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The Speed of Colour

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A fascination with the effects of colour, the absence of a personal handwriting, the impersonal and a conscious reluctance to make any 'political' statements; thinking of a painting as an object in space, of what a painting or sculpture really is or what its meaning might be, reflecting on the space within a painting, the flat surface of the canvas, the notion of composition; a preoccupation with material, the qualities of paint – all these issues are at stake for the artists in the exhibition 'The Speed of Colour'. Some will give more attention to certain aspects than others do, but what they all have in common is that they are indebted to 'modernism' in one way or another.

In its most strict sense 'modernism' refers to a multifaceted conception of art that originated in the artistic modernization movements and /or avant-garde trends that manifested themselves in the early twentieth century (Constructivism, Suprematism, Neo-Plasticism, Orphism, et cetera) and remained dominant for a long time (after WWII, for instance: Minimalism, Op Art, Hard Edge, Post Painterly Abstraction with its great theorist Clement Greenberg who saw art history, briefly spoken, as a logical development toward a work of art as a non-representational, flat object). The basic characteristics of modernism may be described as follows (according to A.A. van den Braembussche, at any rate): aesthetic self-awareness and stylistic purism or formalism; defence of the autonomy of art and art for art's sake as a guiding principle; rejection of a narrative structure in favour of the 'stream of consciousness', simultaneity and assembly; rejection of realism in favour of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain nature of subjective reality; an emphasis on alienation and the loss of the integrated personality, et cetera. The work of art is presented as a statement, a visual fact that can be experienced and perceived by an actively involved viewer. The work does not refer to anything outside itself, only to itself. Work that is labelled modernist is mostly abstract, non-representational in a traditional sense, and impersonal in character. Still, it proves very well possible to recognize a Mondrian, as well as a Malevich or a Rothko or a Stella. It seems to be a *contradictio in terminis*: the impersonal personal. The artists in the exhibition use modernist principles, but each in their own personal way.

Henriëtte van 't Hoog (Amsterdam, 1943) makes reliefs, installations and murals. At first glance we see formal work in a modernist, abstract style. At second glance, however, the idea of balanced compositions consisting of harmonious colour planes seems not entirely applicable to the work she made for the box. When folded out it turns out to be a 3-D pop-up: sacrilege in the light of Greenberg's theory. Furthermore, there is no harmony to be found here – we see colour fields in bright, fluorescent yellow and green, combined with a mellow violet. It is hard to avoid the impression that she is poking fun at the classic modernist doctrine. Such ambiguity is a leitmotiv in Van 't Hoog's work. In the 1970s, for instance, she painted corny postcards of tourist paradises in the Mediterranean as a kind of persiflage of landscape painting, and she did so with flair and a great feel for paint; this was followed by a series with the title 'Congratulations', consisting of images of kitschy birthday cards, in which we suddenly see unintended symbols of vanity. She also devoted herself to the creation of canvases several metres high depicting floral still lifes and jumble sale rummage, trivial subjects so to speak, yet addressing formal principles of painting such as scale, form, line and texture in a way that took ambiguity a step further: sensitivity is not about in the sharp, eye-aching use of colours. Her series of sleeping male nudes, a lofty subject in classic painting, was once described as sleeping Chippendales. Van 't Hoog paraphrases iconographic patterns from art history, creating hidden meanings.

The leitmotiv in the work of **John de Rijke** (The Hague, 1943) is always abstract geometrical grammar: planes,

forms, rectangles, squares, lines, triangles and circles. De Rijke was originally trained to be a graphic designer, but is active as a graphic artist and creator of (wall) objects in mixed techniques. His early work is characterized by the application of horizontal rows of drawn lines in the traditional shading technique (sometimes interpreted as grass), over which a second row in a somewhat different 'position' is always added. He rotates similar 'visual programmes' a few degrees relative to each another. The diagonal, with its accompanying effect of movement, is central to these early works. In later years, the rows evolved into squares of lines filled in with opposing diagonals or horizontals and verticals alternately. In the 1980s De Rijke's formal language became more constructivist in character; tilted squares or rectangular strips in primary colours are combined with diagonal brush strokes in mixed colours. De Rijke is preoccupied with geometrical figures, which on the one hand are given a very rectilinear and finished character, but on the other a deliberate imperfection. The result is an intended contradictory feel. Exact drawing and colouring may occur in a painting next to a deliberate unfinishedness; sometimes he deliberately messes with paint to counteract the mathematical character of his compositions. Sensibility and formalism balance each other out. In addition, he shows an interest in the nature of the material, mixing graphite powder, using gold leaf, scrap wood and sellotape. In his work colours often have a 'signal function' of sorts, drawing attention to the difference between the parts of a work or series, making viewers reflect on what is different. His work is characterized by a reduction of form as well as colour.

For **John Tallman** (1969, York, Pa., U.S.A.), not the object/painting itself is the primary goal, but the artist's mental process. His works are not paintings or sculptures in a traditional sense, and then again they are. His working method entails the construction of moulds in the shape of a painting, into which he pours pigments and various resins, such as polyurethane. The end result is simultaneously two- and three-dimensional. To emphasize this ambiguity, Tallman does not hang his works straight onto the wall; as a result, they become more of objects than 'paintings' that offer a glance into a different world through the creation of illusions. His formal language is deliberately limited: there are square works and round ones; limiting himself to an autonomous abstract vocabulary, the artist feels free; any personal emotion is thus banned from his work and he deliberately refrains from making any political statements. It is the mental processes of the artist during the creation of his work that count, nothing else. Through reduction he aims to give the viewer access to this mental process, focusing particularly on the questioning of the principles of the notion of a 'painting'. He is fascinated, for instance, by how objects (paintings) influence their environment, the effect of gravity in painting, the area behind the painting. In brief, he is basically concerned with the essence of painting, or rather, the painting. In his artist's statement he states that he is fascinated by the theoretical possibility of making a composition that repeats itself endlessly, the substance (the skin of the painting), but also the position of abstraction. Tallman poses questions, and the work resulting from these questions raises new questions, resulting in new works that are in part repetitions yet subtly different within his restricted formal language, as if it were a kind of modernist Droste effect*.

Tony Harding, born in London, calls himself a 'fiercely independent painter'; in Azille in the south of France, he has been working on 'Mass & Dynamics' in recent years, a series containing some sixty works as of now. His formal language is mainly geometrical. Harding positions his paintings somewhere between 'concrete and constructivist art' and 'hard-edge abstraction'; his works suggest careful, highly concentrated reflection on the balance between planes, between colour and plane, and harmony among colours. Harding's compositions balance on the thin line between harmony and disintegration. He describes this as 'anxious balance' himself. Attracted by the notion of anonymity, he has become fascinated over time by the idea of painting space instead of painting a form in space; his aim is to paint the surface of the work as uniformly, as smoothly as possible, without any traces of brush strokes. Apart from that, Harding's work can be called intimate – the paintings are generally very modest in size.

Gilbert Hsiao's (Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 1956) work consists of rhythm, textures, space, movement and illusions; for the viewer there is no right or wrong way of reading the works, as each work is a world within itself, without any reference to either the perceptible world or an artificial one. Hsiao plays with perception, using sharp and clear colour contrasts. He paints with acrylic paint in shining silver and black, as well as fluorescent primary and secondary colours on smooth surfaces. The way he arranges his thin, tapering lines resembles the composition of music according to syncopated intervals; as a result, the surface seems to move. In this sense, his work is similar in appearance to the work of Op Art artists such as Bridget Riley and Viktor Vasarely. The sharp contrasts in Hsiao's work and the arrangement of the composition create an effect in the viewer's perception as if the colour comes loose from the material, as if the work 'dematerializes', as it were. Hsiao's paintings can take on various shapes, from rectangular to triangular and parallelogram-shaped to circular, or an irregular geometrical shape. This adds to the ambiguity of the work; is it a painting or an object, is it the material that counts or the dematerialized colour?

'All that painting produces is at my disposal', **Eric de Nie** (Leyden, 1944) once told a critic. His work takes an ambiguous position in the field of painting. His fascination with the substance itself, the paint, is evident. Using a siphon, he applies doses of diluted paint to the edges of the canvas and lets the substance run down. The direction of the paint is determined by the position of the canvas. It is not only chance and gravity that determine the line; occasionally, the artist intervenes with a steering hand. The material can do as it pleases, but is given deliberate

structure at the same time. Substance and gesture result in a form without any figurative or other reference. De Nie's canvases always have a linear or layered structure, with an alternating rhythm created through the use of various colours. Still, one cannot escape the atmospheric effect of the compositions or the spatial illusion evoked by his grids. Within his oeuvre we find works ranging from contrasty black-and-white compositions to Monet-like tones. He is not a mere formalist. Metaphysical and mystical dimensions have been ascribed to his work. And indeed, the specific coastal light, the sun-drenched silence around his summer studio in Italy, where the maritime light flows along the slopes, as he phrases it himself, bring him into a certain state of being, providing new impulses constantly. Often unwittingly, the accompanying sensations affect form and colour of his work, contributing to its content. In a certain way, his abstract minimalism is drenched in the classical painter's theme of light. De Nie creates a pattern that allows him on the one hand to explore the physical qualities of the surface, and on the other to linger in it, wandering, as it were, through illusionary spaces inside and outside the painting. Eric de Nie's work balances on the border of contradictions.

Modernism as it is used as a basic principle in 'The Speed of Colour' is uniform and multiform, personal, impersonal and above all: paradoxical. Viewed in this light it is far from being at the end of its tether.

* HYPERLINK "<http://www.blog.beachpackagingdesign.com/2008/04/droste-effect-p.html>" The 'Droste effect' is when a product's packaging features the packaging itself. This particular phenomenon is named after a 1904 package of Droste brand cocoa. The mathematical interest in these packaging illustrations is their implied infinity. If the resolution of the printing process -- (and the determination and eyesight of the illustrator) -- were not limiting factors, it would go on forever.