

# Bernd Ribbeck

**Bernd Ribbeck**, born 1974 in Cologne, studied at the academies of Munich, Berlin, and Düsseldorf from 1995 to 1999. He lives and works in Berlin. He received the DAAD travel grant in 2005. His largely small-format paintings reflect the tension field between materiality and spirituality. His vocabulary of forms is oriented on historical models, for example the painter Hilma af Klint or the Expressionist artist group The Glass Chain which consisted primarily of architects.

## »Pure Reason Must Never Prevail«

**Ulrike Groos:** What significance does Rudolf Steiner have for your work?

**Bernd Ribbeck:** The energy with which Rudolf Steiner created is breathtaking. Even though I cannot follow anthroposophical ideas, the entire Steiner phenomenon nevertheless shows how unconventional forms can be generated when they are developed within an autonomous construct of ideas.

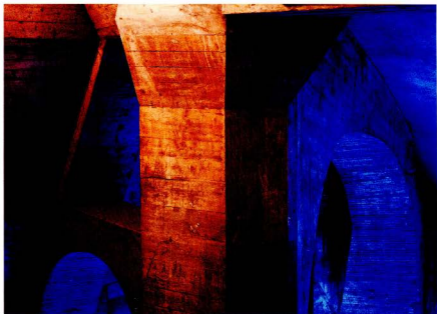
I have long been interested in such exponents of modernism who did not fit into the functionalist and rationalist scheme or budgeted with their forms in the direction of reduction, but allowed things to proliferate instead. Such artists often had ties to the Theosophical Society and have often also been guided by occult practices. The spiritual atmosphere where the obscurest ideas have a chance to be heard and at least followed as far the approach is concerned always give me goose bumps. There was always a door open to a utopia.

I have received much stimulation for my work from the time when Rudolf Steiner was also active. A person who plays a very large role in the process is the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint who was of course also a member of the Anthroposophical Society. For me, the channels through these artists perceived psychic phenomena no longer lie open, but the testimony they provided about their experiences with their artworks are very important for me. That is why I also reject the attempts to dismiss all of it as humbug.



er. Tocotronic had a big hit a few years ago with a song entitled *Pure Vernunft darf niemals siegen* [Pure Reason Must Never Prevail]. While I am not a fan of this band, I found the song very suited to my own stance. I would prefer seeing Steiner's approach as a poetic synthesis of the arts; I just like its impulse and its determination to change the world. I find it epistemically ludicrous; it just cannot be believed that way, or rather: There are too many of Steiner's reflections which one can simply just believe, which can perhaps prevail through charisma and the organization of the Anthroposophical Society and help those in search of meaning fill certain deficits. I therefore prefer taking it than art. I see my role as an artist very differently than artists did in Steiner's day. They thought more about shaping the world of tomorrow with their ideas and works. I do not see today's art that way. However, I do not see it pessimistically because one can move about freely and one can seize on ideas that already existed and examine, combine and continue thinking about them in terms of their potentials. This can be done in a very differentiated fashion because the concepts of art are just as differentiated as regards their possibilities as their means of expression. One can move about constructively and speculate about intellectual added value.

**UG:** Your letter to the curator is quoted at the beginning of the exhibition catalog *Zeichen und Wunder*. As you have told me, this formulation from 2006 is still valid for you today, four years later, whereby you would phrase the language more clearly today: »We will not shape a world and do not want to do directly. Thinking artistically is sufficient to start off with; perhaps something new will come of it, but not if it is to harmonize from the outset with a new world view, but as a sure-fire thing in the hope that it agreeably goes off course and forms wonderful bastards.« As you already made clear, you decisively differ from the approach taken by the so-called Steiner artists who wanted to change the world with their art. Can you explain more precisely your view about what present-day art wants and is able to do?



**BR:** Of course, I cannot speak generally for present-day art. But over and above the above-mentioned «intellectual added value,» I still believe in a «modern sense» that things will go on and that, if you gather up the courage to build a form construct or even an entire cosmos, really new, previously unimaginable forms can be created. The term «bastard» I used in the above-mentioned quote was intended to show that contrary things can also be brought together and unite behind ideological frontlines. A bastard is furthermore, of course, also a hybrid that is perceived to be dangerous, and therein lay for me also the chance that undreamt of forces can be concealed in the work of art and soar «at the wrong moment» as it were.

In a manner of speaking, I think that art has again found its way back to itself. Disconnected from its various forms of appearance, it is deployed in a capitalist fetish cult, but in a simplified form. I believe that many artworks also conceal numerous mysteries over and above their characteristics as just such a fetish object which take much longer to get a hold on than its prominence in the circus in fact allows. An artwork of course still takes note of things in a very individual manner; the good thing is that while there are aesthetic theories, there is naturally no «linguistics of art.» While artworks possess a certain conclusiveness as things may stand, it is only «clear» to me in a single case why they appear as such. There is no general rule and at its core, it is not reproducible. The reason for my affinity to works of art that have made use of such concealed channels as occult practices rests precisely in this point.

**UG: Are there writings by Steiner that you are particularly interested in?**

**BR:** In a preliminary remark to the publication of his 1914 lecture «Wege der geistigen Erkenntnis und der Erneuerung künstlerischer Weltanschauung» [The Path of Spiritual Knowledge and the Renewal of the Artistic Worldview] edited in 1935 by Marie Steiner, the «principles of the Anthroposophical Society» from 1923 are quoted as follows: «Printed as manuscript for members of the School of Spiritual Science, Goetheanum. No one is considered competent to judge the content, who has not acquired - through the School itself or in a manner recognized by the School as equivalent - the requisite preliminary knowledge. Other opinions will be disregarded, to the extent that the authors of such works will not enter into a discussion about them.»

This remark can lead one to assume that anthroposophy is a Gnostic teaching. But the idea of a Gnostic teaching interests me as regards painting. My feelings about anthroposophy are similar to the way I see religion as a practice

of the imagination. The substance is not the most important thing for me in the process, but rather the way things have been imagined. For me as an artist, it is best recognizable based on the pictures, drawings, buildings or designs that spawn a spiritual current. But I have my difficulties in reading Rudolf Steiner's writings.

**UG: You have therefore read texts by Steiner. What impresses you about them, what bothers you? And can you also name specific texts you have read?**

**BR:** It would be an exaggeration to claim that I have read complete texts. It is rather the case that I have browsed around here and there. The most in-depth is the transcription of a lecture given in Christiania [the present-day Oslo] on May 18, 1923 entitled «Anthroposophie und Kunst» [published in English under the title «The Arts and Their Mission»].

Steiner argues in this text that the work of art has its own spiritual quality which can only appear through the means of art and which can only be experienced directly, but cannot be explained. «One can be spiritual in forms, colors, tones, as well as words.» Steiner thus believes that art is capable of very autonomous achievements beyond the purely rational and I also like the fact that he additionally places experience over interpretation. But subsequent to this lecture, he also construed very specific characteristics regarding architecture, sculpture, and painting and even went so far as to attribute concrete characteristics to certain colors. In the process he either established a new symbolism, which he did not want to do because in fact it would not have been direct enough to satisfy the demands he made on art, or he sets up a certain truth that one can only accept if one follows him exactly in all matters. But I much prefer all the qualifying approaches which art history subsequently had.

**UG: In what areas do your artistic thoughts come into direct contact with Steiner's ideas on architecture, design, social matters (education, the economy, and the law), the human being and the cosmos, on nature, the relationship of the crystalline to the organic?**

**BR:** In Rudolf Steiner's case, it was primarily his architecture, his blackboard drawings, and his designs as well. I am fascinated by Steiner's notion that the work of art is not to be comprehended as symbolic of certain ideas, but that the spiritual can be directly experienced in the materials and their assemblage without it having to be translated.

**UG: A central thought in your works is the design of new pictorial spaces formed from structures and patterns which you draw using such simple writing utensils as ballpoint pens or pigmented markers. Are there echoes of Steiner in these patterns, his writings on aesthetics, color and painting or his thoughts on the significance of the cosmos?**

**BR:** I unfortunately have to pass there because I of course never work with concrete references, neither in the sense that I «get into the spirit» of something nor in the distanced form of a quotation. I naturally look at many things, but in the end I design everything anew, even in the cases when I might design something again that already exists. The important thing for me is that my own cosmos emerges about from it.

**UG: Where do you locate the content of the artwork in the spectrum between material and mental substance? What do you think about Steiner's concept of metamorphosis and eversion, i.e. his descriptions of a special relationship between inside and outside, spirit and material?**

**BR:** The material characteristics of my works are very present through the manner in which they are made. I use a rigid support consisting of medium-density fiberboard instead of canvas, thus producing a small panel with an object-like quality. This material furthermore enables me to work on the picture in a more intense, physical way, for example the scraping off of sections of paint or the sanding of the surface. The traces produced in this manner are elements of the picture. They can recall a notch or a scratch on a piece of furniture or also lead to a transparency of overlapping surfaces, providing spatial depth to the picture which leads away from the material surface. The same is also true of the graphic materials I employ on the upper pictorial layers. They are present in their



constructedness by means of the hatchings on the one hand and also introduce an artificial tonality which additions enables spatialities to come about in turn through its contrasts on the other.

I principally regard the fact that ideas can be captured in material form in painting as one of its extraordinary characteristics. But I assume, however, that the ideas have grown over the course of cultural history, and I see it that way particularly as regards art. If I understand Steiner's ideas correctly, he comments on the aspect of the growing up of spirit in his work, but it is consistently refers to a cosmic truth. I believe rather in the part of truth that I can take part in shaping and that is what sums up the »mental substance« for me. I would prefer to set aside the question whether they uncover metaphysical connections; much more essential, I believe, is how artworks link connections in a constructive sense.

That does not necessarily lead to rationalism for me because one can certainly make recourse to psychic

ideas which, as I showed above based on historical personages, lead to their own results. Important for my work is the discrepancy that often comes about between something which is being represented and how something is being represented. I made a group of works, for example, whose starting point was the representations of planetary systems as seen in atlases in which, for instance, the interaction between the earth, sun and moon is portrayed in charts that are often limited to three colors showing the celestial bodies as circles. I am moved by the relationship between the simplicity of the chart and the proportions and balances of power that in fact still exceed our power of imagination. That is not only simply laughable, but our power of imagination comes about in the space that gapes open there.

Painting, as it represents rather a fringe area of the fine arts, also resembles a Gnostic teaching in the meanwhile. You can always see something in the pictures, but much first becomes visible through the comparison with other works of art—an artistic knowledge that is not generally widespread first provides a differentiated access. The notion of esotericism also has subversive qualities: The obvious, most easily conveyable does not prevail in the end, but that which complexly fashioned instead.

The interview between Bernd Ribbeck and Ulrike Groos was carried out in December 2009.