

FRACTURED PERCEPTION

*Paintings of a reality in motion:
Daniel Mohr's visual phase shifting*

Reflections of light on water, moving shadows, prismatic refractions, vortical rotations: Daniel Mohr's works draw pivotal aesthetic impulses from phenomena that disrupt the unambiguous view of the world and its objects. The compositions of the Berlin-based painter, born in 1976, are themselves manifoldly disrupted. They are impacted by the very reflections, refractions, and rotations that the artist—as his photographic studies demonstrate, which have the casualness of incidental snapshots and yet still seem to follow a formal program—imports from the extra-pictorial into the intra-pictorial reality of his paintings, which seem to shatter into pieces before the beholders' eyes. Mohr's paintings are as evasive as the ephemeral play of light and shadow. They are fragmented, distorted, broken up into vertical strips and rotating circles, which, albeit without their cosmic dimensions, recollect "the rotating rhythms and simultaneous contrasts" of the French color de-constructivist and representative of "cubisme écartelé, (literally, "quartered" or "divided" Cubism), Robert Delaunay, who was labeled with the lyrically charged term Orphism by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. As Michel Seuphor has emphasized in his exploration of the development of Abstract painting in the first half of the 20th century, in "breaking down colors in accordance to the rules of complimentary hues" Delaunay made the "depiction of the color components of light [...] the actual theme and pictorial subject." Furthermore, on another level, Mohr's increasingly abstract, collage-like, kaleidoscopic, or in other ways disintegrating and fractured park, sea, river, or beach landscapes, produced on the basis of the artist's own as well as art-historical source images (among these Titian's Bacchanal from 1523-25, located in the Prado, Madrid, and Théodore Géricault's The Raft of the Medusa from 1819, situated in the Louvre in Paris, both adapted in various versions by the artist) share the distinct musical verve of the prismatic color rhythms created by both Robert and Sonja Delaunay. As he himself has stated, despite a recourse to figurative motifs, Mohr "does not relate stories" in his work. Rather in his paintings he is representing "zero situations" with regard to subject matter, where questions of perception take precedence over content-related interpretations or messages.

Interestingly, Mohr points out references in his work to music, seeing, however, in his "modulation of color gradients" and the construction of his paintings more of an affinity to the serial dynamics and repeating patterns of Minimal music of composers such as Eric Satie or Brian Eno—a fact that also finds expression in his giving both this publication and the exhibition that it accompanies the title Phase Shifting. In this sense, the term derived from the sphere of physics refers here to the structural technique employed by Steve Reich and other protagonists of Minimal music where "two identical phrases or sound samples played at slightly differing speeds" are induced "to repeat and slowly go out of phase with each other."?

Considering the subtle nuances and refractions in Mohr's paintings, transposed to the visual sphere the analogy to tonal phase shifting evokes associations to the generation of electronic images on the TV or computer monitor. In fact, among the artist's sources of inspiration one also finds images of digital color bars. Accordingly, with a term derived from digital image processing, he himself speaks of "layers" with regard to the superimpositions that permeate his paintings as inherent patterns and fragmentations. In the simultaneity of

events that becomes manifest in these, aspects of tension may appear in various places at the same time.

In a certain sense, this is similar to the principle of Ambient Music, as defined by Brian Eno, "which must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular." According to Eno, in its hierarchy-free structure Ambient Music "is intended to induce calm and a space to think." Through the subtle, precise, and often sharp-edged disruptions, which Mohr incorporates in his paintings as optical interferences, he opens up spaces for the reflection of perception. While these are being studied or "scanned" by the viewer, in the manner of computer images ephemeral scenes slowly emerge, which, however, could potentially change shape again the next moment. The viewers themselves are requested to piece together Mohr's paintings in their minds, which, in turn, already through their particular compositional setup point to the constructed nature of visual perception as such and to the relativity of representations of reality.

In the artist's latest compositions, the aesthetic vehicle of anamorphosis that was particularly popular in the 17th century, featuring different variations of pyramidal or cylindrical mirrored devices and prisms, which were employed to encode and decode optical illusions and distortions in paintings, is introduced as an additional element of questioning and disrupting conventions of perception. Even Daniel Mohr's most contemplative works, whose color scheme has gained in brightness and intensity in comparison to the artist's earlier, more subdued, diffuse palette, are in a constant paradox state of exception, oscillating between contemplation and irritation, calm and commotion. The intensive focus on colors and the phenomenon of light these constitute, upon which our ability of perception is based, offers the artist both the context and the visual platform for his investigation of the flow of time, which in the variable reflexive space of his paintings is simultaneously arrested and liberated from boundaries. An adaptation from the year 2011 of Titian's ecstatic Bacchanal, where the original motif has mutated into a kind of high angle landscape panorama, not only reveals the shift towards abstraction mentioned above, which can generally be observed in the artist's recent works, but also a form of quasi visual acceleration. For Mohr, Titian's Bacchanal is of particular interest due to the fact that "it is a prime example of a painting that exceeds the scope of what it represents," and is not reduced to a mere illustration of celebrating revelers.

Rather, "the entire painting is drunk and celebrating," as the artist has pithily put it. It is exactly this "energy" that he releases in his reinterpretation, in which the figurative source motif has been transformed into a pulsating, almost abstract color texture.

The aspect of movement pervades the artist's paintings in his very own "rotating rhythms," which set his landscapes populated by sketchily indicated individuals and groups into motion as if by force of an integrated virtual carousel or anamorphic cylinder. It becomes manifest in the multi-faceted, fragmented progressions, reduplications, and inversions in which the pictorial events successively unfold, in the clusters and swirls that carry the forms and figures with them in gyrating fragments of color.

And it even determines the actions of the depicted figures, which fluctuate in fragmented spheres "outside of all places" between stasis and activity, walking and sitting, rushing and reposing. The visual "phase shifts" or interferences not only bring about shifts in the paintings themselves and thus in the perception of the viewers, whose reading of the works is briefly halted, detoured, and led into new terrains and levels of meaning.

In the parallelism of events, the chronology of time also no longer applies. Time keeps bouncing back onto itself, remaining in a state of suspension balancing between progression, rebound, and endless loop: "in a permanent movement of transcendence and construction of boundaries, of dissolving and setting up boundaries, of de-spatialization, which is in compliance with the hybrid spaces" that comprise our experience of the world

with its "vagabonding boundaries" and seamless transitions from real to virtual, and back again.

Daniel Mohr draws from the repository of art history, from moments of reality that he has captured in photographic images, in which the mechanisms of perception are condensed and implicitly visualized by their disruption and mobilization. In his painted collages based on visual observations, found and fragmented slivers of information, he investigates the activity of seeing as well as what is being seen. The "theoretical foundation of personal action" 16 encompasses the mathematical permutative structures of Minimal Music, including the deviations immanent to it, the transposition of the technical characteristics of digital image structures and "photographic effects" into painting, as well as the optical experiments of the Baroque era, the aesthetic issues of the Bauhaus artists, particularly Paul Klee's theories on form and color, and Henri Matisse's cut-out technique of the *gouaches découpés*, up to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's analysis of the nature and perception of colors in the latter's holistic Theory of Colors (1810), which already influenced the compositional considerations of the pre-conceptual Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge.

As Christoph Tannert has aptly remarked, in his paintings that are driven forward "by a search movement setting off in different directions at the same time," Mohr invests "a new, conceptual freedom of movement with a wild aroma," working on the "sublimation of rational harmonies." 18 Expanding this idea, one might even say that the artist is equally engaged in the visualization of irrational harmonies, which articulate themselves in the very fragmentations and interferences that permeate his current paintings. Here those refractions might also come into play that Goethe described in his color experiments and poetically subsumed in his *Faust*.

Referring to the wondrous prismatic phenomenon of the rainbow, in *Faust II* (1832) Goethe lets his main character come to the following conclusion: "The rainbow mirrors human aims and action. / Think, and more clearly wilt thou grasp it, seeing / Life is but light in many-hued reflection." In his phase-shifted, fractured works energetically charged with "prismatic color refractions," where he continues "putting to the test the possibilities of painting," a Daniel Mohr also ventures into the uncharted spheres of "many-hued reflection" extending between the zones of real life and art, between the generation, manifestation, and dissolution of visual phenomena and their legibility. On the "vagabonding boundary," where everything can turn into nothing and light can turn into colors, and vice versa, with the power of his painting the artist points to the complexity of our perception in which the world of images is rooted, as is our cognition of the world that surrounds us.

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