

Twice Reversed Doesn't Necessarily Mean the Right Way Around

Thibaut de Ruyter

One really would have to go Ghent's cathedral, dedicated to the little known St. Bavon, to see what this is in part about. In a chapel left of the entrance, there is an altarpiece protected by thick glass panels and kept in a carefully climate-controlled environment: *The Adoration of the Lamb of God*. On ten wooden panels painted using but little pigment and binder, Jan van Eyck, his brother Hubert, and their assistants, as well as, as reports would have it, numerous family members created something that can truly be called a masterpiece of Western painting. It emerged some time just before 1432, the technique of oil painting is still new, linear perspective is at its beginnings. Nonetheless, we see a rather rich palette of colors, a sheer plethora of details, a masterly geometry of drapery.

The altarpiece shows scenes from the life of God, his Son, and the disciples. From a lamb with a wounded chest a stream of blood flows into a golden chalice. Elsewhere there's Adam and Eve, looking a bit dispirited because of the tragic mistake of their youth. On the outside, the two patrons, and four additional panels that only come together in the closed altar show a key moment in the gospels: the Annunciation. The Virgin exchanges a few words with Gabriel, who has wondrous wings.

Van Eyck develops a system that is both simple and confusing to allow the beholder to see that Maria is answering the words of the archangel. Beside Gabriel's mouth is written in Gothic gold letters the divine words announcing a joyful event. But the news doesn't really seem to please the Virgin, whose head is turned to the right, her eyes are shadowed, her face is somewhat bloated. She is looking up to heaven, a haloed dove hovering above her. Maria answers the divine message... Van Eyck allows the words of the Virgin (on the right) to literally wander to the archangel (left). In order to be understood, the letters have to be read in reverse. The painter thus shows the direction the words are coming from. If the letters were simply reversed, from left to right, other words would result; this is why the painter turns them upside down. But turning them around twice does not necessarily mean the right way around: for it would be enough to turn the picture 180 degrees to wind up with a clearly legible sentence. Here the principle of comics is at work (the words are spoken by the protagonist), but it is at the same time a radical visual use of text. The space is dark, the background framed by windows, the gilded letters float in a space with too low a ceiling and crossed by heavy brown bar.

Sometimes Vittorio Santoro writes words on paper. We now leave the world of angels and saints, Virgins and pilgrims. What remains are grey pencil lines, drawn over multiple times, outlines not painted in. The letters overlap, link up, reverse as in a mirror, the contours intersect, the meanings mix. The paper remains white, the letters float on the page like on an untouched surface.

After I had just put on my T-Shirt one morning, my girlfriend told me that I'm wearing it the wrong way around. I took it off again, turned it inside out. But she still said it's still the wrong way around: twice-reversed doesn't necessarily mean...

Words on paper are nothing new, at least ever since conceptual art. The same could be said of the letters that could be seen later on digital bands of illuminated text or posters—that is, since the 1980s and the easy combination of art and advertising. And that artists add a few well-chosen words to their drawings or paintings can hardly be considered an innovation ever since Dada.

But here it is important that Vittorio Santoro's words are floating in space. They are not inserted into a sentence or a context. At issue are not slogans or concepts, but rather little statements marked by significance and sensibility. And the important thing here is the way they communicate with one another. Be it through the superimposition of two words that then actually resonate with one another, or the way that the words are shown in the exhibition space. In an exhibition in Berlin 2005, the two parts of a sentence are placed opposite one another. The beholder cannot read the two parts

at the same time, and is forced to create the relationship between the two framed fragments. It is ultimately this combination that is at issue, at any event much more so than the sheets themselves, on which over and over again the same letters are written each day over a six-month period. And as if at issue were showing various directions and interpretations, and giving the interpreters a stiff neck, the letters of one of the fragments were mirror-reversed, in the others they were placed upside down.

If van Eyck's letters are also the wrong way around, this should, quite prosaically, and undoubtedly also symbolically, allow the prophet Micah to read them the right way around.

We should probably now say what the words are. But maybe it's better to be silent about it. Santoro's sentences and expressions can only develop their poetry in a certain context, and it is not my task to create such a -context. Some sayings should not be quoted, or, if said and repeated, would lose their charm. All the more since this magic comes more from a kind of poetry of everyday life, a poetry of something pushed into the background, yet diffuse: the omnipresent language of the media, perhaps also a poetry of the found piece, the sibylline fragment, and not so much a literary construction. And then what's important, as already said, is no less their meaning as their existence as such. All the things that can happen between two signs: the space on the paper between two letters, two words, two sentences that remains unwritten. It is a visual haiku. Whatever I do not say, do not write, do not show, but in the mind of a somewhat patient beholder creates images, colors, and smells. There is something unrefined about exposing the beholder's feelings, sensations, and needs, especially when the attempt is made to announce them without reservation. And there is another uncouthness, that of an art criticism that attempts to justify a work by surpassing it in these: thinking it in crude concepts. If two sentences are hung opposite one another, they cannot be read at the same time, but one still has the awareness that what was just read is behind you. In this way, Vittorio Santoro creates a form of annunciation that is far from the great Christian myths.

A haiku also consists of a few words on paper, whereby the division, the space on the page is decisive. If one places more than three of these poems on one and the same page, their effect is immediately lost. The spirit can no longer wander, it is walled in by the meaning of the words. The realm of possibilities closes.

Words hovering in space are also important in a double video projection that Santoro created in 2004. A sheet of fine paper with just a few words written on it, flies about and is blown around, incessantly turning in the wind. Here, one should be silent of what is on the page, the source of the sentence Santoro has chosen... but those who with some courage seek out the hidden, almost incidental poetry, are rewarded. In particular—and this is certainly the key to the secret that surrounds the words of Santoro—it is a story of reversal. Turning letters into a sentence, creating new meanings. Exchanging one letter with another, seeing how it can entirely change the sentence. Reverse, exchange, mirroring, and turning upside down create -un-expected meanings.

Amusing, the English turn of phrase, "Do you get the picture?", with which one doesn't ask whether the picture is being received, but whether a message is coming through clearly.

But in fact, what Vittorio Santoro transmits is not a message tied to a text, but rather a visual language. The meaning of the words lies in their form, the duration of reading, the form of their production and in their context. In another work by Santoro we read two times (almost) the same sentence in various languages, written using the elaborately designed lettering of the titles of French and American newspapers (and other popular monograms). Here, two letters aren't exchanged, but two possessive pronouns, capturing the reader in a back and forth. Left, right, the exchange of words—at issue is then meaning, significance, and direction. This collage could be an anonymous letter, but the quality of the paper, the position of the letters on the page, the charm of the words suggest something else. It could be the same writing that van Eyck used for his altarpiece in the fifteenth century. But that's surely just a coincidence.

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