

Critical positions

**ABSTRACTION,
CONCEPTUALISM,
APPROPRIATION**

**SEVEN PROPOSALS
FOR VISUAL READING
OF CONTEMPORARY
OSIJEK ART**

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On the exhibition "East of Eden", Museum of fine Arts, Osijek, 2022, curated by Valentina Radoš and Blaženka Perica; the concept of the exhibition by Vladimir Freljeh.

Observing the works of art selected for the exhibition *East of Eden* by the participating artists from their existing artistic production with the intention of providing the theme with a consistent visual and spatial identity, the first thing we will ask ourselves is what are the reasons for gathering exactly these works and artists at the exhibition under that name. If we consider the location of the event, *East* from the exhibition title is self-explanatory: what connects it all is the living and working space of these artists, the city of Osijek. Until recently, on the map of contemporary art events it was considered – if not “empty land” – then certainly a marginal environment in comparison to Zagreb, and in relation to which the art scenes in Rijeka or Split were also marginally positioned. With the founding of the Osijek Academy of Arts and Culture in 2004, things began to change radically in Eastern Croatia as far as contemporary art is concerned. The work of the Department of Visual and Media Arts at the same Academy has become not only an ever more present and visible but also an unavoidable factor within both Osijek and Croatian art today. This is largely due to the initiatives and activities of the participants in the exhibition *East of Eden*, most of whom have either been active at the same Academy since its establishment or soon afterwards became lecturers there, whereas some former students became teaching staff there in the meantime as well.

The changes and increased attention to events in contemporary art in Osijek are witnessed also by this exhibition, whose actors, but also many other artists and theorists unrepresented in the exhibition together with the Academy as a starting point for the new events have made Osijek art scene during the last decade recognizable beyond the borders of our country. Such an achievement in such a short period may perhaps be called a miracle rather than a sin, but sin is not only a crime, but also has to do with the strange, with disobedience, something unusual that goes beyond the predictable or an existing, given state. In support of the *skandalon*, the fact that it is indeed a “criminal form” here we speak in a creative, most positive sense, namely artists and artistic production that gave the label marginally in this area a whole new meaning – the meaning of advantage, independent artistic expression with emphasis on the awareness of place and time as a framework for an activity whose reputation, in its essence, rests more on sin and disrespect, rule breaking than on virtue, which is more rebellion than acceptance of the circumstances. Dissatisfaction and disobedience to the given, both the current geo-po-

litical and socio-cultural conditions, here, however, were not primarily expressed bitterly or aggressively, nor were they accompanied by any revolutionary manifestos, theses or frequent anarchic speeches, but the shifts and changes took place in discipline of conceptions and disciplinary concepts of work, with an awareness of the effects of that work on one's own as well as on the identity of the urban environment. The activities of public joint performances of most of the participants in the exhibition *East of Eden* within the POPUP group established in 2012 can also be described as such. At that time, activities in alternative, mostly emptied and abandoned spaces of Osijek, among other things, pointed to the acute demographic and social problems of this environment, which however did not go at the expense of creativity based on research processes that primarily answer the question of art "here and now". If this characterization to some extent evokes lettristic and situationist analyzes of society and urban everyday life, i.e. Debord's definition of the term psychogeography presented in 1955: "study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals", then this can be applied to Osijek artists in a quite altered meaning: their desire for change was not reflected in the desire for "complete dissolution of boundaries between art and life", as stated in the continuation of situationist demands but in the pursuit of articulation of separate boundaries of art within these domains. Likewise, according to the basic principles of the situationist theory of psychogeography, Osijek actors emphasize differences rather than overlaps: thus the term *derive* by no means implies "rapid passages through different environments" in the manner of *flaneur*; and from the method of *détournement* – even if the premise of "ludic-constructive behaviour"¹ is retained, it is with the broader meanings of this term – as "diversion, distortion, subversion" – with Osijek artists present in the aspects of socially conscious positions of art/artists towards society whereas also extremely non-narrative, controlled, ideologically and analytically based creativity is oriented primarily to the discourse of art itself. Speaking about the plans for this exhibition, which, like many other activities was postponed due to the pandemic last year, on the occasion

¹ On psychogeography and its basic starting points, cf. Dario Vuger, Psychogeography: A Situationist Position Against Psychoanalysis, at: www.coursehero.com/file/41249590/Introduction-to-philosophy-Psychogeography-situationist-position-docx/

of the opening of the Knifer Gallery in an interview artist Vladimir Frelj, the first gallery manager and one of the participants and initiators of the exhibition *East of Eden*, said that exactly these seven artists “in a way represent” and form a certain “cross-section, yet by no means a closed list of artists of the contemporary Osijek scene”, i.e. that the exhibition brings together those artists who point to the “Osijek artistic moment related to the issue of the”new image”, and which is according to him an attempt to “provoke the question of identity and different properties of Osijek artistic manuscripts”.²

Hence what could these “Osijek manuscripts” stand for, that “script” which, in the meantime, out of isolation, from the position of marginal and secondary “remark”, predominantly articulates the specifics of the potential of the scene in Knifer’s hometown? This question is especially important if for each of the artists represented at the exhibition *East of Eden*, we can first of all state that the works shown – neither the individual ones nor the oeuvres of individual artists – are subject to subsumption under unambiguous definitions of e.g. individual media, which is why – as for the works of most artists today – we are talking about multi- and intermedia achievements, installations, objects, interventions, ambiances, interdisciplinary and performative approaches. In other words, we are talking about achievements whose primary definition is in their ideological origin and more permanent action, in the intention expressed as a longer-term (which does not mean immutable) conception and concept that is visualized, learned experientially or read in uniquely materialized phenomena (not always necessarily finished, completed artifacts), and not through a media or thematic framework or some prominent narrative that would e.g. be desirable in postmodernist citation in the wake of preferences accentuated either by historical or recent political or cultural themes. In relation to the events on the Zagreb art scene in the 2010s, where the rather subjectively colored so-called “new realism” was favored – painting by photo and media templates with personal intonations; or in relation to the Split scene, which also links the expanded field of painting to the “hybridity of the work”, i.e. the inclusion of objects, sculptures and installations, and performance, but with a more noticeable interest in some socio-ecological problems,

2 Vladimir Frelj, in conversation with Ivana Đerd – Dunderović, for *Vizkultura*, 15 October 2020.

or global, recently discussed artistic themes, in the artistic situation of Osijek the image has been envisaged as being determined in concepts outside of painting, that is the interest in painting was here accompanied by highly procedural and analytical research (of procedures, means and values) of the painting medium itself in processes joined by other, technological media both as part of the process and as tools, resulting in a single metamateriality and metamedia aesthetics of the art of the participants in the exhibition *East of Eden*. The exhibits for the exhibition *East of Eden* – from artist to artist, from work to work – point as much to themselves as they do to the relations to other works (of the same or other artist/s). This additionally emphasizes the referential features of these works that are already problematically present in the individual structures of the realization at the exhibition, which refers us to careful observation. Thus, with one and the same artist, we come across separate works such as painting on canvas next to photographs and/or TV performance; with the others, objects on the wall or in the space next to the monochrome prints that we find in a different medium or way of creation of other artists; word paintings as well as ambient drawings transposed into photo or video media, along with computer simulations, interventions and installations... Paradoxically, all this does not diminish the ultimate clarity of the presented artifacts, which with the mentioned metamedia aesthetics, in a changed meaning, evokes the notion of “pure visibility”³ – the phrase with which the theorist Konrad Fiedler emphatically advocated art as the production of visions and the need to see reality and nature through the eyes of art, and not in reverse, with the hitherto ingrained mimetic, imitative relation of art to reality.

The production of the identity of a work in the age of conceptualism

Although the first impressions while reviewing individual works lead us to think of abstraction as the dominant expression, we must consider the fact that in a more precise observation this abstraction turns out to be the result of a very close relationship with the reality of the source factors as well as the fact that there are also those works that include

3 Konrad Fiedler 's text “Über die Beurteilung von Werken der bildenden Kunst” was first published in 1876.

the ability to instantly identify displayed content, figures/objects of reality, or literal readability when artists use words/text as material for their images.

As can be inferred from these words, the established terminology helps little in trying to interpret the contemporary state of art in general, so each term used requires additional clarifications: abstraction, conceptualism, appropriation, (non)referentiality would be key terms in describing analytical, logical, and the transformational and translocation procedures that mark the works of the exhibition *East of Eden*. However, none of these terms comes alone, individually defined in practice, but is always differently related to some other medium, process, means or surface.

When it is said that neither the work of Osijek artists presented at the exhibition *East of Eden* is strictly determined by the media – we have uttered only the well-known motto which has been in “use”, with the obligatory addition of “hybrid works” and/or “installations” – since 1960s at the latest, when Minimal art of New York provenance with its *specific objects* both declaratively and in practice opposed the dogma of “media purity” by which Clement Greenberg marked the dominance of art, especially painting, abstract American expressionism and high modernist aesthetics of productive self-criticism and theory prone to final interpretations. In the Minimalist manner, what continued in artistic practice was the rhetoric of the negation of Greenberg’s demands or the emergence of conceptual art, yet instead of realizing the promise of resolving art in language, by identifying art with its concept and definition, and against materiality, visuality and performance – a tautological version was achieved. ie. the fulfillment of Greenberg’s ideas of the autonomy of art as is evident from the example of the work of one of the founders of conceptual art, Joseph Kosuth. The meaning of abstraction today, even for most of the works shown in the exhibition *East of Eden*, is not and cannot of course be the same as it was in the time of Greenberg’s self-referentiality or Kosuth’s tautology and even less as in the time of pioneer advocates of non-referentiality as understood by Kandinsky in one way, and Maljevic in another: reduction, “cleansing” of works from non-artistic, i.e. real world content on the one hand or the establishment of ideal/ideological content of art on the other, and in both cases based on formal features of the work. The referentiality of abstraction will be discussed later, but it should be mentioned

already at this point that in recent theory there are also collections on the “iconology of abstraction”⁴

Today, in the era of the pictorial turn, no one doubts (or at least shouldn't!) in the cognitive potential of art, so – if we find that the works from the exhibition *East of Eden* belong to the sphere of postconceptual or conceptualized art – we still haven't said much more than the generally accepted thesis on recent art according to the slogan: “all art after conceptual art is conceptual”. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore that the Osijek art scene is really defined by distinctly conceptualized features. The problem arises where ideological foundations are decomposed/deconstructed with surgical precision in selected foci of the process of artistic production and/or materialization, and analytical approaches tend to provocatively expand traditional definitions of media and visual sphere, an expansion that consciously, both subversively and constitutively, involves theoretical strongholds. Disagreements over the exact definition of conceptual art, no matter how much it invoked internationalism in its initial events, today mostly arise over the inclusion of territorially and regionally dispersed, in the 1960s and 1970s non-established phenomena marked by conceptual art features initially associated with New York and London. This is evidenced by a number of events and publications from the early 2000s that emphasize the socio-geographical conditions of conceptual developments in environments with significantly different economic and political structures (South America, Russia, Canada, Japan and Eastern Europe in a very distinct form) insisting on the specifics of those “peripheral” phenomena. Finally, after the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1999, according to Terrya Smith,⁵ it turned out that initiatives in these areas were often more innovative and radical than the ones in the then artistically dominant environments because they emphasized ideology more as performativity, and encouraged the introduction of (then new) technical media. In addition, these initiatives outside the mainstream of the conceptual were primarily more socially and politically sensitive/engaged than the initial ones, which compose all those features that are far more valuable reference points for the events of today's art. Between

⁴ It is specifically a collection of texts *Iconology of Abstraction. Non-figurative Images and the Modern World* edited by Krešimir Purgar (Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Terry Smith, *One and Three Ideas, Conceptualism Before, During, and After Conceptual Art*, New York, *Journal* #29, November 2011.

those who expand the notion of conceptual art to the limits where the concept itself loses its meaning and those who confine it to the narrowest, historically surpassed moment that referred to “pure” conceptual art as a movement whose limits were advocated by one of its loudest originators Joseph Kosuth – there is still a whole spectrum of artistic phenomena that basically have the same *concept* that was important to the founders of conceptual art: questioning the idea of art as the basis of its practice. According to Terry Smith, in the late 1960s, artists were aware of the dangers of various “isms” and avoided the term “conceptualism”, but were happy to use the adjective “conceptual” in their work. Today, the situation is somewhat reversed: the term “conceptualisms” from a historical perspective becomes much more acceptable than the often unjustifiably used – more phrases, but the label – “post-conceptual art”, as the primacy of mental and formal does not differ from, for example, intuitive approach to art.

“Osijek manuscripts” are not conceptualism in the sense of stylistic definition of a group in the problem framework of a new image, but what constitutes that manuscript has acquired the role of *stylus* (a writing utensil) – an individual means of expression that changes in the process of creation and transforms collective reception of meaning, yet not the meaning itself: the thing is not only in appearance, but in the way it appears.⁶ If in the first two instances of conceptual practice concentrated on researching the status of the perceiving subject and perceived object in managing the minimum and/or maximum conditions of their thinkability and feasibility, then these factors in a third instance, according to Terry Smith – began to be considered problematically within the framework of (social, linguistic, cultural, political) pragmatic conditions of communication and modes of action. Osijek artists do not fit into the usual story according to which today anyone who has any idea of work creates in a conceptual manner, and it is at the exhibition *East of Eden* that the degree of reflexivity of their intentions is evident as well as the awareness with which they approach their own medium. The specificity of their conceptual approach seems to lie in re-examining those “minimum and/or maximum conditions of thinkability and realizability of the image/work” in the recent production and communication of the contemporary art situation.

⁶ Appearance and appearing are key concepts that Martin Seel carefully differentiates in his book *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (2007, *Aesthetics of Appearance*).



Fig. 1. Zlatko Kozina, *Serra in Slavonia*, 2018, 60 x 60 cm, acrylic, collage on wood

Appropriations as interpretations: referentiality and meta-painting

How, then, to characterize the “issue of the new image” in the encounter with the works at the exhibition *East of Eden*? First of all – what we see here as images are new artifacts, but the problematics, if we believe the first impressions when examining these works – has long been recognizable: most of these individual works do not refer to something beyond themselves and we will easily recognize that it is mostly about abstraction or non-referential artefacts. This should, without much hesitation, point to the now slightly more than the century-long history of abstract art and to some of the premises on which that history began. In layman’s terms, it was about the images no longer representing “nothing”, at least not what was expected to be recognized as part of the visual reality

around us: a house, a landscape, a home or war scene, some nudes or figures surrounded by haloes.

However, everything we know about non-referential art is not a sufficient reason to talk about the works of this exhibition in the context of non-referentiality, just as referentiality in the conventional sense is not the right expression if the paintings of e.g. **Zlatko Kozina** are in truth about the reference recognition as it is not the recognition of figures and/or objects that we at present visually identify in the first place, but the “verification” of adequate knowledge, information (visual and textual) stored in that part of our memory that concerns cultural discourse, unfolding in front of us, both in image and word/text, a pictorial compendium of historical and artistic reminders – from Picasso and Duchamp, Paul McCarthy and Franz West, through Malevich to Donald Judd, Richard Serra (Fig. 1) and many others...

In the encounter with individual images of small dimensions, or with their various groupings, which Kozina, according to the mood he is in, the exhibiting intention and conditions, varies as wall formations, by which also presentations develop into completely new visual expressions, expressions of invisibly networked links and dividers – we are confronted with the contents that motivate our memory, make present the awareness of the existence of the known (but also unknown/unrecognized) fragments of collective cultural memory that the artist had in mind while creating them.

In addition to motifs, Kozina activates memory using also other appearance features: there is a way of working, ductus, palette, a quote by an artist written over the painted background of the work that is associated with another author or theorist, and sometimes the artist himself; the terms and/or titles of works that follow or are exactly the opposite of what is presented, and which often leads, as the artist himself emphasizes, to paradoxical situations and humor as an important moment of this painting. It is not surprising that the question “Bad painting?” refers to the meta-image,⁷ to the slightly, “messy” painted (*bad painting* as a canon of modern painting!) red background and the answer: “No. It’s Bad conceptual art”. The print “Licence to Paint”, or “politically incor-

⁷ On the notion of meta-image cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago University Press, 1994, or: *ibid*, *Metaimages*, in: K. Purgar (Ed.), *Visual Studies. Art and media in the era of pictorial turn*, cvs, Zagreb, 2009, pp. 24-57.

rect image” (entitled, by the way, *Entartete Kunst*) has a similar information density and pictorial value as the name of the *Art now* magazine in the picture that corresponds to its cover, so that the meanings/previous knowledge that is to accompany this kind of work is only up to the viewer. Referentiality is conceptualized as much as non-referentiality, not only metaphorically or ironically as Kozina’s work comments, but also literally as a consequence of the superior involvement of theoretical knowledge in the core of the work. Correspondingly, the notion of appropriation is also displaced. Although the artist states that he “directly or indirectly deals with the world of art and the appropriation of artistic intentions as material facts” – more precisely his paintings are only conditionally appropriations, or rather: appropriations as interpretations because what we have here is not adequacy in taking over other artists’ works or motifs (such as in the work of Elaine Sturtevant), but rather an intellectually based, non-personal strategy of meta-painting – paintings that speak about themselves or other paintings/works of art, thinking in images, pictorial interpretations of accumulated personal and/or collective knowledge/memory arising from which is, inherent in the discourse of art, referentiality – as a concept, which could be referred to as redefining self-referentiality, only here it is deprived of self-sufficiency essential for the discovery of abstraction, i.e. contrary to the demands modernist autonomy.

The art of appropriation with pioneering works (Sherrie Levine; Elaine Sturtevant; Richard Prince; Phillip Taaffe, etc.) in the early 1980s was defined as the “conscious use of works or fragments of works by other artists from other epochs or their own time with the intention of creating a new work”, which was presupposed by the experiences of conceptual and so-called art of Institutional Critique, as well as semiotic and structuralist approaches to theory dominant at the same time.

If such a determination were quite applicable in the described paintings of Zlatko Kozina, we would then really see precisely taken motifs as they are exactly present in the works of the authors referred to by Kozina. If this is not the case – then the blue color in the exhibits of **Domagoj Sušac** can certainly be identified as International-Klein-Blue (IKB), an azure blue color that Yves Klein “created” and registered in 1960. With his work *Monochrome 69* (1959-1976-2019; offset printing on paper, 41.5 x 28.5 cm) we can undoubtedly determine Sušac’s conscious intention to apply the method of appropriation – but not of Klein’s work but his

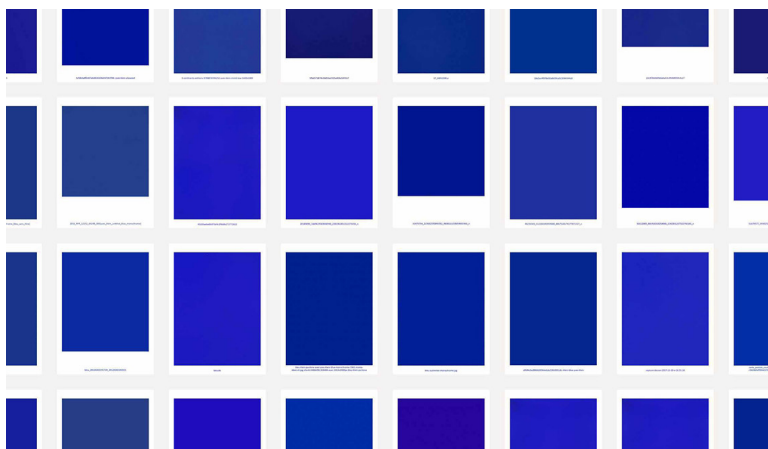


Fig. 2. Domagoj Sušac, *Post Festum*, 2008-2019, 210 x 430 cm; polyptych, c-print on paper, detail

reproduction, or more precisely in the words of the artist himself, it is: “actually a framed book sheet, a page from a book – a reproduction of Yves Klein’s work from 1959. The page number of the book (69) is also visible on the page, which determined the artwork title. The year of creation of the work is also an integral part of the title of the work. Three determinate years are listed: 1959 as the year of creation of the original work, 1976 as the year of publication of the book and, finally, 2019 the year of “appropriation”. These facts would almost be too extensive with the first but insufficient with the later appropriations that Sherrie Levine carried out in a spectacularly simple manner at the beginning of her artistic career by photographing reproductions of “original” photographs from the catalogue of famous artists-photographers, inscribing on the exhibition labels next to the work her own name i.e. subverting that institutional convention that “guarantees” originality and authorship. Unlike Levine, who in later appropriations wrote longer lists of data on labels to ensure her original authorship (and minimized subversion), Sušac underlines on the label, which he considers to also be a part of his work, the obvious authorship of another artist as well as the medium and method used by the artist and thus shows the “deviation from the norm”, as the procedure of appropriation has become in the meantime. With his approach, Sušac “reveals” appropriation as an accessible tool of the media and photoshop age, but on the other hand affirms it as a less

trendy, more convincing *homage* to the neo-Dadaist artist and restores the re-presentative potential of IKB, that is, he dissolves the convention of monochrome, and ultimately forms the reference point of the discourse of abstraction. With his work *Post Festum* (2008-2019) (Fig. 2), composed of 84 framed digital prints of “identical” IKB i.e. the work by Yves Klein entitled *IKB* taken from various Internet and media sources which have been “merged into an ensemble of repetitive images without subsequent correction of reproductions”, Sušac confirms this potential of transformation not by proving that even by technical repetition it is not actually possible to obtain an identical color imprint, but by demonstrating that precisely because of this impossibility both appropriation and repetition in the metamedia age prove to be creative procedures.⁸ Without losing sight of the fact that with his azure blue Klein referred to the “materialization of the infinite” or immaterial – Sušac uses Klein’s blue in the construction of two-wall and one-floor object whose material objectivity primarily emphasizes the optical effect, which is especially noticeable in the work *Image Sign* (2019, aluminum sheet, steel, foil) since it is a reflective IKB surface of a signal sign. Reflection includes the surrounding spatial context, while already the titles of the objects *Self-Meter* and *Self-Adjustment* emphasize the relationship with the author, with the subject that – as absence – appears once as an “abandoned”, amorphous and undefined object created by folding a rigid blue paper that “unadjustedly” hangs exposed on the wall, and other times, equally “anonymized” lying on the floor. Or in artist’s words “on IKB paper a ruler or scale division in centimeters is digitally printed, whereupon using the same paper the non-existent (phantom) ruler is self-wrapped and then unwrapped as the final form of the work. Why the ruler with the “space” dimension of blue? Perhaps because of the fine dose of humor for which the objects – “sculptures in the extended field” – by Domagoj Sušac are otherwise known, created by distorting everyday objects (size deformation, elongation, etc.).

8 Quite a similar result as this work in progress by Domagoj Sušac created by selecting, downloading and collecting prints of different reproductions of the same Klein monochrome/color as it is present in the media form on the Internet can also be found with Vladimir Freljih, yet without the method of appropriation: the starting point of an as well multi-year project, however, is in the photograph of one particular red color – Kat. No. 13041664 (work started in 2005), whose nuance differentiations are caused by printing machines of different capacities for 33.5 x 40.5 cm photographs.

The ruler has been a commonly present “motif” at Sušac’s exhibitions: This practical measuring instrument as a “Ruler” can be made in the form of a crumpled thin plate of lead, or in white forming shadow between two white canvases, and in the work *Rented space* (exhibition *Objects* at the V. Buzančić Gallery, Zagreb, 2017) it can close an angular void that, thanks to the manipulation of light, creates deep shadows and becomes the illusion of the measured space. Using tools and similar apparatus Sušac comments on (in)purposefulness. According to Dario Grgić, the curator of the exhibition in question, “they ‘act’ as real painting accessories – it is a self-portrait without the self-portrayed, a pure waiting for action, a suspension of the act of creation.” Is the method of appropriation for Sušac really just an indication of such a suspension, of the pure potentiality of all elements due to disbelief in the effectiveness of this method, so the application of IKB is actually a “horizon of the future time and is ready for a new beginning.” Of what? The “Self” from the title of some works, in the age of selfies?

In monochromes, the tradition of finality and infinity of painting is encountered. Rodchenko’s triptych with primary colors from 1921, the first three monochromes of avant-garde art (also the last paintings of this artist), did not mean the end of the representational as well as of painting in general, as this prominent Russian constructivist claimed, but used monochromes to demonstrate the “conventionality of painting by which it could be ultimately defined/limited to basic colors”,⁹ which of course were not depleted but only opened up possibilities of monochrome painting in art research, which is why Klein could, three decades later, expand/transcend the idea of monochrome by creating the IKB concept, color/blue “without dimensions”, which is “invisible that becomes visible”, and his paintings “emphatically physical objects – unmodulated, intensely saturated ultramarine fields of velvety pigment” which for Klein, who considered himself a “painter of the universe”, were the way to the idea of immaterial, into a great void.

Historicization of the phenomenon of abstraction points to the conclusion that the revolutionary radical negation – the attempt to always re-create the last image so that Johannes Meinhardt¹⁰ argued that the history

⁹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England, 1996, p. 17, 236.

¹⁰ Johannes Meinhardt, *Ende der Malerei und Malerei nach dem Ende der Malerei*, Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997; introduction.

of modernist painting played out as the history of last images – was succeeded by, at the latest with the emergence of Postmodernism, the opposite principle of action: if modernist painting was in the sign of reduction, extraction until disappearance and dematerialization, i.e. replaced by the idea/language in the conceptual, then the continuation, whose processes we are witnessing today – meant painting as expanding the boundaries of that medium into image as a result of either media expansion or redefining the concepts of pictorial and painterly in conjunction with language, and/or space. It is precisely the spatializations of image that characterize the works of Josip Kaniža and Miran Blažek, while the visualization of words/text is the domain of painting/image by Ana Petrović.

The imagery of words

The use of language or the painting of words and letters is typical of **Ana Petrović's** painting/images but in a completely different role than in Zlatko Kozina's paintings. *Pay to touch this painting* is a series of paintings created in 2015, and a continuation of the series from 2010 speaking in favor of a very present custom of Osijek artists represented at the exhibition, which is to temporalize their themes, i.e. to deal with a specific *concept* in a nonlinear sequence over time. Whether painted with acrylic, from a frontal or lateral, slant angle, these paintings, just like those whose surfaces and letter shapes are made of unconventional material (metal particles, sequins for canvas decoration), on which we read words like *Broken* or *Shattered* (both from 2017) are targeted semantic mimesis. These images are characterized by a certain correct distortion, compression or stretching of letters/words vertically and/or horizontally, so that we get the impression of tightness or flexible width of the painted surface format. The words in the paintings are in a state similar to the anamorphosis in Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533), a painting full of hidden messages and mysterious encryption, dangerous meanings, stories of power and schism told in banal motifs. Words like *pure* or *pay* are just a different – textual – way for Ana Petrović to stage a seemingly banal thing, which in the sentences she writes on the glass facades of art institutions (gallery in Osijek; high school in Ulm or building in Timisoara) that call for breaking turns into a purely visualized, even carefully designed message that is too aestheticized to be truly

politically “engaged” to imply truly destructive action. With such works, Petrović also realizes the presentation form of images as interventions in space, or the form of an ambient painting as in the case when multi-colored adhesive tapes (sellotape, insulating tape, crepe paper tape) were collaged on the floor of the gallery entrance on the occasion of the exhibition *Shudder* (work *Non-Red Carpet*, 2015). This speaks of Ana Petrović’s tendency to expand her pictorial and textual expressions to adaptable formats *in situ/site specific works*, while the contents/meanings of some of the imperative prints appeal more to the awareness of action/situation limits than to agitate for real interventions in social corpus of art, namely on rebelling against the distribution of power in the system of institutional structure of art, against the division into favored and systematically neglected in the hierarchy of value criteria, ways of forming market prices, work distribution networks, etc. determined by capital. “Ana Petrović’s staged statements lead us to painting in which the idea is and remains the starting point, but also the end point”, Igor Loinjak will establish on the occasion of the series *Pay to Touch this Painting*. In line with this, it should be added that this conceptualized painting has equal contacts with pop-art aesthetics in the way described by Ian Burn in 1972, saying that Kosuth’s paintings from the series *Art-as-Idea as Idea* would have been declared objects of Pop Art if they had been made a few years earlier, but as they had been exhibited in 1967, they became paradigmatic cases of “strict forms of conceptual art”.¹¹ In the obvious conceptual basis of Ana Petrović’s painting, such linear-historical – stylistic – determinants of art are inscribed and restored, but no less is the artist’s desire to step out of them: between the changing dimensions of works and imperative statements/instructions for aggressive action, or big words in “limited”, “too small” formats of the stretched canvas in Ana Petrović’s paintings often vibrate with fluorescent-bright pop colorism, which is not without reason more reminiscent of, for example, Robert Indiana’s painting *Demuth’s Figure Five in Gold* (1963, according to R. Demuth’s *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold*, 1928) or a similar “borderline” case such as Ed Ruscha’s *Word Paintings*, and even his monumental print of *Hollywood* (and exactly Ruscha painted the sentence *Pay Nothing Until April* in 2003, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches), than of Kosuth’s

¹¹ Information taken from Terry Smith’s text, *One and Three Ideas, Conceptualism Before, During, and After Conceptual Art*, New York, Journal # 29, November 2011.



Fig. 3. Ana Petrović, *Receipt J8/2W* (Tirana, Albania), 2020, 120 x 100 cm, acrylic on canvas

black plates with graphically shaped white letters/texts with terms taken from the dictionary, or of Weiner's elegant, moderately painted ambiences with word paintings. On the other hand, black-and-white images of enlarged prints of *Receipts* (Fig. 3) supplemented by numeration – “documentary images” of various places, years, purchased items – Petrovic also inevitably associates some conceptual works whose contents are reduced to scanty prints of information on materials, formats and similar specific technical data of a (non-existent) image (e.g. Mel Ramsden, *100% Abstract*, 1968). However, her paintings here are also mimetic

in the style of Pop Art, enlarged as comic book scenes of Lichtenstein, and unlike these non-subjective images with motifs of popular culture – sparse contents of *Receipts* (2012, 2013, 2014) also provide some information from the artist's biography. Their starting point is the real world of the artist who very well balances between *painting*, *picture* and *image*.

Image-space and image-time

Willem Flusser bases his anthropological theory of image on the belief that a specific human activity is not speech but the ability of man to produce images and that at the root of communication is primarily the image, not speech/language.¹² The state in which a person transfers an object or being (e.g. a pony) from the environment to an image in the first instance means “deviating from the object of painting”, “retreating into oneself”, which Flusser refers to as Flusser “stepping into the strange non-place from which man makes images,” which, according to this theorist, is traditionally known as subjectivity or existence”.¹³ Therefore, the power of imagination is the unique ability of man to withdraw from the subject world into his subjectivity, which, I believe, has largely determined the work of the mentioned artists Zlatko Kozina, Ana Petrović and Domagoj Sušac. Such a distance from the world can be achieved once again, yet inversely, by reversing vectors of intentions – namely “byentering the object of painting”. By stepping out of the “strange non-place”, from the inner space of consciousness and imagination, the authorial subject can “paint” with bodily action, appropriate real space/its parameters in order to indicate the (ir)reversible power of performance, transformation potentials, and re-materializing the existing concrete state create new materialized – pictorial – interspace.¹⁴ And thus also produce a part of one's own identity and existence.

12 Willem Flusser, *Eine neue Einbildungskraft*, in: Gottfried Boehm (Hrsg.), *Bildlichkeit, Internationale Beiträge zur Poetik*, Frankfurt a. M., 1990, pp. 115-126; quoted here according to: Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 2014, pp. 20-21.

13 Ibid.

14 Davide Del Sasso, *Exploring Conceptual Art*, wrote about the idea of conceptual art as materialization of dematerialized in the direction of meta-materiality, meta-art, or conceptualism as a “new model of materialization” that presupposes abandoning dematerialistic utopia in favor of ordinary, everyday reality. in: “Realism and Anti-Realism: New Perspectives”, Leonardo Callo, Sarah de Sanctis and Vincenzo Santarcangelo (Eds.); special issue,

Real space as the starting point of painting activity opens a phenomenological, experiential horizon of the creation of the work and its reception, which means that the designation of the image as an iconic difference, “the totality of the plain surface” that excludes all externally painted surfaces as stated in the definition of the painting according to Gottfried Boehm,¹⁵ is displaced to the other, today a common form of perception: immersion, bodily immersion within the boundary spatial parameters of the work.¹⁶ If we face the strategies of **Josip Kaniža**, his frottages used for translating the structures/textures of the surfaces of architectural elements of very real, living spaces – e.g. the hallway of the Fine Arts building at the Academy of Arts in Osijek where he realized the series *Copy/Paste* (2012) on A4 paper with graphite pencil (6B) immediately after graduation – we will encounter an unusual mimetic approach: graphite pressures over paper applied on wall surfaces have the character of a print/trace the same as photography, except that the index character of the technical medium presupposes digital or chemical recording of light effects on luminousensitive background (hence: photography), while Kaniža’s trace record creations are manual and direct. More real/physical or more authentic, therefore, than the most realistic scene possible in the technical medium of the transmission of visual properties of reality. Kaniža transfers the real, material foundations of

Philosophical Readings, Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 2014; pp. 101-114), which was reported by Ivana Bago when writing about art in Zagreb from 1961 to 1986, with conceptual art or conceptualism being the starting notion. Cf. “Something to think about: values and valeurs of visibility in Zagreb from 1961 to 1986”, in: *Parallel Chronologies. An Archive of East European Exhibitions*, Zagreb, <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/essays/ivana-bago-something-to-think-about-exhibiting-valeurs-of-visibility-in-zagreb-from-1961-to-1986/>

¹⁵ Gottfried Boehm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin University Press, 2007, pp. 208-2012. On p. 69 it says: “Die ikonische Differenz macht mithin aus dem physischen Faktum einer materiellen Oberfläche das Feld einer artikulierten Aufmerksamkeit.” (the iconic difference turns the physical fact of the material surface into a field of articulated attention).

¹⁶ Here I rely on the definitions of the notion of immersion according to the interpretation of Lambert Wiesing (*Artifizielle Präsenz, Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 2005; pp. 107-110) who opposes the equating of immersion with the notion of virtual reality (in the strict sense of care cyberspace is, but for example video games are not immersive in nature because they still retain an iconic distance), while the famous, standard text on the subject of virtual art in general is based on immersion (Oliver Grau, *Virtuelle Kunst in der Geschichte und Gegenwart. Visuelle Strategien*, Berlin, 2001, p.22). Namely, Wiesing distinguishes the assimilation of the perception of an image object into the perception of real objects (immersive virtual reality) from the perception of real things that assimilates the object of an image into imagination (non-immersive reality).

3D elements – not space itself but its boundary parameters, the wall as a physical surface – into the medium of graphic two-dimensional surface of A4 paper which then folds as fragments into new – other (exhibition) spatial ambiances furnished with paintings. This type of translocation, which is also the quality transformation of one material surface (wall) into another, artificial paper materiality – is the “reverse” of the process of leaving a handprint on cave rocks e.g. of Pech Merle, created around 20,000 BC: Kaniža’s traces are mobile, portable, iterable (as Derrida would explain the property of an individual sign) like “free-floating signifiers” which, through transfer and moving can redesignate another context or change its identity, even if only temporarily, during an exhibition. Insofar these works correspond to the semantic theory of reading images as signs. Their origin, however, as well as reception, implies physical experience, activity of being in the spatial radius of painting and/or observation/reception of the image – as when encountering *color field paintings*, for example when observing Newman’s large formats whose coloration expands, becomes an inconceivable emanating surface and penetrates deep into the space of the observer. Kaniža works in cycles, the creation of the work is long-lasting, which does not mean that it is not the same when making traditional paintings, but it means that the physical spatial component – the volume of the wall surface he copies – but also the temporal one, dictates the frottage process in two ways: from the closest proximity the artist goes into the pattern in such a way that the subject of the presentation is also a measure of the artist’s existential time and the position of his physical body in the activity of tracing.

The duration of concentrated uniform strokes on paper conditions and defines the ritualized rhythm, repetitive meditative activity of the artist in filling in the paper format on which all time-accumulated, deposited traces from the original wall surface accumulated over time, and the work simultaneously acquires the character of archiving, the place where (not necessarily noticeable) memory is being written and transcribed. The process of arranging the fragments is adequate to the sequence of strokes, it covers the wall to give it a second “state of matter” of visibility, i.e. the materiality of the abstract image.

Such media transposition enables toying around with the dimensions of time, synchronous and diachronic, and at the same time the pronounced communication/communicative character of Kaniža’s achievements: when in accordance with the properties of graphite saturations paper

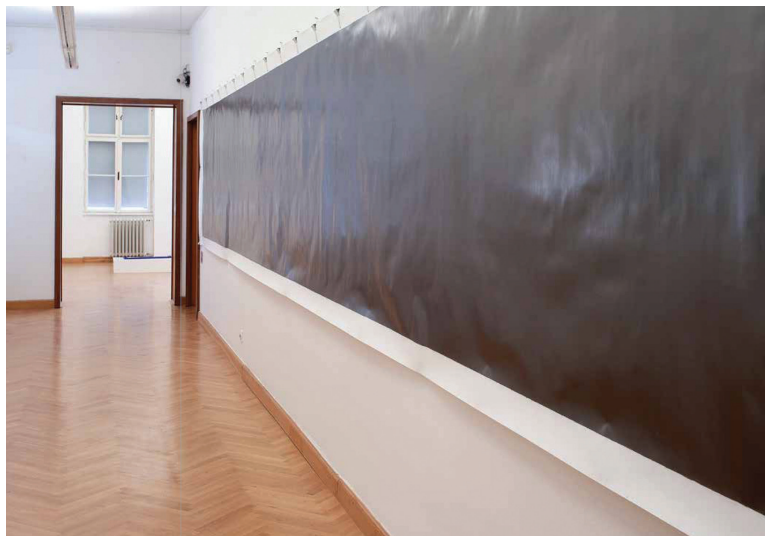


Fig. 4. Josip Kaniža, *8971_01*, 2017, 1000 x 150 cm, graphite on paper

surfaces become mirrored (the wall imprint becomes a reflection of the environment in front of the wall), they always bring the artist, and above all the observer, to the point of presence, to the confrontation with one's own character. In the case of transferring segments of the work and stages of the process of its creation into photographs (the colored ones) and a video that Kaniža exhibits with frottages, the moments of the present before the finished work gain their temporal (diachronic) face, providing at the same time different effects, the nature of the media, their special (in)abilities. The complex work *Copy/Paste* was followed by the series *Not so Grey* and a series of works called *8971* (Fig. 4) whose tenth variant, the work *8971/10* is also of the largest dimensions, namely 10 meters in length (for comparison, e.g. Monet's *Water Lilies*, a cycle of 250 paintings with reflections and changing effects of light presented in MOMA with a painting measuring 219 x 602 cm!). On the occasion of the exhibition at the Waldinger Gallery (2017), where this work was exhibited, among others, the features of Kaniža's work that oblige the observer to "look also with the body" and his communicativeness in reflections of black surfaces were best confirmed. These are also the differences of Kaniža's approach in relation to the tradition from which it originates, to the primary and analytical painting with which it shares

the characteristics of processuality and materiality, but still, especially if we look at his black monochromes, it is far closer to Knifer's meander especially due to the performances in the saturated mirror graphite-coated surfaces when "the meander hid the ritual of the hand",¹⁷ and where that vital component in the intention of this work, its existential dimension, comes to light.

The act of frottage itself is an authentic imprint of a material reality of the wall (location), which means that it is determined by the artist's intention, and of course, the result does not have to and is not always determined by the reflection of the graphite surface. In cases where Kaniža's work has higher tactile qualities, greater visibility of the surface texture he painted/copied – its quality, the quality of "relief" will be determined by the same amount/number of graphite layers as well as changing light conditions of presentation. The real reference point in the parameters of physical space in the creation of an abstract work – primarily paintings, drawings, and sometimes objects or ambience should be understood as a staging of the artist's thought about the processes and means of artistic production of the work, and the role of the author in that process, which is a prerequisite for the work of **Miran Blažek** (Fig. 5). What is "copying" with Kaniža, with Blažek, as he himself states, it is "photographic capture" of the wall: while Kaniža's work in the first instance of making is personified, and "ends" in documented photo and video notes, Blažek, to whom the anthropometric approach was important in the first part of his oeuvre, in a more recent approach chooses the technical picture as a starting point, e.g. for the works *Monumomentum* (2018), or *Exhibition Wall* which were shown in 2020 at the exhibition *Ratio IV* at the Salon Galić in Split. They are also the determinants for the exhibition *East of Eden*, with new works joining them: floor ambience and an object, i.e. *Stand* (monochromes simply lie on the floor as elements of physical space determination and evoke the convention of sculpture), and *Work* (table, tops of work and communication, over which a white canvas

¹⁷ Cf. very inventive text about Knifer's graphite works by Mirela Ramljak Purgar "Knifer's abstraction of gesture. Survival, or how the meander hid the ritual of the hand", in: Krešimir Purgar (ed.) *Image and anti-image. Julije Knifer and the problem of representation*, cvs, Zagreb, 2017, pp. 307-323. For example, in the analysis of "abstract movement" and performativity of painting, the author skillfully connected Knifer's geometric graphite drawings and Pollock's dripping, as well as the "projection function", the idea of a project in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.



5. Miran Blažek, *Plinths*, 2021, dimensions variable, photograph of a gallery wall in the gallery space, print on canvas, frame

is stretched – a digital print of a photograph as a version of previous works for *Exhibition Wall*), whereby there is an expansion of the field of action in terms of image spatialization and imaging (elements, physical parameters) of space using photography and video but at the same time additional layering, shifts to additional focus – the semantic level of the work. Thus, for the “monument to the moment” – the work *Monument* (2018), created on the occasion of the Zagreb group exhibition related to the anniversary of the freedom-utopian student revolution of 1968 – technical support was necessary, namely Jasenko Rasol’s camera and video processing of the facade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb shot in the late twilight, the time when people are no longer there, so the facade appears as a regular monumental raster of glowing uninterrupted window rows. Turning off all lights at one moment, sudden darkness lasting a minute and eight seconds (signaling commemorative silence? Or something a little more?) occurs in a *loop*, a repetition of the change with the lights being turned on... Simple action, visual phenomena/appearances and meaning contained in the work title, and the conceptuality of the approach are reflected and continued in the aesthetics of white monochromes – wall objects called *Exhibition Wall* shown at the aforementioned Split exhibition *Ratio IV*: according to Blažek’s description, one and the same photograph of the wall from Osijek’s Kazamat

Gallery “became a painting” by “being processed in a computer program, passed through layers, printed on canvas and stretched on the painting subframe”. This results in a dual inversion: primarily the physical carrier of the presentation of artifacts (the exhibition wall) in the digital print of its photographed surface is turned into a two-dimensional scene on the canvas, and then the mounted print-canvas on the frame construction becomes a three-dimensional object hanging on the wall; it can be the same photographed wall, but the object can also be shown on another wall, in another space (e.g. in Split, or Osijek) which is again a property of the image/work as a sign called iterability, yet with the use of a wider range of means and media, the individual work achieves conversion probability that makes the originality of the sign unrecognizable during transmission, so the property of portability of the sign assumes an operational function of a completely different quality than in the case of abstractions created in different, more classic media and procedures, which are also characteristic of Kaniža’s frottages, as well as of Blažek’s early achievements. Namely, *Ratio* is the name of the whole cycle of exhibitions that has a longer genesis the beginning of which was not in the spirit of technical, but subjectivist construction of the trace and its spatial transformations and media transmissions: it started in Gallery Koprivnica in 2015, continued in Gallery Bužančić, Zagreb, in the Labin City Gallery and in the Flora Gallery, Dubrovnik during 2017. In addition, in a way, the whole series was a continuation of Blažek’s preceding moving away from traditional painting after his return from a study trip to New York on the occasion of the Radoslav Putar Award (2012), which he demonstrated with his exhibition *Inside Story* at Zagreb’s Academia Moderna in 2013. There, within his hands’ reach, he painted all the walls of the space with charcoal, and in a later version of the work he collected the remains of charcoal, mixed it with beeswax and shaped it into an object – a compressed interior model of the previously painted space. This version of Blažek’s works will be followed by a record: “Hypnosis, contemplation, alchemy, self-referential painting, institutional critique or simply a sense of the space in which he works and resides, (...), perhaps mysticism...” These were followed by other anthropometrically defined works, regular shapes of the circle with which the cycle *Ratio* begins: on the wall/walls in geometrically determined centers of the surface/space Blažek used his hands to determine the contours/diameter of the circle in which the measurement

of volume, the artist's body dimensions or his trace is described and inscribed, and in which the quality, the structure of the surface of the wall on which the drawing is performed is inscribed at the same time. The link between the existential vital and physical and geometric abstract aspects of circles, black regular monochromes, finds a certain counterpart in Blažek's reflection on materials. Although wax is also important to him (let's remember Beuys!), besides materiality, for Blažek, coal has also a special, symbolic, content, and even metaphysical value: deposited in the earth in the process of carbonization over millions of years, coal carries traces/memory of geological time, that is, sediments of organic matter (former organisms that were given life by the Sun); as a fossil fuel it produces energy, it has its physical laws and structures, and chemical formulas, i.e. its "life" can also be expressed scientifically. This seemingly paradoxical bond between the living and the nonliving; between geological and organic existence and eternal cosmic laws (matter, time/duration, energy, natural laws) is for Blažek not outside the domain of artistic material creation, but through his processuality and openness this bond evokes exactly through its in-accessibility/coprehensibility. This starting point seems to be close to Sol LeWitt's view that conceptual art is irrational¹⁸ (irreducible to tautological propositions, to language, as Kosuth argued). LeWitt, who distinguishes the idea (*components*) from the concept (*implies general directions*), emphasizes: "Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalistics. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." and "Illogical judgments lead to new experience", as opposed to rational judgment that only repeats itself. Such binary conclusions are included but not obviously sufficient for Blažek's worldview and understanding of the term "ratio", which may be explained as the effect of historicizing the phenomenon of "pure" conceptual art, the shift from its initial period to the forms it takes today in the sense of "materialization of the dematerialized".¹⁹

This historicization approach to the notion of the conceptual as contributed to its liberation from stylistic historical and artistic interpretations and the affirmation of intensifying the practices of transformations in art that prefer a conceptual, cognitive approach but do not give up

¹⁸ Le Witt, Sol (1969), Sentences on Conceptual Art, in: 0-9, No. 5, January 1969, pp. 3-5. Also in Alberro, Alexander and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Antology*, 1999, 2000, pp. 106-108.

¹⁹ Cf. note 14.

those irrational levels of consciousness in creating works, especially if the emphasis is on processuality and not the finality of the work, to its always possible (permanent) new emergence, e.g. through metamorphoses and translocations, and even through de-construction rather than on the value of its (eternal) existence. Thus, for example, specially constructed frames of different-sized white monochromes of *Exhibition Wall* (and thanks to changes in resolutions of different white tones), give object appearance to individual works on whose wide edges there are lateral black and white photofragments of the originally photographed space, the Gallery Kazamat in Osijek. Presented on the wall of some (other) exhibition space, these objects already entail several different transformations/appearances of the same scene of the wall that became “transferable” across media just as the mentioned works – the copied walls of Josip Kaniža.

However, while Kaniža’s high efficiency is initiated by palimpsest layering and “signifier economics both at the level of the message and at the level of the medium”,²⁰ in Blažek’s works the Protean nature is more pronounced, the transformativeness of the work that puts media substanti-ality in the foreground, or rather subtle transitions from one medium to another in order to “blur” (not erase) the boundary effects of the intermedial (that artificial) space and enable different variations/transformations of media appearances of the work in an undefined number of occurrences. This procedure also automatically changes the iterable property of the work as a sign: it becomes changeable beyond recognition as it is expressed in an always different, not the same form, no longer representing anything but its own adaptive potentiality: readiness for the next change.

Blažek’s work *Polyptych* addresses this as another interesting way of transferring the visual experience of one place and medium to the other one/s: the transformation of wall drawings, inscribed circles created for the purpose of their translocation to other spaces can be enacted as a wall intervention of scraping the charcoal traces of the previously completed work, the painted circle. By bonding and cooking charcoal scraps and wax wall particles, thanks to compression, the black monochrome wall drawing can be “shrunk” into a black brush-shaped object and transferred to the next exhibition.

20 Cf. Text by Andrej Mirčev on *Copy/Paste* – monochromes by Josip Kaniža from 2012.

Painting beside itself²¹

A painted glass can “come out” of a picture, but at the cost of getting a different form of physical existence. This is evidenced by the work *A Glass Full of Painting* (2013) by **Robert Fišer**, a small installation inside of which there is, at least at first glance, a simple painting – a white monochrome – placed above a pedestal on which the glass is filled with white acrylic powder scraped from the surface of the painting on which the artist had previously painted the glass. If we were to use the terminology of Husserl’s phenomenology here, i.e. the terminology utilized by the philosopher to analyze the image and distinguish the existing, painted object on it, the phenomenon he calls *Bildobjekt*, from the material carrier (e.g. canvas, wood, color) which is *Bildträger* and finally from *Bildsujet*,²² that is from a real object outside the picture to which the painted object refers (which it represents; signifies) and which is similar to it but by no means the same thing, then we would say that in the work *A Glass Full of Painting* Fišer on the material background/carrier (*Bildträger*, which is a canvas of certain dimensions and qualities) constructed a painted object that we identify as a glass (*Bildobjekt*, in a certain size and color, in a certain place on the canvas/carrier), which in physical form, as a glass, served the artist as subject of depiction/painting (*Bildsujet*). By scraping the paint from the canvas on the place of the painted glass – which has no physical properties on/in the painting, i.e. is not subject to the physical laws of gravity, cannot, for example, fall out of the painting, or break, grow older, etc. – Fišer destroys the painterly material which, seen in micro-proportions, turns out to be inseparable from the background/image carrier (color and canvas), which has nothing to do with the actual object of the glass except the similarity until the paint scrapings are put into the same glass. With these simple operations of

²¹ The subtitle refers to the text by David Joselit “Painting Beside Itself”, in: *October* 130, 2009, pp. 125-134. On the topic of his text, Joselit said: “I write about the most traditional sort of art object, and some would say the most market-corrupted, which is painting. In terms of how conceptual art’s notion of the circulation of propositions, the dematerialization of work, and the understanding of how meaning migrates could be folded back into that object status”. Cf. DAVID JOSELIT with Greg Lindquist, *The Brooklyn Rail* in https://brooklynrail.org/2013/06/art_books/david-joselit-with-greg-lindquist

²² Cf. on this topic Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie und Bildbewusstsein*, Hus, XXIII, p. 29; quoted here according to Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 2013, pp. 37-80: 53, 70.

painting and painting as a destruction, Fišer not only achieved a material transformation of the painted object, eliminated its resemblance to the object of representation and “brought it back to reality” in the form of color particles, but also demonstrated the basic postulates of Husserl’s philosophy of the image without the help of language or words. Husserl’s philosophies of the image: “The image shows something that it itself is not”. and the statement of the philosopher: “The bearer of the image shows the painted object, but is not the painted object itself”,²³ may in a way turn out to be questionable and even superfluous if we take into account that through destruction Fišer demonstrates and proves that the similarity of the painted glass with the real glass is not relevant for the essential determination of the image (referential relationship of the similarity of the image/the painted with the world), but the fact that the image remains (and becomes) the image even when the painted object is removed, that it still makes something – namely itself – visible, thus resulting in a metapicture level of reading abstraction (about which Husserl did not write). That is why Martin Seel in his “Aesthetics of Appearance” presented arguments about the paradigmatic status of abstract painting,²⁴ questioning the whole tradition of representation-oriented image theory, which, with the appearance of abstraction, according to Seel, was placed in an unenviable position to seek additional explanations for the definition of image. According to Seel, it is not constitutive for the image to bring to light the appearance of something that is not present, or even that “an image shows what it itself is not”:²⁵ Since all images represent, and only some represent something, then what an image represents is how it is presented, and that always includes its self-presentation, the latent self-referentiality from which the subject reality is excluded. Paradoxically, it follows from this conclusion that the so-called figurative, object/representational image in relation to the abstract one is an added achievement, and not something that is the “natural appearance of the image” from which the abstract image is subsequently derived.

23 Ibid. On p. 70. there is a quote from Hesserl’s text: “Das Bild zeigt etwas was es selbst nicht ist. Der Bildträger zeigt ein Bildobjekt und ist selbst kein Bildobjekt.” as well as: “Bildträger wird verwendet um ein Bildobjekt zu präsentieren.” With this, Husserl points out that the existence of a painting as an object hanging on the wall has nothing in common with a painted object, but also that the object-painting on the wall differs from all other ordinary real objects precisely because of that painted object.

24 Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, Hanser Verlag, München, Wien, 2000, pp. 269, 274.

25 Ibid., pp. 272-274.

Analytical decomposition of either procedures or a work itself at a certain point in the process of its creation, or of an object, proves generally to be crucial for Fišer's achievements. A special kind of de(con)struction from which the chance for a new design is originating, as can be similarly observed with Blažek, is the basis of more works by Fišer, an artist who in his conceptual approaches was most intensely preoccupied with painting and image possibilities which could be noticed as early as 2013 in a series of paintings, objects and installations with which he exemplified thoughts on visual media, most often with a starting point in painting. Among these works, in addition to *A Glass Full of Painting*, there are also works shown in the exhibition *Gentle Destruction* (Flora Gallery, Dubrovnik, 2015, and Waldinger Gallery in Osijek and Labin City Gallery in 2016), a series that the artist describes as a cycle in which he is preoccupied both with the "experimental research process" in terms of the expanded notion of the image and the medium of painting. The other three works of this cycle are manifestations of questioning the same procedure – scraping a painted canvas – with very different outcomes: the works *Emergence in Disappearance* and *Negative* are differently designed functions of scraped paint from the canvas, which includes interaction with the observer: located on the gallery floor as dust that visitors spread in space as they walk, in the first case it is a simple scattering of dust in front of the painting, and in the second one the dust on the floor marked the outlines of the canvas (its negative) which was moved from the floor to the ceiling. The process is the opposite in the case of the work *Automimesis*: Fišer uses a light projection to collect the sensitive substance, contrary to the spreading of scrapings in the previous two works, and places it on a pedestal between the screen and the projector whose light now leaves a triangle shape on the painting/screen at the place where earlier the cone had been painted. In all these cases, using similar or more complex procedures, Fišer also deals with the works *Transition* (as a version of the work with the glass, yet this time scraping black monochrome, and re-merging the powder into an object, a black cube); *Bi* (negative prints of objects/geometric solids, a sphere and a cube as floor ambiances); *Binary Space*, and others. Fišer writes that the painting cycle *Monochromy* reflects "his own cold agony, resignation brought to me by the impossibility of painting something new and original" repeating (perhaps even without intention?) a part of a sentence from the work of one of the pioneers of conceptualism in

Croatia, Goran Trbuljak. However, while Fišer openly communicates the impossibility of painting with a sense of agony, Trbuljak's sentence in the poster work in question, written below the artist's photo-portrait, is an indifferent statement: "I did not want to show anything new and original" (1971, the poster is also Trbuljak's first solo exhibition in the Gallery of the Student Center in Zagreb), and then, with a touch of irony, Trbuljak dedicated his cycle *Sunday Painting* from the early 1980s to the impossibilities of painting, i.e. unconventional creations of objects by painting from the background of the painting, dripping paint on the canvas through the hole in glass, etc. Such shifts in almost six decades of the existence of conceptual expression speak for themselves.

Writing about the mentioned exhibition *Gentle Destruction* with a review of Fišer's monochromes – black and white, mostly "untitled" or "nameless" (Fig. 6) – Igor Loinjak emphasized one important moment of this painting: the texture²⁶ of the surface which was the inspiration for many innovations within Russian, and then Polish constructivism or Unism, as formulated by Władysław Strzemiński during the 1920s, which over time took the form of *Theory of Vision* (1958/2016). Following the monochromes Fišer also deals with texture, and perhaps even more with the vision: Having limited himself to black and white, Fišer chooses the extremes within which he pays attention to the appearance of the painting surface, which changes depending on the manner and means of painting: thus –

26 Igor Loinjak, Monochromy on two textures, in: *Artos/Journal of science, arts and culture*, No. 5, Osijek, 2017. Although Loinjak emphasized that on the advice of Zvonko Maković, and Maković made his conclusion based on the study of the manifesto "Luchism" – he opted for the term *faktura* instead of *texture*, here I remain with the latter term. Namely, the Polish constructivist Władysław Strzemiński started writing in the 1920s when he formulated his theory of Unism, while his book *Teoria widzenia/Theory of Vision* was completed in 1947, published posthumously in 1958; and the first revised edition is from 2016, Museum Sztuki Łódź, (with English translation). In the curriculum held by Strzemiński at the College of Plastic Arts and Design in Łódź for the first course under no. 7, "faktura malarska" is mentioned, under no. 8. *faktura ukształpowana* and under no. 9. *faktura ukształpowana*. The translation of the word *faktura* from Polish or *фактура* from Russian (Strzemiński was educated in Moscow at Vkhutemas, where the term was also used) into Croatian is *tekstura*, which coincides with the translations into German (Textur) and English (texture) and was used by many authors who wrote about Strzemiński and Unism (e.g. J. Meinhardt; B. Epperlein; or Yve-Alain Bois or cf. the text by Polish author Helena Trespeusch written in English: "Abstract painting faced with the real: From the first abstractionists to the Neo-Geo movement... and Bertrand Lavier" – which is a contribution to the collection of papers *Publication of the research project "To each his own reality. The notion of the real in the fine arts of France, West Germany, East Germany and Poland 1960–1989)*.



6. Robert Fišer, *Untitled*, 2020, 100 x 50 cm, oil on canvas

if we leave aside for the time being an important element of this work, and that is color in the form of reflection, i.e. light – the lower part of the diptych *Event Horizon* (2019) is a mirror polished surface, while the upper part is opaque, and on some monochromes part of the painting is painted with precise brush strokes, while on the next segment on the same surface the same color is applied with a roller resulting in more

tactile, “embossed” and thus more visible textures. The described field of Fišer’s interests, the atmosphere of experiments close to protocolary ritual actions of eliminations, creations based on transformational and/or destructive processes, and textures, is joined by the interest in which perception and science most closely touch, exploring the spectrum of possible (in)visibilities which can to some possible extent be placed close to Strzemiński’s *Theory of Vision*, i.e. the way of reflecting on “visual consciousness” which is, quite differently from “biological viewing” of historical significance according to the Unistic artist: “The expanding base of visual consciousness constitutes the essential foundation for the development and transformation of our knowledge about the world. This is how we see the world – not biologically, but historically. We see realistically – with our real, conscious eyes”.²⁷ Thus, Fišer accompanies the works *Dark Matter* by writing that he seeks to “reconstruct quantum theories with visual language”, “the areas in which the known laws of physics do not apply, such as hyperspace, invisible (dark) matter, the event horizon (black hole)” and in the form of an “optical puzzle”, “through geometric visual elements” to connect the things of the universe with human existence. It would be naive to think that Fišer believes in a literal, rather than just offered, possible visualization/imagination of inaccessible cosmic spaces and phenomena, at this point within a certain scope of human knowledge, but not being part of human experience. It is important to note, however, that Fišer turns his plan into a consistent strategy, with UV paint playing a prominent role, as its properties allow, according to Fišer, to make visible the “parts of our reality that are not visible in themselves, except for reflection as a consequence that confirms their presence. UV paint is found on surfaces invisible to us, because those surfaces are above or below our eye level but reflected in the closest surface, which is the only way for them to become visible. The levels below and above the eyes represent invisible but reflective frequencies, while what is at our eye level, as most accessible to us, reflects nothing but the present, limiting, emptiness”. The already mentioned works *Dark Matter 1* and *2* and *Event Horizon*, as well as a polyptych of seven objects entitled *Grey* were realized in accordance with the description and the scientific interest in astrophysics and the limits of human

²⁷ Cf. Władysław Strzemiński’s “Theory of Vision” in <https://post.moma.org/wladyslaw-strzeminski-theory-of-vision/> i www.moma.org/artists/5700

vision. Significant for these works are reflections of colors that spread like light in the interspace, the “gap” between the solid segments of the form, “on the surfaces of which there is a UV color that we cannot see directly, but only its reflection.” In this way, the pictorial representation in the form of abstraction turns out not as a reduction but as an expansion of the field of (beyond the reach of human vision really existing) visibility within a scientific discourse that is in itself abstract. “Visual consciousness” is a conceptual awareness of the consequent effect/combination of knowledge and media, which also shifts the limits of “sharpening the sense of existence of the undepictable” as Lyotard, differentiating between beautiful and sublime according to Kant, characterized abstraction in postmodernity, as opposed to the one in modernity that sought to “show the unpredictable”.²⁸ The artist **Vladimir Frelih**, who studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts under Nam June Paik, guru of video and media art and no less important video installation artist Nan Hoover, and sculptor Magdalena Jetelova, as his spheres of interest is expected to record space and media/technical image, i.e. the dimensions of visibility that balance between the real and material and the virtual, which then results in a very wide range of often larger spatial realizations from which traditional media of painting, printmaking, sculpture and text/language are by no means omitted but rather serve as bases and starting points or as means/tools for questioning the nature of visual media and art in general in the condition of the present and the place of its origin. Of course, Frelih’s work, as well as the work of all participants in the exhibition *East of Eden*, is most often characterized as multimedia, but at the same time it indicates certain terminological deficits rather than some clear commonalities, because using the designation multimedia we cover a very modest range of distinctive features that such a designation may imply. In the case of Frelih’s complex projects and achievements such as *deGeneric* (Osijek, Gallery of Fine Arts, 2009) and *deEvolution* (Pula, Museum of Contemporary Art Istria, and Split, MKC, 2013/2014), the artist pointed to the continuity of interest in rethinking possibilities and development achievements of different visual media following a basic concept that he developed in an exhaus-

²⁸ Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernity?, in: Ivan Kuvačić, Gvozden Flego, (Eds.). *Postmodernity: A new epoch or a delusion*, Zagreb, 1988, pp. 233-243: 239.

tive number of variations of representation and media modalities, often with the aim of questioning a certain performance medium/media or the conditions of its/their realization and/or reception, the result of which is summarized in a statement on the expansion of intermedia spaces.

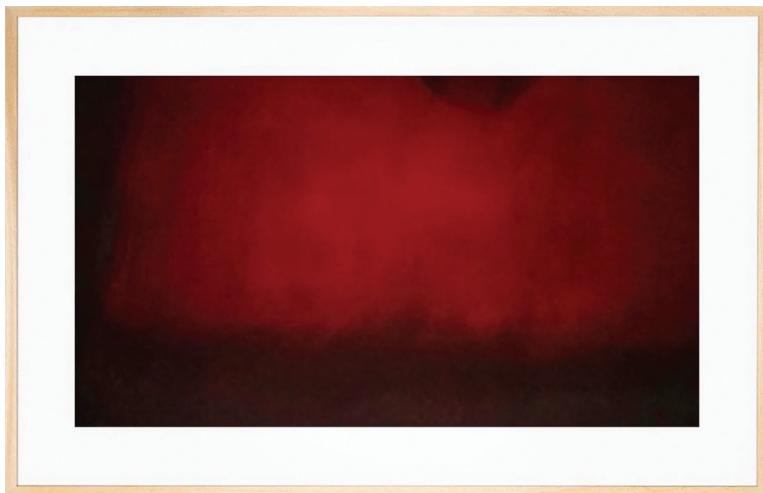
Whether he connects the forms of works with their institutional framework and (intra)media spaces as in the aforementioned projects or seeks the focus in the visual sensations enabled by technology,²⁹ Frelih is distanced from narration or content expressions by a very precise and recognizable way of action typical of which is reaching for previous achievements, their modifications or improvements. At the exhibition *East of Eden*, Frelih shows the work *In the same space*, a collaborative video performance with Selman Trtovac, his longtime artistic interlocutor, which was realized for the needs of their joint exhibition of the same name held at the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017. "It is an overhead video shot using stop motion technique: in the correct time interval one photo is taken every five seconds, which is later merged into a video. The photos in the video are stretched/blurry because the exposure time is about half a second, and Selman and I are moving around the space" – explains Frelih. At the exhibition in Osijek, two of the four possible positions of this video of different durations can be seen. The joint performance takes place on a white paper background ("in the same space") on which there is a small pile of coal dust in the center at the very beginning. By synchronized, minimal, repetitive movements of the two artists during the performance, with their feet they spread the coal dust to the edges until a uniform black surface has been created, i.e. an abstract image – a black "low resolution" monochrome, because a "blurred" appearance of the painting with visible traces of the artists' activity evokes the rhythm of the ritual and the "blurring" of the video image. That being reminiscent of Robert Smithson and the interest in entropy inspiring this work is not only in the domain of spontaneous associations, as we will conclude only if we are familiar with Frelih's

²⁹ At the exhibition *Outlines of Space* (Lazareti, Dubrovnik 2017, with Čaušić, Fišer and Sušac), Frelih created a video installation, a light projection in the form of the so-called static dynamics by projecting three colors of the RGB system, an optical model used in electronic media systems to reproduce colors and produce moving images. By projecting each color of the RGB system from a separate source toward a common point at which the image is reproduced, Frelih creates static dynamics using the foundation of media moving images to reproduce the still one.

long-term experiments in which he has been studying the relationship between inversible and irreversible processes of the medial image production.

Freljih's famous work in the form of *work in progress* is a multi-year project started in 2005 with a starting point in photography of a certain red color – Kat. No. 13041664. The minimal differences in the shades of the individual prints of the photograph, measuring 33.5 x 40.5 cm, which we perceive as a series of red monochromes, are caused by printing machines of different capacity. The question of the photo originality is clearly overshadowed by the fact that an identical copy is impossible. In different photo shops and on different machines, analogue to digital conversions are subject to variations, incompatibilities of the conditions of the creation have been “documented” with the work having an open end: so far there have been over 180 recorded/newly created red shades and their presentation not only requires an ever increasing wall area but also constructs a new realization, a new variant of serial artifacts.

Similarly, yet not for such a large series of prints, at the exhibition *East of Eden* entitled *Rothko* (Fig. 7) are Freljih's initially photographed smaller (mostly monochromatic) parts of Mark Rothko's paintings from Vienna (however the artist does not really care which exactly these paintings are, and in the end also who the author is), which he then technically processed individually, and above all, multiple magnifications of photographs were the cause of “deviation” in the visual field. Let's remember the scenes of Antonioni's film *Blow Up* in which a photojournalist looks through a magnifying glass at his photograph (accidentally taken in the park where the murder took place) in vain trying to sharpen the scene with magnifications in the photograph, to get to the truth. However, in the place where the medium itself is “stripped” to the pixel by magnification, it is of course not possible to see the truth of the scene more clearly, just as we are not able to notice the essential structure of the media by looking at the footage of the scene. It is this fact, namely the split between the structure of the media and the conspicuity of the visual content/representation, that Freljih has been using productively in many of his works, even for the series *Rothko* with monochromatic (blue, red, green, black) abstract photo representations of colors that do not really exist. In other words, in various degrees of magnification, “intersurfaces” were created, whereby, as Freljih says, “the machine/program estimated that the holes/surfaces created by manipulation were



7. Vladimir Frelih, *Rothko 090*, 2021. 100 x 160 cm, ink-jet print on foil, laminated on Forex

to be filled by augmenting analog reality into digital reality.” Using thus manipulation as part of the production process Frelih exploits the knowledge of the incompatibility of analog and digital into the creative goals of research, reproducibility for productivity purposes as to produce new imagery/visuality on the one hand. On the other hand, there is the question of referentiality of the abstract photo-image: the fact is that the original magnification model exists (just as the original red photograph existed) and that it has its referent in reality, although it is not a three-dimensional object but a painted surface, a historical example of a self-referential abstract image. Frelih’s work seems to correspond to any abstract, self- or non-referential image, however, by showing itself the work “hides” its referent as well as the technological procedure of its creation or its medial nature – which contradicts Mitchell’s definition of metapicture, which should talk about itself and other images, about the way it was created and how it establishes its meaning without using language. The medium of photography and its technological conditioning as Frelih uses them are the basis of his abstract photo-image, and in the legacy of traditional monochrome which is also a self-referential type of image. Diversity is created from the ability of the technical image/media to “comment” on that historical medium, and yet have a constructive and authentic result, namely a new work marked by a com-

pletely new aesthetic that was not possible before. In the processes, the dual nature of Frelj's approach emerges, in which Mitchell's conception of metapicture and Lev Manovich's conception of metamedia are connected, as Krešimir Purgar put it in the text "The Meta-Medium as a Work of Art" for the catalogue of the artist's solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje in 2018, interpreting two of Frelj's abstract objects – in fact clusters of utility objects tightly wrapped, covered/hidden under black adhesive foil – after which the exhibition was named *Black Raw Memory*.

To clarify the complexity of Frelj's approach to pictoriality, Purgar establishes his term – meta-referentiality, which he came up with based on relations to referentiality as contained – besides in Mitchell's notion of metapicture also in Manovich's notion of metamedia which includes the syntagm "Avant-Garde as Software" (a text dating back to 1999). Manovich's view is that "new media today are a digital version of historical avant-garde from the 20th century, while modern media, as they did 100 years earlier – use all previously created media but adapt them to the most advanced technological possibilities of their time.", as Purgar conveys in the mentioned text, noticing all the complexity of the difference between the two metaconcepts. In short, Purgar's conclusion is: Manovich's concept of metamedia puts emphasis on the method of construction while Mitchell's term metapicture refers to the social conditioning of meaning. The meta-referentiality that Purgar articulates here as his new term and prefers in his analysis of Frelj's objects does not correspond to either of the two concepts at all, so Purgar interprets Frelj's work *Black Raw Memory* "ontologically grounded between metamedium and metapicture, i.e. between radical exclusion of medial nature on the one hand and the social connotations of the individual symbols of which the work consists on the other". Understanding the theory of media and image in these extremes, Purgar advocates a comparative approach that is summarized in a term whose meaning can be found in the parallel comparative/comparable interspace: *in-betweenness*. Should Purgar's term of metareferentiality be added with a combination of intellectual curiosity, analytical awareness of the historically changing nature of painting (and art) and the *concept* of material and medial nature of artistic production based on that awareness accordant with the presented interpretations of works, we would move closer to the range of meanings of Osijek manuscripts. The mentioned *in-betweenness*, with all the

connotations carried by its starting points on the poles of metapicture and metamedia, would be exactly that unique, authentic field of articulated attention, which makes the recent position of painting on the Osijek art scene exceptional.

All photographs made by Davorin Palijan.

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