BJÖRN VEDDER

LES MOTS ET LES IMAGES

At the centre of Bernhard Martin's multi-part painting *Le Mot* (2018) we see two figures who look very much alike. They sport long hair, beards and sunglasses. If their faces were not formed from a dripping, oozing mass, we might entertain the idea that we are looking at a double portrait of Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill – the frontmen of Texan blues rock band ZZ Top, whose long hair, beards and sunglasses are signature features, albeit always combined with dark hats. But these bizarre, mirrored heads are not the only remarkable and confusing thing in this painting by Bernhard Martin. To the right of the heads something is exploding. Smoke and fire rise, boards, splinters and stones scatter in all directions. Even an ear flies through the air, threatening to collide with a bouquet of black ruffles, which might also be a toupee. Emerging from its centre like a face is a bulging bottom in French knickers. From behind the cloud of smoke, an electric wire juts into the foreground. A flash of lightning in the form of the word "NOYES" erupts from the cable. Below, a fist slams onto a tabletop. To the left, a row of sixteen microphones stretches across a large part of the lower edge of the painting, while from the right a giant wave, several stories tall and full of spray and foam, comes crashing towards the middle. Obviously, it also carries some sort of slime which creeps, long-fingered and biliously yellow, over the top of the microphones. Enthroned high on the crest of the wave, like a battleship, sits a melting piece of holey cheese. The background is dark and lit only in places, be it by the slime of the wave giving off toxic vapours or the explosion breathing fire and illuminating the sky. All in all, it seems some apocalyptic spectacle is afoot here.

What is it that confronts the viewer of Bernhard Martin's three-metre-wide painting? Are the Blues Rockers of the Apocalypse holding a press conference? Is a wave of molten cheese threatening to inundate the world? Or is what we see only a stage show with an absurd backdrop? These questions are not easily reconciled. That is because Bernhard Martin combines highly diverse pieces of content on one plane. This is not only the case in *Le Mot* and other recent works on display for the first time in the exhibition *Image Ballet* at Haus am Waldsee. Even in some of his earlier works Martin joins heterogeneous image content, which results in spectacular paintings that confront the viewer with an unreal situation. This manifests an extravagant imagination, which discovers remote connections between the objects, as well as a wit that seems to jump at everything from everywhere at once.[1] Moreover, these combinations and compositions provide a preliminary clue to what Martin means when he says that he "no longer paint[s] but only illuminate[s] [the medium of] painting".[2]

His works demonstrate the capacity of painting to take up any subject or motif, to transfer any content from one's intuition or representation to the canvas and combine it at will with any other. It is specific to the medium of painting that the overall composition – despite all the tension created by the content – nevertheless appears seamless and homogenous, and not like a random collage. Painting is able to render infinitely subtle transitions and to unite things far removed from each other in reality in a uniform image space.

This advantage distinguishes painting, for instance, from the digital media, which can simulate processes and transitions because each pixel, as small, and hence invisible to the naked eye, as it may be in any given situation, is clearly defined and sharply delineated. Media images and reproductions, as well as copies in the sense of fakes, were an important source for finding images from the very beginning. Early on the image streams of the electronic media served as Martin's stock-in-trade.[3] This can be traced all the way to his colour scheme, which is based on the bright colours of digital image agencies.

Another core impulse for his works is the word, which Martin says provides him regularly with his point of departure.

THE ILLUSTRATION OF PAINTING

However, what exactly does it mean when a painter, whose work evidently feeds on the flood of images and translates them into visually stunning creations, proceeds from words? It means, on the one hand, that he proceeds from the word or, philosophically speaking, from the concept of painting. The question this raises for him, therefore, is not "What should I paint?" or "How should I paint?" but rather, "What is painting?" or "What can painting mean today?" That Martin does not answer this question in treatises is not only owed to his attitude as an artist, but also to the idea that he does not wish to annotate himself. For he is only too aware that "[h]e who annotates himself falls below his own level".[4] This attitude is connected, most of all, to the knowledge that we have to make our concepts "sensible" if they are not to remain empty, as Immanuel Kant said. It

follows that we have "to add an object to them in intuition".[5] Therefore we will not understand what painting is if we treat this question only theoretically and attempt to describe as precisely as possible all the features that comprise painting, while distinguishing it from other arts or other things. Rather, we will only gain insight if we make painting intuitable – that is, if we bring it into intuition through images.

In this, the visualisation of the concepts takes the opposite direction to that of the concepts' formation. Concept formation is a process of abstracting from the abundance of individual features of a concrete intuition. It emphasises certain elements while pushing others into the background. Thus the representation is impoverished, since it loses some of the richness of the features as it gains in differentiation of the features.[6] The illustration of the concepts, in turn, makes it possible to intuit individual aspects in a concrete manner. For the concept of painting this means that Martin makes it intuitable or illustrates it by rendering particular features of painting in a way that allows us to experience painting with our senses. They include, among others, the colouring, the homogenous image space, fluent transitions and blurred contours. Equally, they include techniques such as handling oil and acrylic paints, drawing and collage. Or Martin allows us to experience various styles such as abstract or figurative painting, and even such opposites as Realism and Surrealism. He turns to the style of poetic abstraction or Art Informel. Openly, he references the late mediaeval painter Hans Baldung Grien, or Willem De Kooning, or Roy Lichtenstein.

Furthermore, he sees similarities to digital images when he says that he understands painting as being quite similar to the use of the "brush" among the graphic tools in Photoshop. That tool can be used for generating new as well as editing existing digital images. While the options of the brush-tool are still limited, however, Martin's works reveal the full spectrum of painterly possibilities. His paintings show with sweeping lucidity the historical depth and personal, artistic condition with which painting as a species of image generation is associated today. That Bernhard Martin as a painter proceeds from the word, therefore, fundamentally means that he takes the concept of painting as his point of departure and hence that he illustrates what it means to paint in our times.

In turn, however, that also means – and this leads us back to the initial question as to what the viewer is dealing with when confronted with *Le Mot* – that, primarily, it is not about what the pictures show but *how* they show it. *Le Mot* is not an image of the blues rock of the apocalypse, but rather one about certain features of painting. It is not primarily about communicating something of the picture's contents to the viewer and using certain techniques to do so, but rather rendering visible something about painting as such. And this even holds for the colour palette, which is loud not because the contents are to be shown in a loud or terrible light, but because these colours refer to the glowing digital sources of the images Martin processes.

The painting *Elysian Fields* (2017) illuminates this focus of the painter on painting as such with particular clarity. It shows a man wearing only socks and shorts, pouring paint into a space model, which has a slanting floor and an empty picture frame hanging on its miniature wall, with a vehement gesture. The head of the man, who might be the artist, dissolves into splashing paint. Only his glasses remain in place, and a leaf sticks to his dripping hair. The walls of the room and a broken windowpane in the background no longer provide secure footing but instead recede or splinter apart. The painting revolves around the question how an idea finds its form. The eponymous Elysian Fields refer to the site where the heroes of Greek myth are received and transferred into a paradisal state.

AN UNENDING LABYRINTH OF SIGNS AND REFERENCES

The most important application with language, with discourse and debates that are coming from the media, is their translation into images. *Le Mot*, for example, carries these words, the painter's point of departure, in its very title. The image shows the words as such but in the form of foaming waves and toxic slime, which drips from them onto the microphones, and moreover in the spongy, wafting shapes that can be found in many of Bernhard Martin's recent works: for example, *About* (2018), which also has a wave of colourful foam lapping microphones. The silhouette of a speaker takes up a large part of the right half of the image, while on the left we see an abstract figure who emits a speech bubble in the shape of a cloud. Furthermore, this group includes the painting *Entwurf für eine Verwaltungsskulptur* (2010), in which a big white soft cheese is running down some filing shelves, thus recalling the German colloquialism that calls verbiage "cheese". Such idiomatic expressions seem to play a role in *Le Mot* as well, where melting cheese rides the crest of waves

of chitchat. Another instance is provided by *Big Cheese* (2017), the title speaking for itself. That image focuses exclusively on the, by now, familiar microphones and a toxic, yellow wave that is on the verge of washing over the microphones. And also among the works, which translate language linguistic froth into image foam, are the paintings *Zu Gast in der Venusfalle* (2019), whose figures communicate through foams, and *Disconnected Truth* (2018), which, in turn, shows a torrent of words, microphones and document files.

However, Martin exposes the foam character of many public speeches not only by rendering them as image foams, but also by comparing the different signs – that is, linguistic signs and image signs – with each other. For since Martin is employing the former as the latter, he highlights an important difference between them. While the linguistic sign is arbitrary, and so can be used at random for what it is to designate, image signs are iconic: they depict the object they refer to. The independence of statements from their object – the words and the things they refer to – is the result of this arbitrary link in the linguistic sign between the sign and what it signifies. For if this link is arbitrary, then the truth of a statement is untethered from the relation to an object which it talks about. At least, this holds if no one simultaneously points to what we are talking about. Mostly, that is not the case, especially not in speech on more complex states of affairs, as they tend to occur in public debates. That is what the title *Disconnected Truth* points to. Whether a statement is true or false is not determined by the things it talks about but by the relations it shares with other statements. That is, the statement is either plausible or implausible. Plausibility is the truth untethered from its reference to its object in relation to other statements. There are reasons that justify the statement, but, as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked in a lecture from the early 1930s: "However far the reasons go, they stop short before the fact."[7]

Connected to the untethering of reasons from facts is an infinite regress of justifications because every reason points to other reasons which, in turn, require justification. Under each reason then, just as in the painting *Elysian Fields*, a chasm of justifications opens up, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida notes, who has taken this uncertainty concerning what is, or is not, valid further than anyone.[8] From that perspective even the most well-reasoned speech appears woolly and floundering. It becomes part of the wafting, frothy mass of the chatter, which Martin lets drip on the microphones in toxic green and sticky white, or shows as a cloud in space, as in *Le Mot* and

most recently *About* (2018). The speeches given everywhere, from the talk shows to the blogs, on online forums and on podiums, are (more or less) nebulous assertions, which coagulate with the countless other speeches and statements, which they address, refer to or oppose, to a foamy structure without centre, a tacky cycle without origin.[9] Bernhard Martin paints these wafting (sign-) foams in which we are at risk of drowning, just like the figure in his painting *Many Options* (2018). His imagery, however, presents these word foams in an affirmative way, in bright colours, an exploding abundance of content and a sumptuous flow of forms.

What seems prima facie a critique of our times and media turns out to be "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming", as Derrida writes. It is "the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. [...] And it plays without security. [...] In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace".[10]

And yet even this affirmation of semiotic insecurity is once more broken. That is part and parcel of the permanent positional change and semantic flexibility of Martin's painting. For the linguistic outpourings do not only possess a joyous character; often, they appear to be violent and hurtful. This is perfectly illuminated by the torrent of words emerging from a mouth in the painting *Disconnected Truth*: a mouth that is screaming and contorted many times over, that is spewing at its listener not just words but also bile, toxins and even bullets. This scene can be read as a reference to the debate culture, which has suffered a dramatic loss in quality through the influence of online forums as there people can debate anonymously and thus easily risk being mean-spirited or even downright malicious. From a more fundamental point of view, this kind of violence can be understood as the result of speech that has become ungrounded. For if a chasm of reasons opens under every reason, then every speech that does not fall into this infinite regress but claims to have a firm footing by appealing to some reason will have something violent about it. It posits ground where none exists. It draws a distinction where no criteria for it are available yet. Ultimately, this is true for every rule and law we follow. That is why the philosopher Michel de Montaigne spoke of a "mythical foundation" of the law by the sixteenth century.[11] Establishing a law is a violent act, as it happens before the distinctions of just/unjust and legitimate/illegitimate, which are only possible *after the law has been*

established, not before. Laws, reasoning, justifications and rules pertain to the authority that enforces them, and that is, ultimately, through violence.

THE DISGUSTING AND THE HOLY

Foams and juices do not only play the role of metaphor for the chatter that pervades the media. They can also be interpreted as symbols for sexual impulses and passions. In particular this becomes clear through their connection with the numerous phallic and vaginal-uteral forms with which they so often go together in Martin's works. The ambiguity of the billowing, wafting, flowing masses as linguistic and libidinous foam is perfectly exemplified by the painting *Zu Gast in der Venusfalle*. But these libidinous foams are also in evidence in *Le Mot*, *Innocence Empire* (2013), *Die Feder* (2018), *10.2.10* and *8.3.10* (both 2010) and even in *Äpfel+Birnen* (2009), to name just a few. This raises the question, however, of whether the linguistic foams are always libidinous foams, and vice versa, because our impulses and passions also affect our speech and undermine our reasons and justifications as a mighty stream can wash away roads, and because they are a foamy and seductive language, as it were, which captures us and in which we could drown – like the characters in Martin's paintings.

A particularity in Martin's representation of these sexual events is not only the recognition of his proximity to language but also the fact that he understands them as bodily events by highlighting the orifices and bodily fluids involved. After all, his works are full of splashing liquids and dripping hollows, moist sponges and swelling bodies. This unfiltered depiction of the sexual drive plugs into a mediaeval tradition of showing every aspect of humanity in all its creatureliness. However, it violates the bourgeois criteria of what is suitable and in good taste, which has banned and placed under taboo the animal nature of life since the nineteenth century. The fluid and slimy is, from a bourgeois perspective, a representative of the disgusting. While an open mouth was still considered a "wide open gate into the inward parts of the body"[12] in mediaeval iconography, for Johann Joachim Winckelmann in the middle of the eighteenth century it transgressed the boundary of what could be represented.[13] The same holds for all bodily fluids that have been banned to the realm of the disgusting: "I would prefer not to see the running

nose",[14] wrote the chaplain at the Weimar court, Johann Gottfried Herder, regarding *Laokoon*.

Although this erasing of the orifices and bodily fluids in the arts could not be sustained after 1900, images of orifices and bodily fluids are mostly removed from the everyday world of media images. The contemporary body, as presented by the public media, is closed, firm and dry. Nothing flows, nothing slides, nothing opens to the outside world or mingles with it. This is also connected to digital image culture: for it pays homage to the ideal of the smooth and the firm, shunning everything rough or soft or fluent or faltering.[15]

But these are precisely crucial properties of the body, not only, but certainly primarily, in the context of sexuality as Martin displays it in his paintings. Moreover, this demonstrates that painting is capable of translating the formal qualities of the body into a language of images, while digital image culture can only simulate them. But it does that on an immense scale. For if the bodily fluids and orifices have disappeared from our everyday imagery, a gigantic realm of shadows has risen with a pornographic industry that trades in almost nothing else. This segment accounts for roughly a third of all internet traffic.[16] The result is a strange schism: while the public representation of the bodies has been sanitised, there exists a shadow realm of pornography that reduces the body to the sexual, and the sexual, in turn, to orifices and bodily fluids. Bernhard Martin attempts to overcome this division in his paintings by putting the body in its entirety into the frame, linking it to sexuality and the libidinous. In doing so, he takes advantage of the benefits analogue painting has over the digital image culture.

Tethered to the ideal of the dry, contained and smooth body as espoused in the reality of the media is a societal aspect: the loss of what is holy, and the secularisation of society. This, too, is addressed by Martin by showing what this ideal excludes because it is deemed disgusting: the natural, animal, creatural. For the disgusting is the unfiltered and the impure. The German word "rein" (pure) originally means filtered, freed from the impure and unclean.[17] And the filter, which is applied here, are the culturally sanctioned, established hygiene regulations, or purity prescriptions, of a community, its customs, traditions and faith. What is considered impure is therefore always negatively related to what is regarded as pure. What a community finds disgusting is the negative foil of what is sacred to the members of that community.[18] However, if the disgusting disappears from the image vocabulary (or is pushed into the realm of shadows),

society is also at risk of losing the holy from view. It becomes secular or profane. And that does not just mean worldly and oblivious of all religious purposes. It also means being rational in the sense of means-ends calculations, economically homogenous and dedicated only to one's own self-interest. The profane world is a world where everything has purpose but nothing has value.[19] It is a world where everything is constantly optimising, where everything has to run smoothly, where process and profit maximisation reigns supreme, where freedom and democracy are only simulated, individuality is made to conform and differences are ironed out until no ambiguities and no fluent transitions remain. The aesthetic expression of that profane world is the world of the digital image.

Because Bernhard Martin's paintings put in the picture what the digital image culture has repressed, they oppose the reduction of society to the profane and the economy. Through the presence of the disgusting they vouch for the presence of what is holy.

1   "Seine Neugierde ist durch nichts gebunden, sie springt von überall her, auf alles zu" (His curiosity is unfettered, it jumps at everything from everywhere at once), Elias Canetti wrote of the physicist and aphorist from Göttingen, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, comparing his wit to a flea. Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen. Aufzeichnungen 1942–1972*, Munich 1973, p. 304.

2   From a conversation of the author with the artist.

3   On urban image sources, see Mark Gisbourne, "Der Maler als Vagabund", in: *Bernhard Martin. Touch of Charme*, exh. cat. Villa Arson, Nice, Ostfildern-Ruit 2005, unpaginated.

4   Ernst Jünger, *Blätter und Steine*, Hamburg 1934, p. 226 (Epigrammatischer Anhang no. 100).

5   "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind's concepts sensible (i.e., to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts)." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge edition 1998, B 75/A 48.

6   Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, Hildesheim 1963, photographic reprint of 7th ed., Halle 1779, § 531, § 652.

7   *Wittgestein's Lectures*, Cambridge *1930–1932*, ed. Desmond Lee, Oxford 1982, p. 88. Accordingly, Wittgenstein in his late work, the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), is no longer concerned with the conditions under which a sentence is true (as he was in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* of 1921), but only with the conditions under which a sentence can be justified.

8   Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", in: *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, New York and London 1992, pp. 3–67.

9   See, for example, Jacques Derrida: "Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of a totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center." Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass, Chicago 1978, pp. 278–293, here p. 279. Cf. also Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edition, Baltimore 1998, chapter 2, "Linguistics and Grammatology".

10 Derrida 1978, p. 292.

11 He writes of "le fondement mysthique de leur autorité", in: Michel de Montaigne, "De l'éxperience", in his *Les essais*, ed. Denis Bjaï, Bénédicte Boudou, Jean Céard and Isabelle Pantin, Paris 2001, pp. 1654–1740, here p. 1669.

12 Michail M. Bachtin, *Rabelais und seine Welt. Volkskultur als Gegenkultur*, ed. Renate Lachmann, transl. Gabriele Leupold, Frankfurt a. M. 1995, pp. 391, 381.

13 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, photographic reproduction of the edition Vienna 1934, Darmstadt 1972, p. 271f.

14 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 3, *Kritische Wälder oder Betrachtungen, die Wissenschaft und Kunst des Schönen betreffend, nach Maßgabe neuerer Schriften. 1769*, Berlin 1878, p. 184.

15 The approach of this juxtaposition has been developed by Byung-Chul Han in an interview with the magazine contained in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2014. In the interview Han announced that he wanted to write an aesthetics along these lines. However, to the best of my knowledge that book has never been published. Byung-Chul Han, "Tut mir leid, aber das sind Tatsachen", interview with Niels Boeing and Andreas Lebert, in: *Zeit Wissen*, no. 5, 19 August 2014.

16 These numbers are from 16 May 2018, collected by the data journalist Anne Röttgerkamp and found under: https://www.netzsieger.de/ratgeber/internet-pornografie-statistiken [last accessed 1 January 2020].

17 The German adjective "rein" (pure) comes from the Middle High German word "hraini", meaning pure, clean, clear, filtered, free of sin and sickness; see the article "hrani – rein" in: Frank Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen Primäradjektive*, Berlin – New York 1993, p. 302f.

18 Cf. Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002.

19 On the distinction of "holy" and "profane/secular", which I assume here, as well as on the description of bourgeois-capitalist society as a profane/secular society, see Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism", in: *New German Critique*, no. 16 (winter 1979), pp. 64–84.