Round the waist of perception

Erika Krause and Franziska Hufnagel in Waldkraiburg

"Driving a hoop means to be subjected to efforts that will benefit the dreamer."
Artemidorus, 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (2nd century)

There is at least one level on which the painterly approaches of Franziska Hufnagel and Erika Krause – despite their obvious differences – communicate with each other. They present their audience with unusual challenges when viewing their pictures. For they are less (or more) 'pictures' than most people would expect from abstract paintings, plus they invite us to engage wholeheartedly with their structures and qualities, which can certainly lead to an irritation, a certain dizziness or a sense of detachment from the immediate surroundings. The dialogue with the artists has made it clear that they too – in their experimental processes of image construction – can find themselves on the edge of intelligibility and explainability. Although such effects can also be understood in reduced images, their greatest effectiveness is unsurprisingly realised when you find yourself in front of the pictures themselves.

A concrete psychological effect is probably not at the centre of the intentions of these painters, whose works also pursue completely different references and objectives –beyond the sophisticated appeal to their viewers. The 'complex' effect, created for various reasons through small details, or through the finest nuances, has little to do with the 'immersion' often promised today; more with an involvement that calls for all the viewer's powers of imagination. Perhaps the exhibition title 'Hula Hoop' chosen by both artists refers to the intuitive playing with a moving, aesthetically fascinating context with which the body is included and encircled. The works of both artists are not successful examples of a 'trick' with perception orientated towards Op Art or illusionism, even if they may tend towards circus-like mimetics in places. They clearly contradict each other when their basic compositional elements point partly to the improvised chaotic, partly to the sublimely refined, but always also broken orderliness, when they intersect or organise real and illusionary spaces in front of and behind the picture surface.

Exhibiting Franziska Hufnagel's and Erika Krause's works together represents a significant and important opportunity to expand the aesthetic awareness of anyone who is willing and able to spend more than the statistically typical seven seconds in front of a picture – an opportunity that can only be realised through the juxtaposition of two autonomous ideas of a largely abstract pictorial language. In addition to the creation of imaginative spaces in front of, on and behind the picture surface that can be experienced after some time, Krause's and Hufnagel's works, through their dimensions, their top and bottom, their inclusion or exclusion of design elements within the picture, each derive from their own physical practice, through which they also communicate on an intuitive level with the bodies of the viewers. In this exhibition, both artists show pictures in medium and large formats, which in the former case appeal to the finer intimacy of the pictorial sense, in the latter case to the dimensional parallelism of the picture and their own / the viewer's own body. At their best, the images of both sizes transport us into the very interior of our vision, imagination and perception – and, as will be shown, into the realm of our dreams. Painting the pictures visible in the exhibition as they were painted however, initially formulates an offer to us to follow their inner laws – or to ignore them.

If it were indeed the case, as Paul Klee wrote a hundred years ago in his Pedagogical Sketchbook,[1] that "the eye follows the paths laid out for it in the work" and thus pursues what he called "points of attraction," then this not only formulates something like a subjectivity of the (abstract) picture, it also speaks of "traces" that the actively comprehending and self-experiencing eye leaves "in the picture." With reference to this thesis, the art historian Régine Bonnefoit formulates: "According to Klee, the structure of the eye and its ability to successively 'scan' the object do not permit any other perception than linear perception. If there is no line in the work of art, the eye creates the line itself, just as a person would have to find his own way in a wide field without a path". [2] The contradictions between existing, absent and self-produced lines, which become recognisable after a while, offer a common level of access to Hufnagel's and Krause's new paintings, on which one can at least speak of arbitrariness and freedom and of the limits of abstraction in their painterly settings. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that extremely different historical, aesthetic and performative conclusions can be drawn from the artistic experiences with and assumptions about the perceptual paths of the physical and the "spiritual" eye, which are consequences of individual histories and of the corresponding artistic fields of reference pertaining to the works.

Even with the most precisely coordinated images, **Erika Krause's** pictures can acquire qualities that they hardly possess when viewed without mediatisation. In my otherwise still reasonably clear memory directed back to the first time I saw reproductions of her works on a monitor, they appeared to me to be low in contrast, of an almost submarine murkiness – only for me to witness the opposite a short time later in front of the originals – and then to see that they were and are built up in countless, gently applied layers of colour, as if textured with fine dusts, interrupted, undermined and overlaid in an inscrutable alternation with restrained, slowed-down signs, markings and fields that make a sideways view of the picture surface indispensable. Krause's dark, almost black – or very light – backgrounds, which are applied to a thick, almost completely rigid layer of glue, do not create a technically purified monochrome that conceals its human origins, as post-expressionist artists have been striving for since the 1960s. With the greatest sensitivity, she welcomes and cultivates the irregularities and traces of this base that arise in the manual work of her sometimes two-dimensional, sometimes symbolic layering, which she not only leaves to the random production of brush application, but also applies one after the other in a comprehensibly hesitant and questioning manner, comparing and adapting them with what has already been done and, if possible, correcting and orienting them to one another in the inexorable linear course of time. In addition to acrylic paint applied with brushes, she also uses inks, wax pastels or felt-tip pens to create internal forms, vignette-like, abstract pictorial abbreviations, extended nets, fields and zones on and between the painting ground and the various coloured areas, which are arranged not only through an intuitively balanced colour correspondence, but also according to their own transparency, opacity, subjective openness or closedness that appears in the drying process.

The different, carefully experienced by touch, or undamped, scriptural or ornamental agents of form in Krause's paintings are reminiscent of the systematic indecision that the philosopher Roland Barthes described as 'clumsy' or 'awkward' when describing the 'painting facts' in Cy Twombly's works close to writing.[3] The 'uncool' minimalism of her painting and writing gestures, which look like markings, is striking: Sstraight, almost straight, crooked, bent, truncated, cut out or curved, wavy or jagged lines, or groups of lines, which remain individual and almost always unrepeated, which are more on the way to writing than being firmly local in it, close to what has also long been described in abstract art and creativity research as asemic writing, a kind of writing without linguistic significance. Krause's "writ" appears here more in an associative field of no longer "pure" abstraction from the geometric basis and the (hand-) writing that does not yet convey concrete meanings and, despite the diversity of her gesture, conveys a certain slowness.

[1] Paul Klee, Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch (Neue Bauhausbücher), Munich, 1925.
[2] Régine Bonnefoit, „Der ‚Spaziergang des Auges' im Bilde. Reflexionen zur Wahrnehmung von Kunstwerken bei William Hogarth, Adolf von Hildebrand und Paul Klee", in: kritische berichte, No. 4, 2004, p. 6–18.
[3] Roland Barthes, Cy Twombly, orig. 1979, recent re-edition Paris, 2016.

Erika Krause attaches particular importance to colour, which is first and foremost dependent on the painting surface used. With the momentous decision in favour of wooden panels intended for painting or found by chance, of inorganic-looking MDF boards or plywood showing signs of growth, the painter embarks on a process of image creation that is influenced by the materials used, but otherwise cannot be precisely predicted. The process takes place in no particular order and is not only guided by factors within the picture, but can also respond to the very different conception in the close vicinity of another of her layered pictures – because it is not necessarily a solitary individual picture, there are also combinations that go beyond this that particularly interest her as an artist. The sideways glance at her pictures, which is necessary for her further understanding, thus also tends towards an external sensitisation inside an exhibition context, or in a series of pictures. The subtle hierarchies of the actual and the conceptually conceived layers of space and colour are in any case subject to a genesis that is sensed and ordered, however temporally, not according to a plan. Instead it seems ordered according to the peculiarities of the components used, which Krause usually withdraws in the surface layers interrupted by braking or structuring gesso interventions, while the sign-like lines, depending on the subjective "height" or "depth" in the genesis of the overall picture, are charged to the point of signal colourfulness – without this process, which is based on colour perspective, being assigned an individual spatiality that can be affirmed with shadows.

The half-lines / half-signs seem to float in her image structures - like the irritations or the bits of clouding known as "floaters" or "mouches volantes," which are caused by deposits in the vitreous body of the eye: small, thread-like, blotchy, sometimes transparent-looking structures in the visual field, which can be perceived by many people even without a more serious diagnosis. "Floaters" often surprise people who look at a smooth, white wall and realise that they suddenly notice dancing dots or lines in front of their eyes, which they cannot fixate on, but which repeatedly evade their focussed gaze. One of their special features is that they correspond to an inner experience that can hardly be documented photographically, that they cannot be fixed within one's own eye, as they frustratingly elude the inner gaze again and again. Krause's sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque significations could be understood as "stabilisations" of such floaters, as concretisations of the naturally given wandering streaks in the eye. They move just as little as these themselves - it is always the viewer's eyes that seek and find a counterpart to (almost) every floating form, sometimes in a "weaker" colour, sometimes with a minimal deviation in form, emerging from the chalky layers of the overall picture, suggesting shadowiness without being shadow.

At the end of the 2010s, a new structuring logic gradually took hold in **Franziska Hufnagel's** painting, with which she bid farewell to the more figurative, crystalline and grisaille-heavy pictorial narratives of her early days. Years before paintings such as "Viel los draußen" ("A lot going on outside"), "Festungsbau mittags" ("Fortress construction by day") or "Festungsbau abends" ("Fortress construction at night"), which she painted in the pandemic year 2020 and which show her novel achievements with confusing clarity, she began to arrange painterly surfaces with the finest dividing lines and omissions into separate individual parts that function like "pictures within a picture." The irregular, internally ornamental fields created in this way appear as an abundance of differently coloured internal patterns, without their colouristic and gestural interaction being consolidated. The ornamental repertoire in the linearly encompassing respect zones of her superimposed inner pictorial form associations is not alarmingly new; in part it does penetrate from details of her early work. However, the originally stronger idea of wanting to dominate the picture with the form and the space with the picture is clearly followed in her more recent pictures by the desire for a sharpening and crisis-like intensification that turns the picture surface into an objectively solidified, but subjectively restless zone.

The often but not always large-format pictures are part of a process that does not come to rest in the moment, inside the period of observation, but instead keeps the viewer constantly on the lookout for points of reference and affirmative relationships, allowing them to fluctuate uncontrollably and endlessly, between summary and detail-orientated perception. As their titles go, they are not a "fortress," they are "fortress construction." Although they repeatedly evade traditional mastery in an almost disgruntled manner, and although they seem inclined to keep themselves dangerously open or ruthlessly cosy up to one another, they trigger an initially spasmodic reflex of explanation in viewers, or rather, in viewers like me. This fatal search for meaning in the face of an intuitively perceptible aporia of forms, which can probably only be ruled out by possible ignorance, might remind some of the formulation commonly used in art criticism for a suggestive version of the incomprehensible: the play with the celebrated perceptual failures of an instrumental Op Art, the "puzzle game," the "conundrum," the entertaining riddle that exchanges time for duration – for which, however, resolutions exist or are at least conceivable, if perhaps not through mental agility and skill, but through trickery.

The eyes also wander in Hufnagel's paintings, which may ultimately remind you of a tray of disorganised petri dishes – even and especially after she has (again) expanded her aesthetic field of action to include the stock of forms and the semantic imposition of the written word. The painterly limbo of dazzling colour forms, ornaments, surfaces, lines and patterns, which often makes me whistle the harmoniously intricate title melody of the historic TV show '100 Masterpieces', left me unchecked, to unrestrainedly feel the unconventional power of Hufnagel's rich imagination and set off an unstoppable chain reaction of barely comprehensible bounce-backs between the sensitive areas, the high-tension bumpers and the flashing targets of her pinball image fields, the script-based image architecture mixed with its own theory of movement. The artist uses writing both as handwriting and as decorative lettering – but never as an abstract form that can be mirrored, twisted or abstracted at will, as a kind of geometric fact, but always in the sense of actual reading, which initiates an abundance of beginning and ending left-to-right movements in the picture.

It is these latter hand-written pictures that seem to offer conclusions about Franziska Hufnagel's artistic approach, as they are 'about something'. In pictures such as 'Rue Ubu' (2024), the title-giving letters have crept into the whimsical, picturesque city map like streets or cartographic designations. Here, the title is – sometimes almost cassiber-like - a short linguistic message that essentially fulfils the task of suggesting Hufnagel's artistic orientation towards the historical and still vivid 'pataphysics of Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), which the author had developed with his play premiered in Paris in 1896, "Ubu Roi", which happily despaired of the ritualisms of church and state, the author sending it out into the world as a momentously absurd, anti-rationalist way of thinking on the fringes of modernism – Dadaism, Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp, Karl Valentin, and the Marx Brothers were understood as its successors – Franziska Hufnagel intends nothing less than to stylise herself as an art-historical warning sign before or after the decline of avant-gardism with such an embedded reference. She sees the path of 'pataphysics, the Rue Ubu, as a valid artistic model of action due to its inner and outer contradictions in the historical moment of threat and suppression of more than just artistic freedom that is emerging right here and right now. In its sense, 'pataphysical thinking is the logical equal evaluation of affirmation and negation, of 1 and 0; like Schrödinger's cat, it is both dead and alive in the modern history of mind and un-mind.[4]

[4] Cf. Brian Reffin Smith, ‚Pataphysik, in: 'PATADATA 1, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Lenka Tutschová, Galerie Kabinet T., Zlin, 2017, text in Czech and German inside the sleeve oft he publication.

Far more detailed references are provided by the handwritten text arrangements and overlays of her other paintings and drawings from the past year, which she has called 'Homage to F.G.'. Without 'depicting' a linear text, they contain cursory or lengthily quoted references to Franz Gsellmann's life's work, created in secret in Styria between the 1960s and 1980s, the insane construction later (1973) erroneously baptised "Weltmaschine" by the Tyrolean government council. This unfolded over a period of twenty-three years by an artistically "uneducated" person – in a fetish-like reference to the Atomium in Brussels – on the six by two metre surface of a farmhouse room made up of thousands of machine parts, hard-to-assign remnants, cult objects, lettered texts, cables and colourful light bulbs, which are kept in a compulsively circling, exotically flashing and hopeless motion with electrical (and spiritual) energy.

More precisely, Hufnagel's reference is actually to a specific book about this machine (including its integrated ISBN number), to the "Weltmaschinenroman" (2008) by the author Klaus Ferentschik,[5] with whom the artist also shares an earlier collaboration and who does Gsellmann more justice and stylises him far less than the probably more established author Gerhard Roth,[6] who also devotes himself to Gsellmann's appreciation in an illustrated book equipped with his texts. The inner-pictorial overwritings and arrangements, which are transferred into Hufnagel's involving pictorial design scheme with a decidedly unromantic style and surprising directness, use only the four colours of historical Western office pens: black, red, blue, and green. Painfully built into them, like the machine parts in the biological body of a cyborg, her world-machine typefaces contain careless geometries, numbers and handleless flywheels, V-belts, traffic lights and tubes as drawings – and in other places as literal quotations ('Perpetuum mobile'), which take her equation of image, language and (world) machine to a provisional extreme. Due to the unabstracted directionality of the letters and numbers, the type of movement has mutated into left-to-right view swings of varying lengths, literally creating a painted "book of unrest." Another reference that comes to nothing, in an image machine that is "useless, seemingly infinite and yet an expression of human abandonment" [7] and carries within it all hope, even the most paltry dream circling around a defence of painterly reason.

Clemens Krümmel

[5] Klaus Ferentschik, Der Weltmaschinenroman, with illustrations by Horst Hussel, Berlin, 2008.
[6] Gerhard Roth/Franz Killmeyer, Gsellmanns Weltmaschine, Vienna and Munich, 1986.
[7] Ibid., p. 11.