

Artificial Light as Art. Approaching the Works of Hans Kotter

by Peter Lodermeyer

A hotel in Germany, not far from the River Rhine. I inquire at the desk if it might be possible to look at the work by Hans Kotter that I had read about being here. The receptionist, obviously clueless to what I am talking about, gives me vague directions to one of the upper floors. I go up and down the halls for a long time, searching to no avail, until I discover in a roomy niche three large, elegantly-proportioned objects on the wood-paneled wall. In the dim light I am unable to recognize much of what is on the front surfaces. I notice a light switch and turn it on, not suspecting it has anything to do with this object. There is a short flickering within the three upright rectangular boxes – and suddenly a veritable miracle of light takes place. Across nine square meters of surface a cascade of colour forms lights up in bright cobalt blue, yellow, and bottle green, undulating in slanted waves across one other. To the right the colour culminates in a magnificent cognac-coloured glow. The light-flooded forms remain inexplicable, like in an abstract painting, and at the same time oddly real, material, photographically precise. They seem organically animated – and yet their colours are so cool, their appearance so smooth, that they maintain an air of something confusingly foreign and inapproachable.

Confronted out of the blue with Hans Kotter's photographic works, oscillating between abstraction and materiality, naturalness and artificiality, technical perfection and painterly appearance, a person will inevitably question whether or not these are phenomena that have been digitally produced or altered. The truth of the matter is that the artist takes his camera, zooming in on drops of oil or glass prisms he has built himself in order to observe there the confusingly complicated play of the refraction, diffraction, and reflection of light. Through skillful lighting from various sources, forms of strange beauty and splendid colour quality emerge in the interior of these transparent media. During this process, transitions that are difficult to identify even though they result from light-flooded matter, colourful backgrounds and reflecting surfaces, create phenomena which evoke corporeal impressions, but do not materialize to any comprehensible shape. Thus, pseudo-organic formations come about that seem like paradox plants or landscapes made of fluids, and yet remain at the same time, immaterial, energetic, and indefinable in their innermost. These forms, which Kotter then exhibits as laser-chrome prints or slides in light boxes, are not subsequently altered digitally; on the contrary, they are presented in the way they revealed themselves to his camera.

Kotter's theme is light. His works always address light, tracing its most-unexpected effects. In doing so, the diversity of the light phenomena allows the artist to break fresh ground in finding highly varied possibilities of expression and ever-new techniques, materials, and manners of presentation, which extend beyond the customary boundaries of the genre. Hans Kotter not only constructs light boxes, he also builds objects, pours things he has found into transparent

resins, marks entire rooms with paths of light made of luminescent foils, and, using his camera, approaches the most subtle phenomena of light. In conversation he refers to his photographic works as "painting with light", pointing out that he only discovered photography as an aid after much experimentation and mostly by chance. Kotter is not primarily a photographer, but an artist of light. As such, he is also necessarily an artist of space, since space reveals itself to us visually as a void that contains light. Not only his room installations, but also his light boxes lit with neon tubes reveal a presence that has a considerable effect on the room, and in fact, changes it. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that he repeatedly receives commissions for large-format installations in public spaces and office buildings.

It is highly interesting that a connection has been made between these light boxes and the windows of gothic cathedrals.

What is diaphanous, i.e. the penetration of light through transparent matter, as well as the flooding of light into a room were often considered by art historians as an expression of the medieval metaphysics of light. The magic of the diaphanous certainly also occupies Hans Kotter in his photographic experiments, but it should not be overlooked that the artist is also aware of the fact that today our relationship to light is deeply profane. In his forays into the microcosm of optics he does not succumb to the abstract beauty of the light effects he has observed. He is too much the critical contemporary for this, acutely aware that the notions of light anchored in western thought as symbols of the divine, of truth and of reason have long since been subjected to a far-reaching secularization and finally, a drastic trivialization. One of the preconditions of the western metaphysics of light was no doubt, for the most part, the unavailability of the sun as it sought its natural course through the day and year. With electricity light became a constantly available, producible, and manageable quantity. For all of us artificial light has become a self-evident prerequisite of our modern everyday life. At night, thanks to the glow of neon advertisements, the headlights of cars, and streetlights, even the ugliest city can share in the profane magic of artificial light. At the latest with Dan Flavin's installations of fluorescent tubes in the 1960s, artificial lighting had become at once the theme and the "material" of a new artistic genre, the art of light.

In Kotter's installations and light boxes, the forms and mirror-smooth objects flooded with light always seem "sparkling clean and pure", as the self-ironic title of an exhibition of 1999 suggested. This motto that sounds like some kind of advertising can serve as a reminder that the western metaphysics of light has fallen today into the hands of product designers and advertising agents with their questionable promises of happiness. All of us are familiar with ads where the sun always shines and each tile, each chrome and paint surface gleams, where cavity-free teeth sparkle in their hygienically perfect condition, and metallically-painted limousines shoot across the pictures like beings from other spheres, silent and in utterly pure perfection. Hans Kotter's works consciously place themselves

optically in seductive, almost flirtatious, proximity to the aesthetics of the consumer products that are perfect and sterile alike. Light boxes, the way Kotter uses them, are known to us outside the context of art, above all as an advertising

means used in department stores and fashion boutiques. And in his installation "The very Best ..." he makes everyday objects from the sports world, a table-tennis table, and club trophies, gleam in a cold splendor that emphasizes

the material. By exaggerating the sleek design, imbuing it with an alienating effect through his use of light, the objects are enhanced ironically, mutated to become "cool" signs of themselves with no utilitarian value. A turning of aesthetics into fetishes may be sensed in the table-tennis table, transparent and lit from below, but not usable for playing. Although its measurements correspond precisely to the measurements required in tournaments, the tabletop contains a water-and-oil-mixture that would make a real table-tennis ball stick upon contact. Is uselessness a price one pays for beauty? In his works Kotter tests the borders of the narrow line between art and design, between beauty and functionality. Likewise, his light boxes, hung on or leaned against the wall, alternate between the status of minimalist sculpture and chic design object. But as soon as one activates their fluorescent tubes hidden in their interiors they become magic lanterns that reveal haunting pictures from the wonderland of light. Kotter's works are etudes of the inexhaustible fascination with light.

Translated by Elizabeth Volk