

THE WORK OF ART, FOLDED BETWEEN TWO COLOURS

door Guy Bovyn

Ce quelque chose qui est à mi-chemin entre la couleur de mon atmosphère typique et la pointe de ma réalité. (Antonin Artaud)

Time, space and colour. These are the elementary building blocks with which Pieter Vermeersch creates his universe. How these elements are used and how they interact, is different in every work. Yet all the works share one feature: it is the viewer who, through the physical act of looking, combines the different elements *and*, more importantly, combines with them.

This implies an underlying relational aesthetics. And that becomes obvious in the works Vermeersch refers to as *gradations*: monumental paintings (often murals) that are characterized by a very precise, almost scientific, gradual 'shifting' of the colour: from black to white, from deep blue to white, from dark red to white, etc. These are paintings that lack a focal centre, that are without harmony or counterpoint, without (autonomous) balanced composition – they are a mere 'dis/solving'. From whichever position the viewer contemplates the work, she sees and experiences an impalpable, intangible in-between, a pleasant intrusive vibrating. The colours themselves are chosen with a certain degree of arbitrariness, or, if there is a logic at work, they are 'applied' by the surroundings. Thus, though colour is used explicitly, this is not simply an expressionist art of sorts. On the contrary, it could easily be argued that like artists such as François Morrelet and Hélio Oiticica, Vermeersch adopts an objectifying attitude which sends the idea of the brilliant, autonomous creator, back to the stage of the romantic theatre, where it belongs.

This inglorious, humble and worldly view of the artistic calling is also obvious in the *average colours* series: monochrome—the mean value of the original colours—colour paintings, that result from an 'arithmetical' redrawing of an existing painting, i.e. a statistical adaption of a painting results in a colour in-between. This transformation, this 'objectification' often—perhaps not coincidentally—results in a monochrome brownish-grey, with which the artist as it were 'devalues' the art of painting and hails it back in our own concrete world. With this 'horizontalisation' of the painting, this lowering from the 'vertical' to the 'horizontal', we also experience an activation or temporisation of the painting: the mental gaze of the viewer oscillates between the image that is physically present and the image that remains physically absent (the original painting which is still referred to in labels).

The concept is further explored—an expression that comes to mind is 'studied in depth', but then the phrase may be inappropriate—as the artist applies the strategy to an entire collection. The result, a series of small, monochrome brownish-grey paintings, is arranged according to a strict geometric pattern. As such an 'authentic' *collection* of paintings that was once collected by 'someone' and that was made up of different formats, 'divergent' frames and conflicting stories is now reduced to a non-hierarchical *series* of paintings-objects. At the same time, the artist refers to the modernist emblem *par excellence*: the grid. Yet, once the symbol of being-outside-time and consequently being-outside-the-world, the symbol of the autonomous and autotelic, the grid we see here has 'fused' with (art) history and the active (re-)imagination of the viewer. It can therefore hardly function as it is expected to, as apparently stable systems 'merely' result in this instance in 'unstable' images. This grid that *is* and cannot *become*, carved as it is in the *Now*, this fortress modernism once built as a defence against the narrative, is presented here in its naked existence, as ruin that somehow 'addresses us', 'speaks' to us.

This by no means implies that the artist exalts the trivial image or that he trivializes the painterly image (and by extension the work of art). What Vermeersch is seeking, is the re-translation of (the) 'painting', back to its Essence: Colour, or matter and light, matter vibrating with energy, and Time. By introducing the aspect of time the position of whom we usually refer to as the viewer, too, becomes different: *the* (allegedly rational?) pre-conceiving individual is rewritten into a post-conceiving viewer, who, going beyond an all too

conceptualized 'observing', being herself matter-in-time (but was ignorant of the latter up till now), tunes herself to the 'work of art'. Vibrating with the work of art the viewer thus is positioned on the same ontological level as the work of art: the extremely subjectified viewer joins the painting and becomes Colour. Like the painting she becomes part of an ever shifting Now and *continues* to be part of a process of *becoming*. Two vibrations, one composing the other, two localized moments—the 'here and there' of the recent past and the 'here and there' of the recent future: between those Colours (mutual signifiers) the composition of the work of art *takes place*, i.e. we re-live the actual work of art becoming a shape in space. Furthermore, not only the composition of the work of art, but the composition of the world and the subject, the subject in the world and the world in the subject, occurs in this in-between. A ubiquitous mutual composing.

What Pieter Vermeersch shows us, is not a *representation* of the concepts of 'time', 'space', and 'colour'. The artist simply *shows* us *nothing*. We *become* experience, we become energetic vibration. Colour, Time and Space as sensations, the subject and the worlds as composite. At first sight the work seems rather abstract—for some people it even belongs to conceptual art. Yet, as we contemplate the work more closely, it appears to be rooted in this world, *the* world. From quality to quantity and back to quality.