

## Serial Painting – Concept and Process

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In order to characterise Bernhard Paul's painting, the notion of the serial has to be understood as an artistic concept as well as an artistic result. Not only does he work by producing series which more or less follow the same schemes of production, he also shows the production process of his works as a temporal phenomenon.

### Writing Paintings – Reading Colours

The viewer sees square and roughly square picture ratios of medium and almost monumental size whose surfaces have been systematically ornamented. Brush strokes of equal size fill the whole canvas like characters of a virtual language – running from top left to bottom right. The tongue-like shapes result from the artist's use of art filbert brushes. The grounding of every painting is prepared using light and dark contrasts and lines are drawn freehand but regularly, serving as lines for the artist to write on. The painter repeats the process of painting or writing with all the different colours, each of them filling the canvas. They retain their transparency even though they are layered on top of each other. The effect created is that the colours add up optically and remain partially undiffused. Even the lightest bottom layer of the grounding shines through in parts, giving the impression of a glass window illuminated from behind. Whenever the painter uses the same colour tones, he can foresee what combinations may result from the overlay. When he puts strong fundamental colours against and on top of each other, he can reckon with interesting effects that force him to respond accordingly until the layering yields a satisfactory result. Delaunay<sup>1</sup> laid the foundation for such series through his intensive and analytical study of colour theory. His so-called "Formes circulaires" and "Rythmes sans fin" attest the importance and impact of the new conception that has had a great influence on many techniques, not least on American Colour-Field-Painting.

In Bernhard Paul's works, a detailed internal structure of equal elements makes the colour field flicker. The viewer is overwhelmed with its perception and sees a movement due to the sluggishness of his visual organs. He finally perceives a whole whose parts he can no longer reconstruct. The whole, made up of numerous parts, then forms a series. A series of these serial paintings, which the artist places next to each other like a repeat pattern or wallpaper, makes serial production and artistic individuality clash with one another. This principle of the original

and the reproduction, now taken to an extreme by Bernhard Paul, became an issue in visual arts at the middle of the last century at the latest.

Art history's concept of the artwork and thus of the established aesthetic system were challenged with the beginning of abstract art. The phenomena of serials and non-artistic production of paintings replaced the phenomenon of the paintings' content by way of a new, innate and self-reflexive way of looking at art with art's own means<sup>2</sup>. Let us consider Monet; his painting process resembles an experimental test arrangement and has mechanical traits. The continual subject recedes and is constantly processed, although from the perspective of a scientist whose primary goal is no longer expression<sup>3</sup>. Ultimately the colour is released as an autonomous aesthetic quality. The viewer requires sequential vision that compares and relativises the individual painting.

## Method and Conception

The method of serial painting in the case of Bernhard Paul works according to a simple concept. Equal formats are executed in a technically predetermined framework so that the invariable format is treated by systematic repetition and variation. During the painting process, Bernhard Paul uses the rhythm, drive and constant repetition in Steve Reich's minimal music as his point of orientation. Reich's piece *six pianos*, which works with phase shifts, is hectic and wearing and is based on the same link between constant and variance. It almost seems to be visualised in Bernhard Paul's works whereby the strong visuality of the musical composition, which is marked by an unusual dynamics of movement and shifts of the rhythm, is here translated into a different medium. Accordingly, the artist's choice of titles for his works was inspired by music. He named them after the archive *The Kitchen*, which preserves and edits Steve Reich's early works. His title *FTKA#2Filter* can be read as *From the Kitchen Archives No. 2 Filter*. The title links concepts and phenomena of music with those of photography. The title *TYS\_* refers to a series of mediumsized works which inspired by the music of Frank Zappa's album *The Yellow Shark*.

The medium of serial production helps Paul to develop a new formal and independent pictorial language which he systematically explores and tests. His background in offset printing as well as his graphic roots are clearly evident in his works. First the dissection of colour and its composition plays an important role. The pastose printing paints he had used in his earlier works have by now been replaced by transparent acrylic paint. The transition from drawing and prints to colour and painting was made possible by black and white panels.

## Painting Process

Revealing the painting process is an important aspect of Bernhard Paul's serial painting. The viewer is confronted with works that are meticulously layered. These layers have been created in a writing process and could be continuously repeated had the painter not halted them. Every subsequent painting starts anew at the same starting point and repeats the established system. In a way every painting is the sequel to the former. The brush is employed until it releases hardly any more paint - only then is the continuous process shortly interrupted.

In this respect the works broach the issue of time in a particular way. Uniformity and repetition embody stagnancy and document a stereotypical abundance by one thing. At the same time the course of painting as a process remains visible and the number of series grows constantly. Ultimately the duration of the painting is limited by the length of a piece of music and can be understood like a song or a repeated piece of music. The mechanical cycle seems to be a prescribed principle rather than a meditative practice. Still, it generates an intensity which we can interpret as artistic discipline and concentration which are only possible outside the realm of everyday experience.

This is probably one of the reasons why we perceive the works to be special and beyond our experience.

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Joachim Albrecht: *Farbe als Sprache: Robert Delaunay, Josef Albers, Richard Paul Lohse*, Köln 1979, S. 19-58

<sup>2</sup> Katharina Sykora: *Das Phänomen des Seriellen in der Kunst: Aspekte einer künstlerischen Methode von Monet bis zur amerikanischen Pop Art*, Würzburg 1983

<sup>3</sup> Uwe M. Schneede (Hrsg.): *Monets Vermächtnis: Serie, Ordnung und Obsession* [Katalog zur Ausstellung in der Hamburger Kunsthalle], Hamburg 2001