

Stefan Lenke

'...in this way he took the visible image and subsumed it in an invisible one... and in doing so he made the visible light of the image immediately evident as transcendent.'

On Philipp Otto Runge  
*Der kleine Morgen*, 1808<sup>i</sup>

'In *Third*, time no longer seems to run linearly. It becomes elliptical, as a reminder.'

Review in *Spex*, 2008<sup>ii</sup>

Often we lack a suitable vernacular to describe the subtleties of light and colour in painting. Perhaps this is due to the possibility that painting does not approach the sensibilities of the masses. To speak of light in modern paintings, when it is not even necessarily clear where light is, seems strange not just to the uninitiated; it actually leads to some more general problems. In other disciplines such as music, however, descriptions of analogous sensual or abstract experiences—whether aural, visual, or related to thought—are quite common and seem fitting enough to eliminate any possibility of being considered strange.

A look at history may help in understanding the hidden meanings of light in painting. As the art historian Wolfgang Schöne wrote in the introduction to his investigation of 'modern' painting, and the specifics of light within it, 'mankind is literally "limited" by his senses and his environment (which is limited in any case by its physical properties). ... Therefore, it is only in thought and visualisation that he can conceive of physically limited space as unlimited.' The attempt to behold space in this way, namely in the work of Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge, 'butted up against the limits of the senses, and demanded their transcendence. The same applies to the parallel attempt to behold the liberating light of unlimited cosmic space within the actual boundless range of light.'<sup>iii</sup> Light emerges, it would seem, not from a sacred connection, or even from an earthly source. Instead, it conceals itself more and more in colour itself, which is 'liberated' from any physical justification. We will no longer 'be aware of it as an actual factor'—it becomes invisible. In modern painting, light is only understood as a function of colour.<sup>iv</sup> Consequently, we observe experiments to unfold the light-related properties of colour in ever larger canvases, beginning with Matisse and leading to an artist such as Barnett Newman.

In early twenty-first-century painting we essentially search in vain for pure, pathos- or emotion-driven tones of colour or colour surfaces, used without a concept, an ulterior motive, or hidden under the veil of unrecognisability. In painting today, which we consider an expression of our times, we often find colour or colour tones formally or metaphorically recycled, sampled, broken, blurred, spoiled, covered up, or layered. The power and the poetry of colour and light in our modernity—however fractured this modernity may be—are indeed subject to a layering or hierarchy, or at least to an apparent requirement to comprehend them via reflection and reference. Colour elements used in printing are often tuned up in intensity, while white mixtures become a kind of justification for using colour. These practices should be questioned, since they represent not only a form of alienation, or an increase in artificiality, but also, in a more direct sense, a reflection of new visual experiences—namely those related to light. Can one compare, for example, the ‘colour of sound’ in contemporary electronic music with the colours of contemporary painting, which interrelate with new forms of light and image creation in our high-tech age?

A consideration of Stefan Lenke’s paintings leads us to new kinds of questions in this area of inquiry. Our starting point is a loosely constructed row of tightly grouped quadratic forms placed low in the picture, much as one might find in children’s drawings. They appear to wobble into each other quite easily when placed so close together. The static edges flash in wild orange, magenta, and yellow, or form narrow triangles between the imprecisely fixed quadratic fields. These wedges push into the narrow spaces between and seem to draw the basic body of the painting out of alignment. These tiny, coloured outbreaks are a provocation coming from within the blue-grey foundational colour tone. In reflection, Lenke has spoken of his paintings and aims in terms of provocative mistakes, interruptions, and disruptions.

The upper edge of the row of cubes composes a horizon line. Above it, a spatial depth appears to open up, in marked contrast to children’s drawings or naïve art. In its open span above the horizon, this space appears ready to be filled with romantic metaphor and longing. The grand blue-grey field has no border and is not forced into any shape. It was created in long strokes painted in both directions, parallel to the horizon line, and on top of the still-wet layers of paint below it. Bright zones (i.e., consisting of colours mixed with white) are smeared over previously painted vertical fields. These shapes become blurred when painted over. Traces of still-wet fields of colour, both the brightest and the darkest, appear in Lenke’s paintings. They are not

necessarily out of focus with photos that are reproduced by painting), or even a clever effect used to denote depth of focus. Instead, they come across as repeated light distortions and can be compared to sound textures that are woven together, as in electronic music collages, or acoustic effects with 'feather-light evanescence',<sup>v</sup> or even scratching.

Today, musical structures are created with layered tracks, chopped-up sound bites, synthetic or synchronised sounds, all of which differ substantially from the ideal of a traditional orchestral ensemble.<sup>vi</sup> The thought and the detail behind such structures is comparable to image editing. The playful interaction of sounds, or the concealed origin of individual sounds from the most varied sources, parallels the use of photos, film stills, and other second- or third-hand image sources in contemporary painting. The basic foundation of images produced in this manner is no longer clearly visible, even when the visible surface of the image is. Stefan Lenke's landscape constructions exhibit this veiling, which raises issues related to the recognisability and truth of images. The same applies to Uwe Kowski's colour layers, smeared with the palette knife, or most noticeably to Gerhard Richter's colour layers, stretched out on top of abstract beginnings.

In addition, Lenke's fascination with speed, and with the fusion of images and time, gives reason to compare his matte, silver-grey tones with the black-and-white of television or photographic images. We may also see contemporary visual experiences within his blurred and unfocused colour fields, or think of modern techniques of image editing or composition, including pixilated digital surfaces.

Yet these comparisons with technical artificiality also put the warmth and authenticity of painting in general, and of Stefan Lenke's work in particular, in clear relief. The calm, velvet depth of the pigment-rich paint, with its intense shine on the one hand, or its floating, dry colour layers on the other, illustrate palpably the intense work required in applying colour layers. It is easy to see a musical parallel in terminology such as a 'velvety lower range' or 'intensity'.

Along with the deep luminosity of the pigments, the appearance of underlying colour layers adds to the effect of a painting's aura. Elegant matte or shining blues remain in the viewer's mind as the dominant impression from Stefan Lenke's paintings, along with the cooler blue hints included in the base grey. The choice of blue as a dominant tone is certainly not by chance or mere preference. Rather, the colour blue possesses the most spatial depth, in marked contrast to white, which has none at all. Blue prevails in Lenke's colour mixes, is able to absorb a great deal

of light, and has 'at the same time this peaceful concentration that allows reflection' (Gerhard Andréas). Painting distant landscapes is only possible with cool blue tones; we think of 'blue mountains'. Whether blue in truth has become the 'colour of association with contemporary and future high-technology (e.g., high-tech advertising or science fiction)', as the artist Markus Ambach asserted in 1989, is a matter of subjective interpretation.

In contrast to the warm light of traditional light filaments and candles, today there is an unprecedented presence of monochromatic, cool-light colours, whether in neon tubes, halogen lights, television screens, or in the latest technological development, the blue LED. Painters, who are among the most sensitive observers of phenomena related to light, notice these changes and process them in their work—a development that goes far beyond the conventional difference between those who painted by daylight and those who painted by artificial light.

Returning to our consideration of *Tektonik*, we find the fragments of a structure, which is drawn out beneath the ethereal realm above, difficult to recognise at first. Beaming up from the horizon line, a yellow field pushes its way up to the centre of our attention, simultaneously breaking through from behind the bluish depth. In the midst of the mixed blue and cool grey, this warm yellow-green, light-filled zone is strange and perplexing. As we look more closely, we find underneath the white-blue veil a sub-surface that contains a drawing in all its fine detail. A column of cubes, built vertically, pushes from the left into the field of view, alongside a second, more pale column. The carefully constructed cubes, though they seem to be wilfully in motion, belong to a grid-like pattern, as we now can clearly see.

Both in this earlier image layer, and within individual cubes in the bottom-most row, we find dry paint, which proves to be the earliest colour layer, though it has evidently been partly removed. The resulting colour, which mixes itself in the viewer's gaze, emerges from the transparency of the uppermost layer (e.g., blue over pink at the bottom left), or from the mix of palette in other sections of the image. These are the results of moment-by-moment decisions while painting. The notion that this kind of process could be the result of calculated 'mental preparation' is effectively negated.

There is another distinguishing feature of Lenke's painting that reveals itself in his cubic or grid structures. His compositions are motivated by a set, minimal choice of the most simple geometric features: the cube and the (often equilateral) triangle, as well as fine-lined or, more

precisely, radiating structures. The latter suggests not merely a fragment-based construction of shapes, but also a search process, or one in which Lenke feels his way forward. It seems even to suggest a disinclination to the coarseness of using shapes or constructions that are too finished.

These three basic geometric elements or motifs are used in the manner of a musical canon. In many music forms such as jazz, minimalism, or improvisation, a small element that breaks forth from the prevailing norms can become a sensation, and can increase a work's emotional impact through the effect of slowing or deepening it. Similarly, a painter allows himself but a small formal vocabulary and can reach maximum impact via the interplay between the formal discipline and his pushing of its very boundaries—whether this interplay is in steady balance or whether norms are simply broken. It is only with close observation of the rules of play—as in many games and forms of sport—that the smallest infractions or changes seem to become what might be described as events. The cubes and triangles are serviceable forms that carry with them no narrative content. They are at first just empty material, which is filled with purely formal painterly intention until a valid state is reached.

Lenke's mostly painted-over, diffuse image layers create a tenuous world that is placed in doubt, and which seems to reflect the approximate or the relative in his thinking. These fragile and precious worlds tell of his desire to press up against boundaries, and of infinity and longing. This dimension is opposed at times by an almost oppressive, yet integral level of detail. A small edge peeps out or is built in, and its minute displacement of a quadratic shape can seem bold and unprecedented.

But the concept of a canon-like application of forms ends with Lenke's associative, descriptive landscapes. These include lights appearing over a city, or a blunt, impenetrable colour field, like a wall, which suggests something promising behind it. These landscape associations often appear in conjunction with atmospheric elements, such as shimmering light, fog, or mist. Yet such apparently recognisable natural phenomena, taken at face value, are not sufficient to explain his paintings. Rather, the actual optical phenomenon is more relevant: the appearance of air, which seems to change the visibility of, and distance to, the objects, and thereby their very recognisability.

Stefan Lenke's artistic beginnings were in the representational realm within landscape painting, among other areas. This is of interest inasmuch as they lay the groundwork for his liberation from the rules of spatial effect, or the perspectives of air and light. They are less effective in explaining his most recent work, which makes use of the landscape (or object) associations referred to above. 'Black is a place where something happens,' says the artist, demonstrating his exegetical approach, which does not rely on recognisable objects or on representation, but instead targets formality, reaching closer to the essence of what can be termed a kind of image creation.

Sequences of sounds, repeated in loops, create at first a monotonous noise structure. But in their continued repetition, an atmosphere arises in the rhythm—one could say even a lifestyle or a philosophy. Similarly, in layer after layer of the paintings, fleeting and inscrutable thoughts, experiential fragments, and interrupted pictures accumulate on top of one another. They become physical matter in these paintings, whether in thin slivers, transparent, hovering layers, or matte, heavy colour fields. The layering is most recognisable in the in-exactitude of its edges. Rows or layers of sound loops can reach a certain quality through editing the rush of sound, breaks or cuts, or changes in tempo. Disturbances in the sound, or traces of the production work, are not unwelcome—in fact they are often used as musical themes themselves.

In Lenke's paintings, the number or length of times he has approached and worked on a particular piece appears to be secondary. The borders of different layers, however, betray how many runs at the finished work were made, and how many layers have accumulated underneath. Accumulation also means growth, the emergence of substance. This repeated work results, in the best case, in intensity and repletion. Lenke's world of images oscillates between matte blue and silver-grey, with an emotional effect coming through taut white tones, shot through with shy, slender reds and oranges, or shrill yellow-green edges. The slight displacement of the edges, as well as the apparent movement of the cubes and, for that matter, of the whole canvas, all allow a window onto greater depth.

Viewing the paintings with the goal of writing about them in terms of conceptual categories actually distracts the viewer from what he or she sees. Reason quickly leaps from the act of perception into narrative or conceptual threads. One might contend that Stefan Lenke's paintings defy this kind of observation, and one might believe there is nothing more to say or think. Yet in the meantime, the images have already begun digging their direct path into one's

visual memory, working off of the experience of the senses, bypassing the laggard meanderings of the intellect. An indirect connection to the process behind the perception of music is also evident, while the visual process described is nonetheless directly tied to the paintings and the way they were created. In short, this process of perception illustrates the works' quality. The paintings simply do not allow for mental categorisations, or for thoughts or associations to become anchored. These paintings are of our time and therefore demonstrate our form of reaction. They also demonstrate their own power to slip directly into our consciousness.

– Birgit Dalbajewa

<sup>i</sup> Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, 8th ed. (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1994 [1954]), p. 218.

<sup>ii</sup> Max Dax and Ralf Krämer, 'Portishead. Das Schweigen der Gibbons', *Spex – Magazin für Popkultur* 314 (2008), p. 48

<sup>iii</sup> Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, p. 216

<sup>iv</sup> Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, p. 219

<sup>v</sup> Citation based on a review in an issue of *Groove – Elektronische Musik und Clubkultur* (2008).

<sup>vi</sup> These structures are mirrored not least in the computer-screen world of today's musicians and composers, which is characterised by volume levels, phase relationships, and frequency responses, etc.

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