

HERMES - HERMENEUTICS - HERMETICISM TRANSLATIONS OUT OF NOWHERE

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HERMES

Hermes is „the messenger from the gods to humans.“ This was stated on June 24 of this year in one of 36 articles defining in different languages the mythological figure Hermes in the ever-expanding Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia. The German article continues to elaborate that Hermes is considered as the inventor of mathematics, astronomy, language and script by virtue of the equation of Hermes with Thoth, a deity of the Egyptian mythology.

The inventions mythology ascribed to Hermes

are, as if by coincidence, the very same topics serving Michael Müller in his search for images. Müller’s visual productions are also based on linguistic, numeric, stellar or solar systems, which are invented by the artist. In contrast to Hermes’ inventions they will however not be classified as binding, heaven sent regulations. They offer themselves as idiosyncratic creations, dedicated to internal laws at most and bearing the visible label of being man-made.

To some extent they even emphasise the

impossibility of a spatiotemporal translation, which is the basis for Hermes' messenger services: A homonymous text forms the basis for Müller's nine-piece work *Sternentod* (*Stellar Death*), for instance. The half-page text describes the extinguishing of stars in fabulous rather than scientific metaphors and proceeds to explain the genesis of black holes as the results of the death of particularly high-mass stars. Müller passed on the original German version of the text to a translator who gave a Hebrew translation of it. The Hebrew version was followed by an English translation, and then a Korean, Chinese, Japanese translation and eventually a translation back to German. The sixfold translation of the translation returns greatly altered to its origin. In the end, the sentences are mostly correct with regard to syntax, they however form new semantic combinations among each other.

The observer can regard and read them now as identically framed, equally sized pictures. These text-images, in which the differences become evident in the characters, are hanging side by side in the order of their translations and are flanked by two larger pencil drawings. The first drawing displays what the German text to the left describes: a starry sky crossed by circular cosmic nebulae where a so-called stellar death is taking place. The final drawing at the right end of the work is a negative pattern of the first – white sections are grey and grey sections are white – resulting from the assumption, that black holes possess only negative matter. Both framing drawings are also conclusive in as much as their material alludes self-reflexively to the material, that, according to the text, can result from more

extreme stellar deaths: “stellar cinders”. The graphite used for the pencil drawing is related to this material, which is not in fact displayed but which might result from the displayed occurrences, as the formation of graphite requires an extremely high input of energy. In this perspective, the death of a star gives birth to the drawing material.

The enclosed texts also represent a cycle: just as in the children's game of Chinese whispers, where the players pass on information to each other by whispering it to the next person and passing on only what they heard, the meaning of the text shifts each time. Similar to the described process of stellar death in the sky, the meaning of the text is on the brink of disappearing. It does return to its original language, but the information has been lost in the process of its transformation. The images of the universe holding together the work on the sides intensify the impression of the cycle, which is not only rendered in a medial (image-text-image) but also in a spatial respect (Germany-Asia-Germany). The various languages also represent a trip through the corresponding countries. The work evokes the travels of Hermes in two ways: as messenger between heaven and earth and as translator of languages.

HERMENEUTICS

The aforementioned German article about Hermes further states: “His messages are not merely information; they require interpretation as well. Therefore the science of ‘explaining and understanding’ is also called hermeneutics.” The appropriate encyclopedia entry for

the term hermeneutics, which was composed in 24 different languages on the reference date, identifies humanistic bible interpretation as the origin of hermeneutics. As the article proceeds, hermeneutic understanding derives “from the openness, ambiguity and principal incompleteness of understanding, and especially from the fact, that texts or utterances always display more layers of meaning than can be seen at first sight.”

The observer of one of Michael Müller's works from this year sees the multicoloured, predominantly pastel-coloured, realistic drawing of a carnivorous plant, evoking the fascination of childhood memories. The drawing is coloured with gouache that could have been taken from a paint box. The illustrator does not seem to be bent on masterful skill, but rather on recognition and botanical accuracy. The illustration in the wake of Georg Flegel's watercolours is thus in natural size. Furthermore, the pitcher plant, as it is called, with its leaves forming pitchers, is abloom. A label with the inscription „*Sarracenia purpurea* ssp. *purpurea*“ is mounted below the drawing into the passepartout. This is the Latin name for the portrayed flower. As the drawing imitates nature and the caption corresponds to this denotation, it is only the title, which remains puzzling: *Perfect Words of My Teacher*. At this point the hermeneutic interpretation deriving from the work itself meets the discrepancy between denotative image and connotative title.

According to the artist, the title of the work traces back to Patrul Rinpoche's book *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in which Müller has relativised the adjective in the title by transposing

it. The book is considered as an oecumenical textbook accepted by all of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Although vegetarianism is common in Buddhism, those regions are excepted where vegetables do not yield sufficient nutrition. The monks in Tibet, for instance, supplement their diet by meat. The same applies for the pitcher plant. It thrives on poor soils, requiring the additional intake of insects or spiders. Müller is thus concerned with the analogy between the nature of plants and the culture of humans. He however apparently did not wish to visualise this analogy but rather hide it. To the observer of the work, at any rate, these parallels remain oblique. He/She will hardly realise that the pitcher plant has been drawn on blotting paper, whereas the inscription „*Sarracenia purpurea* ssp. *purpurea*“ was drawn using tusche on waxed paper. It is the same kind of paper butchers use for wrapping meat and that the artist also stamped on the right hand side of his diptych *Schmerz (Pain)*.

The multipart work *Beifang in 3600 Meter Tiefe (Bycatch 3600 Metres Under the Sea)* is no less enigmatic. It consists of an abstract drawing on six DIN-A-3 pages representing a six-fold broken cloud. The single pages of the drawing are composed in such a manner that no continuous cloud formation arises from the composition. Müller seems to have applied his previous drawing technique: he first completes the single pages and assembles them afterwards. This time he however seems to have assembled the prepared pages incorrectly. The geometrical shape of the number four, varnished white, featuring several indentations and suspended from the ceiling on a fishing line

also belongs to the work. The shape is additionally counter-balanced by a weight. The term *Beifang* (*bycatch*) evokes the name of the fantasy city *Laifan*, the title of one of Müller's drawings from 1998. Thus, the entire title of the work is reminiscent of a sunken city. With regard to the fishing line the irritating term defines itself as those fish entering the net apart from the voluntary catch. But what is the connection between the geometrical, indented shape, that resembles no peculiar fish whatsoever, and the level of 3600 metres under the sea or the incorrectly assembled drawing of clouds? This remains in suspension much like the white shape of the number four itself.

Presumably the artist could shed light here as well and it would turn out that many things make sense in his realm of thought. But although the hermeneutic approach is based on the assumption of the "principal incompleteness of understanding", an insightful access is hampered. Ultimately, the meaningful shape refers only tautologically to itself as a piece of art, highlighting its aesthetical essence. There are hardly any possibilities to discursively connect the number four to the fishhook, neither the immanent romanticism nor criticism of whaling. If anything, the suspended shape is the result of a tediously researched generation of meaning as is common for Müller's technique. It remains an image of something, as meaningful as it is meaningless. Only thereby does it finally emerge as aesthetically effective, autonomous picture. It might be possible to find out how the artist came upon the picture. But apparently the point is exactly to sever those ties that serve only to justify the piece of art as an illustration of defined, extra-aesthetic

as an illustration of defined, extra-aesthetic circumstances. The work keeps its secret.

HERMETICISM

With Wikipedia, it's only a stone's throw from the terms Hermes and Hermeneutics to the term Hermeticism, which was available in five languages on the reference date. Hermeticism accordingly refers to "the late antique religious doctrine of revelation and occultism of Hermes Trismegistus", the function of which has changed in modernity. "The hermetic doctrine is perceived as a doctrine of superordinate laws of nature. It includes laws of causality and especially of analogy. Hermeticism is therefore beyond natural science, which does not allow analogies in general, but rather only after examining the individual case. The hermetic doctrine offers a model for explaining the relationships between different entities" and "is nowadays an important integral part of esotericism". In common speech the adjective "hermetic" denotes literally "air- and watertight" and figuratively "inaccessible".

While Müller's works up to now were based, among others, on the officially defined mathematical Ulam sequence of numbers or on the typeface *K4* defined by Müller himself, his latest works are comparably more playful, more poetic, more private. They virtually encourage omitting the quest for meaning, which leads away from the piece of art itself. They conceal the connections, which are hermetic in the common allegorical meaning of the word as well as they appear to be hermetic occult doctrines in the more narrow sense.

The resulting uncertainty of the observer applies especially to those works, in which the allusions seem to cover safe ground. Art historians can find multiple references in the works of 2006: There is for instance a turmeric yellow, organic shape made of wax floating in a showcase, titled *Taking a Bath With Jackson*. Since the sculpture resembles a spatialised dripping of Jackson Pollock's, Müller seems to allude to the US-American artist with this name. The title suggests Pollock and Müller to be intimate on first-name and bath terms. The exceedingly manneristic shape is not hanging freely suspended from a fishing line but rather laid out pending in a timbered showcase, reminiscent of a feretory. The common denominator of liturgically adopted craftwork and abstract expressionism is, however, evanescent.

A further example of Müller playing with great masters is an installation of 16 brass cubes. The cubes are exhibited in four squares, according to the notation system *K4*, and they are titled *Selbstportrait des Ibrahim Vitalis al Said* (*Self-portrait of Ibrahim Vitalis al Said*). Al Said might be a bread-and-butter name just like Müller, Metzger or Fischer (Miller, Butcher or Fisher), but the sculpture is modelled on the eminent Walter De Maria. Furthermore, the varying lengths of the cylinders and the weight hewn in each formation of four cubes expressing in Arabic numerals the weight of a person refers to the revision of minimalist art by Felix Gonzales-Torres. The artist's signature engraved in Arabic but geometrically set letters on the top side of the cubes spins off the chain of connotations on a trip through Oriental art.

Brief aus der Schweiz (*Letter from Switzerland*), a pencil hatching on the inside of an opened envelope, also offers an art historical sheath: Müller here is apparently alluding to Paul Klee. His images not only depict "main ways and byways" in a similarly abstract manner but they are also produced on fragile materials reflecting the poverty of Klee's times. During his trip as exile, Piet Mondrian, for instance, used unfolded cigarette packets for drawing, which in turn suggests Müller's work *Verswinden* (*Disappearing*). This work consists of three frame shapes and it offers, completely concealed, an enlargement of those black rectangles, which have been framing the warning signs on cigarette packets since January 2004, altogether 17 in German language.

The manner of presenting the works further contributes to their hermeticism. The drawings have in common a controlled mode of exhibition in nearly air- and watertight frames. The importance of the literal frame increases to the same extent as the withdrawal of the contextual framing contributes to the uncertainty of the observer. The semantics are as open as the form is closed. On the other hand the frames materially prevent the disappearance, which the works semantically represent. The disappearance is not only implied topically in the works by numerous references to expiry, extinction, drowning or disintegration. The disappearance itself so decidedly takes a back seat, that it can be said to disappear. Whoever acknowledges this double disappearance must also apprehend this interpreting text as paradox.