

#08  
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THRILLOCHROMES



THRILLOCHROME 1, 2013  
TRENCHCOAT ON CANVAS  
80 X 80 CM

TEXT  
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TOUCHDOWNS  
THOUGHTS ON HERMETICS  
VS. HERMENEUTICS  
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TIRDAD ZOLGHADR



Michael Portnoy sent me two possible angles for this essay. One was “hermeneutics vs hermeticism”. The other was the color beige.

And the latter tempted me. What worried me was the fact that everyone who knows Portnoy knows he is picky with his colors. Not just the colors per se, but the way they’re discussed. How many nights have I toiled over the press release, hoping to find the right terms, the right turn of phrase for that textbook shade of limonite ochre or the precise hue of digital cyan. With little Portnoy raising his short, stubby arms to the sky in furious exasperation. His small, chunky torso - Portnoy is the exact shape of a hotel minibar - causing him to heave and sweat profusely. The interns aghast, the assistants atremble.

So imagine an essay on beige. The editorial process, if we can call it that, would have ended in tears, or worse. With Portnoy once again screaming my name from the sidewalk at 3AM. His quadrangular silhouette shuddering with righteous anger in the moonlight. “You told Klaus it’s AZURE?”

At the end of the day, I agree with Renate Adler that sanity is one of the most profound moral imperatives of our time. Hence: “hermeneutics vs hermeticism”. Beige will have to wait.

I will not, however, be discussing hermeneutics in terms of its colorful academic genealogy, i.e. its Aristotelian and/or Heideggerian inflections for example. Rather, I’ll be addressing it in terms of the professional vulgate of the art world. Within this tradition, hermeneutics is the stark

#08  
-  
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polar opposite of hermeticism, in that it seeks to divulge, explain, explicate and deliberate. With hermeticism being an act of willful logophobic constipation, a rejection of the very idea of meaning as conveyed by transparent language. Like so many polar opposites, the two counterparts are in point of fact inseparable, even working closely in tandem. Much like Kinski vs. Herzog; as opposed to, say, the Jets vs. the Giants.

Needless to say, hermeneutics is a ubiquitous thing. Once steeped in poststructuralist doctrine for too long - I studied comparative literature during the 1990s - you cannot seriously consider any alternative to hermeneutics being inherent to all human interaction. Much like oxygen, language, or penis envy.

I'd further argue that the denial thereof will only disservice those doing the denying. The latter merely amounts to leaving the hermeneutics to others. Personally, I'll do nothing to discourage these people. If there are artists daft enough to believe their work will "speak" for itself, then as a writer and curator, it is in my interest to encourage that superstition with polite applause. More for me.

Hermeticism, by contrast, is not a given, but an ideological newcomer that has only recently come to co-define contemporary art as we know it. In ancient Greece, the god "Hermes" was modeled after his Egyptian colleague "Thoth", a god who perfected the geeky art of sealing tubes. In the arts, however, the hermetic is never as straightforward. As

#08  
-  
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*THRILLOCHROME 3*, 2013  
TRENCHCOAT ON CANVAS  
80 X 80 CM

a refusal to explain, I'll just say that its "airtight" qualities are obvious. And yet, this negation is framed not as elitism, per se, but as a denial of any clear-cut understanding to be shared in the first place. It thus becomes a negation that is ultimately populist: For it insists on the democracy of indeterminacy and open-ended reception, as opposed to insider knowledge, or the inside joke.

Such is the hermeticism of the good listener. Silent only because he is very generous. Compare, however, the patriarchs of what is now the Conceptual Art canon; who famously attempted to be both open and closed, specific and anti-professional, accessible and impenetrable, all simultaneously. This allowed them to disavow the institutions of art (medium, venue, history etc), but also to engage with the Institution of Art at one and the same time.

The work need not be built. Nudge nudge. As Portnoy once put it, "the heyday, highpoint and highlight of conceptual art was marked, distinguished and characterized by a hermeneutics of access and simplicity that hermetically held and harbored a specialized knowledge deep within its bosom, its *Geist*, its *genus*, its very *nomos*, *n'est-ce pas*."

In other words, conceptual art offered a subversive, anti-institutional aroma and was nonetheless defined by hidden parables addressing not Joe the Plumber but professional peers and adversaries. The dichotomy was not hermeneutics-as-expert-explanation vs. hermeticism-as-open-ended-silence.

#08  
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*THRILLOCHROME 4*, 2013  
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But rather the dichotomy was hermeneutics as irreverent open-endedness vs. hermeticism as coded polemics, pointed and precise.

That was then. In today's field, the two polarities embody a surprising reversal in terms of their politics of reception. It is hermeneutics that is routinely decried as elitist. For by explaining "too much", you imply that art is only for those with the time and the inclination to read and listen to the insiders. Huge captions, big books, long lectures. Hermeticism, meanwhile, is more user-friendly. The less curatorial bla-bla there is, the more interpretation is "opened up".

Today, this democratic impulse cuts through all possible factions. Including the romantic yearning for transcending language altogether. The limbo of *umpf*, which is still widely assumed to be a painterly impulse by and large; the glum majesty of the monochrome is quite unlike the gusty self-obsessions of ab-ex. And yet the respective fetishes of surface and interiority do meet in the fantasy of the extra-glottic. The best-case scenario, for both, is the incommensurable encounter with art.

To be sure, I'm not saying the democracy of *umpf* is impossible. I am questioning the use of such fleeting moments of incommensurability as guiding principles. It's one thing to enjoy Chardonnay inspirations. To indulge in pedagogical monkey business deep within the shelter of a seminar room. To savor dizzying heights of ego and self-indulgence within the splendid isolation of a studio. It's another thing to account for your historical position,

#08  
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*THRILLOCHROME 5*, 2013  
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your income and your institutional privileges with these innocent flashes of sweetness and light.

Painters aside, obscurantism is equally inherent to the ethos of the process-based and the research-based, the durational and the archival. Think of the artists and curators with a taste for documentary strategies, interdisciplinary meanderings, site-specific dislocations and so on. Note the tendency to congratulate oneself for being impenetrable not only to a larger audience, but to any audience whatsoever: even the producers themselves will pride themselves in failing to understand. (A temptation I've succumbed to more than once, for reasons too irritating to explain here.) At times, they will happily scoff at the production of any knowledge whatsoever, no matter how soft or speculative.

Seen from the vantage point of this essay, the differences between the romantic painter clichés described above, and the ab-ex of the nerds (or the durational monochrome if you prefer), are not as stark as that. At the end of the day, we're all united by a taste for indefinite postponement. The deferral of positions, as well as products; of conclusions, as well as clarity, in the belief that, ultimately, the indeterminacy of meaning will preserve us from expertise and specialization, from institutional power and responsibility.

In the light of this indeterminacy, it's no wonder hermeneutics, though still around, is not exactly a priority. Portnoy once referred to art discourse as a "verbal thong". A sliver of language

#08  
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*THRILLOCHROME 6*, 2013  
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that has no other function than to keep the scandal of discursive nudity at bay. Consider coffee table catalogues, which, even with a purely hypothetical readership, “cover” the art respectably enough, or the many clever Kunsthalle pamphlets and gallery booklet editions, whose average audience is 0,92 readers per page.

To be fair, it is refreshing to be exclusive in a context such as today, where the pressure to please all audiences, young and old, left and right, high and low, is pretty overwhelming. The exclusive, in this context, becomes a luxury worth fighting for.

An intelligently exclusive approach, however, would amount to a hermeticism that demands even more hermeneutic commitment than usual, not less. It would refuse the easy comfort of spinal reflexes, and require a conceptual engagement on multiple levels. This is not some kind of exotic snobbery. The famous Bertolt Brecht himself, who is about as exotic as Mozart, or yoga mats, demanded an “expertise of the stadium” in his theatres.

Consider the fact that even quarterbacks demand more of their audiences than artists and curators today. The pleasure of American Football requires homework. It relies on understanding absurdly complicated rules and bewildering tactics, along with countless anecdotes, micro-histories and public debates that inform the said rules and tactics etc. Which is why football makes the art world look like a fraternity ward. Yadda yadda YADDA! Show me the ART! You THINK too MUCH bro.

Now does this mean a hermeticism of numbers, driven by stringent hermeneutic demands, could be a winning combination? More Tight Ends, less Wide Receivers?

The case of Michael Portnoy certainly suggests as much. He is not one to shy away from explanation; deeply demanding, not to say hermetic explanations at that. His colors aside, he is always sure to explain his political points, historical priorities, even his jokes in challenging detail, while sweetly wagging those arms and sweating abundantly.

You have the lengthy pre-contextualizations (“so this one’s gonna be real funny ‘cause it’s basically like an allegory of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* but like pre-Gadamer...”), the post-justifications (“so the giraffe is basically Heidegger, right?”). To top things off, he sometimes adds a moral to the story. (“Life is short, man. Carpe diem guys, *n’est-ce pas nicht wahr?*”)

Most importantly, nothing is ever impaired, lost or compromised by the explanation. On the contrary.



