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The shop sign

The rue des Vieux-Grenadiers leads into a large open space beneath the old town of Geneva. The Plainpalais is a large square in the middle of the city. When the weather is nice, the citizens of Geneva like to stroll across the many little paths that criss-cross the square in all directions. Regular weekly markets are held on its edges. From the bright light of the open square, one enters into the narrow darkness of the rue des Vieux-Grenadiers, a street that belongs to the Quartier des Bains. Residential and industrial buildings from the turn of the last century line the street. Until a few years ago, this was a thriving tradesmen's quarter for all varieties of metal work. The factory buildings and administrative offices at the end of the road once housed a world-famous manufactory of physical measuring instruments. It was an area given over to mechanical engineering, with all sorts of shopkeepers, locksmiths and toolmakers going about their daily business. Wedged between the doorways and in the myriad yards behind the shop fronts were all sorts of garages and repair shops. The busyness, the fumes, noise and grime of their trade have now disappeared. The workers in greasy overalls have been replaced by sleek and elegant employees, who step swiftly through the streets to their offices. Mamco, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, has moved into a redeveloped industrial building at the end of the road. A variety of law firms, offices and ateliers have settled in the outbuildings of the museum complex. As in many cities of central Europe, an inner-city district originally characterised by trade and commerce has been transformed into a trendy area for well-heeled sophisticates. A variety of galleries have set up shop in the streets around the museum and established the tradition of holding three joint openings a year. In 1994, the Skopia gallery moved into the rue des Vieux-Grenadiers 9, a former workshop where ball-bearings were made. It is a very modest room facing the street on the right-hand side of the ground floor of a nineteenth-century residential building. Four years later, the gallery also took over the rooms on the left-hand side, so that today, it occupies the whole of the – admittedly still narrow – ground floor of the building. Two windows allow passers-by to look into the gallery. The shop windows on the right and left of the central doorway are a mirror image of each other. The window frames are painted green. The name of the gallery is written on the signboard above each window. (See book cover) White letters on a green background spell out SKOPIA art contemporain. The ground floor of the house with the two shop windows and central doorway is strictly symmetrical. Behind the facade, however, the rooms deviate from these even proportions. A glass box was built into the room on the right-hand side in its days as a workshop. It was the foreman's office. Shielded from the noise and dirt of his surroundings, the foreman organised and supervised his business from this glass box. In the room on the left-hand side, the different textures of the flooring– part poured concrete, part rough wooden floorboards – remind us of the different sections of the former workshop. There is no glass box on this side of the gallery.

I have shown my work in the Skopia gallery on a regular basis since 1996. The place is familiar to me. I know every square inch of the rooms, their little caprices, the unexpected protrusions of the walls, vestiges of long forgotten modifications and conversions. I know the irregularities of the white painted floorboards of the old workshop. But every time I go there to hang my paintings, I am confronted with the

conundrum of the strange glass box, the former foreman's office. The glass box dominates and distorts the entire room, to my repeated irritation and frustration. "Why don't you just get rid of it?" I finally suggested to the gallery owner Pierre-Henri Jaccaud. "You'd have a lot more wall space for your exhibitions." He looked at me defensively. He obviously cherishes these vestiges of history in his rooms, of the trade and the machines whose stench and grease have long since disappeared. "Well, make a plan of how you think the rooms should look," he finally conceded. The scepticism in his voice was all too audible.

The shop windows of the gallery give passers-by a good view of the interior. From the street outside, one can see most of what is inside: the walls to the right, the walls to the left and most especially, the wooden cubicle, the foreman's office. I would have to hold a different picture of the gallery interior up against the old one, I thought. I could hang my view of the converted gallery in the shop window. It would hang there like a shop sign, or a sign advertising the kind of services on offer there. I would present my vision of the converted gallery rooms on a shop sign in the shop windows of the gallery itself. "I'll paint a shop sign for your gallery," I told Pierre-Henri Jaccaud. "The sign will display your converted gallery." Jaccaud agreed to the plan.[1]

In 1719, the art dealer Edme-François Gersaint (1694-1750) rented a shop on the Pont Notre-Dame in Paris. His former shop had been on the Petit Pont, a little bridge across the Seine that is a kind of prolongation of the Pont Notre Dame on the other side of the island. Gersaint moved into the new premises and adopted the name of the shop, which was called "Au Grand Monarque". Like his predecessor, he sold "all sorts of court portraits". The name of the shop thus gave customers a good idea of what they could expect to find there. In 1720, Gersaint had the shop converted by his landlord, the city of Paris itself, and had a large stone archway built to match the neighbouring shops on the bridge. A wooden T-shaped construction was built into the arch. The lower openings served as the shop windows and entrance; the arch-shaped space above the windows was sealed and painted over. Gersaint commissioned Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) to paint a shop sign in this space.[2] (Planche I) On a sign more than three metres wide, Watteau painted a view of the interior of the gallery that people could walk into under the arch. (Planche II) The picture shows a sales counter, various paintings and even mirrors on the walls that are available for purchase. We see ladies and gentlemen, elegantly dressed, seated or standing together. They are busy looking at the paintings on show in the room. Some customers are grouped around the sales counter, admiring a selection of jewellery presented to them in a wooden case. We can differentiate clearly between the customers, the vendors and the shop employees. A young lady in a voluminous, gleaming dress is poised on the threshold of the shop, her left foot already inside, her right foot still on the rough cobbles of the street outside. On the left-hand side

[1] A sign is something different to a picture. A sign is a much more objective thing than a picture. The concept of a sign is closely connected with the material on which it is displayed. Signs are made of tin or wood, and they have a front and back. Our concept of a painting, on the other hand, is far less bound up with the material on which it is painted. A picture has no location. The Dutch word for panel painting, *schilderij*, takes account of its association to sign making. It was also the Dutch who popularised panel paintings, later succeeded by canvases, giving a body to the paintings. Until then, paintings were mostly frescoes on walls, disembodied images with no separate, physical existence.

[2] All the information concerning the history, creation and fate of Watteau's painting is taken from Christoph Martin Vogtherr's essay titled "Antoine Watteau, L'Enseigne", in *Französische Gemälde I, Watteau, Pater, Lancret, Lajoüe*, catalogues of the art collections of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2011, pp. 183-212.

of the picture, a portrait of Louis XIV is being wrapped up, Watteau's reference to the name and the namesake of the gallery.

Watteau had painted a shop sign, an advertisement for a gallery. We have no idea whether he thought this commission to paint a simple shop sign was an insult to his talent. Works on commission were very common in those days. Looking at the picture today, I am inclined to think that he enjoyed painting it and used all the tricks of his trade to best effect. The picture has great depth and perspective, the scene it portrays is lively and interesting, and the handling of the different textures of the clothing displays great painterly skill. Watteau did not seem to be discouraged by the thought that his work was designed for outdoor use, at the mercy of the wind and weather, and would therefore probably not last long.

Today, *The Shop Sign of Gersaint* is regarded as one of Watteau's key works, a milestone in the history of French and European painting. What began as a trivial commission is now venerated as a great work of art, exhibited on a par with other great works like Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855). The two pictures show a new self-awareness on the part of these painters as artists in their own right towards the ruling powers of their time – in the case of Velázquez, the Spanish court and Courbet, the rising bourgeoisie. Such a statement cannot really be attributed to Watteau's shop sign. This work is more of a curtsey to the dominant power of the market and the art market in particular, which apparently already held sway over the fortunes of an artist in the eighteenth century.

The name of the gallery, Skopia, is of Greek origin. *Skopos*, *skopein* means seeing in the sense of focusing on something. It is a kind of directed seeing, seeing with a set target in mind, an intention to encounter, to grapple with the object that is seen. In other words – a pretty appropriate name for a gallery. I imagine people go to galleries with precisely this intention. Of finding something to look at in order to understand it. It is not a casual way of seeing, a passing glance but a scrutinising gaze, steeled by interest.

I decided that the sign for the Skopia gallery should be large, but not so large as to block the view of the interior. There should space enough to allow passers-by to look inside and compare the view presented by the painting with their own view of the gallery interior. The dilemma I faced was the fact that there were two shop windows with different interiors separated by the central doorway. Should I paint two different shop signs? I suddenly remembered the large painting of Watteau's that I had seen in Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin a long time ago. I had a vague memory of it, particularly because of the strange little "wrapping up" scene in the corner, the king's portrait relegated to a perfunctory detail. And I remembered the name of the painting –*The Shop Sign*. It seemed like a good idea to go back there and take another look at the painting. To my surprise, I found that the painting in fact consists of two apparently equal parts, a detail that had completely passed me by the first time I saw it. The slit between the two canvases is clearly visible. I instantly decided to paint the sign for the Skopia gallery in exactly the same way. One canvas for the left side and another for the right. The two parts could be put together again later, when they had been taken down from the shop window. The solution was beguilingly simple. The dividing line was exactly equivalent to the gallery's division into two separate rooms, which in fact belong together. And if the two separate canvases were brought together, the two previously separate parts of the gallery could also be brought together, at least in the picture. Such is the luxury of

artistic freedom. In the left half of the room, I painted a mirror image of the foreman's office in the right half, making the narrow little box twice as large, an ideal office room for the gallery, in fact. I got rid of all the partition walls and created a sweeping single room, an ample exhibition space surrounding the office. And I got rid of the doorway and the stairwell behind it, which I had always thought of as an obstacle. Now it was possible to show an exhibition in a large room in a satisfying way. When the two halves of the picture are put together again later, a gallery consisting of two separate rooms will suddenly become a coherent whole. What magic paintings can achieve!

Watteau finished his shop sign, so legend has it, in just eight days, working mostly in the mornings. He painted the sign in the rooms of the gallery itself, because he had just arrived from London and didn't have an atelier in Paris yet. I envy him for the speed at which he managed to finish his painting. He painted the picture as an arch-shaped area on a rectangular canvas. He left the corners at the right and left unpainted. The painting was then mounted on the arch from the inside and fitted with a gilded strip of wood. Today, the picture, which has since become rectangular, still shows traces of the gold leaf arch that once surrounded it.

I took a lot longer than eight mornings to paint my shop sign. (Planche III) In my painting, I removed the two windows from the shop front and deposited them inside the gallery. I eliminated the doorway completely. The view into the gallery interior thus covers the whole canvas. A low step separates it from the pavement. The street in front of the shop is plastered with simple paving stones. All traces of the former workshop have been removed from the gallery floor. It is clean and gleaming, and the room is reflected in its shiny surface. Coming from the dusty street, one steps into a clean, brightly lit room. The foreman's office, doubled in size, stands on the elevated level of the gallery room like on a stage. It is now painted green. It was already commonly referred to as the "aquarium", i.e. an artificially separated part of a different reality. It is a remnant of another era, of the age of manufacture, installed as an exhibit in the former workshop. It has become an isolated work of art in the middle of the gallery space.

The Shop Sign of Gersaint did not spend much time under the arch of the gallery. Watteau died only a year after its completion, and perhaps the dealer was anxious to preserve all works of the artist to cultivate his fame. A common shop sign seemed little suited to such a purpose. Gersaint had it taken down and commissioned another, since forgotten artist, to modify it. It was to be turned into a gallery picture, a so-called *Kunstkabinett*, showing a selection of pictures deemed central to the history of art – much more interesting and important than a shop sign. The left and right ends of Watteau's picture were sliced off and stuck onto the top. The picture thus lost width and gained height. The additional pieces of the canvas were pasted onto the background. As the canvas was now taller, the gallery room had increased in height and additional pictures could be added to its walls. The arch-shaped upper edge of the picture was painted over. The canvas, now rectangular, depicted a picture gallery, a genre with which Dutch painters in particular were enjoying great success on the art market. Following this massive alteration of the painting, Gersaint asked the copper engraver Pierre-Alexandre Aveline (1702-1760) to make a copy of the modified painting. But alas, the painting was over three metres wide –too unwieldy to be transported to the engraver's atelier, where it needed to be taken to be copied. The painter Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736)[3] was therefore commissioned to

[3] Jean-Baptiste Pater after Antoine Watteau and an unknown artist, *L'Enseigne*, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 83.2 cm, private collection, Switzerland.

produce a more portable version of the painting. It was from this copy that Aveline made his engraving, which Gersaint equipped with a text and offered for sale in 1732. (Planche IV) In this text, Gersaint refers to himself as a friend of Watteau's – "son amy Marchand" and alleges that the artist had produced the picture at the height of his powers or – more poetically - "à la fleur de ses ans". The incisive changes the painting had since been subjected to were left unmentioned. Instead, a series of myths and legends began to emerge concerning the picture. It was the only work Watteau himself had been happy with, some said, or wrongly identified it as his last work and artistic testament. A common shop sign could probably never have generated such an aura, whose flames were naturally fanned by the friendly dealer. Gersaint's efforts paid off, and he managed to sell off the original to the Dutch art dealer Pieter Boetgen in 1746. The surprising thing is that – from this date onwards – not one, but two pictures are mentioned. The painting had obviously been cut into two halves of equal size. Who did that? Was it Gersaint, in an attempt to increase his profits? Or was it Boetgen's doing? We may assume that it was the end customer, Frederick II, King of Prussia, who gave the order to slice the painting in two. He bought the paintings from the Dutch art dealer for his concert room in Charlottenburg Palace. As the painting was too large for the room, he had it halved and placed on either side of a door. For almost two centuries, the picture was hung this way along with other paintings by Watteau in the royal collection. (Planche V) The painting is first mentioned in literature at the end of the nineteenth century. Of course it was apparent that the two halves belonged together. A series of in-depth studies proceeded to explain why Watteau had chosen to paint the pictures on separate canvases, conjecturing that there was no room to paint a picture of that size in Gersaint's gallery. It was only when the engraving by Aveline resurfaced that the responsible curators and art historians realised that this hypothesis was nonsense. In 1930, the painting was therefore presented as a whole again in an exhibition by the Prussian Academy of the Arts. Intended as a one-off event, visitors were so impressed that it was decided to keep the painting in this way. However, Aveline's engraving was a dubious basis for restoring the painting to its original state, as it does not represent the original shop sign but an anonymous artist's attempt to expand and redefine the picture as a gallery painting. And not only was the engraving based on the significantly altered painting but on a smaller version made by yet another artist. A serious attempt at reconstruction would have required more than reversing the painting's partition. It would have meant restoring the painting to its original arch-shaped form and identifying it as a shop sign produced for a particular context and purpose. The dilemma of presenting such a piece in a museum context would have remained. It would have been impossible to restore the painting to its original function as a shop sign. For in a museum even the most trivial objects are elevated to venerable works of art.

The colourful fate of this painting can also be seen as an illustration of the changing concept and handling of an "original" work of art. Today, such rough and ready alterations to a work of art like Watteau's shop sign would be unthinkable. Nor would a lack of space suffice as a reason to slice a painting in two.[4]

The painting – or its bastardized version – now hangs in Charlottenburg Palace as part of the permanent collection of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-

[4] The law today determines that the owner of an artwork is not entitled to change it. The author of the work retains their copyright. Slicing a painting into two apparently separate halves is thus a violation of copyright and prohibited. However, the owner of a painting is entitled to destroy it completely.

Brandenburg. The slit between the two joined-up canvases is clearly visible. The replica Rococo frame in which the picture is now presented enhances the fake aura of the cabinet piece it was elevated to soon after the death of the artist. The only trace of its original, entirely utilitarian design is its title. Once upon a time, it was a shop sign.

A picture should be like a window to the world, said Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in the age of the Italian Renaissance. The Dutch turned this concept round and driven by a secret curiosity used their picture frames to look into the private domestic worlds of their compatriots. In the nineteenth century, the shop windows of the newly built boutiques and shopping arcades offered an exciting new view of an artificial and artfully arranged world of consumer goods in the department stores. The view through these much larger shop windows again changed the Western understanding of art, eventually paving the way to pop art. The twentieth century also redefined the metaphor of the picture as a window. A picture is not something one looks through, but an object which one perceives. The picture is a window in an objective sense. It is not a window that can be forgotten because one is looking through it. A picture is a window and not what one sees behind it. In1949, Ellsworth Kelly (*1923) painted the picture *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*.[5] (Planche VI) Its title is a direct reference to the window of the Musée d'Art Moderne near the Trocadéro in Paris. Kelly originally gave the picture the descriptive title of *Black and white relief*. He was probably hesitant about defining his work as a readymade. Later, after he had changed the title, he preferred the term "already made". Kelly's inspiration for the piece came from a visit to an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne during his years in Paris. Walking round the museum, Kelly realised that he was far less interested in the art on show than in the windows between the pictures. He then painted – or rather reconstructed – one of these windows on a smaller scale. The resulting picture-object neither offers a view of the outside or the inside, but of differently arranged opaque surfaces.

In 1970, Blinky Palermo (1943-1977) painted a mural for the Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst in Bremerhaven. The picture traced the silhouette of the shop window on the walls of the gallery room. The found shape of the window frame provided the inspiration of the painting. But unlike Kelly, Palermo positioned his work directly next to the motif that had inspired it, directly linking the original and the copy.[6] (Planche VII)

In my painting, I removed the shop windows from the gallery facade, allowing an uninhibited view of the interior. Painted on canvas in the same proportions, the windows are exhibited in the gallery as paintings. The gallery is therefore shown to exhibit two pictures of windows that depict the windows that previously formed its shop front. The words "SKOPIA art contemporain" on the window frames have been retained. The paintings in the gallery not only show the windows but also the original sign boards of the gallery. One of the pictures has been taken down, and a box of the right size placed in front of it. The picture is about to be put into the box.

From the moment I saw it, the wrapping scene on the left side of Watteau's painting held a strange fascination for me. The practical banality of the cameo scene on the sidelines stands in contrast to the people in the centre of the painting, who strike self-conscious

[5] Ellsworth Kelly, *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, 1949, oil and wood on canvas, 128.3 x 49.5 x 1.9 cm, private collection.

[6] I chanced upon this work after I had finished my painting and was astounded by the formal similarities between them.

and complacent poses in their elegant attire. Their immaculate appearance obscures the fact that every business, including the business of dealing in art, also involves manual labour, at some point becoming a matter of muscle and sweat. The art works have to be taken down, wrapped up and transported to their new location in heavy boxes. The poorly dressed man standing next to the box with a contraption on his back is waiting to take on the laborious business of carrying the painting to its destination. But the little cameo scene can also be interpreted as a reference to another side issue, which is still kept quiet in the art world today. In 1720, France was in the grip of inflation. The stock market had crashed and huge quantities of new banknotes were being printed. The law imposed limits on the possession of precious metals, and prohibited the possession of gold coins, which people were instructed to hand in at the bank. These coins – known as Louis d'or – bore the portrait of Louis XIV. If they wished to avoid confiscation, people were required to hide any gold coins they had, i.e. to wrap them up and put them away. Perhaps the scene in the corner alludes to this black money. The Louis d'or is carefully wrapped up and stowed away. The scene might also refer to attempts at laundering money with the purchase of valuable pictures. Perhaps the art market was already a dark associate of the rich and powerful in those days, which would indicate that little has changed in the industry over the past 300 years.

My interest in Watteau's painting was, as I have already said, sparked by this wrapping scene. The foreground is full of silk bustles, elegant poses, powdered wigs and other props of the perfumed upper classes, whose interest in art is mainly fuelled by the desire to be seen to take an interest in it.[7]The porter is standing on the edge of the scene, a pathetic, morose little man with sagging, damaged knees. His expression reminds me of Watteau's *Pierrot* (1719), the joker and jester whose job it is to entertain the smug and saturated aristocracy.[8] Watteau depicts him as a lonely figure, trapped in an awkward position and imbued with an impenetrable sadness. In his shop-sign version, he is entrusted with the task of carrying away the precious and heavy load from the gallery. The box is on the floor beside him. The portrait of Louis XIV is being stowed away inside it. On the street outside the shop, bundles of straw are lying ready to cushion the fragile picture on its journey. The golden frame of the picture has already been wrapped up in a protective cloth.

In the Skopia gallery, the left-hand picture of the window is about to be put into a box specially designed for the purpose. The customary roll of bubblewrap foil is lying ready in the foreground on the street outside. The shimmer and gleam of Watteau's elegant ladies and gentlemen is here reduced to the surface of the bubblewrap foil. The only shiny thing left in the business is the wrapping of the picture, not the dress code of the clientele.[9]

The counterpart to the poor old porter standing like a donkey on the sidelines is the dog on the bottom right-hand corner of the painting. The animal is at an angle to the scene, an outsider lying on the dirty pavement, gnawing at his fleas. The porter and the dog

[7]Ovid in *Ars Amatoria* (Book I), "Spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae", 43 BC, "They come to see, but mainly to be seen."

[8] Antoine Watteau, *Gilles (or Pierrot)*, 1718-19, oil on canvas, 184.5 x 149 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

[9] Bubblewrap foil is omnipresent in the art world and has come to symbolise the dislocation of art works. They are wrapped up in foil, then unwrapped again, travelling from one art fair to the next. And finally, stifled in bubblewrap, the art works are consigned to one of the endless depots of the collectors with their ceaselessly expanding hoard of objects.

have no place in high-society. I adopted this dog for the Skopia shop sign and placed him in exactly the same position. Bottom right is the place where one would usually expect to find the artist's signature on a painting. The dog has taken the place of the signature, standing in as a living symbol of the artist. The artist has gone to the dogs and stands apart from the bustle and glamour of the society busy evaluating his works. He has no place there – even if he made the things they are all looking at. He has to stay outside, as the No Dogs Please signs announce at every corner. *Kyon* – the Greek word for dog is the namesake of the Cynics, a fourth-century BC philosophical movement, which rejected all social conventions and refused to found a school, seeing greater value in independence from all social norms and goods. The artist, like the dog, has his place outside the glamorous world of the art industry, a situation that was obviously much the same in the eighteenth century.

Postscript

Urban districts change in the course of time. The Quartier des Bainsin Geneva, a neighbourhood once populated by tradesmen and precision mechanics has turned into a quarter of museums and galleries. Places in cities are adapted to the demands and needs of the time. Artworks are obviously also exposed to such changes, as I have documented with the story of Watteau's *Shop Sign*. We apparently find it easier to accept changes in our physical environment than changes to a work of painted fiction, a work of art. Here, we insist on preserving the original. Art works are not allowed to be modernised. On one level, the shop sign for the Galerie Skopia is a conversion plan – i.e. the redevelopment of the gallery. On another, it is also a modern interpretation of a work of art that has already been subject to radical changes – Watteau's *Shop Sign*. I have swept the floor and taken the old paintings down from the walls. A new exhibition is set to take its place. But despite all the changes, the actual nature of the space has remained the same. A gallery is still the place where art is shown, 300 years later, from eighteenth-century Paris to twenty-first-century Geneva. The silk robes and powdered wigs of the customers may have been replaced by the casual styles popular at today's opening events. The leopard doesn't change his spots, but says: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change".[10] The social pecking order and the conditions of production have also remained curiously similar in the art world. Now as then, it consists of wealthy customers, cunning dealers, helpful handymen and modest dogs that prefer to stay outside.

[10] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, 1958.

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