

Painted disruptions

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PAINTED DISRUPTIONS

Elisabeth Gerber

That art and architecture parted paths in the 20th century, that for a long time they even seemed like irreconcilable opposites, also reflects how each discipline developed on its own. However, since the '90s the two have reembarked on a reconciliation increasingly centered on their potential for dialogue and interaction. With a background in non-figurative art, today's artists are setting out on a controversial path of activity indeed. The issues at stake include decoration and ornamentation, self-referentiality and the hard fact – readily dismissed by architects – that there is more to painting than mere color and surface considerations. Thus, the present essay seeks to describe and analyze the sort of painted – and calculated – disruptions that go beyond color design concepts. Besides their formal and aesthetic qualities, such interventions develop narrational and thought-provoking context-related spaces. These define, physically and intellectually, suitable venues belonging to the public or semi-public domain. Painting practiced in this spirit involves itself in various social issues by means of subtly varied statements.

AMBIVALENT ENCOUNTERS

Renée Levi (b. 1960) of Basel and Dominik Stauch (b. 1962) of Thun both belong to a generation of artists who have been working in this vein. Theirs is basically a multiple strategy that results from a discriminating understanding of the spatial, but also functional, directives of their day. This enables them to use painting as an at once analytical and „decorative“ tool, but also brings out the ambivalence marking the renewed concord between architecture and painting, sustained as it is by the historical premises of both modern architecture and art. Architecturally speaking, there exists a gradual shift from surface to naked core, to the intrinsically architectural, accompanied by the rejection of anything ornamental or decorative and, to a great extent, of color as well. On the other hand, painting in a modern spirit deals with such concepts as autonomy and self-referentiality. The de facto separation between architecture and art has invariably been chalked up in profit-and-loss terms, as already attested by the De Stijl movement early in the 20th century, and now again by the renewed discourse of the '90s which, increasingly, falls under the heading of „hybrid zones.“¹

The most radical thesis as to the relationship between art and architecture in general is that the boundary between the two affords no opening and that, quite to the contrary, the manifest gap between the two cannot be bridged. Applied to the specific requirements of painting, this would mean above all that no third possibility exists between the assertion of aesthetic autonomy and formal reaction in the way of architecturally-linked color concepts.² However, it now appears that post-modern painting – working from the double standpoint of self-referentiality and the inclusion of public/semi-public venues – is capable of transcending the painting-versus-architecture debate by addressing certain social issues.

COLOR AS A MIRROR

The qualitative differences between art space and our constructed surroundings, no matter to what use they are destined, change the range of possible approaches to the question. Each artist's particular artistic outlook greatly determines the way he or she perceives the space to be acted upon, and how such action is carried out. For instance, her concept of painting in terms of spatial installations leads Renée Levi quite naturally to intervene in constructed

spaces. Unsurprisingly, then, her means and process are largely one and the same: color out of a spray can, no canvas but instead inside and outside walls and various surfaces serving as picture carriers. A plastic language that is pre-symbolic, allegorically ornamental – a tool used to explore the possibilities painting has to offer today. In this way, Levi reacts „situationally“ to given situations: She integrates herself into them, transforming them into sensuous spatial experiences.

The extensive renovation³ of the Grossratssaal (cantonal great council's assembly room) in Lucerne has brought out that venue's original austere and classicist design. The cross that hung in the stage-like semi-circular space behind the cantonal government members represented almost the focal point of the members of the council, themselves seated in a semi-circle. A plainer version thereof now sits modestly opposite them. This cross, and the spatially dominant architectural symmetry – modeled after Greek theaters – governing the space, contain a great number of symbolic references within the context of the legislature's political function. This is just what Levi's intervention, which goes by the name „Reuss“ [trans. note: an allusion to the river by that name], brings into play. Her yellow semi-circular MDF boards are in full formal harmony with the architecture. A thick and vibrating pattern of horizontally sprayed lines bathes the otherwise coolly grayish space in calm but intensive light. Her painting generates a color space that invites individual contemplation and that, together with the white rectangular space left blank just at head height of the government members, nonetheless provides a deliberately planted disruptive impetus. The promise of architecture to provide a spatial and spiritual anchor point yields to a sense of loss of place. Levi's situational intervention brings to fore the furthermore latent, hidden religious and secularized-utopian mental horizons pervading the political business of the day. It calls into question the positions taken individually by members of a pluralistic society. In this way, the painting – beyond its self-reflective aspect – serves as a mirror, just like the five members of the cantonal government sitting at the time before the white rectangle, lined up like the disciples at the Last

Supper. Still and all, despite the play of allusions, no sacred and transcendental dimension is meant here: It is the dialogue between the Lucerne parliament and the legislators convening there that draws our attention.

Contrary to her limited intervention in Lucerne, Levi's *Le Tapis volant* (The Flying Carpet) project in Geneva encompasses an entire building⁴. Indeed, it is her color scheme that lends feasibility to the severity and simplicity of an architectural language all in concrete and glass. Her play of precisely applied colors allows her to redeem the commonest promise of painting – namely, to provide atmosphere and contrast. Individual pink-colored corridor walls already make an impact on the various public zones, while her rubber flooring throughout the building is orange with sprinkles of blue; the sanitary installations are aubergine-colored. With these colors she totally redefines the spaces, thus also heightening the sensuous quality of the rather reserved architecture. Yet Renée Levi's ambitions go beyond this. The key to her intentions lies in the lower basement floor, in the empty space of the entrance hall, which is easy for visitors to miss but which can clearly be seen from above. Here we have the „flying carpet“ that gives the project its name: a space consisting of a rectangular, reflectorizing white area bordered by a slightly recessed frame in smooth concrete. It lies there like a painting and, at the same time, like a screen on which to project thoughts, ideas, fantasies, dreams ... White also defines the surfaces in each classroom where lecture images and texts are to be projected, and characterizes the empty paper on the desks. White – in which, however, also lies dormant the entire color spectrum upon which painting feeds. Paint is absent from where one would most expect it, and where until now it has been used almost exclusively in architectural projects: on the walls. The artist's discriminating use of paint, her play on absence versus presence, all contribute to an overall color concept that generates concrete and imaginary spaces that are equivocal and, moreover, related to each other in a number of ways. Contextually speaking, Levi's installation subtly sets itself up in the realm of the in-between: The artist plumbs the potential of monochrome painting as a décor and an

autonomous picture, and as an instrument for calling social space into question – more concretely, for questioning a school building as a venue for individual and collective expectations and mental images.

ENLIGHTENED ROMANTICISM

Working with real but also virtual space, Dominik Stauch's painting is historically rooted in Concrete Art – the De Stijl and Constructivist movements. Along with this comes a taste for rock and pop, with a special fondness for the „failed“ heroes of the day. His works are nourished by a field of tension stretching between avant-gardist utopias, disillusionment and romanticizing. The painting tradition on which the artist draws is distinguished by its kinship with geometric ornamentation. This is the source of his dealings with such prevalent construction principles such as symmetry, reflection, rotation and row arrangements, as well as his interest in color systems.

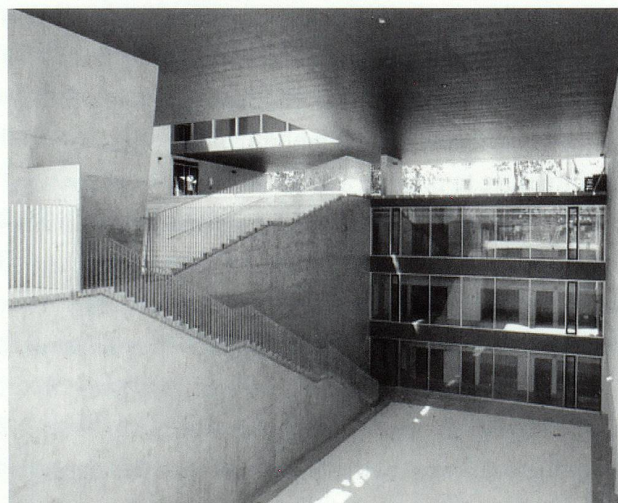
Through its expansion and the addition of an extra story, the TBA (Tiefbauamt: Civil Engineering Inspectorate) headquarters in Urdorf⁵ has been endowed with a new entry zone that welcomes visitors before they join the circular corridor running through the high-tech system that controls the Zurich road network. The building's architecture abounds with sophisticated materials and structural loose ends. A harmonic color scheme might have remedied the situation, but Stauch opted for a different solution by inserting three additional elements. He used the building's concrete grid pattern as a basic unit of measure, from which the proportionate shares of colored surfaces – dual-tone broken yellow-pistachio colors – also derive. The entrance zone – endowed by the artist with a painted glass pane, a diamond-shaped movable spatial element covered by a rug, together with rug insets on the intermediate floor of the staircase – oscillates enormously between concrete use, ornamentation and pure painting. As such, it thwarts the focus on architecture by raising the question: What sort of painting is it that allows itself to be thus trod underfoot? That presents itself as a bench? Or stages itself as a painting temporarily leaning against the wall? The concept behind Stauch's installation-like dealings with architecture is related to the De Stijl ideas on new spatial design⁶,

which still upheld unified compositions as an ideal. Although lost in the meantime, the homogeneous whole remains as much a reference point for Stauch's artistic intervention as today's insurmountable gap between architecture and art, respectively painting. In the irresolvable reciprocal reference between art and architecture, his reminder of the utopia – be it failed – of the moderns becomes a provocative challenge.

With his Abendglüh (Evening Glow) project, Stauch interacts with the space that serves as a cafeteria at an old people's home in Grindelwald⁷. He achieves this interaction through his choice of technological



*Reuss, Grossratssaal, Luzern, 2001, Renée Levi,
Architekt: Marcel Ferrier*



*Le tapis volant, Eingangsbereich, Renée Levi,
Cycle d'orientation de Mombillant, Genève,
Architekten: Weber und Hofer, Zürich*

means and, at the same time, his interpretation of the hidden implications of such concepts as homeland, art and nature, which his work illuminates. The digital wall picture is an abstract design made up of horizontal planes that change shape and color, running through the entire color spectrum over a 24-hour period. It fits in perfectly with the architectural language of the building, achieving the effect of an additional window that opens out on to a virtual perceptual space. As concrete painting that simulates phenomena of – be it ideologically charged – nature, Abendglühn is therefore more than a decorative complement, and more than an invitation to silent meditation. It also induces a critical look at the contractors' overall concept of the project which – next to the institution's contemporary architecture – consists of senior homes in a modernized style of wood chalets. These do ensure a view of the real nature scene, but that does nothing to help elude the contradiction that Abendglühn sets forth between simulation and authenticity, between art, architecture and nature.

Painting, seen as color and surface design, appeases a legitimate need for well-being and harmony. It stimulates the senses, brightens things up, and invites us to dream and meditate. It disconcerts and inspires, since color always works toward clarity but never toward certainty⁸. This also holds true for the painted disruptions discussed in this essay. In the first place, these create spatial experiences. At the same time they formulate questions linked to the specific purpose of a building or space, which, depending on the project, can be understood to be urban, social or political. Seen in these terms, then, painting participates – beyond the narrower Kunst-und-Bau (art and architecture) argument – in the controversial debate over the social role of art in general. As such, painting – so often reputed to be dead – proves itself a highly vital discipline. In confident and observant fashion, it avails itself of the potential of its historical legacy. Like magic, paint highlights incongruities and contradictions and, in certain ideal cases, achieves open reflection spaces along precisely laid out color coordinates.

¹ The hybrid is a mixture; the spatial zone of Kunst-und-Bau projects is designed according to its premises. Sibylle Omlin, „Hybrid Zones in Art, Space and Architecture". In: Omlin, Sibylle and Bernasconi Frei, Karin, editors, *Hybrid Zones, Art and Architecture in Basel and Zurich*, Birkhäuser 2003, p.15

² The third possibility being pleaded here is the highly traditional Kunst-am-Bau institution as an arena where the critical understanding between the two can be kept open while continuing to respect the historical separation between art and architecture. [translated from the German] Philipp Ursprung, „Das Medium ist nicht die Botschaft, Zur Kunst-am-Bau heute" (The Medium is not the Message, on Kunst-am-Bau Today). In: *Kunst und Bau – ein Spannungsfeld (Art and Construction – A Field of Tension)*. Edited by Kantonale Kommission für Kunst und Architektur des Kantons Bern. Stämpfli Verlag, Bern 2001, p. 198

³ Overall renovation 2001–2002, under the supervision of the architect Marcel Ferrier BSA (Asso. of Swiss Architects)/SIA (Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects), in collaboration with Daniela Nüssli Cavelt and Raphael Schertenleib

⁴ The building in question is the Montbrillant schoolhouse in Geneva. Architecture by: Weber und Hofer AG, Zurich. Erected in 2001–2003

⁵ Expansion of and additional story to the existing building, 2001–2003 Architect Jürg P. Hauenstein ETH (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology)/BSA/SIA, Zurich, in collaboration with Gina Rossi, FH (University of Applied Sciences) architecture graduate, and Hans Diener, Atelier am unteren Rain.

⁶ Münch, Andreas, *De Stijl, das geometrische Ornament und die monumentale Gestaltung (De Stijl, Geometric Ornament and Monumental Design)*, Peter Lang AG, Bern, 2003, pp. 142 ff.

⁷ Old-age home and senior residences at the nursing care center, Grindelwald, 2002–2003. Architects: ARGE brügger & ryter, Spiez

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Max Wechsler, Adrian Schiess: *Farbräume, Zusammenarbeit mit den Architekten Herzog & de Meuron und Gigon/Guyer, 1993–2003*, Quart Verlag 2004, p.21