

Anne Neukamp

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Mirror

Among the many parties taking place at the Bauhaus in Dessau, the Metal Ball organised on 9 February 1929 is legendary. The students, dressed as tin-openers, whisks, nuts and bolts, were invited to celebrate at the heart of a space covered with a mirror paper and filled with hundreds of reflective globes hanging from the ceiling. Meanwhile, the Austrian philosopher Otto Neurath and the German artist Gerd Arntz were creating the Isotype, a universal visual and non-verbal language made up of 4,000 pictograms for education, public space signage and data visualisation.

Mirrors and pictogrammatic symbols are the denominators shared by the Bauhaus night and the "Mirror" exhibition, the German artist Anne Neukamp's first exhibition at the Semiose gallery.

Paperclips, ropes, envelopes, notepads, whistles, keys, locks and mirrors are some of the things in our world that Anne Neukamp has attempted to represent in her paintings. For her, the representational activity is not driven by an aim for realism. Instead, her purpose is purely semiologic: this is about creating the symbol of a paperclip, a whistle, a lock or a mirror, that is, an image the representational ability of which is reduced to the bare minimum.

In the exhibition "Mirror," the artist presents about ten new paintings that show, over unstable backgrounds made with tempera and oil, pictograms of various kinds of mirrors: some are set up on a stand (*Announcement; Tilt; Sprout*), other are double pieces (*Duplopia; Revision; Together*), while others are broken (*Incident; Fall; View*). The mirror, whether the real object or its image, has been a topic of interest for many artists in different ways. With Magritte, many mirrors (*The False Mirror*, 1928; *Not to be Reproduced*, 1937) do not reflect the world as they should, as if the specular item did not work. As for Gerhard Richter's *Spiegel* (1981 onwards), mirrors purchased to be converted into substitutes for paintings, bear witness to a desire to be present in the immediate world, to an art that is keen not to ignore the space it takes any longer. Since 1962, with Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Quadri specchianti*, which blend painted images with reflections, the mirror has been presented as a potential ersatz painting. When looking at Anne Neukamp's pictures, one thinks nevertheless more of other mirrors, namely those in Roy Lichtenstein's series *Mirrors* (1969-72), which early on, and not without humour, had set Pop abstraction's semiotic regime—the representation of an abstraction. Although Anne Neukamp's paintings are clear descendants of Lichtenstein's mirrors, their digital origin gives them a

genuine specificity.

In the mid-1970s, the Pictures Generation artists re-used existing images in an appropriative approach. In a similar way, which could be called "Pictures 2.0", Anne Neukamp selects on the internet—from websites such as Clipart or 3D Models, which provide ready-made drawings with simplified lines and digital symbols—generic shapes that later become the subjects of her paintings. For this new series, she has chosen pictograms of mirrors with basic shapes, sometimes even somewhat pixelated—images that might have been created by the graphic designer Susan Kare, the creator of the first Apple icons in the early 1980s. The A4 prints of these generic representations of mirrors cover a whole wall of Anne Neukamp's studio in Berlin, while on the contiguous walls, these pictograms are enlarged and recreated on a noble linen canvas. *Announcement* testifies to this change of scale: the small pictogram pinned to the wall becomes the main subject of a composition measuring 2.8 metres in height and 1.6 metres in width. Similarly, the pieces of the broken mirror in *Fall* appear disproportionate due to the painting's large format (2.2 m). Besides its imposing size, each mirror features formal characteristics that are just as unsettling, due to their digital origin. The extremely stylised frames around the mirrors of *Property* or *View*, adopting a pixelated shape, seem to come from the Super Mario Bros video game's decors. As for the Siamese mirrors in *Together*, *Revision*, *Adjustment* and *Sprout*, they remind us of the specular object in some of Walt Disney's tales. In the face of this painting and digital tool trade, we cannot help but think of some creations from the 1980s that typify the post-modern era, such as Gerwald Rockenschaub's pictogrammatic canvases or Suzanne Treister's paintings of video games, which display this moment when the digital image becomes the very subject of paintings.

Anne Neukamp's mirrors make no reference to reality. The artist uses them because these objects produce images and, what's more, representations directly and immediately created by reality. But in these paintings, the mirrors only reflect precisely that which cannot be represented: abstraction. The mirrors in *Announcement* and *Tilt*, outlined in black like a picture frame, show purely geometric abstractions, created by diagonal, parallel white and blue stripes. The same stripes, of various blues, cover the surfaces of "mirror-paintings" in *Adjustment* and *Revision*, while the shimmering surfaces of *Sprout* and *Incident* are represented by blue gradients. If we go by the semiologist Charles Sanders Peirce's symbol classification, the sign presented by a mirror, the reflection, is a clue, if not a mega-clue since it directly shows reality. Yet here, it seems to have lost this clue-like dimension since it shows nothing from reality, neither body nor object, but abstract shapes. The mirror, too, is affected by this loss of reality, since it is nothing but a mere pictogram.

It is as if Anne Neukamp's paintings were a celebration of the icon's revenge on the clue, or at least pointed it out.

In his essay *The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art*¹, Meyer Schapiro argued that one of the historical and political functions of abstraction lies in its "high degree of non-communication". Abstraction, that of American high-Modernism, could therefore claim to be the absolute antithesis of the communication and media world. In Anne Neukamp's work, abstraction stems not from a break with the images but from their proliferation on the internet. If reality's mark, which is reflection, has vanished from her mirrors, which have therefore become stand-alone devices, these are nonetheless surrounded by traces of clues. Indeed, the picture's background is painted with a mix of oil and egg tempera that makes the brushstrokes visible. By blending painterly brushstrokes and digital icons, which typify the universal language and hypercommunication, Anne Neukamp produces real pictorial oxymorons, sometimes threatened by a bug. In the show "Mirror," the viewers go past mirrors that reveal no truth, but do offer a double event: on the one hand, the fight between the icon and the clue, and on the other hand, the tension between the hand-made facture and the digital simulation. Non-reflective mirrors for painting that decidedly demand that we reflect.

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¹ Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art" (1957), *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, Selected Papers, New York, George Braziller Inc., 1978, pp. 157-160.