

ROMAIN LÖSER

The logistically exalted

Alexander Klose on Romain Löser's exhibition "Under a single commodity mode" "De nos jours, l'emplacement se substitue à l'étendue (...)"¹. Michel Foucault

There was once a time when abstraction was regarded as the embodiment of artistic liberation from indoctrination by ideology, religion or history. The ideal path to abstraction was the avoidance of any claim to naturalistic or figurative representation, and a reduction to geometric forms and unmixed colours. Malevitch, de Stijl, Mondrian, Bauhaus. The dominance of the grid.

The aesthetic revolution of Classical Modernism regarded itself as a holistic, material, intellectual and spiritual movement although it was radically reductive and gave the impression of being technologically oriented, and although it deliberately went against any type of ornamental referral back to nature and was focussed instead on the industrial age, it made a claim to represent a reformation of all areas of life. According to Rosalind Krauss, abstraction drew its expressive strength primarily from the 'mythical power of the grid': "[I]t makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (...) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (...). Therefore (...) the grid is (...) a structure (...) that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed"².

The abstract or concrete painting of the avant-gardists before and after the Second World War initiated a return to a transcendental, metaphysical dimension in or behind the surface – as it last existed in the history of European art in the gold-leaf period in the Middle Ages³ – at the same time as this movement's objectivising shift in favour of the material.

World of operationality

Romain Löser's paintings clearly make reference to colour field painting and minimalism. One visitor to his studio and one of the first critics to see these works said to him: "You are dollhousing minimal art". With this comment, the critic was suggesting an ironic or subversive manner of dealing with the heritage of art history. However, the formal qualities of his paintings tap primarily into very different sources, namely the functionalistic world of logistics: Romain Löser takes the colours, dimensions and proportions of his colour fields directly from the stackable plastic transport boxes that are familiar from the storage areas in super- markets. He is motivated by his unease at the technocratic and bureaucratic force of standardisation and the specifically modern constraints that this standardisation gives rise to. If there is one area where the modernist doctrine of form follows function has been systematically implemented, then it is here: in the world of pure operationality.

Standardised containers – from steel containers and plastic boxes, right through to product

¹ Michel Foucault. Des espaces autres (1967), Hétérotopies. Michel Foucault, Dits et écrits 1984, Des espaces autres (conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales, 14 mars 1967), in Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité, n°5, octobre 1984, pp. 46-49.

² Rosalind Krauss E., "Grids", in: October, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), p. 50-64; p. 52-54.

³ Cf. on the function of the use of gold leaf in religious painting in the Middle Ages: Belting, Hans, Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst, Munich 1993, and Schöne, Wolfgang, Über das Licht in der Malerei, Berlin 1954.

packaging – are both agents and symptoms of this socio-technological interdependency. Functional images such as a diagram of a packing plan or stacking instructions for the optimal use of space and material flows are more evident in Löser's paintings than the art-historical references that also suggest themselves.

What happens when these images from the area of logistics are experimentally superimposed with retro- grade effect on the art-historical incunabula of geometric abstraction?

“Abstract, aesthetic consideration is a tool that allows humans to consciously connect with the universal”⁴, proclaimed Piet Mondrian shortly after the end of the First World War. However, that which contemporaries of all political persuasions in the periods between the wars and after the Second World War plausibly presented as an artistic search for a better society and a new human today appears just as much to be the accompanying cheerleading for a general societal development where objectivised, technologised and bureaucratised – or in short: standardised – bases for reality have become dominant. It is a small jump from Le Corbusier's ideas or the Bauhaus educational philosophy, which was developed around the same time, to Ernst Neufert's book *Bauentwurfslehre*, which was first published in 1936 and has since been updated numerous times and translated into many languages; this book is a key work in the specification of standardised dimensions in architecture for every imaginable human and functional interaction.

The first industrial standard to be successfully implemented in Germany dates back to 1915 and covered the 08/15 machine gun, which consisted entirely of replaceable parts. Indeed, the phrase '08/15' has entered into common use in German and refers to anything that is nondescript and interchangeable – in other words: standard.⁵

In 1917 the Standardisation Committee of German Industry was founded, which was a precursor of DIN, the German Institute for Standardisation. This committee defined the A-series sizes for paper back in 1922, and these are still in common use today. In 1927, the National Board for Delivery Conditions (RAL) published its first colour chart. This chart in updated and expanded versions serves as an industrial standard that is recognised worldwide for the creation and distribution of colours through to the present day.

Critical transcendentalism

In his colour fields, Romain Löser does not directly use the RAL colours that are employed as coatings for the industrial boxes used in logistics; instead, he repeatedly applies layers of watercolour paints in the corresponding RAL colour tones until the right colour saturation level has been achieved. The result is a dimension of depth that goes beyond the aesthetic framework of the context of logistical material flows. What emerges is a transcendental quality in the colours that refers back to the original spiritual impulses of geometric abstraction and colour field painting. In contrast with these origins, however, Löser's paintings do not evoke any quasi-religious qualities or higher being; instead, the transcendental universal that is expressed in/behind the grid here is the basic logistical order of modern society, which emerged over the course of the last century and was orchestrated and developed into an aesthetic philosophy by the artistic avant-garde. With a remarkably stubborn ability to deny reality, this movement long refused to acknowledge the mundane foundations of its work.

Romain Löser's critical continuation of this movement's iconography deals with precisely this denial, and it shifts grids and colour fields away from willing religiosity and places them on a socio-technologically standardised foundation.

⁴ Piet Mondrian, *Natural and Abstract Reality: An Essay in Triologue Form*, New York 1995.

⁵ Cf. Peter Berz, *08/15 – Ein Standard des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2001.