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Portraiture, Narrative and Other Strands
of Practice in the Work of Lothar Götz

To portray Lothar Götz as a portrait or narrative painter would seem at first to be a somewhat willfully contrary interpretation of a body of work which appears – at least at an immediate visual level – to deal in a language of abstraction, one that would seem to reference origins in the Bauhaus or the Suprematist movements from the early years of modernism.

Interestingly, whilst Götz does use the word abstract in defining and explaining his work, this is not as some glib summary of the shapes and lines of colour that compose it, whether in his drawings and paintings or his large wall-works. He recognizes, of course, that these elements often serve to cue an automatic first reading of his work, for in any crude marshalling of art between the abstract and the representational, his would on first acquaintance seem to fall into the former category. However, whilst its forms, materials and surfaces bear no obvious representational elements, it is not really abstract either – despite the impression gained from a superficial reading of its ‘style’ – for every element in a composition references a background architectural and spatial model or narrative that Götz is visualizing when working on a piece. This could be a blue shape representing a pool in a bungalow, or a series of lines fanning out, signifying a terrace overlooking a view. Tellingly though, when asked, Götz describes his work as ‘being abstract in concept’ rather than in style.

Where he does perceive abstraction is in the creation of an abstract space – what he describes as another layer of space in which the work happens – whether this is one that is notionally laid across the surface of the paper in his drawings or that lining the walls of the room in which he is creating a wall-painting. In the latter case Götz characterizes this additional imaginative layer as a kind of *trompe l’œil*, but an abstract one: a space containing references to his internal ideas. And unlike the fictive spaces and perspectives of representational murals – created to extend perception away out of a room, like the transcen-

dent religious space depicted within the Rococo frescoes that Götz spent hours gazing up at in Church as a child – this is space that extends back into the room. He links this concept of abstract immanent space that reaches into and connects with real life with the ideas and praxis of the Bauhaus. Hence, he sees his abstract forms as not purely platonic – in and of themselves, referencing only the material of the canvas or wall – but as elements of an art practice linked to real life. As such it is constructed out of a profusion of imaginative connections and ideas generated by his own particular enthusiasms, obsessions, and readings: of his being in the world.

This narrative might reference particular people or characters, a vase of flowers, or a series of films: witness, for instance, the recent wall-work *House for Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, part of the *Re-make / Re-model* exhibition at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland (2010/11). Here Götz enveloped all the gallery spaces into a fictive ensemble – that of a modernist villa for one of his favourite film directors – and filled it with an art collection: the work of the other artists in the show.

Sometimes a work can also contain a number of ideas or interlinked narratives coming not only from film, but also from music or books. *Winterreise* (2010), for example, shown at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona, took its title from Schubert’s celebrated song-cycle, following a bleak winter journey. The stronger reference behind the work for Götz, however, was the story of Hans Castorp in Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*. Castorp, a near-hypochondriac, enters an Alpine sanatorium initially for a short visit, which subsequently becomes endlessly extended. The book describes the strangely timeless environment in which Castorp becomes suspended, removed from the everyday life he had known in the ‘flatlands’ below and set against a vividly painted landscape of whited-out mountains and blizzards.

This would seem a strange, even random theme for a work produced during the springtime in coastal Barcelona. However, when asked about the ideas behind the work, Götz described how the atmosphere and siting of the Joan Miró Foun-

dation, perched a little aloof and isolated on a ridge above the city, reminded him of the imagery from the book. He also reacted strongly to the atmosphere and architectural forms of the building itself, designed by Josep Lluís Sert in 1974. Its white flanks and distinctively curved light scoops in the gallery ceilings made Götz think of cold space, of icebergs and igloos, so the colours he chose referenced the bright colours traditionally said to be dreamt when sleeping during a snow storm. These strands of thought all merged into a vivid snow-dream on top of a mountain – hence the connection to *The Magic Mountain*.

I have described the background to this particular work at some length in order to illustrate how each wall-work is informed by a mixture of sources and imagery. These sources are then conceptually abstracted in the making of the work to form this layer of imaginative space. Hence while Götz’s work never attempts to represent reality directly, it is still connected to it: to what he is reading or what he has seen.

Notably, his wall-based projects have shifted away in recent years from primarily using the actual physical configuration of the gallery or space as a generator. In earlier projects, the forms of the painting were often adjusted, defined, or even cued by the random configurations or idiosyncrasies of the space: the positions of electric sockets, the level of a window sill, the line of a half-formed groin marking the position of a demolished wall. Götz would then use these interruptions in the space to generate or adjust elements in the painting, to define where two abstract elements met, or to determine the distance from the floor of a band of colour.

In this way the forms of earlier wall-works were often tailored to the physical particularities of the space itself. Now, whilst the wall-works remain site-specific, they do so perhaps in a more conceptual way, more detached from incidental measurements and determined primarily by the ideas or narratives behind them, by an abstracted feeling for the space or venue as a whole. Frequently, as was the case with Sert’s galleries at the Miró Foundation, this will stem from an idealized idea of the overall design and

architecture of the building, not from the pragmatic reality of the built space itself.

Of course, in laying a perfect idea onto or across the actual space of a room, Götz is aware that, in addition to physical irregularities, there will also always be a degree of 'conceptual non-fit' – as he calls it. This is something he rather relishes, for the paintings are not tailored or resolved exactly to the space, nor is he attempting to create the sense of a fully illusory space for the viewer. And whilst there might of course be some hint of this break with reality – created, for instance, by a blue area of wall chiming with the memory of a swimming pool – it is only illusory for a second. There is no attempt to create a stage-set effect, giving a hundred-percent illusion, nor to create some perfected Gesamtkunstwerk. When he creates a yellow room, the important thing is not the experience of being immersed in yellow but the idea of a yellow room itself. The physical effect of the colour is never intended to be in and of itself, but to have an intellectual effect on the viewer, perhaps stimulating imaginative avenues of thought or perception.

While the look of the work is important – in the sense of its looking good, being a good composition – there is always a further reason behind it: a combination of the purely visual and conceptual that maintains a space between the viewer and the work – a space of negotiation. His aim therefore is not, for example, to create a perfect yellow room and thereby achieve a sense of some break with reality, nor is it to provoke some immediate physical reaction or impact as some artists might set out to do, expecting the viewer to go into an installation in order to say: 'Wow!'

Götz's sense of 'conceptual non-fit' means his wall-based projects are neither Gesamtkunstwerke nor just a single picture plane or series of picture planes, but something poised in-between. Götz has observed that this results in some people finding his work unsatisfactory. Because they do not try to create a complete mood, and the intended impact is not always clear his works make the viewer feel slightly uncomfortable or dissatisfied.

As a result, even when he has the opportunity to create an environment of 'total

immersion', this element of 'conceptual non-fit' always remains evident. The work he did for the *Up in the Air* project in Liverpool (2002) is a good illustration of this. Each artist was assigned an empty flat in a soon-to-be demolished tower block. In his flat, Götz made a series of enveloping colour wall-paintings that wrapped around each of the rooms. In addition he bought pieces of furniture, clothes, cans of food, almost as if acquiring props for a theatre performance, and arranged them in each room for the viewer to experience. These objects introduced the idea of an absent occupant, providing very subtle clues – a table with a flower here, a closet of clothes ajar there, or some unfolded underwear placed ready on a bed – about their character (solitary, ordered). This sparse environment was thus only partially illusory, allowing for a dialogue and questioning in the mind of the viewer about the order of precedence between the 'real' space of the work, that of the existing architecture of the flat and that of the world beyond: glimpsed in the spectacular views out over Liverpool. Taken together all these factors created an uncertainty in the experience which was never completely resolved.

This work exemplified the sense of an underlying narrative in Götz's work, which is often suggested by the titles he uses. In the case of Liverpool this was *Waiting for a New Life*. It is a sense that is equally present in wall-projects that utilize only one wall, but is most evident in many of his drawings and paintings where the connecting abstracted shapes he makes – representing the rooms of a villa or the landscape surrounding a country house – are threaded together by specific imagined narratives. These often involve the preconception of a particular character that then generates the ideas for the house or home they might live in. This, in turn, forms the subject of the work itself. Unlike the *Up in the Air* project – with its anonymous tenant – the identity of the characters in his drawings is often more explicit.

When asked why houses designed for specific individuals and characters are such a recurrent theme in his work, Götz replies that you can learn far more about someone's character from how they live than just by talking to them. Hence the drawings of spaces and houses; and

indeed many of the other works generated by the idea of an individual's life, including *Up in the Air*, can be seen as both narratives and portraits, for they not only tell the story of a person's life through their living space, but also in a sense depict them.

Of course, the individuals and characters who form the cues for the various works also serve to illuminate Götz's own life, interests and obsessions. This ranges from the portrayal of childhood memories, as in his exhibition at Museum Goch in 2004 titled *Häuser für Tollmi* (Tollmi being the name of a beloved childhood fantasy figure); artists whose work he likes, witness his drawing *Haus für Anni und Josef Albers* (2007); architects whose plans he finds interesting, such as the series of drawings *Häuser für Mario Botta* (2006); and celebrity figures he comes across in the gossip columns of the free papers he picks up travelling to and from his studio in London, like *House for Kate Moss* (2009).

Some projects, conversely, have been inspired by portraits painted by other artists, for example Velazquez's *Pope Innocent X* in Rome, which generated the drawing *House for Innocent X* (2010), or the Bronzino painting *Portrait of a Young Man in Antique Dress* (1545), which acted as the focus of Götz's contribution to the exhibition *Wildwuchs* (2009). In this latter exhibition, contemporary artists were invited to propose temporary installations for the galleries of the Landesmuseum in Hanover. Götz constructed a hexagonal pavilion-type structure to stand in the gallery space, adjacent to and inspired by this Bronzino painting. The faceted surfaces of the pavilion formed an abstracted reflection of the imagined character of the young man, with the triangulated shapes painted on them using a combination of colours inspired by those in the painting.

Another notable aspect of Götz's work that has emerged over the last few years is a new, more evident continuity in form as well as in the ideas running through the different mediums he uses.

As mentioned above, the wall paintings have become less directly, less measurably site-specific, with an abstract idea often as the primary generator: thus

more closely paralleling his drawings. The latter, meanwhile, have developed in the opposite direction, acquiring a more enveloping, more immersive quality achieved partly by the larger scale – A1 rather than A4. And they have also been joined by a body of new, larger paintings.

Götz's more recent series of paintings and drawings have in a sense also gone in the opposite direction to the wall-paintings, becoming more site-specific and often inspired by a particular city or place in which he finds himself. Perhaps not surprisingly, the series of drawings and paintings he produced in Rome during his residency at the British School last year, referred directly to what he saw and experienced there. It included the Velazquez painting of Pope Innocent X in the Palazzo Doria Pamphili mentioned above and his drawing *House for Nervi* (2010), inspired by the work of the great Italian architect Pier Luigi Nervi, such as his Sports Palace of 1960.

In terms of figural motifs, too, his work has become visually more cohesive in recent years, featuring, for instance, repetitive lozenge or diamond shapes that have been echoed right the way through his wall-works, drawings and paintings, providing a stronger visual link across the spectrum of his practice than was previously the case. As a result, the faceted patterning of many of his recent wall-works, such as the gridded triangles of *Winterreise* in Barcelona, has lent them an intensity more akin to that of his drawings.

The key difference, however, is still that whereas in his wall projects it is the architecture that provides the primary structural 'drawn' lines for a work, in his drawings he has to introduce these lines in order to structure them. So whereas the line is a crucial compositional and formal element in both his drawings and paintings, even when they are worked up further with colour, this is not the case in the wall-works. For these the act of drawing is only important in the preparatory stage – and then in a different vein: in the making of a sketch describing the work as an act of representation. In the final work, the space is defined not only by the lines of the architecture, but also by the lines that he lays down, often made only by the edges of pieces of tape

marking the boundaries of the colour fields and as such not meant to be read as lines in themselves. Instead, it is the impact of the colour the work introduces to a space that is its most important feature.

What Götz depicts in the preparatory planning sketches for the wall-paintings is the wall itself and its elevation (obviously wall-paintings are by nature elevational). As such this is another crucial difference between them and his drawings and paintings, in which Götz most commonly uses the abstracted plan form to represent the ideas of villas and houses.

Plans – or more accurately plan-views – seem to have a deep fascination for Götz. He describes how he considers a plan view, not exactly as a bird's-eye overview or indeed an accurate ground plan per se, but as a way to occupy a space imaginatively when working up a drawing. It is a process that he characterizes as one that allows him to see the house, to go to it and then to imagine being inside it, when working on a drawing.

Of course, in his public or gallery commissions for actual spaces, there are practical reasons for not painting or using the floor space as part of the work; and in any case, these are by default projects for which the plan already exists. Not surprisingly, it is the initial site visit that is a key stage for Götz in developing an idea for a project: the first point at which he physically occupies the space.

In any case, as he points out, any manipulation of the actual floor space, even painting it, has the effect of making the floor itself into a sculpture. In non-gallery projects in particular, Götz prefers the space for which he is commissioned to do a project, to maintain its material, practical function. He also likes everything already in the space that defines this function, such as the furniture, to stay where it is if possible, so that the space maintains its identity. In cases like this, he does not see his work so much as the partial creation of an ideal space, but as an imaginative second layer providing a fresh perspective on what is there already, a way to look at it anew. This is seen most clearly in projects where he

was unable to use the walls, such as that at Bow Church, which formed part of the *inter_mission* exhibition (2002). His work there took the form of coloured cushions placed along the aisles of seating – usable, practical items that formed the work when the church was not in use but which disappeared when people sat on them during services, only to emerge shuffled and displaced.

Naturally many other pragmatic issues impact on the development of wall-projects, which the idealized imaginative spaces of the drawing on the page do not have to deal with. These include the context defined by the theme a curator chooses for an exhibition, the presence of other artists and their work or the brief developed by an architect for a building.

In group shows the juxtaposition of other artists' work and the inter-reaction with other artists during an installation, give a temporary fellow-occupancy to a gallery space and inevitably impact on Götz's work on a particular project – and vice versa. In Barcelona, for example, the mutual interest that developed between him and the group of women from a female collective in Djabiné in Mauritania, who were working on their mural in an adjacent gallery, left a trace in their work of a small area of shapes and colours echoing those of Götz. After completion the two works exhibited a level of interesting synergy when experienced sequentially.

In projects where Götz has worked with architects, the relationship with a practitioner from another discipline of course also affects the outcome of his work – depending on the level of engagement and personal interaction. Götz developed a very successful working relationship with the architects Caruso St John on a project to refurbish the British Arts Council's main headquarters in London in 2007.

Unusually in this project, Götz was involved in developing ideas for the whole building and produced a work that was configured throughout it. Notably, the resulting work did not take architecture itself as its cue, but an idea of a landscape, that of a Bavarian mountain, which for Götz formed the abstract concept he used for the imaginary layer of space. This narrative saw the series of meeting rooms and lobby walls picked out in a sequence of

vivid colours, representing alms or Alpine flowers found on a walk, with each floor painted in a subtly differentiated shade of grey to represent a layer of cloud.

More recently, Götz completed a work for the new building of Westminster College in London, designed by the Danish architects Schmidt Hammer Lassen. In this case the initial brief was more limited in scope, defined around a wall-space behind the reception desk in the entrance lobby.

This site could perhaps be seen as a stereotypical one for a piece of 'public art', so Götz picked up, played with and subverted this idea, proposing a large wall-painting for the space entitled *Fall* (2010), which was a continuation of the architecture rather than being separated from it by a frame. The work wrapped around a corner from the lobby, altering the traditional perception of a work of this type as a single, vast, imposing corporate canvas and suggesting instead that it was 'merely' a wall finish, a decoration.

Indeed, much of his recent work has seemed to flirt with the idea of decorative, applied art, whether as a work in its own right or as part of an exhibition design: figure or ground. For the fiftieth anniversary of the Kunstmuseum in Bochum in 2010, for instance, he was asked to develop a project in the galleries that complemented the re-hanging of the permanent collection of paintings. This time inspired by a painting of František Kupka, *Le Rêve* (c. 1909), he proposed a series of rectangular vertical screens, each consisting of four or five sections, blocked out in colours cued from by the painting. This had the effect, in a more dispersed and less tailored way than the structure he designed in Hanover, of very gently manipulating and directing how people moved around the gallery spaces, providing a subtle new geography for their use. Many visitors to the Kunstmuseum no doubt perceived these screens as peripheral objects or even as part of the museum furniture, like the benches. Similarly, in the Sunderland work referred to earlier, Götz interpreted the theme *Re-make / Re-model*, by transforming the galleries into the *House for Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, painting all its wall surfaces in a series of blocks of colour. This in turn influenced the design

and curation of the show as well as the placement of the other works. Conceptually the whole show thus became his work but at the same time his work did not exist: it was both enveloping and invisible, either just background or almost a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk. The work also played with received hierarchies of work and objects – of wall painting as just background decoration or as a foil for other works in the space on which 'proper' painting, art in a sense as a luxury object, should hang.

These perceptual complexities are something that Götz has recently seemed to be inviting the viewer to experience in reading his work. This was perhaps exemplified in his solo exhibition *...driven by Emotion* at the Petra Rinck Galerie in Düsseldorf in 2009. The show used an unbuilt architectural project dating from the 1970s by the artist Olle Baertling as its cue: a proposal for a combined telecommunications tower and parliament building in Düsseldorf. In the exhibition, a copy of the original model for the scheme – reconstructed from photographs – was placed in the centre of the gallery space. Around this was exhibited the abstract concept that Götz developed for the surrounding space in which he re-imagined the interior of the tower. All the walls of the gallery were painted in a series of triangulated blocks of colour, while a hanging-wall of curtain made especially for the show blocked off and contained the space. On the walls, over the surface of his wall-paintings, he hung a series of his drawings and paintings: a perfect example of the slippage of perception between viewed and viewer, a project 'abstract in concept' but linked to the idea of someone or something in the real world.

Götz thus seems increasingly to be producing individual works that employ the many different facets of his practice – wall-painting, painting and drawing – in a new way. This has resulted in the creation of idiosyncratic spaces, demanding and eliciting a less singular or defined response from the viewer and offering a complexity of experience that seems only destined for further development.

(Parts of this article draw on a conversation between the author and Lothar Götz in London in January 2011.)