

Leaping stimuli

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Sunset, the smell of a bonfire of wine vines and the blank canvases of the table cloths of a restaurant near San Sebastián. The air wafts more coolly round the body, and from the garden rises the scent of herbs from the still warm earth. The waning light, in which the ashes of night are already mixing, makes the sky shimmer in hardly discernible transitions from dark blue to bright pink and a greenish orange-red. The wide stretch of sky through which individual clouds constantly pass, imperceptibly, wholly in the present of experience, extends the summer sunset for the duration it takes for the light to disappear. Mugaritz. Sensory impressions that make the blank whiteness of the tablecloths into a presentation surface for the food. These are short gustatory haikus, and the combination of Japanese culinary culture with the tradition of pintxos and elaborate techniques of preparation makes possible a context of experience that engrosses not only the senses, but also the imagination and the capacity for enjoyment. The food is not served in flat round dishes, and the table surfaces, the choreography of the service, the succession of courses, are themselves part of the event of eating. Conventions and traditional value hierarchies are deliberately disregarded so as to give each individual element its own value. The arrangement of the table and the plates, the possibility of self-selected combinations, and the playful impulse to introduce one's own initiative into the score of a set offering, opens a sphere of sensory and significant experience.

Earlier, much earlier, very much earlier, in a language that nobody today understands, were all people called *Nether Landers*? In any case, the world must have been rather flat back then if we are to believe historical reports and people who have mastered the dead languages. Was it round like a plate, or even raggedly fringed, perhaps somehow rectangular? Hard to say. Perhaps square and flat, like a canvas with elevations that must have been quite high, to judge from effort required to surmount them. It is fairly certain that before there was a Tyrol, New Orleans and the God of Christianity, Hannibal and his army crossed the mountainous elevations and began a proper fight with the Romans. Since back then there was no Europe Bridge that spans an abyss gaping between traces of brush strokes edged by mountain peak silhouettes and hit, as if by waves, by dark glazes, the path through the mountains not yet known as the "Alps" was risky and dangerous. It may be that on sailing voyages to establish the Dutch East India Company in faraway Japan a vissoep tasted particularly exciting when Hannibal's image shone up from the bottom of the bowl. But the world had in the meantime become round in all directions.

The ornament of spring has been given an Arabic character, now entering its second year. Political seasons are usually of longer duration, like the liberation of the Netherlands from

Spanish Habsburg rule. In an indirect way this event also brought about a kind of re-invention of painting, with the introduction of stories that were not to be found in the Bible and landscapes in which a level brush stroke could become the line of the horizon, with shimmering transitions to the open sea. Glazed colors, which made vanishing ships out of lines of condensed mist, whose cargo might be patterned fabrics and porcelain from the Far East, kimonos, plates and vases, bowls imprinted with the heroic exploits of nameless individuals, of whom neither their histories nor their deeds were known. They were the decoration and ornament at the border of plates and testified, like exotic plants in lush paintings of market scenes, to newly acquired wealth and power. These pictures also named a new order. They created symbolic systems that contained elements of changing significance. Their purpose was no longer to control. This opened up a play of variations, allusions and references that increasingly found its cosmos in painting itself.

Stars and stripes become jagged arabesques against a restless background. As shimmering strips of color, they form elsewhere intersections, bands, painterly contrasts and patterned backgrounds, which become visible in sections of butterfly forms. In the 1950s the American flag became a subject of art, changing the perception of the national symbol, which had become a sign of the free and liberated part of the world, the Western world. The emphasis on color, form and materiality of the flat visual surface brought about new concepts of the pictorial in painting. In reflections on painting, the traditional view of the image was then still dominant which saw the relation of image to reality as one of representation and accordingly studied pictures with respect to representational relations. Today the images that symbolize liberation have already changed again. The stars emblazoned on B 52 bombers that glitter in the sun over Afghanistan, the long contrails of the planes that announce their distant origin in the land of the Stars and Stripes, no longer flicker across our screens. A single, different star, darkened by the shadow of the earth and shaped into a crescent moon, stands for a world in which liberation is often symbolized by images that are blurry, pixelated and frequently taken with hand-held cameras, images that circulate on data highways which link the still round but now again smaller world. This process of cultural, technological and social evolution has made images into freely available visual material which, in constant combination and recombination, referencing and temporally limited constellations, presents the world on flat screens. The world has again become smaller and flatter; it seems that the flap of a butterfly's wing in Fukushima, faraway in the Land of the Rising Sun, affects us today as much as does the crescent moon, which can also be seen in the West.

Translated by Jonathan Uhlener