

STORAGE & DISPLAY

Dieter Roelstraete interviews Pieter Vermeersch, Mexico City, 2003

"What especially struck me upon my arrival in Mexico City - the six of us were driven into the city in the back of a pick-up truck and had to lie down every now and then to escape the attention of traffic police officers, so there really wasn't much else to see - was the totally dizzying deluge of billboards planted along all the main traffic arteries of the city, jumbled together on each available roof, clogging your eyesight at every possible turn. Of course, just like everybody else I felt intrigued the most by the huge empty ones, the blank spaces and empty canvasses that often come with nothing more than the owner's telephone number on it, like some cryptic numerological message from another planet or something..."

I find it quite fitting that you would call them canvasses...

"Oh yeah, of course they appeal to my painterly impulses. Let's be fair - who wouldn't want to paint a billboard like that? Actually, I immediately set my mind upon one such instance in particular, an enormous white surface just opposite the Programa block, on the other side of the Circuito Interior - I think it stretches some amazing 20 to 12 metres, an awesome simmering blank rising up from this crazy orgy of people, traffic and noise... It must have been standing empty like that for quite some time - there's not even a number on it."

Did you actually inquire what a monstrous plane of whiteness like that might cost?

"Absolutely - that was basically the first thing we did. And it turned out to be a hefty \$30,000 a year... So that was out of the question obviously."

That's a sobering reminder of the breach that actually gapes between the world of contemporary art and the crude universe of commerce and capital - that kind of money would keep Programa afloat for another four years!!

"I guess so. Anyway, looking at that particular billboard did start a train of thought that would eventually lead to the project I chose to take on, the white cube being reflected onto the white square, toying with this notion of the outside being the inside, turning the whole space inside out - or better still, turning the whole space's inside out."

Is this the first project ever to feature some of Programa's outside walls?

"I don't know, it might be, you should check with the Programa folks themselves. Anyway I think it is - as far as my own practice is concerned, the tension between the inside and the outside has become something of a recurring theme, which was kind of inaugurated in a project I did in Ghent in 2000 called *Off the Hook* - which in itself was a dissident, do-it-yourself artist-run offshoot of a big-ass open-air show called *Over the Edges*. The work consisted of me painting the windows of an empty storefront in a different colour every other day. The actual inside of the store was off limits to the passer-by and the general art audience alike, but you could look into the space through a virginal, unpainted side window, through which you could see the piece transform itself on a daily, performative basis - daylight filtering through the painted panels to produce ever changing spectacles of overlapping colour planes. This piece was actually about a lot of different things at once, but it did touch on the idea of blurring the divisions between inside and outside in a way that is again specifically relevant to the project I am now working on in Programa, where there's also a windowpane "falsely" dividing the interior and exterior wall with my piece effectively "running through" it... Before that I had worked on a series of "identical" paintings of a car window, so the window theme and its many variations, meanings and implications definitely wasn't new to me at that time - that particular series of paintings was also of seminal significance in that it dealt with the relentless repetition of sameness, which I should like to talk about in a minute. And then I also just finished working on a site-specific piece in the project room of the city museum of contemporary art in Ghent that deals with some of these issues."

What's the actual procedure of the work?

"The actual procedure consists of me painting a band of changing colour intensities all over the north wall of Programa's first floor, a space that actually is not that regularly used to house exhibitions or mount works of art. The colour spectrum varies between the twin extremes of the whitest white and the bluest blue, with the white starting from the left side of the wall and systematically, gradually morphing into the deep blue with which the mural concludes at the right side of the wall - the point where inside and outside effectively meet. From there on, my work will continue on the *outside* wall, slowly growing to a really dark blue at the extreme right side of Programa's east-facing outside wall... Of course the blue refers back to the ideal colour of the sky (deep blue is a rare thing in the scorched jungle of Mexico City); in that sense, the mural really is a landscape painting - incidentally, landscape painting is where I learned my "trademark" technique of what is called "degrade", or degressive colour fields."

Just like the other "colour field" works you just mentioned there seems to be a lot of performance involved.

"Well, not exactly – not "performance". Sure, I like the repetition of what Richter called the "daily practice of painting". Through the obstinacy of the procedure, the resulting image acquires a scientific-like character, which I like a lot. Yes, I'm definitely into the mathematics of colour. But then this same "scientific" approach is of course again contradicted by the fundamentally experiential nature of "undergoing" pure colour, which is what the work is really about: if it were merely a scientific formula, it would be easy to extract the hard data of all the colours involved, but the fact is that it is practically impossible to detect any one colour per se - it's all about experiencing the all-overness of the motion of changing colours. The rhythmic metamorphosis of pure colour in itself also has a vortex-like quality to it, which again brings things back to the experience of trance and transcendence. There's a lot of ritual involved indeed - and a lot of self-sacrifice, obviously, because painting a mural like this is a very physical affair, what with the blazing heat and the blinding light of the sun projecting itself onto the white plane... Not to mention the mental strain such an amount of monastic concentration on one particular colouring gesture implies - a small mistake is easily made in mixing colours. And come to think of it, there's no such thing as "small mistakes" in an operation of this nature... They don't come any more perfectionist than this one!"

Then there's also the third element of the supporting structure outside.

"That's there because I really couldn't let go of the billboard idea which gave me the original inspiration. [It also protracts the visual process of the inside/outside mural.] So I eventually decided to have a billboard built on top of the roof of the building next to Programa - which is apparently in the process of being rebuilt itself, it used to be the supermarket to which the storage space that is now Programa used to belong. And now they're making some kind of traffic police station out of it. I don't even know whether these people are really aware of what's going on above their heads; it might not even be legal. Anyway, on this [white] billboard I will paint the telephone number of Programa in deep blue lettering - actually the same deepest blue that makes up the extreme right colour band of my mural painting inside Programa. Every day I will paint over the billboard's white surface in a gradually "darkening" white until the numbers are barely visible anymore, until they are finally swallowed up in this vast monochromatic field of one and the same, all-encompassing blue. Everyday a picture will be made of the state of in-between-ness the billboard finds itself in at that specific moment in time, and these photographs will then again be stuck back on the mural inside Programa, documenting the process of disappearance at work in both the billboard and the mural itself. This work, then, deals more closely with the whole idea of conservation and disappearance, which is very central to this particular strand of my body of work."

I especially like the idea of investing a lot of energy into "redecorating" a generic strip of exterior wall almost invisible to the median Programa visitor. And of course the mural painting on the top floor's inside wall will also remain in place for no more than a few weeks, whereas the billboard might be there until the proverbial end of time... That will surely engender a whole series of different decaying speeds.

"Well, as far as painting the outside wall is concerned, I needed to stretch my work beyond the actual confines of Programa to be able to relate to the Mexico cityscape and its vast array of blank billboards in the first place. And yes, the ramshackle billboard on top of the neighbouring building and the outside "mural" also join together in a monument of some sort - meaning something that will almost certainly remain in place long after the actual exhibition will have closed down. I like the idea of the work withering away, eroded by the harsh conditions of the Mexico City atmosphere, becoming one billboard among the many - better still: the one billboard, above all, that

has no economic meaning or reason for being at all..."