

Annekathrin Norrmann's Visual Objects

I.

What pictorial space (or, rather, in modern terms spatiality) might be, has become a significant question. How simple matters seemed to be in pre-modern or even early modern times, when pictorial space existed in a clear representational relationship with a recognisable, three-dimensional real space, occupied by objects, in which pictorial space could still be uncontroversially conceived within a model of an external, object-occupied space. Of course it was obvious that this space, an artistic space, differed from the space surrounding the viewer at least by the fact that it was perceived purely optically and had become stilled or frozen into motionlessness; by the fact that it was separated from the surrounding area to which viewers were related through their various senses or their corporeality by a "window", by a mirror or some other "transparent screen", and therefore seemed to be reduced to a motionless, settled, purely optical relationship, a configuration of represented objects, whose existence in the picture was purely optical. Therefore the question of the nature of pictorial spatiality was always subordinate to the style of the depiction, the factual representation, and its status was thus clearly defined. The picture showed in a specific manner, which was related to other symbolic systems and could, equally, be clearly differentiated from them, the real world or new configurations of the objects of the real world.

However, the extent to which the representational model, even though it was not fundamentally cast into question until the beginning of the radical modern era, generated an artificial, constrained homogenisation of space, had become clear in landscape painting, particularly during the romantic period. When distance, free of objects, was included within pictorial space (the horizon, the sky, the sea), it could be seen that the perceived distance in the pictorial space and even more the pictorial space's own infinity (in this context infinity is the romantic metaphor for the specific inconceivability and ungraspableness of distance) could not simply be absorbed and comprehended by means of the construction of space through perspective. Because this construction comprehends and constructs depth, the third dimension, on the model of the two other dimensions which are in the field of vision and provide a frontal view. Depth is then derived from the measurability and appreciation of the two-dimensional view and treated as an extension into the inferable, although not truly visible third dimension. It became clear that it was very difficult to combine the three types, or rather aspects, of objective space, which have been developed in modern painting: the space surrounding the work, the near space and the space of the empty distance, which was formalised as a sky-perspective (as almost monochrome verging on blue, as in the Danube school), could only be unified and synthesised into an holistic space by means of a rigid construction, namely the strictly linear construction of perspective. The layered arrangement of foreground, middle distance and background in the Romantics' landscapes was important for painting since it allowed the various visual modes of space and its related modes of viewing to be encompassed through perspective.

Perceiving pictorial space as representational space becomes problematic the moment that it depicts an object-free distance - or rather suggests one; when "empty space" is depicted, when pictorial space becomes the analogy (this analogy is no longer a simple representation) of atmospheric space (particularly for example with C. D. Friedrich and William Turner). Since then, in abstract painting, it has no longer been possible to regard pictorial space as a representation of real space, and because it is no longer possible to assume what (or what type of perception) it depicts, pictorial space has become a mystery.

This mystery was still concealed in Monochrome Painting and in Colour Field Painting by the moderns, particularly in Abstract Expressionism (most emphatically in the paintings of Mark Rothko), by replacing the representation of the world in painting with the representation of the individual and their emotions, feelings, desires and impulses. Admittedly the model of expressivity, the expression of the subjectivity of the artist within the pictorial space, was even less clear and more problematic than the model of the representation of the visible world, and yet this idealistic model of a genuinely meaningful content of a picture and its pictorial space, deriving from the productivity, spontaneity and authenticity of the creative artist, remained fundamental throughout the modern period.

With the disappearance of the model of an expressive, subjective and semantic content for pictorial space in the 1960s the question, however, became unavoidable and urgent; what does pictorial spatiality consist of? What is the picture, or more specifically the pictorial space expressing? What hermeneutical model, what manner of perception will allow us to deal with it? If "empty" pictorial space (we will have something to say about the emptiness of pictorial space later) depicts neither the sky nor a similar intangible distance in the world, nor the tones and colours of creative subjectivity - what then is it depicting?

The perception of an "empty" or objectless spatiality has clearly (and what does "clear" mean here?) appeared in three entirely different, historically sequential analytical and semantic systems of art, in the earliest modern, the abstract modern and in the late modern or postmodern periods. This raises the question of the extent to which we are always concerned with the same perception in a painting, or always with the same spatiality, a very difficult question (what does "same perception" mean, but relationships or analogies are unavoidable). With the Romantics "empty" potential space was understood as the representation of distance in the world, as the qualitative colour tones and gradations of the atmosphere, which, literally, is the combined play of air, water and light perceived from a distance, as a qualitatively visual differentiation of the ungraspable distance; the play of the clouds, of mist, of rain, of haze, of the light of the sun or the moon ("Colour Beginnings" by William Turner, C.D. Friedrich's sunsets). It is no coincidence, that the differentiated, qualitative, but material combined play of air, water, moisture, temperature and sun- or moonlight, the atmosphere, has become, since the Romantics, a general metaphor for qualitative differentiations of perception and the self-perception of the individual, a metaphor for the "tonal" and differentiated emptiness of subjectivity (subjectivity is an atmospheric empty space).

The status of the immateriality of coloured but empty atmospheric space was radically transformed by the moderns: where before it had been understood as a metaphor, as a literal atmosphere, as the colour effects of layers of air and their lighting, it now became the immateriality of spirituality or, more precisely: subjectivity. The "atmosphere" of empty coloured space in a painting no longer depended upon a representative perception, but created a psychic analogy, a complex (romantic) articulation of subjectivity as mood, emotion, feelings etc. (as in the paintings of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman). When, as for Annekathrin Norrmann, this idealistic reading or interpretation of coloured space in painting collapsed, there arose an aporia of the perception, which revealed the problematic phenomenon of pictorial space openly and unmediated to the perception. For although this pictorial space, this "empty" coloured space, no longer expresses meaning, and no longer creates any analogies of the subjectivity of its creator, and therefore can no longer be interpreted as being part of a coded "language of painting", specific complex possibilities of perception (pictorial and in a precise sense aesthetic perceptions) of spatiality are nevertheless revealed, and exhibit an indisputable perceptive reality of a wholly particular reality (it consists of effects).

A pictorial spatiality, when its "emptiness" in (almost) Monochrome Painting or in Colour Field Painting, is not disturbed or confused by any (symbolical, iconographic, indexical) signifiers, distances itself from any perception through the modern model of measurable, homogeneous, three-dimensional space. It cannot essentially be measured - because it exists only visually and does not permit any (measuring, comprehending) physical contact; it cannot essentially be measured - because it exists only qualitatively, in (predominantly) colour qualities, which cannot be quantified; it cannot essentially be measured - because its space is not touchable, and does not touch the space of the physical bodies in which we viewers are positioned (it is infinitely distant); it cannot essentially be measured - because it eludes any organisation of dimensions: even its surface is not a surface (a surface is a two-dimensional facet of a three-dimensional body), but is instead a complex, qualitative, pictorial area, and its depth is not a third dimension, but a qualitative depth of density and multiple layers, so that pictorial area and pictorial depth cannot be sensibly distinguished (the pictorial area is immeasurably deep and the depth of the pictorial space is, at the same time, effectively a surface); it cannot essentially be measured - because it is not possible to differentiate within it between total object and empty space, since it is a qualitatively sensual but not materially occupied space, only distantly comparable to the deep density of the atmosphere.

Pictorial spatiality is perceived differently and must be considered in other categories than as the construction of depth on the model of the two visible dimensions, the surface of bodies, in the homogeneous modern space: the best adapted in terms of phenomena are qualitative categories or categories of intensity: categories of density and of depth becoming denser and darker, of layering and multi-layering, of translucence and milkiness - that is to say descriptions of phenomena, which in general terms are appropriate on the one hand to skin and on the other to the atmosphere. The expanse of the pictorial space is a purely visual quality, is colour and light; this space is therefore effectively undimensional, because it does not permit itself to be orientated in dimensions, because it does not allow any contact (by hand, by measurement, by comprehension), since it endlessly withdraws itself - and even for the Romantics "infinity" was a metaphor for the ungraspability and non-comprehensibility of such a perception, of the pictorial (or in a very precise sense, aesthetic), purely qualitative perception.

II.

Questioning and researching pictorial space has reached an entirely new dimension in Annkathrin Norrmann's artistic work (and the metaphor "dimension" refers at the very least to spatiality altogether). This is because she creates pictorial space through visual objects which are literally empty spaces or empty objects and at the same time immaterial, coloured pictorial spaces. Her visual objects consist of two parts, which are not materially linked to each other, but nevertheless belong essentially together: fabricated, "colour-veiled" acrylic boxes on predominantly monochrome canvases. The boxes, originally transparent, are hand filed without a specific aim or expression, without giving their now rough surface any qualities of the artistic "hand". This is done only for a pragmatic purpose: to make the surface rough and therefore milky, to reduce its transparency to a strong translucency. These boxes are then painted mostly evenly with a colour, or sometimes with several closely related colours: in a way they become a kind of (square-shaped) veil of colour within the space. This quality of a veil of colour is to be understood both literally and metaphorically: like a veil of woven material this veil is both a boundary and an optical gateway. It is translucent, adds colour to the perceived space, so that one can no longer tell whether the space is empty? Or, since it is filled with coloured light, whether it is occupied?

The boxes produce a framed space filled with coloured light - entirely comparable to a stage area. Particularly in relation to a spatially clearly defined area, aesthetically separated from the viewing space, like a stage area, the "veil" concept is both a precise metaphor and a crucial technical operation. In, for example, Robert Wilson's theatre design the layering of the stage area by gauzes and diagonal coloured beams of light through to a background, which itself consists of a gauze lit with coloured lighting, plays a major role: by this means the space is qualitatively layered or ordered and gains a depth which is not the same as a measurable third dimension. The gauze allows the light to manifest itself in the space as a wall or a layer. And here, of course, "gauze" is closely related as a visual phenomenon with "skin" and "atmosphere".

The paintings which hang behind the boxes often have a monochrome surface, and otherwise predominantly horizontal and vertical divisions, which cannot be perceived as compositions. The divisions often appear because the painting beneath the acrylic boxes provides only the upper or the lower half of the box with a coloured background; the other half provides a painted or broken view through to the wall, which then reveals itself as a colour. The acrylic surface of the boxes is often, as with *verre églomisé*, coloured both from the front and the rear, so that the acrylic boxes show two separate layers of colour. Occasionally the paintings on the wall are replaced with mirrors, which re-emphasises a basic principle of the work: it is about transforming the optical and material effects of the introduced materials into visual, pictorial qualities. For this reason the optical and material effects of roughness and smoothness, of transparency and translucency, of hardness and softness, of fluting and the rhythmical and repetitive inclusions of a material are important - all these material qualities and technical means are not deployed creatively, compositionally and intentionally, but largely in a neutral way without any intentional direction of their effects. The graduation of the veils of colour (the veils of the translucent coloured box and the background veils) produces a coloured area which is immaterial both in the sense of empty or objectless (a plastic intermediate space) and in the sense of ungraspable, purely visual (a pictorial space made of colour). And at the same time it consists of a materially bounded empty space separated from the surrounding space. This translucent (with the light passing through several veils or reflected by them and thus coloured) space, filled with coloured light, creates a kind of literally pictorial space (however contradictory that might be): a material, objective inner space, which is perceived as a purely visual pictorial space.

This space is furthermore framed by itself: the narrow sides of the acrylic boxes, also painted in colour, produce an optical concentration and deepening of colour, so that the surface seems to be enclosed within a dark frame. Where the area of colour of a monochrome pictorial space produces another type of space, a qualitative and ungraspable coloured space, which both confronts and simultaneously withdraws from the spectator's gaze like an enclosed, dense void, like a visual buffer, like a thicket, appears to arc forwards and backwards at the same time, the real interior of the boxes in Annekathrin Norrmann's visual objects creates a literal "materialisation" of coloured space, of a pictorial and purely visual qualitative space. Even the immateriality of coloured light gains an odd literality: the coloured light shines out of an empty space through coloured but translucent walls. Just as with coloured fluorescent tubes the light radiates from a transparent or translucent coloured glass object. In the roughened, milky acrylic of the visual objects the colour obtains a sort of "corona", which is both energetically real and at the same time immaterial.

In transforming material qualities into visual, pictorial qualities it is not a question of materiality in general and its optical effects (as was the theme for Moholy-Nagy) - reflection, transparency, the splitting of light - but it is a matter of the effects of the materiality of the means of painting themselves: of the base (transparent acrylic), the medium, the pigment,

the varnish, the application etc.; and added to these effects of the material there is also the dependence of the perception of the siting requirements of the lighting. Depending on the intensity of the light, on the colour and the direction of the light, as well as on the point of view of the viewer, the works change: they become (like veils) more transparent or more opaque, they change the reflections of their light, the colours become darker or lighter. The combination, undetermined and largely uncontrollable, of the painting in the background and the coloured acrylic box undergoes considerable change within the real situation; in this sense the material conditions of the situation and particularly of the light are a basic and constituent part of the pictorial visual objects. The uncontrollable contingency of the material effects and even more their combination produces a pictoriality or a visual space; the unintentional result is, to a considerable extent, without an author, creator or controller.

In this respect Annekathrin Norrmann's works are part of the tradition of Radical Painting. In this tradition the material of the painting transforms into a pictorial manifestation: it is not a manifestation of anything specific or different, but is manifestation per se. It is nothing other than manifestation. Manifestation means neither mere superficiality nor the opposite of a hidden nature or purpose, but means the specific, purely visual, reality of pictoriality, a purely visual, incorporeal existence for the eye.

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