

Let there be surface!

Light and the monochrome surface in the work of Christian Herdeg

Ever since light art established itself as a genre of its own, the fascination that it generates has been puzzled over. With more mass appeal than almost any other medium, its brilliant glow attracts a wide audience to museums. Not long ago, Hanno Rauterberg attempted to explain this phenomenon in *Die Zeit* as follows: “It is an art form without great significance, without meaning. It is what it is: immaterial and perhaps about to die out at any moment. This, however, the shining instant, is precisely what attracts people.”¹ This theory can be countered with the religious, transcendental connotation of light and primeval metaphors from the world’s creation myths. Both views have some merit, but the only undisputed fact is that we all feel drawn to light like moths. It is illuminating and deceptive at the same time, and we humans have always been inclined to let ourselves be seduced by an attractive appearance.

In the 1960s, artists began to address the effect and specific properties of light more intensively.² Representatives of Pop Art, Minimal Art and Post-Minimalism in America, Arte Povera’s protagonists in Italy and artists in Group Zero’s milieu in Germany were particularly influential in this regard. Around 1970, Christian Herdeg became the first artist in Switzerland to start working with the medium that had already fascinated him for a long time.

“Manipulation with light has been on my mind since I was nine years old,” he says, and adds a wonderful description of a remembered episode, in which

¹ Hanno Rauterberg, "Lichtkunst. Das grosse Leuchten", in: *Die Zeit* online, no. 17/2013, April 18th, 2013, <http://www.zeit.de/2013/17/lichtkunst>

² See Peter Weibel, “Zur Entwicklung der Lichtkunst,” in Peter Weibel, Gregor Jansen (ed.), *Lichtkunst aus Kunstlicht*, (exh. cat.) ZKM | Museum of Contemporary Art Karlsruhe, Ostfildern, 2006, pp. 86-223.

june beetles and homemade light stages play a role.³ Herdeg began his career as a photographer and cameraman. It was not until he took a detour through Canada that he found his calling as an artist – by chance, not at the local museums, but in the “earthly realm” of a neon workshop.

“Manipulation with light” – this wording might seem surprising, bearing in mind the rather sober geometric language of forms that Herdeg later established, and the fact that, apart from commissioned public art projects and the *Lyrical Neon* series, his “lights” are mostly dimensioned in a manageable way. He is not concerned with immersive light environments, such as those by James Turrell, Anthony McCall or Olafur Eliasson, in which we easily and gladly lose track of our orientation and relation to the world. Instead, his sculptural light objects are presented directly on the floor or on bases, or else mounted on the wall like reliefs.

This focus on objects with modest dimensions is not a limitation, but an implicit program that Herdeg’s art draws on, and within which he masterfully plays with the whole scope of light’s power of attraction. Many of his series of works thrive on purposeful dialog between the linear luminous element and pictorial two-dimensionality, an aspect that almost no other light artist explores so consistently. Here, monochrome color fields are suddenly enhanced with nuances of hue, geometric forms are visually distorted, or virtual spaces are opened up. Lately, in the *Blacklight* series, even the surface itself is becoming light, or to put it differently: in Herdeg’s work, light is now almost magically manifesting itself in a two-dimensional form.

³ Quotes from Christian Herdeg were recorded during a studio visit in May 2016.

LIGHT BEFORE SURFACE

The liaison between light and surface began at an early stage in Herdeg's work. After he approached Pop aesthetics in his first sculptures, such as *Red Explosion* from 1971 and *Metropolis* from the following year, objects with a geometrically reduced vocabulary already began to appear in 1973, in the course of which his first light panels also emerged. Despite these works' formal abstract nature, there is also a field of association here: the parallel vertical delicate light rods in the center can be considered reminiscent of conduits, the strings of an instrument, or organ pipes.⁴ However, what they do with the surface that they are placed in front of is more important: The tube lights lend the landscape format of the underlying panel a confidently upward-pointing emphasis. At the same time, the energetic radiance of the differently colored neon tubes lays a soft shroud over the monochrome absorbent canvas and entices different hues from it on each side of the light rods. The hazy shine has a painterly effect, especially in the confrontation with an actually painted surface. It is a plain and subtle manipulation that the artist undertakes here. As in many of his works, it is a visual perception game, the rules of which he freely makes clear to us at all times.

These early works already lay out Herdeg's core themes, which he has varied and intensified in various series of works to this day: the dialog between clearly delineated two-dimensionality and hazy atmospherics, the multi-layered symbiosis of emanation and absorption, the sculptural force of light, and light's painterly quality.

⁴ Volker Schunck, "Der Klang des Lichts," in *ibid.*, *Christian Herdeg*, Basel, 1992, p. 14.

The next major group of works in this context is the *Light in a Box* series from 1992-93. Work titles like *Ancient Forest*, *Night Passage* and *Oh to be in Love* (all from 1993) give no indication of the sharply challenging visual solutions on which they are based: The horizontal, slightly off-center division of a square is already enough to strain the eye. The color fields that thus encounter each other, sometimes contrasting, sometimes harmonious, are framed by a larger dark square background and veritably cut through by a vertical blue-white shiny argon tube light. Together with the boundary line between the two color fields, the “light cut” forms a cross shape: guiding lines that point in different directions. These elements, which create dynamism, are accompanied by the soft spreading of the light, which develops differently in front of each of the various base colors and, in turn, “paints over” their actual hues. In view of the powerful compositions, the acrylic glass shell in which Herdeg has enclosed these images seems almost repressive.

The artist’s short *Drifter* series from 1996-97 reads like a direct response to this imprisoned radiance. Here, elliptical panels are mounted diagonally on the wall and, again, crossed by a single fluorescent tube. Like an arrow, the straight line of light appears to pull upward, drawing and deforming the form behind it in its wake. Here, the experimental arrangements, geared toward contemplation of the effect of light on surfaces, are briefly overlaid by visualized kinetic energy.

At almost the same time, Herdeg had started to work on another of his oeuvre’s core series and one of his most famous ones: *Circle meets Square* (1996-2009). Here, he placed monochrome painted squares in front of a circular neon tube with a diameter only marginally wider than the length of the

square's sides. Much like the off-center division of the background surface in *Light in a Box*, this deliberate "imprecision" irritates the eye. It becomes unclear whether the circle is now contained by the square or vice versa and, together with the neon ring's luminosity, it causes the rigid square form to appear soft: The corners sometimes seem to bend outward and, at the center of the circle of light, a spherical form bulges as the gaze plunges into the color field behind it. In one of many variations on the basic concept, Herdeg has placed a black or dark blue square of equal size alongside this light-activated surface, where it firmly rests. Thus, by way of direct comparison, this work demonstrates how the world comes alive in the brilliance of the light between the apparent and the actual.

In parallel to the circle's encounter with the square, Herdeg worked on the (also significant) series *Dual Colors* from 1999 to 2010. This series is based on the findings from the *Light in a Box* works, but frees its visual formula from its display case and reduces it to the essential components. Resembling a diptych, two monochrome portrait-format rectangular panels are mounted directly on the wall here "like two traffic signs," as Herdeg describes them. The shaft of light running vertically through the space between the panels, protruding far above and below them, can now be read as both divisive and connective; its aura appears to visualize a magnetic field generated between two equally or unequally polarized forces.

Other works in the *Dual Colors* series have an extremely elongated landscape format. Two strip-like colored panels are placed directly beside each other and illuminated by a neon tube mounted beneath them. The ratio between lit and

unlit color surface is now almost one-to-one, and the painted surfaces appear to be carried by the light.

THE NEW TWO-DIMENSIONALITY

“Light must hit something, otherwise it goes unseen.” Herdeg demonstrates this fact in his multiple series of works on the theme of light and surface. The trick in observing these objects is to divert the gaze away from the attention-seeking luminous element, which appears as materialized light, and instead to focus on its dialog partner, the colored surface. This is where the light manifests itself in its various “aggregate states” (a key term in Herdeg’s work) and visibly nestles up to the lit object. At the same time, the color fields solidify in the glare of the lighting to make new hues and forms. However, not all possible color and light combinations are suitable for the visualization of these effects. The number of existing “valid schemes” for each type of work, as Herdeg calls them, depends on the meaning of the possible constellations. Does a “justified, democratic” interaction occur between this emanation and this absorption? This was, and continues to be, the question that preoccupies Herdeg, and which, in each new series of works, he can only answer after extensive research in his “light laboratory.”

Some time ago, Herdeg abandoned the colored background surface as a carrier for the light. Instead, he now lets light itself appear to be spread out two-dimensionally across the wall, where it takes on an even more painterly manifestation; he now also hides the light source.

This new phase began in 2005 with the first *Discs*: circular monochrome panels with a shining hole in the center. The outer edge of each disk is also surrounded by an aureole. Here, Herdeg emphasizes the light's ephemeral radiance more strongly than in earlier series, by causing it to appear two-dimensional without visible luminous elements. Thus, in its materiality, the light becomes directly comparable with the physically dense colored surface that it encounters. In the central opening, the radiance of the neon mounted behind the panel generates a permeable layer of light, which the eye sometimes perceives as a sphere, and which appears to bulge out of the surrounding ring. In combination with the radiant circle at the outer edge of the disk, this produces an effect that (albeit logically comprehensible) seems magical: the solid disk appears to really float in front of the wall.

In a second, larger variety of *Discs*, the circular ring stands on the floor, leaning against the wall. The confusing play on sensory impressions is additionally intensified by the fact that the cut-out hole is covered with an acrylic glass panel that has a hue of its own. As a result, the two-dimensional glow in the center is differently colored to the outer fringe of light, and it appears materially situated between the clearly contoured ring and the aureole. Thus, if the observer approaches such an object from afar, the perception shifts many times before it is possible to appreciate what is in front, what is behind, what is solid and what is fleeting.

While the light surface in the *Discs* series is still identifiable as the glare of a concealed luminous element, Herdeg manages to make light canvases that are ostensibly independent of light sources in the *Blacklight* works. The term "blacklight" presents a contradiction in itself. Herdeg draws attention to this

ambivalence in this ongoing series of works. *Magic Circle meets Square* (2012) is the title of a work that the artist also calls, with tongue in cheek, “Das Wunder von Wollishofen” (The Miracle of Wollishofen) in reference to the Zurich suburb where his current studio is situated. In this work, although fluorescent tubes are now visible again, they do not appear to emit any light. They form the dark outline of a square and only exhibit a slight glow at its corners, while a very sharply lined, light blue disk shines on the wall that they are placed in front of. Here, as if out of nothing, the light appears as a painterly surface, which in turn transforms into a sphere or cavity when observed for longer. On the other hand, it is also possible here, as is consistently the case in Herdeg’s work, to comprehend the fantastical phenomenon rationally: The dark glass tubes emit ultraviolet light, which is invisible to us. On the wall behind them, a round surface has been painted in fluorescent paint that reflects this radiant light, enabling the human eye to perceive it.

Nevertheless, the artist evidently delights in the perplexity that the observer evinces when faced with the *Blacklight* works, while at the same time, he himself is struck by the contemplative astonishment that many of his pieces cause. After almost half a century, Herdeg still even manages to surprise himself with his successful manipulative game of radiant light and surface effect: “It’s sometimes so overwhelming that it’s stronger than me, what the light can do. That has nothing to do with esotericism, but the physicality, the emanation, how the light occupies its space, this is magnificent.” As is always the case in art, the “significance” or “meaning” (Hanno Rauterberg’s terminology once again) attributed to this effect is in the eye of the beholder.

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