

Hajo Schiff

The Picture, Space, the World and How Everything Comes Together.

**As an artist Martin Conrad chooses the language of painting. Despite having been declared dead repeatedly, painting remains an unsurpassed method for visualizing and bringing into focus the complexity of perception. Furthermore, it provides images with a stationary and constant physicality, a vital characteristic, particularly in the light of the ephemeral electronic media of our times. In addition, Martin Conrad's painting encompasses a repertoire transcending in a virtual sense the traditional logic of perception, thus forming 'impossible' spatial stratifications determined, moreover, by aporetic structures.**

I.: Why Painting?

Painting is one of the oldest artistic techniques. Even today it is impossible for images to evade the evolved reference system of the history of painting. Indeed it is this very complexity that enables painting to blithely survive despite its frequently invoked demise. All painters who take pride in themselves today are aware of the fact that their actual chance consists in representing "painting after the end of painting." It is not the medium as such that has come to end; merely the avant-garde has passed away after a span of over a hundred years. No one can any longer claim that art history's sole objective should specifically be to further one particular style. Everything that painting has ever been able to express is now generally available. And each once newly devised approach has not annihilated but rather overlapped with and incorporated its respective precursor: a both burdening and binding legacy, but also a challenging spectrum encompassing a host of references.

In the Middle Ages the purpose of the image was to make the invisible and the sublime tangible in the service of religion. When in the wake of the renaissance reason gains the upper hand, the painted image increasingly depicts the perceivable world. After the world has been thoroughly explored, more and more technology is being produced, and photography has begun to paint with light, painters render light itself. Finally they discover abstraction, painting the idea of objects, their volume or structure, followed by Surrealist investigations of the soul and the gestural aesthetics of self-expression, culminating in the painting of painting itself - concrete art with its self-references relating to form and color. These and other approaches were once arduously conceived and established. Today, however, painting is liberated from the obligation to champion methods of representing unprecedented views of the world. The avant-garde movements have exhausted themselves in the course of unceasing waves and gone under, but painting has risen from the dead as an ideal and trans-temporal field of work.

The battles of exclusion fought by the avant-garde movements appear somewhat absurd from the perspective of the present. In view of the worldwide network and the global flow of information these struggles for dominance no longer have any justification and, wherever they still appear, are quickly recognizable as market strategies. When artists use the medium of painting today, their "painting after the end of painting" approximately corresponds to what theorists refer to with the term

“postmodernism” and logicians characterize as “polyvalent logic” – even if the use of these words may meanwhile arouse a certain discomfort. It is the aim of all of these attempts at definitions to surmount linear and dually alternative systems and, instead of compulsive synchronization, to enable the “simultaneity of a factual non-simultaneity,” and to resolve entities that are actually opposed to one another in nonhierarchical juxtapositions. More concisely said, philosophy, art, and the natural sciences are trying to move from a simple “either/or” to an often difficult to endure “both this as well as that” proposition. This not only enhances the density of information within a culture – it might also serve as a method of dealing with the numerous political conflicts.

Photography and film are tremendously suitable for propaganda purposes. Painting, however, is not so much an act of interpretation as the act of individually producing something that previously did not exist in this form. In a prolonged process of choosing constantly from possible alternatives through selected and discarded options, a limited surface receives a complexity that extends beyond the usual, one-dimensional reference to reality. The art professor Bernhard Johannes Blume defines painting as “a medium of visual recall suitable for individual aesthetic purposes and endowed with numinous remnants of aura,” while, however, also employing the term “interface” derived from the field of information technology. Created in dialectical steps and usable by the viewer in equivocal ways – is it preposterous to postulate that painting might be seen as a residuum of ambiguity tolerance? In any case, in the aesthetic practice of painting exactly the close encounter of varying procedures and perspectives within one central focus may be observed that is actually required by polyvalent logic or the multi-dimensionally intertwined space.

What is often wrongly addressed as an anticipation in retrospective reflections upon art history, is nothing else but the artistic shaping of patterns of perception which only make possible a further development within and without the realm of art. In this sense, for instance, pointillism is conceivable as a test model of the resolution of images in digital pixels. Perhaps Hegel, who denied painting the capacity to achieve cognition, is mistaken. And might it not be possible that today, particularly in the case of Martin Conrad, in the traditional medium of painting a capability of perception is developed that we need for dealing more swiftly and on more complex levels with the new electronic media – a capability which precisely within these new media is not and cannot be cultivated owing to the factors of entertainment and the fascination of the spectacle? One should not be misled by the vital presence of the color to overlook that the density and visual contradictions of these pictures render them potential meta-signs, the language of which though is only partially decipherable.

## II.: The Surface as a Vertiginous Polyvalent Space

In his paintings Martin Conrad employs methods of maintaining the tension of the color and working with multiple layers that resist instant interpretation. Both technically and in terms of its content this painting is densely layered. Concise units of color and more open, graphic forms demanding their own respective space are conjoined within a picture. What here in the painting structured by color has left its skeletal traces as a shifted, doubled, extended, and repeatedly circled formal line, stems from completely diverging areas - as a link to the perceivable world, individual forms of banal objects derived from nature and cultural constructions such as architectural and scientific models, which, however, are not vehicles of a specific meaning. For this fund of forms Martin Conrad not only collects objects; he also produces sketches and has at his disposal extensive archives of printed images that

beyond the purely representational have special formal qualities. These graphically reduced objects, the structures of which have been laid bare, serve as islands of focused interest within the arrangement of the colors, extending the representational function of the image. In the dynamic interplay of the penetration of color surfaces and lineaments in the balanced, seemingly serene picture a dialectical tension between line and structure, color and surface comes about.

First, however, Martin Conrad organizes the picture plane by means of layered color structures. The thus achieved pictorial composition and its emotional effect bring forth the graphic strips, triggering a process of mutual penetration: As the space becomes multi-dimensional, impulses are received and transformed; flowing transitions confront abruptly changing levels; rough edges on the surface are juxtaposed with effortlessly transcended boundaries. The quality of the artistic work manifests itself in the capability of balancing these divergences: the tone of a color against the structure of a surface, a layer of color against a line, a graphic symbol against latent representation, the depiction of formal elements against shifted strips of color. Even if the color structure is the starting point determining the conditions within the process of production, in the completed painting no individual element is given priority over other elements. The picture is organized in a non-hierarchical manner – an ideal that has also been called for by communication theory for a long time. Yet for the individual viewer the visual intertwining creates a paradoxical ambiguity that constantly swings back and forth: Each element of the given painting simultaneously takes a unique position and is part of the whole, without the rules of interconnection, which the pictorial structure is based upon, following the viewers' previous logic. In the conscious negation of every manner of clarity, the painting yields a precarious balance, freely revolving like a position suspended in midair. Finally, a rotating axis enclosing the space becomes tangible, encompassing both the viewers and the virtual space "behind" the picture.

Charged with elements of the world, the images composed by the artist have no link to the world, other than indeed the fact of being a picture – a picture that if determined in slightly different manner in a second reality would surely be familiar. An astute critic once remarked with regard to the paintings of Martin Conrad that these are representations of an aporetic structure of reality, which is probably meant to say that the paintings, as is the world, are ultimately unexplainable. Drawing upon such an extensive system of references, the traditional but nevertheless universal art form of painting in all of its complexity is hardly dependant upon seeking references to the newest technical games. A brush and layers of color on canvas still render a density of information hardly permitted by other media. Moreover, in the hectic abundance of today's image production a picture painted on canvas achieves something very decisive: It represents a static information in a specific, real place – and yet, in referring to polyvalent spaces, at the same time remains open.

Hajo Schiff

---

Note: Cf. Bernhard Johannes Blume in "Problem Malerei," *Materialien zur Vortragsreihe HfbK Hamburg*, 2000/2001

*Hajo Schiff, Hamburg, curator and art critic at Kunstforum International, taz*

*Text published in catalogue "Martin Conrad. Malerei", Kunstverein Ebersberg 2002*

