

Inextricable Diversity

About Roman Pfeffer's "Text Image" Series

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At the beginning, there is a "text image". Or, better put, a panel on which a text is transcribed - such panel, itself the result of a chain of multiple references - is the starting point for further reworking. Through a number of "text image" series, Roman Pfeffer has tried to reveal how the process of translation undergone by an artwork (more often than not, a historical painting) leads to the latter becoming a subject of discourse that is eventually re-visualized. To date, there are four series based on the works of such canonized masters as Rauschenberg, Warhol and Buren, that continue the type of appropriations they themselves practised, expanding on them and taking them into unexplored territory. Roman Pfeffer thus exposes the much favoured "referencing" process, intrinsic to so much of the contemporary art production, as a complex, multi-level one that far transcends any linear understanding of appropriation. What the variations in the "text image" series and their (provisional) final results demonstrate is the multitude of inner differences and media divergences inherent to every act of appropriation. This is the "inextricable diversity", the separation and re-union of media that inevitably bind image and text together.

That there is an element of destruction attached to every act of appropriation may sound like a truism today. Oscar Wilde once stated that "each man kills the things he loves"; one might perhaps simply add to this profoundly modern idea that, in every act of destruction, something of the destroyed usually lives on. Robert Rauschenberg knew this when, in 1953, he asked Willem de Kooning for a drawing and then painstakingly tried to erase it. Erased de Kooning Drawing - the work's title - clearly demonstrates that rubbing out is nothing more than re-drawing an existing image with an eraser. Yet Rauschenberg's work also shows that in this "sublimated patricidal assault" (Benjamin Buchloh) an important shift is occurring: a shift away from a mere reference towards an alteration, which, in spite of its destructive nature, produces a new version of a model that is impossible to eradicate altogether.

Over half a century later, Roman Pfeffer addresses this classic example of destructive appropriation in a continuation of this virulent shift. Rauschenberg's Willem de Kooning (2008), as Pfeffer's reference work is titled, first recalls the creation of this historic piece at a textual level. The image comprises entirely of the English description of the work by art historian Manuela Ammer, printed on paper and framed exactly in the same format as the original sheet. In 2010, Pfeffer reworked this "text image" by drawing over it in thick pencil strokes, leaving only the phrase "eliminate the drawing" - in other words, a new attempt at "erasure". What remains is the slogan that could have motivated Rauschenberg's historic act in the first place. At the same time, the black obliteration of everything but this instruction ("eliminate the drawing") demonstrates that the entire process can also be inverted, depending on the chosen medium. Additionally, drawn, graphic media are ideally suited for an erasure of the descriptive text. Thus, such a destructive allegorization (literally: to

speak in other terms) does not simply wipe out the destroyed, as in Rauschenberg's work, but – and how could it be otherwise? – also leads to endless transformations. At best, the original historical context can be eliminated but not the chain of references linking the current version to the past. Three other versions from the year 2011 are conceived along the very same lines: in an otherwise totally blacked-out image, the only visible phrase, *Completing the task*, states exactly the opposite of what is meant to be achieved; *Erasure as a form* - the title of the next, similarly designed image - appears to acknowledge the fact that it is, indeed, to be seen as an example of a genre and not as a final, singular act; finally, *Difficult to erase flatly* and succinctly admits that the process cannot be completed.

The series *Correction of Monk's Mark Rothko* is similarly based on this chain of references and trans-mediation. The starting point is once again a framed text, in this case a description of a transformation relay that is complex to begin with. In 2006, British artist Jonathan Monk chose Mark Rothko's 1957 painting *Red, Ochre, Black on Red* and asked the group of artists *Art & Language* to give a textual description of the work. Such description was then submitted to a commercial sign painter who was commissioned to turn it back into an image. The result was astonishingly close to the original (according to the text on which Pfeffer's *Monk's Mark Rothko* of 2008 is based) – so much so that this is what might have prompted Pfeffer to continue the process, or, in his own words, “to correct” the work. Here again, what is involved is an erasure since neither the Rothko original chosen by Monk nor its subsequent reconstruction appear in the work and are therefore visually hidden. Pfeffer uses the intermediary stage, the description by *Art & Language* at the divide between image and text, as an abstract source for his own “text image”. Furthermore, it should be noted that *Art & Language* did not base their description on the original but on a postcard reproduction, adding another degree of intermediation. As in Rauschenberg's *Willem de Kooning*, the authorship of Pfeffer's “text image” is delegated, in this case to the art historian Gregor Tobeitz. Yet the process does not stop there, the block of text being released in the original format of Rothko's painting for further visual re-workings in a subsequent series. A total of ten *Corrections* were thus created, each one specifying the name of the artist responsible for the reworking.

This type of correction - what Pfeffer calls a “retrogression in the medium of painting” - is accompanied by a renewed visualization, even though this itself has an erasing effect on the underlying text. In Pfeffer's own “*Correction*”, this involved resorting to thin stripes – strictly geometric streaks at various intervals - to cover the “text image” with a vertical interfering pattern. In her re-working, Karine Fauchard used the colours from Rothko's original painting – red, ochre, black – layering them in elliptical planes that, in turn, are pierced by white dots. In his version, Philipp Schweiger almost completely deleted the text by treating the ink pigments used to print the description with a solvent so as to produce a faded-looking frottage. The effect is of a painted-over or smudged abstraction. Several of the invited artists played with crossing out the text or blocking out individual words (Rainer Wölzl, Norbert Zuckerstätter and Max Schaffer, for example). Others opted for the technique of writing over the text. Jacques Carrio, for instance, superimposed a

handwritten French translation, visually merging the words into a literal, bilingual version. Finally, Wendelin Pressl packed the original “text image” in bubble wrap and stamped it “RETURN TO SENDER” – a hint that this process of appropriation and continuation cannot be carried on ad infinitum, although the timeline underlying this chain of references clearly points to the past.

All these various forms of “retrogression” or “correction” are based on a type of appropriation that entails erasure, transformation, reframing or a combination of the three processes. The destructive aspect of the Corrections is not that they make the “text image” disappear but that they overwrite it with concentrated visuality. It is as if an attempt is being made to divest the “painted word”, which according to Tom Wolfe characterizes ultra-modern painting, of its “wordness”, although this continues to have a cryptical impact (be it as the narrative about the image’s creation). Consequently, the aspect of transformation is further emphasised by highlighting the fact that appropriation and trans-mediation – meaning transfer into another medium – inevitably entail elements of gain and loss. Thus, a dialectic can be identified that seems to be at work in every act of appropriation: not only that the original material is transferred into a changed context but also that, conversely, this new framework reflects the underlying material in a different, more open light.

This is not the least clearly demonstrated by the way Roman Pfeffer, in *Re-producing (Buren/Sturtevant/Warhol) (2012)*, pointedly reworked his first “text image”/appropriation work, *Sturtevant’s Four Warhol Flowers (2007)* - where a text by art historian Jörg Wolfert recaps the early appropriation of Warhol’s flowers by Elaine Sturtevant. First, he painted the original text over with metallic paint, before adding grey stripes in the manner of Daniel Buren. While Buren’s art represents another reference source in Pfeffer’s most recent work (e.g., in Buren’s *Marquee Fabric*), the context in which the stripe principle is applied is of a different nature. The word “re-producing”, here at the geometric centre of the 2012 painting, is the only one that shimmers through the stripes - it was subsequently highlighted and thus “freed” from its surroundings. Exactly what “re-producing” refers to is open to question: does it allude to Warhol’s original technique, to Sturtevant’s appropriation, to Buren’s roughly contemporaneous striped images, or to all of these together? In any case, “re-producing” certainly embraces the combination of various art-historical models, resulting in a new overall context where the references themselves are being “reframed”. Perhaps it is precisely this simultaneous separation and re-union of the then and now, the original and the copy, the historical references and their current interpretation, that connect and thus underlie the mantra-like “re-producing”.

This substitution game, which does not leave any of these polarized aspects untouched, brings Roman Pfeffer’s appropriation, reproduction and transformation series right to the point - without an authorial approach or taking on a meta-position but by a perpetual unfurling of the appropriation and transformation process. In an inextricable diversity, so to speak.