

## Forms in No-Form-System

The pieces of paper confronting viewers of the series *No-Form-System* are folded or torn. In some places the folds are sharp and precise; in others they reveal the destructive process behind their making which, thus magnified, acquires an extraordinary presence. The gaze can follow closely along the torn or folded edges and discern the porous fibres. In combination with their respective structures, the striped segments of different coloured pieces of paper make the surface dynamic, while typo- or pictographical fragments appear within the individual motifs. Here the gaze slows down of its own accord and is tempted to decipher the individual fragments – albeit in vain. Their information content remains encoded; the semantic allusions are cryptic and ultimately lead us nowhere. By contrast, the gaze speeds up in apprehending the works that consist entirely of colourful elements. It glides across the smooth surfaces, guided by the structure alone: in their acumination, the folds compel the gaze to move in a singular, generally vertical direction, or the pieces of paper are arranged centrally, converging like a strudel and absorbing our gaze. Yet whether it is sweeping or scrutinising, the dynamics of the gaze are determined by the properties of the material. For even if it bears text or images, the paper is integrated primarily on account of the formal quality of the material itself. What follows, then, is an enquiry into the relationship of *No-Form-System* to designed form, particularly with regard to the use of paper as material. And on another level the process of scanning, and hence the transfer of analogue material to the two-dimensional level of the picture, is given closer consideration. Yet let us first turn our attention to the relationship between design and form.

Looking closely at the folded pieces of paper which, in their arrangement upon a surface, each constitute a structure made dynamic in different ways, it might at first seem paradoxical to speak in terms of a system without form, a “no form system”. To the contrary, the paper works appear in every respect to have been composed in conscious adherence to aesthetic principles. On the one hand, the folds in the paper are mostly proportional, the paper being turned at regular intervals such that, within any one detail, the sections are in similar proportion to one another. On the other hand, the arrangement upon the picture plane, which clearly foregrounds the fragmentation of form, displays aspects indicative of deliberately composed areas. Aligned vertically or horizontally the pieces of paper sit partially on the surface like roof tiles, positioned at times centrally, and at times eccentrically. The rhythm given by the structure and colours is polyphonic, although it tends to be balanced and stable all the same. Hence, with all the designed components, which lend particular emphasis to the individual forms, the creative process must inevitably constitute our point of departure if we are to recognise this as a *No-Form-System*. Indeed, if we regard the *No-Form*, or non-form,

as a form emerging prior to its properties (a priori), then the initial contradiction might be considered resolved. The *No-Form-System* does not contest form *per se*, but rather forms whose inception is not based on properties inherent to their constituent materials. Cuts, tears and folds are all characteristics of paper which Peter K. Koch makes use of in *No-Form-System* thereby staging the material in its fleetingness, its flexibility, fragility and volume. At this point Robert Morris comes to mind, since his concept of Anti-Form has at least one point in common with *No Form*: it is not about the negation of form – even though both terms might seem to suggest so – but rather the emancipation of form from an overly controlled “will to form”, whereby form should to a large extent be given by the properties of the material itself.

If the development of form is to be guided by the characteristics of the material, the main concern must be the exploration of that material. Peter K. Koch more or less deliberately arranges the paper he has folded or torn on the glass plate of a scanner. This objective, and in part “scientific”, approach renders the exclusively subjective “will to form” obsolete. The declared aim is a work governed as much by the materials and their properties as by the artist’s own hand. Due to this attenuation of self-expression, the subject is not only partially superseded by the materials and their innate dynamics as the sole inspiration and cause behind the work, but is moreover deconstructed and at times even eliminated altogether. This phenomenon of absolute deconstruction of the artistic genius is an ongoing preoccupation and plays a role in certain aspects of Peter K. Koch’s work. Between American colour field painting, Pop Art and (Post-)Minimal art and their origins in the teachings of Josef Albers, a field opens up in which the works comprising the series *No-Form-System* can be located. What connects these art movements more than anything else is a preference for pure forms referring to nothing other than themselves – their self-referentiality, in other words. Here, it is irrelevant whether or not this insistence on abstraction in the two- and three-dimensional realms leads to ever purer and more mechanical forms. If the form only ever refers to itself and is freed of all semantic and subjective references, then the sensory, tactile qualities of materials or the rhythm of form and colour come to the fore, as do questions of space, light and the position of the viewer.

Considering the individual pictures in the series *No-Form-System* from this angle, the regular folds of the variously printed pieces of paper coupled with their positioning on the picture plane can be mentioned as a formal element. As a result of the folding, the two-dimensional gains volume and acquires a spatial presence. Although they are presumably almost visible in the original size of the scanned material, the bends and tears, the fissures and fleetingness stand out clearly in the final enlargement. Since they are only intended for scanning, the individual paper formations are short-lived. When, during the scanning

process, the light-sensitive sensors read the individual pieces of paper in order to digitalise them and to generate a sharp image, any disruption results in a minimal deviation, a shadow, a blurring. With such a sensitive procedure it would be almost impossible to create an identical reproduction of the arrangement in all its parts. The selection of the image is determined by the size of the glass plate and as with the photocopying process, light sensitivity is only marginally adjustable. Due to these technical constraints, the scan differs from a digital photograph whose focus, light intensity and frame can be varied at liberty. After the paper arrangements have been read by the scanner's sensors, they fall apart and are thrown away. As ephemeral as the creative process, then, is the material itself.

Paper sourcing from the print media has been used as material by many artists. Back in the early twentieth century, for example, Picasso and Braque used the diverse textures of paper as a compositional element. Not long afterwards, the Dadaists developed their own visual vocabulary by making newspaper clippings and scraps of paper clash and collide in their collages. And the *décollagistes* of the 1960s went on to plunder whole billboards in order to recombine the material in their immense torn pictures. Their artistic use of paper in pictures was preceded by the destruction of both the material and the context. As a result of the fragmentation, of this rough clash between incongruent elements, something new emerged by way of a de-composition: new formal structures and unexpected semantic combinations. The series *No-Form-System* stands in the tradition of this destructive approach to paper in which the destruction gives rise to new forms. But Peter K. Koch goes one step further since he does not integrate the paper in its literal form but rather as a picture. By arranging the print media paper for the brief moment it takes to scan it, he lends its fleetingness an enduring presence since it is only the image he produces that lasts. In order to substantiate the relationship between literal form (paper) and image (scan) in its uniqueness, it is worthwhile consulting Michael Fried (Minimal Art theorist) and his differentiation between *literal shape* and *depicted shape*.

Michael Fried defined the shifting relationship between colour, form and rhythm as an abstract vocabulary characteristic of the literalness of a given shape. The inner compositional structure which posits the individual components in harmony with one another – the internal relationality, in other words – is contrasted with unity, systematics and structure and quite often symmetry (as anti-composition). The series *No-Form-System* presents us with the principle of literal shape: the compression of the folded pieces of paper engenders a structure which, according to the work in question, makes the whole structure dynamic without actually composing it. As the counterpart to *literal shape* Fried introduced *depicted shape* as the pictured form of illusionistic presence. As the works of Peter K. Koch show us,

their relationship is not as dialectical as it might at first appear. The process runs in *No-Form-System* from the surface to volume and back to surface, such that the volume represented proves to be an illusion. In this way, what was previously “literal” now becomes hypothetical. The paper size and folds, the hard edges and opaque surfaces become an image of themselves and merely denote properties without possessing them. Yet even though the previously literal can become a picture as a result of having been scanned, it does not necessarily lose its literalness, since scanning, by its very nature, produces the closest possible correspondence to the original. The procedure is a purely mechanical one based on a causal relationship between the source image and its depiction. It is a process adhering to a logarithm which is a more or less predictable function. Dimensions, colour and scale correspond – with the exception of barely visible divergence losses in the digital scan process – to the source image, and there are no further connotative parts that could lead to a gradual deviation from the original. The depicted shapes refer to nothing other than their source and are thus as denotative as they are illusionistic. Here, literal and depicted shape fuse together such that shape as, and in turn with, illusion literally constitutes form and vice versa: “Not that literalness here is experienced as competing in any way with the illusionistic presence of the painting as a whole; on the contrary, one somehow constitutes the other. And in fact there is no distinction one can make between attending to the surface of the painting and to the illusion it generates: to be gripped by one is to be held, and moved, by the other.”<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> Michael Fried: “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons”, in: *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 77-99, here p. 79. First published as “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s New Paintings”, in: *Artforum*, vol. 3, 1966, pp. 18-27.