

MARKUS RAETZ: DELUSIVE ILLUSIONS

THE ART OF MARCUS RAETZ can be defined in a fundamental way: as the tension between intelligence and sensibility. Nothing more can be added by way of initial generalization, for growing out of this tension is a kind of force field which sets everything else in motion and allows the art to appear in all its ambiguity of meaning. Thus an ornamental network gradually becomes readable as an objective motif, or a succession of objective motifs dissolves into ornament. The various levels of meaning are shuffled together, forming complex overlays without relinquishing their original clarity. These metamorphoses do not so much follow an esthetic impulse as they result from an intellectual expedition into the realm of the visible. The visible becomes the point of departure for an associative process that leads, by way of a multitude of transformations, to insight into the generally invisible aspects of the visible. In other words, Raetz's theme is the fiction of appearances.

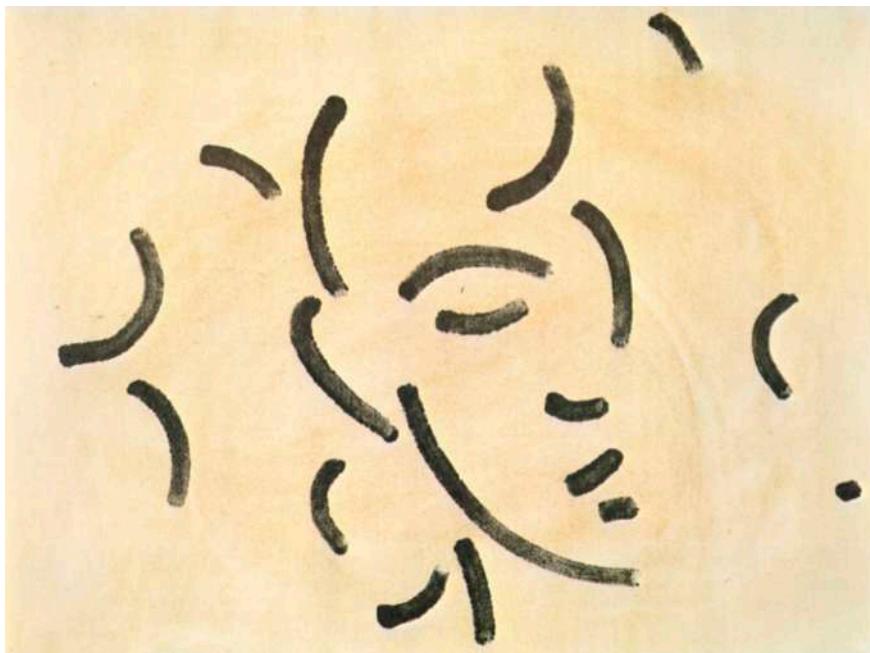
In the "Foreword" to his *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), William Hogarth describes a principle of perception according to which things would be conceived of as empty constructions and imagined to consist of thin shells made up of a fine network of threads. This principle allows the "imagination" to, in Hogarth's words, "naturally enter into the vacant space within this shell, and there at once, as from a centre, view the whole form within. . . ." It is most unlikely that Raetz draws directly on Hogarth's theories, though he certainly values his ingenious wit and love of line; nevertheless, the image of a (fictional) world constructed of a network of lines seems to me an excellent approximation of Raetz's world view. However, what remained largely an artistic method for Hogarth—a method which, consciously or unconsciously, certainly also sharpened his satirical penetration of society's facades—becomes for Raetz a comprehensive cognitive tool which points beyond the production of images.



The continual stream of images flowing from Raetz's hand is first and foremost a constant notation of a parallel stream of thoughts and observations, of ideas whose substance is being investigated in a kind of visual thinking, at once open and precise. It is like thinking with one's hand or drawing with one's head, with the result that the thought becomes sensibly graspable and the drawing intelligent and clear for all its ambiguities of meaning. This graphic stream is a spontaneous reaction to external "reality" which serves as the starting point for uncovering a fictional reality through translation into another medium. Raetz is concerned not with inventing images but with finding as yet unseen images which are released from the invisible realm within the visible only from a particular angle or through a specific way of looking. Or, to put it differently, Raetz investigates the confusion of lines, the thicket of dots, in which visible reality generally presents itself to the seeing eye. It is a kind of investigation that searches for the unknown; it looks for something that is indeed a real image but that has no name. It is a kind of exploration that does not take possession of the something discovered by naming it. As in the case of Lewis Carroll's Snark, the hunt for such a creature is of course a delicate undertaking, demanding the greatest care and above all inventiveness and openness in the choice of means and methods. Carroll's illustrious and bizarre hunting party went at it with "thimbles" and "care," with "forks and hope," with a "railway-share," and with "smiles and soap." However remarkable these instruments of the hunt might appear, on this expedition into the unknown they were as serviceable as any. Of course, regardless of the care taken there's no guarantee, and the knowledge won often consists only in learning that one is astride an illusion—for just as with Carroll, so too in everyday life the Snark usually turns out to be a Boojum. The consequences are of course rarely as grotesque and lethal as in Carroll's epic, where the discoverer of the secret dissolves into nothingness in a "torrent of laughter and cheers." But it may certainly come to pass that one goes a bit mad contemplating the unreality of reality.¹

The uncertainty that results from the tension between objects—between concept and reality—constitutes the ideal soil for Raetz's visual escapades and expeditions. Raetz takes the discrepancy between appearance and reality as the occasion for a playful, loving "*Beobachten des Beobachtens*" ("observation of observing"). That is to say, at the center of his creativity is a continual reflection upon the mechanisms of perception by which an image takes shape in one's mind, and of course the inverse as well—a reflection upon the possible projections by which images can be brought out of one's head into the world. Among other things, it is a matter of how reality can turn into imagination and imagination into reality. In Raetz's work one experiences in an elemental, sensory way that seeing—perception—depends on movement, on an unlimited sequence of seeing-moments to which an equally unlimited sequence of seen images corresponds. Knowledge is produced only by reflection on the deviations, the differences between one image and the next, a reflection which in turn can occur only when the consciousness for the appropriate mental and visual point of view is given. This dynamic concept of image not only informs each individual drawing but connects each work with those that precede and follow it. For in the final analysis they all revolve about the same, in essence unnameable theme. This also explains a certain consistency or self-imposed limitation in the choice of motifs, for at the center of attention is the act of representation, not the representation itself. For instance, by using the human figure again and again, Raetz succeeds—precisely as a result of the supposed familiarity of the motif—in creating a situation in which the observer's attention quite involuntarily focuses on the particular qualities of the mode of representation. That is to say, the familiar takes on an aura of strangeness which lets everything appear in a new light and seduces the eye to look anew and with curiosity.

However much Raetz's art is marked by its intellectual and conceptual tone, as a pictorial event it is full of sensual vividness. What in verbal discourse assumes the dimensions of a semiotic-philosophical problem becomes in Raetz's work a pictorial aperçu. Of course, the problem is presented with some exaggeration, but it remains clearly comprehensible, free of all dogmatic conceptualization. In this way, it is raised to a level where it can be playfully juggled, where it enters into a dialogue with the viewer and where the quest for knowledge becomes an amusement. In this context, an early conceptual work by Raetz must be mentioned. In 1968 he produced 11 little metal plates (of which he sold 10), on each of which was engraved a point in the form of a coordinate intersection above the respective number of the plate. The reverse side gave the name of the owner and the definition—to call it a title would not be correct here—of the work: *11 Punkte ∞ Situationen* (11 Points ∞ Situations). Assuming that a point in motion becomes a line—Hogarth and the Euclidean geometers would nod enthusiastic approval—then Raetz has given us the starting points for a collective drawing that knows no limits, the way to an anamorphosis whose true form not even the bearers of the plates can assess—for who would have precise foreknowledge about his own future movements, let alone those of the others? Be that as it may, the real and constantly changing constellation of the 11 points produces a real image that will remain forever in the imagination.



Raetz shows us images that would probably never be perceived if it weren't for his invitation to participate in the game; unusual images whose origin is not to be sought in the extraordinary, but in the normal, everyday contact with the world of trivial images that dominates our lives, and at the same time in an astonished encounter with nature. Extraordinary experience is no extravagance. It rests purely and simply upon living one's life in a highly conscious way, ripe with curiosity and pleasure. Raetz grants us some insight into the genesis of his images in his *Notizbücher* (Notebooks) which have been a central instrument of his work—a thought-foundation—since the early '70s.² There, the five senses coalesce into a unified whole: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and hand unite to form remarkable shapes. They become, for instance, a hand whose fingers merge with the other sense organs and whose wrist transmutes itself into something reminiscent of the folds of the brain; a better characterization of the thinking/drawing hand in Raetz's work could hardly be found. Anything can inspire a line here—a smell, a sound, a taste, the tactile sensation of some material, a word, a turn of phrase, a pack of cigarettes, an already existing image. And the line always goes its own way in spontaneous independence, meandering off the edge, condensing into forms and dissolving again into chaos. Collections of lines and dashes become billowing surfaces whose structures seem to pulsate.

These books are not sketchbooks in the customary sense. They are rather a kind of “playground” where there is complete freedom to think every which way. In them is collected a storehouse of image-ideas and idea-images which can then become the points of departure for larger, often exhibition-oriented projects. The openness and breadth of Raetz’s visual thinking is reflected in the surprisingly wide spectrum of materials and media employed in these projects. With a highly developed sense for the economy of means, Raetz succeeds in creating constellations in which drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography interweave in a completely natural way and whose sensual fascination we cannot easily elude. But it soon becomes clear that this technical brilliance does not exist for its own sake; rather, pointing beyond the esthetic level, it also represents a sophisticated strategy by which the artist directs attention to the essential—in the last analysis, invisible—aspect of the work. Over and over again we are confronted in Raetz’s work with the paradox that here is an artist who is constantly unleashing into the world images that do not primarily mean themselves but to a much greater extent signify a reality behind the image-reality. He stages a drama of deceptions which is so fascinating precisely because, for all its ironic distance, it follows an inherent logic. The formal diversity in which Raetz’s work manifests itself—a diversity which could just as well be seen as a function of his openness, his love of experimentation and his infatuation with materials—is an essential component of this staging, because on the strategic level it represents a chess move against a stereotyping “artstyle” which would simply allow critics to digress into formal criteria once again.



The ambiguities of meaning that emerge from Raetz's paradoxical logic are at work on all levels of interpretation: lines can be read now as simple contours, now as the outlines of a surface; at one moment they constitute an interior form, the next, the external form; they allow the foreground and background to alternate in significance, or they describe a volume reduced to its essence. The interpretation of content depends, then, on the participation of the viewer. Along with this multiplicity of meanings intended in the superimposition of images within a single image, as it were, Raetz also always plays with an accumulation of images. Whether he dismembers the same motif into new aspects of its appearance, or combines the most disparate form-parts or part-forms into a visual whole, the effect remains the same. The first mode of accumulation can be traced throughout all of his work, for Raetz continually returns to earlier motifs and formulates them anew,³ but it can also take the form of a proper series, for instance in the *644 Profilen* (644 profiles), 1973, for which in the course of one night Raetz made a series of facial profiles, each developing out of the previous one—a procedure which at the same time leads to a concretization and a dissolution of the starting point. The second type of accumulation allows the use of the most widely differing materials in a work without it thereby turning into a classical assemblage. It is most completely expressed in the *Neapelfries* (Neapolitan frieze), 1979–80, in which all the elements of Raetz's visual cosmos are united into a vocabulary, in a free-floating wall installation.

A series of “*Samtbilder*” (Velvet paintings), 1979–80, exemplifies the combination of superimposition and accumulation so characteristic of Raetz's subtle method of working. These are pictures which he “paints” on velvet, i.e., the fibers of velvet are brushed against the nap, as it were, causing nearly dematerialized images of light and shadow to arise, images which, depending on the viewer's angle of vision, appear as either negative or positive forms, or disappear entirely into the gray of the velvet and remain invisible. Using this kind of velvet ground Raetz painted, in the course of one night in 1979, a long series of imaginary portraits in which he reworked the initial image over and over again, stroking the delicate velvet fibers into ever new forms. In the end one “velvet painting” incorporated in its final version all the others; the Polaroid documentation of the intermediate steps gives but a poor indication of this process. It may be that a parallel to these dematerialized images exists in the “invisible” images of the past several years: small oil paintings painted in such dark colors that they become visible only upon close scrutiny, but then disclose an incredible intensity of color as a result of the intensified perception of the most minimal differences—here, light in darkness, color in blackness, is evoked. One of these paintings shows a painter and murderer next to one another; the one is painting on a figure on the ground, while for the other the brush becomes a dagger with which he stabs another figure, like the one being painted. We stand outside and observe with disdain how they ply their handiwork. On the backs of both painter and murderer are large *M*s; *M* for Manet (the figures on the ground resemble his *The Dead Toreador*, ca. 1864, from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.); *M* for *Maler* (painter); *M* for murderer; and probably also for Markus.

The image of the world—our world-image—is a stream of images which must be perceived anew, over and over again. This means that the image of reality, in constant motion, must be destroyed again and again to make place for whatever is currently the truest image of reality. To be sure, in this round dance, the image constantly destroys the image, but it also carries the preceding images in itself. *Mimi* is a changing sculptural concept that Raetz has presented in various forms and locations; only to this work is it given (in a lasting version, from 1981, in a park in Lyons) to forever dream itself in an eternal sleep—as 14 granite blocks, a “Minimal sculpture,” a human figure, a true dream creature in the shadow of the trees: a poetic reality.

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Translated from the German by Leslie Strickland.

NOTES

1. The digression about the Snark takes up a thread from Gilbert Lascault; cf. Gilbert Lascault, "Markus Raetz chasseur de Snark," *Quinzaine littéraire*. February 16, 1983, p. 83.
2. Some of these Notizbücher have been published in parts as facsimile editions Markus Raetz. *Die Bücher*, 3 vol., Zürich: Galerie und Edition Stähli, 1975. Also, Markus Raetz, *Notizen 1981–82*, Zürich: Galerie und Edition Stähli, 1982 (in collaboration with the *Berliner Künstlerprogramm* and the Rainer Verlag, Berlin)
3. This can be seen very clearly in a publication of the Kunsthalle Basel which brings together works on the head motif Markus Raetz, *Arbeiten, Travaux, Works 1971–81*, Basel: Kunsthalle, 1982.