

## ***The Division of Color as an Opening of Sensual Revelation.***

Dr. Renate Wiehager\*<sup>1</sup> on Günter Scharein

Before themes, meaning, or the exegesis of artworks, there is color, emanating from the canvas' reactive surface, challenging the beholder to answer with all his or her experience, sensuality, and spirituality, lest the painting refuse to reveal itself. This is especially true for Scharein's three-part or multi-panel "altarpieces": they unfold around a space that is devoid of terms but loaded with atmospheric color, thus leading their beholder back to the cultic origins of art. What Werner Spies once said about the Lyrical Abstractionists of the 1960s also holds true for Günter Scharein: "It may well be that Lyrical Abstractionists like Rothko, more than any other artists before them, have distanced themselves from making artworks on commission or intended for polyvalent use. Not only do they remove any objective indication of reality or interpretation from the artworks, but also demand that the spectator attune himself to the painting adequately, instead of reading into its meaning." (WS, FAZ, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1971).

*"A painting lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the observer."* Mark Rothko's famous imperative can also be useful in explaining the painterly stance of Günter Scharein. He prefers to bring guests and friends –not anonymous spectators or art venue visitors – to his live-in studio, choreographing the emotional and experiential space that arises in the triangle between painting, visitor, and artist. But then, after contemplating and "tuning into" the paintings at a leisurely pace, he also begins to speak with passion and verve, telling his guest about the day-, week-, and month-long procedures through which these paintings arise, about his quasi-scientific analysis of the primary colors red, blue, green, and yellow, the minute placement of point-shaped transitions and adjacencies, and last but not least, the *precise dramaturgy of light*. Scharein's paintings develop slowly – against the backdrop of a world that falls apart into units of information second by second, one almost wants to say tortuously – in color-based cycles that exclude variation proper. Scharein develops his extremely reduced inventory – four colors and point rasters – through nuances in the dramaturgy of light. Thus, light appears as spiritual energy, emanating from the dark of his extensive series of blue paintings, or taking on an emotional meaning in and of itself, as in his current yellow series. It is this rigorous reduction at the heart of Scharein's painting that will strike anyone versed in art history, precisely because it calls so many moments from the chromatic history of European painting to memory.

### ***A Sweeping Art Historical Detour...***

The history of chromatics since the 16th century is a riveting narrative of bitter dispute and ideological positions. Leonardo countered the medieval system of absolute color with the principle of modeling through values of light and dark, creating gradual transitions between color and surface. This mode of modeling color through value was an attack on the law of "primary color entriasis" as a colorist order with a linear definition, as defended by his contemporaries Raphael, Corregio, or Titian.

In answering the demand for the life-like, optical veracity of figures and things, 18<sup>th</sup> century painters concluded that the beholding of paintings does not exhaust itself in identifying objects. Instead, the beholder's gaze is defined and guided by the actual experience of seeing, of "viewing vision itself." Impressionism radicalized this development, using color to dissolve and even to erase the world of things. This dissolution of the object through impressionism soon developed into the dispute between the Cloisonnists and the Pointillists,

---

\*Since 2001 Head of the Daimler Art Collection (Stuttgart) and its exhibition galleries called Daimler Contemporary in Haus Huth in Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.

coming to a headway as what may have been the most embittered clash in the history of color. The argument was no longer about color versus line, nor about color as material versus the veracity of the painting. Instead, it entailed the collision of two competing views of reality, which were now finding their theoretical articulation. For Cloisonism, color represented a *symbolic* reality preceding all appearances as part of the painting's ideal status. The Pointillists, on the other hand, were asking which subjective and physiological abilities allow us to see color in the first place. If the Cloisonists saw the symbolic content of color *behind* the painting, the Pointillists answered with the scientific recognition that the painting is a fact of the human eye. At the same time, the Pointillist raster of Seurat or Signac also reflects the influence of photography, and especially those rough grained, mineral black and white rasters used in the early photographs of William H. Fox Talbot or Charles Nègre.

The impact of the natural sciences on artistic theories and practices around 1880 was massive. American physicist Ogdon Rood's groundbreaking "Students' Text-Book of Color" was translated into French in 1881. The Pointillists picked up one of Rood's theoretical suggestions, namely that a regular distribution of points of color on the picture plane would heighten one another's intensity, coming together in the eye, condensing to an "optical mixture on the retina." A further innovation introduced by the Pointillists was their application of the law of simultaneous contrast, which had been established by the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul. This law says that two adjacent colors will inadvertently affect one another: when perceived at once, they influence one another in terms of value, i.e. in terms of light and dark. Placed together, complementary colors – red and green, orange and blue, yellow and violet – will intensify one another.

The division of color to educate the eye, the use of photographic processes and structures, the use of simultaneous and complementary contrasts, and last but not least the retreat of artistic handwriting behind painterly means and instruments that now articulate nothing but themselves are all aspects that gave painting a new cognitive and scientific basis. This transformation has had a lasting effect well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though Seurat may not have had any direct students, many artists throughout modernity have studied his artistic stance and his method. Seurat's traces can be found in the reduced formalism of the Abstraction-Création Group in Paris, and in several currents of the Bauhaus, such as Feininger's prismatic planar painting or Schlemmer's archaic-austere figures of the human being.

After 1945, an analytical "divisionist" separation of color becomes programmatic once again, defining point- and raster painting in the 1960s (as in Almir Mavignier, Herbert Oehm, Gerhard von Graevenitz). This tradition is still alive today. There are many artists who obsessively cover large canvases with the finest rasters of points or lines, artists like Hafif, Riley, Gonschior, Max Cole, and of course, Günter Scharein.

### ***...and back to our Subject***

In making this detour from Leonardo to Bridget Riley, I have drawn a rather sweeping arc through cultural history. Then again, it is one of the distinctive features of artistic thinking and practice – and, of course, also a characteristic of Scharein's work – that we as beholders are not simply asked to track themes or techniques using psychological dispositions and one-dimensional messages. Still, my approach toward Scharein's work from afar stands in sharp contrast to what, in my opinion, is the most significant text on the painter to date. It was written for the catalogue of Scharein's solo-exhibition in Heidenheim and Berlin by Eberhard Roters, who had been the director of the Berlinische Galerie for many years, and who passed away in 1994.

Roters begins with a critical reconstruction of Scharein's large triptych "Hommage à Master Mathis," detailing its structure and its use of color. This eventually leads him to a precise comparison of Grünewald's altarpiece with the piece at hand. In a sense, this art historical operation reflects the experience any beholder will make: the mere presence of color, the fanaticism for detail, and the deprivation of figurative or formal points of connection are simply overwhelming; they seemingly exclude any space for distanced reflection. One could almost say that the pure intensity of color in these paintings literally disarms any argumentation their beholders might muster.

Scharein was only able reach this spiritually and emotionally loaded use of color as pure magnitude or intensity of radiation after undertaking a great many exercises in the analysis of chromatics and form. Around 1968, even before enrolling to study art education at Hamburg, Saarbrücken and Berlin with the artists Seitz, Holweck and Gecilli, Scharein had already found his point of departure, developing a rigorously serial concept of painting reduced to the contrast between black and white.

In doing so, he was able to draw upon a number of models, including the concrete art of the 1940s, the early Vasarely of the 1950s, the representatives of the international ZERO movement around 1960, as well as op art, which emerged a little later on. In these early pieces, Scharein varies the square as a basic module, setting it into optical motion by displacing its black-white contrasts or modifying its plasticity. In the following years, the increasingly dramatic use of these modular squares takes on a life of its own in ornamental-baroque relief-paintings, which the artist then abandons, realizing that they held little cognitive value in store.

The raster structure of the photographic image had a very substantial impact on Pointillism's orientation toward the act of seeing, understood as the formation of an image on the retina. Scharein subjects the technique of silk screen to an endurance test: how far can one take a picture's 'divisionist' diffraction without letting go of the raster point's consonance in an overall hue?

Scharein does not use the silk screen to produce editions of graphic prints; instead, he makes unique pieces (technically classified as "oil on soft fiberboard"). With an alchemist's thoroughness and over hundreds of printings, he atomizes the solidity of color. Scharein is already fully conscious as an artist and has reached the high point of an analytical mannerism characteristic for his early work. He now develops a technique of using horizontal and vertical stripes, subjecting them to minute control. This technique interweaves the primary colors yellow, red, green, and blue to a dense picture plane that can no longer be torn apart. From afar, the beholder is fascinated by a chromatic movement that rises and falls rhythmically, the result of a perplexing microstructure of thousands of thinner or thicker lines of color. At the same time, however, seen at an even greater distance, they seduce the imagination. One begins to read into them, discerning figures and contents in associations like corporeal amplitudes, rising fog banks of color, flurried lattices of light, or the tessellated traces of musical vibrations. One can see that these works do not exclude such associations, since they bear titles such as "Tower of Babylon," "Family Portrait," or "Feininger's Cathedral." In the last piece, a painting from 1978, one can discern the contours of the Bauhaus maitre's glassy, prismatic architectures shining through a gradient of stripes from green via red to yellow.

### ***Paintings: Spheres of Spirituality and Art Historical References***

In the same year of 1978, Scharein changes over from the technique of silk screen, which retains a planar orientation despite all its nuances, to painting with a brush (the results are technically classified as "oil on polystyrene board"), embarking upon a qualitatively new exploration of color's spatial depth.

At first, he carries over the linear technique of his silk screens into painterly means, constructing his canvases along grids of alternating horizontal or vertical lines. One unified series of paintings from around 1985 develops out of the complementary contrast between red and blue, using the nearly kinetic interweave of these colors to unleash an abstract, thunderous Bengal light. In these paintings, red can spread across the painting's quadrangle in a body-like spotlight, coming from somewhere and losing itself in the dark blue of outer space, as a figure for yearning and harmony ("Innerred-Crouching," 1986). But it can also shimmer through one of the dominant blue stripes as an afterglow, emanating from an imaginary place under the earth, now no more than extinguished chromatic energy ("Incandescent Red," 1985).

In parallel, Scharein begins to work on paintings conceived as monochromes, in which a raster of points replaces the older linear technique. As in the process of silk screen printing, the picture takes shape in the superimposition of several point-formed color gradients. Each of these gradients is composed of many hundreds of individual hues and thousands of points. In the painting "Reclining Blue," for example, cobalt blue defines the general coloring, which is set into floating motion as a color form through mixtures toward cerulean blue and heliotrope. The "First Attempt at an Alterpiece" (1979/81-82) is tuned to the basic tone of a blackish, deep blue indigo, providing the prelude to an extended series of triptychs. Rich in sacral connotations, this tripartite horizontal format finds its predecessors in two silk screen boards of 1978, namely "Duktus Cross" and "Blue Cross." In both pieces, the cruciform shape shimmers through, lacking strict contours. It is obviously not a rational conception, but is similar to an afterimage on the retina, which the beholder can only recall by applying a maximum of meditative concentration. Made in parallel to the first altarpiece, the triptych "Resurrection Symphony, 4<sup>th</sup> Movement: Very Ceremonial, but Plain" (1979/81) requires a similar attitude on the part of its beholder, though the object of memory is auditory rather than visual. The diptych "Cross and Shadows of the Past" (1982) guides the imagination toward the concurrence of a nuclear strike and the final afterglow of sacral symbolism.

Characterized by an almost scientific thoroughness, Scharein's color studies of the mid-1980s are loaded with spirituality, not only through their titles, but also through their echoes of religious motifs. They culminate in 1985 with the triptych "Hommage à Master Mathis," which the artist reworked over the space of two years. Using the swell and ebb of abstract chromatic movement, Scharein's painting reconstructs Grünewald's Isenheim Altar, which conveys its dramatic image-events in expressive color symbolism. The spheric abstraction and painterly density of this themes find a further high point in "Master Mathis" (1989), which is tuned to the triad of red, blue, and yellow. Further significant examples in this context can be found in the blue monochrome "Crossbeam" (1983), which is connected to Caspar David Friedrich's intimate-monumental "Cross in the Mountains," and in the silk screen "Great Rousseau" (1981), which is reduced to gradients of green. This piece is a meditation of the naïve paintings of the French artist Henri Rousseau, whose jungle fantasies used up to 50 shades of green.

Yellow makes its first appearance as a color with its own value in two versions of "Master Mathis," painted in 1985 and 1989. Scharein has been applying his accumulated painterly experience to this challenge since the mid-1990s. He allows various tones of yellow to play into blackish shadows; they culminate in sunny orange or lose themselves in fringes that tend to white. Scharein defines yellow as a "color of fear," because high yellow paints are extremely unforgiving when shaded or tinted. "Symphony in Yellow" is the largest piece that the artist has made to date, measuring 202 x 750 cm, and extending over five panels. Scharein speaks of a "musical symphony," which usually consists of three to five movements. "My 'Symphony in Yellow' emerged from three large movements: worldly, floating, rising, connected by two small intermezzi. The concentrated energy of the yellow light is meant to be

perceived on an almost physical level, while its visual qualities are supposed to call forth associations and emotions in the beholder.”

From the early 1990s until today, Scharein has been working with the theme of the “altarpiece” in large format chromatic etudes. Their light force radiates into the space of the beholder from deep blue nocturnes to sunny yellows, loaded with melancholia. The rigor and endurance of these paintings moves Scharein’s work into the proximity of the monumental and spiritual intentions of the monochromatic concepts of painting by artists like Rothko, Barnett Newman, or Ad Reinhard. Reinhard appeals to “ecumenical seeing” through variations of black darkness in the strict format of the square. Barnett Newman, on the other hand, had articulated his idea of the sublime through verticals that cut through the picture, opening the wide planar geometry of the painting like narrow gates for the incursion of divine light. “The picture that we manage to create,” says Newman, “is a self-explanatory revelation; it is real and concrete.”

### ***Vermeer’s Pearls and the Creation of the Universe from One Point***

If I search my memory of pictures for the most beautiful moments in European painting, then the reflexes in Vermeer are one of the early high points in the liberation of color. The rooms Vermeer painted are already filled with a light that contains color, a blue or green that seems to emanate from the local color of things, condensing in a colorist chiaroscuro. These local colors themselves become light values again when their materiality is resolved into iridescent bodies of color, composed on point-size reflexes. Such “Pointillist” pearls of light can be found on jewellery shining white or silvery grey, on blue majolica, or yellow velvet. They read like distant salutes to the reductionists among the color theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From Vermeer’s light points, around which the secrets of European painting can condense, my imagination carries me on to the unbelievable fact that the universe developed from one single point. “Who will really be able to image,” as the Munich astrophysicist Wolfgang Lersch puts it nonchalantly, “what the universe looked like in the moments after the big bang? It was extremely small; astrophysicists cite a size of  $10^{-33}$  cm, it was extremely hot at  $10^{32}$  degrees Kelvin, and it was unimaginably dense. To make matters worse, this hot stage only lasted for a very short time. One speaks of  $10^{-44}$  seconds. This is something that the human imagination simply can’t deal with.” (SWR2, Aula, 15.1.2006).

Much has been said and written on the associative spectrum of Scharein’s paintings, which fuel the exponential and emotional power of interpretation in the beholder. I would locate it in this greatest possible space, somewhere between Vermeer’s painted points of light and the point of the world’s creation, which precedes all contemplation.