

>> Of course everything is there... <<

Hannah Weitemeier

Extract from a studio conversation between Hannah Weitemeier and the artist Stephanie Jünemann in Berlin on 19 July 1997. Certain rhythms and repetitions of the spoken conversation are deliberately intended as a fluent text or as an >artefact< of encounter.

H.W.: Today is my first encounter with your work, which is very exciting, of course... As I can see here from your biography, you already set up your own exhibition and relationship network for your art while you were studying in Kassel. What made you come to Berlin, then?

S.J. If you think about it, to get away from Kassel, you can go to Cologne, for example. I've been working there for two and half or three years with my gallerist together. But I've decided to go to Berlin. It's not yet so established. You're in the same situation as many other artists. The situation is still open, and a lot of things are radically changing. It also has something desolate about it that I find interesting... What I like is the fact that everything is not yet so unsolved... at the moment a lot of young artists are coming here. It's always better to come from outside right into a situation. I find the chaotic atmosphere here exciting, too. It's not yet so that it gets on my nerves; however, I don't know how long I'll stay here.

H.W.: Are these works hanging here on display in the exhibition at the Kunstverein Museum Schloss Morsbroich, too?

S.J.: At the moment I've only got only a part of my works here which will come in the exhibition; most of the pictures are in my stockroom in Kassel, because I can show them at the present of > documenta< now to those who are interested. I studied in Kassel until 1995 and I've working for the last year in Berlin now. But what you see here in the studio is representative and makes something clear... I often take materials which stands before me out of the contemporary situation and I try them out. This large picture in orange (1997 "Plexi V," acrylic macrolon, plexiglas (114 x 112 cm) is one of eight pictures in which I've taken plexiglas segments. What is special about it is the fact that they are slightly domed - normally I work on smooth white resopal tiles - but these pictures all have the slight arch in the plexiglas tile and that's the reason why the solution with that of the wall has lifted, transparent plexiglas frames... You feel something more, the materiality. The tiles are only lightly gounded so that they still stay somewhat transparent. I pulled these eight tiles from a container in a factory. They are all the same size and undistorted, but they have these arches, because they were put out of shape while hot, and so the arch stays stable. I did it like always and got into the material just like I found it. Although I also rather struggled with myself, because the idea of making arched pictures is already a step... After long consideration and experimenting, I decided that it can do the pictures good.

H.W.: That's why the frames are remade especially for this form so that the character of a pictorial object materializes?

S.J.: I had the same company make the frames of the pictures, which, of course, became expensive. All the pictures were finished in the last 2-3 months, and three of them have already been sold. Of course, I was very glad...

H.W.: It occurs to me that they are identical in form; at the same time they are not all quite quadratic, but different in the coloring and the grid structure. Do you consider them to be a related series, or is there a certain sequence?

S.J.: That fits in with the space where I present them, the local conditions. I wouldn't hang any picture next to any other.

H.W.: Due to the montage, the works have the advantage that they have an expanse of light behind them. That lends them a particular transparency, this gloss. At first glance you might think of a photomontage...

S.J.: They have a certain material reality that could also be ascribed to a photo, for example, dull or glossy, but I'm always very happy when people look at my pictures in the original, because they don't function on photos... They stem from very determinable material conditions. That lends this transparency and clarity in the structure..., yes, a leap has been made again in the work with this series.

H.W.: Just a few questions on technique. What kind of pigments do you work with on plexiglas?

S.J.: I take acrylic clear varnish and give a slight touch of pigment to it... The pictures are created reclining. I pour the pigment on it, take bright squeegee and stretch the pigment evenly over the complete surface. With these pictures I then finally go in the pigment once more with the squeegee and slide them a bit to the side at regular distances in the horizontal direction and in the vertical... You can see it on the layers. Here, for example, (1997 "Plexi V," acrylic, macrolon, plexiglas, 114 x 112 cm) a clean cut arises and there the pigment slides together and thickens. I let them stay like that as they stay and run, because I don't want to force the pigment... It becomes spatial, too, due to this thickening. In this way a darkness, a depth arises in this thickened area.

H.W.: The single lines hardly appear in the foreground. It has rather the effect of a material fabric, or a prefabricated grid...

S.J.: That depends on the work with the squeegee. I construct the squeegee myself, fix PVC strips on the wooden laths and the minimal unevenness of the strips leave traces.

H.W.: That recalls the technique of classical glaze painting with lots of transparent layers overlapping.

S.J.: The technique is very simple, very reduced, but the pictures are very complex. Even after two layers you often can't be retraced any more how the picture is actually structured.

H.W.: The structure and the methods also strongly recall the technique of the art of the 60's, the new tendencies back then of concrete art and Op-art... also with regard to the geometric structure and the simplification of the material... yet here, at first glance, the pictures have a somewhat strong textile, fabric quality about them. This kind of enlargement of a material woven character comes about through the optical layer of overlapping with the horizontal and vertical movement...

S.J.: Yes, but when you look at it closely and recognize the spaciousness and layering, too, it becomes clear that it is not fabric. I painted on canvas too at the beginning of my painting career... but then this classical medium was too determining and constant. I didn't want continuously the texture of canvas...

H.W.: In addition still, the complimentary colors in their effect, it looks superficially seen rather technically perfect, as if it could have been made mechanically...

S.J.: Yes, they look very even, and at the first moment you might think a grid has been laid on the picture and exactly measured out... There are other artists who work according to the measure of perfection... but that's not the case with me. Everything is slightly staggered and uneven. It's made by hand. Therefore, perfection doesn't exist at all, and these fine fractures

where it then spills over again particularly interest me. The absolute always conceals the danger of explicitness and one-sidedness... For example, here's a work with only one color and one operation, and at this place, at this cut I only strengthened the pressure, pressed the pigment stronger and right away a close-distant effect came about (1994, acrylic on resopal, 32.3 x 36.4 cm, untitled). Even the slightest pressure conceals the rhythms and wave, the effect of the sharply focused and the blurred. The sensors stay in tact, although it is only one operation.

H.W.: Even so, it seems to me as if I've already seen these techniques more often in art, without wanting to name any single names here now.

S.J.: Certainly, all this has already been seen some time once before. But I developed my technique during my studies. At that time in Kassel I didn't even know the representative of the different tendencies... of course, you get tips from the professors... in Kassel from the different visiting professors. My class with Prof. Norbert Radermacher - he's a sculptor himself - was an interdisciplinary class at the time I was studying with him. That was interesting and exciting, and for me very good so. You were free in what you did. Everything was allowed, a lot possible. That was good. You could simply experiment...

H.W.: But yet it remains interesting that after over 30 years, those are already two generations of artists today, again similar minimalist tendencies have reappeared, although in other forms and from different starting points.

S.J.: Of course, it's all there already... I think the way today's artists go about it is strong and very differently related to the peculiar personality, to the attitude you have toward work and reality. I realized that in my case, too. My work, which is rather abstractly and soberly structured, shows no gesture, forgoes characteristic style. And so this has something anonymous and mechanical, which has a lot to do with me, too. Because the attitude I find in these pictures also show my attitude at the moment. The way I go about working with colors. I let them live in their inherent characteristic colors, I work with them just as they act and run. The process in itself, which always repeats itself and always the same again, has its own continuity... Therefore, at the beginning I also had difficulties when other students asked how long I wanted to continue doing that, or how could I stand it at all... but I've simply realized that does me good, this way which is open to the front and also includes coincidences. It is this possibility of sudden development I can't control or influence, but I'm prepared to let it stay, to absorb, to accept and respect it and continue to work with it... I can also use these coincidences and experiences for myself. I'll become familiar with them and control them, but never completely, because then something else materializes again.

H.W.: But you surely can't call coincidence?

S.J.: Sure, things continually come up that I can't determine beforehand, can't predict, for example, which color I'll take, how many layers I'll apply to the picture. Most often that's structured in the picture. It's an interaction, a dialogue, like in a conversation. It develops, the starting point is open... The picture composes itself in the process, and if I see, now it's coherent, now it's enough, then I stop, otherwise it is too full or too much.

H.W.: But that sounds like a purely subjective decision.

S.J.: Yes, I guess that can't be separated. As far as the radical representatives are concerned, I'm rather sceptical. This rationality and feeling can't be separated the way the left half of the body can't be separated from the right. It's all combined. The one goes with the other and I don't want a separation at all, either.

H.W.: Do you work also work laterally with both hands?

S.J.: Yes, I guide the squeegee with both hands. I don't want to separate the two, don't want to try, either, because I want my work to come along as naturally and matter-of-factly as possible. I don't want to force anything. I think, though, that art also generates light, regardless of whether it comes about somewhat under torture, or whether it has been somewhat forced, or how much loss of energy there has been in the process. So, if a compulsion exists, it can be surely felt in the works... I'd rather let it run, I know my part and my share in the works, but I know, too, about the many possibilities I leave out. Of course, I'm continuously being spoken to by other artists in the case of the halftone pictures who have to do with technical conditions, which appear quite perfect in the execution. But such conditions can also miss the mark in the production. In turn that can become a struggle and make the entire business rather unpleasant... I don't care if the handling of a line isn't perfect; even coincidence entails something unforeseen. I let it simply stay the way it is. I simply accept it as perfect even if it isn't, but for me it's exactly a straight line; for many, on the other hand, it's too straight.

For three or four years, these >finger works< have been continuously turning up. I draw the lines directly in the moist pigment surface with my fingers, which results in a direct identity with the unevenness. There's a special text by Herbert Jochmann in the catalogue about the works.

H.W.: Still a lot of other pictures are hanging here and standing, also in other formats...

S.J.: That again is another area. Those are my >paper works< which deal with organic structures. Here's a work from 1993, a favorite work. I used quite different sorts of paper for my paper works: drawing paper, writing paper, wrapping paper. Depending on the composition, paper reacts differently when it becomes moist. When it dries it becomes smooth again, and with the next layer of pigment it is wavy again. Of course, the pigment runs according to the composition of the paper and then dries out with it. In this way the rather organically appearing, biologically working structures materialize like micro-absorptions, or like water...

H.W.: ... or here like drapery or marble. How many layers of paper lie on top of each other?

S.J.: It's one paper each, and the result changes and adjusts itself according to the kind of paper... this here is a very thin paper material which results in the transparent clarity, something almost stoney... there the surprises are always enormous. I love these surprises, for example, when this paper gave it these constructions and formation of bubbles (1994, acrylic on Japanese woodcut paper, girder tiles, 33 x 28 cm, untitled). That's actually a very absorbent Japanese woodcut paper. The sheet is stuck tightly in the rear and lies loose on the top in front, but if the paper is so extremely absorbent it immediately attaches itself firmly to the undercoat and can't run off anymore, and these airtight inclusions cause these formation of bubbles...

H.W.: It looks almost like a modulated body.

S.J.: The effect lies also in the format. I worked a lot with small formats to make some experiments. The intense gloss of the surface looks like it is glazed. However, it results from the acrylic paint which is obtained in that way. The pictures are not touched up. It's the paint that I usually worked with, here in layers of pigment, once in the direction yellow and then blue. The color always follows my intuition. For me, the organic surfaces in the paper works, if it becomes nature-like, a balance, a counterbalance to my works on resopal of plexiglas.

H.W.: The variety of effects is astounding, but the large format works on fiberboard, resopal or plexiglas are also in the case of the paper works the materials of the everyday, the unspectacular, while the technique stays the same, rather the qualities of the material come through and draw attention to the otherwise invisible reactions.

S.J.: The technique is always the same with all the pictures: I pour pigment out, I take the squeegee, I draw the pigment with it over the surface, regardless of whether it's paper or synthetic material, or wood... I repeat the method constantly. You learn when the paper is wet, for example, that it wrinkles, creases, waves... this method conceals such a wealth in itself when you bring color to it and they are then applied in layers. Actually everything is already there in this process. The picture is already calculated in this sheet of paper... I don't want to invent anything. I want to allow something to come through; I want to make something possible.

H.W.: You have to be careful that it doesn't have just a decorative effect...

S.J.: I can allow the process to come through or conceal something. I can eliminate something or try to stop it. But in 99 % of the cases I tend to permit the things to come through in the work as well as in the reflection. I reject the sober drawings or the fixed form and let something materialize.

H.W.: The common denominator is on the surface rather the luster, the brilliance.

S.J.: Like in a photo there is also the decision when comes to lacquer, whether the surface should be dull or lustrous. You can also see quite clearly how brilliance becomes lost with dull surfaces. But the luster doesn't bother me (laughs)... I want this clarity, I want this depth even if the smooth luster sometimes has the effect of being somewhat absent. You are mirrored in it, too. On the one hand, you can look deep down inside; on the other hand it leaves one visible on the outside, too, because it reflects... I like this lustrous coolness.

H.W.: Where does the meticulous reaction to the material, the tireless investigation of action and reaction come from?

S.J.: I actually started with sculpture. I also trained to be a theater set designer. My problem with sculpturing was that I was too good at it... the technical craftsmanship gave me no problems at all. But it bothered me that has always been placed in the foreground. It advanced like that... I've tried out all the classical materials in sculpturing: modulated and poured in plaster and concrete. I've taken wood, worked in stone, in sandstone, marble and have gone through everything possible... I simply did it too well and thought I had to get away. When I study art, there has to be something different - I already knew before that I'm skillful at craftsmanship.

H.W.: And what have you been looking for?

S.J.: I have to do what I can't do. That was then the clear step toward color... I had to dare to do something and so for the first time I tried to have a fling with color. I started with strips of cardboard and cheap paint on wrapping paper and have in that way caused an act of liberation, wild and gestural in the colors and keeping it up to the full. I wanted to continue quite unassumingly, not just fall into a confined position, to run up expense and then be inhibited... I deliberately cut these strips of cardboard and didn't use any brush, because I know I'm very meticulous and very pedantic, and if I had used a brush, I would have probably begun to paint. I wanted the action, because sculpting is also very arduous and prolonged - now I wanted the opposite - keeping it up and fast. Then the work with color changed. I was fascinated by certain phenomena. There was something interesting for me, pictorial areas in a deserted, wild surface, which I then isolated and began to make deliberately in experiments. I went further analytically and experimentally that way, the spatulas became increasingly broader until they were as broad as the pictorial surface itself. In addition to the spatula operations these elevations always arose, these beads of color - I found them exciting, too. But on the whole it was much too much color, too many tensions and directions, too many gestures. It was clear to me first something had to be tidied up and sorted, structured... It's one of my traits. I bring along my order in it everywhere. That was then also just the same in my approach in painting. Sometime there were then still only vertical

structures in the picture which later got round to horizontal structures until I arrived at the black and white values around 1993 and in 1994 drew just one pigment across the entire surface and let stay. Soon everybody always said to me, you have to see the pictures of Gerhard Richter...

H.W.: And what kind of differences did you discover for yourself?

S.J.: Until today, it has remained so for me that primarily no weight is put on craftsmanship, in any case not for me... Also, first of all, what I make with the squeegee doesn't have anything to do with talent or skill or craftsmanship skills. It's a very reduced and almost mechanical method I find very good for me... In sculpting, everything follows the conception, and nothing is left to chance. For example, when a stone is cut... but in my work I've worked in coincidence. It's there and I welcome it and am open for every surprise... It brings the change for incalculability that assures that something new materializes that I can't think out myself beyond my power of imagination.

In retrospect, it becomes logical again that my pictures appear so clean, orderly and perfect today... I realized that I have to accept it, because I'm not allowed to close myself off, but rather work with it, and I live... But those are also processes of development that you go through once... (laughs).

H.W.: How do you judge the public's reactions in your exhibitions? Is there the trained eye for the subtleties of perception and the subtle fractures within the structuring, or are there classical prejudices, too?

S.J.: I've had a lot of luck there and can see clearly, too, just how my pictures are. They come in this period. It's probably difficult for painting today, because it has less to do with the speeds like they become determined by the predominance of the new media. Naturally, there are always emotional reactions and associations - particularly in the fifties... the tartan skirt, a material or fabric. Nobody can free themselves from it, from the historical of the past spaces, from the smells of the coloring, from feelings or thoughts of grandfather, grandmother, slippers, living room, wool blankets. Depending on whether you've got difficulties or positive memories, it triggers off strong feelings, or strengthens the insecurity. I can't prevent that and don't have anything against it, either. In any case, I don't title my pictures, because titles and labels form boundaries that I want to keep open. I only indicate a system of month, year and number of pictures in one month, for example, >Jan.97/1.< In that way I've got a unique description for the systemization and the sale, which remains open to the front...

H.W.: From that it's clear that you already developed the interest in the art market while you were studying and obvious with success?

S.J.: Kassel is certainly the >documenta< city. That expands the view beyond one's own umbilical cord... So while I was still studying I founded the new Kassler Kunstverein with a few people and was on the board for a few years. The view of the college was too narrow for me, and I wanted to know how the other side functions... I was lucky. Very early on I met my first collector in Kassel by way of my activities. Aside from that, I've got to know my gallery in Cologne, and contacts are expanded from outside to make my work visible. Above all else, I've got to break down a lot of prejudices. I know today there are lots of people who don't produce any art, but they understand art. They've got a real passion and enthusiasm for art, and that's wonderful.

Translation: William Mickens