

Diffusion, Concentration, Reflection. Intuitive Insight in the Work of Hans Kotter

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‘Art that impresses the eye’ is a heading that suits the latest works by Hans Kotter: cheerfully colourful three-dimensional and wall-mounted objects, and forms combining mirrors and light in wall-boxes all define the overall spatial context with their sensitively selected placement. At first glance, the compact exhibits with their bright colours and visual illusions suggest cheerfulness and innocence, making the dismal concrete surroundings of many an office building appear in a different light. But a second look reveals a deeper, meaningful dimension, which promises a profane ‘illumination’ full of insight.

Points of light arranged in a ring within a reflecting wall-box shine with absolute technical perfection, as can be seen in the work ‘down under’ (2011). Submerged in bluish or reddish light, the configurations of lights and mirrors develop a more intense atmospheric aura. The eye wanders rather disquieted through the objects’ suggested depth, constantly attempting to find some visual hold. With a wry smile, Kotter highlights the inadequacy of the human perceptual apparatus, our eyes happily joining in his receptive game of lively ‘conversation’. The tunnel formation of these points of light, however, causes the viewer’s attention to wander away from the factual to the metaphorical dimension: in Kotter’s works the well-known concept of tunnel vision, used to criticise a narrowing of perception and one’s limited interpretation of key contexts, is extended into the infinity of three dimensions. Closure and opening thus become vital metaphors, not only in this single work from the artist’s most recent creative phase.

From this perspective Kotter goes a stage further than the aesthetically related innovations of the previous generation, particularly associated with the name Victor Vasarely and with Op Art. Vasarely’s interest lay in illusionist effects, which he attempted to achieve by means of colours, forms and lines; he aimed, therefore, at irritations of vision, at immediacy in the contemplation of art, and ultimately at aesthetics that required no prior knowledge. But Kotter, who claims to see himself within a line of tradition from Vasarely, extends the field of visual irritation. While Vasarely, still entirely in the spirit of Minimal Art, had wished to ban meaning from art and employed his formal aesthetics as a pointer to the limitations of human perception, the semantic and therefore the narrative return in Kotter’s work – which is characteristic, among other things, of the post-modern generation.

The several-part photographic works entitled ‘cliffs’ or ‘chromatic plants’ (2009-2011) convey a disturbing impression. Their powerful colours form strange configurations, which appear indeterminate: are they artificial or natural phenomena? However, they are not materialisations, by any means, but refracted prismatic rays of light, images that Kotter took using a traditional photographic camera. Here, the viewer is confronted by his own conditioning: in the digital age he expects a computer-based formal language, but ultimately this process emerges as consistently analogue, or manual. Such a media-critical conception – quite literally – that sets the analogue against the digital is also revealed in the meanwhile long-sustained conflict between painting and photography. For despite all their technical perfection, some artefacts give the impression that Kotter is referring to painting with his use of sweeping forms. Thus the artist reopens a long-smouldering dispute regarding ascendancy among the artistic genres: in an almost exemplary fashion, the conflict between photography and painting raises the issue of which medium best meets the claim to truth: painting with its great affinity to philosophy, endorsed for centuries, or

photography, which provides documentation of reality via a physical-chemical and so incorruptible process. Kotter leaves it to the viewer to answer this indirectly posed question. His own pictorial works point simultaneously to photography, the new media, and to painting, so that the viewer begins to brood upon the questionability of his own perception, making the credibility and evaluation of each medium into the theme of the works.

Another difficult factor is that Kotter works with and through light: in these, as in other works from the series 'replaced' (2009-2011), light is used as a means of expression. Looking at the history of light-art in the broadest sense, painted light has been understood both as a purely physical and as a philosophical dimension. This basic assumption, which allows the appearance of both profane and sacred light, is still retained today, although slide and video projection, the technology of the new media, photography and film are now represented alongside painting. Sometimes light is employed as a simple dramatic aid in images and installations, and sometimes it is a carrier of meaning; its themes including technological utopias, anthropologies, media-oriented epistemology, culture-critical and social scientific perspectives associated with names like Robert Delaunay, László Moholy-Nagy, Dan Flavin, Bruce Nauman, James Turrell or Mischa Kuball. This brief historical sketch is reflected not only in Kotter's media-critical colour photographs, but also in his light installations: Kotter arranges a row of light boxes of the same and differing formats as if on a rehearsal stage, usually located in a monochrome context in the corner of a room. They are found objects, which – thrown away from industrial sites or offices – are given a new meaning. Like a palimpsest, on the one hand the light objects refer to their original usages, for example when their forms are reminiscent of lighting in manufacturing halls and can be seen, therefore, as a warning reminder of industrial production's alienating work atmosphere; on the other hand, they indicate something new, providing messages – new or long-concealed – in the field of art. Deputising, almost, for what is hoped for but never achieved in social and cultural fields, it seems that these objects succeed in liberating us from the constraints of social responsibility. Kotter offers the viewer such a dimension of his works – i.e. critical, self-reflective and oriented on insight, and in the same breath he re-conjures the elementary utopias of modernism.

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