

CHANGING THE WORLD BY ILLUSION ...

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WHEN I PAINT AND CONSTRUCT / I GO FOR VISUAL ARTICULATION // IN THE PROCESS I HARDLY EVER THINK OF EITHER ABSTRACTION / OR EXPRESSION / AND AM NOT ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ISMS / NOR FOR MOMENTARY FASHIONS ...

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At first sight Claudia Wieser's room installations, drawings and objects don't seem to have that much in common with the rather small images painted and drawn by Bernd Ribbeck. This impression changes, however, as soon as one compares Claudia Wieser's 2005 mirror object *Le Vertige* with Bernd Ribbeck's picture *untitled* dating from the same year. This immediately brings common features to light in formal terms. The enormous, wall-mounted mirror object is like a mosaic assembled from small mirrors cut to triangular shapes and mounted at various different angles, so that their individual surfaces reflect the surroundings from changing perspectives. These mirror axes are repeated in a fixed sequence, and with them also whatever they happen to reflect. The result is an abstract pattern dominated by ascending jagged triangles.

The principle of repeating various angles of vision creates a rhythm that simulates infinite movement and spatial depth. While what appears to be the mirror "surface" is actually somewhat three-dimensional, the depths suggested by their reflections remain an illusion, an interplay of optical make-believe also involving the viewer, whose every movement in front of the mirror unleashes an almost kaleidoscopic flowing, turning and overlapping of various views not only reflecting the space, but also at times the viewers themselves. The firework of perspectives thus unfolded makes any real space and time coordinates disappear.

Jagged, ascending triangles also provide the basic pattern in Bernd Ribbeck's 2005 piece *untitled*. In the rather small space of this picture they are arranged behind each other or next to one another in rows, condensing in geometric elements such as lozenges, vertically projecting triangles and rectangular blocks. The apparent depth this creates almost lends the picture a three-dimensional character, with the foreground and background alternating at a rhythm that generates the illusion of the image opening out in front of the viewer's eyes in a temporality which knows neither end nor beginning. Ribbeck paints his small, industrially manufactured medium density fibre boards with acrylic colours – most recently at times also watercolours. Once applied, these colours are then often washed or scratched off again, overpainted and scratched off once more – lending his pictures a weathered look, a hint of nostalgia that is

quite intentional. Some of the pictures are also drawn with a simple ballpoint pen, using the most delicate cross-hatches, or with a felt marker. But what all his works have in common are their geometrical shapes. Circles, triangles or rectangles, cross-hatched in colour or painted with a brush, intersect, meet, or overlap. They form encoded floating worlds of cosmic infinity and unbounded depth. This illusionist depth of the images and the temporality endlessly unfolding on their surface are practically typical of Bernd Ribbeck's pictures. Similarly to Wieser's reflecting mirror, they constitute an illusion that, although brought about in a playful manner, is somehow also quite deliberate.

And that is the true common feature linking Wieser's and Ribbeck's works, over and beyond their formal aspects: a playfully created illusionism.

In her so far most elaborate installation entitled *Der Innere Kreis* (2009), however, Wieser was not so much striving for illusionism as at changing the environment's atmosphere. She had an entire room of the Oldenburger Kunstverein painted black before attaching black tile elements permeated by brightly coloured shapes to its walls, once again in a fashion reminiscent of a mosaic, creating delicate geometric formations, floating triangles and circles with a nostalgic ambience. Not accidentally so, as Wieser had taken her inspiration for this interior design from a music room created by Bauhaus artist Wassily Kandinsky in 1931.

Kandinsky and the other Bauhaus artists had also aimed at change, to be brought about by art. In their works they believed to be able to bridge the gap between life and art. This utopian idea of life becoming art and art becoming life was to be taken up by many subsequent modernist art movements. But to be able to banish the everyday into art, modernist theory felt obliged to strip it of everything inauthentic and false, to avoid any kind of illusion. Especially because art had always been suspect, owing to its capacity of counterfeiting other worlds.

War was declared against illusionism in art. Beguilement was suspected behind anything and everything – with US-American art theorist Clement Greenberg even presupposing risks in the third dimension itself. Dis-illusionment was the order of the day. At first

with the help of brushes, and later with technical or even electronic devices such as cameras, modernists believed to be able to drive the illusiveness out of the everyday, in order to let the real shine up in its true identity. This led to a habit French philosopher Alain Badiou terms a "passion for the real", a passion he considers decisive for the 20th century in his book *The Century*: in the name of dis-illusionment, everything and everybody was taken apart, broken down, cut up, lit up, x-rayed and disassembled – but also destroyed in terms of its identity. In Badiou's opinion, this is the root of destructiveness, also and especially in art. "Conceived in its contingent absoluteness, the real is never real enough for not suspecting it to be a sham. The passion for the real is perforce accompanied by suspicion."¹ And further: "This means that our century, stirred up by the passion for the real, was in every respect, not only in politics, a century of destruction."²

But also according to Badiou, the art of the 20th century featured one exception: Russian artist Kazimir Malevich. Following his 1915 *Black Square on White Ground* Malevich in 1918 painted a *White Square on White Ground*, a picture Badiou considers the key work for approaching the everyday in a non-destructive manner. But why? "Because instead of an identity, one treats the real as a chasm right from the start",³ says Badiou. Because even the white square and the white ground are separated by a distance, a chasm where illusion lurks, as minimal as it may be. Malevich based his pictorial concept on Russian icons. In contrast to modern image concepts, icons are aware of this uncloseable chasm, which is why they categorically refuse to strive for any identity with the real right from the start. The world appearing in an icon is hence a counterpart to the everyday. But what remains of modernist utopia today, once Badiou has revealed its penchant for destruction? The ability to imagine other worlds, but over and beyond any destructive striving for identity. And indeed also the western parts of Europe had since the beginning of the 20th century seen repeated attempts at constructing such worlds. The theosophy of Russian-born Helena Blavatsky, who was a decisive influence on Kandinsky, needs to be numbered amongst them, as well as its continuation in the anthroposophical society lead by Rudolf Steiner. They furthermore included some of

the proposals made by the expressionist architects Bruno Taut and Erich Mendelsohn as much as other individual contributions, such as that of Swedish painter Hilma af Klint or the healer and painter Emma Kunz, working in Switzerland.

For Wieser and Ribbeck all these schemes are a further source for their artistic inspiration, besides the Bauhaus utopia. This is because they are also engaged in trying to wring a world from emptiness that has no counterpart in the reality of everyday experience, as Kandinsky, Steiner, af Klint and Kunz had already done before them. An illusion outlawed by modernism? Certainly. But Badiou, attacking these modern utopias because of their destructive traits, says that "emancipatory politics always consist of making appear possible what is held to be impossible from within the situation".⁴ Of course, but how can the impossible become possible? By an act of unfettered imagination. Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century thinker once again frequently quoted today, also by Badiou, already knew: a truly unfettered imagination is also always an act of intentional self-deception. No unfettered imagination without illusion, then, but without a free imagination there would also be no change.

1_Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Polity 2007, p. 68

2_Ibid., p. 70.

3_Ibid., p. 72.

4_Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Verso 2002., p. 21.