

## **PETER WEIBEL : VISUALITY IN CONTEXT – PAINTING IN THE EXPANDED FIELD OF ONA B.**

### **I. (Sites of Visuality)**

Modern abstraction accentuates the surface, the two-dimensionality of the gaze by banishing the figurative, the representation of the external world and bringing out the autonomous play of colors and forms. At the same time, it refers to a third dimension, the space on the surface of the painting which itself has become an object through its illusionless, two-dimensional flatness and through the frame and the canvas. Modern abstraction ventures out into the space in a variety of ways. The monochrome painting is becoming increasingly larger. Color conquers the space. The surface occupied by color is becoming increasingly larger. In the process, the picture has developed from a wall painting into a painting wall by way of color field painting. Monochromy also reinforced the object character of the picture. Enormous monochrome paintings, perhaps not just consisting of canvas and color, but also of other materials such as tin sheet, jute seem to be bodies of color, like colored objects. Once the picture has become a three dimensional object, each painting object can become a picture. The picture becomes empty in the conquest of the space through colour and yields to the painting as an object. Modern abstraction basically revolves around the space, which lies somewhere between the second and third dimension. "One sees something that retreats and something that pushes forward." (Frank Stella )

Ona B.'s painting was, in its first phase, situated precisely within this tradition of modern abstraction, which addressed the relationship of painting and space and object. There are many texts which describe the "spatial desire" and the "transcendence of geometry" in her painting. Within this tradition of modern abstraction, of spatial painting, Ona B. has developed specific visual strategies to liberate painting from the confines of the surface. She expands abstract monochrome painting by placing the picture deliberately and conspicuously within the context of space and object. She is not interested in the picture as a wall object. Given the fact that the picture usually intervenes in an existing architectural situation, integrating or opposing, for instance, existing Windows, niches, mirrors, oriels, portals, doors, the picture became recognizable as a part of the space. The space became a picture, the picture the space. Between the picture and the room a formal continuum emerged, which was only interrupted by the color zone of the picture. The picture which can be adjusted in terms of spatial structures becomes a painted space. In this sense, however, the surface of the wall threatens the spatiality of the picture. The response to the process of retreat must be a process of moving forward, if the new definition of the picture consists in stating : "One sees something that retreats and something that pushes forward." (F.Stella) This movement forward takes place when real objects are placed in front of the picture - objects containing sculptural elements and relating semantically to the easel painting. The easel painting itself is modulated chromatically so that it reinforces this process of retreat and advance by means of de- and increasing density of its color zones. The easel paintings create color spaces in this way.

In the first phase of the work, it is possible to recognize the contextualization of the picture through its status as an object and its status in the space in a formally very clear and convincing manner. By deploying a formal dialogue between space, picture and sculpture, Ona B., however, does not leave the realm of painting, e.g., towards an architectural art, as much as she likes - and even insists on doing - to deal concretely and explicitly with the existing architectural situation (palaces, churches, bathhouses), rather, the contextualization of the picture through space and the object implies an extension of painting into the room and a new definition of the picture's function. The picture becomes a sculptural situation. In this new function we are dealing with an expanded form of painting, with a spatial form of painting, which still operates within the confines of abstraction through a sense of corporeality and volume. Actual painting on the canvas remains abstract, but through the situative integration of the picture in the space and architecture, and through the situative integration of objects in the picture, not just a chain of visual references, a continuum of contexts, a network of chromatic articulations, a hierarchy of spatial statements (object, picture, space) emerges.

Instead, an abstract painting evolves, one that still shows body and volume, namely through the integrated objects. Abstract paintings beyond figuration bring back figuration on a different level.\*\*\* Abstract painting as such does not give itself up, yet does not relinquish boundaries and objects. For this expanded sculptural situation contains both abstract painting and concrete objects. Ona B. is interested in liberating painting from the confines of the surface. To this end, she uses the surrounding space just as the objects in the room in front of the picture. In a second approach to this first phase of the artists work we see that the dialogical structure between space and object world, between architecture, picture and object is not just dealt with in formal terms but also brings to bear a socio-psychological dimension.

The first principle that applies to Ona B.'s painting within an expanded field is the dialogical structure between space-painting-object. Object, the configuration of a sculptural situation instead of a picture. In her paintings she tries to show what fills the space between painting and the object - the layers of paint in her pictures allude to infathomable illusionary color spaces. The surface of the picture seems to be the space of the picture. This abstract picture space, however, relates to the concrete space of the installation. The picture becomes expanded, forming a pictorial structure which, in turn, expands with the objects placed in front of it, forming a spatial structure. The classical issue of the relationship between architecture and the visual arts, between sculpture and painting, between spatial art and pictorial art, between the discourse of the wall which leads to the picture and the discourse of the pedestal which leads to the sculpture, is not resolved through conventional wall paintings, but by creating a network between and juxtaposing the parallel discourses of wall and pedestal, picture and object, architecture and painting and object. The wall defined in terms of architecture thus becomes a wall defined in terms of the picture.

In a first move, the given architectural situation is transformed in sculptural terms in the picture to form a construed or invented ambient. The paintings as color objects in the room are combined with the spatial objects and reintegrated into the architectural setting. In this way Ona B.'s painting remains abstract and thus autonomous (independent of color and form), but at the same time it becomes contextualized and loses its autonomy. The spaces, the pictures, the objects relate to each other, refer to each other. The two dimensionality of what is painted tends towards spatiality as regards the color. Vibrating layers of red color make the surface spatial "Firey - cosmic fog of color" (R.Fuchs) indicates spatial depth on the basis of color. What is painted, in turn, provides a framework for the three-dimensionality of the objects in front of the painting. There are thus numerous sites of visibility, within and without the picture. The visual takes place within the object zone in front of the easel painting, in the color zone of the picture and in the color zone of architecture. The variability of the respective zones, i.e., that of the visual and that of color, the nuanced, variable hierarchy of the sites of visibility lead us to our second principle. Painting's radical breaking away from the confines of the surface (into the object world, the real space), formally richly orchestrated, leads to further strategies of liberation. The visual installations of her painting between abstract imagery and the concrete architectural space recalls an open structure, an open dialogue (between space-painting-object) but also a cultural one not only formal terms but also in cultural ones. The dialogical structure refers not only to the completed easel painting becomes an "open artwork" (Umberto Eco), an open game, but also the ideological elements constitutive of our culture.

## II. (Dialogues of Culture)

The inventor of the theory of the language game, Ludwig Wittgenstein, describes this game as follows: "the totality: of language and the activities related to it". The rules and the connections thereof governing our concrete use of language and ascribing meaning to the sentences, the context of communicative action and the related forms of action are referred to as "language game" should stress that speaking of a language is part of an activity or a form of life."

The dialogical structure between picture and space has also transformed painting into an open game of its constitutive elements, into a "language game".

As Wittgenstein stresses, a language game does not just involve language, i.e., painting, but also the context. This explains why the picture moves forward into the spatial surrounding and into the object world. Abstract painting thus conquers its real context, its connection with life in a very concrete way. The spatial and object context of her paintings thus implies not just an arbitrary expansion but a networking with a form of life. The variability of visibility, of the places of the visual, corresponds with the variable nature of the game rules. For as Wittgenstein himself already noted: "various times have completely different games". Painting within an expanded context creates an open dialogue between the diverse different games (between the object game, the space game, the painting game) and, by extension, also with the various forms of life and cultures. This connection between formal grammar and the real manifestation of life that constitutes the "language game" is precisely the interconnection of art and reality, illusion and life, as it was traditionally demanded by good art. If the picture defines the space for the objects and architecture the space for the picture, if Ona B. studies painting on the basis of objects and space, this is not a purely formal game. Rather, in the sense of a language game this open dialogue between text and context must also take into

account the cultural context in which the artist made her statements. Ona B.'s work thus has formed the outset cultural-historical quotations and references, from the title to the materials used in the works. The horizon of this cultural context is constantly expanding. This ranges from appropriations of the illusionistic Baroque fresco painting (an illusionist figurative conquest of the space through painting), over Czech mannerism of glass art, Celtic cults or Jewish legends (Lilith) to Chinese forms of life.

The second principle that applies to Ona B.'s painting is the dialogical structure underlying forms of art and forms of life. Here, too, she operates within an expanded context. The forms of life do not just originate from the artist's own life world, but are also taken from outside, alien life worlds. It is also for this reason that she prefers exhibitions in "unfamiliar" rooms and likes installations in historical architectural settings (palaces, bathhouses, churches).

The variable nature of the sites of visibility and of the language game are expanded with the variable nature of cultural contexts (not just architectural ones). The second principle is a logical consequence of the first one. Painting's liberation from the confines of the surface is followed by a break with the confinements of culturally coded visibility, with the confined nature of life and forms and culture. The diverse ways in which this can be embedded in a spatial setting is followed by the diverse cultural implementations of its visibility. One ventures out over the dark river to the sun that shines over new cultures.

In a central work made for the Graphisches Kabinett of the Vienna Secession in 1991, IN LUCE the two principles come to bear. The artist painted all of the side walls (Aquila, Vultur, Favonius, Auster) and the ceiling (Heaven). The wall painting has thus definitely become a painting wall, the architectural wall a pictorial wall. The endless, boundless space of painting tried to also make the real space boundless, at least in an illusionistic sense. The difference between picture, object, surroundings was eliminated. This resulted in a pictorial unity, an integration. For the first time, here, the motif of the snake appears formally, which devours its own tail, the Uroboros, the symbol of integration: "I am my surroundings". Through the boundless nature of visibility, the color space and the picture space, resembling an Uroboros, the cosmological references also appear for the first time. The large room, the universe, becomes a studio. Light, the immaterial color, plays a role in space. Light conquers the room as color had before. There is also a religious emanation that sets in. To be outside of oneself, which painting has formally pursued, to be outside of the picture, to transcend the boundaries of the easel painting, now also means that the viewer is outside of him- or herself with regard to his or her mental state. The excentric nature of the visual. The shifting and varying of the places of the visual, of the color, object and space zones, constantly become ex-tasy, ex-istence, the being-outside of being itself. The origins of painting, space and the goal of painting, also space, can now be experienced and conceived of in psychological terms. Space and body leads back to the origins of painting in corporeal experience. The sculptural installations try to stimulate this experience of ex-istence, the being outside of oneself, the liberation from the prison of space and time. Ona B.'s technique, i.e., combining icin-like paintings with mysterious objects (cups, balls, and the like) in spatial configurations, has always sought to have a magical-religious effect so as to attain an ecstatic state of existence with sculptural means. "Creating a new world out of colour has gradually led Ona B. from the 'boudoir' (the alchemist kitchen of a painter) to outer space", as Edelbert Köb writes in the IN LUCE exhibition catalogue.

The second principle also reveals that the visual strategies deduced from the first principle aimed at stimulating religious trance and techniques of ecstasy otherwise offered by the alchemy, religious rites, meditation exercises and ritual ceremonies.

The expansion of painting by means of contextualization strategies with space and objects has a deeper motive, in keeping with human desire to transcend the boundaries of his or her world. Space and time are connected in the picture. Yet expansion is a fundamental law of universe. Ona B.'s painting expands to the room, but only with alchemist and religious techniques, and also into time. IN LUCE time tends to become transcended, suspended. The surface of the painting is without a boundary: the eye, the gaze experiences eternal return. The sites of visibility are countably infinite. The piece "Verborgener Strom" (Hidden stream) (1991/92) is also a parable for the flow of culture over and beyond continents and epochs.

### III. (Painting – Models and Cultural Forms of Life)

Each painting is a model. Painting itself represents a model. Each painting is first of all a model of painting. Painting, then, is a model of life. There are other models for this, which are models of art. The bull fight, tauromachy is a well-known model for art. Archery is Ona B's model for the art of painting. Instead of "Zen in the art of Archery" (Eugen Herrigel, O.w.Barth Verlag), the title is "Painting or the Art of Archery". If artworks function as a metaphor of life, then I have tried to show that Ona B.'s sculptural practices, understood in the sense of a language game between painterly articulation and form of life, do not allow any distinction to be made. Her artworks show a form of life.

In Japanese archery there is a moment when a specific pose is retained even after the arrow has already reached its goal. This shows that the mind hits the mark, not the arrow. With Zanshin, the body that remains, the archery ends. It sways in all directions like a temple bell. What does Ona B. want to convey to us, when she proposes Zanshin as a title of her exhibition? Does the body stay behind? What happens in the period after the last brush strokes? Does the mind hit the target and not the paint? Zanshin as a model of painting obviously has to do with a relaxation of the body and mind as ideal, the purity of the sound of the tout bow, the purity of painterly means, the swinging movement in all directions, the triad of painting, space, object. It has to do with control, harmony, movement between the elements of this triad as well as in the related life contexts. The central statement, however, is made in the Kyudo-ceremony of archery, which teaches that each arrow must be new regardless whether thousand or ten thousand arrows. Regardless whether ten or a thousand paintings, each must be new. No painter is the best. Each must become better and better. Painting is an endless search. The reward? Endless pleasure. Painting as a symptom becomes fixated in the gaze. The victory over the symptom is the victory of the gaze over the eye. The eye becomes - like a column of the visible (the inversion of the title) - is dealt with something existent, outside of the body. The exteriorization of the eye as an object, as a glass ball, the existence outside of the body, points to the symptomatic structure of Ona B.'s models of painting. In order to reinforce this and at the same time to make this transparent, Ona B. increasingly integrates herself as the subject or the eye into the sculptural situation. Voyeurism and object of pleasure become reified as an eye. An exhibition in Prague which took place in 1993 was titled "I am only the eye". The subject and the body are more than just an eye. It is symptomatic for the detachment of a (partial) object from the network of symbolic markers. The same is true for her piece, "Untitled" (1989, Kunststück) where two balls made of Murano glass are placed on racks in front of the picture. The balls change the view of painting and painting changes the appearance of the glass balls, given the fact that the colors of the painting are reflected here. These balls are eyes. However, they symbolize the triumph of the gaze (the mind) over the eye (the arrow) ...

The mind, the gaze hits the target, not the arrow. The glass balls do not refer to eyes, they are not ciphers indicating something else. In painting understood as a symptom the eyes are the glass balls, the only thing that really exists, just like the colors, space, time. The glass ball is the gaze, which says: I am only an eye within a context. It is in this sense that visuality within a context emerges from painting as symptom. Within the symptom, a kernel of pleasure persists, which undermines any analysis and can also not be reduced to the real, the imaginary. Painting as a symbol thus implies the persistence of pleasure which opposes reality, means pleasure as the real. The bow and the string and the arrow create a symbolic network, into which the body is integrated in the same way as pleasure is integrated into the symbolic network of painting and object and space. If in archery Zanshin means that the body still maintains a certain pose when the symbolic network has effected, in interplay, that the arrow reaches the target, then Zanshin applied to painting means pleasure, painting as something real. The sleep of reason which brings forth monsters is Newton's sleep, the rational disenchantment of the world. Ona B.'s painterly installations seek to reenchanted the world. On this difference another difference is founded. Ona B. is a female painter, not a male painter.