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All the Colours in the sky

New developments in Anke Kuypers' and Henk van Gerner's work

For years Anke Kuypers and Henk van Gerner lived near each other, one in Surhuisterveen, the other in Boelenslaan, two villages in the north of Holland.

This led to an intense exchange of experiences. From an artistic point of view they were a sounding board to each other and, in a sense, each other's conscience. Similar themes engaged them in this period although their starting points varied. They were preoccupied by ambiguities in perception, the slipping and sliding that the eye cannot quite follow. Anke Kuypers expressed these ambiguities in a game of changing points of view and later plays with the doubt the viewer feels when geometrical shapes can be seen as a sequence of parts. In Henk van Gerner's work the focus was on the momentary confusion that lies in the process of perception itself.

Yet it seemed as if their artistic ideas matched each other very closely. This impression was reinforced by three installations that they carried out together: Leeuwarden in 1981, Drachten 1987 and Surhuizum 1990. Five years ago Henk van Gerner moved to the village of Julianadorp, in another province and now the Afsluitdijk which is the motorway through the old Zuyder Sea, is the only connection between the two studios. This occurrence literally brought a period to an end for these two 'fellow travellers' in Friesland. They kept in touch, although at a distance. Both went their own ways, without sounding board or external conscience. The first joint presentation of their work in the Lawei in Drachten shows the result of this. Does their progress still run parallel or is there an unbridgeable gap between them? That is the question that comes up as we see their work exhibited in a location familiar to them both in northern Holland.

The presence of colour is most striking. Both used colour in earlier work but sparingly, as a purely formal detail. However, colour now takes pride of place in their work. Quite independently, they both fastened upon this phenomenon. It seemed as if the two of them, in their separate ways, were looking for a new concept, an area that provided more room for subjective experience and a new rendering of the subject matter they were concerned with. Perhaps the constructivist tradition that one always recognised in their work had cramped their style in the end. Whatever the reason, their work appears milder now, less dogmatic, perhaps more accessible but nonetheless still consistent. Even the rigorous Mondriaan, while not renouncing his principles, bowed to a snatch of Boogie Woogie at the end. The discovery of colour looks as if it has been an eye opener for Anke Kuypers and Henk van Gerner. It is new ground that they have individually covered and subsequently conquered. They have done their work thoroughly and systematically, literally exploring the new terrain. Their methods are familiar in the low countries where dykes, polders and tulip fields are mapped out with the ruler and rectangle.

A change of scene can work wonders. It is tempting to relate the changes in Henk van Gerner's work to the changed scenery of his new home. But that is a dangerous undertaking. Before you know, you start seeing what you want to see. You start connecting things that may have some sort of relationship with each other but then on a very different level than the directly visual associations that a landscape can evoke. He must have thought that the infinite combinations of colours and shades in the flower bulb fields were quite ghastly at first. Electing got colour means leaving room for capriciousness and loss of consistency, Capriciousness is, however, exploited shamelessly in the bulb fields of North Holland. A bulb grower just gets a box of yellow tulips when he has finished his last box of red ones. He doesn't worry about the consequences for the composition of colour in the fields, let alone about the aesthetic effect.

Whimsical patterns appear with one colour suddenly followed by another. Behind the most fantastic colour combinations, pure chance is the only guiding principle. And yet we can still speak of a

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methodical consistency here, an almost constructivistic attitude. In any case, it is likely that the near physical effect of the coloured fields in his surroundings, albeit temporary, opened Henk van Gerner's eyes to the phenomenon of colour and its possible applications.

His daily bicycle ride provided him with another experience. Very early each morning he bikes through the dunes to the beach and watches the sunrise slowly colouring the sky. A washed out blue begins to vibrate along the edges of the grey morning light. When this occurs in the infinite space of an early morning hour at the sea, it is as if you cannot perceive the birth of this first colour directly but only stealthily and only then in constant changing conditions. This first blue light seems to tremble in the corners of your eyes.

In an analysis of the aesthetic effect in Barnett Newman's work, Arie Graafland refers to this elementary experience of blue light on the extreme edge of colour perception. Research has shown that dimmed light has shorter wave lengths than bright light and blue is indeed the first colour one distinguishes in the sunrise. "In these conditions, blue is perceptible by the staves at the periphery of the retina, while the central part of the eye (the fovea), that contains mainly canes, holds the object and identifies its shape." In connection with this fact, Graafland refers to Broca's paradox: to see blue, you should not look at it. Blue is a colour that lies before or beyond the actual shape of an object. Being able to perceive blue is the first perception of colour a person has in the first months of his life, as the fovea in the centre of his retina is not yet formed. This process of colour perception without an object plays a large part in Barnett Newman's work. It is enforced and emphasised in different ways, including the use of enormous canvasses, but it is done explicitly in the large colour surfaces where colour seems to vibrate as in the Cathedra series and the canvasses with the significant titles of Primordial Light, Day One and Day before One.

The discovery of this vibrating blue light at sunrise gave Henk van Gerner a shock of recognition. He is not so much concerned with the near mystical experience that Newman's paintings wish to evoke nor does he need the viewer to confront his work head-on. There is usually one compelling place in the room from which you can best view or rather, experience the work. Newman's work demands silence and attention, even complete surrender, so that you lose yourself in it. The viewer falls back into an unfocussed, oceanic visual experience. In most cases, the ideal stance from which to look at his paintings is not at all that far from the centre of the canvas, where the waves of colour unfold to the left and right, smoothly or interrupted by a stroke of white – his so-called 'zips'.

Henk van Gerner's recent work is diametrically opposed in this regard to Newman's. He does not evoke an oceanic experience for the viewer but brings up the process of perception itself. That is to say: the experience of related constellations of colour and shapes in relation to the point of view where both can be perceived simultaneously. He deals repeatedly with the cursory friction that occurs during the viewing. That friction comes about when the image that places itself in the centre of one's sight does not correspond with the vague perception in the corner of one's eye.

There is certainly no ideal place from which to view his work. On the contrary. It is better if one goes slightly past it. Not that one should walk past the paintings but it is better not to look them 'in the face' so to speak. They require a roving eye and a blank face, a sort of visual relaxation which precedes the conscious look. One should not drink them in, in a kind of visual ecstasy – as with Newman's paintings – but they should be regarded almost casually. Not once but more often. The canvas does not reveal its secrets at first glance. Or rather, the canvasses, as the image usually consists of two parts, not with a painted zip but with a real seam in the middle. At first glance, the wilful compositions of shape and colour that appear to the left and right of the white surface seem slightly absurd. Together they look like a kind of picture puzzle demanding a solution. Unaware, one casts desperately about for a solution as if the painting is an abstract rebus of rhyming and not rhyming shapes.

It is that overly conscious type of perception that stands in the way of the real effect of the image. The secret is revealed when one glances at the image, fleetingly, almost superficially; in other words with a

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purely optical, almost casual manner of consideration. What happens then is that a shape in combination with a colour suddenly revolt against what is happening on the other side of the canvas. The flat surface of the shape on one side does not seem to fit in with the curving effect of the other. The substance of colour makes a stand against the illusion of line and shape. The receding calm of green wrestles with the shrill flamboyance of yellow. Something is trembling but you don't know what. It is not like the tangible vibrations of the first morning light at sea but it is a kind of restrained glare which happens while you are actually looking. In short, this is an image on the retina we cannot quite come to grips with.

Anke Kuypers discovered colours gradually. Several years ago, she exhibited works of art where, for the first time, soft colours in pastel shades were visible on the surface. Her method was to sand down several layers of paint. These were her first attempts to create room for a more sensitive expression of colour. About three years ago, she began to experiment with wire mesh, a material also used in the building trade. It comes in rolls and is suitable for making objects with rounded corners. Colour is given to the wire mesh by coating it with a layer of epoxy. This makes for semi-transparent, tenuous constructions, whose colours tend to mix with the surroundings as one can see straight through the construction. The result of this is that colour becomes hazy and this raises awkward questions. What is it exactly that you are looking at? Is the colour in this construction a substance or a contextual experience? To put it differently, is the colour directly related to the wire mesh bearer – or is the colour you see here purely a result caused by outside influences all having an effect on each other?

Something can be said for both options. The colour of the mesh is inextricably bound to the industrial colour of the coating. On the other hand, there are constant changes in perception depending on the viewer's position in relation to the wire netting. The curve in the netting, the increasing density in the layers shifting patterns and the resulting moiré effects, and last but not least the changeable light in the room itself – all this is the cause of a dynamic but uncertain experience of colour. You, as viewer are involved in a game and you have a say in the outcome.

The colour not only raises questions about itself but also about the process of perception. How and for what reason do you make a decision about the shape as a whole and the patterns you can distinguish in it? The shape as a whole sometimes seems to be lost completely in the misleading colour effects of the semi-transparent surface. As if there is no geometrical form at all that you can fix in your mind. Sometimes the eye has nothing to focus on, especially when the repetition of shapes sparks off changes in the vanishing points.

Compare the effect of the pattern in the straight lines that is suddenly revealed in this work with the unexpected panoramic views that open up as you drive past a forest of trees planted in geometrical rows. You are suddenly surprised by some regular structure discerned within the whole.

Colour plays a curious part in this game of shifting patterns and concealed shapes. Shades intermingle as the variously coloured meshes glide past each other. The viewer sees the changes in the thickness of the mesh, sometimes dense and then threadbare, but does not experience this as structure but as degrees of colour. The eye is caught between two apparently incompatible modes; between colour and line, between atmospheric and linear perspectives, between context and substance. The three-dimensional structure of these figures is connected intrinsically with the colour and one is compelled to interpret and reinterpret. Is it the figure that demands attention or is it the interpretation that generates the figure we see?

When we say that a figure is white, we are really alluding to its disposition to become white, to be able to be white, rather than to its pure white colour. For example, I think this piece of paper is white in the

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darkest twilight, even at night by starlight, in candlelight, by the light of lamps, in bright sunshine, at sunset, in the snow and rain, in the forest, and in a wall-papered room. But I am convinced that it is everything but white, except in the brightest sunshine, on a mountaintop for example, and even then you would perceive the reflection of the blue sky. But we do not really notice this because in all of our judgements that are based on visual perception, judgement and perception are so intertwined that it will take us years if ever to separate them; we believe we perceive things all the time when in actual fact we only draw conclusions.

Georg Lichtenberg (in a letter to Goethe)

This uncertainty in perception, which has long been a characteristic of Anke Kuypers' work has now undergone a new rendering as far as colour and space is concerned. The question is also if this subject matter has something to do with her immediate surroundings. The landscape of Achtkarspelen with its wooded embankments displays a constantly changing perspective; the eye is always challenged by new vantage points. Here again it is possible that this is only wishful thinking. The relationship between art and landscape is often much more subtle than you would think when you first associate them.

Yet it is striking that Anke Kuypers can also see a direct relationship between her work and everyday experience. The example she gave me does not, however, relate to the particular landscape of Achtkarspelen, but to an experience she had in the cathedral in Florence:

"The nave was filled with scaffolding, and up above light streamed through the side windows and the rosette window. There were areas of colour among the lines of the scaffolding: there was a patch of blue, elsewhere green and blue areas filtered through, as if there were coloured clouds hanging overhead. My first immediate impression was that the colour effects were caused by the light that shone through the stained glass windows and was trapped by the scaffolding. But the effect was really too strong for that, and then I saw that the scaffolding was built up out of varying pieces, a pale bit here, there a piece of red, there a random piece of white or blue, whatever worked out best as it was constructed.

But what impressed me most, was that in there that place I had the feeling for the first time that colour could drift in space, hardly attached to a bearer, not connected to a form.

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