

Bernd Ribbeck is an artist who in many respects resists the trends and expectations of the art scene. Small-format, restricted to the medium of painting, technically complex and sophisticated, Ribbeck's art does not conform to what dominates contemporary biennales and trade fairs. Yet the small-format paintings by Bernd Ribbeck pack a punch. Incredibly dense, they seem to radiate from within. They are created in a long process of intense work and revision. For the works on MDF, the artist applies several layers of paint and then partially sands them off. The forms literally peel themselves out of the ground of the painting, are exposed, overlay one another, and shine iridescently out of the depth of the picture. Ribbeck subsequently reworks the sanded out forms with a ballpoint pen and a color marker. At first sight, the fine lines of the ballpoint pen can hardly be distinguished from the scratch marks caused by the sanding process and display the character of the fine needle scratches of an etching. Due to the numerous overlying techniques and carefully coordinated colors, the small formats achieve a density and a radiance that fills the entire room.

The works on paper are created using a different technique: however, it is hardly less multilayered. Ribbeck generously paints the geometric forms with tusche and then rinses the color off again with water, after which he applies a new color and rinses it off until the different colors begin to shimmer and the dried edges of the color surfaces reveal the subtlest geometric patterns.

All of the compositions are based on exact geometric calculations and color coordinations, which Bernd Ribbeck time and again dissolves through the coincidence of the working process. In Ribbeck's work, the two-dimensional severity of geometric abstraction repeatedly combines with an impalpable, irrational mystic atmosphere consisting of color and light. Construction and deconstruction, mathematical calculation and chance, rationality and spirituality are the contradictory poles that are inseparably bound together and achieve a fascinating tension within the works.

Since the turn of the millennium, a pause has made itself felt in the academies and in the studios of many of the artists born in the seventies. They do not take up the great gestures of the eighties and their teachers or the sociocritical contemporary observations of the nineties. They draw far back on the beginnings of modernism and search for forgotten artists, marginal figures, and worldviews in the storerooms of history that the rational, materialistic, and mechanized twenty-first century apparently no longer has to offer. Art history is not understood linearly, according to which the now is based on what lies directly before it in terms of time. Rather, it is recognized more as a repository or treasure chest that holds a great deal of forgotten or insufficiently appreciated material in store that is worth readdressing and

tying into. This historical reinterpretation did not remain the sole interests of artists. Curators also increasingly undertook a reevaluation of the artistic positions of the past against the backdrop of the present—or vice versa. Massimiliano Gioni succeeded in doing this most comprehensively with his presentation *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* at the Venice Biennale.

Bernd Ribbeck was also interested in the intellectual environment out of which abstraction in art developed in the early twentieth century. Theosophy and spiritism had a major influence on the art of this period. The centuries-old teaching of theosophy is an attempt to recognize the world as God's development and appreciate it in mystic intuition. Pantheistically, God is not considered a person but something divine and spiritual that is to be equated with the cosmos and nature and thus existent in all things. At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the theosophy of the spiritist Helena Blavatsky, which was characterized by Buddhism, was particularly influential, which led to the founding of a number of Theosophical Societies. The secretary general of the German section, established in 1902, was Rudolf Steiner, who initiated the Anthroposophical Society in 1912.¹ Wassily Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" of 1912 was influenced by theosophy, and Piet Mondrian also found his way to abstraction by way of theosophy.² The Swedish artist Hilma af Klint was a member of the Theosophical and later the Anthroposophical Society and developed her art in a direct examination of the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Alongside theosophy, occultism and spiritism exercised an influence on numerous artists at the dawn of the modern era, which was extensively presented in the pioneering exhibition *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (Occultism and the Avant-Garde) at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in 1995. Artists ranging from František Kupka and Wilhelm Morgner to Robert and Sonia Delaunay, to name only a few, sought to depict the extrasensory and the impalpable by means of art. And thus it is actually not individual art-historical positions but a worldview and part of the history of thought that posed an alternative to the materialism of the period and which laid the foundation for Bernd Ribbeck's artistic work.

If one compares the art-historical reference positions with works by Bernd Ribbeck, it quickly becomes clear that these were only initial starting points that Ribbeck has meanwhile transferred into an independent and multilayered oeuvre against a shared intellectual background. In fact, with his numerous revisions and overlays he seems to be testing the aesthetic of the modern era for its suitability in the present and is hence creating a complex basis for his further work.

Ribbeck's color and formal language changed after about 2011. The mostly axisymmetrical geometric works with

natural, coalescing shades of color are replaced by an extensive series in which each painting is defined by a central, circular motif. The circular motifs, reminiscent of targets, rigorously set themselves off from white or black backgrounds. Whereas the earlier works exhibit analogies to the beginning of the modern period, these colorful circular motifs instead seem to have their origin in Pop Art. But here, too, one recognizes the painterly paradox that is so typical for Ribbeck: the simple circular motif seems worn out, traces of sanding call their clear placement into question, traces of color behind them become apparent, the edges of the circular form are frayed. Here, too, it is the contrast between the affirmative decisiveness of the simple form and its simultaneous scrutiny and dissolution that determine the character of the works.

In retrospect, the circle series produced in 2012 seems like a sidestep for the purpose of arriving at the most recent works, which were created from 2014 onwards. The paintings are defined by isometrically arranged compositions, in part abstract, in part with clear references to architecture, such as arcade arches. The extensive use of bright colors, as Ribbeck had begun doing in the circular works, now corresponds with the ballpoint pen lines in earlier works. The isometric pictorial structure permits a more complex composition out of overlying visual and vanishing axes. What were originally compositions that were arranged centrally and axisymmetrically now pursue different directions and in part gain an ornamental character. The esoteric color space of earlier works is replaced by a contradictory play consisting of three-dimensional, geometric spatial illusion and its dissolution through the overlaying and intermeshing of two-dimensional color surfaces. This newly acquired compositional freedom is furthermore highlighted in the exhibition at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum by the exhibition architecture designed by Bernd Ribbeck in collaboration with the artist Raphael Danko. Whereas the works produced up until 2010 are presented in an intimate spatial construction with colored walls and diffuse light, the most recent works are hung in an installation made of arcade arches that seem to stem directly from the paintings. The exhibition architecture not only constitutes a suitable setting for the new series, but itself becomes a painterly spatial composition. The present publication and the two exhibitions at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum and the Museum Haus Konstruktiv are therefore a summary of Bernd Ribbeck's present oeuvre as well as a prelude to a new, promising work phase.

1: Cf. Helmut Zander, "Theosophie und Anthroposophie," in *Die Lebensreform—Einführung zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900* vol. 1, ed. Kai Buchholz et al., exh. cat. Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt (Darmstadt, 2001), pp. 422–26.
2: *Ibid.*, p. 425, and Hiko Pockwarr, "Abstraktion als Suche nach neuer Geistigkeit," in *Die Lebensreform—Einführung zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900* vol. 2, ed. Kai Buchholz et al., exh. cat. Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt (Darmstadt, 2001), pp. 65–80.

Cosmic radiance, kaleidoscopic visions, crystalline cathedrals composed of lines and color: many things in Bernd Ribbeck's painting may seem harmonious and well-tempered in an almost sacred way. Yet within this painting are united absolute opposites and extremes. Ribbeck's paintings can be at once spiritual and material, total internalization and total surface. They alternate between systems of explaining the world and abstract compositions. One can imagine how they date back through the modern era, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, into an archaic past in which planets and entire solar systems were born. Or mere circles? It may be that Ribbeck's paintings radiate in advance into an abstract world devoid of people, into an approaching, futurist time for which there is to date neither images nor a language—but can it be that this imaginary future is currently taking place as an ornamental design for a quilt?

Even though classic modernism may time and again appear in this painting—from Lionel Feininger's church paintings to Paul Klee's abstract-expressive late oeuvre—the true patron saints in Ribbeck's art are outsiders: proponents of a geometric abstraction that does not primarily develop in a dialogue with art history but out of a deep inner, spiritual, or even delusional experience. From the very beginning of his artistic career in the late nineties, the focus of his interest has therefore been autodidacts, kners, spiritists. All of them have been situated outside the modernist canon all of their lives: the Swiss healer and artist Emma Kunz (1892–1963), who produces her geometric drawings with the use of a pendulum on graph paper. The American outsider artist Forrest Bess (1911–1977), who was inspired by alchemy and the ideas of C. G. Jung, and who had himself surgically transformed into a hermaphrodite and captures his visions in archaic abstractions. The Swedish artist and occultist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), who, driven by her visions, paints the first geometric-abstract paintings in art history between 1906 and 1907, even before Kandinsky. What unites all of these positions is that in its formal language, this abstraction—despite its urgency or even obsessiveness—is altogether "modern" and actually preempts tendencies of the established "avant-garde."

Concrete motifs or engagement with the biographies of these artists resonate to a lesser extent in Ribbeck's painting from the first decade of the millennium. Rather, it is the search for new strategies in painting that release themselves from solidified institutional discourses and increasingly react to the heated global art market. In view of the situation at the time, even his choice of small and medium formats, the "modesty" of his media (medium-density fiberboard [MDF], ballpoint pen), and the simplified, meditative hanging of his works can be seen as a kind of political statement. It is the period of booming art factories; of smooth, productoid surfaces; of large-format paintings. Jeff Koons and Damien

Hirst redefine the bling in art and produce more and more elaborate Pop sculptures. Relational Art, with artists such as Tobias Rehberger or Philippe Parreno, transforms museums into clubs, lounges, and playgrounds. Under the banner of revived figuration, the so-called New Leipzig School, with Neo Rauch at the forefront, produces dreamlike, opulent history painting, in most cases in gigantic, overwhelming formats. Yet a strange emptiness is taking hold in the midst of this atmosphere, and the longing for something authentic, radical, less calculable and calculating is becoming palpable.

This becomes particularly noticeable when examining the phenomenon of Hilma af Klint, who has interested Ribbeck since his student days. While her pictures had been well known as early as since the mid-eighties in insider circles and especially among artists and were presented in thematic exhibitions such as *The Spiritual in Art* (1986), in her case the fate of numerous "outsiders" to merely serve in exhibitions as a footnote to institutionally sanctioned art history did not really change until 2006. The Camden Arts Center in London presents af Klint in the celebrated solo exhibition *Art After the Universe* and introduces her as an independent position into a discourse that at the time had already been seething in contemporary art for some time.

Since the beginning of the millennium, it looks as if the established art world and the increasingly heated art market would actually open themselves up for forgotten or suppressed modernism, for outsiders and autodidacts. As early as 1999, Udo Kittelmann, the current director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, collaborated with the gallery owner Susanne Zander to curate the show *Obsession* at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. Bernd Ribbeck, who was studying painting in Düsseldorf at the time, also went to see it. The exhibition presented many now high-profile outsider stars: Morton Bartlett (1909–1992), Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983), Henry Darger (1892–1973), and Paul Humphrey (1931–1999). Darger became an international phenomenon with the retrospective at New York's PS1 in 2001 curated by Klaus Diesenbach. This was only surpassed by af Klint, who has been acknowledged as a pioneer of abstraction since the retrospectives in 2013 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Hamburger Bahnhof.

At the start of the millennium, however, another discourse was relevant for Ribbeck's painting, one that challenged modernism's concept of formalism. In 2004, Yilmaz Dziewior not only critically addresses the legacy of modernism with his exhibition *Formalismus: Moderne Kunst* (Formalism: Modern Art) at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, he unites a number of artists, including painters such as Tomma Abts, Markus Amm, and Anselm Reyle, who represent a new tendency according to which the biographical, political reflection on gender or cultural identity can by all means manifest in abstraction, in

the choice of material. The folding of a sheet, the drawing of a line, the use of a specific fabric or pencil can be gestures charged with content or poetry. At the same time, opposition is forming against the notion of purist formalism as postulated by, for example, Color Field Painting, Hard Edge, or Minimal Art.

Ribbeck's oeuvre addresses this thinking. For him, the choice of MDF as a ground is also important, or the decision to carry out the hatching on his color fields with ballpoint pens or pigment markers. Yet the approach in his painting distinguishes itself fundamentally from many of the positions cited in the current debates on formalism. Because they continue to argue within an academic system of reference and level criticism against the institution out of the institution. By contrast, Ribbeck is interested in formalist thinking that has nothing whatsoever to do with the modernist canon that wrote it.

The early paintings with which Ribbeck became known early in the millennium resemble hybrids from both spheres—the spiritual, visionary world of the outsiders and the abstract formal language of modernism. One of his untitled works from 2003 is similar to a psychedelic version of Kazimir Malevich's iconic *Black Square* (1915), which constitutes the gate, so to speak, through which abstract modernism entered the twentieth century. In Ribbeck's case there is not only one square but many staggered one behind the other that glow in different colors. They also recall the famous squares by the Bauhaus master Josef Albers, however they have begun to totter. Together they constitute something like a cosmic tunnel into another, otherworldly dimension, a still unknown space. With regard to Ribbeck's oeuvre, the proximity to Suprematism is interesting in several respects. Like Malevich, who in the Futurist exhibition *0.10* in 1915 mounted the square at right angles below the ceiling, which in a Russian room was the place for an icon, like an abstract placeholder, Ribbeck also sees his works not only as paintings but also as objects that correspond with the space. Like Malevich, he is interested in the auratic charge of these objects. While the illusionist space is dispensed with, in Ribbeck's painting and during the installation of his paintings on colored walls it often has to do with the question of the spatial conditions, about the relationship between foreground and background—in the painting and outside of the painting.

In Malevich's Suprematism, the spiritual experience of transcendence and endlessness connects with the experience of abstract space. In the paintings he began producing from 2006 onwards with circular and spherical forms, which are reminiscent of stars and planets or abstracted figures, Ribbeck addresses Hilma af Klint's abstraction and sense of space with the same earnestness. With the spiritist he chooses a coordinate for his painting that alludes to a point that is readily swept under the carpet—the fact that rational

modernism also definitely has its roots in the irrational: "The relationship between art and spiritism and occultism was neglected for a long time, even though in many cases artists had made unequivocal statements to this effect," writes art historian Astrid Kurt in 1998 in her essay *Moderne Kunst und Spiritismus* (Modern Art and Spiritism). "The reason for this may include the fear that by reappraising the occult foundations of modernism, its modernity could be relativized. The interest in occultism in artists' circles was in most cases a reaction to bourgeois enlightenment and bourgeois society, in which, however, occultism was likewise received with interest, albeit under different circumstances."¹ As Kurt explains, artists were above all fascinated by the utopian potential of spiritism. Moreover, the development of abstract art in around 1910 was inseparably connected with the occultically motivated anticipation of a turn toward the spiritual, which was to be accelerated through painting.

If one imagines the construct of modernism to be a radiant cathedral of the functional and progressive principally built by men and which holds art, architecture, design, music, film, photography, and literature in the spirit of the Bauhaus, then Ribbeck devotes himself to the carpenter's workshops and the wilderness in front of it, from which established art history isolated itself for nearly the duration of the twentieth century. This undergrowth is mad, feminine, folkloristic, spiritual. It ranges from the visions of outsiders and the mentally ill to folk art and occultism.

And yet Ribbeck's art constitutes anything but an attempt to restore belief systems or lost originality. On the contrary: for him it is a matter of thinking further and building, lying in with what has not been thought through to the end, not brought to fruition—with all of these imaginary and gigantic blueprints of the world and utopias, be it Hilma af Klint's cosmologies or the designs never realized in their enormous dimensions by the representatives of revolutionary French architecture such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806) and Étienne-Louis Boullée (1720–1799). The geometric forms, which tower like huge fans or stylized butterfly wings in Ribbeck's paintings, likewise appear to be inspired by this architecture as well as the churches from the Art Nouveau period and Expressionism, such as, for example, designs by the Belgian Joseph Diongre (1878–1963) or the prominent German architect Dominikus Böhm.

In Ribbeck's case, this proximity between modern and sacred is not a confession of faith or spirituality but something more like a speculation. One can compare him with a medium that holds a session and conjures up spirits without really knowing whether there is an otherworld or higher powers. "I would more likely describe my mode of behavior as a modern one that also seeks to establish order in work," says Ribbeck. "But I have no fixed worldview from which this order results—like the Futurists, for example, who proclaimed that everything is

influenced by dynamism and then painted dynamic paintings. I lack that in this concrete form. For me it has something to do with the desire to act constructively and painterly develop specific orders over the years. This is also how I understand earlier theories of order, for instance that of the nineteenth-century spiritists or a healer such as Emma Kunz: above all as an aesthetic or formal experience that can simultaneously have a spiritual dimension.” Thus he is also fascinated by the paintings and illustrations by the Shakers, an American religious community that was founded in Britain in the eighteenth century, who became known for their simple, nearly monastic congregational life, their handicraft, and their clear, minimalist furniture designs. The Shakers used grids, circles, and rectangular and triangular forms for their handicraft for the purpose of producing visual harmony, which they perceived as the expression of an inner and divine order that was then intended to affect the viewer.

Ribbeck's open stance is definitely political as well. Not only that it is women and outsiders to whom he makes reference; his painterly practice also consciously takes a stand against dominant or overpowering gestures that stake a specific claim. His paintings do not take sides but move sensitively along the boundaries between disciplines, movements, and ideologies. This also holds true for his relationship to the discourses in art and painting. When Ribbeck began studying painting in the nineties, in the midst of Institutional Critique, this medium was considered outdated and exhausted. Within the scene, painters are seen as conservative, outside the current discourse, or even reactionary. Much like the American painter Laura Owens at the California Institute of the Arts developed a very individual, conceptual painting in the mid nineties, Ribbeck's practice also responds to the art businesses' dogmas. Like for Owens, for him the areas of applied art, myths, and folk art, which are more likely to be frowned upon in the academic discourse, give him inspiration. Yet unlike Owens, who makes a mockery of the male-coded myths and genius cults of Abstract Expressionism with humor, changes of style, and a wide variety of techniques while by all means referring to painters such as Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen or the modernist Francis Picabia, Ribbeck completely dispenses with the strategy of irony.

Rather, he finds distance to the genius cult, to solidified institutional discourses in the notion that art is the expression of an internal development process. “I perceive painting as a practice that is very connected to one's own existence. One expresses oneself very directly when one manually inscribes things on the material, on the object. If one practices this for a certain amount of time, one builds one's own house, one's own formal construction. One is the master in one's own home, so to speak, and constantly decides what is taken in or thrown out. What develops is perhaps something like a basic element, a core, that one first recognizes over the years.”

Just how variable this formal construction is becomes apparent in the interconnected and grid-like building structures that Ribbeck constructs in his most recent paintings. Whereas he previously completely dispensed with illusionist pictorial space, Ribbeck now quite undogmatically turns the tables and elevates it to become the subject of his painting. The minimalist structures in the paintings call Giotto to mind, but also Brutalist and postmodern buildings or the style of Italian fascism. Above all, however, one associates them with the oeuvre of one of the most reproduced and imitated artists of the twentieth century: M. C. Escher. His most well known works, such as *Ascending and Descending* (1960), address perspectival impossibilities and the fantastic possibilities of the virtual division of space. While they may have nearly earned Escher the status of a pop star, at the same time he only ever remained a graphic artist, an outsider, in the established art world.

Whether Escher, the outsiders and spiritists, Malevich, or Feininger, the abstract forms that Ribbeck takes up have always migrated—from mass culture or folk art into high art and back again; from medieval celestial charts or alchemistic cryptographs to reading books, calendars, church windows, or fabric patterns. The question of how we arrange the world, what kind of relationship we develop between inner, visionary experience and rational thought, is definitely important for Ribbeck's oeuvre. When, as in the healer Emma Kunz's case, ancient secret knowledge is captured on industrially manufactured graph paper, this also speaks of a certain pragmatism. This duality becomes particularly evident in one of Ribbeck's body of works. Beginning in 2012, he produces circular paintings that are very planar compared with his earlier works. His pictures suddenly seem emptier, harder, more signal-like. They are reminiscent of the famous *Targets* by Jasper Johns. However, they also call to mind the abstract circular forms of tantric painting that have been handed down from generation to generation in the Indian state of Rajasthan since the seventeenth century and are time and again recopied. Based on the cosmology of Hindu tantra, like a precisely defined visual alphabet these abstract paintings done in tempera or watercolor symbolize various states of heightened awareness. In everyday life they are attached to the wall for the practice of meditation. In this sense, one can definitely refer to Bernd Ribbeck's paintings as spiritual. They issue from meditating on his own artistic development and the discourses on painting. At the same time, they effectively act like mandalas on which we can focus in our own meditations on art.

1. Translated from Achim Kurl, “Moderne Kunst und Spiritismus,” in Sonja Rindler-Kreidl, ed., *Zwischen Orientierung und Krise: zum Umgang mit Wissen in der Moderne* (Wein, 1998).

Sabine Schaschl: If one examines the reactions to your works, one often hears or reads that they have a spiritual aspect. But at a first glance, your abstract-geometrical works seem to arise from the realm of logic and mathematics, which is often considered to be the opposite of the spiritual. In terms of art history, the spiritual element can be brought into connection with Art Brut as well as with Kandinsky's theoretical essay "On The Spiritual In Art". Is this connection with the spiritual something that you resist?

Bernd Ribbeck: No, actually not. For me a work of art, a painted picture, is always a sort of spiritual experience, because one takes a material, however it is formed, and imbues it with something transcendent, spiritual. This also occurs in the process of perception and creation. One approaches a picture and initially has a mass of color – with Cézanne, for example, I always first see an almost gray mass of color – and only upon longer scrutiny does it begin to unfold for me in all its differentiated and lively nature. I sense this as well, and that is a beautiful experience. I would definitely call it spiritual. On the other hand, I'm also interested in artists who refer back to other worlds, who – whether they are outsiders or spiritualists – have an alternative model for explaining the world and have accordingly found their way to an utterly individual formal language. As a rule, the art-historical view of modernism is too narrow for me; my concern is to include other perspectives that cannot be objectively validated. The writing of art history and the current discourse build upon a rational, language-oriented mode of thought. I would like to suggest that this way of thinking restricts the possibilities of entering into and giving an account of artistic thought. This becomes especially clear in the response to so-called "outsiders." I also believe that the recognition that this art has received in past years – for example, through exhibitions like the one dedicated to Hilma af Klint or through the thematic treatment of outsiders at the Venice Biennial in 2013 – only partly represents a process of rehabilitation and above all reflects an openness to alternative modes of thought.

Which artists would you include among the spiritualists?

That's of course an extensive field. The ones that I repeatedly cite are Emma Kunz and Hilma af Klint, or also Forrest Bess, but I'm also interested in Outsider Art that hasn't arisen from a spiritualistic background. Once at an exhibition at the Ben Kaufmann Gallery in Berlin, I presented my own works together with works by Aïse Corbaz, who is considered to be one of the artists of Art Brut.

Did you already know Hilma af Klint before her rediscovery a few years ago?

I was familiar with her art from my student years. She became important for me later around 2003, when I expanded the development of my own work through the notion that it could have been done by some else or even have come from a different era in the past or future.

Have you ever read Kandinsky's text "On The Spiritual In Art"?

Yes, but that was a long time ago. Kandinsky speaks there of rising and falling forms and assigns various meanings to colors ...

Your works as well are marked by vivid colors, often by luminous ones. Does it make sense to ascribe meanings to certain colors in relation to your oeuvre?

I don't think so, not in the way Kandinsky did. A symbolic code for colors can be agreed upon, but I don't believe that this is actually the case.

I have my own reservations about attributing fixed meanings to colors. I once heard a concert by the British conceptual artist Martin Creed, who wrote a song with color feelings. There were lines like "I feel red, I feel yellow, I feel blue" and so forth. At the end, all colors mean whatever each person believes, and it is all wonderfully relativized. Someone says, "Red means this and that," and someone else says, "On the contrary, red means this and that." Basically, it's not very interesting when you have to first agree on an attribution of meaning which then, however, has no general validity.

If there is at least a recognition that this is an agreed-upon convention, then that's acceptable. I sometimes find it tedious but basically okay that a symbolic system or a specific significance is transferred from a cultural background onto a work of art. A person can also be expected to be familiar with cultures or contexts and thus to recognize certain signs and systems. For example, the Museum Haus Konstruktiv calls to mind a sober approach influenced by Max Bill. But in principle, this is a convention and, particularly because of the sober, rational aspect, it tends toward an ideological orientation when the aspect of mutual agreement is excluded. It's only a perspective for sorting out things. No more or no less valid than another one. With Bill, the logical and mathematical characteristics tend to suggest that the oeuvre is well-founded, but ultimately one must understand it to be a system and acknowledge that there are others.

In your studio, you have a series of books that convey a sense of what interests you and what might possibly be reflected in your pictures. I notice that you concern yourself with the French architects of the so-called utopian revolutionary architecture: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Etienne-Louis Boullée.

I'm fascinated by the gigantic dimensions in which Boullée and Ledoux thought. Their architecture is fantastical, and I'm interested specifically in its utopian contents. It doesn't particularly matter whether the designs were realized or not. On the contrary, it's possible to go much further on paper than in reality, to push ahead mentally into new spaces.

We've spoken about the gigantic dimensions used by the French revolutionary architects. Your works, on the other hand, most often have a small format. What's the biggest format that you've ever used?

The largest pictures are 60 x 70 cm, but most of the time they are around 30 x 40 cm.

Questions of size are quite specific matters that must be decided for every work as well as for the way an artist works and what the respective concepts are. What interests me is why which size fits which concept. With respect to your paintings, I suspect that their

small format enhances the possibility of diving mentally into the painted spaces. What is small often stimulates the imaginative faculty more strongly than a large format.

Yes, I think so too! When I look at paintings by other artists, most of the time I likewise prefer small formatted pictures. I like the quiet familiarity with the object hanging over there on the wall. I want to explore it slowly, not conversely to be watched or overwhelmed by a picture, as is the case with those monstrosities. I make my approach to things more through vision and in my head than in physical experience. In this regard, I'm also extremely interested in the small predellas, the tiny panels beneath the altar pictures, of Fra Angelico. I like to contemplate these miniature panels that in his case are connected to geometry and architecture. Perhaps a story is also told there that I know or surmise only in part. That's something that I myself look for. Also with regard to other artists, I delight in gazing at really small pictures.

You're already describing quite well how small formats strongly activate the imaginative power or are capable of triggering a spiritual reaction.

Yes, precisely. I also consider that to be a spatial grouping. One has a counterpart of equal value, and this plays out a program, an animation in the head. An entire world opens up during the contemplation. And I particularly like what is small, legible, concentrated. If the small format is then staged in contrast to a large wall, then one is asserting a great claim to power, demanding much space for a supposedly minor thing.

I find it quite interesting that you already include the large wall in your thinking, and I wonder whether the spatial concepts of the pictures are already determined by the large wall that surrounds them.

Not always, because I also like to create smaller spatial frameworks for my works.

How would you describe the function of the space that surrounds the pictures?

The space creates an emptiness and quiet which counterbalances the energy of the painting process that is contained within the picture. The fact that this energy is concentrated must occasionally also be visible from a distance.

Your pictures seem to shine forth from their center. This shining also has a spatial component. Could you say something about this luminosity?

Frequently there are different spatial levels that are intertwined in my pictures. In the more recent ones, already through the parallel perspective, but also through a sort of figure and ground relationship, just as through contrasts of color or of brightness and darkness, or through softer and sharper contrasts. This is continued in the handling of the pictorial surface, where I spatially "open" closed surfaces by scratching away paint, for example. Without light, it wouldn't be possible to perceive any space. Nor without matter; that's why I so highly value the simultaneity of the material presence of the means employed on the surface of a painted picture and of the visual effects that can thereby arise, without

one of the components being obscured. That brings me back to the initial question about spiritual experience.

Do your pictures have something like a central point? In my experience with your pictures, the eye darts around. It seems to be seeking a central point, then immediately jumps away and subsequently approaches the luminous points. It's as if the eye were striving toward the light – a fall of Icarus, if you like. The eye would probably become quickly bored if the picture were symmetrical, but that's never the case with your pictures. They are never distinctly symmetrical; again and again there are disruptions.

Symmetry is extremely well suited to represent the deviation from symmetry. I can relate to your sense that the vision doesn't come to rest inasmuch as in the process of painting, I also work against the balance that is contained in the sketch for a picture. As for the arrangement on the surface, I look for the moment when the rational aspect of the basic geometric structure recedes into the background and an artistic tension arises, [...] where a visual space arises, where there is sound or a spiritual energy arises, where before there was nothing more than a geometric form. What interests me about the simplicity of the selection of forms is that it's possible to observe how this sort of tension arises in the picture. This is something that I very much value in painting: You notice how you are captivated, seduced or tricked, however you want to see it.

How do you proceed with the conception of your pictures, how do you develop them?

First I make sketches on checkered index cards in an A5 format.

So you take the grid structure of the index cards as a geometric unit?

Yes, as an underlying pattern.

So are the index cards a sort of notebook for you, a sort of archive to which you repeatedly have recourse? Do you have an ordering principle – for instance, according to years?

The index cards constitute an archive and are arranged more or less chronologically.

In addition to sketches for pictures, calculations can be seen. What do they refer to?

Dimensions that could possibly arise.

So already in the sketches, you give thought to variations and applications of color?

Yes. The more recent pictures, which are concerned with isometric formations, allow me to divide the individual axes into three colors – one color respectively for the x-, y, and z-axes. On the drawings, that's not necessarily a coloration design, but first of all a way to separate the levels.

And how do things develop further from that sort of design to the picture?

At first, I prime a MDF panel with many coats of white paint in order to have a ground that can hold up against the subsequent working process. Then I first of all transfer the sketch onto it. Next I use acrylic paints to begin a painting that is related to this sketch.

I lay variously colored surfaces upon each other, following the lines of the sketch but also running contrary to them. So I build up the picture in many layers of painting. At some point, I burnish the surface with a machine, so that the layers acquire a certain transparency and appear to be interwoven. Not much remains to be seen of the original sketch, so I draw it once again, because for the following process I need the concrete forms once again. I use various transparent and opaque markers, ballpoint pens or acrylic paints to work out the final motif; here I also scratch surfaces free or conversely apply thick hatchings until I am satisfied. This basically not only gives rise to a picture, but the entire process is inscribed in its spatial and temporal dimensions and can be felt by the viewer.

Do you work serially, in other words simultaneously on several juxtaposed pictures?

Mostly I start off working on two or three pictures, but then at a certain point I decide which one I will concentrate on, and then stick with it until it is finished.

How do you decide what materials to use?

Some things are occasioned by this or that technical necessity that has arisen over the course of time. For example, with its quick process of drying, acrylic paint is practical when I superimpose many layers. As a solid basis for a picture, MDF is more suitable than canvas for me, because physical forces are also involved in the process of creation. Moreover, a picture on a solid medium is always somewhat close to an object and to an icon, which makes sense with regard to my pictures. The graphic materials, markers and ballpoint pens, have a quite limited, industrially predetermined palette, which makes it exciting for me to give rise to a variety within this limitation; this also applies to the choice of format and the sketches on checkered paper.

Your recent works remind me of the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher. How does this Escher principle work?

I don't know whether that has a special name. Escher worked with optical illusions and perspectival impossibilities that summon up an effect of reversal that causes the representation of a floor from above to appear simultaneously as the representation of a ceiling from below, for example. These spatially impossible architectures and optical illusions occur here and there in my works, but this is not the primary element. I originally came to this more through isometric representations of architecture. The isometric manner of representation corresponds closely to my concept of pictorial space, because it has only one apparent space that doesn't function in terms of illusion. I consider the fact that the space can flip back and forth and can expand in perception in opposing directions to be a sensible extension of my concept of pictorial space.

How many levels of spatiality do you conceive of here?

In this picture there are two perspectival axes. It is a matter of two views that are intertwined. In the picture "Untitled, 2016" for example, the vanishing lines proceed upward to the right, while the brown yellow stairs go downward to the left. These are two

different views and perspectives of stairs in a single pictorial space.

And does this shift – through the fact that you treat surfaces differently, on the one hand by using rubbed-away acrylic paints, and on the other hand through the use of ballpoint pens – once more create another level of spatiality?

That's exactly the case.

And there are disruptive elements such as the yellow forms where regularity comes to a relatively clear end. It also breaks down in a few other instances, but with yellow this is relatively strong.

I actually feel this to be an alternate spatial system that is interwoven with the purely constructed one. There are two systems of spatiality. In addition to the geometrically constructed one, there is the painterly spatiality that is created by scratching and revealing deeper layers, as well as through contrasts of color. For example, there arises a spatiality between the turquoise and orange in the picture. If you had this in front of you as a large surface, that would be an effect just like in a Color Field Painting.

When individual details are removed, a new picture could be created. Have you ever done that?

I'm doing it at this very moment.

So your painting offers an entire series of mental doorways into various pictorial worlds and in turn generates out of itself new images and spatialities. It's possible to lose oneself in them. Thank you for an informative conversation that provides revealing insights into your concepts and manner of working.