

Like few other artists of his generation, Günther Förg (1952-2013) was insistent and audacious in questioning and expanding Modernism's formal vocabulary. From the mid-1970s onwards he developed a complex, varied oeuvre in which painting, photography, sculpture and works on paper could exist equally alongside one another, but could also influence and interact with each other. Günther Förg also exploited this interplay of the various media in large-scale installations, which were always conceived to respond to their setting.

Förg was interested in abstraction from the start. In his paintings he reflected abstract-minimalist trends in 20th century art as were manifest, say, in the Russian avant-garde, American color field painting or Minimal Art. He seemed to casually translate the solemn gravity of these historical models into his very own intensive and laconic visual language while always nonchalantly ignoring the thematic charging of his sources, be they of a utopian-social, moral or mystical-religious nature. The lead paintings produced through into the 2000s are exemplary for this subjective appropriation: the minimalist-looking color panels cite the formal repertoire of modernism while undermining its inherent perfectionism by allowing for inaccuracies and carelessness in execution. With their brisk application of color and calm brushstrokes which seemingly cancel the heaviness of the lead they demonstrate Förg's individual handling of color and picture supports. They celebrate the principle of the series and simultaneously emphasize the image's status as an object. Like all of Günther Förg's works you could describe them as a series of conceptual experiments, which examine whether the doctrines laid down by modernism are still relevant today to prevent them from becoming kitsch or becoming historicized.

Inspired by his work with lead, in the mid-1980s Günther Förg turned to sculpture. Initially he produced bronze reliefs whose surface structure he worked directly using his hands following the modernist practice of gestural, abstract sculpting. Yet the bronze reliefs remain true to the minimalist formal language of his pictures, which however with his return to the canvas from the 1990s become increasingly more liberal. The so-called "*Gitterbilder*" (*Grid Paintings*) abandon the orthogonal pictorial frame of Modernism in favor of an informal, intuitive framework that fluctuates between conceptual methods and individual expression.

Similarly, the series of 11 plaster reliefs also produced in 1990 admirably demonstrate the free translation of creative and formal principles from one medium to another so typical for Förg. And once again, the motif repertoire of his lead paintings represents the formal starting point: sculpturally developed lines, stripes, squares and rectangles are condensed into spatially defined, abstract, geometric compositions. Förg did not use fine tools on the molds, and the marks left by scraping and scratching are clearly visible so that as with the damaged picture bases of lead the

materiality of the plaster surface enters into a fascinating dialog with the paint. Applied directly onto the unworked plaster the acrylic paint fluctuates between transparency and opaque density. The color palette also seems to have been adopted directly from the lead paintings: from vermilion via mustard and rich green through to translucent violet it lends the works a subjective, emotional echo, which contrasts with the sober, mathematic principles of construction. Every relief is defined as a picture object by a frame-like, contrasting color edge. The association with a window rises unbidden, one of the most important visual motifs, which Förg continually devoted himself to in his work from the 1990s.

In his “window pictures” Günther Förg explored a classic motif of art history, which since time immemorial has allowed artists to reflect on the medium of painting: the window as metaphor for the image, the threshold between inside and outside. In modernist painting it increasingly closed itself off, refused to show the outside world so as to reveal a new reality intrinsic to the image. Accordingly, the windows in Förg’s paintings and drawings are generally blind, permitting us to neither look out nor in. The reliefs add a spatial dimension to expand this visual experience. On the one hand they simulate a real depth, and on the other they confront the observer with the material nature of their painterly surface.

In presenting his work Günther Förg always took into account the architecture of the respective exhibition context. He conceived complex room situations in which connections were created between disparate work groups thereby directing attention from the individual work to the overall presentation. Hanging the plaster reliefs as a row in the windowless White Cube of the gallery amounts to an architectural intervention wholly in the spirit of Förg’s love of orchestration: It suggests a glass façade that opens up the gallery space – if not onto the outside world then onto the visual world of Günther Förg.

- Astrid Ihle

Translated by Jeremy Gaines

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