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Simply Taken From Life

Sometimes we have the luck to be able to find in everyday life something that teaches us something about what lies behind this everyday life. I was lucky when I bought an object at a well-known Swedish furniture shop. It was one of these ubiquitous things which we purchase hoping for the beneficial effects of feng shui, and which end up collecting dust on our shelves. Over time I had found different places for it in my flat, and now it had settled alongside an exotic pinecone and pebbles from Italy in a bamboo bowl—mass-market products, arranged to please the eye. That was last October. Now, six months later, it is back in its place. But I will never be able to look at it in the same way that I did up to the moment when René Wirths discovered it, picked it up and simply took it away—to his studio. What happened? What changed? It was painted, brought about an artistic examination of the world around us, and became part of a statement about the way we perceive things in it. Jokingly I had said to him: “If you want to paint it, I want to have the picture.” Pretty naïve—yet this reveals something, says something about the relationship between the thing and its artistic image or representation. This mundane and almost worthless object had been taken out of its context, became transformed, enriched—surrounded with an aura of meaning and was turned into—a work of art. It was only fitting that I got it back along with a photographic reproduction of its image in the gallery catalogue. There it carried a title, *Korbgeflecht* (Basketwork, 2011; ill. p. 106), and in brackets: “150 × 160 cm.” I look at “my” rattan ball on a blank white background: if I look closer, traces of brushstrokes tell me—this is a painted image. In the catalogue reproduction it has almost regained its original size. If I hold the object against it in the right way, I am able to identify the angle from which it was painted, am able to compare its reality to the reality in the picture—and realize how thoroughly irrelevant the differences are to the plausibility of the painting.

What happened in the meantime? How did it occur that this insignificant “thing” started a process that ended in an image, that its value is now also derived from the fact that it is able to communicate something, that it can convey something about the relationship of things, human beings, and the world; the fact that it has become a medium—in the most literal sense of the word?

The starting point for René Wirths’s more recent works is always an object that drew his artistic gaze. It is often round, will likely have an interesting surface structure, or both; sometimes it has other geometric forms which underlie it—the motif of the image gives a clue to the artist’s motivation for selecting the object portrayed. They are never merely “found objects.” Even before they lose their arbitrariness in the course of becoming the subject of a painting, René Wirths’s objects are often items to which a certain symbolic value has always been attached: wheels, balls of yarn, butterflies, a skull, a loaf of bread—as well as modern cult objects such as the red Moto Guzzi motorcycle. They provide starting points for the meaning-generating-machine that the viewer’s brain is, invoke other inner images, and call to mind what has been seen, heard, read. Or they have a biographical link, are utilitarian objects such as bicycles, shoes, and brushes, which have retained their significance for the artist because of the fact that they were part of his everyday life over a long period. This participation has been inscribed in them, and can be read in the traces of their use.

Although the image format always arises from the specific proportions of the things themselves, the scale of the enlargement in the image determines the proximity of the viewer to the object. In so far as the limits of the thing and of the image concur, the canvas stretched on the wooden frame itself becomes the meaningful boundary line between the inner space of perception and its unmarked environment: “I have stretched a frame for myself and squeeze the visible world into it,” Wirths says.[1] In the same way as the choice of image format, the white priming coat is more than just

simple preparation for the making of an image: it marks the tabula rasa, symbolizes emptiness as the prerequisite for the state of contemplation, into which the artist now inscribes with charcoal the traces of his first engagement with the nature of the object. Tracing the outline, he sees the idea of the object emerge. In a process of increasing concentration, the finished body of the image then gradually develops with more and more differentiation from its ideal seed.

As early as 1935, Walter Benjamin called attention to a decisive shift in collective perception, which accompanied the development of photography and film, and which continues to have an impact today. In his well-known essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,* he describes how apparatus-generated reproductions have the tendency to supersede the "original" with its "uniqueness," how moving images prevent the in-depth consideration of a work of art, and how distraction has replaced contemplation. Lost in this development was something that Benjamin tried to express with the term "aura," the "unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be." [2] It is the trace, the signature of the cultic origin of all art, and it is only revealed through contemplative observation: "While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch." [3]

Although our eyes, accustomed to photography, immediately tend to infer from Wirths's accurate and detailed realism (source) images created by an apparatus—a second, closer examination reveals exactly the opposite. In contrast to a mechanical reproduction of the object, in Wirths's painting we indeed do not have perfect images before us. The animation on his website of a painted bicycle-wheel reveals, for example, an imbalance: and that makes us realize how used we are to abstracting from what our eyes perceive, and accepting as "round" something which is in reality not round at all. Wirth's manner of painting asserts a rejection of representation conveyed by mechanical means. He reconstructs the objects rather as subjects of a contemplative exercise in perception, retracing their surfaces with the painter's classical means: eye, canvas, hand, paint, brush.

In a time of visual overstimulation and omnipresence of "media," this art intervenes in a remarkably silent way in the meta-dialogue around art and media theory. Silently, and yet not without implicitly recalling and resonating with the long-running discourse on realism; for example with certain works of Albrecht Dürer, Jan Vermeer, and Jan van Eyck. The apparent proximity of Wirths's way of working to photorealism is thus only ostensible: his reproductions of objects seized from life are not copies, but rather material traces of a painterly appropriation and internalization, or even also an assimilation of the seen. Wirths's painting is a recreation of spiritual images, produced in contemplative observation with the use of paint and canvas. Confronting these vestiges, the observer becomes involved in a process that resembles the one from which the image arose. Following the finest brushstrokes, we recognize the polychromicity of the light, the differences in structure, the traces of production and use, the "work" of time on matter. Inscribed in the often extreme enlargement of the painted objects is a simultaneous summons to come closer, to take a very careful and detailed look. The images demand the same thing from the viewer that the objects' depiction required of the artist: meditation, contemplation, precise observation of "what is"; engagement with the world of phenomena, even though we with our senses can never reach beyond their surface. At the same time, the white background draws the observer's awareness to the difference between what is and what is not. Viewing of the paintings thus turns into a reconstruction of the individual process of perception to which they bear witness.

In pictures where Wirths submits the works of other artists to the same treatment, this process becomes intensified. Large-format oil adaptations of the children's drawings and watercolors of his daughter, for example—even more than the concealed self-portraits and self-quotations in the painted, mirrored reflections found in some of his other images—point to the intricate nature of his play with perception. In *Clara-Bild* (2010, ill. p. 94) the subject depicted is an image in which we recognize a meadow, a sun, a princess; but already shaped, alienated by an individual adaptation and

assimilation of the world—a child's view of things, which says a lot about the young artist. In submitting this process of assimilation to his own painterly process of contemplation, Wirths also shows the viewer clearly how to look at his pictures: the enormous enlargement, and the translation of the gouache/watercolor hues into oil paint are not only traces of the accommodation of a foreign view of the world, but also a challenge to
the recipient to engage in the same process.

This also applies to three-dimensional artworks, such as the excavating machine of the southern German artist Roland Kappel, which is -assembled from items found on construction sites and depicted in Wirths's most recent painting: *Hanomag, Nr. 109 (Roland Kappel)* (2010–11, ill. pp. 108–11). Taken by itself, the machine already represents an interpreted reconstruction of reality—appropriated by the painter, it now allows the recipient to reflect on his or her own way of seeing on yet another level. How big is the thing in reality? What is it made of? Does it work? And how? The picture offers no quick and certain answers to such pragmatically directed questions. Whoever though is prepared to allow for this uncertainty may experience in this sense of perturbation something about the way our own perception functions; and may learn how the brain endeavors to produce meaning and a coherent view of the world. Tuning into the painterly contemplation of René Wirths, we can once again be touched by the "aura" of the (art) object, and in the process, simultaneously experience something of the cultic origin of art. Or, in the words of the Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hanh, who Wirths likes to quote: "When we practice mindfulness of objects outside of ourselves, then the knowledge of these objects is also mind." [4]

My rattan ball now lies in its old place once more—and only I know its story, only I know that it was of great importance for some months, and that it currently hangs in an exhibition enlarged many times over as an oil painting. Some small part of the artwork's aura, however, seems to have remained with it.

1 Interview with René Wirths by Charlotte-Louise Bartsch, www.renewirths/text/Interview_2010.pdf

2 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* eds. Michael W. Jennings et al. (London, 2008), p. 298.

3 Ibid.

4 Thích Nhất Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston, 1987), p. 63.