THE BEHOLDER REMAINS IN THE PICTURE: ON ANDREAS HELLER'S ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF PERSPECTIVE

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'Perspective no longer appears to be an issue in modern art as it abandoned this legacy a century ago.'[2] This opening sentence of Hans Belting's latest book predominantly carries rhetorical weight, and in order to dispute its verdict, it is unnecessary to concern oneself at length with Marcel Duchamp's, Hiroshi Sugimoto's and Jeff Wall's perspectival pitfalls. That perspective has, after all, always remained a relevant issue in the visual arts is, in fact, a logical consequence of what perspective ultimately is: a methodology that emphasises the act of viewing as such. Also in this opening paragraph, Belting thus poses the question of '[w]hat else art is there for if not to be beheld'[3].

Despite the fact that central perspective in painting had long been pronounced dead, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have brought forth a host of artworks that are more or less exclusively concerned with perspective and its implications. This is also why Peter Weibel has been able to review discourses on conceptual art in terms of perspective:

'Perspective is a reflection on seeing, an observation of the gaze. As such it constitutes the onset of the principle of construction—the "costruzione legittima", logocentric rationality. Over the course of its evolution, perspective has passed through various media—from painting to computers, from painted panel via moving image to the computer screen. Like a mushroom or umbrella, perspective as a constructive principle in so doing

[2] "Perspektive scheint kein Thema der modernen Kunst mehr zu sein, denn sie hat dieses Erbe seit hundert Jahren abgeschüttelt." (Belting 2009: 8)

[3] "Wozu sonst ist denn Kunst da, wenn nicht zum Betrachten?" (Belting 2009: 8)

unfolded further constructive principles and problems: movement, the infinite, interaction (between image and beholder), technological creation, the problem of the self.'[4]

What remains to be noted, though, is that the problems that came into focus with perspective did not originate in the art of the twentieth century to which Weibel refers. Moving images came into being much earlier than film. Art has been aware of a non-stationary beholder since way before the installational settings of the 1960s. Since long before our time, perspective has expressed an ever-changing notion of interaction between image and beholder or between the latter and his/her stance in the world. As the essence of Western image competence (see Belting 2008), perspective clearly determines our Western notion of image and hence also the relation or interaction between image and spectator. Perspective does not only construct the space behind the picture plane; it also assigns the beholder a place from where he/she is drawn into the illusion and thus dislodged from his/her place in the world.

In any case, from the Renaissance onward, perspective has always been the means to fall back upon for generating the illusion of space. However, herein the Western image is, technically speaking, rooted in a paradox: as a method of exemplifying Euclidean space, perspective is rationally constructed. Yet, it appears natural in such a way that one was easily led to believe that human perspective was perspectival until it came under phenomenological pressure in the twentieth century. Bernhard Waldenfels spoke of the 'literal shattering of space' ("förmlichen Zerspringen des Raumes"; 2009: 105), and the launching points for artistic critique of what is perspective-related are manifold. Such critique is either geared towards the relation between image and beholder, i.e. what occurs in front of the picture plane, or towards the organisation and structure of the image itself, i.e. the illusionist evocations upon or behind the picture plane.

One may quote considerably early examples for this. In Piranesi's works, for instance, several lines of sight coincide, thus satisfying multiple gazes at once and boosting perspective by way of its own means. To the same extent to which the depicted architecture seemingly braces itself against the surface of the image, that

image confirms a flexible gaze. This is not merely due to missing vanishing lines. Piranesi occasionally also skilfully obscures the perspectival gaze, frequently approximates the portrayed architecture and no longer makes a clear sensation of space available. In the twentieth century the most apparent example of a critical artistic approach towards perspective is that of Paul Cézanne. As explained by Fritz Novotny, hesitant movement of vanishing lines, unstable contours and faltering lines along with a decreasing expanse of foreground and diminished perspectival contrast of size were the painting-immanent preconditions that caused the end of perspective in Cézanne's art. Moreover, it was Novotny's concern to further differentiate the very dialectic he himself had established: that between the picture plane on the one hand and an illusionistic projection of space on the other. In this context, the structure of Cézanne's works—the 'colour-fleck forms' ("Farbfleck-formen"; see Novotny 1938)—was under scrutiny on a micro-level, as was the general composition of his paintings on a macro level, which Novotny (ibid.) refers to as a 'curious system of obliquities' ("seltsames System von Schrägstellungen") that function as the 'veins of the image's spatial structure' ("Adern der Bildraum-struktur") and already point towards abstract painting. Novotny also draws a parallel between a weakened depth dimension in linear perspective and a decrease of drop shadows. Many a critic of the central perspectival image dispositif was able to invoke Cézanne as a reference. It was notably Cubism that appropriated Cézanne. Central perspective was shattered, the typical appearance of things contested in favour of a more facetted view.

As casting a look at Andreas Heller's artistic work ought to illustrate, the potential for a critique of central perspective as evoked by Cézanne has by no means been fully exploited yet. At first glance Heller's methodological approach appears to come quite close to that of Cézanne. He systematically—and in *Blueprints for a Blackout* even quite literally— continues the obliteration of individual vanishing lines. *Blueprints for a Blackout* are actual blueprints which Heller lifts from nineteenth-century copper engravings that were conceived as a kind of visual travel guide through Styria, a region in Austria. With Heller treating all of the original images' contours equally, abandoning differentiations in hetching as determined by linear perspective, the act of copying does away with the original images' spatial dimension. Thus the element which in the original engravings once discerned the objects' boundaries from the boundaries of their respective shadows is lost. The shadows are consequently deprived of their purpose, which is to define the spatial dimension of an entity in relation to the sun:

'What emerge are drawings that render different spatial layers as reminiscent of thick wickerwork. Through the simple effect achieved by blueprinting, the depth of images is transformed into layered models—what used to have a dimension further to the front or to the back is reduced to above and below. Heller's transformation turns that which, to begin with, was vastness, landscape, hill or the shape of a plant into a nexus of island- or layer-like parallel planes […].'[5]

A direct comparison of blueprint and model reveals how, unlike Cézanne's works, Heller's deconstruction of perspectival features is no longer guided by or concerned with the beholder's own perception. For Heller, such deconstruction rathermore thematically probes a set, prefabricated view of the world. He makes art about art. His images refer to de facto quoted models. They dissect a preconceived extrinsic perception and view of the world instead of drawing upon their own. Heller is no longer interested in perspective as such but in how it takes actual shape in nineteenth-century landscape painting which he subjects to a deconstructive analysis. He does so by asking himself and us alike how far the naturalisation of the perspectival gaze actually goes and poses the question of when annihilation of perspectival practice actually starts causing the model to lose its natural identity. Of course, he thus provokes the perspectival gaze of the spectator. In confronting the beholder with an at first obscure entanglement of individual contours, Heller challenges him or her to re-establish order in the overabundance of visually conveyed information. And it indeed becomes apparent that the viewer's gaze does not tire of blazing its trail through the thicket. This in turn implies that the jumble of signs is taken in as a spatial structure, that depth is excavated from actual two-dimensionality; it means continuing beyond the jumble and employing it as a literal 'travel guide' into the illusionistic world.

From Heller's deconstruction as well as our perception of it, we are able to derive the intensity of the impact imposed by perspectival construction. This substantiates that perspective is not merely a matter of inner-pictorial organisation. It actually protrudes from the image, so to speak, and assigns the beholder a habitually assumed viewpoint from where he or she ultimately evolves into a constitutive part of perspective.

To continue such artistic analysis in the medium of sculpture is a logical next step. In appropriating their surrounding space, Heller's installations dissect per-

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5 "Es entstehen Zeichnungen, die Raumebenen als dichtes Flechtwerk wiedergeben. Durch den einfachen Effekt des Pausens werden Bildtiefen in Schichtenmodelle umgewandelt, hinten und vorne erscheint nur mehr als oben und unten. Was ursprünglich Weite, Landschaft, Hügel oder Pflanzenform war, wird in Hellers Umwandlung zu einem Schnittwerk an flächenparallelen Inseln und Schichten […]." (Trummer 2008: 37f.)

spectival depictions of nature into a series of scenographically arranged layers that are reduced to mere contours, be it in positive or negative forms. Model-sized stages with titles bearing theatrical implications are created. *O Grad* ('*O Degree*', 2007) or *Der Mann ohne Schatten* ('*The Man without a Shadow*', 2006) are, for example, theatrical backdrop ensembles that enthrallingly interact with their partially perforated base panels. This interaction, as well as the fact that the individual layers extensively overlap when viewed from the front, soon indicates that they have not been designed in regular stage terms. They are, after all, not presented in a peep-box fashion, as there is neither a frame nor peep-holes that determine the beholder's viewpoint. The ideal viewing position has to be sought, has to sneak into the illusion, as it were.

Heller installs room dividers whose only reminiscence to landscape is the mountain-shaped contour of their upper edges. They may also function as guiding lines through the exhibition space, but besides their practical value they also unfold a self-reflexive moment in that they, too, provoke the question as to which standpoint might be most suitable for perceiving an ideal image. To exponentiate the number of possible answers to this question, Heller's shaky lath constructions are reduced to their plain contours and sometimes even to the mere upper edges of their outlines. Dangling freely off the white exhibition space's ceiling, the installation *Beilstein 1372m* (2008) consists of equally-white varnished cross sections which define a very irregularly circumscribed volume. An 1897 Ferdinand Krauss text about a magic grotto made of glittering ice functions as an instruction on how to view the piece. By way of contrast, Heller's silhouettes appear as an enigma, as an anamorphosis transposed into three-dimensionality and owing its deconstructive potential to its unusual, unergonomic ideal viewing position. Heller's contours want to be brought into line. The beholder is meant to see through them as a literal reference to the etymological root of the term perspective: Latin 'per spicere', 'to look through'. Perspective interrelates the beholder's place and illusion, as if the latter contained within itself a potential of further spaces.[6] In Heller's installations as well as in the context of anamorphosis, this place of the beholder needs to be identified first of all. Thus the perspectival image is endowed with its actual theatricality. In this respect, Heller is concerned with a very Baroque problem.

Renaissance artists already conceived and constructed pictorial space in relation to a specific viewing point; only thus was it possible for their images to

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6   Bernhard Waldenfels juxtaposes physically and spatially related experience, i.e., "place identity", and "place non-identity". The latter could prove well-founded in perspective. (Cf. Waldenfels 2009: 97)

represent imaginary extensions of real space, as can be illustrated by Masaccio's *Trinitá* (ca. 1425–1428), which wants to be perceived as a 'chapel' rather than as a painting. However, in the Baroque period the painterly structure extended even more radically beyond its frame, as the Baroque image can be understood as a projection onto, and an intervention in, the beholder's actual space, vehemently posing the question as to the ideal viewing point. The space of the beholder is hence as much stage as the imaginary space beyond the picture plane. These guidelines were most impressively played upon by Andrea Pozzo, who endowed his paintings with an immense dramatic momentum, turning the image into an event. The painted architecture of the nave frescos in Sant' Ignazio (1691[?]–1694)[7], for example, constitutes a logical, yet daringly aspiring continuation of the built architecture. Above the actually-built architecture's vaulting cell windows Pozzo places an additional, nave-breaking storey.

> 'As the beholder positions him- or herself in the perspective point marked on the floor, the actual and the illusionistic space conflate; it is as if in the Albertian system the spectator had almost stepped across the frame into the image, or, conversely, as if the images had spilled out of its frame into the space of the viewer. The very moment the beholder steps away from the perspective point, this continuum between the actual and the illusionistic space is broken.'[8]

The painted architecture no longer appears to frame the image but rather fuses what is seen in the picture with the beholder's world of experience. The image is no longer merely to be understood as a window but evolves into an actual extension of space as one gives into Pozzo's fiction. His fresco ceases to be a framed image in the classic sense in that he has the pictorial illusion explode metaleptically and tries to blend actual built and painterly simulated architecture as seamless as possible. Underneath Pozzo's theatrical scenario the viewer literally becomes someone else, someone who beholds the sky. In looking up sharply one ceases to be earthbound and is transformed into a soaring eye. In a section of the nave, which illustrates the fresco's ideal rays of vision, Pozzo even depicted the viewer thus disembodied: as a circle or letter 'o' floating head-high above the ground.

As central perspective was taken to an extreme, it also appears to have been

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[7]   The date of origin appears to be verified. However, as to the time span Pozzo took to accomplish the project specifications differ between three (Pascoli) and six (Baldinucci) years. (Cf. Kerber 1971: 69f.)

[8]   "Steht der Betrachter auf dem im Fußboden markierten Perspektivpunkt, so verschmelzen Betrachterraum und Kunstraum zu einer Einheit, es ist, wie wenn im albertischen System der Betrachter gleichsam über den Rahmen in das Bild hineingestiegen wäre, oder umgekehrt, das Bild über seinen Rahmen hinaus in den Raum des Betrachters hineingewachsen wäre. Sobald der Betrachter den Perspektivpunkt wieder verlässt, zerfällt dieses Kontinuum aus Betrachter- und Kunstraum wieder." (Burda-Stengl 2001: 12)

perverted—intentionally or not. The visual arts soon started to adhere less rigidly to the rules of perspective in order to be more in accordance with the actual nature of the human gaze. The nineteenth century finally saw the synthesis of man and world ultimately shattered. Early evidence thereof can be traced back to the Romantic period in the form of an introspective tendency of the inner-pictorial gaze, of which Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808–1810) constitutes an eloquent example.

Heller's art bears reference to this also. The title of his photomontage *Vom Punto di Fuga zum Vanishing Point* (2007) is actually suggestive of perspective in two different ways. In reminiscence of Friedrich, a viewer figure is standing on a suggested mountain ridge in the lower right-hand corner of the image against an otherwise empty background. In accordance with the title, his pickaxe and hat situate him in the same mountaineering milieu as Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). The montage *… zum Point de Vue* (2008) shows two female back figures gazing into nothingness as they stand at an observation point. While the meditations of Friedrich's back figures were still potentially guided by striking scenery, the gazes of Heller's intra-pictorial beholders no longer fall upon anything natural. The photographically rendered figures brave pure white planes. However, it is only thus that the extra-pictorial viewer can actually enter the picture. The world mirrored in Friedrich's images had only feigned the possibility for one to enter and stroll around in it. In all its restraint Heller's white is by far more powerful, offering itself to the beholder as an innocent form void. Yet as it is being viewed it proves to be very protean. Being viewed, it is exposed to less innocent eyes, who use the opportunity to bestow form on it. This being a perspectival process, a process of projecting perspective into the whiteness, is not merely due to the picture titles. Those translate elements of perspective into fictitious place names while on a different level defining the depicted figures as intra-pictorial substitutes for the actual beholder. However, it is the latter who remains responsible for evoking perspective in the image. He or she remains in the picture—literally, figuratively and redoubled.

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