

NO SPORTS

On the Playful Relationalism In Dominik Halmer's Work

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Lilac and sienna brown squares in a checkered pattern begin to morph into rhombuses with different degrees of elongation. Through slight shifts in color, they form a drop that seems three-dimensional, as if extending outward from the picture's surface and tapering off toward the upper right edge. The resulting dynamic optical effect is characterized by a sense of speed that inevitably directs the beholder's gaze in this direction. The painting *California* (2015), which was just described, from Dominik Halmer's exhibition *KONTROLLE* poses an extreme challenge to the beholder's eyes, especially their retinas. On the one hand, the pictorial narrative invites us to follow the dynamic movement and relinquish our control to the velocity of the painting. On the other hand, however, Halmer's optical tricks are so obvious that we want to resist falling for his traps. We would become completely lost on this seesaw between attraction and rejection, which is typical for Halmer's works, if our gaze were not additionally confused by an object at the upper right edge of the painting. The basketball hoop attached to the frame appears as if it could be the ultimate goal of the drop shape's dynamic movement. Not only do our eyes follow the form, which now reminds us of a ball, they also complete the movement in a more or less athletic sinking of the pictorial ball object into the real basket. In this way, the artist cleverly encourages a way of seeing that can be best described as playfully associative. Beholders must be baffled when they realize their perception is playing basketball and the picture is morphing into a visual, familiar sports-watching experience. Almost all works in this exhibition follow this principle, and it can be read like a large game – like a ballet of the most diverse sports. We find boxing gloves stuck on corners of pictures, and gymnastic rings hanging from the bottom of a painting. The paintings sometimes even leave the wall and become attached to racks in the middle of the gallery. Rolls and wheels seem to invite us to push these mobile pictorial units around the room. Everything screams physical activity – as if the pictures are doing fitness training in the eyes of the beholders.

But that is not all: The exhibition walls are also marked with sweeping black lines, as if the visitor's wandering gaze has left a trace on the walls. This line brings the individual works together in a unified whole – a visual orgy that swallows everything and in which beholders find themselves strangely authorized not only to look at these hybrid pictorial objects, but to actually use them. The questions that Halmer confronts us with in this exhibition are thus exciting and multifaceted.

We might be tempted to simply interpret his pictures as paintings extending out into the surrounding space and to regard his approach as ironic. Indeed, the fact that Halmer obviously transforms his picture supports into three-dimensional objects and that he effectively subverts the frontality of painting – something that has been regarded as restrictive and limiting for decades – by separating the painting from the wall supports this interpretation. The works created in this way are certainly just as much illusionistic paintings as they are formed objects. This underlines the idea of a hybridization that could mean the much-heralded departure of painting from the picture – a strategy that refers to certain moments in art history.

The artist found several of these moments in Op Art, which at the time found a way to counteract the subjectivity of Pop Art (which it regarded as insincere) with a rational, optical game based on

geometric forms. Its primary goal was to leave the static, abstract painting behind by simply “destroying” it, to quote Yaacov Agam. Halmer’s interest in Op Art is likely more influenced by the approach of its main representative Victor Vasarely, who once said that the most important thing was to catalogue the human retina’s reaction to colors and forms. This was more important even than the concrete works he was creating at the time. Halmer juxtaposes Op Art’s diligent, and in parts even overachieving, focus on the technical aspect with a playfully experimental arrangement that seems initially to want to achieve this same goal, but in a much subtler way. His thematic engagement with sports and the fact that he holds on to narrative moments within and beyond the picture are proof of a kind of sophistication that may remind some of us of the artist Michel Majerus.

Michel Majerus’s famous work that he realized at the Kunstverein Cologne in 2000 comes close to Halmer’s approach in many ways. Like Halmer, he skillfully used sports motifs to challenge and expand the visual habits of exhibition visitors. He built a 42-meter-long and 10-meter-wide skateboard ramp in the exhibition space and painted its surface with logos, slogans, and motifs. The effect was just as impressive: Because the beholder of the artwork was also a potential user of the ramp, the artwork was transformed into a sports area – in other words, a useable object – that only unfolded its usefulness in the eyes of the beholders and was thus perceived as a picture after all. For Majerus as well as for Halmer, sports is a Trojan horse that pulls the beholder back into the picture. It thus successfully demonstrates what painting is still capable of. In both cases, this intellectual movement only works if we understand painting as not only the object of the canvas and the sum of the colors used, but also – in the spirit of Vasarely – as an abundance of neuronal effects that only become a picture when they are translated in the brain of the beholder. Neither Majerus’s nor Halmer’s works have anything to do with sports in the strictest sense, although in Halmer’s case the inherent idea of performance and competition seems to hover over the exhibition like an ironic cloud.

Instead, both artists follow the theoretical approach of Johan Huizinga, whose book *Homo Ludens* from 1938 lays out a theory of emotions in which he states that playing games is the essence of every culture. He describes the heightened emotional intensity people experience when playing games as “sacred earnestness,” which since the game-hating 19th century has become more and more scarce. In addition to religion, Huizinga not surprisingly focused mainly on sports and culture, the two disciplines that Halmer quite naturally relates to each other. Already in the title of the exhibition, the artist refers to an inherent aspect of art as well as sports: the submission of both systems to the rule of consumption – to regulation and thus a form of (self-)control that runs counter to the fundamental drive to play. Halmer’s greatest achievement is thus not so much the superficial departure from the picture, but rather the revelation of a relationalism that lies deep within the artwork and that restores the validity of the sacred earnestness of playing as a unifying element of art and sports.