

Ingo Nussbaumer 2010

Regarding the term “color proposition”

I.

The term “color proposition” refers to a *consequence of a sequence of colors (shades and nuances)*. In a sense, this consequence constitutes the chromatic core, so to say, the “painterly statement” of pictorial works. It is the expression of an idea, or to be more precise, a *pictorial notion*, which can come to bear in different ways. First, suddenly (or spontaneously)—and it is then at once and altogether present to the inner eye. Subsequently, it assumes the shape of the concept (sketch) of a picture. Second, gradually (or successively)—it is substantiated step by step for the perceiving and grasping eye in the artistic act. It reveals itself as the physical, palpable capacity (*intentio in objecto*) of a painting that has proven to be the bearer of the picture by a number of experimental trials and selective procedures. I call this idea the intent of the picture, as opposed to the pictorial concept. Pictorial concept and pictorial intent merge in my work, creating a network.

II.

I began calling my paintings “color propositions” the year in which my first book *Malerei als Proposition* (Painting as Proposition) (1977) was published. The works depicted in this book were not yet given this name. However, at the time it struck me as a useful general way of describing them, so that later I even named several works that were created previously as such. The decision to give this name is based upon my experience that there is a *comprehending (intelligible)* viewing of pictures founded on the (sensual) phenomenon of color. This manner of thinking in, with and out of colors is in contrast to a manner of thinking in and with words, a way of thinking based on the shape of sound, as it were. Artistically, this seeing with comprehension (*begreifendes Sehen*) is intimately bound to the *sensation* of color and thus not limited in rational terms.

Since for me there is comprehending-viewing even without (hollow) words (an act which only then can cooperate with thinking-speaking (*denkendes Sprechen*)), I came up with the term “color proposition” to be able to do justice to this experiential state. Here, I will approach this term and try and explain its theory to provide a better understanding of the underpinnings of my work.

III.

The English term “proposition” derives from the Latin word “propositio”. The most fitting translation of the Latin word into German would probably be “*Vorstellung*”, or representation, but this particular translation does not capture the specific meaning I have in mind, since it is too unspecific or general. What I am after does not have to do merely with actualized perceptions of colors.

Thus, I have tried to go one step further here. In medieval logic, this expression – coined by Boethius in the 5th century – stands for a *sentence that designates something true or false*, which in German is generally referred to with the word “*Aussage*” (in English: statement, proposition). Thus, the expression is used for a statement in language, which indicates something specific and on the basis of its indexical function makes a true or false statement in a spoken or written context.

Since sentences, with very few exceptions, are complex linguistic formations and are also linked with certain contents (that is to say, perform a semantic function), the word “sentence” and, by extension, “statement” are better translations for the Latin word than “representation”. I have thus at times also spoken of color structures and color formations in terms of painterly statements without alluding to the correspondence-theoretical relationship between picture and reality. Yet it is limiting in a sense that this expression – and this is certainly true for the word “statement” (and in particular for the German word “*Aussage*”) – has the connotation of relating to a spoken word, most notably linked to sounds and words and spoken action.

On the other hand – and this brings me closer to the heart of the matter – the German word “*Satz*” (“sentence” in English) alludes to the much more general activity of positing, so that a *positing* of connections does not necessarily have to be done in linguistic terms. This would only mean: positing or asserting something through speaking. It can also take place by means of signs (symbolically) and, to go even further, **by means of images** (iconically) or even by means of objects (pragmatically). If someone plugs a hole, this person prevents a liquid from running out. This act of closing off characterizes the positing of a consequence (i.e., a relation that can be reconstructed), which can result from a sealed opening, namely – and here one example – “not letting any more water flow out, holding it back, collecting it”, etc. In the positing of such an act there is a connection that can be reconstructed, captured.

It is this act of creating connections that plays the central role here, when I take the liberty of speaking of propositions also in painting. **A proposition is a created connection, implying a consequence of forms and colors. A color proposition is a connection of colors that can be grasped in concrete**

terms by the senses. Since in painting nothing can be captured without being seen, seeing is here the supposed actual meaning of thought, and a positing of color consequences is a proposition that can be captured by the eye. How compelling can the consequences reveal themselves to the eye through colors in painting?

For me, in this connection, medieval logic reveals something else that is interesting. It has two expressions for the German word "*Aussage*" (statement), whose meaning is questioned here: *enuntiatio* and *propositio*. Only "*propositio*" characterizes the statement in terms of a thesis (premise in a syllogism) or also: it is understood with regard to something else, that is, the logical consequences that can be derived from it.¹ By the same token, the act of shutting off something can be understood through the collecting of water (the consequence that can result from this), by something becoming logical, i.e., conceptual. Thus, each color in a picture is, comparatively spoken, bound up with the consequence, which establishes the painterly content (the "statement" or also the "thesis") of a picture. The colors of the pictures are their elucidating premises, their theses and keys. The picture is grasped through its color, the propositional content upon which it is founded. This, in any case, is the way I have always read a picture. Inversely, it means that one can only interpret the colors of a picture in the complex of the emerging structure and must learn to grasp it on the basis of sensations. This, of course, does not mean that a picture or a painting can be conceptually reduced to color. But to grasp a picture it is not necessary to capture in words the 'proposition' of the picture.

IV.

The term "color proposition" has been used – as already alluded to above – for 13 years in the abbreviated form "cp" followed by the numbers (e.g., *cp 0034*) as catalogue raisonnée listing different-sized pictures based on various techniques. In order to identify differences, different types were introduced: "CP" as a rule for larger oil and/or alkyd pictures, "cp" for smaller oil and/or alkyd pictures, which would not transcend the breadth or height of 120 cm, and "cp" for small-format watercolors (31 x 23 cm). A few of the earlier, going back to 1993, were later added to the catalogue raisonné. (In order to make the differences between the various work groups more obvious, the numbers in the numeric sequence were varied.) Thus, this catalogue offers a general survey of the works produced in the past 13 to 17 years. Graphic works (prints and serigraphs) as well as other types of works, such as drawings on paper or objects made out of different materials, were also not included in this catalogue.

¹ Cf., for instance, William Sherwood, *Introductiones in Logicam, Einführung in die Logik*, Hamburg 1995