

SIGNS IN WOOD

Necessary annotations on the beating of wood and on forms of communication

By Philipp Maurer

The most important aspect regarding the person of Michael Schneider and his work are the international references or rather the international character of his thinking and working experiences. After finishing his studies at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts with Professor Maximilian Melcher, Michael Schneider studied in Japan for four years. After his concentrated and comprehensive occupation with the woodcut during his time at the Vienna Academy he did not aim at becoming a "Japanese" woodcutter, rather intended to consolidate the Japanese technique and esthetic with European thinking, to offset them in a worldwide understandable synthesis. His prizes, awards, exhibitions and acknowledgments in Asia and Europe show that he has succeeded.

The artistic concept of Michael Schneider is one that intensively occupies art and philosophy in the 20th century and displayed a long tradition in the European philosophy: the sign, its versatility and modes of interpretation. Therefore Michael Schneider moves into the center of discussion about communication, message and politics, in which his artistic tool, the woodblock print, has been located from the beginning. The woodcut, or printmaking in general, was the first technique of mass communication that met the social function that nowadays is met by Mass Media and Internet in timely technology. And the discussion has been and is one about the use of resources, about the concentration and subservience of communication, and caused to prevent uninfluenced communication from happening.

The open ambiguity of the sign was already a subject in the earlier woodcuts of Michael Schneider, during his time at the Academy in Vienna, when he used traditional tools to cut traditionally into wood. References to landscape and flora, screens and fences, musical notations were starting points for the formulation of symbols, which can not be developed from language in a satisfactory manner, not only in the sense of Paul Klee by making the invisible visible, but by conferring visual materiality to visual concepts, that will infer an emotional and intellectual world outside from the rationality of reason. Michael Schneider developed a readable world of ambiguity outside the necessary readability of standardized signs.

Michael Schneider intensified his occupation with the sign in Japan, where he got to know a new world of ambiguous signs: Japanese characters, taken from the Chinese, that characterize with one form various things, therefore they have multiple meanings and only in the context, not always obvious, they are readable. A characteristic example for this Japanese thinking is the name of Mount Fuji. Not only one meaning is known, but because different meanings for the sign Fuji are given, the specific meaning for the mountain is apparent.

Multiple meanings, interpretability, mystery characterize the understanding of art works for us, they provide a specific quality. For us today, cave drawings, rock scratchings and stone plates prove a challenge through their incomprehensibility, their modes of interpretation. And for the people who created and read these signs, they not only marked an importance, but formed a relation between the levels of effectiveness and thoughts, were symbols, visible magic and desirable facts.

The painters of the early Italian Renaissance enjoyed the use of mysterious symbols and elements in their work. The deciphering was only possible for an intelligent, observant person, who in addition was familiar with the spiritual legacy of the Orient, the Bible, with its infinite multiple interpretations, with the classical mythology and literature. In the rational thinking and painting of the Early Renaissance the decoding was achieved through knowledge, the mystery remained an intellectual, and was principally solvable. The High Renaissance created its mystery in the area of Psychology: the inexpressible, indescribable smile of the Mona Lisa appeals to the viewer to answer to this smile emotionally; yet the answer remains in the inexpressible, mimic sphere. In his etching "Melencolia", Dürer combines both these elements: the emotional enigma of the pensive seated female figure, the intellectual mystery of the mathematical symbols and scientific instruments, which have been replaced by esoteric symbols.

Artworks enquire for communication: the viewer is requested to interpret the message for themselves, to consummate the artwork through participation, viewing and analysis. The modern artwork is according to Umberto Eco in his aesthetic principle work "Opera aperta" (Milano 1962), an open work, a carrier of communication, not a one-way street but an existing dialogue.

Printmaking is the art that informs a large audience. The information can be very obvious but also very ambiguous: definite was the message by a woodcutter from Salzburg around 1390, who cut two-dimensional transfers of three-dimensional Madonnas and Crosses into wood and then offered it as printed promotional material to interested abbots in order to sustain contracts for wood carvings. The message in Dürer's woodprinting series of the Apocalypse and the Life of Maria is deliberately ambiguous: discussion contributions for the current debate on Ideology, Religion and Politics.

The theoretical development in visual communication gains a new dimension in the Renaissance, caused and inspired by woodcuts like the illustrations to Sebastian Brants "Narrenschiff" and to the "Schedelschen Weltchronik" from Nürnberg. Here too the tension between certitude and ambiguity is visible. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the signs in the social order within their contextual nomination became more and more discrepant to the necessities of the addressees, the Expressionist artists assigned themselves to the interpretation of archaic signs as an artistic value: the smile and the scream are appellative mimic messages with multiple references to be interpreted by the viewer.

In the production of multiplicity, Michael Schneider moves a step further than the woodcut seems to allow. The traditional woodcut only knows the sharp, razor-sharp divided areas of black and white. This separation occurs both through the cut with the knife and the print by the pot and roll press. Michael Schneider however does not cut, but beats the stone into the wood, he does not print with the press, but with the baren. By beating with the stone one does not receive sharp edges, but slanting areas, more or less "slopes" that will be colored in; while printing with the baren and the tampon, "slopes" are individually "scanned" and will, depending on the print, pass color onto the paper placed on the woodblock. Michael Schneider controls and directs this process of printing carefully. Each print from the woodblock is therefore an individual print, one possibility of the image from the block amongst many. The form and the composition of the finished image are not developed by beating only but also by the printing itself.

The extended interpretability of the sign in art exists in contrast to the explicitness and respectively the normed multiplicity of the signs that the industrialization and communication

of the 20th century strive for. A traffic sign has to be definite (and it is only for those who have learned about its meaning), but intended to be interpretable are the signs of advertising. They do combine the invitation to buy with the appeal to reach many despite often unclarified expressed wishes.

Michael Schneider regards the treated woodblocks, following the East Asian ritual stones, as "undeciphered plates", the frottage, as "reconstructions", according to the Believers and Travelers who created the frottages onto paper from ritual stones for their own production, for the so called souvenirs. The new collection of ten wood-block prints by Michael Schneider is therefore consequently titled "reconstructions of undeciphered plates". The works of this folder develop aesthetic thoughts towards the relationship between the filled, modeled and the empty space, over messages of landscapes and music, of notations and scripts. Like all cognition a process prolongs in an interplay of new beginnings - tentative connections, verification, reconsideration, rephrasing - a process that is comprehensible in an image through the sign of the spiral. As such the plates of Michael Schneider extend into new forms and return on the last plate back to the form of the first: at the end of the folder there is a sheet, similar to the first, yet very different, and the viewer occupies the same position, but nevertheless on a different, higher level, invigorated by a new experience. This process can be repeated again and again: repeated viewing leads into the realm of one's psychology, appeals to the archive of memory inherent to each human, to emotions, thoughts. This personal archive is the key to the individual reconstruction of undeciphered plates, to the journey of the inner self and to the personal art experience of the ritual stone.

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