

Nick Oberthaler
M_O_B
Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna

Mike Zahn
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Nick Oberthaler's recent exhibition M_O_B, at Galerie Emanuel Layr in Vienna, is composed of seven identically sized vertical panels. It delineates an expression which is less about where painting may have been and more about how it has arrived at this moment. Exactly where it might take us with Oberthaler is uncertain.

This is a feeling impressed upon the viewer from the first instant of encounter. What the work as such limns are the dimensions of a non-place between discovery and understanding. In an unusually factitious move, the artist has hung these panels lengthwise in a tightly formatted array across the span of a single wall. Their semantic distribution of indecorous hues is marked here and there with navigational graphics which suggest flags, maps, pins, and signage. A radical oblique sections each work, while the repeated orthogonal division of projected planes runs counter to the normal vectors of generalized space. This regulates passage from one point to another and the next within a calculated structure. Oberthaler's presentation thus becomes critical of local form without instantiating a larger critique. Nonetheless, it systematically tests the logic of mobility characteristic of our age. Indeed, juxtaposed neatly with the static qualities of the objects at hand is the artist's avowal of constant movement. This brings forth an awareness that experience is global, aggregate, proximate, and synthetic.

Reflective of the communication networks described by Vilém Flusser, Oberthaler furthermore negotiates surface as an analogue which mitigates against the mathematical order of the technical image. Flusser argued for intervention opposed to the circumscription of a programmed world, and championed activities which were in dialogue with a materialism capable of shaping the numerical, imaginative, and textual conditions of our sense of things. His are assertions drawn from traditions which inform histories spread across many fields, and in particular may be read as redressing a modernity which established its methodical systemization of the visual with the introduction of perspective. Flusser surmised this remains a burden from which media may free us, in part by taking a philosophical turn towards linking technological developments to the ethical goals of a neo-humanist society.

Computation is underwritten as binary notation. Its adaptable coding subordinates all the world to a 'zero-dimensional' rationale, made from bits of variation contrived to model any random event. In its speculative prescience, Flusser's theory beheld machines operating at, and upon, the limits of what's now referred to as post-internet culture. This is an odd area for painting to share with the apparatus of digitized mechanization. What Oberthaler effectively accomplishes with M_O_B is the production of a cybernetic image of an iconic image consisting of successive isochronal images. The recursive lateral spread of his work at Layr insists upon this, and disrupts conventional notions of getting from A to B in any straightforward linear manner. M_O_B shows how the additive nature of Oberthaler's construction gathers its hypotheses within a realistic schema which, despite its quasi-algorithmic exactitude, is evocative of doubt, or that which makes us what we are, and compels us to act as we may. Could an artificial intelligence accomplish the execution of a picture of painting similar to the one designed by the artist? Answers to this question turn upon how concepts of subjectivity might be inscribed within the norms of invention. How would agency figure into this novel organization of principles? What's to be gleaned from the difference between the richness of metaphor, which usurps lexical reference, and purely operative symbols, deployed merely as stock quotation? This is the manner of skepticism on display in Oberthaler's rendering of the contemporary common sphere, and painting's place in it. Given our position, the bigger picture is sure to change from this which is plainly recognized today to that which will possibly be not, tomorrow.

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