

The Resonance of Colors

by Magnus Thorø Clausen

Ane Vester is working with painting on the basis of a conceptual and expanded approach, where what defines the works as paintings is continuously subject to negotiation. She is combining color surfaces with words, working site-specifically with respect to the space and the light, and calling into play materials like wood, glass, Plexiglas and aluminum. There's a sense of curiosity in these experiments, which plays a role in opening up for fundamental painterly questions regarding place, language and memory. Ane Vester's early works from the 1990s was based on a sculptural and installation-related interest. Since that time, she has been changing her focus towards painting in the broadest sense. However, she has consistently held on tightly to a sensibility about the work's existence within the space and its relation to the body, where it can be experienced, by turns, as picture, as object and as sign.

A pervasive feature of Ane Vester's art works is their distance from expressive marks. Generally speaking, they are in possession of a relatively cool, anonymous, or objective appearance. As far as it is possible to do so, she avoids letting the individual brushstrokes be distinctly clear, with the result that one's attention remains fixed on the surface and on the work's presence in the now. This manner of rendering the painting process – or the painterly gesture – anonymous anoints her works with a considerable degree of directness, while simultaneously placing Ane Vester herself, as artist-subject, in parentheses. The painting is thereby allowed to make its appearance as thing or as color emanation rather than as representation or working process.

The works' objective appearance is situated in continuation of a long tradition within abstract art that extends back to the 1960s, where the choice of geometric structures operated as a way of circumventing notions concerning intuitive composition and concerning the art work as an expression of the artist's inner life. In Ane Vester's work, however, abstraction is not merely a tradition that is being confirmed but is just as much

a dimension in the art works, which is being nuanced and transgressed. The works make their appearance as formal paintings that, in reality, not only are formal but also are equally personal and language-related.

The transgression of the abstract aesthetics can be both direct and subtle. Take, for example, a work like *Recollection*, which was created in 2000. Here, monochrome-colored panels are placed in a row so that they come to resemble, when taken together, a color spectrum or color chart, in the manner that the hues are typically conveyed to the users in small formats at the art-supply store. At the bottom of each panel a certain word has been suffixed, which denotes an everyday thing: “jacket”, “soap”, “chair”, “dress” ... these words represent Ane Vester’s own color memories, her associations from colors to some specific everyday things from the past or the present. In this way, the link between abstraction and concrete words transforms the color from appearing as a symbolic universal language to suddenly being susceptible, as well, to being perceived semiotically as a sign for specific objects. And the effect that is elicited here is that the colors not only relate to each other, reciprocally, but can also be perceived as echoes of everyday things and the memories of these things. The colors are accordingly charged with a subjective presence, and the words insinuate their way, so to speak, into the painting’s abstract surface and dissolve the abstraction from within.

These concrete couplings between colors and words function, moreover, as mirrorings of our own perception’s fragmentation ... of the situation, that is to say, that, in our own visual reading of the surrounding world, we do not see everything all at once but that we register, instead, certain points or fragments, which become suspended in our memory. In a Danish context, the painter Kasper Heiberg developed, in the 1970s, a coherent theory of color on this foundation (in his book, *Den europæiske palet*, 1975), a theory that he employed as a basis for his own site-specific and color-specific works. In a comparable way, Ane Vester’s oeuvre appears to embody a way of thinking about colors. But hers is a sensuous and intuitive way of thinking, which is primarily being unfolded in the paintings themselves. Word paintings like *Recollection* are playing themselves out somewhere between – and conjoining – concrete color sensations with virtual color

memories and they are accordingly enunciating something fundamental about how we, in our consciousness, preserve color impressions.

Our color perception always seems, to a certain degree, to be subjective and contingent on what contexts we manage to come up with ourselves. The implication here is that it cannot be taken as a 'given', beforehand, that one, as a viewer, can automatically follow along in making the association between, for example, a gray color surface and a jacket, because each one of us will quite possibly be reminded of other gray things from our own respective worlds of experience: a computer, a carpet, a particular book cover ... There is thus a tension arising between the work's assertion of identity and the viewer's potential perception of difference. And the works, in this way, are also dealing with this discrepancy. However, regardless of whether the relationship is perceived as a similarity or as a difference, there is a relational connection that is being generated, a connection that invests the colors with personality, emotion and history. They undermine color as something universal or transcendent in favor of its always-localized existence.

Moreover, colors are sensed in different ways, depending on what other colors they happen to be seen beside. This is a phenomenon with which many artists, throughout the course of time, have been preoccupied. Especially worthy of mention in this regard is Josef Albers, who was exploring, in his extensive series of works, *Homage to the Square* (created between 1950 and 1976), the various colors' perception-related complexity on the basis of a simple compositional scheme of squares that were placed inside of one another. Another pioneer in the exploration of color perception is Bridget Riley, who has been making optically vibrating paintings on the basis of a simple register of colors and abstract forms, since the middle of the 1960s. In their interaction, these pieces engender movement, light and space, in ever new combinations. In extension of this, Ane Vester's paintings are also most often built up from different color surfaces placed next to each other, in an open and changeable variation.

The relationship between color and context can also be more subtly present, as an aspect to which one becomes attentive simply by spending time together with the work. This is

especially true of the series, *Colour Stripe Paintings*, a group of pieces Ane Vester started working on back in 2008. They consist of vertical color stripes on a white background. The stripes have been painted on the back side of Plexiglas plates, in such a way that the colors seem to recede into the surface, while at the same time the pictures' surfaces very slightly reflect the surrounding space, including the light and the viewer's body. The stripe format relates to the surroundings by reiterating the room's other vertical structures, from radiators to floorboards and window frames, while the separate color stripes play a part in activating the colors that are present inside the room. However, they also function, at the same time, as self-referential pictorial spaces, which are exploring, via their plain and simple structures, subtle transitions from color to color and between surface and depth.

In another series of works, the paintings take on the form of painted objects that have been built up from wooden blocks. The color-related aspect settles here into tangible things that serve to activate the surrounding space by physically intermeshing in it. The series takes its beginnings in the works, *Wooden Shelves*, from 1994, and *Wooden Posts*, from 1996, and continues up to the works, *Signs*, from 2015-17. The painted wooden objects are most frequently mounted onto the wall as hybrids between painting, sculpture and everyday objects. The naming of the works as shelves, poles and signs serves to accentuate their affinity with everyday furniture.

Historically, the painted objects are in continuation of the expansion from artwork to space that was begun in the 1960s and 70s, with minimal and installation art. Their manner of being mounted on the wall serves to impart to the objects a special rhythm within the room, a concentrated structuring of the viewer's gaze and movement. They designate horizontal and vertical directions, which relate to the body's and the gaze's position in relation to the works, and they investigate the color constructively – and architecturally – on the basis of questions like: What difference does it make? How do we perceive two colors differently depending on which one is up and which one is down? How can two colors be organized so that they visually seem to move through or around one another? The interference between two colors takes place within these objects, not

only on the surface but also materialized in three dimensions, and the concentrated color spaces are being experienced as a temporal sequence, since the viewer is reading and sensing the works while moving through the space.

The wooden objects' material character can seem akin to wooden toys in the form of bricks that are put together in simple pieces. This reminds me of a passage from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, from 1957, wherein he describes the wooden toy's special sensuousness and poetics. According to Barthes, wood is, at one and the same time, "firm" and "comparatively soft", and the sound it makes is both "muffled" and "distinct":

"[W]ood is a familiar and poetic substance which allows the child a continuity of contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood neither wounds nor goes to pieces; it doesn't break, it wears down and can last a long time, can live with the child, gradually modifying the relations of hand and object [...] Wood makes essential objects, lasting objects."

This intimacy and this familiarity with the body can be compared to the experience of the wooden art works, although these – of course – also differentiate themselves by virtue of their non-function and definition as art. However, on account of their physicality and their concentrated elaboration, one senses them in a tactile way: feeling their weight, their potential sound, and the way that they rest within themselves inside the room. In contrast to more dematerialized forms of abstraction, one reads them via their titles, in relation to everyday objects such as shelves, poles and signs, to which one already has a bodily relationship. As soon as these pieces have been installed as points within a specific room, the interval between them also becomes a part of the perception of them. The boundary between the artworks' space and the viewer is partially being broken down.

The colors here take on a material and an installational character that can be likened to works such as Blinky Palermo's colored wall objects from the 1970s or Donald Judd's polychrome wall objects that date from the mid-1980s and onwards. In a Danish context, they bespeak a relation to pieces like Albert Mertz's conceptual painting-demonstrations

and Kasper Heiberg's color models, dating from the 1960s, where he combined different color spectra in painted metals and acrylic plastic.

It is the normal state of affairs that we deal with colors and spaces without thinking any further about this. It can be hard to put into words precisely how one feels or thinks about a particular color, and it can be hard to define what it's like to find oneself inside of one particular room, as opposed to being inside other rooms. I think that Ane Vester's works inspire one to become more conscious of these fleeting sensations of space and color, maybe because of their simplicity and clarity. They invite one – or they make it possible – to rediscover the world through their reduced alphabet of small differences, which are ordinarily situated below one's threshold of attention.

In the series of murals that were created from 2005 up until the present day, color relationships are being explored in direct interplay with the surrounding architecture. The murals make their appearance as large monochrome color fields, where one color field is bordering on an adjacent one, in a deliberately placed exchange with the specific room. By way of example, in the artwork, *A Color, A Word*, from 2013, a gray surface is related directly to a gray radiator inside the room, while another gray color reiterates the gray tone on the wall's sockets. In these murals, there is a constant exchange that is going on between autonomous color sequences, specific architecture and sometimes referential words. By virtue of being painted directly on the wall, they also underscore the temporary exhibition situation, of which you yourself become part just as soon as you step into the room.

In 2017, Ane Vester returns to the series of wooden objects, which she paints in various combinations of red and blue hues. The simple combinations serve to elucidate that here, blue and red are not being considered as generic entities but always as a specific blue and a specific red, which engender, upon their convergence, a specific color space between them: dark red and dark blue; orange red and light blue; light red and light blue, etc. It's tempting to regard these works as being in dialogue with Albert Mertz's so-called *Rød + blå propositioner* [Red + Blue propositions], which he was working with from the outset

of the 1970s, and from then on. Mertz, too, was interested in the connection between abstraction and everyday life. However, whereas Mertz, for the most part, confined his investigations to red and blue, and worked primarily in flat pictorial formats, Ane Vester is working with a much broader register of colors and formats.

By naming the works *Signs*, their proximity to signboards is being emphasized, both in terms of their color-related signal value and in the way we perceive them inside the room. Here, also, the idea about color as universal dimension is being undermined. The colors are being rendered concrete, personal and tangible and are being related to a specific everyday-ness. Ane Vester's works conjoin abstraction and context in surprising encounters, since they appear both as autonomous things and as dialogic formats related to the rest of the world of objects, places, and memories. The abstract-timeless universe, in her works, is being turned into an object for continuous reconstruction in interplay with memory, body and place. They are, in a literal way, bringing the universal down to earth, but simultaneously insisting on an objective, reduced aesthetics. The abstract is being widened so as to also contain a subjective or prosaic aspect.

The colors in the works can be regarded as found or ready-made entities, inasmuch as they descend from a specific place and refer to specific things, rooms and words. The colors are being chosen and combined because they already exist (or existed) beyond and prior to the painting in our social reality. Abstraction is not a closed universe (nor is it, conversely, a totally open universe) but rather a kind of concentration or echo of a particular context that, quite possibly, may not exist anymore. However, even though these paintings relate themselves to memories of certain colored phenomena, they are also detaching themselves from these memories. They both are and are no longer linked up with the world of things that existed beforehand. The color is always, also, something else, a kind of emancipation, an event within the now, and a potentially new experience. The American writer Gertrude Stein had a keen sensibility for these kinds of paradoxes, as comes to light in this passage from *Tender Buttons*, dating from 1914:

“An ordinary color, a color is that strange mixture which makes, which does make which does not make a ripe juice, which does not make a mat.”

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN