

Michael Hübl (ed.) in: *Dieter Villinger. Gelb.Blau*, Nuremberg 2002

Preliminary remark on terminology

In the following text the word “picture(s)” will initially appear sporadically. The large-scale paintings which Dieter Villinger realised for the Fachhochschule Landshut are not to be seen as individual works, however, but as parts of a situation-oriented colour installation. The term “pictures” corresponds to the viewer’s first, unbiased – and in that sense naive – encounter with the work. As the discussion continues, the works will be referred to exclusively as colour objects.

Objectivity and colour

A stocktaking

Villinger carried out the artistic design of two spaces, reacting to their varying dimensions and proportions with two formats and two colours, blue and yellow, each colour pair also differentiated within itself.

With regard to colour and design, the two yellow surfaces are based on an identical initial situation. In both cases Dieter Villinger used the same amount of paint. He even did the paintings one after the other as quickly as possible so that they would emerge to the greatest possible extent from an identical impetus and under similar physical conditions. The difference nevertheless apparent in the results is due only in very small part to the minimal deviations that occur in – or virtually creep into – every kind of repetition. A much more decisive factor for the difference in the colouration is the pictures’ supporting surface. One of the two works was painted on cotton duck. Here the yellow appears dense, almost homogeneous, and radiates an opaque glow. In the case of the second painting, Villinger applied the pastose mixture of pigment and acrylic binder onto unbleached linen. Here the colour dried much less evenly than the yellow of the neighbouring picture. The structure of the picture surface is fiercely turbulent. It preserves the painting process, records the exertion, chronicles the expenditure of energy that was demanded of Dieter Villinger in order to attain a final state in correspondence with his intentions. The yellow plastic matter that spreads across the entire rectangular area forms waves. The paint mass arches up into sated yellow faults which break off abruptly because in certain places it is stretched almost to the breaking point. In those places the paint is a mere membrane. The natural grey-beige of the canvas occasionally pushes its way forward, appearing as a green shimmer in contrast to the irradiant yellow surrounding it.

Villinger’s pictures are painted in a single, continuous session. Each piece is produced during an uninterrupted process which – in the case of formats such as those used in Landshut – can last an entire long day. At the time of the

Impressionists, this working method would have been referred to as *alla prima* painting. In contrast to the traditional technique of constructing a panel painting layer by layer, this method is based directly upon the fresh application of paint. Yet even if it had been carried out swiftly and directly, the depiction of a market scene, nude or still life with flowers permitted later corrections and additions. Villinger's monochrome painting method, on the other hand, allows no such retouching. In order to arrive at the desired colour effect, the painting process must go on without major interruption until it has reached its definitive conclusion.

For each of the four pictures which Villinger painted for the Fachhochschule Landshut, more than thirteen square metres of cloth had to be coped with. Mathematically, the two yellow rectangles in the corridor between the cafeteria and the cloakroom have the same surface area as the two blue works in the Main auditorium. There the pictures are square. Villinger decided in favour of this format¹ because it preserves his autonomy with regard to the architecture of the space. The architectural design adheres to clear lines and symmetrical arrangements, but comprises a large number of elements such as extremely narrow, high window openings on either side of the front wall and conspicuous cross beams. There is also technical equipment, which is attached to the ceiling construction. In the midst of all these elements, the form of the square which Villinger chose for his works remains neutral. There is no architectural detail with which it relates directly, for no other squares occur anywhere in the auditorium.

Thus the blue paintings keep their distance – to the surrounding space but also to one another. For, unlike the case of the two yellow works, the supporting surface here is the same, while the colour combination varies, so that the colours appear to drift apart. For the right-hand surface Villinger used exclusively pure cobalt blue. In its left-hand counterpart, the proportion of cobalt blue has been reduced by one third: Here it is turquoise that sets the tone, despite its minimal proportion in the mixture.

If Villinger's work was intended as a form of symbolic discourse (which it is not), the blue would stand for a state that is removed from the surrounding circumstances. In the culture of the occident, to an extent in continuation of Old Testament conceptions, there evolved a long tradition of blue's transcendence to the sphere of the divine or cosmic/universal. Konrad von Megenberg, for example, the fourteenth-century author of numerous Mariological, ethical and political treatises, makes reference in his *Buch der Natur* (Book of Nature) to the "sapphire, which resembles the pure firmament"² and helps us to renounce worldly things because it leads us to "disdain the world"³. Von Megenberg, a cleric and prolific writer, was thus adhering to the aesthetic/theological superelevation of the aforesaid mineral and the colour blue, an idea which became a well-established element of medieval Christian iconography⁴. Probably the most impressive example is the blue glow of spirituality in the western windows of Chartres cathedral. Like most other testimonies to the art of the Middle Ages, this treatment of blue was rediscovered and afforded new tribute during the age of Romanticism – an epoch which, at least in Germany, was pictorially associated with the colour blue: Novalis elected the "blue flower," a dream apparition, as the leitmotif of his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (never completed); this symbol would become a synonym for a poetic/philosophical vision of the world which reconciles near and far, sensuous and rational, individual and universal. Readopted in the twentieth century, the vision was carried on, further developed, the colour blue once again playing a central role as a bearer of import in the work of many artists.

One of the latter, the artist Yves Klein, extended the conjunction of blue and white in two directions in extremis. On the one hand he advances into microscopic scales by no longer treating the blue pigment as a mere chemical/physical material but elevating it to a kind of semantic substance by means of the quasi-scientific name IKB (International Klein Blue). IKB is capable of harbouring its entire spiritual power even in the smallest doses. On the other hand Klein penetrates the spheres of gravity, declaring even outer space as a potential field of action for his art. In 1958, for example, in an ambivalent gesture of absurd exaggeration and at the same time sacral revaluation of technological progress, he proposed dying all future nuclear explosions monochrome blue⁵. From Klein's point of view, a supraglobal intervention of this kind would represent only an intermediate stage; he wanted to go further, much further – until the “sudden possibility” presented itself “of looking beyond the infinite”⁶.

The objectivity of colour

In Villinger's work the delocalisation of colour is real and measurable: The canvas stretchers of each of the four large-scale works maintain a certain distance from the respective wall by means of a simple construction. As surfaces, the blue and yellow colour extensions are not parts of still larger surfaces, are not – like Giotto's frescoes or Sol Le Witt's colour impregnations – incorporated into the overall appearance of the wall, but rather stand out against their architecturally constructed backgrounds as distinct units. Villinger emphasises the object character of his works, thus stressing their objectivity. The colour is neither symbol nor expression, trace nor reproduction of a subjective condition – it stands for itself. What we see is “paint as colour” (the title of two of his one-man exhibitions, also readable as *colour as colour* since “paint” and “colour” share a single term – “Farbe” – in German)⁷. This strictly objective relationship to the substance of his own art is reflected, among other places, in the precise specification of the pigments whose monochrome condensation the painter Villinger undertakes. The titles of the works are reduced to colour designations: *Krapprot* (madder red; 1985) or *Zinkweiß* (zinc white; 1996), *Hansascharlach* (hanse scarlet; 1988) or *Heliogrün* (heliogreen; 1985), *Pariserblau* (Parisian blue; 1991) or *Permanentrot Neutralrot* (permanent red neutral red; 1999).

By defining his paintings as objects, declaring them individual pieces, Villinger is making an indirect statement about the consistency and the presence of his paintings. Villinger's colour objects are bodies, not surfaces. Here the consistency of painting is carried on in corporeality, the paint not having been spread smoothly and evenly across the surface but allowed to dry in relief-like plasticity. It attains positively tangible, haptically experientiable form. This form, in turn, contains a reference to the visible signs of the artist's working process, the consciously manual character of the paint's application. For Villinger, painting is not a medial process, organised so as to generate some specific texture – be it realistic or abstract, impressionist or tachist – which then functions as a bearer of information. The application of the paint does not serve the composition of a non-verbal message intended for later translation into words, stories, didactic examples or questions. What it serves is the goal of attaining a state in which a particular green, red, white or – as in *Landshut* – one yellow and two kinds of blue begin to take effect, are perceived as significant entities, as opposed to simple coats of paint. The significance lies in the fact that the colour appears in its own right and not as an accidental (the blue of a blouse, the yellow of a railing) or, more precisely, the colour is there, it is present. The process of painting, the treatment of the canvas, the processing of the paint are decisive factors in the attainment of this – literally – e-laborated state and in the presence acquired by the colour.

The appearance of colour remains explicitly bound to the material. Yet the basic substance, a neutral mixture of pigment and binder, must be activated. Only through the expenditure of painterly effort and energy does the colour become recognisable as an aesthetic value and not merely as an ingredient added to a semitransparent acrylic mass. At the same time, the work factor serves to emphasise the object character of the paintings. These works have obviously emerged from hard labour, like a carving from a block of wood, a circumstance that also characterises them as objects and distinguishes them for example from the British *New Modernism* of the 1990s, at least with regard to its attributes of “dead pan flatness” and “banal or industrial colour”⁸. What is more, the corporeality of Villinger’s paintings is also linked to the painter’s physique because, on the one hand, Villinger chooses his formats according to whether he can cope with them without any special platforms or other structural aids and, on the other hand, because he conceives of painting as a self-contained act. Only as a self-contained act is it a logical, uniform act, which can neither be divided up (this much today, maybe a bit more tomorrow) or planned as by modern work rationalisation methods (daily from six to twelve). The colour field must be tilled at a single go. Thus the end of the work is always determined by its beginning; it cannot be postponed indefinitely. Once the painting process is underway, it must be taken through to its conclusion. This inner coherence between the production process, the demands of the material and the artistic result is a constitutive element in Villinger’s painting procedure, an aspect further emphasised in Landshut by the fact that not only the individual colour objects were each made in one casting, but the intervals between the working phases were kept to a minimum.

As already mentioned, Villinger’s reason for subjecting himself to this temporal self-discipline was to ensure the emergence of all four works under the same conditions. Neither the artist’s vegetative state nor his emotional mood, neither the lighting nor the room temperature – of decisive importance for the thorough drying of the picture – were to vary too greatly, particularly in view of the fact that Villinger worked *in situ* and the Fachhochschule was still a construction site at the time. The intent was to preclude the interpretation of the paintings as descriptions of momentary states, as a kind of monochrome sequel to Monet’s daylight studies. Naturally, Villinger had to accept the fact that the working conditions could not be reproduced with absolute precision, as in a laboratory, but only with approximate similarity. After all, the weather changes now and then, and although one’s own condition may be relatively stable it is nonetheless subject to day-to-day fluctuations, however minimal. Yet even such instances of chance and imponderability serve as evidence of the works’ objectivity. They confirm the real presence of the painting, for – along with the surface structure – they are the elements which indicate the primary contrast to mechanically produced colour surfaces.

In Villinger’s monochrome objects the paint only reveals itself as colour because it was opened up and developed by the painter’s intervention, a circumstance that remains consistently recognisable. The essential condition of Villinger’s art is the material handling of the paint (and not the artistic ability to produce three-dimensional effects, compositional tension, etc.). This close functional relationship between the paint and the work is the very core of Villinger’s painting. It is the decisive parameter, the factor which places these colour objects into the context of real objects and – with regard to the architecture – makes them immune to the kind of mimetic or referential leanings encountered in the suggestive repertoire of both historical and contemporary art: The typological scenes with which Giotto decorated the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua transcend the surface upon which they were painted. The lucid, expansive blue in which the artist embedded the biblical events is meant to draw the

gaze past any and all earthly limitations; it makes one forget that the scenes were painted on the run-of-the-mill plaster of a no less run-of-the-mill wall. The homogeneous monochrome surfaces designed by Günther Förg for a staircase in the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst also evade the material circumstances. Here it is the impression of colour that comes to the fore, the visual sensation which – heightened by complementary colour contrasts – seems to nullify the architectural framework.

Villinger has no truck with such transcendencies. His paintings are real objects in space. They are as concrete as a chair, a lectern, a platform. They thus overcome the discourse of the sublime pursued repeatedly by monochrome art, be it that of Barnett Newman, Yves Klein or Gerhard Merz. Whereas Jean François Lyotard identifies *instantaneity*⁹ as the actual content of Newman's painting, Villinger's efforts to realise colour are decidedly not intended to trigger specific visual experience. Lyotard compares the instant – as staged by Newman – with the bolt of lightning which separates, divides, establishes a difference in the midst of the indefinite. "Without this bolt of lightning there would be only nothingness or chaos. The bolt of lightning is there *the whole time* (like the instant) and it is never there. The world never stops beginning"¹⁰.

Painting as a repetition of Genesis, as a visual big bang: Here the rhetoric of overwhelming energy has been applied, a form of energy which Villinger's colour objects seem to contradict, already by virtue of their corporeality. "The realisation of colour"¹¹ undertaken by Villinger implies a fundamental rejection of every kind of narrative, metaphorical, symbolic, metaphysical, psychologising or idealising intention. Colour does not serve Villinger as an accumulator of meaning, which is discharged when it is looked at. Colour is the meaning. And the development of colour's semantic purity heightens its effect, although Villinger certainly takes into consideration the possibility that sensory or physiological retroaction can arise between the monochrome field and its human vis-à-vis. Because of the fact that the auditorium is used (among other things) for examinations, Villinger refrained from a *loud* chromatic intervention and shifted the colour from the long-waved segment of the spectrum (red, orange) to the area of approximately 440 to 495 nm. That is the wavelength which the human neuronal system interprets as blue.

Spatial arrangement

Control over the viewer's gaze is avoided in the Fachhochschule Landshut by the spatial arrangement of the four colour objects, as is unanticipated astonishment as a response to the gesture of aesthetic dominance. Due to the fact that they relate to one another, the objects form a self-contained unit: the two blue variations in the auditorium respond to the double yellow in the passageway, located opposite them. Yet within this simple, symmetrical, frontal arrangement, all connecting paths remain open; each viewer is free to form his own relationship to the monochrome elements. Villinger does not dictate any one situation as the ideal one. The two yellow rectangles are hung in the corridor, i.e. come quite close to the viewer or passer-by, a circumstance which might lead one to surmise parallels with Barnett Newman's variations on the question "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?". Because one cannot evade their effect when standing in front of them, the latter pictures were intended to appear limitless. In Villinger's installation for the Fachhochschule Landshut, no such visual constriction can evolve because, for one thing, one side of the corridor is made of glass. What is more, sliding doors allow the corridor to open

entirely onto a courtyard. The same applies to the opposite side of the installation. The division between interior and exterior can also be suspended in the auditorium, allowing various perception possibilities to be played through or tried out – from the microscopic close-up to the long-shot perspective from a distance.

The painter Robert Ryman theoretically projected such generous latitude into outer space: “I don’t know, but probably the paint would stay right where you put it and it would float around and you could see the front and the back and the edge of it and it would all make sense”¹². The backs of Villinger’s objects remain hidden and their locations are precisely determined, and everything that lies between these fixed parameters is left to the viewer’s autonomous conceptual reception. Yet depending upon the place he/she chooses to stand, a relationship to the four works is always automatically defined. (Close to yellow inevitably means far from blue; the same distance to all prevents a close-up view.) This alternating dependency between the viewer and the object can be expressed as a functional relationship in space: If Position A, then Perception P_A, if Position B, then Perception P_B, etc., where the index designates the respectively changing distances to the two blue and the two yellow paintings. Thus the basis is created for a model of the construction of reality. The four works which join to become a spatial installation in the Fachhochschule Landshut illustrate the relative conditionality of perception and cognition. In and of itself, each element represents a – more or less – clearly defined reality, but its meaning shifts and changes within the context of the other elements.

Like Minimal Art, non-representational painting – for which the term radical painting came to prevail in the mid 1980s¹³ – was declared the ascetic response to the obscene excess of stimuli and information typical of advanced consumer societies. In this context, Villinger’s work further enhances the discourse, for instead of withdrawing into a gesture of abstention it aims toward clarification. The presence of the colour objects within the overall complex of the installation in Landshut can therefore be understood as a continued allusion to the fact that even the globally amplified static of the data streams can be broken down into its individual components and transferred to the realm of analytical thought.

Michael Hübl

Notes

- 1 The following information is based on a conversation with the artist held in situ on May 16, 2001.
- 2 Konrad von Megenberg, *Das Buch der Natur, Die erste Naturgeschichte in deutscher Sprache*. Franz Pfeiffer (ed.), Hildesheim/Zürich/New York, 1994 (3rd reprint of the 1861 Stuttgart edition), p. 458.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Cf. Beate Bender, *Color caelestis. Anmerkungen zur Farbe Blau im Mittelalter*, in: Hans Gercke (ed.), *Blau: Farbe der Ferne*. Heidelberg, 1990, pp. 82 – 103.

- 5 Dominique Bozo et al., *Yves Klein*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1983, p. 334.
- 6 *Yves Klein, Des bases (fausses), principes, ... et condamnation de l'évolution*, in: *Soulèvement de la jeunesse*, Paris, 1952, No. 1, quoted from Bozo, pp. 180 – 182.
- 7 kunst komplex, Neuss, 1987 and Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus/Kunstforum, Munich, 1989.
- 8 “This new British Painting shares with Minimalism and Pop Art the anonymous look, detachment from the artist, dead pan flatness, banal or industrial colour, the rejection of composition and a commitment to the real material object.” – Brian Muller, *Real Art*, in: *Real Art*, exhibition catalogue, Southampton, 1995, Stedelijk Museum Aalst, 1995/96, Leeds City Art Gallery, 1996, pp. 6 – 23, here p. 7.
- 9 Jean François Lyotard, *Der Augenblick, Newman*, in: Karlheinz Barck et al. (ed.), *Aisthesis*, Leipzig, 1990, pp. 358 – 369, here p. 362 (German translation of *L'Instant, Newman*, first published in the exhibition catalogue of the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 1984).
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 See Eberhard Simons, *Die Vergegenwärtigung der Farbe. Zu den Arbeiten von Dieter Villinger und ihren Voraussetzungen als radikaler Malerei*, in: Reinhard Ermen (ed.), *Dieter Villinger. Die Anwesenheit der Farbe*, Munich/Cologne, 1986, pp. 13 – 20, here p. 15.
- 12 Robert Ryman, interview with Robert Storr on October 17, 1986 in: Galerie nächst St. Stephan (ed.), *Abstrakte Malerei aus Amerika und Europa*, Vienna, 1988, pp. 211 – 220, here p. 217.
- 13 On the origin of the term and the further discussion of it, cf. Stefan Kraus, *Joseph Marioni und die Ikonographie 'radikaler' Malerei*, in: Michael Fehr (ed.), *Die Farbe hat mich. Positionen zur nicht-gegenständlichen Malerei*, Essen, 2000, pp. 153 – 156.

German-English translation by EGLS, Judith Rosenthal