

Just days before the opening, Katharina Grosse's painting for Inside the White Cube was yet to be made. Within the time remaining, the painter would begin and complete a large, invasive work, using the diffuse impact of a compressor to explore and evince a new and highly dramatic physiognomy for the pragmatic container of the existing architecture.

Whether working site-specifically or autonomously – she also paints on canvas, aluminium and paper – Grosse's working process might best be described as stochastic: skillful and intentional, yet exuberant and open to chance and random variables in the articulation of different layers, reaches and depths of field, harmonies and clashes of colour. Like the improvisation technologies of dance and music, hers is a highly conscious act that embraces the outcome of its first phase of activity in a non-judgmental way; in other words, nothing can go 'wrong' or 'right' in terms of the final outcome.

As with all abstract art, Grosse's work could be said to function purely in terms of Gestalt; and yet, conversely, it is in this most essential, so-called indivisible quality that hybrid metaphors, associations and contradictions proliferate. Laurie Anderson once sang, unforgettably, that language is a virus, and in Grosse's control, the sublime language of abstract painting turns virulent and deeply evocative as it 'contaminates' the blank space and its surroundings in a sudden release of baroque energy.

PAINTING IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

Louise Neri: You work directly on walls, using the architecture as your support, thus your work immediately assumes an environmental rather than object status. Is this painting as attitude rather than form?

Katharina Grosse: The way you asked the question already shows that my work can, of course, be understood through historical precedent, how other artists have used 'the space', from cave painting to Renaissance painting to avant garde conceptual strategies. But my personal attitude is very simple: I have always painted on architectural supports since childhood. When I began to study art, I found abandoned houses and made huge charcoal drawings directly on the walls, never caring about what would happen to them. So, you see, it began as a natural impulse, which was put into context later.

L: What prompted you to use spray paint?

K: I was making wall paintings with paintbrushes, following the format of the wall itself. It occurred to me that I was working as if with objects and I thought that my painting should be more independent from the space and its surface. This is what spray-painting allowed. I use the space and the surface but I don't touch it, feel it, and fetishise it. I'm quite detached from it because of my mask and protective clothing. I watch myself doing it. I see the paint hitting the wall in front of me; the implement does not obscure it, as with a paintbrush.

L: You make strange a process that is usually intimate.

You're small in relation to the image you create, as is the viewer, like Friedrich's person in a landscape. As well, you're sealed in a space that

is largely obscured from you by flying paint; in your protective clothing you look like an astronaut, or a worker in a restricted industrial environment; you're connected to the paint compressor by an air lead, a kind of cyborg, half-woman, half-machine. This image places you in a perverse relationship with painting and its traditions.

K: I'd call it 'romantic irony'. For me, true Romanticism is a very remote idea about one's own reasons for living on this planet. It's ironic that such a big fuss can be made with paint! I'm more ambivalent. I draw on many traditions in painting but at the same time I use a technique that is cheap, associated with car finish and graffiti. For me, this can be a productive approach to Romanticism, not Caspar David Friedrich – although being at the edge of the painting is quite an interesting idea.

L: When you speak of romantic irony, I think about the vast associative dimensions that the sheer excessiveness of your work communicates: among many other things, toxicity, artificiality, expenditure, exuberance.

K: I consciously include elements that have nothing to do with this other status of painting and its associative elements. But then, all of a sudden, a metamorphosis takes place with the interference of external referents. I could be very clear about what I want, but I don't want to make an easily identifiable image. That's where the process starts to be a secret language. Ultimately, an image is enigmatic because it can't really be taken apart. Sometimes I don't know what it is myself; sometimes it's just that the painting ends.

I chose to work directly on a wall with a spray gun to reveal the intrinsic qualities of paintings. Paintings operate with a very different idea and understanding of the rules of space than architecture and sculpture. But, paradoxically they need these structures to show the linking of pictorial space with architectural space. This fact makes all these thoughts bounce back and forth. So I am constantly dealing with the ontology of painting, revisiting the whole question of what this can be, the conditions, the proportion, the physical attributes and so on ...

L: In this instance you created an engulfing field rather than specific foci.

K: The painting was detailed and dense, so it looked like a very big painting in a small space. Thus it required a certain kind of exploratory attention from viewers.

L: Generally your wall paintings are not objectified or bounded. They can function as décor, scenography, as well as a subject, as background and foreground.

K: Painting is the only medium that allows you a panoptical structure with regard to the gaze and a synoptic structure with regard to time. Spray-painting intensifies these physiological experiences. It's difficult to say what one really sees and I don't spend time defining my work to other people. Instead I describe the activity itself, or the things I like about the space in which it takes place. In this case, there was a lot of interference: the door, the windows, the stairwell, and the context of the Chapman brothers' jokey 'museological' show downstairs.

L: Rather than obscuring the architectural features, you allowed them to punch geometrical forms out of the painting from within, and frame glimpses of the work from the exterior of the building; in a context that could have

been restrictive, you structured the painting so that the viewers were drawn into it from far away and moved in and through its different spaces.

You said that you recently saw a Sol Lewitt wall piece being made. There would be little to compare with your work, except perhaps some notions regarding context and instruction. In Lewitt's work, little is left to chance; other people make it, following his instruction. Whereas you make your own work and circumstantial elements are important to your process.

K: It's true that I'm the only one who is visible in my process, but recently I have experienced the importance of team effort in the larger commissions and how it contributes to the final outcome. Now I think I could incorporate other people's decisions into my own but unlike Lewitt, I would never make my process of decision-making completely transparent.

L: Yet, in making your work yourself, you expose yourself.

K: It's true that I don't rehearse prior to doing it. It is a transparent process that attests to my presence.

L: So your position is humanistic, subjective even.

Lewitt's work exercises a level of objectivity within clear analytical method. Your work can't be similarly systematized.

K: Well, it can't be copied ...

L: Not even by you!

K: But I would say that my work is analytical.

L: For yourself?

K: The whole working process, every kind of movement that takes place in the space with regard to pictorial thought: In the first phase, I regard the space and what I am in relation to that space, without recourse to a preconceived idea; in the second phase, I take what I have done and refer again to the space containing the first pictorial idea; in the third phase, I take up what I have done and refer again to the space containing the first two pictorial ideas, and so on until I stop.

L: It's a dialogic process then?

K: Yes, with the entire situation, the pictorial facts that have accumulated. These facts are always visible. That's why I have to stop at a particular point, otherwise these facts could be obscured and the process could suddenly become unclear.

L: What you have described as your working process relates strongly to 'structured improvisation' in dance technology, a highly disciplined process that incorporates chance and intuitive elements into its initial codes, a binary system of concept and emotion where one is both the initiator and recipient of the work.

K: Many different things condition my work. That's what I call setting up the tools I work with, which I choose myself, the space included. When I am in this kind of conditioned situation, I develop a secret language that is a chain of intricate decisions. The way I reflect my work is based on previous things that I have done, including things I don't want to repeat. I don't think the split between emotions and intellect exists when I am working, reacting to something I have already done. I am completely aware of what I am doing, but I don't want to discuss or name it.

L: Talking further about your relationship to historical precedence, I was always interested that you drew equally from so many cultural areas.

Clearly you didn't position yourself squarely in classical precedent. You gave equal importance to your fugitive, unwitnessed activities.

K: I wouldn't do this now...

L: Yes, but this dichotomy was your formation.

K: I don't have prejudices about expressive forms. Over the last fifty years, painters worked to declare their intentions. Painting is a fast medium, especially the way I work. It doesn't have to be translated; it can transport ideas directly. It can absorb an amazing input of knowledge that creates its own necessities. A painting can be changed in no time. Speed relies on how flexible you are with your own rules; it is directly linked with one's mental capacities. Painting is also a fantastically old medium.

Its history is not a burden for me at all because I can use it all. That's why painting is still so fertile.

L: Like the inexhaustible potential of the human body. You called cave paintings 'the first spray paintings which evokes for me the notion of archaeological layering in relation to your own work. Your painting *Inside the White Cube* is no longer visible, but it is still there, buried under various coats of white paint. So, although we speak about your work as being ephemeral, in fact it is indelible.

K: This paradox between 'ephemeral' and 'permanent' is not something that I experience. The sense of temporality is obviously very different for me than the viewer in this respect. Each work contains all the other works I have done because I always start with nothing and end up at a point where I don't know what else to do. The period of highest tension for me can be the time between finishing one work and starting another, when I am not communicating.

L: When you say you start with 'nothing,' you're really starting with everything ...

K: Sometimes I have access to knowledge without even really being aware of it. That's why I think it's important to be very active, to do lots of work, to maintain the flow of thought and activity. As I said, sometimes I can't even determine between works, whether the start of one is the end of the previous one, or whether the end of one is the start of another. The function of time for me is completely different, beginning with the idea of permanence. I don't experience my work in terms of its values.

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