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Fleeting Preferences

How to get from Performance to Painting

Harald Fricke

At the beginning of the 80s, painting determines the art scene in Berlin. Generally speaking, together with Munich and Dusseldorf the city has been the centre of German painting for an eternity. The *neuen Wilden* of Moritzplatz are making sure it stays that way. Whilst here Elvira Bach or Helmut Middendorf, Salome or Rainer Fetting are covering unbelievable quantities of canvas with pink and green and yellow and a few brush strokes, and these are being sold for incredible prices, next door in Kreuzberg there is a small group of artists who have shifted their interest to music, video or film and above all to performances.

At the beginning of the 90s the situation is similar, but the other way around. Directly after the fall of the Wall there is an active scene with musicians and DJs who run films and video animations in the background at mass events, whilst every few seconds the sounds and melodies blend to a static beat. Sometimes only a sonorous drone can be heard, an enervating, whistling siren or the noise of over-modulation. At this time, which might be considered a late realisation of all the fantasies with which the *Geniale Dilletanten* had championed their vision of a synthesis of the arts ten years before, Nikolaus Utermöhlen – in semi-seclusion – is producing only pictures and paintings concerned with classical themes and romantic depictions.

If this interest had been considered merely anticyclic, that would not have been sufficient concept to produce the few, but remarkably dense and precise series painted before his death in 1996, Nikolaus Utermöhlen had not bid farewell to the performance and underground art of the squatters' scene with which he began. His change to the field of painting, his investigation of colour spectrums, lack of definition and art-historical patterns, even William Blake's *Vision of the Last Judgement*, is a transfer and continuation of the experience collected with the group *Die Tödliche Doris* in the 80s.

There is no need to search for breaks in his biography, since they are obvious. After all, according to their own words, the performance band – consisting of Käthe Kruse, Wolfgang Müller and Utermöhlen – was an "amoebae-like creature" which took up various styles and ideas, placing them into sometimes irrational, sometimes grotesque contexts. Logically, Nikolaus Utermöhlen also saw paintings as an effort to examine aesthetic codes. Under altered conditions – why else would he have begun painting again in the 90s?

The kind of performance which concerned *Die Tödliche Doris* may be located somewhere within the actionism of Beat, Fluxus or happening; but above all, it was also a denial of and parody of the genre which had become esoteric in the course of the 70s. Rather than continuing with the slowness, duration or physical resilience which was to be found in the exhausting bodily performances by Abramovic/Ulay for example, the work by *Doris* developed into piecework, sometimes consisting of only a few individual songs made as if for a video production. The pathos the 'in' form of spiritual exercises expressed in a live-act is countered by exaggerated, fashionable stylisations. At the first

festival of *Geniale Dilletanten* in the tent of the Tempodrom in 1981, they appeared in silver make-up like Roman fauns; yet another time the group conveyed the impression they were combining Velvet Underground with Beckett's laconic style. Performance here is no longer the search for existential experience, but a dispassionate game with artist types and avant-garde attributes; however, it is also the attempt to make people recognisable in distortion. The more anonymously the action takes place – it is often performed on an almost dark stage, superimposed by slide projections or submerged in flickering stroboscopic light – the more authentic the collective process. It is a matter of the way in which the myth of the artist as an asocial individual can be turned around; just as the subject does not leave the performance fortified and at one with society; but is able to adopt everyday forms as a result of the continually fraying actions.

Even when the group received a grant for one year at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 1987, Wolfgang Müller summed up their work on the 44-piece painting then produced as practice for a normality suitable to art: "In addition, it (the normality) spares us the stress of searching for something special, something unusual, searching for a material, a form which no-one has yet found or invented. As we all know, the pressure to find the new is completely out-dated, yet on the other hand it is quite normal and very up-to-date, which is not to say that we always aim for what is most normal for our concepts. In addition, any concept followed to the letter is often the expression of an artist's childish terror; he longs to be credible or is fanatically convinced by his own work and seeks to convince others. By contrast, the salesperson in the specialist shop for canvas frames next to the Bilka department store in Kottbusser Damm in Kreuzberg is particularly friendly. She has a cheery, open face and, as I discover later, she is the daughter of the famous Berlin naïve painter Mühlenhaupt. She gives her customers many a helpful tip."¹ It is important to see Utermöhlen's shift to painting from the perspective of a similar relation to and preference for the material.

In one of his essays on the precondition of "painting as a libido-dispositive", Jean-François Lyotard gives a name to what Müller calls normality is his work with artistic strategies. He compares the act of painting with various acts: the application of lipstick; iron oxide dust being blown onto the wall of a cave through stencils; the painting of fingernails; a bucket of paint thrown onto canvas from a stage. The important thing is not the technique which furthers the production of pictures, but that the primary aspect of this act is the supply and disposal of energy. However, in this casual relinquishment there is also a release from trapped energies which can be fed back in artistic expression, as Lyotard maintains with reference to Bellmer's writing on *Die Puppe*: "Should one conclude, since both the most powerful and the least noticeable reflex movement of the body, of the face, of a limb, the tongue, a muscle may be explained in this way, that the tendency is to divert and to divide a pain, to counter the real centre of irritation with a virtual centre? This seems certain, and leads us to see the desirable continuity of our life of expression as a consequence of liberating transferences leading from an evil to the image of it. Expression, and the part of it which is lust, is a pain transposed, it is a release."²

But since the energy emanates from one's own body, after such a transfer and reinterpretation of libido energy, he locates it close to performance. One might think of Jackson Pollock, who dripped paint onto sheet after sheet in his studio, or of Yves Klein, in whose work naked women dripped in blue paint become brushes.

Nikolaus Utermöhlen uses the insights gained in the practice of his performances: his work with painting is always a means of checking out whether a relation between the object to be depicted, its perception during the various working stages and the ultimate form comes about during production. As early as 1987 he noted: "With every idea, not only the object upon which the energy has an effect alters, but the entirely alters to the same extent together with each part. However, it appears

that this whole – even when perception is opened as far as possible – can ever be experienced as limited in any way. On the contrary, perception and experience – together with other aspects – work with our awareness like a kaleidoscope, feeding it with endless patterns. These patterns and structures are always put together from only one part or parts of a whole as basic elements. By means of a constant motion from within, forms merge and are retained on a wide variety of levels.”³

This permanent interaction between form and design at least makes it possible to explain variations of the same motifs, as in the ‘Schwertbilder’ of 1991, whose theme in their hanging is a particular colour course; a course which also corresponds to an analysis of the colour spectrum and to the lack of distinction arising from each altered shade of blue, red or green. This shift only becomes visible, however, if one passes along the row of pictures – that is, participates as an observer in the change of colour, which in turn is itself a progress of differently perceived conditions. The important thing about this procedure is that there is neither an intensification of colour, nor an addition towards a specific target – the series does not live from combination, but from its interplay (that is why Utermöhlen had a fold-out leaflet made of the presentation of the ‘Schwertbilder’ at the Gallery Witzleben in Karlsruhe. This indicated a path through the exhibition; when opened out, the overall picture it gave was completely unclear, whilst the individual sheets create an infinite number of interrelations).

Nonetheless, with his work concerning the transfer of libidinous energies to produce images, Nikolaus Utermöhlen adopts the opposite approach to the supply/disposal model described by Lyotard. Utermöhlen reduces the energy involved in the way in which he uses canvas as a carrier. Whilst planning the colours of the motifs, the application of paint is already materialised not at all or very little. Instead, the effects of its composition are left to the settings of the copier. The artist follows these technically determined visual effects by sealing the picture with an extraordinary number of layers of varnish – intended in classical painting to protect the handiwork of the old masters, here this becomes an essential means of artistic design.

For the work on the *Blake* cycle, he takes a further step: the copy paper on the reverse is almost dissolved, so that at the end the layer of paint and the varnish remain on an aluminium plate. The important aspect here, it appears, is that Utermöhlen is concerned with working on and conserving the pictures, whilst the subject continues to be technically recorded. The artist refines the products from the copier without taking much influence on the object of the picture. Instead of literally picking up the paint himself and transferring it onto the canvas by means of physical effort, as an expression of his own creative activity, Utermöhlen thins down this principle, so shifting the energy model to the apparatus and finally dissipating the energies brought into play. Ultimately only the paint remains as prefigured material, glowing, however, with almost “immaterial beauty”.

Although the physical effort of producing a painting or picture is held back in Utermöhlen’s work, an awareness of the conception of what is depicted comes all the more to the fore. Whatever is to happen in the copier as a result of its programming is considered in precise detail beforehand. In his notes on the Gate Picture of 1989, he wrote: “emphasise/exaggerate transition of colour, perhaps after (recalling spectrum) – makes more super-realistic (brighter, harder), painterly but on the other hand abstract. If possible start with colour copy. Foreground: gate sharp; space behind it: blurred, all shades of colour (that is, light/dark).”⁴ All these components may be found again in the programmatically named *Brown’sche Bewegung* (*Brownian Motion*) of 1992, for which Utermöhlen transferred four picture parts onto five panels. One sees the regularly distributed accumulation and concentration of dots on copied sheets, which indicate the state of saturated solution when referring to the motion of electrons. In the thinking of the 80s, “Brownian Motion” was used as a metaphor for

the post-modern entropy in which all signs and possibilities of signification are equally valid in the case of complete differentiation.

The fact that part of the image carrier in Utermöhlen's version nonetheless remains as an unprinted rest may be an ironic comment on scientific efforts to arrive at a universal interpretation of motion; but above all, it shows the artist's process of construction, which takes place below the (mathematical) calculability of the world. The gap between the calculability of colours and their perceptible, materialised manifestation may be clearly demonstrated using the example of Utermöhlen's An infinite painting on "A vision of the last judgement" by William Blake⁵. The extraordinary psychedelic, quasi-spatial effect radiated by the picture panels does not lie in the addition of colour which Utermöhlen tries out in his pre-studies, but in the superimposition of the individual outcomes of addition. The dissolution of the dense colour values in each of the sheets lies in the combination, and at the same time they are newly concentrated in another unit – in light.

Indeed, here Utermöhlen comes back to the question of the reduction of light and its transposition into painting, analysed by William Turner's depictions of "coloured mist" as "images of nothingness". Utermöhlen's starting point is not so far removed from Turner's work. He is also seeking to translate light into colour which throws a veil over the objective world. But for Utermöhlen there is no original purity concealed beyond this veil – corresponding to a reflection of the divine myth of creation – "Let there be light". Rather, his work originates from a state which Alfred Schmid describes as "light death": The extinguishing of light into heat is its actual death. All light which is extinguished by material which warms in the process is dead and shadows are the traces left behind by his death."⁶

This notion returns once more in the frieze *Das ohnmächtige Modell (A Model Fainted)* of 1994. It is possible to read the work as the sum of experience Utermöhlen has gathered in his work with painting. Whilst the male nude model in the studio (Utermöhlen's room in the house of *Tödliche Doris*) has collapsed, objects dance around him in an ornamental figuration. These things are alienated to the extent of unrecognisability by colour, and are superseded by shots of exploding fireworks. There is nothing to hold onto the wild colours of the figures, the world appears (from the perspective of the fainter?) to be evaporating. Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, sees the value of art in precisely this condition, even using the same example as Utermöhlen: "The prototype of a work of art is the phenomenon of fireworks, which has been subjected to little theoretical examination due to its fleeting quality and empty entertainment value; ...It is an apparition 'kat exochein': something empirically apparent, freed from the burden of the empirical as one of duration, a heavenly sign and yet something produced in one, a portent, glittering and fading writing which cannot be read in terms of its significance."⁷ The only question remaining unanswered is whether the model has fainted because it has seen this phenomenon – or perhaps in order to be able to view it better?

Utermöhlen himself will have enjoyed this ambivalence: after all, in his painting he was able to enter through both the entrances – or should one say gates – of perception. As a viewer before and an actor behind the images.

Translation: Lucinda Rennison

¹ *Die Tödliche Doris*, vol. I, Ed. Wolfgang Müller, Martin Schmitz, Kassel, 1991

² Hans Bellmer: *Die Puppe*, Frankfurt/Berlin/Vienna 1976, p. 73, in Jean-François Lyotard: *Essays zu einer affirmativen Ästhetik*, Berlin 1982, p. 57

³ From the artist's notes 1989/1995

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Compare the text by Hanne Loreck

⁶ Alfred Schmid, *Traktat über das Licht*, Bonn 1957

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno: *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt/Main 1973, S. 125