

Rafael von UsLAR: Good Evening, Ms. Rottenbacher. What significance do cleanliness and order have in your life?

Susanne Rottenbacher: I experience cleanliness and order in spaces as calming and relaxing—also, order has the simple advantage of making activities so much easier.

RvU: Do you like to clean?

SR: No, actually not at all.

RvU: Really? Your works always appear so orderly and tidy. Everything is in its place, everything is transparent to the smallest particles of dust.

SR: In my work I am on another, more attractive, level. I call it my “metalevel.” When I am there, I am often, and happily, in a kind of daydream. This dream is commonly about rooms that clean themselves, about plants that take care of themselves.

RvU: That sounds very tempting! But if you do not like cleaning, who calms and relaxes you at home?

SR: Violetta takes care of the cleaning, twice a week and almost completely unobtrusively. It’s fantastic! I’m not disturbed by it and it gives me time to dream.

RvU: So your works reflect a dream of a simplified, calmed world in which the light never goes out.

SR: I’ve never thought about it like that before. But actually I am driven by a desire for peace, concentration, and quiet.

RvU: Much of the impression of order and cleanliness in your works has to do with your choice of materials and with the rigor with which you create the objects. Is Plexiglas dreamlike?

SR: No, Plexiglas is not dreamlike. Plexiglas makes it possible for me to incorporate the surroundings into my works. Plexiglas produces the translucent construction of my works, enabling the colored light to flow into the space and, simultaneously, the “white” light of the surroundings, the natural light, to be taken up in the works. It gets me to my aim: the composition does not remain limited to the works; the surroundings are integrated, the viewer activated.

RvU: Astonishing: an artist who claims to reach her goal and FINALLY accepts the viewer! In your works, it is noticeable that order has much to do with an overview, clarity, and transparency.

SR: Well, for one thing, a certain order always arises in my works through the luminous grid, the grid structure on whose points of intersection I attach my small “light projectors.” This grid structure must have a certain regularity and order so that the projected light is equally distributed and no “light spots” are projected. But above all, with my clear formal language, I can focus better on the things and issues that are important to me. Nothing symbolic or narrative, but rather cool geometric structures, intuitively tangible orders.

RvU: Why did you select such a technological work method of all things?

SR: This technological work method is the handwriting I have found to express myself adequately. With industrial materials I can express myself—in my work, I can’t relate to classical oil painting, for example, to atmospheric symbolism and deep narrative content. I rather search for a kind of “mechanical” depth in materials, the vitality in the materials—transparencies, reflections, superimpositions, fractures, layers of color. On top of that, I find it interesting if the entire technique in my works then actually does add up to a sensuous experience, which is difficult to imagine with all the plastic stuff.

RvU: Plastic stuff is immensely sensuous!

SR: The word or the stuff itself?

RvU: The stuff above all!

SR: Great! I myself am repeatedly amazed. The supposedly plastic-like thing inspires emotions, maybe even a feeling of comfort, an apparent enclosure of the body. The physical corpus opens up into its surrounding space. What seems perfectly controlled begins to change—just like that—relentlessly. It becomes uncontrollably dependent upon natural processes—day/night, summer/winter, etc.

RvU: Plastic breaking and relentlessness. . . . I'd like to avoid that for my collection in any case. A true disaster, what you're describing!!!

But to come back to the element of process in your work, I am aware that space, stillness, and time are central themes in your work, even the constant changing of objects' forms of appearance. These changes, which enable the experience of time and space in the *farbräumen* (color spaces), have something to do with a progressive movement of time, in which the objects and their order are repeatedly confirmed.

SR: This change is the message. If order means control or a demand to maintain the status quo, then the works debunk this concept. The impression of the works changes depending upon the point in time at which the works are viewed. There is no *SINGLE* status quo. For me the works' very different effects give rise to a kind of confusion rather than to confirmation.

So it can happen that at night you have what seems to be a completely different work than during the day.

RvU: Well, it certainly can happen that one is very amazed in retrospect about some nocturnal encounters! However, I'd disagree with you: I would not characterize or view the work as "other." The work always remains itself and forms a unity in the totality of its appearances and in the totality of time that it needs in order to display itself or to occur. Only this unity IS the work. Everything else is a momentarily viewable situation. That is why, in my view, you can never *see* the work.

SR: Yes, there's no other option: you have to live with my works; you have to have them around or own them in order to experience them completely.

RvU: Oh, wow, how unbelievably German of you! One *have to* after the other! That's why I absolutely HAVE TO ask you in connection with questions about technique and order the following important question: what's your take on design?

SR: For me, good design occurs when some meaningful function is fulfilled anew in a novel or especially well-made form.

RvU: I definitely agree with you that good design is always an event!

SR: And how! In my works there is always an accompanying phenomenon or side effect that the spaces in which they hang are supplied with a certain basic light. Without a doubt, it is pleasant. But actually questions of lighting in relationship with my work don't particularly interest me. I would much rather investigate the relationship of people space time—how is a person in relation to space at different time points—it's just that involvement with this investigation does not ever lead to solving any single practical problem.

RvU: Is it a question of the person's mental state who is sharing space with one of your *farbräume*, for whom you anticipate the effects?

SR: No. Viewers of my works often claim that these have an effect on their mental states.

But that's also not actually what interests me. In relation to this, my works rather profit tangentially from the emotional power of colored light. — No, what interests me is the spatial relationship between people and space, elaborating, intensifying a sensation of space, the incorporation of the surroundings in the work itself, and a kind of “activation” of the viewer.

RvU: It's certainly very interesting, all the things you are not interested in. Not even whether your viewers feel better through your works!

SR: Nobody has ever called me up in tears. But of course it's nice to learn that my works have a big effect on the people who live with them.

RvU: The tearful phone calls will probably only come once the collectors read this interview and feel completely overlooked!

SR: No, no, that's not how it was meant. I value my collectors, each and every one of them!

RvU: Good artist! But allow me another question about the technique you use in your works. Did you develop it yourself? Were there important preliminary studies, a process of development, which brought you by way of various technical and formal stages to the *farbraum* works, or were these objects the aim that led to the technical solution?

SR: I knew that I wanted to create relationships of colored light with colored surfaces and natural lighting. The LEDs were seemingly predestined because of their small design and monochromatic light. I had the image for the *farbräume* (colored light projected onto colored surfaces) inside me and considered how I could produce a plane that would emit light and be see-through at the same time. I worked two years on this light-emitting grid structure and on suitable, special reflective backgrounds, for example, or on the casings that contain this entire technical structure, fix it to the site and in position and yet are still transparent so that they can give off and absorb light at the same time. I showed my first *farbräume* in public for the first time at the beginning of 2006.

The combination of colored light (grid work), colorful painted surfaces, and natural light I call my “variable” system, by the way, because it is the foundation of all the works and is variable in dimensions. In the beginning I studied and applied my variable system to smaller *farbräumen* and later to larger ones. Since at least a year now I have further developed the principle, on the one hand in the form of large, expansive sculptures that extend into the space and on the other hand, very recently, with the “spectrum” works.

RvU: Could you please explain a bit more the physical background for the *spectrum* works.

SR: With pleasure! The effect of the *farbräume* is based on the physico-optical phenomenon of combining two principles of color mixing: subtractive color mixing, the mixing of pigment, that is. This is combined with additive color mixing, i.e., mixing colored light. The meeting of colored light and pigments gives rise to shifts in color tones.

The new spectrum works take up the principle of additive color mixing and develop it further through the combination of all the colors of the spectrum in one work. White light can be broken down into the colors of the spectrum. The spectrum works use this physical phenomenon. In theory, every spectrum work could result in white light.

RvU: So a visual translation of white noise, to a certain extent?

SR: Well, not exactly. The spectrum is the totality of all lines and bands of a certain frequency. “White light” in physics (practically impossible to achieve) is a light that

mixes together all wavelengths of visible spectral range with equal energy. Then it is the same as our daylight, the light of the sun. Through optical prisms, it is possible to break up “white light” into (individual) colors of the spectrum as monochromatic lights.

According to Newton there are seven: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.

RvU: Your *spectrum* has nine units!

SR: I confess to a certain creative extravagance!

RvU: Since we’re on the subject of confessions: you elegantly avoided my question about the possible affinity of your work to design with your statement about your lack of interest in the qualities of your works as decorative lighting. But what is your relationship to looking at the works of other art makers who share similar interests to yours and if possible related formal approaches?

SR: When I began developing my works, for a long time I didn’t look at the works of any other artists at all. I didn’t want to locate the source of reference for my art in art. I attempted to escape this reference system. So I developed my work from a completely detached and, in a certain way, ignorant position.

RvU: The claim of ignorance of art history by someone making art always sounds like a threat!

SR: Exactly! And you should learn to take such threats seriously! In the meantime, my work has developed to such an extent that I look at works by other artists with great interest and study art historical developments with a mixture of inspiration and curiosity. I think my work becomes more mature and richer through this involvement. I find it very exciting to go back to structures from art history and to tap into these for my work. This is one of many ways to arrive at new artistic content and results. I come across aspects that are “useful” for me in this way, which I can connect to my own topics and current interests.

RvU: It is always reassuring to learn that art also has a very practical use. . . .

SR: Aspects of Minimal Art appeal to me: for example, how they dealt with materials, the use of surfaces from industrial contexts, the formal vocabulary of this art and its object quality.

RvU: I don’t want to get in the way while Minimal Art takes up the dialogue with Ms. Rottenbacher, so I’ll thank you for this interview.

SR: What won’t you do to get in the last word?

RvU: A lot, Susanne, a lot!