

Navigator

Austrian artist Manfred Hebenstreit is often referred to as an artist/traveler. And not in vain, for toponyms are often present in his pictures in various forms—not just oikonyms, but hydronyms (Manfred is a snorkeler and diver) and even speleonyms (the artist likes to explore caves).

However, we need to clarify one thing here. The term “traveler” has the slightly ironic if not negative connotation of a kind of global tourist, passively recording typological impressions, a comfortable participant in a tourist industry which has now penetrated the most exotic and extreme corners of the world. Hebenstreit's complex relation to the mimetic, his lack of orientation towards depiction, towards reproducing landscapes (in the sense of postcard views), is enough in itself to show that this term fails to do justice to the fruits of his artistic activity. Furthermore, it's worth noting that the artist uses geographical concepts less often than physical and topographical ones to describe his works—*Narrow Vertical*, *Entry*, *Downstream*, *Air Layer*, *Aqueous Solution* and so forth.

We also can't fail to notice Hebenstreit's ability to escape the boundaries of the environments available to him, however exotic they may be (caves and the underwater world), and blaze his way into the imaginary realms of myth and fairytale. Or even depict travel itself in an abstract, natural-philosophical light, as in *Through the Flower*. However, we could get by without naming these works at all. It's enough to simply feel the currents with which the artist's work is charged. This is the energy of overcoming, of constant denotation of the space in which the artist finds himself (or which he independently creates), of defining his place within it, via both reflection and tactile sensation. In a word, Hebenstreit is far from a simple traveler. And far more than just a traveler.

He's ... a navigator.

This navigator's, this helmsman's, need to locate oneself within space seems to be quite evident even in the artist's earlier works. The origins of his art can be traced to several sources; most see its genesis in *L'Art Informel*. It seems to me, however, that issues of style and form-creation are less important for him than those, as I've said, of identification. Even in his early works, Hebenstreit confidently applies to the canvas supremely powerful lines and daubs which have special significance for him. To seek an analogy in them to other artists, or some formal response or echo, would hardly be productive, though such points of origin could naturally be found if desired: contemporary artists, even ones not tending towards representation, live in an extremely rich iconosphere. However, I think that Hebenstreit, even in his early works, was little inspired by the spirit of obeisance to predecessors or rivalry with contemporaries. He had more important things to do. He was defining poles and coordinates, entries and exits. He was surveying the territory. He was carrying out reconnaissance. The persistence with which he immediately takes to the process of orientation (up-down, center, poles and exit points) reveals that very same navigator's complex: to create landmarks and signs of orientation (all those triangulation points, trailblazes, buoys and mileposts). These could least of all be called gestures of homage or rivalry. No, they're simply necessities for survival, for losing one's orientation means allowing oneself to dissolve into space and vanish without a trace.

This is the essentially existential urge that moves the artist when he demarcates his space with thick, impetuous lines and spots.

This is a rather strange assertion, when we consider that Hebenstreit's space is not figurative. Indeed, it's hard not to notice the absence (or insufficiently revealed presence) of the mimetic, representational aspect in his work. In other words, the non-manifestation of “locality” *per se*. When faced with a more or less representationally developed work, we enter it (into its “locality”) as we would enter a furnished room filled with familiar objects. (Naturally, this “entry” is somewhat conditional: with the Lesser Dutch Masters the “door” is “opened” differently than in a canvas by Cézanne). When, on the other hand, we're confronted with a work where figurality is subtilized to the point of disappearance, the cultural, perceptual-semantic, psycho-motoric and other premises of the aforementioned “entry” process demand radical readjustment.

(The works of Paul Klee frightened Rilke by their lack of a defining reference point from which the artist sees the world and from which the world correspondingly sees the viewer—in other words, by their interrupted or “postponed” communication. Klee referred to this mutual positioning as “cosmic”; Rilke, as the situation “behind nature's back”).

So from the very beginning of his career, the artist found it important to “latch onto” a space of some sort, even an abstract one, to demarcate it, to establish himself in it, to determine its entrances and exits. That's why (and not because of some response to *L'Art Informel* or, say, the Neo-Expressionism of the Berlin *Neue Wilde*) his powerful lines and smears of color are so signally expressive, marking up-down, north-south and center. They're like navigation coordinates for some course, some route essential for survival.

But where does that course lay? Indeed, it's worth asking that simple question, one which none has seemingly dared to ask: Where is the topography of the artist's signals located? Just whose coordinates does he have in mind? And what sort of topography is it? Can we apply this term in its cartographic, geodesic sense, or is this some anatomical or optical topography? In short, where is the navigation taking place? In what space? An actually existing one (it's not for nothing that Hebenstreit slips in geographically recognizable “beacons” into the names of his paintings—Sinai, Mexico, Siena, Iraq and so forth)? Or an abstract one (which, by the way, could either retain its representational matrix or be completely symbolic and topological—the final stage in a whole cogitative series of mediations, encodings and geometricizations)? In other words, is this the reality of consciousness? Or are these the coordinates of something external yet unavailable to our perception (like Klee's “cosmos”, for example)?

I don't think Hebenstreit raises this issue purposely. For him, the process of navigation *per se* is what's important—and therefore the interference pattern of zones, environments, and material states. In this he's not alone. He was preceded by the classics of modernism. How deeply did Kandinsky, the founding father of the abstract method, investigate the question of mediating external reality in its transformation into the reality of consciousness, i.e. the transition from

pictorial representation to pure substance. As we know, he divided his works into "impressions", "improvisations" and "compositions" according to their distance from the real-life impulse. In the final stage, that of the "composition", the artist arrives at pure abstraction. But even at the "improvisation" level, figurality is hidden somewhere in the subcortex and the conception is realized by means of pure painting—the dramaturgy of lines, spots and color. Nonetheless, in the foreground of the famous work *Improvisation 11* we can distinctly make out the outlines of ... a dog. We encounter something like this in many of Hebenstreit's works, too, such as *Dog or Hare*, *Elephant's Wedding* and *Coyote*. Of course, the artist includes a certain identifying message in the very names of these works, which stimulates the viewer's imagination (and in the case of the last-mentioned one we also see a kind of salutation to Joseph Beuys and his famous work *I Love America and America Loves Me*). But this isn't the main thing. Rather, the artist feels the need to emphasize that the process of navigation itself is more important for him than the concrete state of representation, i.e. whether visualization has totally "detached" from reality or still retains a certain rudimentary contact with it (traces of images from the animal world, at the very least). By the way, the role of such signals/messages is also played by geographical names connected with physical and color characteristics, e.g. *Black Siena* and *Iron Europe*, or by indicators of a sort which record sensory states: *Red-Green Heat*, *Red Ice*, *Freezing Point* and so forth. Though it's hard to locate the concrete visual source in these works, they insistently—both verbally and visually—signal the fact that certain mental and psycho-physical ties are retained through all the stages of mediation of reality and departure from it to "other shores". As to the destinations arrived at, they can diverge widely, from "pure" non-representational abstraction to a "hierarchy of spirits" (to use a term by the Russian philosopher Berdyaev) to topology—geometric structures of objects, including cosmic ones.

The natural-scientific discourse, so to speak, is important for the artist in general, as all his measurements, work with light and refraction, and planimetric, topological and digital investigations bear out. And it seems that the choice of materials such as glass or iron to support the image (and not as mere substrate but as an integral component of the resulting work) is especially important for him from not merely an esthetic but also an ontological standpoint: in his journey through reality he must rest on something objective and reliable, something not tied to mirages and mental aberrations.

At this point the question arises: With what goal in mind does Hebenstreit undertake his navigations, what does he get from them and what meaning does he invest in his endless process of "attachment" to various states of environment and consciousness?

I would answer thus: Hebenstreit's navigation opposes chaos and entropy through intentionality.

This is the source of his obsessive urge which I provisionally define as "attachment to locality": the complex of an artist/helmsman who must determine his location in space (any space) using all available means, be they orientation points, stars, light, the heat environment, the "signature of nature" (such is the name of one recent series, in which natural, immediate sensory data are emblemized with the aid of the computer), or signs and marks on a wall (and why not?—the "Otok Krk" series contains arabesque patterns reminiscent of a strange ideographic script. These arabesque-ideograms have a "local" connection of course (the historic city of Krk is situated at a cultural crossroads), but they clearly serve a different purpose too: they seem to indicate a new turn in the road, an exit to somewhere).

This is the reason for the artist's overt articulation (both in the names and the visual aspect of his main series and separate works) of his procedure of ordering, measurement, illumination and organization (for example, in *Creating the Earth*, *Earth Scales*, *Thinning*, *Lighting* and other works).

This structuring tendency can be observed most clearly in Manfred and Billa Hebenstreit's recent project "Kometor", dedicated to 15th-century astronomer, mathematician and humanist Georg von Peurbach. Here, of course, the historical particulars themselves—the thinker's interest in the systematization and symbolism of numbers, and especially his study of Plato's system of elements and bodies—have provided abundant material for the realization of the artist's topological intentions, most notably in his work with the geometry of stellar formations.

All the same, Hebenstreit's most important navigation has taken place on completely unexpected territory, that which I would refer to as the mytho-poetical.

In order to arrive there, the artist required new experience: emotional, visual and ... investigatory. Today Hebenstreit is opening up the underwater world for himself; he's recently done much traveling to the caves, grottoes and underwater lakes of Austria, Slovenia and Croatia. Both these environments, the underwater and subterranean, have allowed him to alter his very way of seeing and orienting within space (It's worth recalling that Daniel Buren also specially thematized changes in spatial orientation in his "orienting" installations). Hebenstreit's new navigational experience has guided his works in glass and artificial lighting sources. The experiments in glass began in 2001; new technologies allowed the artist to combine expressive and somewhat symbolic painting on glass with images of an objective character (digital photo and computer images) as well as introduce special optical effects (air bubbles and so forth). However, this was just the beginning. Hebenstreit has been able to turn these newly acquired technical possibilities into a means of expressing deep-lying mental strata which originate in the collective consciousness while possessing at the same time a distinct individuality.

The mytho-poetical discourse is traditionally strong in Northern European culture; in the sphere of modern art it's represented by such figures as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and others. So what makes Hebenstreit's perception of this material individual and characteristic? There are probably several explanations here. Above all, as has just been noted, his personal experience of orientation in new spaces and environments, guided by empirical objectivity and the spirit of investigation, e.g. the studies of light's transformation and refraction through water, of backlighting effects resulting from the passage of light through pack ice, and so forth.

And there's also the effect of a sort of naturally occurring "stained-glass", when light shines through large granules of color, "sculpting" forms. The principle of refraction through color finds further development in the complex structures

resembling masses of icebergs or refracting rocks which the artist creates using glass and mirrors. The resulting stalactites, stalagmites and karst-like strata of color are permeated with an inner glow. And all this is connected with myth and fairytale, conveying a poetic message. How? Apparently, on top of the previously discussed natural-scientific foundation the artist imposes a form-creating element (by the way, the stained-glass principle in itself returns us to the realm of myth and epic, to collective forms of creation and perception). What's more, this form creation, for all its seeming spontaneity, is fully thought out and, I would even say, artistically functional. The visual prototypes resulting from this superimposition or grid form a kind of visual analogy for the hidden, primordial structures of consciousness responsible for the generation of myths. As a result, the visual aspect—all these optical transformations conveying transcendental meaning—becomes a kind of "architectural mytho-poetry". We arrive at a higher organicity of visual prototypes emerging from myths, created in their image and likeness. And Hebenstreit feels this—it's no accident that he's named one of his series in glass "Caves and Myths". Caves are pregnant with the mythological. For myths, caves are like an ancestral home.

Very recently, Hebenstreit exhibited his best glass pictures at the Upper Austria Land Exhibition in Ort Castle in Gmunden (Upper Austria). Here we find the ice cave motives, the dramatic story of the mermaid of Traunsee (paraphrased in one of the texts in this publication) and more. Hebenstreit's mytho-poetical discourse is represented here to the fullest degree. And it seems to me that his navigations through the territory of myth contain one more component: childlikeness. Archaizing elements of consciousness are seemingly compensated by childlike ones: stained glass has a "younger relative"—the children's kaleidoscope; the mirror systems remind us of amusement park "halls of mirrors"; and the photographs of underwater mermaids, altered by computer with a touch of kitschy glossiness, along with the "cave" effects, are reminiscent of horror films. What's more, there's something irredeemably childlike in the very technique of painting on glass and in depictions of carpets of stars and stellar ornaments: all of us remember how we once breathed on a frozen windowpane, admiring the crystals of frost, and "breathed out" a hole to peer outwards—to the world outside.

Well, perhaps a real, thoughtful artist/navigator should always take everything along with him: for both childish and adult things are equally necessary for the maintenance of the spirit.

Alexander Borovsky