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The search for resistance in the image
Notes on several series of diptychs by Wilhelm Drach 1994–1998

“If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility” is the title of Robert Musil’s 4th chapter in the first part of his *Man Without Qualities*. Detached from its author, the sentence has become a short philosophy of the 20th century – despite or precisely because of this, in its resistant insistence, it particularly applies to an important aspect of Wilhelm Drach’s color field compositions, which were created in 1992 and are divided into two parts. In the beginning, there were a few canvases, some of them consisting of glazes with lighter shades towards the edges, others of the pastose and opaque layers in a composition. These, however, reminded the artist too much of divisions with which Mark Rothko experimented in the late sixties. Chance led to a separation of the two different color bodies and thus to the creation of something completely new and change-able: two separate works suddenly stood close together and formed a new unity. For the next seven years, the diptych was the subject of debate. Factors from outside added to the self-discovered experience, because the multi-part picture is a characteristic of painting after 1945, although it existed long before then, actually since antiquity, it was precisely this artistic means of the multi-partite that became one of the main factors in painting from then on.

“Thirty are better than one”, Andy Warhol said, and the addition to groups of pictures, altar-like polyptychs of all kinds has continued to this day. In 1998 Werner Hofmann dedicated an enlightening study to the return of formal criteria from the Middle Ages in modern art – these are intellectual searches for traces of the avant-garde artists, who look back over the centuries of the autonomous easel painting and central perspective in a cultic and thus also rhetorical integration of the works.

Even if it is the “aesthetic church” since the 19th century in which the pictures are discussed, the process of the artists’ work is still immersed in the aura of the magical dark when transforming from a spiritual origin of the idea into a concrete object, a surface of layers of color that allows us to trace that transformation of spirit into matter as a personal writing. Even the automatically, intuitively, informally working painters, who speak of switching off the brain in favor of the physical gesture, insist on this incomprehensible and thus – according to Hegel – playfully sacred process. But Wilhelm Drach is not an informal or actionist painter, even though he is very well in the know about the aura of creation.

From the beginning, his ideas exist concretely in his head and even if he does not sketch them in the sense of a preliminary drawing, the process is analytical, not intuitive. The coincidence in the spontaneous setting of abstract signs, sometimes lettering, is kept to a minimum, so that the corrective work in the use of color tones and the conscious addition and subtraction is given a far more important function. The view is critical, several pictures are created next to each other, but none of them is completed in one go, all are passed over after breaks, often older works that do not stand up to Drach’s critical view are painted over, pasted over with collage, the object-like materials woven into the layer of paint – a difficult field of experimentation that took several years to perfect the connection. Finally, it became apparent that earth, wood, straw, corrugated cardboard, etc. can best be fixed to the canvas with acrylic binders and become uniform with the color pigment without dissolving again.

The series of diptychs have no titles, the canvases are numbered and dated, a first series in 1993/94 was followed by later series from 1996 onward, in between there were breaks forced by family and professional life, but these were deliberately reflected upon in relation to art, allowing the distance gained to be considered useful and to gain depth. Of course, an important role for the later pairs of pictures is played by the fact that it was about the illness and death of the father, whom Wilhelm Drach accompanied until the end and for this reason he stopped painting.

Understandably, this changed with the resumption – many works are marked and reworked in repeated thrusts of desperate power; the process is very orderly, almost meticulously careful, although it achieves a spontaneous effect in the opposite way. In the diptychs, the resistances that arise in the juxtaposition and the differences in the use of the body of color are essential. In the contrasts, however, there are also connections, the tension-filled opposition is followed by a combination – especially for the eyes of the viewer. One of them – usually the larger picture surface – mutates into a haptically rough, restless, almost relief-like form interspersed with collage. As a contradiction in terms, the horror vacui of these objects is inscribed with unifying painting and also with inscription and exaggeration; an abstracted body or object form outlined by broad black lines, sometimes similar to characters from East Asia, is superimposed on it. The dominance of these broad, at times open brushstrokes is due to the “designation” they give to the whole picture and thus to the way they mark it: without a title, viewers are free to see people, still lifes, landscapes, or even just the distant memory of the representational – for Drach, each of these configurations has a correspondence to reality.

The incorporated materials are: corrugated cardboard, jute, earth, plywood (mutating from fruit boxes to an association with closing fences), and straw. Drach encountered the natural materials earth and straw in the painting material intensively in an exhibition of Anselm Kiefer’s works in Berlin. He is not interested in the content of the internationally

renowned German artist's work, but in his virtuoso handling of materials. However, this adoption of materials changed to personal condensation – first with earth colors, occasionally a dark violet, followed by ochre, black, Terra di Siena, but the uniform color intensity has only slowly been extended. In between, on some of the pastose relief-like collage parts, the painting could be greatly reduced and the objects could be left to impress on their own – just as, as mentioned above, the plywood fragments of fruit boxes were transformed into fence-like barriers. One can think of closed paths, of transgressions into other worlds, of thresholds or ladders to a beyond from here; an afterlife that (still) remains closed. Surrounded by a few patches of color or characters in black, the sign itself has become more and more dominant and the material has become more integrated.

The usually narrower and glaze-like painted counter-images of these couples, which are now strongly related to the optical, also changed from atmospheric surfaces or values thinning outwards from green to blue etc. to more uniform color fields, which at the beginning, however, show an omitted or seemingly excessive texture at the edges, as if the painting wanted to leave the picture surface. The push out of the color field later becomes a uniform opaque, strongly colored skin of red, blue, violet up to light mystical-appearing bright yellow and once even bright green. A spatiality of the color body appears, whereby this deep-dimensional quality of the color is supported by the fact that it recurs in small patches on the other part between the collages. At times, the resistances within the diptych are: haptic-optical, rough-smooth, planar material and deep-spatial color, etc., heightened by the artist's emotional incompatibilities in relation to a particular color. The antipathy towards raspberry-pink and certain violets is chosen as an intentional complication in order to build up and clear up the unpleasant contrasts – an increase in resistance in favor of the challenge of painterly overcoming.

Like the multi-partite nature of the image, the double meaning of the contradiction, the doctrine of the similarity of opposites, the twofold truth, is one of the most important principles re-established in the 20th century by Musil, Proust, Wittgenstein, Joyce, and others. This principle was actually already present with the invention of the *Ars combinatoria* by the Catalan theologian and philosopher Ramon Llull against the rigidity of medieval scholasticism and gained influence on thought and art from the 14th century onward through its further development in the concept of "*Coincidentia oppositorum*" by Nicholas of Cusa. The Renaissance and Baroque eras also continued with the antithesis of the "*Discordia concors*", which was only temporarily submerged by the one-sided emancipation of the logical principle from the Enlightenment onward.

Today, it is precisely these free "possibilities of thought", which Dieter Ronte already ascribed to Wilhelm Drach following Robert Musil in 1987, which stimulate the self-referential experiment of the painterly to new confrontations, which no longer ask for a distinction between non-representational and figurative or other creative restrictions. This also puts an end to the pathetic rule of the one-piece panel painting – the icon in the empty white space. The new "devotion" in front of the aesthetic expression of the painters allows the concurring contradiction, the agreeing counter-argument, the incongruous unity, the harmonious opposition and the double and multiple understanding.

In the other picture series of diptychs after the strongly colored counterparts, the need for harmony is brought back and the colors are standardized up to tonality. In addition, however, the signs in black become stronger, it is a gentle beginning to a dissolution of the collage through stronger painterly integration, a lowering of the dramatic increase in contrasts. Besides the dwindling materials, a changing brushstroke of varying width and scratching into the paint with the brush handle can be noticed as a process of deliberate coarsening. Alongside the heavier-looking collages that stand out in relief, a series of objects in Plexiglas boxes was always planned; it has not yet been discarded, but only postponed to future plans. Finally, in 2000, the signs in their structure dissolved in favor of moving lines and the materials disappeared completely, as did the choice of the diptych – heralding the turn of Wilhelm Drach's painting to a new phase.

In: Katalog DRACH, Diptychen, Werkzyklus 1994 – 1998, Herausgeber Drach-Hübler & Socher OEG, 1998