

Un / framed space – Elisabeth Sonneck & Dittmar Danner aka Krüger

29.1. – 6.3.2021

Inviting two artists to stage an exhibition together is always a gamble, especially if they do not know each other beforehand. But it is also an exciting challenge for all sides. It starts with joint visits to studios and getting to know each other's work and the associative thinking of both artists and of the gallery owner/curator with regard to the upcoming exhibition.

By painting on rolled paper webs, Elisabeth Sonneck, well-known for some time for her highly sensitive and diversified abstract works, has been spatially expanding her focus into sculpture and installation since 2006, if not before, with her own body setting the parameters. She calls this kind of work "site-specific painting".

For her *roll paintings*, the production process already has the quality of an installation, one could even say of a non-public performance, because it takes an immense physical effort for her to artistically process the paper webs up to 10 m long and 110 cm wide. She stands over the paper web with her legs splayed, bending over it to guide the wide brush in even strokes from left to right. The layering of the numerous superimposed glazing layers of paint yields the cumulative colour (e.g. a blue), which is composed of different shades (of blue) and diverges locally. A whole spectrum of delicate colour nuances opens up.

The line where the brush comes to rest can be read as a deciphering/encoding strip that materialises the history of the creative process, thus documenting the character of the work in progress while also defining time as an important component of the picture. It also functions like a spectrometer that makes the layering plausible and sometimes reveals a fascinating interplay of contrasting colours. The conscious decision to use long brushstrokes up to the maximum physical reach creates an increasingly transparent colour gradient starting with high saturation, becoming increasingly thinner until almost only graphic traces of paint remain. The visual 'stop', i.e. the brush's stopping point, creates a pictorial tension of its own, interpretable as the final chord. Painting becomes music.

The *roll pictures* could be paintings in their own right, but they serve as material for what the artist calls her site-specific painting. Its localisation is precisely oriented to the geometry and specific conditions of the space, to its corners, edges and proportions, and also to such marginal features as ceiling hooks, projections etc., and unites the painting/colour with the framework of the existing space. *With these congruities between space and work, I seek, says the artist, to merge the space with the imported painting, found objects etc., into an overall situation.*

Her *clipages* consist of several sheets of painted paper joined together as well as photocopies of the painting, which are mainly held together with the aid of foldback clips. Sonneck knows her material and how to gauge the paper's tension and use it as a sculptural element.

After decades of preoccupation with painting in the exciting field of his built spatial and colour bodies, Dittmar Danner aka Krüger, gallery artist since the founding of Semjon Contemporary in 2011, has again been applying his years of experience to the flat rectangle of the canvas as of 2017. In doing so he has created for himself a new field of activity (actually familiar from his studies) – classical painting on canvas – with the provocative series title *It's not dark yet*. He has also lent outward form to this radical change by giving himself a new name, Dittmar Danner aka Krüger (from the previous Dittmar Krüger).

The three-dimensional colour boxes have now been metaphorically translated onto the two-dimensional canvas as painted frames – mostly rectangular, occasionally also square. The result is a framework structure that, constantly changing, opens up the pictorial space, sometimes towards the interior, sometimes towards the frame, and also closes it off. What is frame, what is the space behind it? Which surface is in the foreground, and which in the background? The paintings play with our own perception in a variety of ways. As a painter, Dittmar Danner aka Krüger is a master of the colour palette and is capable of transporting us into worlds and spaces of colour that on the one hand seem familiar – when he combines certain colours that remind us of the colours of the German flag, for example – or else subjects himself and us as well to a confusing, almost psychedelic experiment, so that we run the risk of losing our bearings. The contrast of meticulously filled colour fields, alternating with watercolour-like applications seemingly wafted on in passing – free at least from the dictates of painting surfaces 'properly' – introduces tension into the pictorial structure and results in a stream of new discoveries. When the artist applies gold tones or adds tactile pearlescent colour glazes, the spatial element is heightened in a physical and also mental sense. Since time immemorial, gold has stood for the divine, for infinite celestial space, while mother-of-pearl carries within itself a diaphanous quality that deceives the eye in terms of colour depth. How far does the colour space open up towards the rear? How deeply does the light penetrate?

When the artistic artefacts of the two painters now come together, the work can – that at least is my aim – cross-fertilise each other in their physical interaction, and also in the perceptual and mental senses.

The thoughtfully conceived arrangement of the works in the gallery rooms yields an exciting stroll that gives the individual painting or sculptural picture enough space to generate its own effect, but also to enter into a dialogue with the other artist's work.

In the main room of the gallery, the 240 x 180 cm painting *It's not dark yet M-50-2020* by Dittmar Danner aka Krüger, a picture comprising almost 30 coloured fields, painted in proportion to the canvas rectangle as a multi-nested framework, rests majestically in itself. The shades of blue and yellow in various degrees of brightness create a cheerful and friendly atmosphere, very welcome in this period of COVID gloom. The picture creates an indefinable depth of space, causing us to wonder which frame is in front of or behind which frame, and which frame encloses the (deep, underlying) colour space: *un / framed space*. Coupled with this powerful painting, Elisabeth Sonneck has placed a four-part painting installation in the opposite half of the room, counteracting the apparent stoicism of her fellow artist's canvas and articulating a lively and multifaceted contrast.

The arrangement is so finely balanced that any shifting of the structural coordinates, such as the heavy steel straps or the spirit level, would cause everything to fall out of plumb and collapse. The point of physical balance of all the parts of a work of art (without the use of screws or other aids) creates an idiosyncratic tension suggesting the destruction of the work of art at any time: The paintings on glassine have become an artistic material that asserts itself in the competition and interplay between the other components and form them into a whole. Metaphorically speaking, the subject of balance becomes the artwork's *raison d'être*.

In the gallery's exhibition storeroom, which serves as a corridor to the gallery's second axis, smaller canvases by both artists are hanging in a loose arrangement. Here, the difference between the two painters becomes apparent, even though both are committed to abstraction and open up the pictorial spaces with their distinctive painting methods. In Sonneck's work, the painting is dominated by the application of paint with a 12 cm wide brush. The resulting (colour) surfaces in relation to each other in an overall composition allow vast compositional freedom. Each brushstroke contains exciting details, such as the 'stops' described above, which decode the individual colours of the layers, but at the same time become a shaping element within the interplay of the bands of paint.

Dittmar Danner aka Krüger shows us that although the principle behind a picture's composition may always seem the same, i.e. that the nested frames progressively reduce and reiterate the proportions of the canvas shape on the painted surface, the finished painting can be of a very different nature. Sometimes austere or casual, sometimes with consonant or dissonant colours (yet still finding the visual golden (colour) ratio!), sometimes cheerful and sometimes serious. Sometimes the frames occupy centre stage; sometimes the picture is dominated by the relationship between the central colour surface and the frames.

The second room facing the street, called the Strassen-Salon or 'street salon', seems almost empty at first glance. A vertical *roll painting* by Sonneck is suspended from a colour-contrasting neon green nylon cord strung in space across the old gas lamp hooks. Opposite it hangs a medium-sized canvas work by Danner aka Krüger. Only on approaching the shop window does one become aware of the large *roll painting*, which has been precisely fitted diagonally on the floor in the front part of the room. Consisting of two long webs of painted paper laid one on top of the other, it appears in the main shades of dark blue and mauve and is a reference to Danner aka Krüger's mauve, purple and gold-coloured canvas. With the aid of the white of its reverse and the right white edge (where the 'stops' are), the upper paper web, rolled up on both sides, rhythmically breaks up the earthen heaviness of the dark blue and mauve, and the heavy steel straps that fix the asymmetrical curling of the upper paper web visually lead this work dynamically back towards the corner of the room. The diagonal position of this roll painting prompts the gaze to wander to the fellow artist's canvas. It's "Catholic", almost episcopal colours (purple and gold) emanate dignity. In terms of formal aesthetics, the fellow artist's floor roll painting could be interpreted by free association as a proscenium to it.

At the very front right, immediately in front of the door to the street, Sonneck has set up a small installation consisting of a tilted table, a chipboard panel with remains of sprayed

paint, an oval porcelain bowl with a steep collar-type edge and the charred piece of wood it contains (all found objects). Only on closer and careful inspection does one appreciate that this configuration is a work of art that is perfectly poised but on the verge of collapse. The porcelain bowl broken in two reinforces the element of the casual, temporary and unstable. Only at third glance does one realise that also integrated are two paintings on paper that discreetly and almost invisibly subvert and question their own presence in a tongue-in-cheek gesture. The painting becomes the lower-order material for a new higher-order work of art.

When visually exiting and also entering the gallery, a small sculpture by Sonneck entitled *Hommage à Nouvelles et Textes pour rien 20-11.2* can be found in the entrance area of the main room. It consists of a tilted Erlenmeyer flask stand, which is held in balance by an oblique wooden mixing stick with remnants of dried paint and sandwiched between two pieces of painted paper laid one on top of the other. The painting, consisting of two multi-layered glazed brushstrokes on watercolour board, can be interpreted as a display card. Part of the title may refer to it ...*Textes pour rien*. From a purely pictorial point of view, it could be regarded as a text field. In this very peculiar COVID-19 period, it might say: *A warm welcome to the exhibition (without an audience)*.

The exhibition extends beyond the "framework" of the gallery: two of its five rooms are visible, while the others are reserved for digital dissemination via a 3D tour and the exhibition portfolio (links to these are published on the gallery homepage). An analogue desideratum, a catalogue brochure, will be published, kindly sponsored by the Federal Government in connection with the NEUSTART KULTUR COVID-19 aid programme.

un / framed space: An exhibition title is lent additional meaning by the new reality. The artworks themselves, which in terms of content define the "framework" or "context" and at the same time break out of it, both acting in unison and against each other, framing spaces and at the same time annulling them and forming them anew, are framed and reset by a new kind of reception: with analog viewing at a distance via the shop windows and digitally in a new framework or context, in new virtual spaces.

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