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You have to want to see!ⁱ

On the subject of *II-15 (red)* and *Cyclorama (2000)* by Sanford Wurmfeld

Sanford Wurmfeld's paintings relate to a phenomenon that can only be understood by direct viewing: making it possible to experience colour and light as a manifestation in space, as an immaterial quality. Wurmfeld's paintings enable you to have a purely visual experience of colour. They generate colour in a form that can otherwise only be experienced as a natural phenomenon, such as the blue of a cloudless sky.

Like all Wurmfeld's paintings, *II-15 (red)*, painted in 1998, confronts the observer like a technical high-end product. No wonder, really, because the picture really is technically constructed. Moreover, it is one of a four-part series of identically constructed pictures, which differ only with regard to the colours used in each. The surface of the painting (measuring about 1 x 2 meters each) is divided by two grids placed one above the other, creating 2 x 80 columns or 2 x 40 rows of elements of varying sizes. The size of the individual elements is determined by the division of the basic square form into 21 sections, resulting in 20 steps of progressively increasing or decreasing sequences inversely related to one another: Two of each of the elements lying side by side or top to bottom are together the same size as the basic square form. Consequently, 2 x 20 rows and 2 x 20 columns each form a square. The painting can therefore also be construed as a combination of 2 x 4 larger square fields, within which elements of increasing or decreasing size form inverse, sequential progressions.

The artist introduces pre-mixed colours into this dynamic matrix of a total of 12,800 individual elements. In the process, he attaches particular importance to the completely even and smooth—if you like, "technical"—application of the paint. He also follows a precise plan: the picture is constructed with fifteen different hues of the same valueⁱⁱ from the red-orange to the red-purple segment of the colour circle, and displays purple and blue as well as orange and yellow hues, in addition to the shades of red. However, they do not appear as saturated colour tones like the red tones on the left-hand side of the picture. Instead, they are laid out in a four-stage progression over the entire width of the picture and mixed with grey; thus they are also arranged as a chromatic tonal progression. Three adjoining colours with the same chromatic value are inserted into each of two fields placed top to bottom, to produce continuously changing simultaneous contrasts within the inverse progression from basic form to basic form described above.

Seen as a whole, therefore, on the one hand, the factual picture contentⁱⁱⁱ of *II-15 (red)*, is a hue progression both vertically and horizontally, and on the other—horizontally, too—a progression of chromatic hues on the left-hand side of the picture right up to almost achromatic colours on the right-hand side of the picture. However, if you consider the individual fields or columns and rows in the picture, the inverse relationship between the size and colour of individual elements of the picture allows you to observe the phenomenon of the interaction of colour as colour and form assimilation. The hues are selected to prevent sharp contrasts or a blend in total optical mixture. The construction of the picture thus turns out to be a complex balance of all the possible aspects of colour: hue, value, chroma, but one which is designed so that the red tones dominate the picture—just as in the other pictures, blue, green and yellow dominate in a similar way.

This by no means exhaustive description of the picture, however, does not reveal much about the effect of the painting—which, moreover, fundamentally eludes any possible

method of reproduction. For when you observe the picture for a time—and this time must be given to the picture as another structural factor of its composition—an effect occurs which can only be experienced while directly observing the painting: the experience of a multi-coloured surface detached from the surface of the picture, floating in front of it and, therefore, precisely what colour theorist David Katz called *Flächenfarbe* and later, in English, *film colour*.

Katz defines film colour as colour that appears as a loosely structured or diaphanous, two-dimensional and front parallel surface in space, without any reference to a surface, form, object or volume.^{iv} It is a colour that cannot be painted, the way surface colours can, but it can be produced by painting. It occurs solely as a manifestation and exists only as a perceptive phenomenon. Natural examples of film colour include the colours of the spectrum, like a blue sky or the grey you see with your eyes closed. It is depicted as the so-called aerial perspective in Renaissance art or the paintings of Claude Lorrain, for example, and it is deliberately used as a central theme in the paintings of William Turner or the "American Luminists." The production of film colour, however, was a specific objective of the Pointillists, especially in the scientifically based painting of Georges Seurat. As far as he was concerned, the main thing was "through painting, to make one see the empirical world actually in terms of this kind of seeing, that is, to develop a way of painting that when viewed comes as close as possible to a viewing of reality."^v Seurat was, therefore, not interested in representing a reality already seen, but in using the picture to evoke the act of perception that reality causes in the eye.^{vi} This could only be achieved, "if (he succeeded) in reproducing not the body colours, but the effect of light on the eye."^{vii} In Seurat's case, therefore, there is an extreme discrepancy between the content of the picture—the canvas covered with paint—and the picture. To use a well-known phrase, what you see is not what you see; and this contradiction is not resolved in a representational picture until a certain viewing distance is achieved. Because Seurat realized his painting solely in terms of "recognizing" or objective seeing, the film colour that his paintings actually enable you to experience was mostly not perceived as such. Instead it appears to be merely a kind of special effect that the conventional viewer usually passes over in favour of objective viewing—that is, to interpret the reality objectively "represented" in the pictures—and construes as surface colours.

Seurat's work is mentioned here, because his scientifically based way of painting is one of the points of departure for Wurmfeld's art that—seen from this perspective—you can understand as a systematization and radicalization of Pointillism. Nevertheless, Wurmfeld's paintings do not have any objective reference, nor can they be classified with abstract art, such as Mondrian's. Wurmfeld's conception of a picture is quite clearly rooted in the tradition of non-representational art of an American stamp, but through the reflection of Luminist painting and intensive study of the theory of colour, he gives it a new twist. Following Susanne K. Langer's terminology,^{viii} the artist calls it *Presentational Painting*, referring chiefly to its non-discursive character.^{ix}

Wurmfeld's painting *II-15 (red)* thus proves to be an artistic construction designed to produce a colour picture that appears in the way of film colour, and is not the same thing as what the painting is in the sense of the factual picture qualities or picture subject described above. Wurmfeld's picture is concrete, abstract art in which the dichotomy between subject and picture that normally occurs only in figurative art, and thus the qualitative leap from material subject to an intelligible picture, is expressed within the context of the concept of concrete art.

With *II-5 (red)* what you see is what you see, and at the same time, what you see is not what you see. For in Wurmfeld's painting the experience of film colour does not occur automatically, as an involuntary function of the perceptive faculty,^x instead it depends on the willingness of the observer to get involved with the picture and to give it (and himself)

time. In alternation of the successive perception of individual elements of the picture and the simultaneous perception of them as parts of the picture as a whole, the picture causes a constantly changing eye movement. It is caused by film colour and surface colour in turn, that is, alternately by the immaterial colour phenomenon evoked by the totality of the picture, and the interaction of surface colours in individual fields of the picture or by the progressions of colour tone in individual rows or columns.

The special quality of Wurmfeld's paintings, however, is that they do not relate to the dichotomy between subject and picture in terms of "recognizing" or concrete seeing,^{xi}. Instead, they make it possible to experience it as a dichotomy for "autonomous" seeing, as a dichotomy between two different manifestations of colour^{xii}. The pictures thus give the viewer a new, as it were, emancipated role. By being not only simply the recipient of an existing picture, but also the producer of a picture that exists only in his visualization, he can experience himself as both a viewer and observer of himself.^{xiii}

What has been observed for *II-15 (red)* also applies in particular to Wurmfeld's *Cyclorama*, a circular painting with a height of about 2.30 metres and a diameter of about 9 metres that, just like a panorama painting, is reached via a staircase to the middle of the room that houses it and can be observed from a platform that reaches right up to the canvas itself. Constructed in a similar way to the pictures of the *II-15* series, *Cyclorama* shows a horizontal progression of 24 hues that form a self-contained progression through the colour circle. Unlike the picture described, in *Cyclorama* the individual hues are combined with tints or shades, giving 2x24 further hues, to produce a vertical progression from darker values at the bottom to lighter values at the top. The effect of this line-up is, however, that the observer is confronted by an intensely luminous surface, even in the deepest shades of blue, which envelops him and makes colour a primary experience.

In *Cyclorama*, Wurmfeld makes reference to the panorama paintings of the 19th century, although in contrast, *Cyclorama* is not conceived as a means of illusion. On the contrary, in fact, *Cyclorama* is a means of evoking and allowing you to experience one aspect of reality, the reality of coloured light through film colour. *Cyclorama* uses the form of the circular painting and the idea of a painting completely concentrated on the viewer, in order to free the experience of film colour from any accidental quality and to make it possible to experience it in a substantial sense. As a circular painting, as a painting without any beginning or end, and as a painting with a consistent structure throughout, *Cyclorama* makes it possible to have a total, as it were, absolute experience of colour. In *Cyclorama*, colour is established as an autonomous part of reality, so we are not dealing with a *virtual reality*, but with a *real reality*.

It is not easy to estimate the significance of such a painting. At any rate, with *Cyclorama*, Wurmfeld has not only succeeded in meeting Robert Delaunay's requirement of creating a concrete *forme en mouvement, statique – et dynamique*; he also makes it possible to experience the *simultanéité rythmique* Delaunay strove for in terms of film colour; that is, as an immaterial phenomenon that exists only through seeing. By establishing and developing the entire colour cosmos in a closed system, in which the observer can move freely, Wurmfeld's *Cyclorama* actually goes much further: the picture prompts the question anew of whether concrete art cannot after all show and create in the eye of the beholder a "picture" of the *mouvement vital du monde* (Delaunay).

ⁱ "Cherchons à voir" Robert Delaunay, *La Lumière* (1912), as translated by Paul Klee in: *Der Sturm* 3, (Berlin 1913), No. 144-5, p. 10, quoted by Gustav Vriesen, Max Imdahl, *Robert Delaunay, Licht und Farbe*, (Cologne, 1967) p. 10.

ⁱⁱ I refer here to the terminology of Munsell's *color space*, on which the selection of colours in the picture is based. The translation of the terms follows the suggestions in Narciso Silvestrini, *IdeeFarbe. Farbsysteme in Kunst und Wissenschaft* (Zurich 1994) 70pp.

ⁱⁱⁱ I.e., as “factual fact” as defined by Josef Albers

^{iv} Loc. cit. Katz, 12pp

^v Max Imdahl, *Farbe. Kunsttheoretische Reflexionen in Frankreich* (Munich 1987), p. 126.

^{vi} Contemporary critic George Moore, in *Modern Painting*, quoted by W.I. Homer, *Seurat and the Science of Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964) pp 159, described the most important theoretical prerequisites of Pointillism as follows: “A tone is a combination of colors. In Nature, colors are separate; they act and react one on the other, and so create in the eye the illusion of a mixture of various colors – in other words of a tone. But if the human eye can perform this prodigy when looking on color as evolved through the spectacle of the world, why should not the eye be able to perform the same prodigy when looking on color as displayed over the surface of the canvas? Nature does not mix her colors to produce a tone; and the reason of the marked discrepancy existing between Nature and the Louvre is owing to the fact that painters have hitherto deemed it a necessity to prepare a tone on the palette before placing it on the canvas; whereas it is quite clear that the only logical and reasonable method is to first complete the analysis of the tone, and then to place the colors which compose the tone in dots over the canvas... If this be done truly – that is to say, if the first analysis of the tones be a correct analysis – and if the spectator places himself at the right distance from the picture, there will happen in his eyes exactly the same blending of color as happens in them when they are looking upon Nature.”

^{vii} H. von Helmholtz, *Über das Sehen des Menschen* (1855), in *Vorträge und Reden*, Braunschweig, 1896, Vol. II, p. 114, quoted by Imdahl, loc. cit. p. 127. What von Helmholtz refers to here as body colours are surface colours in Katz’ terminology.

^{viii} Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), Cambridge, Mass., 1979, pp79

^{ix} Sanford Wurmfeld, *Presentational Painting*, in *Presentational Painting*, exhibition catalogue, New York 1993.

^x This demonstrates the most important difference between Optical Art and Wurmfeld’s art.

^{xi} On the distinction between recognizing and seeing, see Max Imdahl, *Cézanne – Braque – Picasso. Zum Verhältnis zwischen Bildautonomie und Gegenstandssehen* (1974), in Max Imdahl, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ed. Gottfried Böhm, Frankfurt 1996, 303pp.

^{xii} In accordance with Joseph Albers, you could actually speak here of a to and fro between actual fact and factual fact. Cf. Imdahl, loc. cit. p. 151.

^{xiii} Here lies the great difference between Wurmfeld’s work and James Turrell’s installations that also expose film colours. In Turrell’s case, the observer is exposed to the colour phenomenon like to a film at the cinema; he is not given a chance to reflect his experience with the picture.

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