

A Concentrated Perception of Everyday Life

Harald Stoffers' Use of Language

Before he writes something, Harald Stoffers first draws feints for his sentences, which he aligns to the preceding lines. This produces an effect reminiscent of the constant repetition of striped constellations that occur in nature in the form of wave movements, grains or layers. In the pre-ruled lines, he makes everyday notes, memos, schedules or comments on the current writing circumstances. Line by line, until the sentence is complete. The contents mainly deal with actions about to take place. This can include entries on the time and place, such as plans of the trousers he wants to wear the next day at work at the Elbe-Werkstätten GmbH (in almost all of his letters), when he will leave which platform or how much money he needs to pay for a coffee. The use of words, figures and punctuation marks, like commas, colons and semi-colons constantly varies. In some of his letters, he tears away the sentence and starts writing from scratch using the rest of the paper or on the other side of a page that has already been written on, and so on. If he writes a shorter sentence on the back of a page it can sometimes happen that he'll tear this off and – in doing so – tear the sentence in half on the other side of the page.

When he creates his letters, Stoffers on the one hand sticks to a fixed procedure, which lets him do as he pleases, and on the other hand lets him develop new ideas on impulse, if need be. This brings styles to the surface that can be made out, guessed at or interpreted at the viewer's own discretion. In this manner, his works reflect an openness and flexibility that makes them highly fertile. The ambivalence of presentation, both of the readable letter and the visible picture posits questions, such as how Stoffers' works. Do his works consist of a textual part, distinct from a graphically designed part? Or, are text and imagery combined in a single message as coexistent mediums of meaning? What is the message and who is it directed at? Aren't letters as such private, especially when addressed to your own mother?

Harald Stoffers rarely gives his letters to his mother. Depending on the context of meaning and circumstances, he creates and tears up his work in different places. He leaves his letters lying around, for display, or passes them onto other people. Nearly all of us have at one point in their lives written a letter they haven't sent to the person for whom it was meant. Perhaps it was clear from the start – before writing the letter – that the addressee should never be delivered the letter. That would presuppose that the letter form solely serves the purpose of a beginning, for example to put thoughts down on paper, to internalise them or, like Jan Verwoert in his book "Briefe". Harald Stoffers writes to give himself time and space, to structure and shape his everyday life. Stoffers does this in two senses: first, as part of the schedule contained in the letters, and second, actively in the apparent delight he takes in creating his letters.

By constructing his letters the way he does, however, Stoffers destroys the familiar context of a normal letter. Words, content and design are presented in an unconventional manner and don't let the reader simply browse through the written text. At first glance, the larger format letters with their normal-sized writing even give the impression of illegibility. By using symbols that are similar to writing as well as colons, semi-colons and commas, Stoffers follows a process of alternating and permutative accumulation, which particularly benefits the textual characters of the works. Stoffers' amassments of colons (sometimes after every word in a sentence) follow an own system and provide the reader with a pause for reflection. In contrast to the monotony of an repetitive, unvarying style of writing, a variety that doesn't simply make reading difficult for the reader and viewer, but tiring. Embedded in the faint lines and in the sum texture of his letters, each letter and each word is perfectly legible – albeit slowly.

The unaccustomed level of concentration required for reading the letters lets us relate to the concentration Stoffers musters when writing. The lines shed light on how slowly the pen writes. The marks illustrate how concentrated every single moment of the writing process is. As stated before,

Stoffers' content deals mainly with pending schedules. The letters take on the function of a time schedule or of memos, which demand concentration when writing, and which also require concentration from the reader to memorise them. Writing and imagery, expression and meaning cannot be separated clearly and fall together in the conciliatory effect of Stoffers' concentrated attitude of consciousness, expressed through noting specific tasks or appointments as well as in their manifest design. In this manner, the expression of Stoffers' emotional situation creates the space it needs. An expression of his consciousness is evident in the action of writing, conceiving, and in the form that results from these actions. The writing – in its individual, material characteristics – evolves along and together with the linear axis of the lined rules – line by line and sentence by sentence – in a coherent surface, which can be understood as Stoffers' physical canvas and as his material signature. This gives us the opportunity to approach the pictures via their pictorial or semantic content. The reception of the pictures can therefore alternate between the awareness of the linguistic symbol system and an artistic approach. By means of notes made with high concentration, or by means of the broken syntax of simply strung together words, and by means of the play of accumulated punctuation marks and faint ruled lines, the viewer is involved in a reflection of artistic principles. Conversely, in their concentrated texture, the letters can be perceived in full. Or, individual graphic elements can be identified from contexts, and words can be understood as artistic symbols in their meaning. This creates an ambiguity of linguistic expression and stimuli which appeals to the recipients to keep their options open. The viewer can engage in different levels of interpretation and reflect on language in itself in the way it is used and functions.

For more than fifteen years, Stoffers has been writing letters every day. Their use can be considered a type of diary. Stoffers' letters therefore seem as if they can be continued ad infinitum in two respects: as individual letters, which Stoffers' larger works illustrate well. On the other hand, as a daily necessity, like eating, drinking and sleeping. Sometimes, Stoffers refers to his perceived present at the point in time of writing and also provides an investigation of the everyday situation as it occurs, for example by referring to the fact that the coffee machine has to be switched on: "Eine Kaffee Pause Machen Wasser Aufsetzen" (HaveCoffeeBreakBoilWater). Stoffers' letters are rendered the quality of a performative presence. It seems impossible to look at Stoffers' letters without being drawn into the writing process. This impression is amplified by the letters' appearance resembling notations, for which Stoffers' works can be acknowledged. The letters and sentence symbols, which remind of notes and clefs, and the constant form of his handwriting, which hints at a constant writing speed and is oriented towards the linear time axis of the ruled lines, which in turn resemble staves, give the impression of a musical score. Through the marks, movement and time gain relevance in a controlled sequence. With the faint line system, he transforms a serial aesthetic of sequence into an aesthetic of a web with an own system of rhythm and structure.

To a great extent, writing shapes Stoffers' everyday life and at the same time occupies a large space in his everyday life. He uses it to pick up on aspects of everyday life, incorporate them into their artistic structure, transcend their functionality, limitations, and fixed character, and to open up these aspects for new manifestations, new relationships and new forms of perception. They are presented to the viewer as characteristic elements of everyday life. The presentation of the readable letter and the visible image therefore depends on the extent to which the activity of writing or forming confronts the passivity of a pictorial totality. The picture, which evolved from writing in time and is rendered readable over time, appears in space. Stoffers' text works therefore obtain the status of a concept, as he combines spatial and temporal methods. Time and space-related dates and schedules face the letter as a procedure and as a completed work, which as a whole is completed in different places, left lying around, or is passed onto somewhere else. This multi-functional characteristic leads to a plurality of contexts to which the letter can attach itself. A letter written to his mother, an appointment as part of a conceptual process based on principles of design, therefore becomes a model of Stoffers' own history.

Although most of his letters are addressed to his mother, the mass of contained components posits the question of the real addressee: his mother, other people, the general public and/or himself? The multitude of usage possibilities results in an amendment of linguistic semantics through usage semantics. That means that it isn't just the way Stoffers combines meaning and expression that is of interest, but also how differently the letters themselves can be used. How are the letters used, or how can they be used? This is how Stoffers' works are lifted out of the reign of the material world into a level of abstract ideas.

As part of Stoffers' performative acts of declaration, a language action takes place, which lets him fulfil a social action. By envisioning a specific language structure, the letters create a possibility of reflection of the conditions of understanding in itself. Stoffers creates his own language and – in doing so – directs attention from a view of individual language to the general functions of language. His works therefore not only act as end to themselves, but also as a clarification of language. The recipient's dynamic process of investigation of the letters can lead to an understanding of the concept of writing letters and can study aspects of art. Stoffers' text works therefore offer the opportunity of critical reflection both of letters, notes and their composition and of art and language with their own conditions, functions or limitations.

Based on the multi-functionality of his letters, contradictions can occur for the viewer, whereby Stoffers calls attention to these. Perhaps he offers possibilities of developing a sense for differences for the one or the other perception – even in regard to contradictory logic within society. Since our perception of reality is shaped by language, or since language acts as a corset of our perception, this method can provide insights through an examination of innovative forms of language, such as those found in Stoffers' letters.