

Jürgen Kisters

The Research Painter and Subtle Differences  
(on the art of Christian Frosch)

“... because what reason is there not to be prepared for everything, even if nothing ever happens?” (Wolf Wondratschek)

The time has long since come in which art must disassociate itself from the spectacular noise of modern entertainment culture. In the past decades art has all too often flirted with the conception that the images and objects it produces should be grasped immediately and, most importantly, be fun. In a perfectly organized culture of consumption, art is thus accorded a different status than at those times in which works of art were flowering fruits in the cultivation of the mind. Yet the cultivation of the mind has been miserably neglected for quite a while now, the *Zeitgeist* of ‘easy living’ and ‘anything goes’ has meanwhile swept away everything in its path, thereby also depriving art of its firm grounding. While the art scene has also become dominated by big gestures, off-beat flashes of wit and non-committal playing about, erstwhile ponderous artistic activity is meanwhile and for the most part being done inconspicuously, on a small and unspectacular scale, and at first sight is not almost inaccessible. One spot of color pressed between two glass planes; and next to it other glass planes with more spots in the same color. Or a delicate line of yellow oil paint on the bottom edge of a white piece of paper.

Can a single blot of color embody the mystery of painting? Or does it only add to its (further) de-mystification? Is a thin line of oil color primarily an experimentation with color devoid of all emotion? Or does one single colored and painted line suffice to enter the sphere of poetry? The painter Christian Frosch is not committed to one or the other. He began painting in the traditional manner as a figurative expressionist, being impressed by the work of Francis Bacon, for instance. However, instead of painting pictures he soon began to cut up stretchers and use the loose pieces of wood to ‘frame’ synthetic fabrics. This was inspired by some warped stretchers with badly stretched canvases. He has used such ‘accidents’ over and over again, and from the ‘aberration’ he has developed an artistic principle.

Since he began transforming the traditional picture into a painterly object Frosch has turned his back on conventional painting. Instead of stroking different brushes across the canvas, he arranges them according to size as a figurative image. And he stopped pressing colors from a tube onto the picture surface, ‘banning’ them instead to containment in glasses like objects in a pathological collection. This simple trick was enough to ‘preserve’ painting and at the same time throw up the same question that has been asked since Marcel Duchamp with regard to painting’s end. But what form of painting is meant here? Painting as the continued experiment, motivated by the drive to irritate and expand our perception? Or is it about painting as existential reflection, carried by the breath of silence, the soundlessness of paradox and the invisible air of death, painted in the colors of caution and fright? And is it possibly about the realization that the one may inevitably exclude the other? Does the spirit of experimentation kill the objective reflection on the spirit of poetry, or can both be possibly reconciled?

Because in the shadow of modern consumption culture there are no longer any painterly certainties, Christian Frosch has almost inevitably become a ‘painting’ researcher. “I paint because I cannot do otherwise”, he says. And: “Painting has for a long time now no longer been carried out with just brushes and colors.” From the very beginning he was interested in the question: “What is painting, and where does the object begin? How do painting and the object relate to each other? When does

the one turn into the other, and where are they no longer indistinguishable? Instead of rediscovering his colors on the path of a painterly certainty he tests his colors in ever new 'experiments' which he himself calls 'trial arrangements'. And although he has not painted a conventional painting for years, he still considers himself to be a painter. He researches, therefore he paints. Researching and painting are inextricably entwined. And while he is unremittingly engaged in discovering for himself a new form of painting, he is also secretly trying to develop the painting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much patience and playful (novel) curiosity are much a part of Frosch's painterly research as his continuous well-calculated trial arrangements. The precision of his concept is fundamentally more important to him than the quickness and quantity of his artistic 'production'. The difficulty lies in not being beguiled by his own ideas. What seems in his pictures to be a fixed idea and quick formal movement has actually been crystallized through a slow process of re-search and selection. In his art nothing happens as a fast sleight of hand; instead the simplicity of his work is the result of a deliberate process of reduction developed in a long 'painterly trial' full of detours, fringes, seductions and errors. For the artist, the (or his) concept is finally in equilibrium if his sensuous presence and challenge to think balance each other out. Both must be imperative: an imperative possibility.

A single spot of color, extricated from the routine of all colors, has enormous presence. Like a biologist who places a substance on a specimen slide in order to magnify it under a microscope for research, Christian Frosch has pressed a spot of color between two glass panes in his so-called 'Macros'. The event is comprised of a single color (as a point of forceful concentration) that spreads into a blot (through pressing it between the glass planes). The blot of color is an elementary expression of a color's appearance. And the pressure exerted by the glass panes is also an elementary operation in a process. He has pressed various spots of color in this way, thereby creating a series. In order to compare the forms. And in order to compare the shade of each color. Their similarities and differences. And in order to illustrate that it is basically about nuances.

In this manner he has taken the color white from three different companies and pressed them between two window panes in order to illustrate (the) differences that occur under the same conditions: color variations, different spreads and traces of drying. The differences are so obvious that one's customary apprehension of color becomes more analytical. There remains at the same time a vivid fascination with a simple, bright point of color, an inexplicable enchantment that is manifest in every isolated point of color, even in an undesired spot on a piece of clothing or piece of paper. The spot of color as something that unmistakably separates itself in its own color from everything else. Christian Frosch has undertaken the same test with various other colors: primary yellow, Prussian blue, cadmium orange. In this way he not only compares shades of the same color but also those of other colors together. The painterly and research components involved here are just as inextricably entwined as the interplay of (mental) austerity and 'pure' joy of color.

Christian Frosch has titled another research sequence 'Abstriche' ('Smear Test'). Using yellow oil color he has applied a single delicate film of color on the lower edge of a piece of paper. The paper slowly absorbs the oil, and, similar to the imprint of a wave that the retreating ocean leaves behind on the sand, a smear of yellow is created, becoming lighter towards the upper edge. The experiment encompasses as many studies as there are pieces of paper in the block. And each piece of paper exhibits different traces of oil. Different, yet similar. Similar and yet not the same. The same procedure always brings about a different result, thus also confirming the procedure itself: the same result in different variations. But what result are we talking

about? And is it just as meaningful as an artistic concept as the coloring that a litmus paper shows in determining whether something is acidic or basic?

Do the subtle differences in the oil tracing demonstrate the basic nuances of uniqueness? Or are they only dependent upon general conditions: color temperature, how thick the oil is applied, the invisible irregularities in the various pieces of 300 gram paper? Are all the subtle nuances of the oil tracing on paper possibly subject to an inescapable law or perhaps just chance? Frosch pins the small pictures next to each other and in this way the entire series creates a fantasy of repetition that says nothing else but that each repetition truly represents a small nuance. You never step into the same river twice, the philosopher said. And you never paint the same painting twice, even if you are trying to. You also never even look at the same picture twice. No moment is the same as the other, because you are not the same in every moment, even though or especially because you are the same person.

In the light of these 'smear tests' concepts such as transformation and individuality are to be interpreted differently than the way they are generally being done today. These concepts are less spectacular yet all the more general, less programmatic yet all the more fundamental. While fashionable laws of modern culture of consumption and media celebrate individuality in colorful extremes and bold vagaries, proclaiming change as a message of salvation, Christian Frosch shows by means of a few color points and numerous smears of color that human beings are more or less similar in that they are never truly quite the same. In the course of his seemingly 'neutral' artistic research the (individual) human being becomes suddenly evident. One discovers oneself in a spot of color, and recognizes oneself in a smear of oil color. Indeed, Christian Frosch insists that not the history of art but his highly personal life experiences represent the point of reference of his work. It is therefore unnecessary to try to understand his expanded concept of painting within art historical categories. It would be better to take a look at the way children or researchers apply their playful (novel) curiosity to discovering the world and thus realize that the material processes of our reality make far more meaningful experiences visible than all our thought-up belief systems. Christian Frosch's artistic work is therefore a return to the concentrated simplicity with which children are still capable of recognizing the importance of the world. He himself said that the kind of clarity he is looking for in his art is inseparable with the kind of clarity he is looking for in his life. In this way he has increasingly been able to focus his pictures on ever less detail.

This simple insight sends the message that the plainer and calmer his pictures become the stronger they stand out against the endlessly moving images that dominate our culture everywhere. Of course this approach can refer to the position of avant-garde artists as much as to the broad field of experience exhibited by painterly specialists who particularly stand out in the entire field of art by their insistence on a strictly outlined concept. Christian Frosch's painterly position as an outsider, however, is based on particularly overcoming these positions. He does not want to bind his work to a certain principle or style.

Basically, the nonsense about style, strategies and distinctive trademarks is a trap that modern culture - and art - has been caught in. "Arrange it that way.

Everything stays the same and everything changes. What is in the world is really opposites", wrote Agnes Martin in one of her legendary yet little known writings. Nothing more can be added.

Cologne - Höhenhaus,  
January 2002

