

Tomas Schmit

The Unknown Known

Lecture by Barbara Wien at the Royal Academy of Stockholm, 19th January 2016

At the beginning of January 2016, I received a lovely booklet about the conductor Hermann Scherchen whom at the time the artist Luca Frei was doing a show about in my gallery in Berlin. In this booklet, Scherchen was labelled as “the best known unknown”. Immediately, I thought of Tomas Schmit – the artist and writer I am here to talk to you about today. Tomas Schmit, was, and is still today known within the artistic circles but remains terribly unknown in wider poetic realms. And I must say – his entire work and the subjects he was interested in are still unfamiliar, even within the professional world. It’s been 9 years since the Museum Ludwig in Cologne exhibited their homage to Tomas Schmit, which opened 6 months after his death in 2006.



Kasper König speaking at the opening of the Tomas Schmit exhibition “Are Humans Capable of Thought?” 2007 at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne

The title of the show was “Are Humans Capable of Thought?” In the catalogue, published on occasion of this show, Stefan Ripplinger – a very good Berlin-based author – wrote “the very first essay to focus on Schmit’s aesthetics and establish its place not only in the history of art but also in the history of science.”

(I)



Catalogue published by Walther König, Cologne 2007

I will return later to this outstanding essay, which is the first, and until today the only, published text exploring in detail the concepts of Tomas Schmit’s radial project. Ripplinger explains clearly what his work is about, “...it aims at an artistic explication of scientific questions: How did our senses come into being? How

do we see, how do we hear, how do we think?" (2) Ripplinger highlights these questions that form the basis of most of Schmit's works, even calling the first work of art by Schmit "an experiment". (3)



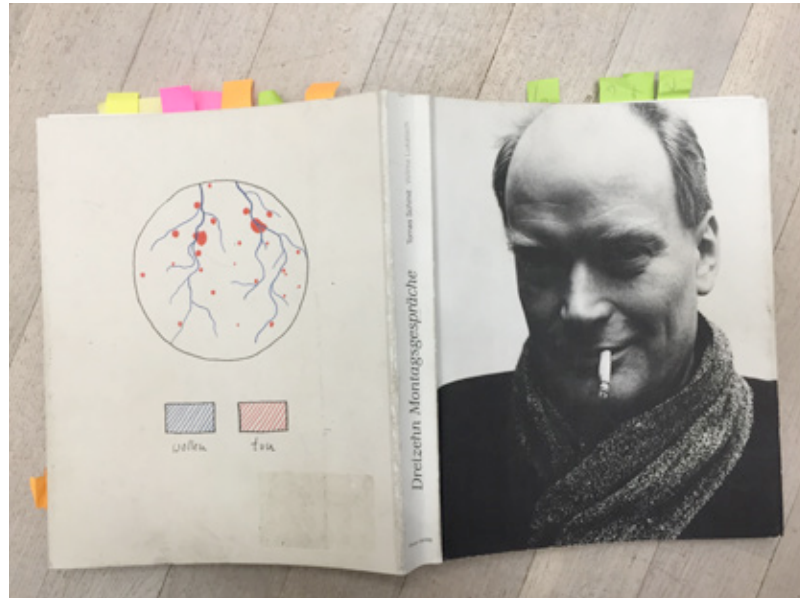
#1 "zyklus for water-pails (or bottles)", 1962, performed by Tomas Schmit in "Die Kleine Komodie", Amsterdam 1963

He continues, "already Schmit's first action was reminiscent of an experiment. The 'cycle for water-pails (or bottles)' (#1) by the not yet twenty-year old artist dates back to 1962. He instructs the performer to keep pouring water from one container to the next until all of it has been spilt or evaporated. Although, as Schmit remarks, one could make a 'physics lecture' out of Piece No. I, one should avoid doing so. The point is to 'simply do it', with the emphasis on 'simply'." (4) Ripplinger highlights this ethos of simplicity as the most important characteristic of Fluxus. As a result, piece no. I by Schmit, the cycle for water-pails, became one of the most distinguishing pieces of this event-based art movement. Performed first in Amsterdam in 1963 and multiple times after, it was mentioned in almost every Fluxus catalogue.

Before I begin to elaborate step by step on the developments of Schmit's work – from the Fluxus pieces, to books, texts based works, editions and his main field: drawing – I want to read what Schmit said himself about Fluxus, explaining why he felt attracted to this "school of scepticism and minimalism" (5).

In one of his essays he wrote, "the f[luxus]-way was, to avoid all symbolistic, feuilletonistic, expressive, or any other showing-off gimmicks as much as possible, and to come up with things as simple, concrete, FORMFREE as ever possible." (6) He was interested in this spirit of reduction and both his life and work were driven by this tendency. Instead of blowing up his ideas to create giant art works, sculptures or paintings, he concentrated on reducing as much as possible. This following statement by Schmit's sums up this way of thinking, "what I learned from f[luxus], along with many other things: what can be mastered by a sculpture, doesn't have to be erected as a building; what can be brought by a painting, doesn't have to be made as a sculpture; what can be accomplished in a drawing, doesn't have to become a painting; what can be cleared on a scrap of paper, doesn't need to be done as a drawing; and what can be settled in the head, doesn't even require a paper scrap!" (7)

Schmit wrote this important statement in 1982. At that point, he had long been separated from all Fluxus named activities. He was one of the few who were willing to analyse the events of the early 60s and view them in a critical – and as always, self-critical way. In addition, he was always ready to explain, in the most wonderful manner, what he had learnt from it. Meanwhile, Schmit's research about perception, consciousness and the function of the human brain, amongst other fields, began to take form in drawing and writing. The 'simplicity' I mentioned earlier and his focus on reduction remained prominent in the development of his ideas into drawings.



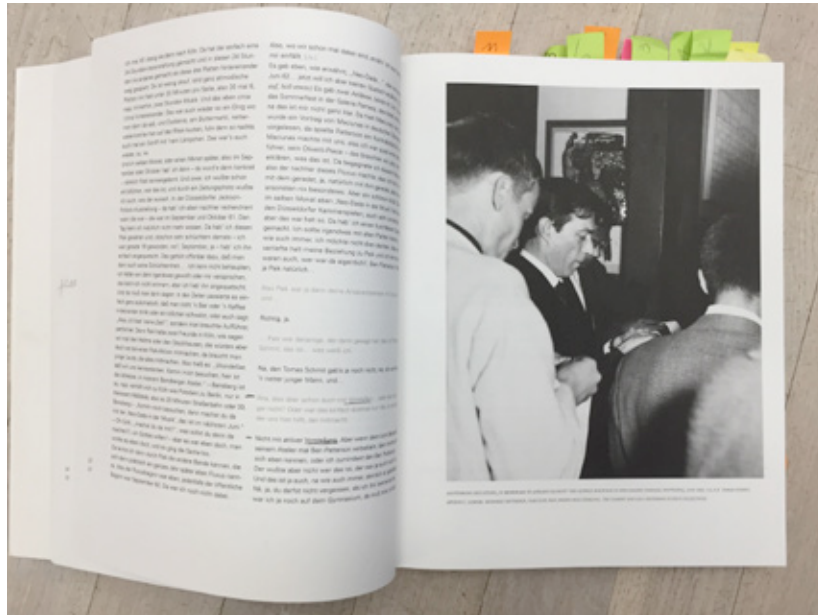
“Driezehn
Montagsgespräche”
 (“13 Monday Talks”)
Tomas Schmit /
Wilma Lukatsch,
Wiens Verlag, Berlin
2008

In the book “13 Monday talks”, which consists of interviews Schmit gave to the art historian Wilma Lukatsch in summer 2005, he said he always took pride in the fact that he only used material which every child has at hand, and any child can buy on any corner: paper, pencil and coloured pencils. “I was always quite satisfied with that – that I didn’t need any special brushes from China and... or bristles from a wild boar’s ear, ah there are all sorts of things - (...) I have always used very ordinary means and have just done what any child does.” (8) In another text, Schmit explains why he preferred the smaller scale, the concrete and the simple concepts like drawing and his refusal to enlarge. “in an age when salon daubs, monster sculptures, packaged buildings, satellite follies, psychobombast, dominate the art scene, drawing almost becomes a piece of *nature*.” (9) Nature, or moreover - the complexity of nature and the many unsolved questions of what nature and human nature is - was Schmit’s lifelong interest.

I’ll begin now to explain step by step about the life of Tomas Schmit. I think it’s important to know a few of these facts in order to better situate his work and understand how radical it was.

Tomas Schmit was born in the middle of the Second World War, in a small town in Germany called Wipperfürth, near Cologne. It was July 1943. He grew up with his mother Johanna. His father, whom he only met once or twice as a baby, died - or better, was killed - during the war. Schmit went to Cologne with his mother, where he attended the Gymnasium (high school). The description of his life and upbringing in his CV is of particular interest - “born 13th July 1943, near Cologne; gymnasial, no other training; he used to call people like Paik, Maciunas, Kōpcke, Gosewitz his teachers. Since 1962 pieces, actions, concepts, language pieces, texts, books, editions, and drawings, from 1955 in Cologne, from 1965 in West-Berlin, since 2001 in Berlin-Mitte.”

After meeting Schmit at a Jackson Pollock exhibition, the Korean artist Nam June Paik asked him if he would participate in Fluxus events as a performer. Like this, the 19-year-old Schmit came to Fluxus - without any academic training. He began writing his own pieces and attended Fluxus festivals in Wiesbaden, Copenhagen, Paris etc..



In the foreground:
Tomas Schmit and
Nam June Paik in
the Galerie Parnass,
Wuppertal, 1962



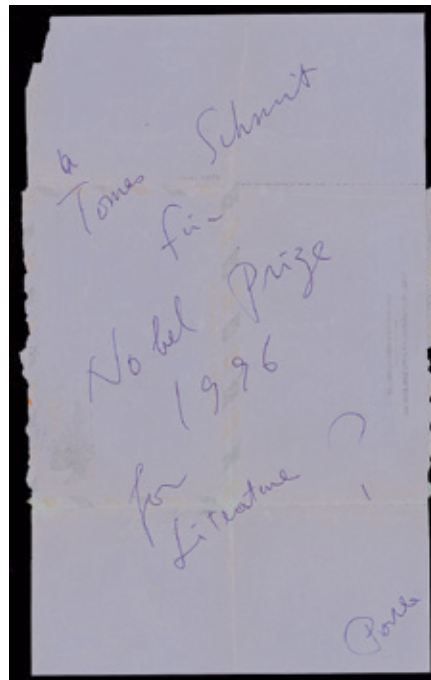
Left: Performance of George Maciunas' "In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti" at "Festum Fluxorum Fluxus, Musik und Antikunst - Das Instrumentale Theatre", Staatliche Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, 1963. L-R: Tomas Schmit, Nam June Paik, Arthur Köpcke, Wolf Vostell, Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams, Frank Townbridge and Bengt af Klintberg



Right: Tomas Schmit & Emmett Williams performing at "Festum Fluxorum Fluxus, Musik und Antikunst - Das Instrumentale Theatre", Staatliche Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, 1962

During this time, Schmit also became the assistant of George Maciunas - the founder and motor of the Fluxus movement. For months, Schmit was living in Maciunas' house, in Ehlhalten, near Wiesbaden, where he edited Fluxus pieces and typesetted the texts and advertisement sheets.

If I were to mention only one of the extremely influential relationships of this time, it would have to be that with Nam June Paik. Tomas Schmit called him "teacher", and naturally so as Paik opened up the art world to him. Later, they became close friends and highly regarded each other's company. The tomas schmit archiv, which I founded in Berlin after Schmit's death, contains many letters from Paik - all full of admiration.



Letter from Nam June Paik to Tomas Schmit, 1966

I would require a second lecture to elaborate fully on the fruitful relationship between Paik and Schmit as it was so full of important events for the history of art. However, mindful of time, there are two texts I'd like to mention. The first text written by Schmit came as a result of Paik's exhibition "exposition of music" which took place in Wuppertal in 1963 at Galerie Parnass.



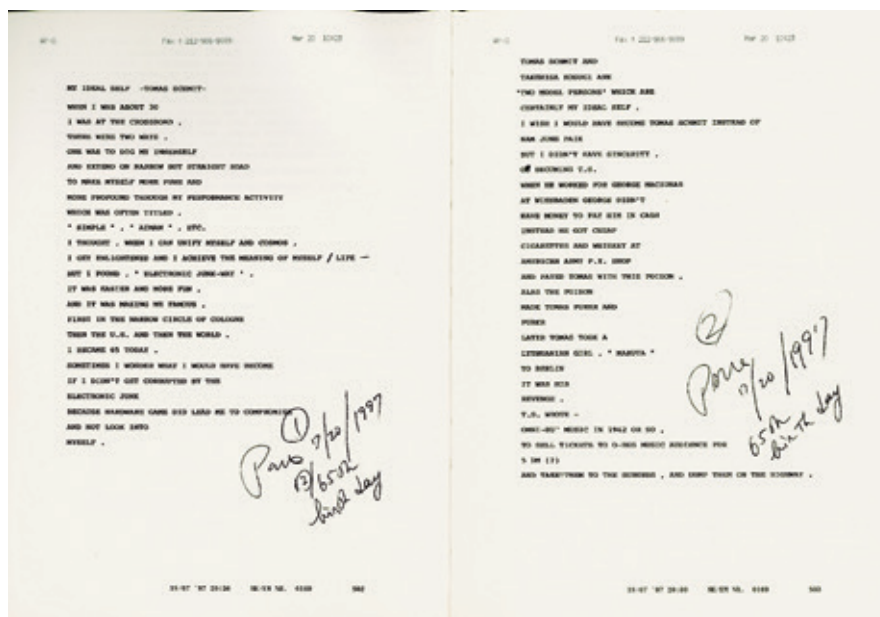
Schmit assisted Paik in the creation of what later became a historical event in regards to new technology, early video sculptures, Zen and Fluxus. As the documentation was not so rich, Paik asked Schmit in 1976 if he could put together his own description and memories of the show.

The end result was a precise account of everything Schmit could remember; a flawless text interpreting Paik's connection to his culture in Asia and the relationship he had with the Western society he was living and working in. Nowadays this is a renowned text. It has been reprinted in many catalogues, translated into English and Korean and is viewed as the best review about Paik's early expositions.



Cover of the catalogue: Nam June Paik, "Werke 1946 - 1976", Kölnischer Kunstverein 1976

Nam June Paik wrote the second significant text, which was printed in Schmit's 3rd oeuvre catalogue and titled "My Ideal Self – Tomas Schmit". I'll just read two sentences from the homage: "Tomas Schmit and Takehisa Kosugi are 'Two Model Persons' which are certainly my ideal self, I wish I would have become Tomas Schmit instead of Nam June Paik." (10) In this text, Paik regrets his move away from the pure, profound and simple way of doing things.



Foreword by Nam June Paik in Catalogue 3 by Tomas Schmit, Frankfurt, 1997

Due to time restraints, I cannot elaborate further on Paik and Schmit's relationship, however I strongly recommend those who are interested to investigate further. I hope the art historians and researchers can delve deeper into the interwoven elements of their relationship and decipher the questions the serious artists put to themselves.

Let's now go back to the sixties and look at Tomas Schmit's other developments. Between 1962 and 1965, the festivals for Fluxus took place, in which he participated and Schmit organised the "20th of July 1964" event at the Technological Academy of Aachen.



Cover of the Fluxus-Festival catalogue
"July 20, 1964", TH Aachen (organised by
Valdis Abolins and Tomas Schmit)

He invited artists, developed the concepts and edited and published the catalogue. This catalogue is a very rare book and collectable item.

By 1965 Schmit had begun thinking about leaving the active role as a performer. He took part in an event titled "24 hours" at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal.



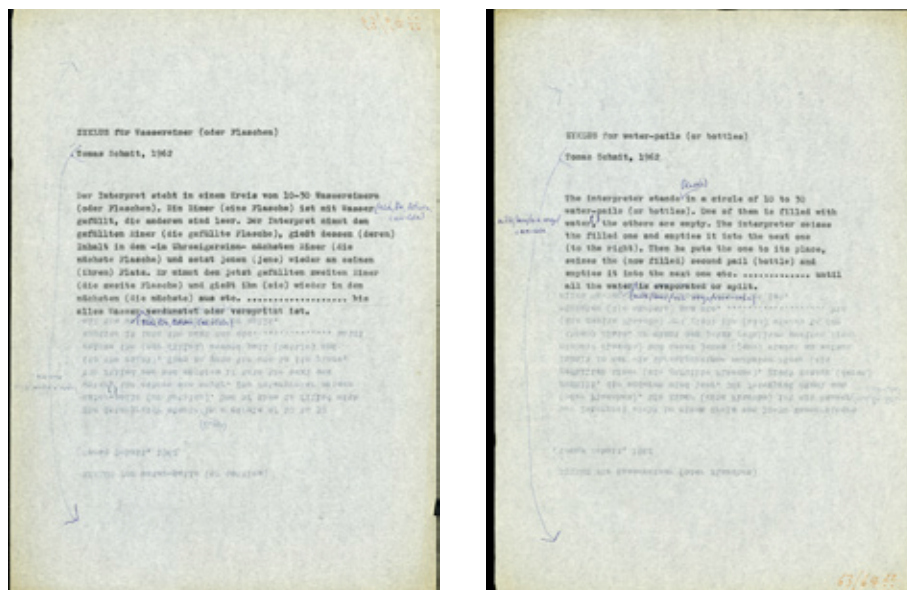
#35
"action ohne publikum"
("action without public")
1965, performed by Tomas
Schmit at "24 Stunden",
Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal

Schmit, together with Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, Bazon Brock, Wolf Vostell and others, performed their pieces for 24 hours, just as the title says. Tomas Schmit's contribution was "action without public" – which involved him sitting amongst a circle of buckets and pouring water from one bucket to the next – referring back to the piece "cycle" from 1962. However, the difference was that he performed this piece only when he was alone, when no one else was present in the space. As soon as a visitor came into the room, he stopped and began talking, smoking or drinking with the viewers. This performance is number 35 in Schmit's oeuvre catalogues, marking almost his last performance in the Fluxus scene. He participated in another event in Berlin in 1970 for his friend Arthur Köpcke – but he never returned to the stage with his own Fluxus pieces. For Schmit, radically questioning the relationship between actor and viewer, active and passive, artist and public wasn't working anymore in the form of Fluxus events on stage.



"music while you work" by
Arthur Köpcke, performed at
the Forumtheatre Berlin 1970.
L-R: Tomas Schmit, Arthur
Köpcke, Emmett Williams &
Marianne Filliou, Al Hansen,
Carolee Schneeman, Valerie
Herouvis

The tomas schmit archiv in Berlin contains all the scores of Schmit's 35 performances.



These scores are texts, mostly written and typesetted in German and English, outlining the basic details of the work, which can then be performed by anybody. Until today, nobody has published these scores and similarly nobody has written about them. In other words: there is a lot to do and a lot remains to be discovered.

Between 1965 and the early 70s, Tomas Schmit collaborated with the German artist Ludwig Gosewitz.



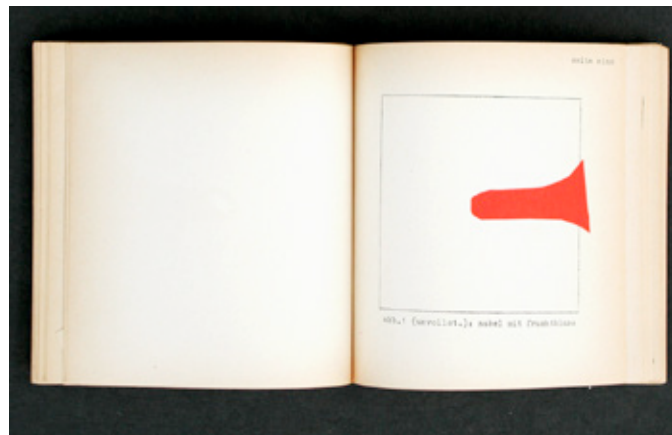
Ludwig Gosewitz, Maruta Schmidt and Tomas Schmit in Tiergarten, Berlin ca. 1965

They invented a publishing house for one day and, together with the Austrian artist Gerhard Rühm, created "the Büdinger Oratorium" in 1966. Here a daily conversation between Gosewitz, Rühm and Schmit was transcribed and staged with children. The children spoke each sentence as if it were an oratorio. From 1965 onwards, Tomas Schmit appeared on the artist list of gallerist René Block and a lifelong relationship began. In 1969, Schmit exhibited for the first time in a small gallery called Jysk gallery in Copenhagen.



Tomas Schmit at the "Jysk Kunstgalerie" in Copenhagen 1969

This came as a result of his close friendship with the German artist Arthur K pcke, who after emigrating to Copenhagen with his wife Tut became the most important figure on the Danish Avant-garde scene. Friendship aside, Tomas Schmit and Arthur K pcke were both lively, independent and brilliant intellectuals.



#70
"das gute d nken", book, 272 pages, 15 x 14 cm, lumbecked, hectographed with 149 drawings (16 whole pages, 7 coloured and 114 tiny), 6 images, 10 glued-in snippets, 2 bookmarks and (at least) 1 surprise, self-published, berlin 1970

In 1970 Tomas Schmit published his first artists' book "das gute d nken". Ripplinger explains the book's relationship with science, which was the most important terrain for Schmit. Ripplinger says, "Schmit's exercises in paradox and wordplay are clearly part of his broader project to research the evolution of the senses and the mind." (11) In this book, drawings and texts speak about logic, the structure of language and in length towards the end about the origins and developments of language. Within "das gute d nken" Schmit announced his plans for another book.



Left: #339 "erster entwurf (einer zentralen  sthetik)" / ("first draft (of central aesthetics)"), book, 164 pages, format 20,5 x 15 cm, b&w-offset, stitched; with 12 diagrams, 4 book-pieces and 38 small to full-page drawings; self published, berlin 1989; edition of 1600
Right: Tomas Schmit presenting "erster entwurf (einer zentralen  sthetik)" at Walther K nig bookshop, Cologne, 1990

Published in 1989 by Schmit himself under the title “the first draft (of central aesthetics)”, Ripplinger calls it the “most important of artist’s books” (12). Schmit describes the aesthetic as a science of sensory cognition – (Wissenschaft der sinnlichen Erkenntnis) elaborating on the knowledge surrounding our senses. In fact, the book is full of experiments concerning perception and open-ended questions. For example, Schmit queries how humans “have developed colour vision without any noticeable evolutionary pressure.” (13)

I should add - the previously discussed book, “das gute dünken”, was not only published by Schmit himself but he also singlehandedly printed, bounded and distributed it too. Schmit’s reluctance to give something to the hands of others – as long as you can do it yourself – is further demonstrated by the fact he wrote his own oeuvre catalogues – four books in total.



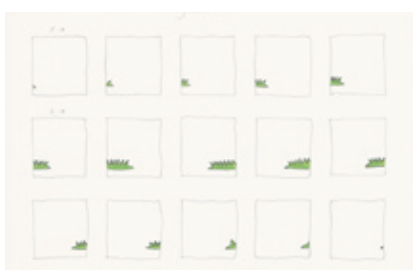
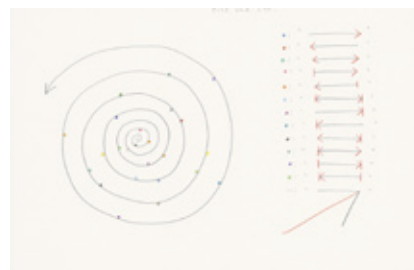
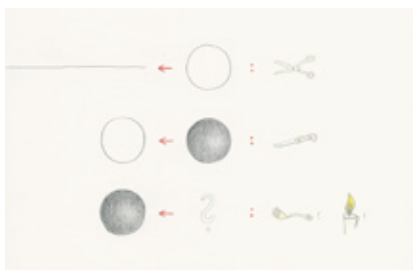
Cover “katalog I”, Kunstverein
Cologne 1978. Schmit at his
writing-desk in his flat in Berlin,
Bleibtreustrasse 3

He began in 1978 by counting all his works and assigning each a number. He precisely described and commented on each picture or drawing, writing about the circumstances, ideas and subjects - even occasionally criticising himself. When speaking about these accompanying texts, “frequently enough it is not about the pieces at all, I just use it as an occasion to write something.” Schmit used this method of writing because it also leads to the “fact that one can distance oneself.” (14)

In fact, it’s very important to mention this particular way of working, for it shows that Tomas Schmit was searching for an absolute independency. He did not want to please a publisher or a certain public and he didn’t want to create books and works striving to fulfil the expectations of art history or the market. He simply wanted to be free from all this. The book “first draft”, for example, has a blank white page for a front cover – a nightmare for publishers and booksellers – and it begins with a semicolon. Nevertheless, the difficult to read “first draft” was reviewed in the scientific magazine “Spektrum der Wissenschaft”. The cyberneticist Valentin Braitenberg expressed his admiration of Tomas Schmit’s poetic language, suggesting to his students that this book is the best-written introduction into brain science (15). Ripplinger gave further praise, “This book is absolutely indispensable for anyone who does not merely find Schmit’s drawings cute and droll, but really wants to get involved with them.” (16)

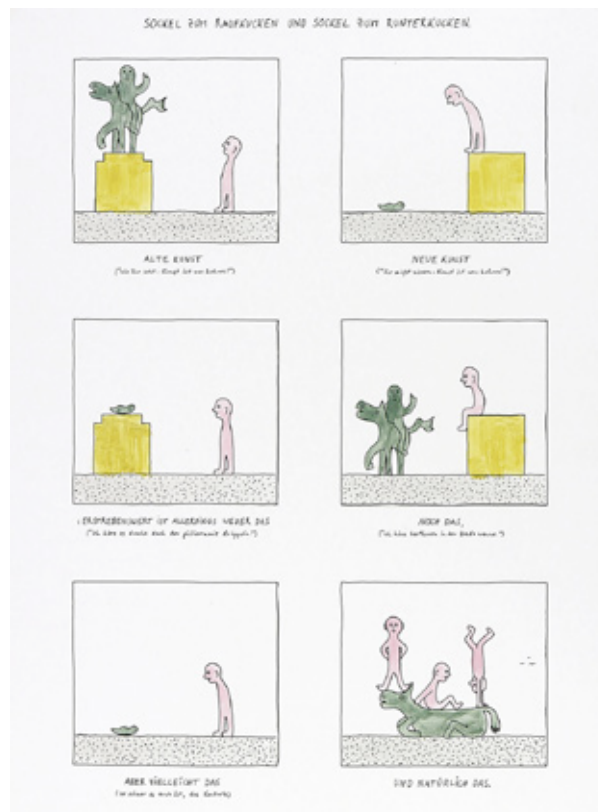
As the one who takes care of Tomas Schmit's estate, I have tried to publish as much as possible, examples being catalogue number 4, together with the publisher Walther König in Cologne, and the previously mentioned "13 Monday Talks" together with Wilma Lukatsch. Furthermore we created a website, digitalising all work, complete with descriptions and numerous texts. However, I know full well what is missing. And that's translations of Tomas Schmit's texts. I mention this because Ripplinger is right – it is crucial to read Schmit's "first draft", for example, but it is written in German and up until this point no one has offered to finance a translator. I hope this will change soon. For the moment we are working on a full translation of the interviews book into English, but it will take another year for its completion. I stress the importance of translation because I've become increasingly aware that if one wishes to understand the complexity of artists such as Tomas Schmit, or Dieter Roth, then one must read what they have written themselves. Let's hope that the interest in these artists' texts grows and the institutions and academic world's curiosity about their sources develops.

So, we understand the basis for Schmit's drawings and books as being "questions of perception, the senses, stimuli and reactions, forms, evolution, the interconnection between living in the world and perceiving the world". (17) I want to then show you a few drawings and drawing series as examples of how Schmit developed these concepts. In the 70s he started to work with an editor named Armin Hundertmark. For him, Schmit drew what he called "edition-originals" (18). He made 9 different "Hundertmark editions" until the 80s – all consisting of original drawings or objects, which Schmit repeated 20 or 25 times for the 20 or 25 cardboard boxes. I'll show you one of these editions called "rauschebaum und zeisigkeit" (1979) – a series of drawings about space and time.



217 "rauschebaum und zeisigkeit"
cardboard box 24 x 32 x 1,5 cm, label on the lid, in the lid numbered, dated, signed; 17 drawings 21,5x30,5 cm, pencil and colour pencils; 1979; edition of 25/II copies; '60. karten' of the edition hundertmark, berlin

Then I want to show one of the 3 hand-coloured graphics, “pedestal for looking up and pedestal for looking down” from 1975. This work shows what Schmit enjoyed discussing and was always striving for, and that was to encourage the viewer to play an active role; to participate, to think, to solve the riddle – to be active and not a passive consumer.



151
“sockel zum
raufkucken und sock-
el zum runterkucken”
 (“pedestal for
looking up and pedestal for
looking down”)
offset 61 x 43 cm,
handcoloured; signed
and dated; edition of
100 numbered copies
(and 46 ap); 1975;
kunstverein
wuppertal

In the 80s, Schmit started to prepare his book “first draft” discussed above. Naturally at that time, his drawings were primarily based around his research into colour and behaviour. One example is the series “and like this a chameleon looks like” from 1986.



305
“so sieht ein chamäleon aus” II
 (“and like this a chameleon
looks like” II)
drawing 43 x 61 cm, pencil &
colour pencils, 1986
from the 7-part series # 304 -
310

After the book “first draft”, his drawings remained dedicated to the open-ended questions surrounding evolution. Let’s see the work #389, called “what do you mean by asking what do you mean said the wallpaper to the paper wall and there was no reply or two”.



389

“what do you mean by asking what do you mean said the wallpaper to the paperwall and there was no reply or two”

drawing 52 x 43 cm, pencil & colour pencils, 16.5.1993

Here Schmit is drawing, or to put it better, performing a mutation on paper. You can see several DNA strings. He drew in numerous lines, one string after the other with different colours. Naturally, as with any repetitive method, he accidentally confuses colour and form and a mutation occurs. I would even go so far as to say that instead of using the stage in his life after Fluxus, Schmit rather used the paper to stage an event. Still today, this drawing concept has not been considered and analysed by critics and historians, as far as I know. Another example of this method is “nicht immer alles dazusagen!” (don’t always say everything!) from 1999. (#502). Here he moves on the page like a chameleon - back and forth, back and forth.

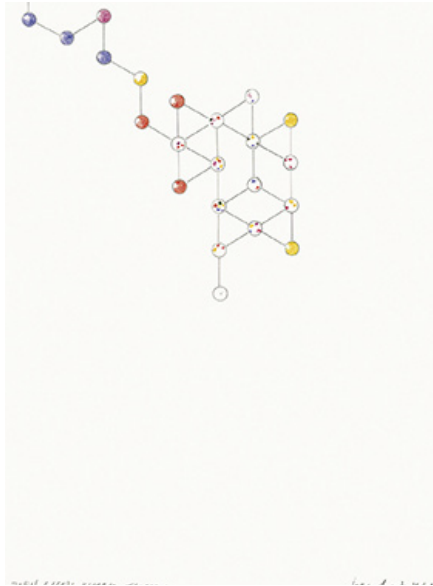


502

“nicht immer alles dazusagen!”
(don’t always say everything!)

drawing 43 x 30,5 cm, pencil & colour pencils, 11.3.1999

At the end of my talk, I want to show you two drawings, “john cage’s bicycle diving” (#566) and “john cage’s bicycle flying” (#567) from 2002.



Left: # 566

“john cage's fahrrad, tauchend”, (“john cage's bicycle, diving”)

drawing 43 x 30,5 cm, pencil & colour pencils, 29.4.2

Right: # 567

“john cage's fahrrad, fliegend” (“john cage's bicycle, flying”)

drawing 43 x 30,5 cm, pencil & colour pencils, 29.4.2

These are wonderful examples of another concept Schmit followed closely in his drawings. He established a certain rule, using a dice to decide the colour and direction of the next colour field. So, essentially he prevented his own decision-making and let chance decide which form would appear on the paper.

Thanks for listening!

Barbara Wien

- (1) Julia Friedrich / Kasper König, in: Tomas Schmit 'Können Menschen denken?' Köln 2007, p.8
- (2) Stefan Ripplinger, "Was uns macht", in: Tomas Schmit 'Können Menschen denken?' Köln 2007, p.12
- (3) Ibid., p. 12
- (4) Ibid., p. 12-13
- (5) Ibid., p. 14
- (6) Tomas Schmit, über Fluxus, 1982, citation from Tomas Schmit 'Können Menschen denken?' Köln 2007, p.14
- (7) Ibid., p. 14-15
- (8) Tomas Schmit, 'Dreizehn Montagsgespräche', Berlin 2008, citation from the English translation by Andrea Lerner (unpublished)
- (9) Tomas Schmit, "zeichnen:", in: Vom Zeichnen, Aspekte der Zeichnung 1960-1985, Catalogue Frankfurt 1985, p.374-377, English translation from Tomas Schmit in "fishing for nets", New York, 1994
- (10) Tomas Schmit, Foreword in Catalogue 3, Frankfurt 1997
- (11) Stefan Ripplinger, "Was uns macht / What makes us" in Tomas Schmit 'Können Menschen denken?' Köln 2007, p.16
- (12) Ibid., p.12
- (13) Ibid., p. 31
- (14) Tomas Schmit, 'Dreizehn Montagsgespräche', Berlin 2008, citation from the English translation by Andrea Lerner (unpublished)
- (15) Valentin Braitenberg, "Tomas Schmit: erster entwurf (einer zentralen ästhetik)", in: Spektrum der Wissenschaft, August 1990, p.135
- (16) Stefan Ripplinger, a talk 'on Tomas Schmit', Kunstbibliothek Berlin, 22nd October 2009, English translation by Andrea Lerner (unpublished)
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) Tomas Schmit, 'Dreizehn Montagsgespräche', Berlin 2008, citation from the English translation by Andrea Lerner (unpublished)