

Painting Color

With its radical presentation of a single color per work, monochrome painting makes high demands on its viewers. All the more so in view of the fact that monochrome is not simply monochrome, but an infinitely differentiated phenomenon. Dieter Villinger's paintings are monochrome. Not only does the painter use only one color for each work; what is more, this color is not varied in tone, not chromatically modulated, contains no nuances of darker or lighter color values. Nevertheless it is only conditionally correct to define these paintings as monochrome, for monochrome is not Villinger's main focus of interest, no matter how obvious the assumption that it is. He is concerned less with the articulation of *one* color than with the *articulation* of one color.

Villinger paints his large-scale canvasses with a viscous acrylic binding agent; the respective pigment is mixed into the binder in such a way that a completely opaque layer of color is only seldom attained. Instead it retains the quality of a rubbery, elastic, more or less transparent skin, even when the pigments are equal in value. Because the canvas is left in its natural tone and not grounded in white, places where the paint has been applied thinly – and where therefore the canvas is visible as a color in itself – are easily distinguishable from thick paint applications. And the materialization of the paint applications can be read from the surface. The paint is applied and spread by means of wide brushes onto a canvas fixed to the wall. On the occasionally relief-like surface of the paint are clear traces of each of the painter's long strokes; i.e. the trail of the brush, from contact to departure, stands out clearly.

Yet it would be inappropriate to suppose that we are therefore dealing with a mere variation of action painting. Action and articulation of a color are two different things; the one is not necessarily related to the other. Villinger is not interested in demonstrating the impulsive gesture. In monochrome painting no figure-background constellation involves. If it did, a gesturally defined figuration would stand out against a surface of a different character, manifesting itself in the long run as a quasi frozen painting gesture. Here, on the other hand, during its application the paint is moved back and forth across the surface until it has reached a sufficient degree of saturation. The painter's gestures are not merely action-oriented but carried out consistently under the conditions of – and with regard to – painting. However recognizable, these gestures are preserved in the monochrome layer of paint, i.e. are not demonstratively absolutized. The individual painting gesture

always appears on the surface in a league with all of the others – the surface itself not really existing until constituted by the gestures in their entirety. Thus it is not the particular *gesture* but the act of *painting* itself which is essential to Villinger's work. He does not set out to paint (*one*) *color*, but to *paint color*. His paintings are one color because in order to paint, one color – and not necessarily more than that – is needed. They show the traces of action because action is one element of painting on a large surface and there is no reason to conceal it. Painting requires – at least one – color, just as color is provided only by painting.

Through the movement of the paint masses in wide strokes, usually from the left- and right-hand edges towards the middle – where they meet in playful encounter – the bodily sensations of the viewer are roused and drawn into the act of viewing. The onlooker can visually reconstruct the powerful pushing and shoving of the paint-saturated brush, perhaps not the exact chronological process but certainly the basic processuality of painting. One realizes that the painting is not the product of a predetermined, goal-oriented act of creation. The result cannot be pre-planned in detail. The dynamic of the flexible material and the dynamic of the painting act trigger the constant reaction of the painter to his material and of the material to the painter. Thus the result is not calculable. Villinger merely defines the preconditions of his painting process, i.e. he creates conditions under which he can achieve the realization of the color, its materialization in space and time: Color needs substance in order to be realized, color needs a ground across which the substance must be moved in order to remain visible as color, and color needs the movement which spreads the substance over the ground. If these minimal requirements are fulfilled, color happens – with all of the accidentalities caused by its realization – almost inevitably. In the consistency chosen, the consistency necessary for this manner of painting, the paint is too individual, too firm, to begin moving under the weight of the layer. Single applications of paint, however, do begin to slide when they are still wet, leaving vertical, avalanche-like traces in the basically horizontal strokes. During the process of painting with a wide brush, small bubbles or impurities occur, for example not fully bound clumps of pigment. These are not corrected but accepted. This painting is not undertaken with the aim of creating a perfect picture, it is not an act which could not tolerate such accidentalities, but rather an autonomous process whose intention is the realization of color.

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Note: This text was originally published in German under the title *Farbe malen* in the catalog *Dieter Villinger. Malerei* (Kaiserslautern: Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, 1993), 7 – 9. Cf. also Matthias Bleyl, *Essentielle Malerei in Deutschland: Wege zur Kunst nach 1945*. (Nuremberg: Institut für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg 1988), 192 – 194.

German-English translation by EGLS, Judith Rosenthal