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“Raimund Girke – Painting, a Trace of Thinking”

At the opening on 18.5.2003

Kunstraum Fuhrwerkswaage Cologne

In a conversation that took place in summer 1995, during the preparations for a large retrospective exhibition which was subsequently shown at four museum venues, Girke remarked: “It has to do with my current situation, the fact that I think it all might be over in six months perhaps, so I myself must determine how that should look.” (1)

Girke thus indicated the extent to which his thoughts and actions in the 1990s, after the discovery of his illness in January 1993, were shaped by an awareness of a mortal threat to his life. This situation, caught between worry and hope, did not prevent him from working very hard, indeed in retrospect it seems that his works in the 1990s took on an existential dimension, as it were. His own awareness that they expressed more than just a “mere aesthetic, perfect dalliance” (2), to use his own words, also became quite evident. Girke saw his painting – often understood as just “white painting”, a term he often found quite appalling – more as a means of philosophising with colour and form instead of language. He recognised in it “traces of my thinking, my emotions, my understanding of the world, of reality” (3), and believed that if it were not possible for him to communicate himself comprehensively through his own work, this would scarcely have any effect.

The viewer – presented with Girke’s paintings of the 1990s in this way – finds himself unexpectedly drawn into the situation of someone aware of threatening shadows and seeking to assert himself.

The exhibition begins with two small works executed with a spatula dating from 1990. These developed their vital coloration from superimpositions, the layering of the paint. White paint was applied to a coloured ground with a spatula in irregular, quasi-rectangular planes so that the layers became stratified and intertwined leading to a pictorial surface defined by a rich colourfulness, frequently differentiated and disrupted. This reduction of the colours gave rise to a richness of modulation, resulting in a complex, differentiated pictorial field in which the element of chance was not excluded. What was not steered rationally developed in a diagonally orientated composition that defied any tendency to formlessness. The power and tension of the intermingling colours and their pastose application were so controlled that the rational and the accidental interpenetrated to form a unity.

The painting *Die Kraft der Vertikalen* (The power of the verticals), 1997, can be assigned to a group of works with a much more dramatic impact than anything in Girke’s oeuvre until then. There is no trace of the serially pacified, controlled composition often seen in Girke’s works. Nothing points to a distanced constructed picture field. Instead dark, blackish-blue verticals, signalling the greatest possible movement, rupture the pictorial plane from top to bottom, wedge-like, shooting like bolts into the white of the plane. Until then, white for Girke had meant “both coldness and heat – the embodiment of the pure, of light and brightness.” (4) Now it was rent by darkness. Girke himself described the drama that presented itself in this way as follows:

“ ... increasing darkness and disappearing light, darkness that embraces brightness and becomes engulfed by dark black: movement of light, time of transition, of both dissolution and

becoming, time of movement and peace, time of twilight.” (5)

Initially, Girke's paintings are colour that gains in intensity through the interpenetration of layers. Yet his paintings are never without form, they exhibit strong structures that convey peaceful motion. The painting *lichtes Feld* (light field), 1999, is imbued with rhythm thanks to structures that resemble a late echo of those rock formations which Girke encountered in quarries in his early childhood in the 1950s. He took these up in paintings to which he gave titles such as *rhythmically emphasised*, 1956, or *Structure/rhythmic*, 1956, and which owe their inspiration to his early impressions of landscape.

It is also possible that *lichtes Feld* alludes to the exhibition of works by Girke at the *Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister* in Dresden in 1996, where they were confronted with C. D. Friedrich's *Gebüsch im Schnee*. Yet despite all the nature associations it facilitates, *lichtes Feld* is still a free structure made up of light and shade.

Movement for Girke is never a hectic advance, but instead seems calm, repetitive, almost natural. In *lichtes Feld* the structures lend order to the colour space, creating spatiality through superimposition and tending to advance across the edges of the painting. They give the impression of a controlled movement. Yet the fabric of their order seems to rupture as the network of structures comes under threat. In the lower left half of the painting the composition is overlaid by an irregularly-delineated diffuse shadow of blue, intimating dissolution.

In the 1990s Girke's painting, which always developed in the finest colour nuances and to this extent entailed hazard, took up the theme of being endangered. His painting was – in Girke's own view – script, message and “very much related to myself and very determined by me.”

- 1) Jacek Barski, “ich möchte gar nicht populär sein” – Interview with Raimund Girke – *Lovis Corinth Preisträger* 1995, in: *Die Künstlergilde*, 2. Folge 1995, p.13
- 2) Jacek Barski, see footnote 1, p.12
- 3) Jacek Barski, see footnote 1, p.9
- 4) Raimund Girke, “Gedanken zu meinen Bildern” (1960), in: *R.G. Texte, 1960-1995*, *Kunsthaus Zug*, publication for the exhibition 17 September to 5 November 1995, no page numbers given.
- 5) Raimund Girke, *Schattenlicht* (1992), in: see footnote 4.
- 6) Jarek Barski, see footnote 1, p.8