

“Painting has a great future ahead of it,  
but it’s not going to be easy for the painters.”<sup>1</sup>

### Artistic Reflexivity

Writing about the current state of painting, the art theorist Johannes Meinhardt recently complained: “What is observable in many young painters is a massive loss of the historical ability (formed in the course of modernism and late modernism) to differentiate among problem complexes and discourses, [...] which has unavoidable repercussions for the status of their art. Even if this loss is not always noticeable at first glance, a second, closer look shows how much of their intensity, complexity, multi-layering, and ambiguity paintings lose when an increasing tendency to forget historically formed differentiation diminishes the intensity and complexity of the questions.”<sup>2</sup> This timely call for a stronger awareness of art theory is nothing other than an appeal for greater reflexivity in artistic practice. This kind of reflexivity can generally be defined as the capacity to contemplate critically changes in the meaning of images, media, and forms of expression; as the ability to address the historical development of artistic paradigms; and thus as a chance to query the conditions of contemporary painting. Before Meinhardt, Stefan Germer had already made a similar call for the theory of art to be taken seriously: “It is not for its novelty that artistic creativity can be justified today, but solely out of a thorough consideration of history, possibilities, and conditions. Consequently, I am interested in works that do not try to repress matters for debate, but instead confront them and take them on board, make them their subject or reflect on them in their approach.”<sup>3</sup> This capacity to reflect on one’s own historical situation and on how the visual is historically conditioned—as demanded by Meinhardt and Germer—is today more than ever the fundamental precondition for art production.

Peter Zimmermann’s works show clearly how conscious he is that the myth of creative immediacy, in the sense of a direct and unconditional creativity, cannot be upheld. It is no longer possible to look at an image without seeing a multitude of visual contexts that place it in relation to other, pre-existing images. That is why Zimmermann feels the need to define artistic practice in relation to the world of images around him, rather than understanding art as an absolute source that draws its legitimacy solely from within itself. This field of other interwoven visualities consists first and foremost of the mass media images that we encounter on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, at the cinema, on television, and on the internet, but also draws from the traditions of art, especially of the kind we find in museums and art history books.

Zimmermann responds to these worlds of images by taking them seriously as frames of reference and as a defining cultural force and making them the starting point for his own artistic work. The two reflexive strategies he employs in the process lead to two very different types of picture: the

*Book Cover Paintings* are based on the concept of pictorial *contextualization*, while the considerably more numerous *Blob Paintings* are based on a *mediatization* of the chosen subjects. Both these approaches will be examined in more detail in the course of this essay.

### The Book Cover Paintings

The first examples of Peter Zimmermann's *Book Cover Paintings* date from the late 1980s. Taking book covers as his subjects, he transposes them into the medium of painting. The formats of the canvases here range from 30 x 42 to 200 x 150 centimeters, which means that the paintings are mostly much larger than the books themselves. The unframed motif—for example, in paintings such as *Texte zur Theorie des Films* of 1990 (fig. p. ##), *Number 32* of 1997 (fig. p. ##), or *Malewitsch* of 1998 (fig. p. ##)—completely fills the pictorial field, which means that the edges of the picture are identical with the outline of the subject itself, the book. This makes these largely realistic paintings almost appear to be objects. Zimmermann's selection is composed primarily of dictionaries and encyclopedias, school textbooks, restaurant guides and travel books, classics of art history and cultural theory, and monographs of abstract artists. This almost encyclopedic representation of compressed knowledge has little to do with personal tastes and preferences. The encyclopedias and dictionaries, especially, reflect an "unobtrusive" kind of knowledge consisting of general, strictly ordered facts. So in terms of his subject matter and the way he represents it, the artist cannot be regarded as a subjective factor in the production of meaning. What he thinks about the books themselves remains unsaid.

Yet it is not just the selection and appropriation of the book covers, but even the way in which the books are transposed to canvas that seem to confirm the idea that Zimmermann is refusing point blank to become involved in subjective interpretations. The letters of the book's title and the individual shapes of the images to be reproduced—for example in the artists' monographs—are cut from the sheet plastic using a plotter and stuck to the primed canvas as positive or negative stencils for applying the paint. Epoxy resin with various pigments mixed into it is then poured onto the horizontal canvas and allowed to harden before the stencil is removed to reveal the finished picture. The smooth, shiny surfaces look like the result of an industrial process, a far cry from the individual brushwork of conventional oil painting. So this method of producing pictures negates any idea of "the artist's hand" or of focus on the artist subject and follows a concept that is laid down precisely in advance. This aspect reveals Zimmermann's close connection with some of the fundamental ideas of American Conceptual Art. As Sol LeWitt put it in 1967: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair."<sup>4</sup> By the same token, the book covers re-

presented on canvas appear as a kind of conceptual painting, but one that comes in the guise—depending on the book chosen—of seductive, even opulent sensuality.

When Zimmermann turns book covers into paintings, this is more than just an appropriation of an industrial print product that is made into “art” by the act of “painting.” It also represents a critical examination of pictorial forms of representation. For a book cover—especially when it features reproduced art—raises questions about the legibility of the image and the image-like quality of the lettering. The use of type in a painting (author, title, subtitle, publisher, etc.) entails both a verbalization of the image and a visualization of the language. Or put another way, the textualization of the image (meaning that the picture can be read as text) is at the same time a pictorialization of the textual elements (meaning that the text can also be viewed as image).<sup>5</sup> The real book cover is, of course, already a kind of “image,” in the sense that it visualizes the book’s content by means of illustrations, type, and typographical design. But the effect of enlarging it and transforming it into painting is to make the viewer much more aware of its pictorial essence and reflect on it more than if he or she were looking at the book itself. Zimmermann’s *Book Cover Paintings* thus provide a graphic basis for reflecting on the dovetailing and duality of image and text, of representation and language.

### Contextualizing Painting

A striking number of the *Book Cover Paintings* reproduce the covers of monographs about abstract painters. This group of works includes *Mondrian* of 1995 (fig. p. ##), *Malewitsch* of 1998 (fig. p. ##), and *Pollock* of 1998 (fig. p. ##). Here the insight that the history of art is one of the formative influences under which new artistic work evolves becomes Zimmermann’s theoretical and practical starting point. On the one hand, the real books with their illustrations show the work of a visual artist while also giving expression to how that artist was interpreted in an art history context. On the other, the book covers are the subjects Zimmermann chooses for his own paintings. So here Zimmermann is testing both the *discursive* and the *practical* frame of reference in which he moves as an artist. He contextualizes his pictures in the sense that they depict part of his context—in this case the art world: art history books and exhibition catalogues.<sup>6</sup> This strategy rests on a simple but important realization: that the production, dissemination, and reception of art take place not in neutral, purely phenomenological experiential spaces, but are primarily determined by institutional contexts. Academies, art societies, galleries, auction houses, museums, universities, and libraries are socially, and thus historically conditioned spaces that steer and massively influence the way art is regarded: the way it is viewed and the way it is valued. Art books are an important instrument here, because as academic publications they embody powerful processes of ordering, historiography, the

production of meaning, and the shaping of values. We have to remember that art and context are always bound together in mutual interdependency.

One group of *Book Cover Paintings* stands out from the rest. These are the paintings based on covers of monographs on Jackson Pollock, of which Zimmermann has produced eleven different examples. Apparently no other artist so fascinated him in this context. These paintings not only work as pictures that represent and reflect the contextual framework of writing about painting, but can also certainly be understood as a homage to this extremely prominent proponent of Abstract Art. Pollock was not only one of the protagonists of Abstract Expressionism and the most celebrated American artist of his generation, but also, alongside Andy Warhol, one of the most myth-laden artists that country has produced. Before we take a closer look at Zimmermann's *Book Cover Paintings* and their treatment of Pollock's painting, we should first throw some light on the historical background in the interests of better understanding.<sup>7</sup>

#### Excursion: Jackson Pollock

The paintings that primarily form the basis for Jackson Pollock's fame were done in the short period between 1947 and 1950. Using dried-out brushes, palette knives, spatulas, sticks, or even pouring directly from a punctured can, Pollock poured and dripped runny enamel, aluminum, and oil paints in wide arcs onto his canvases, which were often large-format and normally laid flat on the ground (fig. 1). In these "Action Paintings" the lines formed a dense network of intertwining and overlapping tracks of paint, whose dynamic, energy-laden mode of application remains clearly visible in the finished picture. In other words, the resulting appearance always points to the process of its creation. Now dripping as a specific method of applying paint was not Pollock's invention—before him Max Ernst, Francis Picabia, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Hans Hofmann, and Janet Sobel all used this technique—but no other artist applied this painting process in such a thorough and rigorous fashion. The pictorial space of *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30* (fig. 2), for example, an exemplary work of Pollock's from 1950, is no longer structured by any hierarchical composition, but by a uniform all-over, a meshwork of equals from one side of the canvas to the other. The radicality of this approach lies not in the refusal to make reference to anything external to the picture. The unusual thing about Pollock's innovative manner of painting is that the abstract gestural painting is a largely flat, unhierarchical expanse that is evenly structured and open to all sides. This all-over puts his painting outside the compositional principles of the European tradition. Even his fellow painter Willem de Kooning had to admit that Pollock quite simply exploded the accepted ideas of what a picture was.<sup>8</sup> But the artist's fame is only partly grounded in these formal aesthetic peculiarities of his artistic practice.

Pollock's public derives its image of him not only from his pictures but has always focused strongly on his difficult personality and uncompromising lifestyle. To this day Pollock is surrounded by an aura of transfiguration, so it is entirely consistent that the Hollywood movie made in 2000, which Ed Harris wrote and directed and in which he played the leading role, celebrated the artist as a tragic hero, presenting his personality as a blend of eccentric genius and rambunctious rebel. The movie *Pollock* makes a cliché out of every one of the aspects that made him into a legendary figure: his alcoholic excesses and social provocations, his psychological instability and his temper, the supposedly accidental invention of dripping, and the sheer incomprehensibility of his pictures, along with his early death in 1956 in a car crash (for which he was himself to blame). The movie is a kind of culmination of a public image that had already been decisively shaped during Pollock's lifetime by the film recordings and photographs of the German photographer Hans Namuth. Namuth's numerous photographs, taken during the early 1950s and reproduced over and over again since then, show Jackson Pollock at work in his studio as a dramatic "Action Painter" and present his technique as an inspired, mythical act of creation.

Ultimately, Namuth's images are almost more popular than Pollock's paintings themselves, because they have captured a highly influential vantage point in the public arena. They have provided the popular audience, and to a large extent the critical discussion too, with a basis for psychological theorizing about Pollock's work. For example, in Harold Rosenberg's view the pictorial space becomes a kind of arena that offers room for the artist's existential self-expression. The act of painting as a process becomes the focus of interest and attains greater importance than the results of that process. In the apparent identity of painter and work (or of art and life), Rosenberg says, the artist shows himself to be a free agent and a model of a modern man no longer alienated from his work. In his famous piece "The American action painters," Rosenberg wrote in 1952: "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence."<sup>9</sup> Writing in 1959 on the occasion of *documenta II* in Kassel, where several of Pollock's pictures were presented to the European audience, Werner Haftmann largely concurred with his colleague's interpretation, saying that Jackson Pollock drew on the canvases "the desperately choreographed path of his life."<sup>10</sup> During the 1950s it was a matter of feverish, almost religious belief that Abstract Expressionism was an authentic and immediate form of self-expression and an existential self-justification. And the painters actively supported this ideology through their own apologia. The idea of the immediacy of expression is, however, as David Anfam, for example, emphasizes, a myth and a fallacy, "because every communication of expression necessarily requires cultural, semantic, and other channels of mediation."<sup>11</sup> There is no such thing as a completely autonomous, unrestrained, ahistoric, and contextless art that

emanates solely from the deep subjectivity of its “creator,” however often the Abstract Expressionists insisted that there was. An artistic practice whose roots could not be traced would automatically seem unique, but the supposedly immediate and unique is always in fact mediated. So for all their authority and power effects, the artist’s statements in interviews and writings served above all as a discursive instrument for individualizing and canonizing his own artistic products as part of the business of art.

In artists’ and critics’ attempts to legitimize the movement, a special role was played by the idea of the subconscious, which became increasingly widespread during the 1950s. It was grasped as an important element of the human condition and as the individual wellspring of creativity. For critics like Harold Rosenberg, Pollock’s art emerges from urges that are out of all reach of rational control. The dynamic lines of his pictures thus appear as trails left by subconscious energies. Pollock, who was fascinated by the teachings of C. G. Jung and Sigmund Freud and the Surrealist Automatism of the 1920s, supported this interpretation to some extent: “The source of my painting is the unconscious,”<sup>12</sup> and “When I am *in* my painting, I am not aware of what I’m doing.”<sup>13</sup> Even the critic Clement Greenberg, who as Rosenberg’s antipode was interested more in aesthetic achievements and the formalistic conditions of the medium of painting, could not completely escape the dominant idea that this was an existential expression of emotion and the subconscious.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Leja warns against treating Pollock as a unitary, easily grasped artist subject and interpreting his “feelings as the source of meaning in his art.”<sup>15</sup> The problem is not only that the historical patterns of interpretation, as laid out by Greenberg and especially Rosenberg, must now appear as ideological constructs of their times. Even if the artist did make his inner world into the theme of his pictures, his works (above all those created between 1947 and 1950) tell us nothing useful about his spiritual state or psychological constitution that could actually be drawn from the formal appearance of the paintings themselves. What is more, as shown by Pepe Karmel’s meticulous investigation during the preparations for the great 1998 Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the artist actually applied his lines of paint in a controlled and conscious manner, which contradicts the idea of his paintings having a purely or primarily emotionally based structure.<sup>16</sup> All the same, the ideas of an antirational “Action Painter” expressing himself directly and working through the subconscious remains part of the Pollockian artistic legend.

### Demystifying the Myth

Peter Zimmermann’s Pollock *Book Cover Paintings* work not only as pictures that reflect on the artistic context of published art criticism. They are also a kind of painting about painting,

because in appropriating and transforming the book covers Zimmermann automatically faced the challenge of reproducing the art illustrated on the covers. To cite a vivid example: Zimmermann based the painting edition *Pollock* (fig. p. ##), which was created in an edition of ten in 1999, on the exhibition catalogue *Jackson Pollock* published in 1964 by the New York Marlborough-Gerson Gallery. Alongside the title and the name of the gallery, the silver-colored cover shows the right-hand half of an untitled painting on paper from 1950. Unusually, this Pollock painting is made up of just a very few lines, elegantly distributed across the broad expanse of the paper like calligraphy. To obtain his copies of these black lines, Zimmermann used negative stencils, as described above, which he stuck to the canvas before pouring the epoxy resin into the open spaces. For the white lettering of the picture's title he used positive forms that blanked out the letters, leaving the first white layer of epoxy resin still visible.

For other book covers featuring complex dripped patterns, Zimmermann was unable to work with stencils, instead having to copy the technique and the specific picture directly: this was the case with *The Essential: Jackson Pollock* of 1999 (fig. p. ##), *Number 32* of 1997 (fig. p. ##) or *Pollock/Basel* of 1995 (fig. p. ##). But even the works produced using stencils are not exact copies, because in the paintings the monochrome surfaces of the book covers gain a painterly, slightly iridescent life of their own, which results from the pigments dissolved in the epoxy resin. But in the painting edition of 1999 the black pattern is actually a perfect copy of Pollock's lines. Here, dripping as the quintessence of spontaneous emotional expression is transposed into a literally stereotyped method of production. The picture is thus deliberately and demonstratively stripped of all the connotations of "Action Painting": immediacy, authenticity, heroism; the Pollock legend is brought down to earth. Additionally, abstraction is turned into a specific form of realism. In Zimmermann's picture Pollock's non-representational meshwork is depicted in a realistic reproduction. So the picture shows an abstract motif in a realistic manner. As actually opposing modalities, abstraction and realism form a surprising couple in this *Book Cover Painting*.

Excursion: Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Kippenberger

Jackson Pollock's pictures became a challenging and explicit point of reference for whole generations of subsequent artists including not just Peter Zimmermann but also Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Paul McCarthy, Martin Kippenberger, Louise Lawler, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Thomas Demand. I will use three selected examples to illustrate the differences between their artistic concepts and Zimmermann's.

As one of the major trailblazers of Pop Art, Robert Rauschenberg made a couple of gestural brushstrokes (complete with clearly visible drips) across a collage of calendar pages and reproduced photographs in his 1957 combine painting *Factum I* (fig. 3). In *Factum II* (fig. 4) he copied this picture so exactly that at first glance it is hardly possible to detect a difference. Here Rauschenberg deploys a certain amount of irony to demonstrate that the impression of authenticity and immediacy—as celebrated in the “Action Painting” of Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning—can certainly be faked. The two combine paintings convey with astounding simplicity the insight that the claim of the Abstract Expressionists to truth and originality possesses little credibility and can easily degenerate into nothing more than a cliché.

In the mid-1960s, when the Abstract Expressionists were more firmly entrenched than ever (despite the successes of the young Pop Artists), Roy Lichtenstein also turned his attention to gestural visual language, producing paintings like *White Brushstroke I* (fig. 5). In Lichtenstein’s picture the individual brushstroke of the Abstract Expressionists is isolated from its original context, monumentalized, and given clear contours, right down to the drips that made the painting seem so wild. Lichtenstein shows us the dynamic gesture as a mechanized and standardized form of expression of the kind used by comic strip artists. Where the abstract application of paint is itself abstracted, it appears not as an actual brushstroke but instead as the representation of one. That same artistic element that became the byword for spontaneous creative virtuosity in the reception of Abstract Expressionism congeals here as flat cliché. Lichtenstein makes fun of the Abstract Expressionists’ idea that the plain evidence of the artist’s hand in motion is enough to prove individual genius at work.

In 1993 Martin Kippenberger (fig. 6) presented a multiple stripped even more radically of every connotation of subjective creative power: *Poorly Topped Student Pizza, Pollocked* (fig. 7). A wooden relief in the form of a pizza is spattered in dripping technique with red and yellow paint to suggest a topping of tomato sauce and cheese. There are clear lines and drips of the kind we know from Jackson Pollock’s paintings on the light wood, into which slices of mushroom and salami are carved. The title shows Kippenberger’s intentions even more clearly than the work itself. The name “Pollock” appears in the form of a past participle (“Pollocked”) equating the artistic technique with the name and making dripping into a ploy, a cheap trick. The negative connotation of “Student Pizza” is amplified further by “Poorly Topped.” Connecting Jackson Pollock’s name with fast-food of the lowest quality reduces “Action Painting” to pizza topping. In his demonstrative disrespectfulness Kippenberger takes the sarcastic commentary still further by offering the edition in two additional modified forms. The painted relief was also sold in halves and quarters, so to speak catering to the reduced appetite of the small-time collector for whom a whole relief was either too much or too expensive.<sup>17</sup>

Peter Zimmermann's treatment of the artistic production and critical reception of Jackson Pollock is without the irony or sarcasm of Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, and Kippenberger. Zimmermann's take is more objective, analytical, and conceptual. Appropriating and transposing Pollock book covers into painting implies—to recapitulate the point—a questioning of the legibility of the image and the visibility of the letter, an artistic duality of abstraction and realism, a homage to Pollock and his reception in the sense of productively relating to a tradition, a contextualization of his own art through this process, and a critical but not ironic relativization of the historic concepts of immediacy, authenticity, and originality.

### Mediatization of Painting

More perhaps than any other artistic paradigm, abstraction is today compelled to tackle its own historicity if it is not to succumb to the danger of simply repeating previously developed positions. For most of the great questions of abstract art had already been formulated by the 1960s. Peter Zimmermann's *Book Cover Paintings*, to the extent that they depict art books and exhibition catalogues, follow the strategy of *contextualization* of art, whereby they reflect on the history and reception of abstract art. Alongside this consideration of context and its cultural defining power, the *mediatization* of painting using digitalized images plays a great role for Zimmermann in his artistic practice. Before looking more closely at Zimmermann's abstract *Blob Paintings* and the way he appropriates and processes images that are already present in the media, I would like to take a more general look at the meaning of and necessary conditions for the use of such a technique.

In the course of the advancing differentiation of artistic techniques and means of expression, the new media have achieved an ever growing general importance for painting since the 1980s. The rise of new image technologies based on digitalization wrought changes in the possibilities for artistic production. This applies not only to photography, film, video, and internet art, but also to the medium of painting. Of course an artist is not compelled to respond practically to these developments, he or she can also leave it at the level of critical theoretical reflection. Nor does a new means of production necessarily imply new or noteworthy content. So there are really no grounds for the levels of euphoria stoked by certain media theorists. That said, changed conditions of production can indeed lead to new visual concepts whose outcome can under certain conditions facilitate autonomous experiences of a sensual and intellectual type.

But how does mediatization or digitalized abstraction actually work in Zimmermann's *Blob Paintings*? Since the late 1990s Zimmermann has set up an enormous image archive on his computer, which serves him as a trove of inspiration for his abstract paintings. The archive contains all sorts of images that he found on the internet, as well as scanned visual material from

magazines, books, and catalogues, and also images of his own photographs and paintings. He selects images without any strict system or criteria that would be clearly recognizable to an outsider. The only decisive thing for him is the notion that by digitally manipulating a particular image it might be possible to develop a suitable composition for a painting. Zimmermann uses the popular image-editing software Adobe Photoshop to modify the images on the computer monitor with all sorts of filters, screening and blurring tools, and numerous other special effects. If he is pleased with the results of his digital image-editing the following process of purely mechanical transposition to the canvas takes place in the same way as for the *Book Cover Paintings*. The individual forms or areas of color are cut out of plastic sheet using a plotter, stuck to the canvas, and used as positive or negative stencils for applying the paint. For larger areas Zimmermann sometimes does without the stencils and applies the paint directly with a brush. The formats of the canvases are generally within the range 60 x 40 to 240 x 600 centimeters. The epoxy resin is colorless, gaining its desired shade only through the addition of pigments. Zimmermann lays the canvas down flat and pours the paint into or between the stencils that are glued to it, allows the resin to harden, and then removes the stencils, before moving on to repeat the process with new stencils and different colors.

#### *Blob Paintings* with Dot Structures

Although Zimmermann makes use of the many possibilities offered by the computer when editing his chosen images, this program-controlled electronic machine is only a preparatory instrument for him, a painter's aid. Even if the finished painting could not have been created in its specific form without the work on the computer, the result is not media art in the sense that photography, network art, film, and video art are, because the final production is done not by an apparatus, but by the hand of the artist, who applies the paints to the canvas one after another. To emphasize this is by no means to fetishize the artist subject, especially as the application of paint here is more of a technical nature, and the distribution of the epoxy resin (and with it the structure of the image) is based on the preordained concept of the stenciled forms. The decisive thing is that when the computer-generated digital image is transferred to the canvas, the artist's picture gains particular painterly qualities that a computer printout could not have: the objectified character of the physical picture, the relief-like, practically haptic surface of the superimposed layers of paint, the specific sheen of the epoxy resin, the considerable transparency of the layers of paint, and their clearly discernible successive application.

Four early and similar examples of abstract *Blob Paintings* made up of different combinations of primary and secondary colors in various ratios are *F-Raster* from 1999 (fig. p. ##), *T-Raster* and *OK-Raster* from 2000 (fig. pp. ## and ##), and *L-Raster* from 2001 (fig. p. ##). At first glance

the structures of the pictures seem like greatly enlarged details of an offset print, because the partly overlapping colored circles distributed across the surface look like the screened dots used in that industrial reproduction technique. In order to reproduce half-tone images such as photographs in a book or a magazine, the half-tones of the original have to be broken down into many tiny structures invisible to the naked eye. In other words, this pattern, which generally consists of uniform dots, is a technically necessary mediating device. Zimmermann did not in fact enlarge the photographic originals of these four paintings to the point where the dots became visible as the image-constituting elements. Instead he modified the images using the Photoshop “color halftone” pixellation filter, so the screening is actually his own. This is an artificial dot pattern that strongly abstracts the image and does not result from any dot structure that may have been present in the original image itself.

The dots or circles depicted in the four aforementioned paintings have been reshaped into more organic-like structures in *XXR* of 2000 (fig. p. ##). The amoebic, sometimes kidney-shaped forms are distributed evenly across the light-colored surface yet still manage to form, owing to their high degree of overlap, a complex irregular pattern. The painting *T. L.* (fig. p. ##) done in 2004, by contrast, displays a much more intricate structure, which appears at first glance—and in contrast to the dot pictures—very muddled and chaotic. Numerous blobs, especially red, yellow, blue, green, and black, are distributed across the canvas and directly “interwoven” like in a carpet. In this all-over structure all the paint blobs are distributed relatively evenly and unhierarchically, and would appear theoretically to continue beyond the boundaries of the painting. The attempt to take in *T. L.* visually is experienced as a manifestation of fullness that evades capture in words, as a kind of visual white noise. But if we look longer and closer a repeating rhythm reveals itself in the pictorial space: an orthogonal alignment of the blobs forms a basic vertical and horizontal structure. They appear to be organized in lines, whereby the most clearly discernible is a broad stripe running from top to bottom in the right-hand half of the picture. The apparent chaos turns out to be a perpendicular structure parallel to the edges of the picture that reveals itself only on the second glance, like a half-concealed weaving pattern.

### *Blob Paintings* with “Flowing” Forms

When we examine Zimmermann’s mediatization of painting and his digital processing of found images we find—alongside the examples mentioned so far—one type of painting in particular that has become firmly established in his oeuvre since 2000. These are *Blob Paintings* that exhibit clearly defined, transparent, organic-like shapes. In purely formal aesthetic terms they recall to some extent the psychedelic structures that appeared at the end of the 1960s, for example in the light shows of Mark Boyle and Joan Hills.<sup>18</sup> A picture like *slow motion* of 2001

(fig. p. ##)—in different shades of pale blue, green, yellow, red, and orange—evokes not the impression of a static composition but much more a slow flowing motion of the rounded color blobs. The softness and apparent changeableness of the blobs results above all from a digitally generated fuzziness in the photographic original. In the process of artistic transference to the canvas Zimmermann has placed ever smaller and ever darker blobs on top of the larger, paler ones. Like islands rising out of the sea surrounded by coral reefs and different depths of water, he has arranged the blobs in up to seven superimposed concentric layers. (This description is not intended to imply any specific natural association, but simply to explain the structure of the painting and its relief-like surface.)

In *slow motion* Zimmermann has applied the paint to a white-primed canvas, causing the surface to appear to possess an inner light. This is neither light from outside nor a brightness inherent to the paints; instead it comes “from within,” meaning that the white base appears like a counterpart to the luminous computer monitor and intensifies the intensity of the colors yet further.

Additionally, each color always has its own depth effect in relation to its background and its contrasting neighboring colors. Normally the warm and bright colors seem to come out toward the viewer while cold, dark colors recede. In some of Zimmermann’s *Blob Paintings* this color-spatial effect is reversed. In *slow motion* he has left the white base partially visible and thus integrated it in the structure of the picture. This means that the bright colors of the picture remain on the plane of the pale background, because they can stand out only weakly from the white. At the same time the darker tones—in line with the color theory of Johannes Itten—crowd optically to the fore, as if they were being repelled by the pale ground.<sup>19</sup> The haptic surface structure additionally reinforces this specific spatial effect of the colors because the overlaid blobs stand out from the white background not only optically but actually slightly three-dimensionally. Like in a relief they protrude into space. This effect is best seen when the picture is viewed obliquely from the side.

The painting *bag* of 2002 (fig. p. ##), which comprises overwhelmingly areas of dark gray and black, is a different matter. Seen from a distance, it is not the large dark areas but the smaller white ones that come out toward the viewer. The dark blobs of color are perceived as the background from which the light areas clearly stand out into the foreground. Interestingly, the physical structure of the work does not correspond to this perception of the colors. On the white surface of the picture Zimmermann applied first the light-colored blobs and then successively the dark ones. The darkest areas are consequently the top layers of the relief surface and closest to the viewer, in other words these are the ones that seem physically to come toward him or her. So seen from close up, the normal sequence of color perspective seems to be reversed and the

illusionary pictorial space eludes any attempt at visual comprehension. Seen from a distance, this effect reverses again.

### Abstraction and Representation

In almost all the *Blob Paintings* you believe at first that you have a visually autonomous self-referential construction before you that celebrates the liberation of color from all objective representation, in the tradition of abstract painting. But are these works really about displaying pure visuality in the sense of a complete negation of any mimetic or symbolic representative function? With Zimmermann abstraction certainly does not mean doing completely without the reproduction of an external reality. The starting point for his *Blob Paintings* is almost always photographic originals, which are then greatly abstracted by processes of digital manipulation before they are turned into paintings. The pictures almost never evoke the actual photographic object, but owing to their structure they always recall their medial precursor. This is what saves the pictures from degenerating into random and semantically empty decoration.

This phenomenon can be described even better using semiotic terminology. In the terms of Charles S. Peirce's general theory of signs, his "speculative grammar,"<sup>20</sup> Zimmermann's *Blob Paintings* are to be understood as both iconic and indexical signs. We speak of an icon when a sign has something qualitative (i.e. structural) in common with the object to which it refers. For example, according to Peirce, a photograph is an icon of the photographed object in the sense that it is precisely the relationship of the parts that makes it into an image of the object.<sup>21</sup>

Mimesis and imitation are typical iconic forms of representation, which generate a similarity to the original object. In Zimmermann's work, however, this similarity to the respective model is so abstract that the iconicity is for the viewer at best just visually perceptible but not verifiable. The titles of the pictures are of no assistance in this respect, because they either play on the original in a way that is not comprehensible or are oriented via free association toward the result. For all that though, image and model still do have something structural in common, however vague. It also seems important that the *Blob Paintings* can be interpreted as indexical signs, too. An index indicates the existence of the object simply by being there; so the picture is based on a cause and effect relationship. The abstract pictures also stand in an existential relationship of this kind to their models, for the paintings refer directly to the originals on which they were modeled, which must actually have existed or otherwise the paintings could not have been produced in this specific form. It follows that the pictures are certainly not beyond the realm of depictive or symbolic reference and representation. The works are abstract—or more precisely they demonstrate an extremely high degree of abstraction—but they are not utterly unrepresentational, because each remains tied to its respective original.

## Moments of Coincidence

The opposite of a *Blob Painting* would be a composition produced according to the general rules of design, in the sense of a picture constructed by the artist alone and aimed at achieving harmony. But the *Blob Paintings* always have something coincidental or random about them, of the kind that can be generated best of all through the abstractive powers of a computer program. If the artist digitally editing a photographic original successively applies pixellation, blurring, and other special effects, he knows on the basis of his experience how the image on the monitor will change. Nonetheless, the moment of coincidence remains relevant as a part of the artistic concept and production. This procedure also permits little imperfections and imbalances to occur in the process of image generation, intentionally contradicting traditional composition— take, for example, the color distribution in some of the pictures. If coincidence is deployed as a strategic tool in image generation, the artist is liberated from the necessity of a traditional composition and can allow something more or less unpredictable to arise, something that breaks through the bounds of his own expectations. And so it was absolutely no coincidence that Peter Zimmermann's 1998 exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein was called "Actually Everything Could Have Been Different."

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At the beginning I defined the general concept of artistic reflexivity as the capacity to critically contemplate the changing meaning of images, media, and forms of expression; as the ability to relate to the historical development of artistic paradigms; and thus as a chance to query the conditions of contemporary painting. Peter Zimmermann meets this challenge, which represents a fundamental precondition of today's art production, in a modern and sophisticated way. Through the *contextualization* of his painting—through the *Book Cover Paintings* after Pollock book cover designs—he pursues both painting about painting and a reflexive representation of the reception of painting. Art books as one important element of the intellectual and visual context of the art world here become the subject matter of his own paintings. Through *mediatization* of painting—the digital processing of found images in his *Blob Paintings*—Zimmermann has developed an independent and highly seductive form of abstraction. By using image-editing software he has done anything but plunge abstract painting into a crisis of legitimacy. On the contrary, he has constructively expanded the potential both of the traditional medium and of our own visual experience.

<sup>1</sup> Thierry de Duve, “A Century of Contemporary Painting. A conversation between Bernhard Mendes Bürgi and Thierry de Duve,” *Painting on the Move*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, and Kunsthalle Basel, Basle, 2002, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Meinhardt, “Malerei der Bildverweigerung,” *Still Mapping the Moon: Perspektiven zeitgenössischer Malerei*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Germer, “Rückblick nach vorn,” *Germeriana: Unveröffentlichte oder übersetzte Schriften von Stefan Germer zur zeitgenössischen und modernen Kunst (Jahresring, Jahrbuch für moderne Kunst*, vol. 46), ed. Julia Bernard (Cologne, 1999), p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 10 (summer 1967), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Peter Zimmermann, “Interview von Peter Weibel mit Peter Zimmermann,” *Peter Zimmermann (Artist in Residence, Bulletin 4)*, exh. cat. Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, 1996, n. p.

<sup>6</sup> On the terms “Kontext” and “Institutionskritik” see also Johannes Meinhardt’s contribution in *DuMonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Hubertus Butin (Cologne, 2002), pp. 126–30 and 141–44.

<sup>7</sup> On the reception of Abstract Expressionism see, for example, Peter J. Schneemann, *Von der Apologie zur Theoriebildung: Die Geschichtsschreibung des Abstrakten Expressionismus* (Berlin, 2003) and Roger M. Buergel and Stefanie-Vera Kockot (eds.), *Abstrakter Expressionismus: Konstruktionen ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Dresden, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Willem de Kooning, quoted from Rudi Blesh, *Modern Art U.S.A.: Men, Rebellion, Conquest, 1900–1956* (New York, 1956), pp. 253–54.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American action painters,” *Art News* 8 (December 1952), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Werner Haftmann, “Einführung,” *II. documenta '59: Kunst nach 1949*, vol. 1, exh. cat. Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Cologne, 1959, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> David Anfam, “Pollock als Zeichner: Linien des Geistes,” *No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock auf Papier*, exh. cat. Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2005, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, ed. Francis Valentine O’Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw (New Haven and London, 1978), vol. IV, D 113, p. 275 and D 72, p. 241.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, D 71, p. 241. Pollock did, however, relativize those statements: “I *can* control the flow of the paint; there is no accident” (D 100, p. 262).

<sup>14</sup> As a vocal proponent of a modernist understanding of art, Greenberg sees the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists as containing a formal aesthetic investigation of the media of art. For him the task and goal of art lies in an increasingly rigorous exploration of its own means,

whereby everything that appears less than befitting to the respective medium should be eliminated. Greenberg's imperatives are artistic self-reflection, the pictorial expansiveness of the image, and an autonomy located far from any social or political concerns. See, for example, Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vols. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (Chicago and London, 1986–1993); idem, *Die Essenz der Moderne: Ausgewählte Essays und Kritiken*, ed. Karlheinz Lüdeking (Dresden, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Leja, "Vorsätze zu einer Pollock-Monographie," *Texte zur Kunst* 4, no. 13 (March 1994), p. 37. See also idem, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Pepe Karmel, "Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth," in *Jackson Pollock*, exh. cat. Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, 1998, pp. 87–137.

<sup>17</sup> *Kippenberger: Multiples*, ed. Karola Grässlin, CR and exh. cat. Kunstverein Braunschweig and Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Cologne, 2003, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> The films *Beyond Image* and *Son of Beyond Image* produced in 1969 by Mark Boyle and Joan Hills show different-colored blobs of liquid separating from one another, whose rounded, viscous, convulsively moving forms were projected onto walls. Accompanied by music by the English group Soft Machine, these experimental light projections formed a psychedelic environment whose effect could be (and indeed was) heightened by taking drugs. The two films were shown in 2005 and 2006 at the Tate Liverpool, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, and the Kunsthalle Wien in the exhibition *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*. The eponymous exhibition catalogue (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2005), however, contains no stills.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Itten, *Kunst der Farbe: Subjektives Erleben und objektives Erkennen als Wege zur Kunst*, Ravensburg, 1987, pp. 77–78.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," *The Philosophy of Peirce, Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (London, 1950).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.