

NOTATIONS

The word „art“, etymologically speaking, means to make, simply to make. Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting some of it on the palette, and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing. So in order to choose, you can use tubes of paint, you can use brushes, but you can also use a ready-made thing, made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, even, if you want, and appropriate it, since it's you who chose it. Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting.

Marcel Duchamp¹

It is not clear what criteria Joseph Marsteurer bases his decisions on, for example, what paint he chooses on what day in order, as he says, “just to paint”. The product is “not a picture, not emotion; every day five minutes painting, no more”. The choice, particularly the tube of paint or any other medium that is being used, is made, even if “indifferently”, not intentionally or even as a conscious decision not to make a choice. The artist describes his dilemma as follows: “Having to decide and simultaneously not being able to decide, for me that is an aesthetic situation.”²

Duchamp made the decision to quit painting because of the impossibility of being able to make a choice. The decision for ready-mades undoubtedly revolutionised art because, according to Duchamp's proposal, owing to the use of a tube of paint, which is a finished product, a ready-made itself has now become painting. He describes this situation of indecision, of whether the ready-made is now painting or not, with the term “infra-mince”: “The aesthetic judgement [which is made indifferently] floats undecidably between two statements: ‘This is painting’ / ‘This is not painting’. In between is an infra-mince passage, an indifferent difference, something that has no name and even less a concept. The aesthetic decision is a matter of experience that escapes any conceptual access.”³

Marsteurer's painting is in this constant infra-mince-status of transition and undecidability of painting and non-painting. Infra-mince means the in-between space between the indifferent

¹ Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 1996, S.162/163

² Joseph Marsteurer, in: *Der Raum des Bildes*. Monika Leisch-Kiesel im Gespräch mit Joseph Marsteurer, *kunst und kirche*, 01/2007

³ Thierry de Duve *Pikturaler Nominalismus. Marcel Duchamp, die Malerei und die Moderne*, Munich 1987, p. 223

stance of the painter [as we just assume] and the delayed reception by the observer. It describes the interval between a naming, which however does not come to light, and a presence, which is not intended by the artist but which is nevertheless there. The observer completes, but according to de Duve what happens or is lost in this in-between cannot be reproduced.

So even if, intentionally, no decision is taken, there is a conscious decision on the image ground, on the type of brushwork, the technique etc. (the decision on the type of ready-made is also of an aesthetic nature). For this reason, in his approach, which one can understand as a conceptual system, Marsteurer wants to escape from categories such as expression or gesture inasmuch as he introduces the serial form. What is important is the moment of repetition, the almost ritually but automatically repeated and not so much the product of an action, which on the other hand is an immediate consequence of it. One can gather what is meant by this from the “work records” or the “archive”. Both are reminiscent of the processes of minimal art or conceptual art. In the work records, in a certain prescribed layout of a precisely defined typography, what happened at what time is stated in an objective tone – official paper, diary, technical report, mathematic-numerological considerations, notation all in one. The painted “picture-rolls” have the nature of signs, contrary to Marsteurer’s intention: they hold a potential, if they may as it were reveal, unroll in their scroll-painting-like composition; not a guarded secret, that might have been inherent in traditional scroll paintings or scrolls of writing, but rather the markings and entries of what section was painted with the use of how much and what colour. They hold the coolly recorded dimension of temporality, in order not to say the recollection, the memory, in a particularly obvious way in itself.

The “archive” is a filing system, formally in the spirit of Judd-like minimalist sculptures, in which the rolls on which the colour is applied – every day on a previously precisely defined section – are stored according to an ordering principle. These pseudo oil canvasses, freed from frames, for which they were never intended, can be activated at any time for a form of action painting.

Here too, the individual intention is irrelevant, the issue of the breaking up of the picture, of the picture frame. Pollock’s painting extends in the imagination to a potential infinity. Marsteurer actually extends the picture frame inasmuch as he extends the image into quasi-theatrical space

that sometimes also displays virtual features or even seems anamorphic. Some of his rooms have a certain affinity to the stage rooms of the Russian Constructivism of Meyerhold and Rodchenko, or to spatial studies or exhibition rooms such as those constructed by El Lissitzky (*Raum des Abstrakten*, 1927/1928 in the Hanover Provincial Museum), Herbert Bayer or Thomas M. Messer (*Art of this Century*, Guggenheim, 1942-1947) which are arranged in the classical modern art. A further example might be Richard Hamilton in his "exhibition" in the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1957: *an Exhibit. An Exhibit* is pure design. It developed with the intention of creating an exhibition without theme, objects or artworks, a purely abstract exhibition consisting only of the design of walls and plates/boards in a particular relationship to one another in different colours – pure abstraction. In some works in his space constellations Marsteurer appears to retranslate from the three-dimensional space (marked by wooden scaffolds) into the two-dimensional, in which he bans all the action to a canvas, and the scaffold "goes to seed" into enormous frames awaiting canvasses. This one outsize screen again becomes an almost traditional abstract painting. Figure and ground unite into a space of illusion. "The last radical paintings that concerned themselves with the figure-ground problem were Noldand's circles in the period around 1960. The painters discarded the teleology of distance and pictorial depth as they discarded the background completely and paintings as a whole became objects. This happened some time before they were blown up into wall objects, up to the ceiling objects and down to the floor objects,"⁴ wrote Jo Baer in reaction to Judd's und Morris's pronouncement of the death of painting. In other situations, Marsteurer "exaggerates" in the other direction: he leaves the picture area and, as already described, enters a space of contrary sensations, because they are composed in a contradictory, illogical way.

The space thus also becomes an extended pictorial space on which signs are inscribed; "pure painting" the artist proclaims. However, they have little to do with pure painting as Michael Fried or Clement Greenberg understood it. The movement into the space, which displays performative features, allows a precisely measured, well considered space to develop, which suggests

⁴ Jo Baer, reader's letter, in: Gregor Stemmrch (ed.), *Minimal Art*, Dresden/Basel 1995, p. 140, first published in: *Artforum*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Sept. 1967, p. 5 f

virtuality. The fractures and the imperfections in it, however, allow conclusions as to how it has come into being and compel the observers constantly to “switch” between an illusionist space of imagination and a real space. Here the irritation begins, followed by analysis. Marsteurer describes the reason why these fractures in perception are consciously induced as follows: “Aesthetics needs the space of logic to the extent that it needs analysis. The real space needs the aesthetics space, because in my view every recognition or understanding is essentially aesthetic.”⁵

This transcendental approach is preconditioned on the fact that aesthetic experience is a condition for the possibility of understanding. With Marsteurer, beyond the pure effect of colour, aesthetic experience also demands a mental act. How are space, arrangement of the picture grounds – of which there are usually several – connected. In the attempt to create a total aesthetic space, the artist himself infiltrates disruptive elements that reject illusion and that fragment and make the elements that are part of the monumental “image arrangement” transparent. Although the constructed coordinates again take up the question of figure and ground and the teleology that Baer talks of, in the spatial arrangements Marsteurer attempts to demonstrate the “ground” as empty space which the “figure” meets in a contingent way. The installative image arrangement receives the status of an object, is spatialised and emphasises the accusation that Michael Fried made against Donald Judd and his manifesto of minimalism “Specific Objects” (1965): he brings an element into art that previously was not an integral component of the work in the “pure” painting of Abstract Expressionism, the observer: “The literalists’ [i.e. the artists of minimal art] promotion of objecthood means nothing more than an appeal for a new kind of theatre, and theatre today is the negation of art. The literalist view is first of all theatrical because it considers the actual circumstances under which the observer encounters literalist works.”⁶

Marsteurer stays with painting; he presents us with no primary structures, but this is not two-dimensional, pure, purposeless painting. It juggles back and forth between the expectations of

⁵ Joseph Marsteurer, op. cit.

⁶ Michael Fried, “Kunst und Objekthaftigkeit” in: Gregor Stemrich (ed.), *Minimal Art*, Dresden/Basel 1995, p. 342, first published as “Art and Objecthood”, in *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 10, Summer 1967, p. 12-13

various media from the understanding that the avant-garde of modern art or the post-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970 acquired, only to disappoint them, and attempts to depart from allusive imagery but at the same time to generate a fictional space. At the most genuine, the picture frame functions where the media have not yet decayed into their individual parts, scores and archived potential scroll pictures, but all the questions reunite around a canvass complete with framework, as is the case with "project 04/05".

Finally, a thoroughly refreshing answer to the image and the question of authorship is the *Collection Physique*: fabric cloths on which paint marks have been painted according to an ingenious system of chance. These cloths are finely and neatly folded like serviettes, inventoried and provided with a paper ribbon on which *Collection Physique: a collection of paint marks* can be read – ready to be used for all sorts of situations in everyday life: sometimes they are hanging on the wall like a dishcloth, sometimes they are lying on a table, are crumpled up in a bargain basket in a department store, serve as neat mats under knick-knacks or crockery, or lie neat and tidy in the cupboard. Sometimes they also hang on the wall like pictures.