

Freedom in Fluo

On the painting of Lori Hersberger

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When confronted with Lori Hersberger's paintings for the first time, one has the impression that they consist of a collection of autonomous fragments, held together by the white canvas. Although the total image constitutes a unity, the artist apparently elaborates the fragments at separate moments. All his energy is then directed towards that one fragment, without being limited by earlier or future parts. Each fragment appears as a point of departure containing the same aesthetic and emotional freedom. Each time, the artist succeeds in freeing himself from the course he has followed up to that point. Since a painting necessarily constitutes a unity, painters generally feel the pressure to consider the composition as a whole when finishing the details. In Hersberger's oeuvre, each part betrays the creative freedom that is inherent in the moment of painting. The white canvas becomes an open field on which a wide range of personal interventions is possible. The artist is never pinned down to earlier fragments. In that sense, the painting expresses the wish to escape.

In an interview, the artist confirmed these first impressions and explained his working process. In his studio, he works on a whole series of paintings at the same time. When he has applied a fragment to one painting, he walks up to the next one, twenty metres away, on which he performs another single intervention, and so on. In other words, he enriches himself with other destinations before solving the questions raised by the first painting. Only after having intervened in several other paintings does he return to an earlier work with a fresh outlook. On his return, he views the work with surprise again, from a changed viewpoint. These interventions take place within the space of two or three days, during which he works intensively on, say, ten to twenty paintings, until his energy is exhausted. Time is the only parameter in this process. To him, painting is a form of time management. He calls the time factor his only enemy, but also his ally. Hence the exhibition title *Time was an idiot* (Bazel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst). His working method sharply contrasts with that of artists who want to turn art into a system of rules to abide with. Hersberger counters technique with technique in order to create something new. He continuously plays with the duality between two extreme points. He creates a visual space he can both believe in and take a distance from. His work continuously swings back and forth between a and b, a system of two possibilities that is to enable him to maintain a refuge for himself. Because the work is constructed around poles and antipoles, the artist can always escape back to the point where he is not. At the heart of this oeuvre lies a never-ending dynamics, which, throughout every fragment, guarantees an escape to something new.

At a time when a considerable part of young art is more or less embedded in everyday life, Hersberger deliberately strives after an artificial art that, on the contrary, creates an anti-reality of its own, unconnected to the outside world. In his video and carpet installations, however, there are links with everyday life. But the medium of painting offers him a white canvas he can fill with colours and shapes that are not tangible reality. He considers a painting as a "Gegenentwurf" or counterproposal that surpasses reality in richness. The white

canvas allows the artist to create his own illusions in which he can free himself from mental pressure. Yet these new designs can have an influence on reality, at a later stage. This sense of an illusory escape was characteristic of much of the history of painting, from religious painting and baroque art to abstract art. The creation of an imaginary world, independent from reality, is also a major element in motion pictures, fashion and music. Hersberger's typical fluo colours emphasise his deep longing to surpass nature and the effects of ordinary colours, which is to result in a hyperartificial perception. The bright colours unchain a dynamics in an infinite free space. As to content, they express the intensity of the emotions. As "living daylight", they do not remain visually fixed on the canvas, but jump out, right in the spectator's face. They are a vivid presence on the surface, simultaneously blinding and already escaping to somewhere else. The combination of rapidly changing image production and decomposition is also present in Hersberger's mirror paintings. In his conception, mirrors contain both total reality and perfect antimatter, ultimate sublimation and absolute truth. Even time is real. At the same time, they are no more than a smooth surface in which reality is totally absorbed in an illusory world. Everything you see is both real and unreal. It is the truth of a face that is reduced to a shiny surface. Mirrors ceaselessly produce illusions and disillusion in a continuous dynamics. Reality stripped of its frills dissolves in a dream world full of glitter. They are both present all the time. The artist navigates between pole and antipole in a never-ending dynamics of escape from one side to the other. Precisely at the point where the opposites meet, he discovers room for creativity. Hersberger paints on the mirrors with fluo colours, which reinforce the feeling of a dynamic presence. Different from Michelangelo Pistoletto, Hersberger strongly emphasises the opposition between the illusory world and reality, and the place of escape in between them. His approach is closer to the concept of the illusionistic mirror halls from the beginning of the eighteenth century, in which the architecture was magnified in a play of light and time, or the illusive way filmmakers have used mirror effects.

In the evolution of Hersberger's oeuvre, the fluo paintings came after the other media. Leaving aside his black-and-white paintings based on film stills from the twenties, he made his first video installations in 1990 and his first carpet installations in 1995. The preparations for his carpet installations involved long quests for the right materials. In the case of the videos, the technical development was very time-consuming. A certain dissatisfaction with these work processes made him turn to painting. Rather than developing a routine, he preferred to devote much more time directly to creating autonomous works of art. Thoughts and feelings were given form on the canvas without an interruption in time. He wished to maintain the dynamics of freedom, escape and the elaboration of new ideas at all times. Although he has an idea of what he wants to create when he starts a painting, he does not want this to curtail the further flow of ideas during the creative process. If he did, the dynamics between opposites would have to be interrupted for practical reasons.

Both in its formal aspects and its mental outlook, Hersberger's painting is very different from the various Expressionist movements. Since art historians are often inclined to look for similarities with established art from the past and since this is far from obvious in Hersberger's case, they often refer to American Abstract Expressionists such as Louis Morris, Kenneth Noland and Clifford Still because of the pure colours and the importance of

the white canvas in Hersberger's work. But the informal result, the work method and the excessive use of fluo colours clearly make it very different. And then we have not even mentioned the enormous difference in mental outlook. Like many other artists who came to the fore in the mid-nineties, Hersberger was decisively influenced by the broad cultural field in general, in which the visual arts in the strict sense are only one of the actors. Gerhard Richter's theoretical writings fit in with Hersberger's ceaseless dynamics of renewal and his resistance to stylistic formalism. An artist must gain a new freedom, separated from established art and even apart from his own stylistic preferences. As a student, he opposed the strongly formalistic approach of his Swiss art education, which was then still dominated by the epigones of the Bauhaus tradition. Doing just better than the training is not art. He was especially influenced by the music, fashion and design of the late seventies, when he was at grammar school. It was the era of punk rock, glitter rock and new wave. At the time, what seemed messy and cheap was elevated to the fashion standard. And the bright kitschy colours in his carpet installations had general currency in the seventies. From Dadaism, he learned to use cultural elements from everyday life as art. In the eighties, there was Jeff Koons, who made modern icons with a strong superficial appeal. Hersberger's moving fluo shapes leave their mark on the public memory. At the same time, the bright colours and the scattering of heterogeneous fragments undermine the iconic seriousness. The icon contains its own negation. Icon and anti-icon are intertwined in one image.

The paintings express a hybrid range of feelings. They are not merely personal, but based on the current state of affairs in the world and on the media which we now have at our disposal to communicate with. Western individuals have an enormous potential of personal freedom and creativity, but on the other hand, they also have to cope with feelings of despair and impotence. As consumers, we are offered a multitude of choices, travel and communicating have never been easier, and we have freed ourselves from the social coercion and ideologies of the past. On the other hand, we cannot change the world as a whole, nor even the lives of people around us. This is precisely where the problems lie that threaten us in the long run. The world is full of images, sounds and information, but how can we play a role in the whole? Or are we almost compelled to isolate ourselves in narcissistic self-satisfaction? This whole atmosphere is entrenched in Hersberger's oeuvre. The paintings carry the traces of that doubt and disillusion, but in the same movement the artist confronts the spectators with an overwhelming sense of optimism and freedom. He flings these intense feelings in the spectators' faces by means of blinding colours, so that they do not grasp at once what they are seeing. His paintings remind one of the splendour of brightly coloured flowers, which display their vitality without any restraint and then fade. All that is left afterwards is the melancholic sense of so much lost happiness. The artist can certainly not be said to indulge in a one-sided glorification of the rosy side of life. At the same time, he is aware of all the individual limitations. There is a form of irony in his work with regard to post-modern cynicism, which has become the main pillar of all kinds of wrongs. Strangely enough, by this unlimited expression of freedom and happiness, his oeuvre has more critical impact than the umpteenth cynical attack on traditional values. Post-modern cynicism puts a heavy damper on freedom.