend the world. He is on his guard against trammeling the energetic sources of the impulses behind his writing by attempts to define it. He rejects the idea that he writes according to some dictation set by the psyche.

And with Malik's oeuvre there can definitely be no talk of that trance-like state which the Surrealists endeavored to induce by means of drugs in order to counteract the control exercised by the will/consciousness and thus (as with Henri Michaux) to ensure that pure movement, i.e., the movement of writing, takes on nomadic form in a flowing subjectivity. On the contrary, Malik draws on an enhanced state of wakefulness. *"When writing, I am absolutely sober and of a very clear mind."* (July 7, 2002) He is not interested in the "omnipotence of dreams" evoked by the Surrealists. Although his writing follows unknown impulses, he by no means sees himself as a passive medium. As regards the results, both in the work of André Masson and Henri Michaux script-like forms emerge that are usually embedded in all sorts of figurative essences that call for interpretation. Malik's signs, by contrast, are self-referential structures that refuse to be interpreted. Malik writes that *"in écriture automatique the focus is on anything but lineation."* (Sept. 7, 2002). The opposite is true for him. Unlike écriture automatique his procedure is not a means to an end involving the creation of new images. Unlike the veiled or indistinct results of écriture automatique, Malik's signs usually exhibit decisive and clear contours. The artist himself states: *"My lineations are not delirious. They are not movements that slide or drag there way across the paper; they are set with great precision, have a surgically exact quality."* (July 7, 2002)

On perusing the diaries that Malik has been writing day-in day-out since 1989 and that are bound in 30 thick tomes, you will be astonished by the wealth of beautiful amoeba-like, shell, oyster, and snail forms, the floating, almost three-dimensional constructs, splitters, images of bug food, and the like, attesting to Malik's special talent in drawing. These are intentionally shaped signs, in which aesthetic norms and the visible reality unmistakably play a role. These are the fruit of mentally controlled, thematically-focused writing movements. These forms are beautiful. They are tasteful. They embody exactly what artists understand as deformation, as access to the normal from which they constantly try

and liberate themselves. Malik has also taken this resolute step. He has discerned that it leads nowhere to create tribes of signs in line with an idea and has therefore desisted from this approach, devoting his attention instead to signs made unintentionally that, unlike those carefully designed products, could be termed "raw", raw signs, forms that are primordial or as original as possible – after all, they are all roughly socialized in line with the parameters size, type, spacing, basic lineage, sequencing and picture format. The wish to create something original and unsullied that is not subject to rationality, something innocent and pure – that is a need many great artists have felt, and Axel Malik would seem to share it to a certain extent. He terms writing signs *"a clear, pure movement, a movement purged of self, an empty meaningless movement."* (Dec. 5, 2001) In general, one could object to all these various approaches that a thoroughly socialized society, in which even nature (from the countryside through the animals to humans themselves) are ever more thoroughly and enduringly socially produced) no longer provides enclaves of pure energy, neither as inner nor as outer nature. Despite this quite general objection, the new or the relatively new can usually be recognized by the fact that it is astonishingly raw and coarse, and thus judged by most to be ugly. Malik thus corrects nothing, even in his diaries, that terrain of experimentation, for errors are not possible in Malik's concept. Nevertheless, the viewer will no doubt regard this or that sign as "beautiful" or "unsuccessful" and precisely the fact that these tableaux and books also feature "unsuccessful" signs is what makes them seem so authentic and lively. *"I do not care what the signs look like. To my mind they are all unsuccessful fundamentally speaking."* (Sept. 10, 2001)

Everything is open to view, nothing is concealed or touched up. Unlike painting, for example, there are no secrets here. The act of drawing the signs is evidently a matter of great intensity. Yu-Ichi, the Japanese calligrapher I mentioned at the outset, experienced a real explosion of feeling and screamed when putting brush to paper. When viewing Malik's video works (they are works in their own right, not documentation), you hear him breathing heavily while at work. He has to concentrate very hard to set the next sign. In this way, the signs attest to moments of great excitement. Unlike the explosive brushstrokes of art informel, Malik's signs actually seem to result from implosions. Instead of unfolding outwards, the movements seem to be drawn inward, to revolve around a dot. The movement of art informel painters extended outwards, the movement in Malik's acts of writings is intensely inwards. This is, of course, related to the confined space which the series of signs have at their disposal. Yet precisely because the scope for the signs to develop is so meager in Malik's works, they unleash an amazing variety within the framework set them. The implosive intensity results from the constraints Malik places on himself – and the viewer may find it constraining given the row after row of signs and columns that march ever onward. Indeed, the repetitive metronomic iteration, they ostensible never-ended progression of this work evokes associations with work at a

conveyor belt – whereas it is actually the obsession of an artist who exercises a profession which is without doubt freer than any other as regards the scope for freedom in decision-making.

While Abstract Expressionism and action painting allow us to sense the violent explosions of the artistic thirst for freedom in the uninhibited manner in which the paint is applied, in Malik's stringent collections of signs, each enclosed in its frame, there is a tangible tension left unresolved – the product no doubt of this confinement and also caused by each line being forced to return to the center rather than wildly heading off in this or that direction. However oppressive at times the density of signs may seem to be, they possess a dancing, subtle quality and thus a grace that reminds me of Robert Walser's stories – his style was so magical precisely thanks to the way in which it formed a contrast by inscrutably and joyously playful treatment of conformity.

Malik's self-imposed discipline at work brings to mind the asceticism of monks. In fact, in a letter the artist confirmed this assumption I had long since had when he elaborated on the project for copying the Bible, and he intends to put the finished product on display in the library of Hildesheim Cathedral. In the library vaults he discovered a copy of the Bible made in minute Gothic minuscules: sized 11 x 7.5 cm, the Bible features 43 lines only 2.5mm high squeezed onto each page. Malik writes: *"I was impressed and stunned by the care and consistency of the script, its differentiated smallness and clarity, and the timeframe of the writing process involved. I have experienced and grasped this monastic effort as a special form of diary writing. My own work is thus an updated form and rephrasing of this context."* (July 7, 2002) In May 2003, Malik will be putting a 10m long and 2m wide canvas scroll on show in Hildesheim, on which the sizes vary strongly in size from 1mm to 30 mm – showing his reverence for the ascetic work of monks. *"Asceticism"*, writes Malik, *"is the conscious and intentional reining in of the ego's elements, in order to experience another context."* Or: *"It means serving a thing, or self-restriction for the benefit of the higher object, the greater dimension."* (Feb. 8, 2002)

The diaries are numbered sequentially. This might appear at first sight to be a merely technical device, but proves that Malik grasps his entire oeuvre as a "work in progress", as a major ongoing context. It *"is quite obvious that the signs set out specifically for infinity, that is the direction in which they embark, that is their desire, their impulse driving them forwards."* (Sept. 10, 2001) Most recently, Malik has tried to visualize the ongoing nature of the work, its essential never-ending quality (and this property also plays such a paramount role in the oeuvre of Roman Opalka and in On Kawara's Date pictures), by writing on long strips, which then form a frieze – this is the plan for the group show in Schloss Duchcov in October 2003. As part of an international artists' symposium launched by Wulf Kirschner under the motto of the "Endless Line", Malik will be describing/inscribing

a section of the "Great Wall". The signs are, as it were, nodes/knots – knots in time in an endless line that commenced with the first words written. In this way they also relate to the artist's own lifetime. An intense moment is captured in each figurine, an event that sets itself off from other events. Seen in this way, the sequence of separate signs forges a chain of embodiments of excited moments in time.

The audio works (and they exclusively communicate the sound of writing) also give a similar impression. They create great tension, just as radio plays attract creative attention by abstracting from the visual.

At the same time, the constant setting of one sign after the next is also reminiscent of the work of a farmer in the field, plowing one furrow after another, or planting one plant after another when doing his day's work, say one field a day.

Malik's ongoing repetitive work, and it is hard to interrupt it, is tough. After all, some of it is performed lying down. This act of writing as a response to the impulse of energy is emphatically physical, it entails the whole body, as it were.

Studies on ergonomics have long since identified that manual activities frequently tend to be rhythmic in motion owing to the iteration involved, even in the case of tasks requiring fine motoric skills, such as soldering small electrical components where the soldering iron has to touch specific points to affix elements to them. Rhythm may also perhaps play a part in Axel Malik's work. The spaces between the signs bear witness to a pause between movements. Here, writing is related to walking, which likewise obeys a certain rhythm. Walking and writing are rhythmic forms of moving the extremities forward and both are of great significance. However, strange the almost factory-like discipline which he imposes on his work may seem, it follows logically from his decision to write in keeping with a movement the tact of which is predicated by writing one line at a time, just as would apply with setting letters in upper case.

When you view the videos that present the work of writing close up, you will inevitably gain the impression that you also probably get when carefully scrutinizing the signs, namely that the act of writing resembles movements in dance, the dance of the highly excited hand, in some instances it almost reaches fever pitch. It would be a dance that qua pure movement signifies nothing and is therefore not expressive. Malik is not one of those artists who dreams up inventions. For he does not try and consciously shape things, and, seen superficially, always produces one and the same thing. Yet he certainly discovers things. To quote him: *"After the event, I am not surprised at what I have done, because I really feel it the moment it happens."* (July 7, 2002) Each discovery uncovers something not yet seen and to this extent something new. Malik never knows beforehand what will come squirting out of his pen. I assume that what he brings forth is in many instances foreign to him. With great mental presence, he then observes the hand working quite on its

own. The question "What is my hand doing?" is characteristic of a divide, as if the artist had divided himself up into hand and eye. In this setting, it is quite conceivable that there is a form of silent complex communication between the movement of the writing (which essentially is non-signifying) and the mentally alert eye, whereby the latter may understand the former to be a language. *"The line speaks because during its short run it transmits information on its properties and consistency."* (July 24, 2002) Indeed, Malik claims that *"movement signifies language. The movement of writing is alone, unto itself, a language that has fallen silent."* (Feb. 13, 2002)

That said, the movement of writing can of itself not be a language, if it is bereft of all meaning in order to produce abstract written images. One of the great achievements of abstract art was to liberate itself of all the meaning that adhered to art. The movement of writing therefore contains no messages. *"My 'discovery' consists simply of the fact that firstly people usually assume that intellectual, linguistic-semantic reflection is a fairly complicated, complex and extremely challenging matter, yet that writing it all down is as a rule a negligible attendant activity, of a meager and inconsequential quality, and secondly people usually assume that writing by hand is actually a mindless as essentially purely functional/technical matter. My 'shock' simply stemmed for the fact that I had naturally also assumed that if you strip the script of its semantic content you get a fairly lifeless entity (and at most something suitable for entertaining graphic and ornamental fun.) I was astonished to find at a flash that this is not the case, and that I had to concern myself most intensively with the connection, the seam where thought and writing meet."* (July 9, 2002)
What is meant here by seam?

Malik repeatedly talks about properties that are mutually exclusive: on the one hand, he talks of the pure movement of writing and, on the other, of its linguistic character. For example, as regards the handwriting of a letter-writer, he states: *"It was, alongside all the content, the expression and trace of absence."* (July 25, 2002) In other words, the handwriting in itself expresses something personal, e.g., a state of excitation or agitation, and at any rate something about the character of the writer. Precisely for this reason, in former times children were forced to practice tidy handwriting as if they were being drilled in keeping step. Malik actually endeavors to *"elide everything personal from his handwriting"* such that *"the text contains nothing biographical about it."* (July 25, 2002) (Although it must be pointed out that his scripts are of course not texts.) Malik imagines that *"language is mounted on script"* and enquires whether *"it is not perhaps even within it."* (July 24, 2002) He imagines that the pure movement of writing and its legible trace (the sign) embodies something that is linguistic. For the discerning eye will find that the movement of writing which the hand accomplishes of its own volition and without being instructed to shape something is meaningful in the sense that the natural impulse (qua nature) lends itself shape – albeit in keeping with the above-mentioned parameters. Both

art and literature have frequently made use of the idea that nature "addresses" the cognizant observer, be it by revealing its intrinsic order to him or be it by kindling feelings within him – neither notion assumes that the linguistic form entails intention.

Goethe, for example, was convinced that there was a language intrinsic to nature. In his famous morphology of plants he averred that *"everything that is must also indicate and reveal (sic!) itself... The inorganic, the vegetative, the animal, the human – they all indicate themselves... The doctrine of morphology is the key to all Nature's signs (sic!)."* Goethe was thus convinced that the shape of the entire plant could be discerned in the individual shape of a leaf. Because nature in his opinion itself set signs, Goethe rejected any violent intervention in it, such as dissection. Indeed, in this sense all technology is an application of natural laws understood either as if they were a voice or as a voice. The Bible suggests that in the beginning was the word. And there are any number of passages which narrate that the Creator speaks in occurrences and miracles. And this too is evidence of how natural it is that the regularities and the forms of creation that appear direct before our eyes are linguistic in character. Seen thus, it comes as no surprise that the movement of writing seems to be meaningful as the expression of a natural impulse – even if it has divested itself of the task of transporting cultural meaning as does legible handwriting, and the signs as the trace of it are to this extent self-referential and abstract. We could understand Malik's talk of the *"seam along which thought and writing link."* For the mind-ful eye is one that discerningly recognizes while and because the thinking mind is present. Only in this way can we grasp that Malik construes his oeuvre as an ongoing process of research. His art essentially consists of organizing the eye that witnesses the natural movements in with greater attention, indeed probably also soon with practiced attentiveness. The source feeding this independent movement of writing is therefore apparently located deeper than those strata of the psyche which drove *écriture automatique*. Indeed, something *"trans-individual"*, namely nature itself, effervesces here, manifestly not just constrained by the contours of individuality. The quality of energy guiding Malik's hand is, we could say, comparable to electricity and to this extent an objective force. Malik's art – and this is precisely what I wish to establish – thus has more of an affinity with the objectivistic stance of artists who were prompted to let light paint by itself than with the subjectivism of gestural painting. The definition of the size of the sign, the type of the sign, the basic outline, the serial form of writing and the picture format – all those parameters mentioned above with which the artist conditions the writing – resemble a device destined to capture lightning, as a metaphor for energy.

(The quotes are from letters from the artist to the author)