

THE PATH OF PERCEPTION.
 LANGUAGE IN THE WORK OF RÉMY ZAUGG
 Javier Hontoria

Rémy Zaugg at Dreispitz studio, Basel, April 25, 2004



Driven by an uncompromising rigour over a period of four decades, Rémy Zaugg's work uses a wide repertoire of disciplines. Zaugg is mainly known for his painting, but his insatiable curiosity also led him to the study of architecture, urbanism, theory, design, video art, public art and curatorship. A common aim underlies all of his work: the implacable synchrony between the work of art, its receiver and its context – *place*, one of his great passions. Guiding all his work was an obstinate, unremitting desire, underlain by extraordinary complexity, to activate all our perceptive faculties. In his painting, but also in his project on the Arnhem bridge over the languishing Rhine, or his signage at a Munich shopping centre, the image of the world is conceived and grows before the onlooker; and the process occurs at a particular rhythm which depends on who is looking. The world is different to each of us, says the artist, and our perceptive consciousness has no equal.

Zaugg claimed that "Perception is the quintessential expression of man, and humanity is wholly revealed through and within perception." "The work of art," he observes in his well-known conversation with Jean-Christophe Ammann, "is open to the universe that reflects the human conscience and is reflected back in it."¹ Beginning with the obvious, unavoidable premise that consciousness and universe exist simultaneously in time ("neither one precedes the other,"²) Zaugg states that "work of art and man are inseparable, and are reflected in each other, wholly, unconditionally ... with no founding convention or law. There is no law to define the work of art, or to define man, except for the degree of human consciousness reflected in the work of art, which in its turn gives back to man an image of his consciousness. Man opens himself up to the work of art in his entirety; physically, psychically and culturally. And the work of art does the same. This is why every single part of the work counts, whether concrete or ideal, sensory, intellectual or semantic. Each and every element of it expresses something and is decisive. Each of them, with no exceptions."³ It is hard to find where to close Zaugg's quotes, which are always vehement, incisive, so distanced from the commonplace. Not a single instance in his discourse is dispensable.

Much of Zaugg's writing insists on the importance of perception as a fundamental element, not only in our relationship to art, but, more broadly considered, in our grappling with our place in the world. Zaugg thought about the qualities and attributes of painting deeply and intensely, and this led him to confer exceptional importance to each element in it, whether essential or accessory. Whatever was essential he exalted, ruthlessly discarding the accessory; yet every element was scrupulously, strictly analysed. This entailed deconstructing each part, without losing or decomposing: everything was reconstructed and its correct meaning sought. After breaking the parts down he rebuilt them, carefully and precisely conjugating nuances, step by step, serenely and perspicaciously.

If perception is the centre of the problem, colour and language are Zaugg's principle means of analysis. This text will focus on analysing the different ways he uses language in successive groupings of work, which can be easily separated as this exhibition shows.

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In 1963, when Zaugg was twenty years old, he saw Barnett Newman's *Day Before One* (1951) at the Basel Kunstmuseum. This was an entirely new aesthetic experience for the young student. The work made such a strong impression on him that it appears to have disarmed him, eclipsing all of his habitual perceptive abilities. Shortly afterwards, he appears to have wanted to regain them in a monumental five-year project. Language made its entrance into his work in his dissection of a copy of *La Maison du pendu* (1872-73), a painting from Cézanne's impressionist stage in Aix en Provence, which he found in an art book. The project, titled *27 esquisses perceptives d'un tableau* (27 perceptive sketches of a painting, ill. pp. 61-69), is a detailed breakdown of the elements that make up the painting. It is not a representation or a copy, but a translation of a painting into language. It is not exactly a text, either: Zaugg compares the function of a paintbrush to those of a pencil, and sometimes "composes" his analytical texts as if they were paintings.

This work places Zaugg in the intermediate space between image and text, between what we see and what we read. On small notebook pages, he systematically laid bare the different aspects of the copy, tenaciously extracting the motifs he *perceived* in it – the oblique facades, the trees on the left, the path, the blue of the

sky ... And, in accordance with the Impressionist tradition Cézanne was following at the time, he began to separate colour from objects to the point where the two became separate entities. As if Zaugg were exhausted after his feverish analysis, the last pages contain nothing but a perfunctory list of the colours in the copy, although he does specify their tone and intensity.

Zaugg's *Esquisses* bear a close affinity with Cézanne's manner of working. Like the French painter, Zaugg analyses the different parts that make up the painting from multiple viewpoints. And, like Cézanne, who ruptured the order by which we had perceived elements of the painterly plane for five centuries – harmony, rhythm, and the logic of perspective –, the Swiss artist proposes a series of divergences which escapes a univocal gaze, as if he were avoiding the lazy convention of the vanishing point. The artist's decision was to use a reproduction rather than the real work as his object of study (he could easily have analysed any of the treasures in the Kunstmuseum in his drawings, as he had done with *Day Before One*, but that would have undermined the primary intention which his encounter with Newman's painting had driven him to conceive). Zaugg wished to learn how to look. *Esquisses* is not a work about Cézanne; it is about him looking at Cézanne.

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The *Esquisses* are exhibited in the right wing of the Palacio de Velázquez, in a semi-closed nucleus which appears to contain the heart of the exhibition. The exhibition layout in Madrid attempts to evoke Zaugg's 1989 show at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, where the *Esquisses* were sheltered, almost watched over, by the

monumental series *Une feuille de papier* (A sheet of paper), made between 1973 and 1989.

Une feuille de papier (A sheet of paper, ill. pp. 103-121) uses the same parameters as the *Esquisses*, but transcends the specificity of the Cézanne painting. Zaugg was also working on other series, but for nearly two decades he steadfastly returned to the sheets of paper on which he pursued his meticulous analysis of the perceptive nature of the act of looking. He did so in a simple gesture, with which he was to establish his particular method for detecting the obvious, and how much of an artwork or its observer was accessory.

In developing his process, Zaugg initially followed two premises. He first placed a sheet of brown paper over a canvas. Then, he painted the surface of the canvas in the same colour as the paper. A third formula was used for many, but not all, of the paintings: in the semi-darkness of his studio, he projected paintings that were versions of others onto the canvases (Picasso's *Portrait d'un peintre d'après El Greco* was one of them) and, using the same brown paint, he simulated an exercise interpreting the works. As in the *Esquisses*, for which he eluded Cézanne's original work and used a copy, these works ignore El Greco's original and recur to Picasso's interpretation of the work.

The artist's commitment to confronting painting from diverging perspectives is manifest, as is the complexity of his search. Zaugg, however, was never satisfied with his obstinate probing, and went back, once again, to language. *Une feuille de papier* does actually honour its title. It is a sheet of paper on which the artist made sketches, scribbles and notes as if analysing the motif in real time. His *Esquisses perceptives* turn painting into language, whereas *Une feuille de papier* is a common ground for

painting and writing. The two practices are intermingled here, and their respective inherent time frames are confusingly superimposed in intricate semantic strata. Zaugg, in one of his habitual conjectures, invites us to ask what came first. *Une feuille de papier* attempts to be a grand summary of the ways painting evolved up to the closing stages of the 20th century. Representation and abstraction, what is pertinent to us and what is not, subjectivity and objectivity, the two-dimensional condition of the image and a certain fondness for three-dimensionality, are all in tension; but painting and language converge towards a common ground, almost becoming the same thing. Zaugg, as I have said, spent nearly two years rewriting and repainting the sheet of paper. Onto it he recorded the questions and new aesthetic concerns that the passing of the years brought with it, and the piece became a monumental emblem of his full maturity as an artist.

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The identification between painting and writing in Zaugg's work reached a new intensity in the mid-eighties in two new groups of work, *Un mot – un support* (One word – one support, ill. pp. 137-142) and *Für ein Bild* (For a painting, ill. pp. 87-95), which were started around the same time and show formal characteristics that are apparently similar, but radically opposed in their outcomes. An essential element was introduced into Zaugg's repertoire here: typography, which had already appeared in *Une feuille de papier*, now became a clearly defined aspect of his work.

Un mot – un support is a set of small works in which the word plays a leading role. Zaugg used a model designed by Swiss typo-

grapher Adrian Frutiger, a graceless, unadorned typeface that evokes nothing more than itself. The word predominates here, and the title of the work alludes to this, highlighting the fact that the size of the word will define the way the painting is constructed. The typeface is outlined precisely against the background, but painted, not printed onto it. The background is white and painted in a single brushstroke, far from the smoothly immaculate surface we would expect words, whether handwritten or printed, to appear upon. This is one of the paradoxes of this set of works. As Gerhard Mack points out⁴, the white brushstroke of the background is markedly *painterly*, unlike the word on it, whose contours are clear and precise enough to feign printed matter, despite the word having actually been painted on.

But what do these paintings *say*? Zaugg follows a different strategy than in *Für ein Bild*, which I will analyse next, and references ideas outside the perimeter of the work itself. The self-referential character of the works is reduced by a slippage in meaning, which vanishes from the surface just as colour slipped away from form in the *Esquisses perceptives* and their allusion to Cézanne's impressionism. Here, words refer to issues that transcend the imperturbable relationship between the artwork and its receiver; and space and time make their appearance, providing us with new tools with which to question the here and now. This is evident in the way the works have been installed in the Palacio de Velázquez, occupying large spaces – the word 'space' here being used in its global sense and extending widely beyond the limits of the 'plane'.

Throughout his oeuvre Zaugg made use of an imaginative range of resources in undertaking his analyses. He was unambitious in the forms he chose and the materials he used, and worked with simple, even prosaic tools, but underpinned the complexity of his work with an ingenious system of contradictions and paradoxes.

Why, if not, would he have worked for nearly two decades on a brown paper surface and identically coloured paint? How can a single word give way to such a conflation of meanings? His formal precariousness also evokes the precariousness of language; fragmentary, molecular, broken off and distanced from any anonymous narrator, fractured, nominative only, mostly unevocative, persistently requiring us to form our own interpretation of it. The existentialist nature of Zaugg's untiring quest into perception has often been pointed out. References have been made to Camus and to Beckett. Sisyphus is undoubtedly a presence in the background ("... The desire to understand the world is a vital need, almost a fatality one need not be proud of," said Zaugg to Jean-Christophe Ammann). But the figure of Beckett may shine a revealing light onto form and language in his work. In his series *Un mot – un support*, Zaugg displayed single words on a painting (or, shall we say, he organised paintings around single words). But he also organised the words into sets that encouraged the emergence of new meanings. The groups *DIES / ICH / BIN* (This / I / am, ill. p. 140) and *CECI / MOI / ICI / VOIS* (This / I / here / see, ill. p. 141) are solitary occupants of two of the towers of the palace. As sentences, they seem scatterbrained, wrong; and are imbued with Beckettian resonances. As sets of words, they become interstitial structures; in the space between them we have room to make space and the moment our own. The idea of an interstice is enhanced by the use of different languages, something that frequently occurs in Zaugg's work. He used English, French and German naturally, with the notable objective differences in the visual structures, phonetics, and subjective connotations of each.

Between 1986 and 1987, in another of his feverish bouts of activity, Zaugg produced over forty paintings comprising the series *Für ein Bild*. As the title suggests, the set of works introduces a development, a process that has been begun, but whose ending is hard to discern. Zaugg conceives the work as the analytical

construction of a painting, but does so in a very different way to the construction of *Un mot – un support*. Firstly, the previous series based its construction around the word; whereas in *Für ein Bild* the origin is the painting itself in its most physical, prosaic sense. Zaugg once again used a common element, in this case a standard format for the paintings. The painting and its standard format become the measure for this series. Following similar parameters to the previous series, the painted word lies on a white surface, similarly stark, painterly and substantially material. Words here become a possibility. Zaugg was sceptical about results, sometimes even leaving the canvas white, where language had not occurred, had not been ciphered; annulled, perhaps, in a dense web of uncertainties.

There is no frustration in this, though. Zaugg mentions the elements that might have been used in forming a painting, the things that might have come into it; but also the expectations the artist places on the painting to be constructed. Through this, we understand the emphasis on the lack of a result – that is, on the persistence of white, which produces a Mallarméan atmosphere, where, as we know, the tyranny of finality, the need to reach an aim, dissipates. Looking at the paintings together, in the presence of what some of them were and what others could be, one quickly becomes aware of what they could have been. As Gerald Mack reminds us, doubts in Zaugg's work are stronger than certainties. In *Für ein Bild*, Zaugg presents a singular typographical order, and the musicality of the words on the surface, with their arrhythmical play between sound and silence, give form to the tension between success and failure in the artist's uncompromising perceptive adventure.

The late eighties and early nineties were an important turning point. Colour makes a decisive entrance; language becomes strongly manneristic, and the artist begins to favour industrial production over conventional painterly practices. In *De la cécité, Über die Blindheit, About Blindness* (ill. pp. 161-167), *De la mort, Vom Tod, About Death* (ill. pp. 187-199) and *Nouveaux tableaux, Neue Bilder, New Paintings* (ill. pp. 171-185), three large groups of work which were to occupy Zaugg almost until his death in 2005, language and colour, heightened by the apparent coldness in the making of the paintings, move into an ambivalent terrain of interrelations. These three series are well represented in this exhibition.

Language in Zaugg's new field of action acquires a surprising expressiveness, shedding the burden of self-referentiality and revealing itself as a potential agent, possessing a wider range of tools for directing the viewer's perceptive processes. Language abandons its schematic, fragmentary nature and begins to flirt, sometimes more deeply, sometimes less, with poetry. Its associations with colour are conjured into a conspiratorial tension, conveying an ambiguous relationship.

It should be mentioned here that Zaugg worked with industrially spray-painted aluminium surfaces in all of the three series. Language is screen-printed onto them, and then a coat of varnish is applied and repeatedly polished to a flawless sheen. Any reference to painterly qualities is jettisoned in this new seemingly impersonal strategy, meaning that the work's receiver must leave aside previous formal considerations related to the gesture, or to the texture of the *painted* surface, and focus on the relationship between text and colour.

The works in the series *Nouveaux tableaux* display phrases that not only show a more elaborate syntax, but also introduce a flow of poetry and exhibit a strange freedom which counters the severe, rigorous tension in Zaugg's analytical works of the previous decades. One of the pieces that make up the monumental polyp-tych *Le monde voit*, dated 2000, in the Luxembourg Mudam, is inscribed "ET SI, / DÈS QUE JE RESPIRE, / LE BLEU DU CIEL / S'EFFAÇAIT / BLANCHISSAIT / PÂLISSAIT / SE RARÉFIAIT / JAUNISSAIT / BLÊMISSAIT / S'ÉVANOUISSAIT." (And if on breathing the blue of the sky were to fade, to whiten, to pale, to rarify, to yellow, to discolour, to vanish, ill. p. 185). The accuracy of the structure and rhythm reveal a possibly unexpected aesthetic aim. As in his other work from the same decade, we need to pay attention to the tone with which the paintings *confront* their receiver. The text is white, on a blue surface, and its reader/viewer will soon identify the white with the possible evanescence of the blue sky. Our attention is drawn simultaneously to the text and to a place outside of it, which depends entirely on the viewer's subjective imagination.

At this point, I wish to refer to a public art project – which, although it was never finished, developed far enough to exist autonomously – conceived by Zaugg for a bridge over the Rhine in Arnhem (ill. pp. 146-151) in 1993. The project has very similar connotations with regard to the way the motif is exhibited and the ambivalence of its iconography. The viewer's gaze moves in the same direction as the river, close to its mouth, and comes across a frieze of words across the underside of the bridge. The words designate real objects that the viewer can also see, such as the houses to the right of the bridge. According to Zaugg, the plural "huizen" rather than the singular "huis" was used to emphasise the specificity of the houses, actually on the left of the bridge, so that they would not be perceived as an abstract concept. However, the rest of the words in the frieze ("wind", "utopia", "the sea", and others) evoke nothing visible. On the contrary, they designate "immateriality,

movement, the abstract, the ideal, travel, adventure, the past, distant lands, or hope.⁵ The ideas they contain are closely tied to the experience of the particular physical context they exist in, but are not tangible. They are simply evocations.

The series *Über die Blindheit* also powerfully impacts the viewer. Text and background are defined by a harsh colour contrast, and the message is impetuous. "SCHAU, / IM AUGENBLICK / BIN ICH BLIND, / SCHAU." ("Look, I am blind now, look.") The tone of it warns, is imperative and emphatic, inquisitorially reiterative. The contrast with the background effects a similar reaction in the viewer to the momentary blindness that the painting, itself, expresses; and so the direction of the gaze reverts back to the viewer, as if he or she were looking into a mirror.

In the paintings in the series *De la mort, About Death, Vom Tod*, Zaugg avoids the dramatic aspect of the funeral. The works show the names of minerals and flowers in an unequivocally benign climate of brilliant colour. The relationship created with the viewer is so intense that it may be hard to relate death to his or her own experience. As in the *Nouveaux tableaux* series, meaning is somewhere else. It has slipped away from the surface and vanished from the act of perception.

Zaugg's works from the nineties open up a new chapter in the relationship between the gaze and the painted work. The rich formal qualities of his previous work permitted an exploration into the interstices of painting; a study of what could be found in each of its strata, in the different temporalities the analytical process occurred in. The aluminium paintings, however, with their screen-printed text and varnished sheen, cause the opposite reaction. The gaze slides over the surface. It is not held, but repelled by it. The implacable quality of the surface and the conceptual bias of

the text direct, or possibly even bind the exercise of contemplation, forcing it out towards other semantic latitudes like a powerful centrifugal force.

- 1 Rémy Zaugg, *Conversations avec Jean-Christophe Ammann. Un Portrait*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1990.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Gerhard Mack, *Rémy Zaugg, a monograph*, Luxembourg: Mudam, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean Luxembourg, 2006.
- 5 *Rémy Zaugg: The Work's Unfolding*, Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1996, p. 94. See in this book an extract from this text, pp. 146-151.