abstract *critical*

for abstract art

12 December 2012

Lothar Götz: The Line of Beauty

Written by Sam Cornish

Lothar Götz, What Makes Boys Dance?, Domo Baal, 2012, photo by Andy Keate

A few weeks ago I spoke to Lothar Götz during the first part of a two exhibition at Domo Baal, 'The Line of Beauty'. For the first part Götz made a painting using all four walls of the smaller of the gallery's two spaces; in the larger space was a selection of line drawings in coloured pencil. The second part, which is open until the 22nd of December, is based around a personal selection by Götz of artworks and ceramics. The artists comprise Eric Bainbridge, Neil Gall, Joachim Grommek, Daniel Robert Hunziker, Paul Huxley, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Ben Nicholson, Uli Nimptsch and George Shaw. Though the selection is in general biographical – for instance involving family connections or individuals important to his training as an artist – Götz stressed that it was not necessary for a viewer to know the particular reason behind each selection. Exhibited over the wall painting in the smaller room are a series of small abstract drawings by Götz which responds to the artworks he has selected. Using a mixture of Pop sensibility and Constructivist motifs, where apparent the links between the source material and the resulting drawing are oblique, often seeming to involve some kind of visual pun.

SC: Firstly did the gallery give you a choice, or did you have to work in this room?

LG: No, I could have worked wherever, I could have done staircase for example. I was

interested in that room because I have quite a thing for square rooms… and especially because when it is painted it becomes not a wall painting, as in one painting in a room, but is really about the whole space.

Lothar Götz, Hinter der Flamme, Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg, 2012, photo by Achim Kukullies

SC: Because with a long wall it becomes a panorama?

LG: My last piece was a wall in Wolfsburg. And there, even though it was really big, you still look at it as an image, as a picture. But here what I find interesting is that you can never forget what is behind your back, because you are surrounded by it. So as a viewer it's a very different situation. The interaction of the shapes and the colours is then different – you cannot see that yellow without seeing the pink, even when you don't see the pink. That was why I chose this space; also I do quite like the domestic scale, the traditional rooms which appear again and again in architectural history. Whether it's a Georgian house, or a Victorian house or a modernist house you still have that kind of unit. And this is important for the character of the gallery. Though in fact the building was not built as a house, it was actually built as lawyer's offices, but the rooms are still a domestic scale, not like a typical gallery scale, not a the white cube. And also for me this piece plays with the tradition of ornament, the decorative aspect of making a design for a room.

SC: I hadn't seen the room before it was painted for this show, how did it change as you began to work?

LG: What was interesting when we started to paint everything pink, it become not a very pleasant room. It changed from a very, very tasteful grey into something like an institutional colour, perhaps like when it was a lawyer's office; and then we added the black and it was extremely graphic. We might have left it black – there are lots of stages where you think it can be left. What I find interesting with these site specific pieces is that at every stage is an option, you could do this, or you could do that. I could make a whole series of different pieces for a room and see how it reacts.

Lothar Götz, What Makes Boys Dance?, Domo Baal, 2012, photo by Andy Keate

SC: So generally it is improvised on site, or at least in this case it was improvised on site?

LG: No, I do a plan beforehand. The different options I see as I go are more in my head. It could go in ten different directions, but I've made the decision beforehand, apart from minor changes. For instance I changed the shapes over the windows. Sometimes I find that you don't know exactly how the painting will interact with something which is outside. Here when I made triangular shapes above the windows, I suddenly realised that it is completely echoing the triangular spaces above the doors [on the building on the other side of the street] and I thought this is too much. It looked like it was a direct relation to the doors, but it was not meant to be like that.

This is a typical room for me now. If someone offered me a very neutral room, I probably would not do it. Instead every shape has to respond to something in the room. Because it is a domestic room, it becomes a modernist version of a wall-hanging.

SC: Compared to your other works it is quite formal, not in the sense of abstract form, but in the sense of decorum, it's not very disruptive.

LG: Yes, I made a very clear decision to use areas that already here, or that are defined by areas that are here. I just went through drawing diagonal lines [between areas defined by the room's paneling, doors and windows] and coming up with these shapes. I could have added other lines but that would have nothing to do with the room, and that would be like being a painter and working on the wall like on a canvas. Many of my site specific pieces, when are I work with a place, they are simpler and also more dynamic. In Düsseldorf there is a wall-painting which is quite simply on a wall. There it was about making a painting on the wall; here every decision is linked to the dimensions of the room.

Lothar Götz, Cut, Petra Rinck Gallery, Düsseldorf, 2012, photo by Achim Kukullies

SC: As well as painting within already existing rooms, you have also worked directly with architects, can you say something about that?

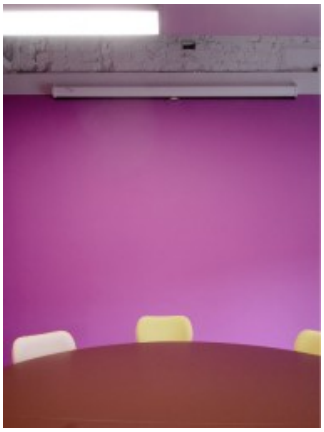
LG: The level of the cooperation is very important. I have done commissions, where I am straight-forwardly just commissioned to do a wall-painting, but I have no input in the architecture. They say here is the wall, and I do it. It was like that with the piece in Westminster Collage. It's in Paddington Green, right near the entrance of the new college building. There was a competition managed by Modus Operandi and Vivien Lovell and the architects were Schmidt Hammer Lassen. I did a design, entered the competition and then it got executed. I had no collaboration in terms of the building; one of the project architects was in the jury, and because they select someone it is difficult to collaborate on the same level as there is already a hierarchy. In the process of doing the work we had meetings and there were discussions, but no collaboration. You should go and have a look, because it's a great building and a great entrance to the building and I very much enjoyed it.

The other extreme, the most collaborative piece was the one for the Arts Council offices with Caruso St John, where I worked with Adam Caruso. There it was completely different. It was a collaboration where they showed me everything and over a period of time there were meetings and it was completely open what I would do. It was very satisfying as everybody brought ideas to a meeting and at the end we came out with a decision which nobody had thought of before, which was really rewarding. It is very different to working in the studio on your own, as people can suggest something and so you can come up with something completely unexpected. There was mutual respect and interest in each other's work.

I didn't want to have one room where I would do a piece or a wall where I would do a piece. Instead what I created was basically a conceptual piece which you can't see just from one position; it is part of the building. Adam gave me the freedom to do what I wanted. I started from a very abstract idea: how can I make a colour-scheme where I am not just adding something? So I thought it has to be part of the building and make sense when you walk around it.

A lot of my decisions had to do with decisions made by the architects. They made a

distinction between the inner and the outer walls, between the skin of the existing building, and those that they put in; so I started with a very simple thing, with the walls on each floor that were connected to the skin of existing building getting a different grey tone. This is quite subtle and you don't notice immediately. And then I used different colour schemes in the rooms. If you looked at the building in an elevation, or in a cut-through, it would be an abstract painting, with the different grey stripes and then all the colours of the individual rooms.



Arts Council England National Offices, 2008, photo by Hélène Binet

For example there is one wall which goes through all the floors, and this just has one colour. And then, as it is an old building and it got smaller and smaller toward the top with all these different niches, small rooms and kitchenettes, I got the idea to mark the differences as if it were a mountain. Imagine going for a walk in the Alps or something and you have stark colours of the different flowers, all mixed up, you will find a red here and blue here. So I mixed up all the colours on these small rooms. Also there were four meeting rooms on top of each other, and I painted them in a sequence, each room is one colour and it is a real colour experience; an orange, a pink, a very, very deep mossy green, and a blue. And all the colours come together in the board-rooms, and within the board-rooms the piece looks like a wall-painting. The idea that in the boarding room, was that all the parts of the organisation come together.

Lothar Götz, Arts Council England National Offices 2008 in collaboration with Caruso St John Architects, ph by Hélène Binet

SC: Having the different colours on different levels is something which some buildings have anyway, just as a purely functional way of telling the different floors apart. How important was it that people can tell that there is more than simply a functional identification of different areas?

I would very much hope that people could feel that. It's an interesting point because

here I had a completely free choice, but often people do say we want a piece of yours but we also want it to function as a way-finding system. There is another project, a project in Newcastle for Walker Park hospital where I did the whole colour scheme, and the function was more important. One of the challenges was thinking how can I do something which will have the integrity of a piece of mine but is also seen by people as a part of the building, with a function. It is interesting to find a balance. And I do like it when somebody comes in the building and realises that there is an art piece, because you wouldn't automatically. But if you make a concept that goes through the whole building, when you get to the top floor and start to go down again you realise that its not just colours. Also I put in things which make no sense… though I don't mind when it takes on a function. People start identifying with the colour, they might start saying "we are the green room" or "we are the brown room". And I do like it when people in the public domain can have the option to have a different approach to a piece than just saying this is abstract art. I find this pretty amusing, what different responses there are and how people can get into a work when they are not interested in art. So they don't for example see a red square and think back to Malevich and so on, but they have a different approach and maybe a very unorthodox one.

Lothar Götz, Arts Council England National Offices 2008 in collaboration with Caruso St John Architects, ph by Hélène Binet

SC: When people look at a Malevich square, particularly when they are not involved with art, they often see it as a denial of meaning. It can be potentially an aggressive thing. And so having something which is part of the environment and partly having something which is very different to the environment is perhaps a much less aggressive of working with abstract shape and colour?

LG: I often find people attach their own meanings to things. I have had projects where this is very difficult, where I do not want to make these compromises, but when these sort of things happen by chance that is OK. It is something to do with how we perceive the world, how we make stories up and that can be a frustration. I'm sometimes really shocked with what people come up with; and perhaps that happened with Malevich when he painted his red square. But on the other hand I like that quality of abstract art, that is open, you can't control it. Obviously I can go to an exhibition and be extremely happy without knowing what I see. But for lots of people there is a desire to turn everything into something figurative. I don't know where it comes from. If you do

something in a hospital you know people will do that. But I still believe in the red square, and that it does something to people that is independent.

SC: Coming back to this project, it's interesting that you spoke about the pink being an institutional colour, because I was thinking it is part of how different your work was to earlier modernist wall-paintings, of de Stijl for example. Everyone says how Mondrian rejected green, but pink is another colour so far away from modernist work, introducing lots of different references…

LG: I like pink because it is a strange non-colour, that by itself is extremely ugly, but in combination it does something… but I'm not using pink to distance myself from anything.

SC: I see it as almost a cartoon flesh tone, whereas the modernism of de Stijl is to do with cleanliness…

LG: I do quite like colours which remind you of things. I like for example a very deep green, so you feel in a deep forest, so you don't think about anything abstract, you are in nature. It's not an abstraction from anything I have seen, it's all just about what I see in the colour. I hadn't seen it as a flesh tone, but I suppose this is the colour people might use to suggest skin.

Lothar Götz, What Makes Boys Dance?, Domo Baal, 2012, photo by Andy Keate

SC: There is an artificiality in your work, which is interesting considering how you describe relations to nature, mossy greens or mountain flowers. You've also described your interest in gardens, which are highly artificial natural places…

LG: Yes, I am very much interested in garden architecture, and that is because it is artificial, or it's this kind of abstract concept. I am not really looking at a tree, and I am not really interested in the tree itself, it's about the concept or the vision. What I enjoy about gardens is when they make you think without thinking. I don't know how to describe it, when they become a very clear image, which to me is quite abstract…

SC: You mean when you see an logic which has been imposed on it, or which comes out of it?

LG: Yes, but when the image is so strong that it is no longer really about that; I find it very hard to describe…

SC: Do you mean when it in fact seems to become natural; you are just 'in it' as it were?

LG: Yes, but I mean it is something which only happens in an artificial or in a constructed garden. In real nature it is very different; of course real nature hardly exists anyway. I am not talking about the really sublime moment of being in a storm, it is more subtle. It is something which comes out of a human construct.