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**Monika Leisch-Kiesl; Evoking a Sign | Perceiving an Image. Toba Khedoori: Drawn Painting;** transl. from German by Mary Louise Dobrian; Wien: Verlag für moderne Kunst 2021; 348 pp., 14 ill. in color; ISBN 978-3-903796-44-7; € 45,70

I. *Evoking a Sign*, the English edition of Monika Leisch-Kiesl's book *ZeichenSetzung*<sup>1</sup>, was published by the Verlag für moderne Kunst (VfmK), Vienna, in early 2021. The author is Professor of Art History and Aesthetics at the Faculty of Philosophy and Art History at the Catholic Private University Linz, Austria. She has held guest professorships at universities in various countries, has organized numerous conferences and workshops, and has also curated exhibitions. The German edition of her publication from 2016 has already received great response in research on image theory, semiotics, and art studies, which, for example, a number of reviews and statements demonstrate.<sup>2</sup> The English translation by Mary Louise Do-

1 Monika Leisch-Kiesl, *ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung. Toba Khedoori: Gezeichnete Malerei*, Wien 2016.

2 See: Susanne Winder, "Buchneuerscheinung ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung, Toba Khedoori: Gezeichnete Malerei. Gespräch mit Monika Leisch-Kiesl", in: *kunstgeschichte aktuell* 33/4 (2016), p. 3; Isabella Guanzini, "Book Review 'Monika Leisch-Kiesl: ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung'", in: *JRFM. Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 03/2 (2017), p. 79–84; Johanna di Blasi, "Rez. 'Monika Leisch-Kiesl: ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung'" in: *sehpunkte* 17/6 (2017), accessible at: <http://www.sehpunkte.de/2017/06/30408.html> (20.07.2021); Peter Schink, "ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung", in: *kuki. Magazin für Kritik, Ästhetik und Religion* 62/2 (2019), p. 62; Monika Keller, "ZeichenSetzung | BildWahrnehmung. Toba Khedoori: Gezeichnete Malerei", accessible at: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2372340381> (20.07.2021); Hannah Winkelbauer, "Ein wissenschaftliches Buch mit künstlerischem Mehrwert", in: *OÖNachrichten*, 12.01.2018, p. 16. Furthermore, there can be found two user reviews: [https://books.google.at/books?id=O\\_COvgAACAAJ&dq=leisch-kiesl&hl=de&sitesec=reviews](https://books.google.at/books?id=O_COvgAACAAJ&dq=leisch-kiesl&hl=de&sitesec=reviews) and <https://www.amazon.de/ZichenSetzung-BildWahrnehmung-Toba-Khedoori-Leisch-Kiesl/dp/3903131296> (both: 15.07.2021).

brian can be seen as a logical consequence of this success: first, because the artist it deals with, Toba Khedoori, has received less attention in the German-speaking than in the English-speaking world; second, because it makes the important theoretical concepts that are introduced by Leisch-Kiesl available to an even wider readership.

II. The translation faced several challenges, mainly due to the complexity of the subject matter as well as the author's conceptual word creations. For this reason, at first it was decided to have an experimental translation done – an “Appetizer” (7) – by Laura Schleussner and Jennifer Tayler. The entire publication was then translated by Mary Louise Dobrian. The thematic difficulties regarding the translation are already evident in the title of the book, *ZeichenSetzung*, which is one of Leisch-Kiesl's main theorems built from a word creation that is, in terms of typography and content, almost impossible to translate: it “tags a constitutive threshold between mark and sign. It pinpoints the semantic vibration that occurs between the generation of a picture (drawing), and the generation of meaning in looking at a picture (drawing).” (15) Dobrian's translation of this theorem as ‘evoking a sign’ stands out for the sensitivity with which she transfers Leisch-Kiesl's complex theoretical concepts and word creations. Also, if necessary, Dobrian still adds the German term in parentheses to indicate the complex meaning.

III. The author's theoretical sources of reference are Gottfried Boehm and William J. T. Mitchell, who, in the 1990s, formed a milestone in the research on images with the key terms ‘iconic turn’ and ‘pictorial turn’. On this basis, she brings together the lines of research up to the end of the 2010s. Although Leisch-Kiesl closely follows the questions raised by her teacher Gottfried Boehm, ‘What is an image?’, or also, ‘What is a sign?’, she alters them significantly. This results in a shift in meaning that finds its expression in her two main questions: “How does an image become a sign?” (13), that is, the question of how images acquire meaning, including an aesthetic-epistemological aspect; and vice versa, “How does a sign become an image?” (13), including an ethical-sociopolitical aspect. (299) This shift directs the focus from ‘what’ onto ‘how’, thus to the functioning of images and signs as well as their interplay.

To answer her research questions, the author has chosen the following composition for her publication: After a *Preface* (5–9) to the English edition and an *Introduction* (10–20) in which the theoretical framework is clarified, there follow a *Prelude* (21–30), five thematic chapters, a so-called *Cut* (297–330) which also serves as a summary, and an *Appendix* (331–345) containing all bibliographical information. The first thematic chapter introduces the artist in more detail (31–72); the next three are built around the key terms *Drawing* (73–128), *Mimesis and Deixis* (129–192), and *Image Grounds* (193–236); while in the last one, Leisch-Kiesl (together with Khedoori) increasingly goes *In Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (237–296). In the *Prelude* as well as in the *Cut*, the author contextualizes Toba Khedoori's work within art history by referring to important precursors, namely Marcel Duchamp's installation *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942) and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's series of small drawings *Movements de lignes* (1939). With these two exemplary works, the author drops an anchor in modernism as she identifies in this epoch the principal roots for the most recent develop-

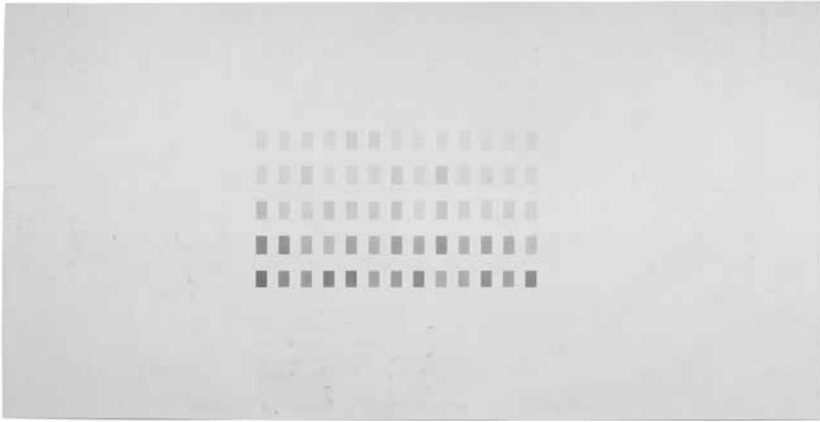


Fig. 1: Toba Khedoori, *Untitled (Windows)*, 2001, oil and wax on paper, 366 × 704 cm (144 × 277 in.), Emanuel Hoffmann Stiftung, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio.  
© Toba Khedoori (44–46)

ments in art, in particular drawing. In *Cut*, Leisch-Kiesl dedicates herself to another contemporary artist, Katharina Hinsberg, whose drawings are very different from Khedoori's but create a productive tension.

IV. The research on images up to the 2010s, after Mitchell's 'pictorial turn' and Boehm's 'iconic turn', may be characterized by five central approaches: semiotic, analytical, phenomenological, anthropological, and deconstructive. Even though there are, of course, overlaps within these approaches, it is remarkable that Leisch-Kiesl makes a point of opening up these school boundaries with her research questions by precisely asking how to move from the semiotic to the aesthetic/phenomenological and vice versa. While the 'linguistic turn', according to Leisch-Kiesl, practices criticism of language and signs, the 'iconic turn' does image criticism. (13) Images are a subtype of signs, one argues in the field of semiotics. Semiotics, on the other hand, is not in a position to grasp the specificity of images, one argues in image theory. The joining and combined analysis of image and sign, which Leisch-Kiesl attempts, represents a "rupture – not in the matter at hand but in the thinking about it" (14). According to the author, research on the specific quality of perceiving an image has made inspiring and productive contributions, but has the problem of merely placing the viewer in front of a framed canvas and forcing silent observation. In other words, it does not provide a theoretical background and therefore remains unsatisfactory for many art historians. Since semiotics encompasses a very broad spectrum of philosophical discourses and demonstrates the social relevance of art more convincingly than phenomenological theorems, art history cannot afford to leave it aside, argues Leisch-Kiesl. Rather, it provides an important tool for clarifying theoretical questions such as those of sense and meaning, author and recipient. At the same

time, it is of course too limited to consider works of art as mere pictograms. Moreover, the author rejects the complete subordination of works of art to visual culture. (14) Consequently, she endeavors to combine these approaches, which already becomes evident in her two research questions.

V. In addition to these phenomenological and semiotic approaches to the image, Leisch-Kiesl also refers significantly to deconstructive theories on drawing. She names three central motifs in the *Introduction* which guide the following analysis. One of them is from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*<sup>3</sup>. In addition to Derrida's concept of the 'brisure', above all it is his concept of the 'différance' – as the questioning of how meaning emerges without naming a source or establishing the significance (10) – that is important for Leisch-Kiesl's approach. The other motif is by the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, which states: "Drawings have a featherlike quality." (9) This metaphor implies, following Leisch-Kiesl, both a lightness as well as a prickly and sharp quality that is inherent in a feather. It also addresses a specific characteristic of drawing, as drawing is very precise and yet cannot be fixed totally. On this basis, Leisch-Kiesl initially restricts her object of research to contemporary positions in drawing that are committed to the traditions of Minimalism and Conceptual Art. (10) To characterize the specific qualities of drawing since the 1990s and especially those of Toba Khedoori, she later sets the term "narrative Conceptualism" (84).

While these two mottos precede the *Introduction*, the third is presented at the end. Nevertheless, it plays a central role. It is derived from scientist and writer-artist Emma Cocker and deals with "the premise of the 'if'" (14). The "hypothetical 'if'" (17) is conditional and mostly followed by a "consequential or predictive then" which is characterized by Cocker as "a form of fixation" (14). The 'if' is opening and creates possibilities, while the 'then' is grounding, closing, justifying. The 'if' takes the form of a hypothesis, is understood as a preliminary or preparatory phase within an enquiry. Therefore, it is a premise for something that will come. At the same time, it is perceived as always antecedent to something else. The hypothesis thus marks the entrance of a threshold zone between the known and the unknown. For Cocker, drawing is comparable to a hypothesis because within artistic practice it is also often considered a preliminary practice that initiates further activity and is not always considered for what it is in itself. Connected with this hypothetical character is an inherent and deeply rooted openness that marks a beginning which Leisch-Kiesl also claims for the image, or, more precisely, for the drawing. However, she demands two aspects: the characterization as mediacy ('through which'), as if the drawing were subordinate and added as a form of an idea; and the description of the drawing as a preliminary activity that is not taken for itself. (17) She thus proposes the following reformulation: "drawing 'as' hypothesis and therefore 'valid' as such" (17). Building on Cocker's motto, "The premise of the 'if' – 'then' grounds" (17), Leisch-Kiesl takes the 'if' to be the image, or, more precisely, the drawing, and the 'then' in turn to be a sign. That means, *Evoking a sign* is understood as the setting of

3 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore 1976.

the relation of 'if – then' and it goes along with the opening by an image and then the founding by a sign. While this does not tell us how this process actually works, it does provide an initial direction for the first research question. The image is thus the precondition for the sign. With the 'if – then', Leisch-Kiesl not only adopts Cocker's approach but also a basal syllogistic form, namely the 'modus ponens', the 'if – then' structure itself. Although the author does not discuss the relation of her 'if – then' to the syllogism directly, the strong meaning resonates. This is a bit surprising, since the author elsewhere tries to free herself from formal structures.

VI. Leisch-Kiesl includes a great variety of relevant research literature of recent decades in her analysis – besides the already mentioned and amongst others that from Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, Georges Didi-Huberman, Dieter Mersch, and Bernice Rose. Especially the former is relevant for her theorem of 'evoking a sign' with which she addresses not only the act of producing but also and foremost the act of reception. This brings up another key concept of Leisch-Kiesl: 'perceiving an image', which is also the subtitle of her publication. She argues that drawing in this sense is characterized by its fragmentary and therefore evocative character. (191) With Deleuze (and his reflections on Proust), she brings a concept of sign into play which is closer to phenomenology than to semiotics. (188) Consequently, iconicity is not a property of the object but rather a situation of perception. (199) In this way, the author also finds answers for her second research question on how signs become images.

A productive addition to Leisch-Kiesl's great efforts to intertwine semiotic and aesthetic/phenomenological approaches may be *Le plaisir au dessin* by Jean-Luc Nancy, published in 2009.<sup>4</sup> Nancy's thinking has, generally speaking, very close thematical points of contact to that of his friend and teacher Derrida. With this book in particular, Nancy presents a highly interesting study on drawing in which he puts emphasis on the corporeal dimension of drawing. In this sense, it could serve as a counterweight to Derrida's more semiotically oriented approach which is of such great importance to Leisch-Kiesl.

However, the author's study gives many insights into drawing as a sign-producing practice and the subjective ability of being affected by signs/images as well as their interplay. Due to this and the conceptual as well as the methodological reorientation, the publication can be regarded as groundwork – a transfer to other areas would then be a desideratum for subsequent research work. Her focus on drawing (and the restriction to Minimalism and Conceptual art) could thus be opened up for other pictorial forms, such as painting and comics, but also maps, graphs, et cetera.

VII. In addition to the conceptual reorientation, Leisch-Kiesl also methodologically sharpens her focus. Compared with her prominent reference sources which often reflect on a selection of images by different artists from different periods in their major works, she chooses to reflect primarily on one artist. In doing so,

<sup>4</sup> The English (*The pleasure in drawing*, New York) and the German translations (*Die Lust an der Zeichnung*, Vienna) were published in 2013 and 2011. The latter is also listed in the bibliography but is not referred to in the text.

the author also makes a statement against the arbitrariness of selecting images or the use of images as support for theoretical arguments as is often practiced in image theory. As a consequence, images are often not viewed for what they are, but rather serve to exemplify elaborated concepts or to outline categorizations. In such a mostly philosophically oriented image theory, the primary concern is to find a concept of the image in general, and therefore, the exploration of the categorization of the image. In contrast, the author gives herself time and space to take a very close look at five large (even room-filling) drawings of Toba Khedoori (fig. 1). In those, the artist depicts minimalist three-dimensional objects, preferably in-between objects like windows or stairs, on large robust sheets of wax-coated paper. Placing one artist at the center of one's considerations is of course not a new approach, rather it is quite common in visual studies, 'Bildwissenschaften'. However, these are mostly explicitly work-based investigations, justified by a presumed meaning of the image, pertaining to content, meaning, or relevance. Leisch-Kiesl, on the other hand, unfolds the drawings of Toba Khedoori very carefully page by page and develops on this basis her concept of 'evoking a sign'. Thus, besides the particular chapter on Khedoori in which the five drawings are introduced, every thematic chapter ends or begins with a drawing by Khedoori. However, Leisch-Kiesl also faces the responsibility of developing general image-theoretical conclusions from this singular investigation by claiming her theorem of 'evoking a sign' not only as being accurate for Khedoori, but, to a certain extent, for drawings in general. The author describes her aim in more detail: "What is interesting for the study I am undertaking here is the degree to which drawing – or certain concepts of drawing – contains genuine qualities that could make visible this kind of a dimension of reality which cannot be captured by conventional means." (30) One wished that Leisch-Kiesl would have addressed the tension between the singular drawings and the transfer to a broader range of drawings/images more explicitly and theoretically to avoid accusations of arbitrariness and to present her approach more clearly for other researchers. Her approach is, however, already noticeable in the *Prelude* and on many other pages of the book. A highlight can then be seen in 'the final Cut', in which the theorem is extended to the very different drawings by Katharina Hinsberg. While this does, of course, not allow a 'pars pro toto' generalization to all images, the process of 'evoking a sign' is carefully demonstrated in these drawings and made discursively accessible. Such a new approach seems necessary, since Leisch-Kiesl's claim is not to develop a theory of 'evoking a sign', which would again mean to explore the 'what' of the image, but to discover the 'how' and also the 'that' of 'evoking a sign' in its immanent form and effects. Singular images (respectively drawings) and image theory are thus intertwined without placing themselves in an inductive or a deductive relationship.

VIII. Particularly noteworthy is the special layout of the publication: The first thing that stands out is the generous format. Then, the wonderful design catches the eye. Both the main text and the drawings are printed on high-quality paper. In order to adequately present the large-format drawings and the resulting overload on the re-

cient, the printing was arranged in such a way that the reader has to turn several pages to see the entire drawing. Another special feature is that the references are not listed as footnotes or endnotes, but are given their own page which is narrower than that of the main text. Thus, between each double-page, a slip of paper is inserted on which the references are noted. This way, the literature is given its own space, no longer banished to the margins, but interwoven at its core with the main text – it is inserted or worked into the publication like little notes. The special layout goes back to the author's opinion that scientific books need an adequate form to stimulate the reader at the threshold of looking and thinking. (7) Thereby, Leisch-Kiesl also contributes to opening up strict science and its formal requirements in order to provide spaces for art and creativity. Here, what is often negotiated under terms such as 'artistic research' or 'arts-based-research' seems to be applied calmly and elegantly: the intertwining of science and art, or, rather, the thinking through art, or how one can gain a new understanding of thinking starting from art. Leisch-Kiesl does not place a theoretical construct over Toba Khedoori's drawings but succeeds in letting the specific drawings guide her thinking. Coming from this, she develops a concept of 'evoking a sign' that is central to iconicity. This turn in thinking requires an adequate form on several other levels, such as the already mentioned modification of methods and the special design, but also the transformation of standard scientific structure that in Leisch-Kiesl's publication is not strictly linear but rather circumferential with intermeshed reflections. The drawings are thus viewed from several different perspectives and questioned for their theoretical implications. With *Evoking a Sign*, the author presents a comprehensive outline whose translation into English has not caused a loss of innovative power in the author's line of argument. On the contrary, the translation gives clear contours to the work of Khedoori as well as to the field of image theory.

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**Annette Müller-Spreitz; Autonomie und Anpassung. Die Bildtitel bei Wolfgang Mattheuer 1950 bis 1990;** Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag 2018; 387 S., 45 farb. Abb.; ISBN 978-3-96023-153-0; € 39

Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927–2004) begann 1941 mit einer Lithografenlehre im Betrieb seines Vaters, besuchte nach kurzem Militärdienst 1946–47 die Leipziger Kunstgewerbeschule, studierte 1947–51 an der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) Leipzig, arbeitete freischaffend als Grafiker, wurde nach einer Assistenz 1965 als Professor an die HGB Leipzig berufen, die er 1974 als freischaffender Künstler wieder verließ. 1958, als das Ende der Stalin-Ära sich abzeichnete, wurde er auf eigene Bewerbung Mitglied der SED, ver-