

Michael Fehr

Lively Grey

I. Grey – a reflexive colour value

From the point of view of colour systems, grey qualifies as the non-colour per se, as a visibility value, which can not only be made up of a mixture of black and white, but can also be produced by mixing other colours with their complementaries in the colour circle. Grey stands for the neutralizing of colour, in colour terms it is as it were a zero point, even in respect of an achromatic palette, a palette, that is, reduced to black and white. And in that sense grey has a particular quality: grey stands for total negation.

However, as such grey in fact represents an ideal: the idea that there might be something that is absolutely neutral, amorphous or without effect. For, every actual grey is at one and the same time something completely other than the absence of colour: grey is a nothing which, like no other visibility value, sensitizes the eye to colour. Grey lights up other colours, evokes them out of nothing and nowhere, so that we become aware of the infinite nuances and diversity in everything it touches. Grey is a colour-negation, which affirms – and all the more so as we engage with it and finally come to realize that there is, in fact, no such thing as a neutral grey. For the more sensitive we are to grey, the clearer it becomes, that it always tends to go in one direction or the other, towards either cool or warm, dark or light, inclining before our eyes to this or that other colour. Grey always appears to be on the way to being a colour, a colour which we have yet to see in it, which as it were we have not so far trusted. And along with this experience goes the realization that, at the very point when we believe we have identified the colour in it, it does not actually exist.

So grey works quite differently from all the other colours, whether bright or not so bright, whose complementary at least we always see as an after-image. For grey has no definite complementary, instead it evokes the potential of all that forms it: that is, the entire colour spectrum, more or less as Phillip Otto Runge made clear in his colour sphere, as the mid-point of our colour cosmos.

However, this ideal place of grey also denotes the moment its actual appearance plunges us into a crisis of colour perception. That is, as a colour with no actual opposite, grey disrupts the routines and conventions of our perception of colour, and because it cannot be so clearly assigned or determined, lets us recognize the fact that what we call colour cannot be defined independently of the context in which it appears. Grey not only calls for a particular form of attention, but also forces us to differentiate *between* colours and decide what colour, what a colour is. In dealing with grey, in seeing grey we are made aware that seeing colour is not simply a matter of understanding a physical fact, but is a form of perception in which we react to the interaction of particular properties of surfaces and their illumination: grey is the colour value, which, in whatever form, generally leads to our reflecting on the perception of colour and the act of perceiving itself.

We can perceive colours as immaterial (physiological) film-colours (David Katz), or as material (physical) surface- and volume-colours. Examples of the former are the light spectrum or the blue of the sky, in the latter case we are forced to see them as attributes of surfaces, or volumes. In relation to this, grey is particularly significant, in so far as it can occur as a film-colour as well as a surface-colour, that is, as the result of a subtractive or an additive mixture of colours.

For the viewer paintings are constructed surfaces, which, depending on their pictorial concept, the materials used in their production, their facture and the ambient light (or lighting) appear to be singular products of the relationship between film- and surface-colours. Here too grey is of particular significance, since, because it is not a "coloured"

colour, it is perceived above all else in terms of its brightness value. Thus, the brighter it is, the more it appears to react to the colourfulness of its surroundings or the lighting conditions, whereas a dark grey has a tendency to absorb light and – similar to bright colour tones – asserts itself as an autonomous phenomenon as counterpoint to its environment.

II. Lively Grey

As with the series of exhibitions "Mainly Grey", there are two aspects to the exhibition "Lively Grey": On the one hand the commitment, in relation to a single colour, to finding a criterion for comparing various concepts, styles and perceptions of colour in the area of non-objective painting; and on the other the attempt to explore the boundaries of what can be construed as grey. In relation to this, the exhibition focuses specifically on painterly grey, that is, the grey that results from the mixing and over-painting of bright colours, and on the variations of grey resulting from specific picture facture. In so doing the exhibition takes up the basic artistic idea, which, as their common ground, underlies the works exhibited, and is to be understood as its transposition to the level of exhibiting, that is, if you will, as a concrete exhibition. Whatever the case, the exhibition is to be seen as having no reference point other than the work presented, and therefore no interest in connecting with anything other than the aim of finding out, as with the work itself, what role the engagement with colour may have for the development of artistic pictorial concepts and our perception of the world.

An earlier version of this exhibition concept, which was shown in 2005 in the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, was built around the tension between two artistic positions, Josef Albers' painting "de profundo" (1968) and Icke Winzer's "Untitled" (1980), both to be found in the museum's collection. Albers' work, executed with colours straight from the tube – while being typical of his series "Homage to the Square", nonetheless an unusual picture made up of three "un-colourful" colours, that is three grey tones set in relation to each other – represents the phenomenon of the *Interaction of Colour*, here made up of very dark grey tones, whereas in Winzer's painting the grey is a painted grey made up of "colourful" colours. Between these two extremes twelve further concrete art positions were displayed which, with a few exceptions, we were able to show in the Berlin exhibition as well. However, neither the first exhibition nor the Berlin series claimed, or claims, to be an exhaustive presentation of the relevant field, but rather an attempt to lay out some generic examples. The following observations therefore are to be understood as no more than a brief description of what there was to see and an attempt to summarize some key points.

III. "If you haven't painted with grey, you are not a painter" (Paul Cézanne)

The exhibitions featured grey in every imaginable gradation and nuance in terms of brightness value, from nearly white paintings (Alteneder, Lalic), through to light (Kompa) and medium values (Gasteiger, Kaiser, Paatz, Tollens, Winzer, Wurmfeld) to darker (Frattegianni, Gal, Joachim, von Hasselbach, Hessling) and practically black greys (Charalambou, Cohen, Sagerman, Schade-Hasenberg). In any case the exhibition "Lively Grey" was not organized in terms of such a spectrum but was an attempt to establish a more complex organization of the pictures in which their colour or brightness values were more a framework for comparison rather than being the theme.

In comparison to the other works in the exhibition Andrea Alteneder's and Maria Lalic's practically white paintings take up very different positions. Viewed individually, Andrea Alteneder's four small monochrome paintings "Untitled (Daylight)" from 2012/13, could be described as white, but seen as a series and in relation to each other subtle nuances are discernible, whose values are in a way not disturbed by the way the paint has been applied; the longer one looks at them the stronger the clearly different, if un-nameable,

gradations of a very light grey reveal themselves - resembling various daylight colours. Maria Lalic's subject, on the other hand, is the material from which the colour of her paintings is made. Her diptych "Stretched Lead Squares" (1992) is made up of thin lead sheets stretched over the support, and still visible at the edges. She paints over them in lead (Chemnitz) white with neutral brush strokes, which reveal the soft, slightly uneven structure of the metal and in addition demonstrate that white can dissolve into perceptibly stronger or weaker light greys depending on the lighting. Hartwig Kompa's three-part work "Grey times three" (2011) is completely determined by the material properties and not by personal facture: powdered glass in three noticeably different blueish tones has been applied to aluminium sheets, hung at slightly different distances from the wall. In addition to the comparatively mutual, intensifying brightness and colour values of the three sheets, they are also distinguished by their similar technical structure, but nonetheless differently working inner structure: due to the materials' different remission properties, the lighter and the darker sheets are interfused and animated by nearly white particles, whereas the medium grey one appears static and very nearly monochrome.

In so far as the aim is for the colour to be seen as a property of something, as uniting the colour and the support, rather being as it were accidental, Kompa's works are comparable on one the hand with Jürgen Paatz's series "Hand Tafeln" (1977) and on the other with Alfonso Fratteggiani Bianchi's "Grey Triptych" (undated). In fact, the effect of the two works is completely different, although both artists work the colour in by hand: in Paatz's case the process involves a sort of fundamental colouring of the support, in this instance paper, so that the paintings function as if they have tried everything not to take on the colour, and are as they are, as only they can be and always were. In contrast, in Fratteggiani Bianchi's stones the colour, or more precisely the pigment – by his own admission he uses no binder – sits on the support like something applied, but at the same time also inseparable from it, like an immaculate, highly saturated monochromatic surface, whereas the colourfulness of Paatz's work is always informed by the structure of the material and because of this exhibits a variety of values. In this they resemble Mateo Cohen's "Untitled" (2011), where the dull, black-grey paint seems to have seeped into the canvas and dried, although there is still evidence of painterly application at the edges where a whole range of dark grey tones can be seen.

Gabriele Schade-Hasenberg's "Untitled" (1999) is also nearly black, although in contrast to the above, it is made up of a myriad of coloured glazes, in much the same way as both of Dorothee Joachim's paintings, "22.08 – 10" and "14.08 – 5" (2008). In any case the effect of the two paintings is very different: Schade-Hasenberg's painting has a highly glossy surface, which is modulated by the reflected colour from the room, whilst Joachim's works absorb all the light, incorporating it to strengthen its values. Both effects come together in Raymund Kaiser's "GR-H3 (190313)" (2013), which has a greyish-green, partly reflective, partly matte surface, but not one, as in Schade-Hasenberg's painting, revealing an effect of depth, but rather in a sense really confronting the viewer. A surface which reflects the ambient lighting is also a characteristic of Rosa M. Hessling's "Licht-Wandellust V" (2008-2010), and Tinka von Hasselbach's "Nebelgrau" (2013). In Hessling's painting the dark-looking ground tone takes on a really silvery-grey hue depending on the viewer's position, whereas in Hasselbach's painting the continual shifting from lighter to darker is tangible. Claudia Desgranges's subject is the emergence and iridescence of colour which she achieves by deliberately reducing the remissive and reflective properties of the pigments; in her painting "Epidote" (2001) it is more than anything else the colour and reflective properties of the support (aluminium) that modulate the applied colours.

Compared, the work of András Gál and Jakob Gasteiger are completely different, as they work by applying the paint with a pronounced impasto, and use the haptic qualities of the material to modulate the brightness values. In "Untitled/Grey" (2013) Gál builds up the colour mass by overlaying squeegee strokes in such a way that the surface gives the impression of a natural texture and with it produces varied light refractions. In

comparison, in Gasteiger's two-part picture "15.9.2012" (2012) the paint is applied in a systematic way and two different, dry-looking grey tones in the form of striped colour reliefs confront each other. There are two further pictures which play even more with the materiality of paint, in that they treat the pictorial surface as an open structure: in "Untitled KB Series" (2006) Sotirakis Charalambou has made a painting out of dyed black, cellulose flakes, which not only soaks up the light, but also creates inner shadows, in a similar way to Robert Sagerman's painting "5026" (2012), which consists of 5026 pigment marks systematically laid one over the other which evoke very dark brightness values in the form of reflections and remissions.

It is possible to see the influence of Josef Albers' *Interaction of Colour* in it, which is anyway the basic theme of Sanford Wurmfeld's "II-17 + B (N + Sat B)" (2006) and almost systematically demonstrates, how it is possible to make a grey surface out of colours other than grey. A similar effect can be seen in Gabriele Evertz's "Six Greys" (2006). The surface of the painting's striped construction resolves into a four-fold interplay of six different, light greys, which together with three stripes of the ground colour create a dynamic and spatially active constellation.

Finally, Peter Tollens' "grey green orange pink grey" (June–November 2012) and Icke Winzer's "VI" (2007) are typical of two gestural, painterly positions which could not be more different. Tollens' picture is done with innumerable short, partly colourful and, despite their similarities, individual strokes with a straight brush, repeatedly laid over each other and which create a highly differentiated colour field, a playful, warm-looking grey. In contrast, the grey in Winzer's equally haptic painting, applied with a spatula, is the product of a mixture of red, white and blue. However, it fails not only to meet our expectations of harmony and equilibrium, but also denies us the peace and clarity we might expect to find when confronted with grey.

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