



## Five Comments on Reality

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catalogue text

### *The Realistic Image*

Ever since art aspired to depict the visible reality “faithfully”, problems with “reality” in history have mushroomed. Painting the leftovers of a banquet as though the banqueters had only just retired, or a deceptively lively fly that had just landed on the picture frame, meant creating the illusion of visible reality. Yet the realist image, much like any picture, is no “illusive imitation”; rather, it is invariably the creation of a new simultaneous “reality”. What about when photography started making inroads into artistic practices? Discourse on artistic realism, although preceded, for example, by Dutch painting, did not surface until the mid-19th century, when photography was coming into its own. We might even divide artistic realism into periods before and after the rise of photography.

In the second half of the 19th century, the painting, confronted by photography, entered uncharted territory. With pictorialism, the photograph borrowed the “form” of a painting, mimicking its spatial rules, time, values and norms. Julie Margaret Cameron declared that, just like painting, photography seeks beauty.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, when painting and photography started vying to see which could render visible reality more faithfully, painting could not match photography. Painters learned from photography; Oscar Gustave Rejlander published complementary photographic figurative works serving, for example, as templates for Courbet when he painted his nudes. Delacroix painted his *Odalisque* according to the photography of Eugène Durieu, while Horace Vernet purchased daguerreotypes on his travels as a reference for his historical pictures. The Impressionists, grasping photography’s inherent distinctive capability of capturing reality in a single unrepeatable moment, strove to achieve the same in their paintings. Just how daunting a task faced them is lucidly exemplified by Mark Tansey’s painting of plein-air artists.<sup>2</sup>

Some painters, on the other hand, quickly realized that their mission lay somewhere else entirely. Indeed, this was the gist of Edward Weston’s well-known remark that the painter should be grateful to the photographer for relieving him of certain demands, enabling him to train his eye on other goals; this held true for expressionism, abstract painting, cubism, surrealism and other movements. The “realistic painting”, however, clung on, continuing to evolve into a confrontation with photography.

All the same, not even a photograph is a reproduction of reality. A photograph is as much a new reality as the painted image, yet it is different, with its own rules, its own space and time. When, in 1968, Malcolm Morley faithfully copied a photograph of the Valley Forge US Marine Corps Base,<sup>3</sup> this experiment showed that there was a difference between “photographic” and “painted” reality. Morley drew attention to the fact that photography simulates the process of our perception of reality only in its initial optical phase, whereas a painting always also incorporates the phase taking place in the human mind – processes of visual perception in the brain. Bill Viola, who examined the perception of the human eye, conclusively proved that what we see is not related solely to the parameters of our eye, but also to the parameters of our mind. Neuropsychologists confirm that the

1 Sontag, Susan. *O fotografii [On Photography]*. Prague: Paseka, 2002, p. 89.

2 In his *Action Painting II* from 1984, Mark Tansey depicted plein-air artists as they attempt to capture the launch of a space rocket.

3 Malcom Morley, *Valley Forge*, 1968, 155 x 126 cm.



way we see is actually a cultural matter. Our vision is influenced by education, memory, education, and notions of lifestyle. The way people today “see” is influenced by their experience of “seeing” through an apparatus simulating the human eye and, sometimes, human intelligence.

The human mind automatically creates a mental image when we look at something. It is important to realize that that mental image, let’s say a squirrel, is often generated on the basis of a photograph we have seen of a squirrel. Even our ideas about squirrels and the way we imagine them have originated in photographs as, quite simply, hardly anyone nowadays watches squirrels *in natura*. Vilém Flusser<sup>4</sup> called this way of seeing techno-imagination.<sup>5</sup> Techno-imagination means forming a mental image based on a technical image. Flusser coined the term “technical image”, which is any image created by a camera, and the term “techno-information”, which is the information conveyed to us by technical images.<sup>6</sup> The power of the technical image has dramatically affected the consciousness and imagination of modern man; obviously, it has also influenced artists, storming into and radically changing the world of art.

### ***The Current Image of “Reality”***

The issue of artistic realistic depiction, if this term can still be used, has shifted quite tellingly into another sphere. The dispute on whether visual perception is better “reproduced” by photographs or realistic paintings has long been meaningless. Today, the motive for painting a picture tends to be how to express complex interaction between our immediate vision and what we “see” through the lens. To point out the game of media mirrors (photography, television, film, computer), which give us a snapshot of visual “reality” while creating an infinite number of technical images through which we perceive the world. To demonstrate their mystification.

So far, we have only discussed visual “reality”. What about the social, psychological, political, cultural and other forms of “reality”? Baudelaire defined artistic realism as a “vision” (he meant the perception of the world, not optical sensations) without prejudice. He said that a realist artist experiences reality with the senses, emotion and intellect, free of illusion and ideology. Without political, ethnic, religious or other prejudices. In this respect, the realist artist experiences “reality” complete with its evil and in its multiplicity. Perhaps this definition still has merit.

There is here, though, one more task of contemporary painting, no matter what we call it. In the wake of incursions by photography into art history, incursions by conceptual and non-conceptual art, and new-media incursions, our cultural space has been left with painted pictures from the past, and it is not clear what to do with them. Contemporary artists often try to adopt this unwanted pictorial legacy somehow. They strive to incorporate this decoupled wagon into the train of contemporary art.

### ***A Short Guide to the Beyond Reality Exhibition***

This exhibition features artists who use the painted image to make statements about “reality”. We might say, somewhat simplistically, that some artists are interested in the mystery of media mirrors

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4 Vilém Flusser, philosopher, born 1920 in Prague, emigrated in 1940 to Brazil, where he lectured at the Institute for Philosophy in São Paulo; he died in a car accident near Prague in 1991. He wrote a number of philosophical works dealing with photography and new media from the perspective of Noetics.

5 Fiala, Jiří and Slavická Milena (eds.). Vilém Flusser: Moc obrazu [The Power of the Image]. Prague: OSVU, 1996. pp. 16-22.

6 Ibid.

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reflecting the “reality” we see, while others are more interested in “cultural reality” – semantic fields and their transformations. Yet others focus on how to link up the “art of traditional paintings” to today’s artistic practices. Understandably, the work of some artists incorporates all of these ambitions to one degree or another.

Jason Brooks’ *Mr. X* and *Zoe*, painted according to photographs, do not look like portrait paintings. They conspicuously and deliberately borrow and preserve the “image” of the photograph. Models quite obviously posed for a camera and are bathed in the bright white light of the sort of lamp used in photographic studios. In this respect, the pictures represent two visual realities, “two in one” as an advertising slogan would proclaim, i.e. the original reality of the photograph and the reality of the image painted with acrylic on canvas.

These are the images of a man and woman with tattooed bodies. Tattoos in primitive tribes play a protective role as they are meant to confuse evil spirits, who are said to see only the tattooed images and not the body. In the case of *Mr. X* and *Zoe*, their fear was probably not of evil spirits, but of their own body and its excessive animality. It was possible for the face to remain free of tattoos and to be limited to piercings because we view our own face simply as a reflection in the mirror and it lacks animality. Whatever the reasons may be, a kind of new pictorial surface of characters eclipsing the body has been created. The untattooed, bespectacled faces contrast with the bodies disappearing beneath the tattoos.

Hynek Martinec’s *Zuzana in Paris* and *Zuzana in London* also indicate a marriage of two simultaneous realities, i.e. that of the photography and that of the painting. *Zuzana in Paris* is wearing glasses, the lenses of which reflect the space where the subject was at the time the photograph was taken, yet behind the painted face there is no such space, only a monochrome background treated in the manner of a painting. *Zuzana in London* has her glasses pushed up over her brow to reflect a bright beam of light, consistent with a photography session rather than the lighting used in painting. Both images are of great painterly quality, but have not lost sight of the photographic template. On the one hand, there is a typical view *en face* into the camera; on the other hand, there is an almost psychological portrait painting. The Parisian Zuzana is carefree, inquisitive, whereas the London Zuzana is full of fear and uncertainty – the expression of the eyes and face indicate the model’s state of mind. The combination of paintwork of the highest order and photography creates a fascinating hyperreality, the enigmatic visual quality of the two portraits. Nevertheless, even more mysterious visuality is offered by *Zuzana 1854*, a picture painted according to an ambrotype using the grisaille painting technique. It is as though Zuzana’s face has ascended from the depths of time. It is bordering on phantom-like, in part because it lacks all social attributes, clothing, hairstyle, and factual detail. Not only Zuzana’s facial expression, but her very appearance contrasts quite starkly with the previous two pictures, not because of the model’s different age, but on account of the different photographic medium according to which the picture has been painted.

Ben Johnson is another artist who transmits the parameters of technical media to another medium, although not purely painterly this time. The image is pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle of fragments of digital photography. After all, photography is a set of dots (in this case a set of pixels), so why shouldn’t a different form of image not comprise such dots too? Ben Johnson has developed a sort of “collage-forming pointillistic technology” which shuns coloured dots created by the touch of a brush in favour of scraps of cut-up photographs. In this regard, the medium of Johnson’s picture simulates the parameters of a photograph in the same way as the pointillist images once did, but for quite different reasons. Pointillists were interested in the optics of photography. Ben Johnson is interested in something completely different. His paintings draw attention to the complex process that of today’s reflection of visual “reality”. Our mental image is not formed on the basis of direct

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experience of an observed object. We compose images in our mind like a puzzle, by referring to technical information. The dimensions of Johnson's images are important, enhancing the impression of the super-reality of interiors and vistas that are incredibly real and really incredible.

Keith Tyson is interested in the relationship between nature and man. Tyson explores "hyped nature" in television, film and documentary images of nature. His interest verges on the scientific, considering the systematic structure of his research. *Time travelling with the clouds*, featuring different painted images of clouds drawn from photographs, has been selected for the exhibition. Each of these images conceals a "heavenly story" set in the sky. Some cloud formations were caused by natural forces, others by human activity. Among the images, we find a cloud generated by the explosion of an atomic bomb and a cloud of dust billowing up from after the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York. The second work by Keith Tyson exhibited here, *We have a black and white TV* and *We have a colour TV* concerns the media hype surrounding a natural disaster. When we watch a television report on a disaster, whether caused by the forces of nature or man-made, our attention is focused, for example, on a comparison of whether a colour image is better than black and white, or how the shots have been taken, but the actual tragedy, perhaps resulting in a high death toll among humans, animals, birds or other beasts, escapes us. One further memento can be gleaned from Tyson's images. Such pictures may only be taken by pioneering optical instruments; the painter's eye would be unable to capture "cloud choreography" in this way. Again, we are touching on the issue of images painted on the basis of technical (in this case high-precision) and, in a sense, "superhuman" information.

The relationship between the film image and a realistic drawing is a subject of interest to Marie Harnett. Harnett redraws footage from Hollywood films, often shots with faces of well-known movie stars. She chooses them according to their visual appeal, respecting neither the film plots nor the roles played by the actors in the film, but instead infusing the characters in her drawings with a new identity. The transcription of film images into drawings thus involves not only a change of visual medium, but also mental transposition.

Jonathan Wateridge returns to the old methods championed by the 19th-century realist painters. First, he creates "living pictures" in his studio, arranging scenes and models which he photographs; then, he paints a picture according to this photography. Jonathan Wateridge creates situations which always contain a certain *punctum*, a distinctive and important detail through which you can almost instantly understand the whole story depicted in the picture. In this respect, the scenes he stages in his studio are far closer to the practices of realist painters of genre and historical paintings, and even to the practices of the pictorialists, than to the work of a director in a film studio. This is because Jonathan Wateridge understands what an "image arrested in time" is. Arrested, not interrupted, not an interlude between acts. Time condensed. This condensed time can be seen in Goya's *La Moncloa*, which, in a single image, in a single moment, in a single place, represents a condensed feature film about the Spanish uprising against Napoleon. Wateridge works with this condensed time to achieve the extreme faithfulness and impressiveness of his painted stories.

The subject of Damien Hirst's *Surgical Procedure (Maia)* does not stray from the core themes of the artist's works, which include illness, death, the world of drugs and medical instruments, physicality, and a fascination with the dead or mutilated body, but is removed from Damien Hirst's recent artistic practice focused installation, object and new media. The realistic figurative picture painted according to a photograph demonstrates the multi-layered reflection of "reality" we have already discussed. Unlike Wateridge's paintings, this image takes the form of a movie scene and could even be a shot

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from those television series that so often, and with such gusto, are set in a hospital environment which is frequently only loosely imitated.

Mathew Weir, like Ged Quinn, Glenn Brown and Jake and Dinos Chapman, deals with the “reality” of various semantic discourses. We could say that his interest centres on semantic transformations of artworks, their mutation and the manifold way in which they can be read depending on the period and the culture. Mathew Weir frequently finds inspiration in ceramic and porcelain figurines and the commemorative images we know from European bourgeois culture of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as German Biedermeier or late Rococo responses. This artistic output is often viewed as decadent art, as kitsch. The character of “death” has become particularly appealing to Mathew Weir. The masked figure of death in an urban environment (as opposed to a rural setting) was usually just whimsily fearsome in appearance and was not scary; indeed, it often tended to be comical. Weir’s paintings also feature other figures, maskers in different historical uniforms, kitsch lovers, boatmen and shepherdesses, as though Weir had been browsing in the Ostend souvenir shop where James Ensor grew up. In the context of Weir’s paintings, the way this kitsch iconography is “read” changes. In these paintings, we can also come across political or social content. They can also be decrypted psychoanalytically, for example with reference to Freudian analysis.

Ged Quinn is dedicated to the transmission of various iconographic depictions from the past to the present, including the transposition of the content used as the vehicle for iconographic schemes. At first glance, the viewer has the impression of standing before what are, in some way, nostalgic reminiscences of the bucolic scenes of classical images, or before testaments to romantic landscapes with stormy lakes, weathered trees and ruins. Viewing the image longer, however, you start to see a number of disturbing details, Bosch-like “jokes”, which give the image a different ring. Suddenly, the pictures become a kind of theatre of allegories and symbols with various cultural, historical, philosophical and religious meanings, but in the pictorial performance staged by Ged Quinn they are transformed, and are suddenly interesting and topical for the contemporary viewer. Sometimes, paradoxically, by comic transformation, they even reference their truly original meanings.

Glenn Brown is another who has set off into the kingdom of the history of culture. His paintings are overflowing with borrowings from ancient and modern painters and sculptors. During such a “loan”, the paintings and sculptures of foreign masters are deconstructed, often brutally and mercilessly, they are melted and rendered grotesque, they are sizzled on Glenn Brown’s “artistic grill”, they are deprived of their identity (their original form is sometimes barely traceable) and they are transformed into something very strange. Glenn Brown treats masterpieces just as cruelly as today’s tourist industry. That said, the reasons for such treatment are different. Glenn Brown appears to want to find a way to re-manipulate these works. To extract energy from them without nostalgia and sentiment. Glenn Brown seems to want to bleed old and modern masters alike, to collect their “pulsating blood” so that they become a living inspiration for contemporary artists. *The Aesthetic Poor*, a picture painted in the style of the English romantic painter John Martin, who has recently enjoyed sizeable recognition, has also been selected for the exhibition. The massive romantic pathos of this image is not ironic. It is a kind of adaptation, summarization, a sort of extraction of the romantic image into the practical form of a “picture digest” suitable for the contemporary viewer who is always on the go.

Jake and Dinos Chapman are celebrated masters of semantic play. They jump from one semantic field to another as if they were dancing on melting floes on the turbulent river of the history of art. The exhibition will feature only a certain portion of their vast artistic discourse, specifically the 2008 series of paintings *One Day You Will No Longer Be Loved*. The iconoclasm in the subtext of this cycle



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is different from Glenn Brown's deconstruction. Jake and Dinos Chapman repaint the conventional old portraits that can be purchased at auctions and in antique shops. Under their brushwork, these pictures are transformed, in a nod to the picture of Dorian Gray. Yet whereas, in Wilde's story, the image is "true" and the reality of life is "false", here we are confronted with the opposite. Revealing what art "in reality, actually is" and the obsession with tearing the mask off of art are characteristic for Jake and Dinos Chapman, and this cycle is no exception. Here, again, the two artists stick to their traumatizing discovery that "behind the delusive face of art" is concealed a "lie".

### ***Beyond Reality***

Paul Watzlawick's book *How Real is Real?*<sup>7</sup> discusses the human cognition of reality, where the author demonstrates that reality cannot be recognized, much less verified. There is no regimented reality. There are only various structures of reality. The artists selected for the *Beyond Reality* exhibition are well aware that they are merely creating further illusive statements about reality, that they are simply painting more delusive mirrors of delusive reality. Because everything happens beyond reality.

### ***The Subtitle of the Beyond Reality Exhibition***

The exhibition subtitle, *British Painting Today*, is not intended as a promise of a British art show. The emphasis is on the words "today" and "painting". The tradition of European painting has been severely disrupted several times in the history of modern art; the painted image has been declared a ridiculous affair, a dead and dysfunctional medium. Yet the image as a framed canvas covered with colours is a European invention (as is the book in the sense of the book codex) and we are loathe to relinquish it. For reasons that are quite complex, we usually refer to insular cultural specifics; there has been no radical iconoclasm in British modern or post-modern art. The tradition of "painting pictures" was not bombarded with mortar as hard as in Europe and the United States (in part thanks to Lucian Freud), yet all the isms and trends and tendencies of the twentieth and the current century spent their childhood in Britain and many were actually born into British nappies. Not surprisingly, it is interesting to see how pictures are painted in England. How, believing in all possible artistic practices and in image-perfect digital technologies, great artists use the medium of the painted image.

There is another reason here. Naturally, it has been known for a long time that the "slurry of contemporary art is cooked" mainly in London. Czech artists are intimately familiar with the global names of British artists, but a deeper knowledge of English art is lacking in Bohemia. Czech art has traditionally been associated with German art; after the First World War it sought inspiration and models almost exclusively in France, and then, after the Second World War, in the United States and partly in Germany again (of course, we are not talking about the official socialist art). Yet British art, with its multi-national dimension, but can be very inspiring for Czech artists. This exhibition aims to introduce, for the time being, only a snapshot of contemporary British art, concentrating, as has been stated many times, on painting. That said, this is certainly not the last exhibition of British artists that will be held at the Rudolfinum.

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<sup>7</sup> Watzlawick, Paul. *Wie wirklich ist die Wirklichkeit – Wahn, Täuschung, Verstehen*. Piper. München 1976.