

Spaces of Enlightenment. On the works of Christian Herdeg

Since its medieval (Western) beginnings, light in art has been strongly associated with mental or spiritual experiences. However, modern and contemporary schools that try to connect with this kind of light symbolism (with all its strong religious and spiritual connotations) by using light as a material and medium are fundamentally misguided; too many shifts within society and within art itself, too many processes of alienation and above all too much scientific knowledge and technological advancement lie between the glass windows of St. Denis and today's artworks made from (generally artificial) light. And yet the invention of electrical light creates new metaphors of its own. Different technical methods and elements have been used to create light in various artistic contexts where art fully exploits their inherent semantic potential and gives them a new charge. Light tubes and fluorescent tubes included in Arte Povera, Minimalist art, Pop Art and Concept Art, for instance, reference the illumination of signs and adverts, the language of design and marketing. In spite of these varying connotations, images of transcendence and spirituality continue to be perceived in light art. This must be due to light's material qualities; it is a medium that cannot be grasped, both literally and figuratively.

For forty years, Christian Herdeg has been working with electric light, and until recently has focused on one specific kind of technological light production: light tubes containing noble gasses. Generally known as neon tubes, these light systems comprise hand-made, thin glass tubes with electrodes at each end. When a high voltage is applied, the low-pressure gas contained in the tube glows. The basic colour of the discharged light depends on the type of gas used. Pure neon glows orange-red, and pure argon glows blue-white, with its blue tone and UV content potentially reinforced by the addition of mercury. Alternatively, the physiochemical colour spectrum can be expanded by coating the glass tubes with fluorescent powder or by using coloured clear glass. The light can be made brighter or dimmer by changing the voltage. Despite being widespread in the world of signs and marketing, Herdeg's working material still has to be fashioned in a complex manual process. This explanation of the technology involved appears justified to me, as investigating the physiochemical properties and technical parameters of these light systems is central to Herdeg's artwork. In the mid-seventies, he collaborated with chemists from Heidelberg's Leuchtstoffwerke factory to 'compose' over two hundred of his own fluorescent powder mixtures, a finely graduated electric light 'painting palette' that opened the door for highly differentiated designs. This is an example of scientific processes being consistently and purposefully made to serve Christian Herdeg's aesthetic concepts. The constant sphere of action for his working process is the no-man's-land between empirical investigation and an artist's needs.

It was in the mid-seventies that Christian Herdeg discovered a language of shapes – reduced, but packed with meaning - that still characterises his work today, with the "Step-On" series of floor objects, in each of which he covers a continuous light tube describing a rectangle with a massive metal or stone slab. The tubes and the slabs are positioned so that the massive load from the flat but compact block floats on a cushion of light. The weight and mass of the slab rests squarely on the "incorporeal" light, seeming - against all the laws of gravity – to be supported by its immaterial energy. Aside from the contradictory materials, the peculiar effect of these floor objects is due to precise deployment of the neon or argon light tubes. The tubes' colour and light properties engage in a subtle dialogue with the materials of the slabs that weigh them down. They surround them with a band of light, a kind of colour field on the floor.

The different 'aggregate states' and above all the spatial dimensions of light and colour have always been central to Christian Herdeg's works. In "Boundless I" , a cube of transparent acrylic glass with a special white argon light tube running diagonally through its interior, he creates a vivid synthesis of corporeal and ephemeral presences, with a geometrical order and multiplying spatial expansions that seem virtually endless. One implied, optional aspect of these earlier works is crucial to the works from the late seventies: light layering and lightspace measurement. The group of works entitled "Licht vor

Licht” forms the point of departure for this, while their precise structure and careful shaping also suggest a crystallised comment on painterly issues. In each of these works, Herdeg mounts two light tubes on a transparent acrylic glass case. They occupy the same space and mark the central horizontal axis - one mounted behind the glass, the other on the outside of the pane. The reduced, simple setting contrasts with the rich, precisely arranged ‘colour emanations’. A clearly delineated light line created by the forward tube stands out strongly within a diffuse, oval colour field, surrounded by a narrow band of colour. The acrylic glass captures the rear tube’s light, imprisoning it, as it were, within a rectangular field. The box’s volume is ‘dissolved’ and replaced by ‘light matter’ that can be perceived spatially. Here we see Christian Herdeg creating light-and-colour objects with a corporeality produced solely by the spread of light. The colour contrasts, the light intensity and the subtly balanced gradations of each light colour all depend on precise use of technology – which, however, is never an end unto itself. It is never used solely because of its semantic potential or to showcase the range offered by technology. Instead, it is harnessed to shape the light pictures.

This makes it hardly surprising that Christian Herdeg was working on his first “Kunst und Bau” (art and architecture) project during this period. In “So near, so far”, which was installed in 1986 at Klotten airport, the artist fuses a treatment of kinetic issues with a reductive design and use of materials. Seven long light tubes, coated with different fluorescent powder mixtures, hang freely within the hall. Every tube is set into a prismatic acrylic glass bar whose surface reflects both the light from the tubes and the space’s ambient light. Like a mobile, these light bars define a space in the air. They form axes of light that traverse this space, criss-crossing and overlying it. The projects created over the following years mark a radical extension of this approach, with “Network”, created in 1986 for the sunlit atrium of a building owned by Ciba Geigy (today Novartis) in Basel, and “Synergy” , created in 1997 for the Platz der Einheit in Frankfurt am Main, featuring bold technological solutions and a puristic language of shapes. In these works, Herdeg’s light colours retain the shape of the light tubes, and are spatially expressed either as straight lines or as clearly-defined geometrical figures. These ‘light-space drawings’ are based on a constructive, almost architectonic vision of the graphic principle, using lines and glowing colour to create space and a dynamic.

Christian Herdeg’s projects for public spaces reveal another key characteristic of his work; his use of light as a medium includes natural light and any lighting conditions unique to an artwork’s setting. The artist expressly intends his art to be effective as an artistic form and as a spatial configuration under various different lighting conditions. Gallery rooms, generally darkened, are only one possible setting. Work groups from the past ten years, usually comprising wall-mounted artworks, have taken this principle even further, giving Herdeg’s artworks a pictorial presence in normal light conditions. The beginning of this can be seen in the “Dual Colours” series, which began in 1999. Here, Herdeg positions two MDF panels sprayed with contrasting acrylic and gouache paints and an argon light tube together, thereby intensifying the elements’ material characteristics and emphasising their different colouring. The blue-white light from the tube extends into the surrounding space, creating lit areas which are partially curtailed by the panels, while the panels’ nature as solid, opaque bodies – dense, compact volumes of colour - is accentuated by the light. Their haptically perceptible objectivity contrasts with the light’s immaterial corporeality. In “Circle Meets Square”, a series begun shortly afterwards, Herdeg condenses the setting still further, combining colour panels and light lines to create a ‘panel painting’ and inscribing the circular light tubes directly into the quadratic picture field. Aside from the tension created by the two interlocking geometrical shapes, the direct interaction of light colour and paint colour is what gives this work its fascinating potential. These horizontal-format works, constructed like ‘colour diptychs’, extend Herdeg’s visual researches. The matt, deep black fields of equivalent size that he places alongside the coloured panels with the circles of light attached absorb the brightness of both the light tubes and the ambient light, sealing it beneath their impenetrable surface. They are offset by the many-layered interactions of colour radiance and light effects, the pigment’s own colour and ‘lit’ colour substance unfolding on the opposite squares. Despite this

inherently antagonistic template, works like “Cool Jazz” or “Mango” are in carefully balanced equilibrium, with the laws of colour perspective and the principles of picture composition and of picture space coexisting tensely.

Christian Herdeg's work can be roughly divided into two categories. On the one hand there are the large and elaborate installation-type artworks, generally connected with “Kunst und Bau” commissions or public spaces. On the other hand, there are his wall objects and smaller sculpture, which have a certain “chamber music quality”. These two modes allow the artist to illuminate certain issues in more than one context and from different perspectives, as can be seen by the interrelationships within the works themselves. For instance, the shapes of the recent “Discs” series revisit the strict, reduced light circle structures which characterized installation projects like “Pantha Rei I – III” or “Eight Lightcircles”. In conceptual terms, however, “Discs” sees Christian Herdeg continuing the same exploration of light and colour materials, vision and optical phenomena that produced “Circle Meets Square”. The “Discs” artworks begin with a round, coloured MDF panel with a hole cut in the middle. Behind this disc is a circular argon light tube, mounted out of sight around the edge of the inner opening. The light that floods through the hole in the disc curves plastically away from the circular surface, while the same light surrounds the round shape with an aureole. As with the early works from the seventies, Herdeg is investigating the spatial aspects of light and connecting them with physiological perception issues. When and in what form afterimages appear, which colour contrasts create a certain optical effect – all these complex pieces of scientific knowledge are demonstrated in finely-tuned gestures and concise but telling statements by the artist. Christian Herdeg's most recent works have a different focus; in these, he is inspired by the presence and expressiveness of light lines. This artwork group, in which the artist combines neon and argon light tubes in a many-layered ribbon of light, is entitled “Lyrical Neon”. In it, he exploits the whole spectrum of colour design, stacking tubes of different length in a staggered arrangement above and below each other and thereby creating a richly orchestrated, atmospheric colour space. Once again, Herdeg proves that his essential interest in artificial light has nothing to do with a ‘technological aesthetic’. Instead, he aims to investigate and create a great diversity of colour harmonies and light effects.

The “Kunst und Bau” artworks from the past ten years perfectly illuminate the pragmatic, research-orientated side of Christian Herdeg's art. In these projects, he expands his working media by including fluorescent tubes and LEDs as light sources and using computers to control these and to regulate their colour and intensity. The colour gradients, overlapping, flowing light transitions and above all the colour movement viewed over time are created by a complex working process - testing technological solutions in the studio, carefully trying out the effect thus created in the actual location and utilising years of accumulated knowledge of light and space. The most recent projects stand out thanks to simple basic geometrical forms and subtly modulated ‘light orchestration’. Herdeg's intervention in the Car park building Berntor in Solothurn (2005), for instance, makes direct use of its architectonic features. A programmed light strip of fluorescent tubes installed along the entrance ramp immerses the interior in spheres of light that change slowly, in alternating, cool colour tones. By contrast, the installation “Panta Rhei III” in the Zimmerberg Hospital in Horgen (2005) focuses on changeable elliptical light symbols created using LEDs. Sometimes the whole ellipse changes colour, sometimes only a sector changes. The “Three Light Facades” at the main headquarters of Münchner Allianz (1998) and the “Twelve Dynamic Lightpanels” at the TRAFÖ building in Baden (2002), created rather later, are compelling statements on a large scale by Herdeg, meditations on the architectonic tone of the buildings, but also on the city plan context. Countless individually-activated light tubes behind coloured acrylic glass panes combine to create a number of different rhythmic sequences. This is Herdeg researching light on a grand scale, incorporating rest and movement, self-contained light fields and dynamic colour changes, soft transitions and abrupt, almost pulsating shifts. His gestures purposefully echo the language of architecture, giving the monumental facades accents that shine out beyond their immediate context and create their own long-distance effect.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's statement that "less is more" had far-reaching consequences for 20th century architecture and design. It also seems to me to sum up Christian Herdeg's artistic approach and working strategy. Starting with artworks from the late sixties, which had not yet moved away entirely from the 'industrial material aesthetic', Herdeg's oeuvre has increasingly moved towards formal reduction and material precision, shaping complex works reflecting on the conditions and effects of artificial light as a technical medium, but above all creating new forms of expression. In doing so, Herdeg opens up an artistic field within which not only the properties of light itself, but also the limitations and essential principles of architecture, painting, object art and sculpture are examined and, to some extent, dissolved. The frequent severity and coolness of his artworks represent deliberate restraint on his part, as he consciously distances himself from any hint of pathos or inordinate symbolism. The role played by spatial parameters, the priority given to a defined field of perception, how far the effects of the physiochemical properties associated with any particular medium can be extended and intensified – these are the questions that lie behind the artworks of Christian Herdeg, defining an artistic position that penetrates comprehensively into the poetic and to some extent existential dimensions of light and colour, materiality and immateriality, seeing and perceiving.

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