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## Michael Oppitz

Rubens and the Winter Garden

“La peinture n’est que de la morale construite.”  
Stendhal, L’Histoire de la peinture en Italie

for the voice of Roman Jakobson

From the Retina to the Brain and Back Again

Since Duchamp’s box of 1914, the visual arts have been free from the tyranny of the retina. Visual production gradually entered into the service of ideas, statements, and concepts, which the artist expressed in a sensory form. Conversely, the printed language lost its monopoly as a medium of abstract communication. The materials and objects of the perceptible world, which now functioned akin to linguistic symbols, became carriers for meanings that exceeded them. Visual representation gained the same authority as language to express thought.

The artist became a thinker with materials.

The works of Marcel Broodthaers are situated in this modern tradition. In this essay, I will attempt to use two examples - both less than a year old - to show how the artist makes a given thought - that is, the message of the art object - not only readable but also visible. He does so through the materialization and arrangement of expressive media. According to Broodthaers’s own dictum, the subject is a fraud if it takes place only within the domain of reflection (see his text in the catalogue *Actualité d’un bilan*, Paris: Yvon Lambert, 1972, p. 37). His statement is principally directed against art critics who do nothing but philosophize. They seek refuge in notions. In other words: they philosophize precisely because they fear matter. Essence over plaster.

Similarities between *Rubens* and the *Winter Garden*

The works under discussion here are *Rubens*, an arrangement of nine paintings, and the *Winter Garden*, an environment or, more accurately, a historical landscape. While they appear to be very different, the two works nevertheless share several features in common. Both contain a declaration, an optical statement.

Both of these statements refer to history.

Each of these statements on history takes the form of a negation.

The set of nine paintings titled *Rubens* conveys a statement on the history of painting from Rubens to the present; the *Winter Garden* conveys a statement on the history of the present, on the ideological position of society in the 1970s. Both borrow from the past - we will see later from what - in order to reflect on the present. What, specifically, do these two works show and say?

## Rubens

The nine paintings that comprise *Rubens* are by no means anomalies in Broodthaers's oeuvre. Together with four other series - each comprised of nine paintings which differ from the series discussed here in their distribution of language, the coloring of their frames, and the density of their printing - they form a chain of transformations. In a broader sense, this chain of transformations connects to the series of canvases containing the phrases "die Welt von..." (German thinkers), "il parle..." (French poets), and "the turpitude of" (English authors). The works in question also share a common denominator with every example of Broodthaers's work in which the artist, following Magritte, investigates the relationship between the language of words and the language of images. In the series of English and French authors, Broodthaers reaffirms this relationship by selecting a representative figure for whom the pursuit of painting was at least as important as that of language: Blake and Magritte.

All the paintings in *Rubens* have the same dimensions (85 x 100 cm), the same dull bluish letters on the canvas, and the same printed frame. In seven of them, an identical name and sequence of dates - namely Petrus Paulus Rubens and 1577 -1640 (his birth and death dates) - appear in an identical position inside the printed frame. At the center of each is a plural noun that designates an object or entity in the sensory world: les bijoux, les armures, les chiens, les tapis, les fleurs, les femmes, and les nuages. These seven designations appear together on the eighth painting. This time, however, the language switches from French to Flemish (or, more accurately, to Dutch, which represents Flemish as a written language inasmuch as the latter is generally not written): de juwelen, de harnassen / de vrouwen, de wolken / de honden, de bloemen, de tapijten. (The slashes here indicate line breaks).

Changing languages permits the construction of a chiasmus. Rubens, who painted the subjects designated in French, was Flemish. A francophone Belgian, Broodthaers - who can be considered the true referent of the eighth painting, although only the year 1973 appears instead of his name - designates the subjects painted by Rubens in Flemish. The presence of the two languages, French and Flemish, signifies "Belgian." This chiasmus, which constitutes both a formal play and a play of meaning, can be represented graphically in the following manner:

Rubens	✕	Flemish	}	Belgian
Broodthaers		French		

The ninth painting in the series contains no designation of any object whatsoever. By comparing its differences and similarities with the other eight paintings - which, in formal terms, can be divided into two groups, that is, 7 + 1 - it is possible to see precisely how all the paintings are connected.

The ninth painting shares two elements in common with the seven others that contain the name Petrus Paulus Rubens: a name and a set of dates (birth and death). Together, they constitute a series whose common denominators are names and dates. The typography and layout are, moreover, identical across the two groups: the name is always placed in the upper quarter of the painting and the dates in the bottom eighth. The same Dorchester typeface is used in each of them. However, the particular names and dates in each group are different: while the name Petrus Paulus Rubens and the dates 1577-1640 appear in the first group of seven paintings, the name Pieter Jansz Saenredam and the dates 1597-1655 appear in the ninth painting. These are, of course, the Dutch painter's birth and death dates.

In addition to these differences - which are, so to speak, differences of variety rather than of kind - the ninth painting also diverges from this other group on the level of kind. While the seven Petrus Paulus Rubens paintings contained designations of objects, themes, or subjects that played a major role in the work of

Rubens, no such designation appears in the center of the ninth painting that contains the name Pieter Jansz Saenredam. Subjects like jewels, armor, dogs, carpets, flowers, women, and clouds played no role whatsoever in the oeuvre of this Dutch artist, whose art historical importance derives primarily from his depictions of multileveled church interiors. To a certain extent, Saenredam marks a break with the types of classical subjects painted by Rubens. For this reason, the center of the ninth painting does not contain the designation of an object but rather an end-sign (~), which gives the impression of a painterly flourish. Painterly, here, should be understood in the literal sense: it resembles a calligraphic mark made by a painter after completing a work. It is precisely this end-sign, missing from the group of seven paintings, that establishes the link between the eighth and ninth paintings. The eighth painting - which differs from the ninth by substituting a name for the complete list of objects in Flemish and birth/death dates for the year 1973 - also contains this painterly end-sign.

In the same way that the group of seven P.P.R. paintings connect with the ninth painting, P.J.S., through the formal similarity of two out of three elements (name, birth/death dates), the ninth painting connects with the eighth through one shared element (~), and the eighth connects with the first group of seven through a different shared element (designations of objects). All three groups of paintings are thus connected in one way or another, as shown in the following diagram:



The nine paintings formed out of the three groups thereby constitute a set.

Setting aside the uniform framing and coloring of the canvases - the blue of which plays on the manner in which Saenredam rendered space - all three groups are unified by one single element: the numbers that appear in the lower eighth of the image. These numbers, which change three times, are the only constant in *Rubens*.

They enjoy a position of priority. As individual dates, they signify a reference to history: as a succession of dates, they refer to a sequence of historical time. The two end-signs on the eighth and ninth paintings play the role of historical breaks. Inasmuch as the dates are connected to names in the history of painting, the final strokes indicated by the end signs divide the diachronic line of art history into discrete phases.

This effect - which construes the history of painting from Rubens to the present as a history of upheavals rather than as an uninterrupted continuity - is heightened by a second conceit that informs the arrangement of the paintings. The nine canvases in the *Rubens* set are arranged in three columns of three. The central vertical column functions as the axis. Flanked to the left and right by two Petrus Paulus Rubens columns, this column is the only one in the entire set where each painting belongs to a different group: Petrus Paulus Rubens - Pieter Jansz Saenredam - 1973. These shifts within the axial column are immediately legible as a temporal line broken into sections. Its model is a chronological table:

Rubens  
 Break  
 Saenredam  
 Break  
 Present day

What we have before us is an art historical statement about breaks in the history of painting. Taken as a whole, the set of paintings titled *Rubens* makes the following claim: just as Saenredam, the Dutch painter of interiors,

put an end to the tradition of mythological, genre, and still-life painting ideally embodied by the Flemish painter Rubens, so do the artists of 1973 (Broodthaers and Co.) put an end to painting itself by making a statement about painting.

Broodthaers's statement about the end of painting has a painterly character, indicated by the canvases, cut like paintings, the frames, and the paint. The two aforementioned end-signs, whose calligraphic lines appear particularly prominent because they are the only non-linguistic signs in the entire set, also play a role here - as does, ultimately, the printing. The words are not printed on the canvas in a uniform fashion; the density of the letters varies from painting to painting, creating an impression of movement through irregularity that is more typical of painted images than of printed ones.

The individual words do not speak: they proclaim the end of painting without saying so explicitly. Printed inconsistently on the canvases, they nevertheless become a piece of "painting" themselves. The words in *Rubens* are the constitutive parts of the painting, just as dogs, women, and carpets are the constitutive parts of Rubens' paintings. Clearly, Broodthaers does not speak his message in a conventional way - like I do, for example, in the present analysis. For him, words are part of a repertoire of visual materials. It is these visual materials that he uses to code his statements.

The same is true of the *Winter Garden*.

## The Winter Garden

The *Winter Garden* premiered on January 9, 1974, at a group exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. All the elements of Broodthaers's contribution to this exhibition consisted, without exception, of found objects - as was the case for numerous other environments as well. The manual aspect of the artistic act was performed, in this case, by furniture movers.

The constitutive elements of Broodthaers's exhibition - that is, the smallest meaning-bearing units that it contained - were the following: slim garden chairs, grouped in a circle at the center of the quadrilateral exhibition space or placed in pairs and individually along the walls; engravings of exotic animals (elephants, camels) and other fauna (insects), hung in picture frames on the walls or displayed in glass vitrines; a video monitor placed in a corner on a pedestal at chest height, directed outward at the exhibition; a rolled-up red carpet, lying in another corner as if forgotten; finally, and most prominently, a large number of potted palms around 1.50 m to 2.00 m in height, either grouped like the garden chairs in a circle at the center of the room, forming a kind of arbor, or placed at intervals along the walls.

This configuration of constitutive elements produces a structure. A simplified model of this structure is reproduced below.

I use the term "structure" intentionally. The distribution of the exhibited objects, which function as constitutive meaning-bearing units, is neither random, nor arbitrary, nor determined exclusively by questions of form or taste. Instead, it is evidence of a calculated arrangement in which the placement of elements plays a fundamental role in the production of meaning, that is, the visual formulation of a statement. The arrangement functions as a grammar that allows the elements (chairs, palms, etc.) to be grouped like words into a declarative sentence. The meaning of each individual element depends on the meaning of the whole sentence.

What is the meaning of the *Winter Garden*? I mentioned at the outset that the *Winter Garden* is a historical statement, a historical landscape of the 1970s, a dismissive remark on the ideological position of today's society.

One notable characteristic of this decade is its tendency to borrow from history. The term *nostalgia*, which has been beaten to death, only vaguely hints at this state of affairs. Historical citations - cloaking one era in the style of another - are hardly rare in history. They typically occur when a historical moment is unable to

formulate its own self-conception from within itself - in short, when it cannot find one fully representative style. As a result, it chooses instead to quote from other eras, dressing in their clothes and passing them off as its own. This phenomenon almost always indicates a historical phase with no dominant political direction. The 1970s push such citations to the point of inflation; this decade, in general, is characterized by the fact that it claims nothing as its own. The syncretism of borrowed styles is the defining feature of our time: the 1950s (rock and roll revival, clothing fashions, lipstick, Brylcreem), the 1940s (wartime looks, swing), the 1930s (art deco, center-parted hair, tap dancing), and the waning colonial era (palm trees and wicker furniture) all come together to form the style of the 1970s. This is perhaps most perfectly expressed in the overall appearance - clothes, hair, repertoire - of the English group Roxy Music.

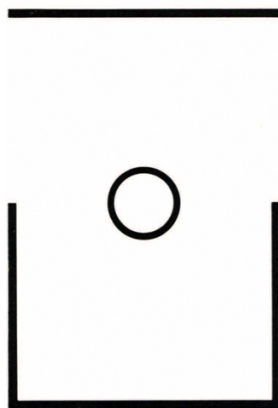
With the palm, the spirit of colonialism is transferred into a plant pot. It is a mobile stage prop of the imperial stance. Upon seeing it, one thinks immediately of the pith helmet, huge Cuban cigars, the Governor of Batavia, rubber plantations, fronds, and fans humming tiredly on the ceiling.

A sign of victory and peace in Antiquity has, since the nineteenth century, become a sign of the victor and of pacification. The replacement of eighteenth-century orangeries with palm houses - in places like Chatsworth, Kew Gardens, Herrenhausen, and the Frankfurt Palmengarten - was motivated not only by the peculiar nineteenth century interest in the shock of botanical exoticism. More than a yearning for primitive life, the civilized palm became the insignia of the colonial master.

Even if the era of colonialism is over in an administrative sense, it can still be summoned as a mental attitude. A glance at everyday interiors now confirms how fashionable this attitude is. In boutiques, those barometers of trends, in nightclubs, in cafés, in airports, in department stores, and at home - palms are everywhere. What, then, differentiates Broodthaers, who jumps onboard this fantasy boat with his *Winter Garden*, from an interior decorator making a penny from the latest fashion?

The answer is provided by the structure of the *Winter Garden's* arrangement, which incorporates a critical position - a dismissive statement - on the mental colonialism of the present day. As such, *Winter Garden* can be divided into three spatial levels which, on closer examination, reveal themselves to be levels of meaning.

The three levels of meaning in the *Winter Garden* (simplified model)



- 3 Level of analysis
- 2 Level of action
- 1 Level of inventory

The first level consists of the two sides, left and right, and the frontal axis: it is the level of inventory-taking. It registers, in an abbreviated form, what the present appropriates from the late nineteenth century: colonial palms, exotic engravings, museum vitrines, and metropolitan garden chairs.

The second level of meaning can be found along the perimeter of the palm arbor; this is the level of action. The palm arbor, a caricature of the bourgeois garden arbor, is a place where gentle social life plays out. Within the exhibition, it was the actual space through which the audience moved, either taking a seat within the palm arbor itself or setting the exhibition in motion by gathering around the arbor in a concentric fashion. It is at this level that the audience - representative of society as a whole - acted out its historical appropriations. It is "in": at the center of a colonial environment. It was certainly no coincidence that during the opening in Brussels, this second level of Broodthaers's work became the social focal point of the entire museum: you are attracted to what you feel close to, especially when you do not notice why.

The *Winter Garden's* third level of meaning - which corresponds to the rear axis of the room - is the critical level, the level of analysis. Its most obvious component is the video device that stands across from the level of action. When switched on, the device holds up a kind of mirror to the face of society. Society sees itself on an electronic screen - surrounded by nineteenth-century décor. The video thus contradicts the rest of the interior. By creating a paradox in relation to the other exhibited objects, this device reveals their anachronism: the electronic age vs. the turn of the century. Concealed, the rolled-up carpet likewise belongs to the third level, the level of critique. The rolled-out red carpet was a key prop in the social reception rituals of the periods in history appropriated by the 1970s. Now, it is rolled up: those eras are over.

Anachronism - the rejection of the quotation of a past era - a new era: the final point is reached with the third critical element on the analytical axis. During the opening of the *Winter Garden*, mimeographed copies of the artist's notes on his work were laid out on a garden chair, placed between the rolled-up carpet and the video device. One sentence reads: "I see new horizons approaching and the hope for another alphabet." It is in society, beyond the *Winter Garden*, that this new alphabet lies.

#### A Political Function of Art

Art, as one may have already noticed, is not merely one sector within the ideological superstructure. Transformations in art are not co-determined solely by transformations in the economic base and in other sectors of the superstructure. Art can do more than illustrate; it can also critically attack the forms of the superstructure and establish a counter-image to them. Such is the meaning I currently attribute to Stendhal's sentence, which serves as a motto for two works that, to some extent, fulfill this function.