

## Peter Zimmermann / Marietta Franke

### INTERVIEW

#### About paintings that compete for perception, cohesion rather than fragmentation, and the luxury of the painter

Marietta Franke: We are meeting in your Cologne studio to talk about the paintings that have come out of the last four years. - Paintings lead their own life. Would you consider a phrase such as "Paintings want something" to be valid?

Peter Zimmermann: In any event, they do something other than what I want. During the creation process, they initially present me with a certain resistance, which I can only control up to a certain degree. I think that the paintings do, indeed, lead their own life to a certain extent. That becomes particularly clear when they leave the studio. When you look at the special case of "paintings in an exhibition context," the paintings want, first and foremost, to be noticed. They compete for perception; experience shows that what I am trying to instill in them is not necessarily the same as what other viewers get out of it. Someone who goes to my exhibitions and sees the paintings most likely gets something else out of it than what I tried to put into it.

MF: The paintings compete for perception. What sort of perception do your paintings seek? Could it be pictured like a seismograph that searches for the fields where this perception could be particularly successful?

PZ: Since I work in the field of art, they should first and foremost be perceived as art. At the same time, I also enjoy questioning the reality of perception. What I mean is that nowadays, we are visually bombarded from all sides: open fires (there is one lit over there), TV screens, movie theaters, billboards, etc. - all of that demands our perception. When my paintings in an exhibition withstand that competition from images in other contexts, I consider that to be a quality.

MF: Would you like to transcend that?

PZ: Gladly. In principle, yes. But it is difficult to find a statement in that regard. To transcend that can only mean to clarify the distinction from other spheres, such as film, advertising, fashion, etc.

MF: You use images from the media, fuse those images on your screen, making them into a kind of primordial soup, and draw new images out of it. Does the distinction between *Studium* and *Punctum*, which Roland Barthes introduced with regard to viewing photographs, play a role? I mean that an image that contains a *Punctum* that cannot be decoded or clarified, and therefore retains a residuum, remains an image; in contrast to that, an image that can be decoded from the *Studium* viewpoint is decipherable and therefore no longer an image.

PZ: The original image I start out with is necessary because I do not want to come up with something or make a gut posing. In that respect, I need the original image. I do not want anyone to be able to trace it back to that particular picture. In addition, it is not critical for the enjoyment of an image. I leave a trail. The *Studium* from this *Punctum*, to practically extricate the obscure, obliterated, and mystical elements can already constitute a certain pleasure, to reverse the obfuscation process and the

traces of the machine that melts down the whole thing to decipher it and make it once again visible. The story of how the paintings come to be is, indeed, important to me. However, the starting point must not necessarily be recognizable. What is important is the presence or appearance of a painting, that it has something that surprises and impresses the viewer. In that respect, there is a certain correlation to Roland Barthes' *Studium* and *Punctum*.

MF: Among the paintings that have come out of the last four years are the so-called Blob Paintings, or paintings with overlapping layers of light. There are paintings with piles of dots - something that can be observed in the cosmos. There are paintings that play on light / shadow or light / dark situations. And then there are the paintings that have something practically impressionistic about them. Are they paintings that can withstand these other image situations and perhaps transcend them?

PZ: In the very least, there is a certain hope associated with it. - When creating, Impressionism is certainly not a category that brings me to achieve a certain result. In hindsight, if I put myself in the shoes of the viewer, impressionistic aspects could be present in it. Perhaps simply due to the fact that I value a certain color effect and light situation. In addition, you have to get into the issue of how such a painting is created. My paintings are based on models that are taken from the screen. It is important to me that the luminosity and color intensity on the screen also be conveyed in the painted image. Therein lies a certain anachronism, because you cannot transfer the colors generated on the screen to an image that is painted with colored matter. When you paint an image in the traditional sense, you must do so with color pigments, whereas they are generated by light and electricity on the screen. In that respect, the methods are different, but I try to get as close as I can to the same effect.

MF: Your paintings may run the risk of being associated with movements that have taken place in the history of art, such as Rayonism, Impressionism or Color Field Painting, or they will simply be classified as abstract art. You are exposing them to the possibility of being misapprehended.

PZ: Such misunderstandings cannot be ruled out. I may also play with these cross references. It is possible that such references lend themselves well to certain exhibitions. But I now rely on an independent repertoire of found images that makes it clear where these images are from and when they were created.

When representing (screen)light, for example, the misapprehension may come from the fact that a technical image cannot be honored or sufficiently implemented with conventional painting materials.

MF: Do you see these technical possibilities as superior?

PZ: I think so. When you watch, for example, how children respond to a key media stimulus, a cell phone or a screen, it is not so simple for a painting to compete with that.

MF: So you rely on an immediate effect that the viewer cannot at first reconsider, into which he simply enters, that grabs him.

PZ: That is correct.

MF: You think a lot in the direction of the viewer; when he has been grabbed, he must continue to deal with the whole thing. What does this viewer who responds ideally to your works do?

PZ: There is no ideal viewer. I think you must presume there is a basic difference of interest between the painter and the viewer. And, of course, you must also bear in mind the contingent language or

communication patterns. In my early work, I was particularly interested in that tension, and at that time, I addressed it in several works. The following question in particular preoccupied me: Are images texts that can be read clearly? Or is there a certain lack of definition that takes place on an intuitive, nonverbal, emotional level that cannot be communicated?

MF: You are now speaking of previous situations. For example, you made posters (1994-1995) that apparently went in a certain direction, with regard to sense or ideas, but then cut their expression short. Was it intended to tease the viewer, incite or provoke him in order to thrust him into the unsayable aspect of art?

PZ: With the posters, we have a coherent text projected on found posters. Certain terms are highlighted depending on where they appear in the layout. Whoever let himself sink into this work could, with a certain amount of effort, understand the text, like a continuous text, a little story. The highlighted terms have, in and of themselves, no meaning and provoke a certain lack of understanding. But if we were about readability, I would have printed the text on a sheet of A4 paper.

MF: Habits of perception were disrupted. There was also perhaps some uneasiness and uncertainty.

PZ: What was irritating about this poster work was that a lot of people never even discovered this work and took it 1:1. Only when it had been pointed out to them did they realize that there was something different there. In that respect, this disruption effect or uneasiness was an intended posing. For me, it was a study of under which conditions certain subjects become art.

MF: It could be an artistic form of the admission of "lack of observability of the world" (Niklas Luhmann).

PT: That is in reference to the blind spots of the world. For me, the question is rather: What conditions or structures must be fulfilled so the different conclusions that represent the individual posters do not demolish the framework and make the whole thing disintegrate into individual components. What interested me, also figuratively, was how different, contradictory parts or statements are held together without falling into disorder or randomness. The text, which extends over the entire poster, deals with exactly that phenomenon.

MF: So cohesion rather than fragmentation. You explored the idea that an image can be text, brought it to a certain point, and then left it to stand there. Later (1999-2000), you then also became interested in other issues when the question of an image as an image and painterly possibilities came to the fore. Could the abstract, i.e. nonobjective, image be a catalyst for the process of recovering the image as an image?

PZ: For me, an image does not necessarily have to be abstract in order to be a good image. The fact that my paintings are abstract is due to my interest in pursuing the relationship between images and text. When the computer came into play, I had the opportunity to continue my artistic work by painting because, in paintings, each image is encoded as text. My paintings are abstract because of the lack of definition and ambiguity; the way they are made makes the paintings interesting.

Image as an image - that question can only be dealt with if you take painting as a system and evaluate or compare a certain image with another from that system. It is a nice game on which I spend a lot of time. I naturally try to fabricate certain details in order to show in which sphere I work, in some cross reference to other painter positions.

MF: Among which, there are also references to American painting.

PZ: I have certain preferences that have changed with the years. But it is certainly true that certain painter positions from American painting are of particular interest to me. These include Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, but also Paul Jenkins and Phillip Guston. I am interested in their conceptual approach to painting. For example, I have used some of those artists' paintings as models. I dealt with Jackson Pollock in my book title phase (1987-1999).

MF: You use large, so-called American formats, but are also familiar with small formats, like your paintings that deal with book titles.

PZ: I wish I could just make large paintings. With large paintings, there is the fact that you can stand in front of them and be overwhelmed by a color and a reflective surface. I think that the material (epoxy resin) I work with works better on a large surface, because then it reflects people, objects and spaces. The experience of standing in front of such a big painting is more striking. Of course, showrooms do have certain limits.

MF: You are an artist who is strongly driven to explore things, to get into the unknown, to investigate. You have no idea where this whole thing will lead.

PZ: Earlier, that was certainly even more so the case than it is now. I think that ..... The range of motion is narrower with each new work because each new work excludes certain possibilities.

MF: I notice that you develop ideas while talking.

PZ: Perhaps I am now allowing myself to speak more from a painter position.

MF: The conceptual linking of your artistic thinking remains.

PZ: It remains. I could add that what is meant by the painter's position is the luxury to hide very specific artistic opportunities and to focus on painterly issues.

MF: Self-restraint in order to potentially get closer to the image as an image?

PZ: But I also understand that an image as an image does not exist.

MF: It is a construct, just like image as text is a construct.

PZ: Of course I am aware of the conceptual and contextual implications. Nevertheless, in the actual practice of finding out what a good image is, how it can be transferred, and which paint maneuvers are necessary to achieve that image, theoretical considerations play a secondary role.

MF: The formal heterogeneity of your artistic work cannot be argued away - could it be related to the fact that art or painting cannot be described and therefore not possessed? Thus painting is somehow inapprehensible?

PZ: Once again, this is similar to what we said earlier about how the paintings lead their own life. It is still very exciting when suddenly, despite every system, a door opens and something unexpected

happens. Its emergence, which could not have been anticipated but which advances the work, is a great moment, a great gift.

Most of the time, though, we try to conquer and cultivate a particular territory. I think recent and ancient art history is influenced by these turf wars. At the same time, though, there is a certain hubris in that.

MF: That naturally raises the question of with whom you are waging a turf war. I can also ask the question another way: What do you think when you confront an artistic work like one by Gerhard Richter with its highly-differentiated atlas-like conflicts with the question of what painting could be today - to which he also does not have an answer. The question remains.

PZ: I am very sympathetic to his position, probably due to the fact that he has left the question open. I cannot answer the question either. I find positions that act as if they could answer the question suspect.

MF: Intellectual effort like Wassily Kandinsky undertook, for example, in order to give abstract art its own reality, his entire thought on "the Spiritual in Art" – does somehow delimiting the media flow of images interest you at all?

PZ: It's a nice game.

MF: You see it as a mental game.

PZ: I use it as a pretext to honor it in one image or another. Ultimately, I am the first viewer of my images and I try to draw some amusement from it, to be provoked, and to be incited to some action, but I would not be so presumptuous as to think that it might be true for others.

MF: Could it be considered unaccommodating painting?

PZ: No, the stakes are too high for that. By now, there is simply too much of my life in it. It is true that it is associated with certain physical exertion and wear. It is real effort. In that respect, I think that for me, personally, it is very obligatory, but the question as to whether it has a larger context, with regard to art history or contemporaneity, is a different kettle of fish.

MF: Does art open the world of communication?

PZ: As an artist, you are always in a dialog situation. You may do your work in a studio, but in the moment you exhibit it, you are in a dialog with your audience.

MF: Are you of the opinion, as Gerhard Richter wrote in his early notes, that "now there are no priests or philosophers left, artists are the most important people in the world." (cf. gerhard-richter.com/quotes/kunst-1, Notes 1964-65). Would you attribute this importance to artists?

PZ: I would be more reserved. Why are scientists, doctors, or teachers less important for our society? You can take the question even farther: Why is a homeless person insignificant? Maybe it is also simply true that creativity is not limited to certain professions.

MF: There are many jobs that are significant for people to live together.

PT: In an ant colony, there are not only queens, but also workers and drones. There, differentiation is

the ultimate guarantor of survival.