Enriching Transformations

In the year 2007 — four years after the first Iraq war — artists from Iraq and Austria came together for a symposium at the WUK cultural center in Vienna. In the middle of the symposium rooms stood a wooden door that served no purpose, placed there by the artist Michael Wegerer (born in 1970 in Vienna). All the symposium participants were asked to write a message on the door using the pens that lay beside it. Over the course of the week, the door was filled with a dense assortment of German and Arab sentences, drawings and other visual symbols. The sequence of letters that stand for the 'Three Wise Men' were inscribed on the doors, as were calligraphic notes and love poems in Arabic. Yet the simple participatory process by means of which Michael Wegerer was able to bring together the voices of the symposium participants in a single place was only the beginning of a more complex production process: in several subsequent work stages Wegerer transformed the door into a printing block that still contained all these written and graphic statements — now, however, in a negative form. After transforming the object in this way into a template, Wegerer produced a paper replica of the two sides of the door as an oversized book spread, on the reverse side of which was printed a picture of the M1 Abrams tank utilized by American troops in both Iraq wars. In this way the work *Baghdad in Love* contained both traces of the tentative dialogue that took place at the symposium as well as references to the past violent interventions that made this dialogue so necessary. Through its multiple mutations the object became a transmitter of meaning with different layers.

The work described above exemplifies Michael Wegerer's artistic interests — multiple image creation and translation processes, often based on written, oral or digital sketches, lead to new forms and a greater level of complexity than was present in the source material. Wegerer often works with pseudo ready-mades — that is, objects that appear to have been taken from the everyday world. Wegerer's doors, chairs or windows quickly prove to be extremely artificial versions of real objects transformed by means of various printing methods. Wegerer, who, after completing his training as an electrical engineer began relatively late in life to study art, was rapidly able to make a name for himself in the international graphic art scene with these works. Since then he has developed this approach step by step into a rich artistic language that is as influenced by conceptual art and installation as it is shaped by Wegerer's highly evolved understanding of print and graphic art.

Languages require grammar and, as is the case with linguistic systems, the power of conviction in Wegerer's 'system' — lies in the fact that the artistic enhancement takes place by means of the variation of (apparently) similar elements. Wegerer's artistic acts of transformation are not neutral, but rather lead to a multiplication of the levels of meaning. To the same extent to which Wegerer creates the preconditions for this translation work through his intense exploration of different places of origin, the resulting forms become communicators of networks of relationships. In this respect, one of Wegerer's most important techniques is lending information a form or shape. His intention is often to transport information and its communicative materials over great geographic and cultural distances and to render it legible. His methods allow him to perform this act of transportation with a 'lightness' characteristic of our age. For as sophisticated as Wegerer's formal approaches opportunely might be, he has always maintained his distance from the boastful virtuosity of the 'master artist' and the logistical feats that go with it.

During a residence in Australia in 2010, Wegerer enveloped a bus station in the middle of a desert town with cling film and retraced the structure with a pen. While carrying out this meticulous work on *Desert Bus Stop*, Wegerer asked local youths — similar to the participants in the symposium a few years earlier — to immortalize themselves by writing a message on the cling film. This easily transportable material would later serve as a basis for a true-to-scale paper reconstruction of the bus stop, which, in contrast to the original, now also contained the young people's graffiti, recreated by means of silk-screen printing. In this way Wegerer not only transplanted an architectural symbol from the Australian desert but also rendered the social environment of his alleged 'objet trouvé visible'. In a text on this work, the Australian artist and writer Peter Westwood called the reconstruction a "thoughtful ghost" and also refers to the "tenacity" with which Wegerer attempts to capture "fragments of life".

In both of these works the inclusion of text and handwriting plays an important role. Yet Wegerer's interest extends far beyond purely linguistic sources and now encompasses the entire spectrum of human and machine-based expression in everyday culture, art, language, information processing and music. Since 2010 data sources have played a greater role, sources that Wegerer picks up in the course of his digital 'travels' in the same way that he collects the material and linguistic traces of his discoveries in the real world. With his increasingly frequent references to the world of data that surrounds him, he takes up a development in art and society whereby haptic, physical and digital experiences are becoming increasingly intertwined.

Michael Wegerer's clocks — which were created in 2010 under the title *Perceptions of Life* — render this development visible: at first sight the defamiliarized IKEA products appear to be intelligently remodeled design objects. In place of the clock face, graphically complex diagram-like structures have been inserted, which, however, clearly no longer serve to indicate the time. The clock hands still function, turning round and round the abstract arrangement of symbols, though it is not readily apparent what information they convey. If one spends long enough looking at these objects one eventually recognizes that the source material for the clocks are studies and data found online, the meaning of which has been adapted by Wegerer as a point of departure for his visualizations. Wegerer's objects don't tell us the time of day but do allow us to experience something else about the time in which we live. One particular set of statistics — all of which have been inserted into the clocks with great meticulousness — demonstrates the connection between personal happiness and the educational system in fifty-two countries, while comparisons of international unemployment data are the source for the schematic representation of another modified chronometer.

Wegerer uses a similar technique in a series of works (on paper) that he has brought together under the title *Diagrams and Visualizations*. In these works Wegerer's print graphic and conceptual experience is intertwined with his keen perception of contemporary worlds. In the work *Sei ein Held* (Be a Hero, 2013) he is able to translate the mathematically opaque world of stock prices and statistics into geometrical images, which he then superimposes on the sources of his information — the economic sections of daily newspapers. This double translation and superimposition procedure doesn't, of course, simply serve to illustrate something. Almost the reverse is true: paradoxically the artistic intervention serves to increase the unrepresentability of processes related to the stock market, thus reminding us that the complexity of life in the present age can never be depicted with simple rows of numbers.

Wegerer often transforms specific sources of information into abstract patterns. Or he translates information values into formats that can be directly experienced, such as the pile of 13,333 A4 sheets of paper, the volume of which corresponds precisely to the ten liters of water needed to produce a single A4 page. With this intertwining of information and form he follows an artistic line of tradition that stretches back to the early twentieth century, in which abstraction, language, philosophy and information dwell in close proximity, which corresponds to the concept of abstract

art as a purely personal, atmospheric image that later became so widespread. It is no coincidence that Wegerer's first clocks were further developed in the context of the exhibition *(Zeit)lose Zeichen* ([Time]less Symbols), which was dedicated to Otto Neurath, the Austrian pioneer of the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics.

This line of tradition, which is also a story of interdisciplinary influence, is continued by Wegerer when he decides — consciously searching for influences — to work together with other artists. The work on *LOOP* — one of his more recent exhibition projects, presented in 2015 at the Vienna Künstlerhaus — was preceded by a months-long process of exchange with three other participants (Scott Betz, Barbara Höller and Richard Phillips), organized for the most part as an internal blog. Some of the text passages that appeared in this preparatory blog were used in turn by Wegerer as part of the text-image pieces included in the exhibition.

In these recent works we are thus confronted again with the interest in dialogue that we already encountered at the beginning of this text in the work on *Baghdad in Love*. Again and again Michael Wegerer attempts to expand his artistic cosmos by means of new materials and techniques and through exchange and cooperative projects. He does this, however, by building on the solid foundation of a stable system, within which he has balanced his technical ingenuity with a conceptual approach that is just as highly developed. Whether it is by creating doors upon which messages have been written, translating data flows into graphic works or playing a round of artistic ping-pong with contemporary music, in Michael Wegerer's ability to effect enriching metamorphoses it becomes evident that the capacity to transform can yield works of great artistic quality as long as a consciousness is maintained of the stable core.

Martin Fritz