

## Reflections on the observation

of a recent series of paintings by Dirk Vander Eecken

The recent work of Dirk Vander Eecken reveals the folly of viewing painting as a form of reasoned human manipulation. In fact, painting never actually turns out to be the 'expected and foreseen' expression of an attempt to translate (artistic) intentions into a process of execution, that in turn duly leads to the material embodiment of its finality. The recent painted work of Dirk Vander Eecken is instead based on seriality and is aimed at creating difference and nuance. This methodology is a constant element onto which the artist builds variations during the course of the work's execution. The results that are produced by this process are images that seem to seek out, so to speak, whatever it is that lies 'behind' reality. Material reality is not as monolithic as we experience it in life; everything is in a state of unseen motion; everything around us is made up of twirling dust particles in which the erosion and transitoriness of things are contained. It was this scientific discovery that brought Marcel Duchamp to forego any attempt to paint the image of motion with paint on canvas, and instead to bring reality itself (the readymade) into art. The art of Dirk Vander Eecken seems to allude to this in some way—tangible reality is an illusion and the visible appearance of reality is its layer of veneer. His paintings resemble the fragmented enlargements of microscopic images: details of the vastness that lurks beneath all things. This assumption is strengthened and pulled into focus by the pixel effect evoked by the grid that is created through the use of spray paints. As the canonized icon of modernism, the grid produces an all-over image that prohibits the mental delimitation of what is, indeed, the undeniably delineated picture plane of the stretched canvas. The paintings are ungraspable; they are boundless and appeal to the immeasurable forces and elements that make up our 'material' reality. This work knows and explores boundaries, however. The suggestively 'expanding' motif is framed within the surface, as the picture plane fails to coincide with the actual surface area. In this way, the artwork becomes like a picture card or photograph and/or it creates the impression of being steeped in reality: the painting 'acts' as a contrived object, whereby the significance of the painting runs out at the delineation and demarcation of the motif. The contemplation of the painting is guided and 'layered' by the presence of the grid that the artist uses as a kind of practical movable template when 'mechanically' painting/spraying with spray cans. The manipulation of the grid defines the final composition of the vaporized paint. The grid functions as a membrane between the gaze of the viewer and the paint that hides behind the grid. The grid itself remains, at most, an imaginary prosthesis in one's memory, an 'accessory' that is used throughout the pictorial activity. It seems as if numerous mistakes have seeped into the painting: irregularities, signs of disease, abnormalities and deviant zones that upset and disturb the aesthetic serenity... The painting evokes an imperfection that cannot be located content-wise. For this reason, it remains purely material. The composition is neither aimed at a narrative, nor a content-related transfer of knowledge. The painting of Dirk Vander Eecken is therefore a delineated pictorial field on which a controlled experiment 'takes place'. The application

of the paint on the carrier creates—through the introduction of various distances between grid and canvas—the impression of haziness and motion. At most, this can be considered a paradox—an apparent interpretation, a perceptual side effect of an actual pictorial situation on a canvas. The use of grid points takes the interpretation of this work back to the roots of Dirk Vander Eecken’s artistic production: graphic art. The seemingly mechanical production of his work is reminiscent of silk-screening and the many ‘close’ pixels that together form images like the ones seen in the coarse black and white newspaper photos of the past. The fact that artists such as the late Sigmar Polke found temporary pleasure in ‘filling in’ the dots of enlarged photos, confirms the desire that (some) artists have to take ‘inspiration’ and ideas from fields that are accessible to all, such as folksy motifs, popular art, or alluring illustrations taken from mass media. An artist like Sigmar Polke knew how to connect the aspect of boredom, which is inherent to the artist’s life, with the soul-destroying labour of copying dots. Based on a critical attitude towards ‘capitalistic realism’, the copying and parodying of images taken from mass media resulted in their ironic reinterpretation. In time, Sigmar Polke managed to introduce an element of elusiveness, convinced as he was, as a ‘post-war child’, of the more or less politically inspired argument for refusing to repress the German horror. His monumental canvasses with motifs of watchtower ruins are phenomenal. Here, the artist ‘violates’ his work using artistic means, and transforms it by exposing it, for instance, to changes in the ambient temperature. Sigmar Polke managed to produce art from the basis of banality, in a way that many critics described as ‘alchemy’. The echo of printed mass media also reverberates throughout Dirk Vander Eecken’s recent works, whose imagery, however, fails to conjure up any form of alibi. The canvases remain abstract and keep the viewer guessing as to what the content-related finality of the work might be. The selection of the colours, nicely stacked in the studio on a wooden shelf, and the ‘automatic’ decision to apply the paint in a sequence of ‘motions’, is traceable through the grid or dotted screen. The painting reveals something and presents an x-ray of its own genesis. At the same time, it refers to the microscopic structures of the unseen nature of things. In this series, all facets of the artist’s methodology are exposed: how he attempts—with nervous movements made through the grids—to give ‘form’ to the essence of painting through the use of paint in motion, and how these actions are sometimes interrupted by (human) hesitations and pauses, so that the subtle accumulations of painted matter appear like scratches and planes on the even gridded surface of the canvas. Dirk Vander Eecken makes concrete art: the pictorial surface stays flat and new viewing angles reveal that the painting does not fall subject to gratuitous optical changes. The art of Dirk Vander Eecken is the sum of conscious and contingent factors that lead (seduce) the creative process into unprecedented constellations of paint. The paint, in turn, is ‘tamed’ and controlled by a grid-template that functions as a shield between painter and canvas. For the artist, the work itself really comes to life after the ‘act’ of painting, the moment when attentive viewers start to interpret the actual painted surface—each ‘on their own account’ and from the basis of their own individual cultural knowledge and backgrounds.

At a first viewing of Dirk Vander Eecken's recent work, I was peripherally reminded of the edition *Erster Blick* (2000) by the German artist Gerhard Richter. This simple appropriation of a page from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* shows a photo with a text fragment from the very first image of the inside of an atom, an image initially produced by scientists at the University of Augsburg. It is an edition in which Gerhard Richter expresses his fascination for that which underlies the material world, or that from which it is made up. Concrete reality is tipped off balance by the means of a microscopic examination that creates a mysterious image evading all human control. Following a period of illness, Gerhard Richter also painted snow landscapes that conjure up a similar fascination with a landscape that exists, but is temporarily covered with a layer of white snow. In a similar way, the oeuvre of Dirk Vander Eecken is an attempt at creating a continuum, an attempted contemplation of 'realities' that directly opposes the routinised perception of the over-pressurised, rustling reality that surrounds us.

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