

Galerie Thomas Bernard

Cortex Athletico

Press release

Music for the Eyes

Artists : Rolf Julius

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Perception of the absent.

On the more recent works of Rolf Julius.

Volker Straebel, 1999

"The reality of the perceptible and of perception is one and the same thing, but being is for them not the same. I mean, for example, the sound in reality and the hearing function in reality, because one can have the hearing function but still not hear, and what has sound does not always sound. But when that which is able to hear realises itself (is really active), and that which is able to sound actually sounds, then the hearing function appears in reality and the sound appears in reality, whereby the former can be called hearing and the latter can be called sounding. [...] Thus the reality of sounding capability is sound or sounding, and the reality of hearing capability is the hearing function or hearing; thus twofold is the hearing function and twofold the sound."

Aristotle emphasises in his theory of perception by the senses the possibility of an event or an action before its actual implementation or realisation. The hearing function, the potentiality to hear, is the prerequisite condition for hearing. Similarly, the sounding thing is first of all something which is able to sound. These capabilities also determine the respective relationships between perception and perceived object. Thus the sounding thing is at the same time something to hear. Whether the perception takes place by feeling, odour, taste, hearing or vision, is already determined in its object: "Each sense judges over its assigned objects and cannot be deceived in that it is, for example, colour or sound, but only in what is bearing the colour, or what and where the sounding thing is. Such objects are therefor called characteristic of the particular sense."

The works of Rolf Julius are not accessible to such dissecting consideration. They contradict the otherwise matter of course assignment of perceptive quality and manner of perception. The Music for a Yellow Room - presto (1982) ? reproduced by two small loudspeakers lying on the floor, colours an empty room yellow. Julius wrote in connection with his Concert for a Frozen Lake (1982): "Several loudspeakers play the music for the frozen lake. So I hope that the lake itself will become music." Such statements and titles for his works have earned him the reputation of a truly synaesthetic artist who experiences the acoustic events as visual or haptic qualities. In conversation Julius indeed preferentially uses adjectives such as "rough", "rusty" or "round" to characterise his music. However, his most recent work appears to be set more according to the model of intermodal perception and by growing interest for artistically induced imagination.

The synaesthetic experiences the stimuli of one sensual area as perceived qualities of another. The long list of theoretical systems for assigning individual tone pitches or intervals to certain colour hues is based on this

experience of relatively few persons. In contrast thereto, intermodal perception, the integration of several individual information streams picked-up with different senses, to produce a perceptive experience on a higher level, is quite common. Aristotle describes this case as "sensus communis" ("general sense"). "But commoned objects [that is those which are associated with the sensus communis] are motion, rest, number, shape and size. For such objects are not inherent to any particular sense, but common to all senses, thus motion can be perceived haptically as well as visually." Furthermore there exists a combination of the stimulation of several senses in a single act of perception: "The perceptive senses perceive the specific objects of the others accidentally not by being specific, but in that they each respond when the perception takes place on the same object, for example the bile is bitter and yellow, and it requires no other specific sense to convey that it has both these attributes." In this way perception also gives rise to complex attributes, such as the weight of a suitcase perceived through the way in which a person carries it and the sound emitted when putting it down, as well as combinations based on experience, such as the transitive perception of bitter simply by looking at bile.

Rolf Julius aims at just such combinations of different areas of perception. In 1998 he erected in the huge transverse gallery of Hamburg railway station and in the museum for art of today in Berlin, the installation of music for a nearly empty space. The approximately 80 metres long barrel vault of the gallery was empty except for four groups of four loudspeakers each standing on the floor in a square arrangement. A square glass plate rested on each group. Julius sieved nearly circular heaps of red and black pigment onto the glass plates. Quiet music came out of the loudspeakers, consisting of a sustained gently chirping rushing undercoating of the room and somewhat lower pitched sounds appearing in the foreground as short actions. There were intervals of ten to more than thirty seconds duration between these short motifs. The sounds were too depleted of low frequencies for setting the glass plates in vibration, so there was no motion of the pigments. The earlier magnetic tape compositions of Rolf Julius were unpredictable in detail because of their intricately subdivided structuring, but over a considerable period of time they produced a predictable impression. In contrast thereto, the phenomenon of pauses appears for the first time in the music for the almost empty space. The background coloration ensures in familiar manner the acoustic presence of the installation and enhances the concentration of the visitor, but the oscillating sounds in the foreground set clearly perceptible markers in time and constitute characteristic, even lightly varied figures. The pauses between them are very long for a musical work, indeed so long that the attention of the listener can drift away, in particular since he is not in a concert hall environment where the presence of the musicians has a disciplining effect. But in Julius' music the colours come to bear in such moments. The visual part of the installation sounds during the pauses, not in synaesthetic duplication, but in intermodal supplementation of the multi-sensorially experienced presentation space which the listener and viewer constructs in time. Thereby the fundamental modes of experience of art in time and space merge here. The pauses in the music mark the time during which the listener can give more attention to seeing - but, as in visual art - the temporal structuring of the observation, including its exact starting point, is left to free choice.

For his new paper works Rolf Julius photographed pigments sieved onto glass plates, with a digital camera aligned exactly parallel to the picture plane, so that the shots produced could easily be manipulated with a computer and then output by an ink jet printer onto special cardboard or lightly structured Japanese paper. In the two-dimensional depiction, the characteristic materiality of the pigment dust evaporates, but the impression remains of colour density varying according to the photographed original. Black drifts into anthracite, red into orange. The shapes too, nearly circular or irregularly oval areas with differently soft contours, or more recently squares and rectangles with sharp contours, for which correspondingly shaped glass plates are completely covered with pigment, are preserved on the paper. What is missing, is the music. The sounds which emerged from the loudspeakers under the pigmented glass plates and mingled with the colours, remain acoustically silent.

These sheets nevertheless evoke strong auditive emotions. Individually framed and presented in block form on the wall in several stacked rows, sometimes pervaded by sheets on which brief terms or fragments stand in large type (Black listens to Red, 1998), they act like a pool of sounds, particularly when their common title makes them appear as a score (Piano Concerto, 1998). The only on first sight monochromatic, in fact internally structured and at their edges characteristically fringed red or black colour patches are, like sounds, hard or soft, light or dense, round, mobile, calm or powerful. The viewer gathers an aesthetic impression of them which could have grown from an intermodal perception. But for him as "capable of hearing", bearing in himself the potentiality to hear, the level of the heard is only imagined. Of the three levels of perception described by Aristotle, the viewer implements the first (the possibility of hearing) and opens for himself via the third (the perceived is accidental, *sensus communis*) the second, actual hearing achieved in reality. In this way the new works of Julies succeed with their peculiar aesthetic situation, in producing the abstract experience of sound which is not present - we hear, not because a sounding thing is present, but because we are able to hear.