

*Between icon and eidos*

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Speech delivered at the opening of the exhibition "Afronauts and Other Works of a Summer," paintings by Daniel Kojo Schrade at Gallery Michael Gausling, Pähl Germany in November 2005

"You are all familiar with the magazine *Aviso*, it's published by the Bavarian Ministry of Art. This magazine, that comes out four times a year, is always devoted to a special topic. The issue of *Aviso* that I saw recently was all about "Seeing". In a brief foreword, the Bavarian Minister of Art, Thomas Goppel, writes about the "iconic turn". This is a concept that is very exciting for art historians. When it first appeared a long time ago, I was a student in Berlin at the time, I was electrified, because as an art historian, who really prefers to be called an art scholar, I saw this so-called "iconic turn" as an opportunity, and as a kind of upgrading for myself: for if our society is being more and more conditioned by images and less by writing, as the expression "iconic turn" or "pictorial turn" suggests, if the so-called "Gutenberg universe" is being replaced by images, mainly as a result of the latest technologies that use images to a great extent (something that anyone who owns a computer can confirm), if this is really so, then it means that people who are professionally concerned with images, art historians and art scholars, have a different status than in the old days, when they were only concerned with what could be termed a "cultural fig leaf", with things that were gathering dust in museums. Now images are everywhere. So we have an "iconic turn". But there is a problem with images, for, as the magazine makes very clear, pictures were and still are regarded with mistrust. That pictures lie is a topos as old as pictures themselves. Considered from the standpoint of reality, painting deceives the eye. There is a whole branch of painting devoted to the creation of optical illusions, known as "trompe l'œil". That what we see is a deception, that the messages received by the eye have to be interpreted, is a theme running through the whole of western history, right up to Oedipus, who blinded himself because his eyes had deceived him. This topos of deception has something to do with the fact that pictures are ciphers, or encoded signs. They carry messages which have to be decoded, or read, in order to understand them. But since they are not unambiguous, and therefore liable to wrong interpretations, meaning that they "lie", they are strongly exposed to accusations of deception. Pictures as carriers of codes: but does this still apply to painting in the 20th century? Pictures have motifs. A motif is something that is moved, like a locomotive, a place that moves. In painting, the motif is thus something that has been moved, maybe something that has been moved into the picture from a different context, and which perhaps also contains whatever it was that motivated the painter to choose it, to put it in the picture – like the motive for a crime. There are motifs not only in painting, but also in songs, in music of course, but the accusation that motifs can deceive is mainly restricted to the visual arts, to painting – to the "icons" in pictures. "Icon", another English word – on the one hand, there is the religious icon, a picture of something sacred. Unlike "images", an "icon" is something

which has more hidden beneath the surface. Not just image, but "icon" – as used in the world of computers. You are familiar with the icons in Windows, for instance, when you click on them there's something behind them – and that's the thing with "icons", unlike the "image" an icon is a door to something hidden behind it, something more. A religious icon is itself sacred, it's not just an image, for instance of St. Nicholas. Kissing an icon is an act of worship. "Icon" is thus a very interesting concept, when applied to pictures. But let us first return to the motif. Where do we find motifs in painting, which is what we are concerned with today? In Daniel's paintings there are motifs that might not be clearly recognizable at first glance, but there is one thing you may have already noticed: there are letters, there are signs, there are ciphers. Are these letters also "icons"? I'll be coming back to this. Another observation: you also have figures in the pictures, you have drawings which at first glance you might think are purely gestural and non-representational, but when you look more closely, they represent something figural. You can see a face crystallizing out of the gestural form with a kind of halo, rather like an aura, and above it there's a drawing of an umbrella held by a figure wearing a helmet with a visor. Over the underground or background you see two overlapping drawings or paintings, but which are so intermixed that you let them slide out of your analytical mind again and perceive the whole as gestural painting. This effect is sometimes more and sometimes less strongly present: but you will see that these motifs, these ciphers, are repeated in the pictures. And you can read this from the titles of the works, where the "Afronaut", for instance, appears repeatedly, and gave the whole exhibition its title. "Stop-Look-Listen" is the title of a series of works, and "Brother Beethoven" is another. And now comes the point at which you have to think about these titles a bit if you want to decode, decipher them. Daniel's motifs are repeated, they are worked out in series and appear to have a special importance. They originate from a complex of motifs in our world, or rather from a cultural complex, which touches on the question of cultural identity. Here it is necessary to know, for instance, that the words "Stop-Look-Listen" are found in Ghana on warning signs at railway crossings. "Stop" means you have to stop, "Look" means you have to look whether a train is coming, and "Listen" means you have to listen because even if there is no train in sight, approaching trains can usually be heard. And the beauty of it all is that while Germans might think that "Stop-Look-Listen" sounds like an officious command, in Ghana it is like a meeting point for communication, since everyone has to stop and listen together – and when people stop, they meet each other, they exchange news, they wait. I sometimes wish that we also had such a "Stop-Look-Listen" meeting place in our towns, and that people would really stop, even if no train is coming, and think about how to achieve communication. And how easy it could be ... stop, look, and listen. In some of the pictures, you see the big O or the K of "Look" or the O and P of "Stop", and so you have different fragments left over from these words. Another title: "Brother Beethoven". How does this bring us together? "Brother" is the way Afroamericans addressed each other in the 1960s and '70s; brother, brotherhood. And Beethoven, something I never knew before, seems to have had a grandmother from Surinam, so that this "teutsche" composer, born in Bonn on the Rhine, had a mixed ethnic origin. It really doesn't matter where the grandmother really came from, the painter has deliberately joined Brother and Beethoven, has placed them side by side, "Brother Beethoven": anyone who says this is accepting him in a brotherhood and thus in something that we connect with a completely different cultural complex. Turning to the

concept of the "Afronaut", on which my colleague Thomas Huber has already written a very enlightening essay in the "Afronaut" catalogue, this is a new kind of astronaut with a helmet and what appears to be a space suit. This figure is inspired by the musician Lee "Scratch" Perry who used to perform in a similar outfit - an African (What is an African? Does "the" African really exist? This is the superficial view from outside, of course) who was born in the Americas and is searching for his roots, as it were, and now claims that he could just as well have come from outer space. Everything is centred around people's sense of identity. And we are in an area where you will notice that most of these series of motifs are linked to this question of identity, to roots – especially when one does not exactly know where they come from, and how they are made and interpreted. In my contribution to the small catalogue I have mentioned, I called this "painting from the spaces in between". And I chose this as the title for two reasons.

One important thing, as I have already said, is the motivic space in between, in other words the thing that moves and was the motive. But as you can see for yourselves, there is also the painting that we have in front of us and which is also not easy to grasp. The development of Daniel's painting began with a gestural approach – on the other hand we see in it the assistant, previously the student of Professor Reipka at the Academy of Visual Arts in Munich, then came a period spent in Spain, following the tracks of Tàpies, as it were, and with a great interest in gestural elements in 20th century painting. But the other thing in the paintings is the integrated drawings, the figural in the gestural. After spending some time in Mexico, Daniel continued to develop this interest in figural motifs which themselves come from a space in between – just as in Mexico there is a pictorial culture between Spanish baroque and what is left of the Indian, the indigenous tradition. This mixture, both in content and in form, leads me to the conclusion that we are dealing here with a kind of painting that goes its own way. A way which on the one hand is concerned with "eidos", an important concept in gestural painting. Willi Baumeister called many of his pictures "eidos", idea, meaning that there is no longer any need to produce images of things, but that the picture is simply there, it stands for itself. That is the achievement of gestural painting. In the case of Daniel Kojo, gestural painting is also something that stands for itself. On the other hand, there is also the "icon", in other words the picture which can be "opened" and given a content, a "link" to a theme, but one which is stored in us and not in the picture itself. We find these "icons" in the word fragments, the drawings and also in the titles, and behind these pictures within the pictures is the question of identity, for instance. Between "icon" and "eidos", that would be a good way to approach these paintings."

Jochen Meister (Art-Historian, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich): Between icon and eidos.