

Matthias Hoch – To the Beat of the Techno-Systems There are at least two different ways of reading an artwork: directly/literally or indirectly/metaphorically. The indirect route, which leads to the symbolic or metaphorical meaning of an image is always based on the directly visible, quasi-verbally or literally observable surface of an image. Thus if one wants to grasp the symbolic connections or references of an image, one must first deal with the layers of meaning in its direct, visually accessible surface. A literal reading of a work is concerned with the presence of the work and its existence both in a place at a particular time and in the physical presence of the viewer. In this sense, every experience of art is historical, since it is irretrievably bound up in the a priori basic categories of space, time and volume. Matthias Hoch's photographs may be read in these two ways, both for their literal and their symbolic meaning.

First and Foremost The most important part of any photograph is its outer surface. In terms of system-theory the surface may be regarded as a plane dividing a system and a medium.¹ It is on the surface of a photograph that the decisive differences which influence its effect as a work of art may be observed and distinguished. Matthias Hoch's new photoworks have been produced using the so-called diasec process. This involves a permanently elastic, smooth fusion of a paper print or slide transparency and acrylic glass. This process was developed in the 70s by the Swiss chemist Heinz Sovilla-Brulhart. Using a special adhesive, an air-tight bond is created, fixing the photopaper to the back of

UV-resistant acrylic glass. The point of this is that when the light penetrates the layer of acrylic glass the light refraction on the surface of the photopaper is completely different from the effect when a photograph is framed with a passepartout and ordinary glass. Even matt photopaper will diffuse the light to a greater extent than a diasec-mounted photograph. In the latter case there is less diffusion because of the largely homogenous quality of the acrylic glass. As a result the colours seem deeper, sharper, more brilliant and more immediate. Furthermore, the traditional method of framing a photograph with a passepartout and ordinary glass creates a greater distance to the viewer's eye which is not only perceived spatially but which may also be apprehended as an emotional, intuitive or semantic distance. The way a photograph is presented - its surface, its materiality and its optical distance - plays a significant part in the specific form of the meaning which then derives from the image.

Formats In purely formal terms, compared to the size of the viewer there are three kinds of picture formats: smaller, bigger, or the same size. Same size formats confront the viewer on a 1:1 basis, bearing equal weight and validity. Smaller formats, on the other hand, are controlled and dominated by the viewer's gaze. They are in thrall to the latter's gaze. The situation with larger formats is simply vice versa. By their size they subject the viewer's body and gaze to the control of the image-system. The viewer's observations and the direction of his/her gaze are held captive and dominated by the specific logic of the image-system.

At 150 x 180 cm Matthias Hoch's large-format pieces are only a little smaller than a human being. They are open to the control of the viewer's gaze in that they may be taken in as a whole - although only if one puts a considerable distance between oneself and the image. The larger they are, the closer they approach the logics of uncontrollability. This may be read both literally and symbolically. As the image increasingly eludes complete control by the viewer's gaze, it acquires an autonomy all of its own, a logic of visual power. Large formats attempt to take possession of the viewer's gaze just like the anonymous ordinances of technological administrative systems attempt to take hold of the uncontrollable individuality of human beings. This is the central aesthetic message conveyed through the material conditions of the formats. And yet, Matthias Hoch may be seen as a neo-humanist, for with his smaller formats (84 x 100 cm and 100 x 120 cm) he does grant the viewer at least a remnant of visual power and autonomy. At the same time, one can also imagine harsher variants where the viewer's gaze would be entirely at the mercy of the image-system.

Flying Colours Colour plays an important part in the work of Matthias Hoch. Even before the Wall came down he was one of the first in the GDR to emerge from the ideology of black and white reportage and to start working with colour photography. The latest neurological research has shown that our cognitive system apparently processes light/dark impressions separately from colour impressions.² We primarily use light/dark values to distinguish contours and

edges which we must register in order to move through a space without hindrance or injury. Besides assisting us to recognise objects and different segments of an image, colours above all create mood and expression. As Matthias Hoch himself has said, these expressive qualities are of major importance to him, for otherwise he could equally well have photographed the same motif in black and white.

Let us look again at the additional information that is specifically conveyed by colour. In this connection it makes sense to distinguish between the atmospheric qualities of the colours of Nature and the colours of a machine. Any pretensions machine colours may have derive from the meanings of natural colours, albeit largely broken, distorted and transposed. The effect of a red poppy in a green field is thus echoed - much fractured - in a red asbestos cement slab in amongst green slabs (photo #22). In an artificial space where Nature, including natural light and air, is wholly excluded, plants, daylight and fresh air are simulated by means of colour. Colours in a techno-space in fact have three cognitive functions. Firstly they function as so-called 'attention-getters', as signals which either attract attention to themselves or provide a warning. Secondly they act as 'mood-makers', silencing the acoustic noise of the machine-room by means of colour, and apparently inducing a feel-good factor in a completely artificial world. The third function is expressive. Colours convey particular attitudes and conditions such as reason, precision, logic, coldness, hardness, mercilessness etc.

The colours in Matthias Hoch's photographs can also be read in two ways: literally and symbolically. Literally they are guaranteed as 'eye-witnesses' by the ideology of the photographic logic, as an authentic representation of a reality which one would not believe possible, and yet which does exist. On a symbolic level the moods of the colours point to anonymous powers and machine-systems that function automatically without individual human input, mercilessly operating until everything has come to an end. The colours symbolise an apparatus-culture, where the human being as the subject is the oppressed, the 'subjectum'.

Fleeing The German word for 'vanishing point' - 'Fluchtpunkt' [from 'flüchten': to flee] - literally means a place where one could take refuge. Hoch excludes these places as far as possible by locating them outside the frames of his photographs. In symbolic terms this means that refuge is only to be found beyond these configurations of technology and machines. The vanishing point is not visible, it is only present as a void, as a cognitive uncertainty, which may be subjectively filled and complemented by the viewer's own imagination. The Italian for vanishing point is 'termine' - last point, closing point, end. 'Fluchtpunkt' is the place where the flight comes to an end, where the space of the central perspective and the time of the gaze come to an end. It marks the death of the whole system. But at the same time it is also a source where all textures and all structures are born. This notion stems from a reverse reading of vanishing points, which in turn derives from the idea of a viewer moving around in the space.³

Frontality Matthias Hoch's pictures confront the viewer directly, without distance and without offering any chance of escape. They block the viewer's path at right angles and prevent any further progress. A frontal confrontation is more direct than any diagonal perspective. There is no vanishing point in the sense of an emergency exit for the eye. Thus the pictures are unavoidable - which may in itself be read symbolically. Matthias Hoch wants to leave the viewer no escape route. In his own words: "Frontality offers no way out." As he sees it, diagonals are always diluted.

Frames The margins of Hoch's photographs disguise the edges where the texture of the picture either drains away or flows back into the centre. The white margin of the photopaper fulfils the role of a point of reference, providing a zero-point for all the colours, or an external anchor, which in turn allows the various colours to relate to each other. The cold white of the paper forms a framework which functions as a context within which the pictures are situated. With the cold white margins of the diasec surfaces Matthias Hoch creates a specific horizon with implications of coldness and clarity which are constantly in the background of the viewer's perception of the images, and which form part of anyone's experience of these images.

Finale In the visual rhythm of these images there is just as much the sound of the machines as the taste of the metal in their colours and surfaces. The machines create a rhythmical beat, alternating between pause and beat, the

difference between absence and presence. A rhythmic interpretation of the photographs produces a visible, audible, tasteable beat and an audible, tasteable rhythm. Thus Matthias Hoch's photographs are multi-media pieces, indeed they are even synaesthetic. The rhythm of the machines symbolises the pulse of our own times. Hoch's photographs create a virtual momentum to which our powers of observation adapt, and our hearts pick up the hertz of the techno-systems around us.

Hans Dieter Huber

¹ For more on this see Hans Dieter Huber, 'Oberfläche, Materialität und Medium der Farben', in: Anne Hoormann/Karl Schawelka (eds), *Who's afraid of. Zum Stand der Farbforschung*, Weimar, Universitätsverlag 1998, pp. 67f.

² Margaret S. Livingstone, 'Kunst, Schein und Wahrnehmung', in: Wolf Singer (ed.), *Gehirn und Kognition*, Heidelberg 1992; Karl R. Gegenfurtner, 'Farbsehen beim Menschen', in: Anne Hoormann/Karl Schawelka (eds), *Who's afraid of. Zum Stand der Farbforschung*. Weimar, Universitätsverlag 1998, pp. 24-36

³ Cf. James J. Gibson, *Wahrnehmung und Umwelt. Der ökologische Ansatz in der visuellen Wahrnehmung*, Munich [et al] 1982, pp. 244-250