

Essay by the curator Claudine Metzger from the catalogue

This & that: On Markus Raetz' Treatment of Printmaking Techniques

In 1970, Markus Raetz produced a work entitled *DIESES & JENES IV (1970)* or *THIS AND THAT*. The work was commissioned for the Kunstverein Nordrhein-Westfalen and had to be completed in a very short time. Raetz had not yet mastered the techniques of professional intaglio printmaking, such as that of etching, which he was soon to learn at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. He thus reverted to a motif that he had already been involved with for quite some time, and by choosing frottage, went with a very basic technique.¹ He carved the words "DIESES & JENES [this and that]" into a woodblock and made rubbings (i.e. frottage), using two different crayons, combining the colours differently for every sheet. Using an elaborate method somewhere between repetitive print and multiple drawing, he produced 150 sheets.² The title³ thus refers not only to the subject in the image, but also to the variation in the method of production.⁴ As the flow of the rubbing can never be the same, and the artist also changes the colour combination in every case, each individual sheet is different. Hence, although the procedure remains unchanged, a series of different sheets is generated, which as an edition exhibits a characteristic of Markus Raetz' use of the medium of graphic reproduction: the work is "*Dieses & Jenes [this and that]*"; in this case, both unique piece and multiple, both drawing and print.

A similar game with the medium, albeit with a different printing technique can be seen in the series *NO W HERE (1991)*. Here, Raetz works with spit bite with a brush – a technique that he personally developed and perfected.⁵ Following a pre-conceived plan, the artist sets a few strokes blindly, as it were, on the plate with a brush that has been submerged in high-percentage nitric acid. This enables him to create the illusion of a landscape. The spatial depth arises through the different reaction times of the acid on the copper, whereby the acid is applied as an active element: those parts of the landscape that are close are "painted" first, parts that are further away, later. In this way, an aerial perspective with its soft transitions is generated via the etching process' temporal progression. These are imagined landscapes, which, as the title states, are "no where" and yet "now here". Here, too, the as well as is not limited solely to the content. The manufacturing process of the plate, as well as that of the printed sheet, show parallels to the technique of watercolour painting – with the difference that in spit bite etching with a brush, rather than using watercolours, the artist "paints" on the printing plate with acid, with effects entirely beyond his control.

This as well as can be found at both the level of form and of meaning in a group of works based on play of words, which unite two motifs in one and have been realized in two versions, one as sculpture and one as print.⁶

While the viewer can examine the sculpture *TOUT-RIEN (Everything-Nothing 2007)* from all sides, and thus one time read the word *TOUT* (everything), and another time the word *RIEN* (nothing), the view in the engraving *Croisement (1997)* is locked in place between *TOUT* and *RIEN*.⁷ What the viewer sees are the various possibilities of abstract forms that accrue from the crossing of the two contradicting words. If one's full power of spatial imagination cannot be mobilized from the very outset when viewing the work, the three-dimensional letters in the two-dimensional realization are initially simply abstract forms. While they do recall letters, they yield only nonsense. The two terms are, indeed, joined in the three-dimensional as well as the two-dimensional version, but at the same time, they cleverly expose the impossibility of the

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simultaneity of “everything” and “nothing”. In comparison with the sculpture, however, the print succeeds in demonstrating the double meaning of the title *Croisement* more clearly: on the one hand, the crossing of the visual axes, captured by the presentation of only one perspective; on the other hand, the crossing of the words *TOUT* and *RIEN* to make a complex with only four letters. In contrast, in the work *ME-WE*, both sculpture (2004–2010) and sand-grain photogravure (heliogravure) (2007) function on the basis of the same principle. In a mirror, the English “ME” becomes “WE”. Both words are visible at the same time, whereby the one does not rule out the other, but rather seems to be another version of it. Unlike in the work *Croisement*, which like a visual realization of the popular phrase “all or nothing” reveals the irreconcilability of the two terms, in the conceptual pair *ME-WE* all nuances between ME and WE, between the single person and the group of people, are possible and conceivable.

Likewise, in his involvement with the contrast between light and shadow – so fundamental to the fine arts – paradox remains the main source of inspiration for Markus Raetz. In the black-and-white aquatint *SEE-SAW II (Nothing is lighter than light)* (1991), light, as the main motif, is at the centre. It becomes manifest as a bright oval on a downward-tipped seesaw and is staged in an unusual context. In a conventional interpretation of the subtitle, the sheet represents an illustration of the statement “nothing is lighter than light” through the various gradations from black to white. At the same time, however, the depiction and subtitle steer attention to the weight of light, too – a quality that normally plays no role in its description. The seesaw is, namely, tilted downward on the side catching the cone of light, demonstrating that “nothing” is lighter than light, as the subtitle claims. In contrast to aquatint, in which the artist has to represent light and shadow himself, sand-grain photogravure (heliogravure), an intaglio printing technique based on photo-mechanical processes, offers additional possibilities for introducing light directly as a means of composition and in this way, examining its qualities not only philosophically, but also at physical/chemical levels. In the sand-grain photogravure (heliogravure, i.e. photogram) *Reflexion I–III* (1991), the artist shows us sophisticated variations of shadow, light, and reflection. For this, Raetz employs the direct sunlight in the studio as a light source, exposing lightsensitive gelatin paper to it, which is afterwards put on a rosin-grain pre-dusted but not yet bitten aquatint plate. Whereas the face drawn on a round mirror is visible as a shadow in the bright oval in *Reflexion III*, *Reflexion I* and *II* reveal the image’s genesis by showing the shadow of the projected drawing, the mirror, and the arm. Raetz uses sand-grain photogravure’s ability to depict shadows in a way not possible with the medium of painting.⁸

The “simultaneity of contrary figurations and thought processes”,⁹ characteristic of Markus Raetz’ art, finds suitable technical processes in graphic reproduction, which present his interest in paradox with more congenial modes of implementation. Through his use of printmaking techniques, Markus Raetz expands their possibilities, affording them a position between media, in which techniques from drawing as well as sculptural material processing are employed in the production process. The printed works can look like drawings, like watercolours, or like photographs; they can sometimes be unique pieces, sometimes editions. They are, in short, this and that.

¹_See also RMM 126 and 127.

²_Eva Korazija, "Im Möglichkeitssinn", in Graphische Sammlung der ETH Zürich (ed.), *Schweizerische Künstlergraphik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Basel 2005, p. 115

³_On the play of words and the metamorphosis sculptures, see also: *Markus Raetz*, exh. cat. Centre Pasqu'art Biel, Bern 2001, particularly the text by Andreas Meier, "AH – OH", pp. 5–11

⁴_Eva Korazija, "Im Möglichkeitssinn", p. 115

⁵_Markus Raetz in conversation with the author, June 20, 2013. On spit bite etching, see also in this catalogue Josef Helfenstein, "Der Säureanschlag", pp. 115–119. See also *Gaze*, 2001, threecolour brush etching, 74 x 92 cm, RMM 322

⁶_See also the sculptures *CECI-CELA*, 1992–1993, 4 brass case sculptures based on plaster model, mirror, letters H 8 cm; *ECHO*, 1993–1996, two processed steel-pipe pieces, hand mirror, installation 33 x 25.5 x 18.5 cm, rough pieces, diameter 2.7 cm; *SI-NO*, 1996, brass cast based on wire/wax model, H 7.8 cm; *SAME* 1996–1999, iron wire on painted wood base, mirror, installation: 161.2 x 111.4 x 35 cm; *TODO-NADA*, 1998, brass cast patinated, based on wood/wax model, 7.7 x 97 x 11.4 cm; *OUI-NON*, 1996–2000 (sculpture for the Place du Rhône, Geneva) steel construction, iron mica paint, gilded letter sculptures, H 10 m

⁷_Marie-Cécile Miessner, "Parcours de l'oeuvre imprimé en compagnie de son auteur", in *Markus Raetz, estampes, sculptures*, exhib. cat., Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris 2011, p. 64

⁸_Ibidem

⁹_Max Wechsler, "Vom Fluss der Figuration zwischen den Figuren", in Stephan Kunz (ed.), *Blickwechsel, Texte zum Werk von Markus Raetz*, Nürnberg 2005, p. 274