

Synthetic Landscapes

The wall works and sculptures by the Berlin artist Susanne Rottenbacher carry us away into a constantly changing realm of light and color. Using wire structures, LEDs, foam, painted stripes, acrylic glass, and colored foil, the artist conjures enthralling Synthetic Landscapes that interact with the natural times of day and weather conditions in a fascinating way.

Larger-than-life Arcs in Space

Around thirty years ago, the American sculptor Richard Serra created, for the first time, a larger-than-life, freestanding arc made out of COR-TEN steel—the St. Johns Rotary Arc (1980). Large and powerful, it stood on a square in New York, getting in the way of passers-by and demanding of them that they take on a physical relationship to the sculpture. More arcs followed in relation to their respective sites; multiple arcs were erected simultaneously, sometimes leaning a little into one another so that those passing through them struggled with the oppressive feeling they might be crushed by a steel plate.¹ The physical situation created between the arcs, the truncating of the view, the blocking of the normal path, the guidance of one's pace, and, along with it, the perception of the existing space, place, or landscape are all characteristics of Serra's artwork. The respective form and materiality of his sculptures forms a unity along with the space where they are shown, which the viewer must engage with in order to experience the work and be able to understand it.

For the exhibition Synthetic Landscapes in the Cologne gallery TEAPOT, Susanne Rottenbacher produced the work Color Crescents (fig. XX), which is also made up of larger-than-life arcs positioned in space. Yet their light, delicate materiality provides a different experience. The two standing arcs of different lengths are placed offset relative to each other with both concave sides facing the left-hand wall, and they can be seen from outside through the windows on the gallery's glass front. Upon entering the gallery space, one first sees the convex side of the arc nearest to the window, as well as the gap looming between the front and the back arc. One has to decide whether to go behind the front arc, in order to move into the next room as well as the kind of interior space created between the concave sides of the two arcs, or whether to follow the convex curve into the room to walk between the two arcs and land "in the interior of the sculpture."

¹ See for example Serra's work Berlin Junction, 1986, in front of the Berlin Philharmonie.

Depending on the decision made, different impressions of the sculpture and space arise. One is engulfed, invited, or led around, crosses a passageway and changes from the exterior of one arc to the interior of the other or vice versa; one catches a glimpse into the other spaces of the gallery, as well as of the street. The arcs are fabricated from transparent acrylic glass parts upon which the artist has painted horizontal colored bars of various widths and applied transparent colored foil. Inside the arcs, there is a fine wire grid with countless pink LEDs separated at regular intervals. The partially colored supporting structure does not completely separate the viewer from the facing space, but rather it allows a mixture of blurry and direct views through the work, stimulating anticipation of what might be behind it. The light extends the construction into the space, leading to unpredictable reflections on the Plexiglas, through which the colored stripes overlap in various ways according to the angle of view and deflection. The different pink, red, and orange tones lend the arcs, which have been produced using high tech materials, a conscious impression of a sensual-excessive artificiality, which acquires a deep, carnal character in the increasing darkness, most of all in the concave interior of the sculpture. While Serra's steel arcs suggest an impression of weight, presence, and physical threat, Rottenbacher's arcs captivate through their confusing transparency, multiple reflections, and the well-composed color combinations. If one sees Serra's work as archaic-modern sculpture made out of industrially produced steel, then Rottenbacher's arcs are contemporary modern, showing a high tech aesthetic, delicate poetry, and hyper-sensuality. The body and eye of the beholder are involved. It is not a bodily threat that is produced, but at most a certain feeling of vertigo, considering the complex reflections of light.

Farbräume

The arcs of both artists were preceded by smaller works, in which material qualities and various formats were explored. Serra famously began by experimenting with lead and rubber. He stacked blocks of rolled steel on top of one another, leaned four squares of lead on their corners against one another, and clamped the edge of a standing COR-TEN steel wall in the corner of a room. Rottenbacher began with square polyurethane foam panels, on which she painted horizontal stripes of various widths with acrylic paints. She adorned this with a Plexiglas cover, on the front of which she affixed the LED grid structure described above. Together she titled them all farbraum (color space) and individually named each object according to its respective wavelength of LED light. The objects were initially cubic in form (see farbraum

450a, 2005, on the homepage, and farbraum 505a, 2005, in the exhibition). Based on the cube, different variations of the square arose, some with a mid-size format of 96 x 96 cm with LEDs spaced every 25 cm (farbraum 470b, 2005, in the exhibition), sometimes with a width spanning 200 cm, a marginal height, and LEDs every 10 cm (farbraum 590c, 2006), and up to the large format of 140 x 140 cm (farbraum 470d, 2006, in the exhibition). The artist combined each of the different corresponding color tones with a colored light: so, for example, green, yellow, blue, and white with blue light, or red, yellow, orange, and white with pink light. The constantly changing mixture of colored paint with the similarly colored artificial light, which is influenced by the changes in the natural light according to the time of day, season, and atmospheric conditions, is a central characteristic of her artwork. Along with the various formats and color combinations, she developed works in 2006 that, instead of a horizontal division, exhibit a vertical gradation of shades of color, showing a temporal progression (farbraum 590e, 2006, see fig. XX and farbraum 470c, 2006). What characterizes all of the objects is the maintenance of a middle, a horizon, a stripe that has been left blank or a painted, light surface strip broken up by paint—a symmetry without strict formal mirroring, more in the sense of a balance, a capturing the eye.

Cubes and Screens

Once she had established the interaction between the elements and materials, Rottenbacher, like Serra, began to deal with her sculptures in space. For the exhibition *Lichtberlin* (Light Berlin) that took place in Tiergarten in September 2007, she created an installation of three 250 x 250 x 250 cm cubes covered in gauze dyed various solid colors with LEDs inside. Two Color Cubes (see fig. XX) glowed red, the other blue. The interaction of colored paint, colored lights, and natural light played an essential role for the perception of this artwork as well. In the evening, the cubes appeared to glow and develop a massive character, while during the daytime they shimmered faintly. The relationship to the site, the various perspectives, and the ability to walk around the sculptures were important here. The visitor could move around and between the cubes and through the emitted light; they became a part of the work for a short time, their bodies immersed in each of the colors and became visible, simultaneously, as dark silhouettes from a distance. The cubes stood along the axis leading from the Bellevue palace into the Tiergarten, accentuating this through a staggered arrangement.

The cubic shape and semi-transparency of Color Cubes relates the work formally to the

Boxes and Stacks by the Minimalist artist Donald Judd. His Boxes, made out of brass, galvanized iron, copper, or steel, represent a physical counterpart in that, according to the respective material, they reflect the environment and the viewer. The absolutely identical, industrially produced cubes stand in rows of even numbers without pedestals directly on the ground. In Rottenbacher's works, which are also presented without pedestals and are fabricated just as precisely, the effect is different. Hers are handcrafted; they have been variously treated with paint, and are installed as a triptych, which can be viewed from various directions, thereby generating a tension on the clearing. The same principles of industrial production, and serial, non-varying arrangement form the basis for Judd's Stacks: boxes made out of aluminum or iron are attached to the wall at regular intervals. Their tops and bottoms are each made out of acrylic glass sheets so that the light coming from above becomes increasingly intense in color. In relation to the transparency of this material and the use of frames and colored glass, Rottenbacher's works are similar, yet Rottenbacher combines various hues. This is especially clear in the Color Screens from 2008. This work is made up of two high, rectangular acrylic glass prisms positioned at an acute angle to one another without touching; inside of each are blue LEDs. The sides are each composed of multiple horizontally arranged sheets of acrylic glass, which overlap in layers. Painted stripes, blank areas, and areas pasted with colored foil alternate randomly. And, similarly to the farbraum works, the intensity of the blue lights from the LEDs appears different according to the brightness of the surrounding light. During the day, it can barely be discerned, appearing as only a flat blue shimmering. The blue-green coloring and the horizontal arrangement, along with the transparency of the material of the support, make one think of landscapes, nature, and air. This character increasingly disappears as the day progresses. At night, a multiplicity of strong blue lights sparkle, often reflecting unpredictably in the acrylic glass sheets. The Color Screens now make one think of a city at night: glowing shop windows, advertisement lights, and cars driving by at such a pace that they melt into strips of light.

Landscape Painting

There is a long tradition of landscape painting that goes back to the fifteenth century, when recognizable landscapes first appeared in the backgrounds of representations of religious figures. Throughout its development, various, epochal conceptions of nature, culture, humanity, and animals surfaced in the paintings. To this day, various ideas are connected with landscape,

stretching from the romantic idyll, good, unspoiled nature and wilderness, to cultivated landscapes.

Susanne Rottenbacher's Synthetic Landscapes do not depict any mountains or valleys, trees or meadows, houses or people. They are not even painted on the conventional support of canvas. Yet they refer in an abstract way and with high tech materials to landscapes and a yearning for nature. Not concrete elements, but rather the mood and atmosphere of Rottenbacher's wall objects are reminiscent of landscape painting. One thinks of William Turner's dissolution of landscape into color-light-phenomena² or on some of the expressive paintings by Emil Nolde or Alexej von Jawlensky³ that exhibit little depth and are composed in stripes. Certainly Rottenbacher's blue-green pieces inspire completely different associations than her red-yellow objects do. The latter are reminiscent of evening, desert landscapes, tropical suns; the former of breaking waves, forests, and mountains in daylight. A small cubic work, laid on its back (farbraum 505a, 2005, fig. XX) transforms with encroaching darkness into the secretive, turquoise-green submarine landscape of an aquarium. Also that, to this day, fascinating meeting between sky and the earth or water (the horizon)—think of Gerhard Richter's sea pieces—can be found in the light zones of Rottenbacher's wall objects. In Rottenbacher's sculptures, on the other hand, it is another story. As with the Color Cubes, these are actually located outdoors; in changing lighting conditions, they shine their colored light into the Tiergarten, focusing the view of the surrounding space.⁴ The Color Screens, on the other hand, remind one, at night, of urban landscapes and, during the day, inspire a yearning for happier, atmospheric nature, even for trees and bushes reflected in the blue of water, as has been portrayed in so many landscape paintings.

Yet here light and reflection are real; they are not, as in painting, representations of natural phenomena. Historical representations and visual impressions combine with actual events in Rottenbacher's works. This is also true of the Color Crescents, which rather inspire thoughts of the tropical sun and saccharine romanticism and whose pink-orange color creates a sensual, lusty cavity with the growing darkness—the interior of a cityscape, so to speak. These Synthetic Landscapes, devoid of all people, are simultaneously abstractions of the natural and possess real elements such as light and reflection.

² See for example Joseph Mallord William Turner: Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis (1843) Tate Gallery, London.

³ See for example Jawlensky: Sommerbad in Murnau, (1908), Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus Munich.

⁴ As was also the case, for example, in Serra's work Shift, where concrete slabs introduced at within sight the ground of a non-level site made the relief visible.

Light Art from Artificial Light and Natural Light

In the pioneering stage of light art, in the 1920s and 30s, acrylic glass already played a role. At that time, based on the Russian idea of *Fraktura*, László Moholy-Nagy, Naum Gabo, Kurt Schwertfeger, and other Bauhaus artists were dealing with the innate colors of new materials. They utilized acrylic glass, aluminum, and colored glass for their transparency and reflective quality in experiments with light [*Lichtspielen*]. Moholy-Nagy designed the first kinetic light sculpture, the *Licht-Raum-Modulator* (Light-Space-Modulator 1922–30), a rotating object made out of metal, acrylic glass, and aluminum. It was illuminated by a lamp that cast the resulting shadows and reflections into the space. Soon after, Zdenek Pesánek created a constructivist woman's torso out of acrylic glass, paint, plaster and a curved neon light, thereby introducing the first neon light into an artwork.

Susanne Rottenbacher continues this tradition by combining the latest light technology (LEDs), acrylic glass, and painting, consciously employing transparency, reflection, and changes in lighting. Similar to the kinetic light artists of the 1960s (such as Karl Gerstner, Nicolas Schöffer, Gregorio Verdaneza), she creates works that continually change in colors and allow space for chance. While the earlier artists produced this with colored light bulbs, moveable elements, and electronic (random) controls, Rottenbacher allows her static works to be transformed by natural light. This connection between natural light, artificial light, and painting is related to the artistic position of the Swiss light pioneer Christian Herdeg and to that of the American artist James Turrell. Herdeg investigated the appearance of the color of monochrome paintings in relation to various colored neon lights.⁵ Turrell, in contrast, researches the perception of the interplay between colored light and natural light. I am specifically referring to his *Skyspaces*—rooms with a beveled opening to the sky and which are finely lit through hidden light sources. With encroaching darkness and changing weather conditions, continually new images of the sky arise, and the artistically formed experience becomes charged in terms of color.

Due to the constant changes, Rottenbacher's cubes, screens, and crescents—in contrast to conventional sculpture—do not possess a moment in time at which they can be completely perceived.⁶ In order to truly view them, one must not only walk around them, but also go between the elements and through them. One's own body becomes a part of the artwork while standing in the blue, red, or pink light space, interrupting the fascinating play of reflections for a

⁵ Cf. Herdeg's series *Scheiben* (Discs) and *Circle Meets Square*, www.christianherdeg.com.

⁶ Cf. Matthias Weiss's explanation of Jeppe Hein's light and mirror work *3-Dimensional Circle* in *Von Ort zu Ort: Internationale Lichttage Winterthur*, ed. Verein Internationale Lichttage Winterthur and Yvonne Ziegler (Winterthur, 2007), p. 56–59.

moment. In Rottenbacher's statement that one has to live with her works, an artistic position is expressed, which makes clear that art is not made for a single moment and a quick tour in the museum, but rather it must be repeatedly perceived. The reception corresponds to the work process, in which the artist continually observes the work, changes and develops it. In such a piece, one can share in the life of the artist with her work.

Yvonne Ziegler