

JAKOB GASTEIGER

By Karlyn De Jongh

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The analytical painting of Jakob Gasteiger (1953, Salzburg, Austria) centralizes the process and act of painting itself. Gasteiger lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

KDJ: For this year's 55th Venice Biennale, you will make a room covered completely with carbon paper. Why did you choose to make this particular statement? What do you want to say with it? Why create a Black room?

JG: For twenty years I have worked with paper as well, carbon and tissue paper. Before the introduction of computers and printers, carbon paper was used for copying. What you see are, strictly speaking, industrially produced monochrome charcoal drawings.

Tissue paper is being sold in many colors as wrapping paper for presents. I stick these papers on canvas or, for an exhibition, directly on the walls of a museum or gallery. They are environments, graphic rooms which temporarily can be walked in, and at the same time murals. The color pigments of the papers come off when I stick them on the walls and you get, although I don't use any paint here, the impression of a painting. The 'treated' walls are not black, however, depending on the brand the colors of the papers come off differently.

KDJ: In an interview for Personal Structures: Works and Dialogues (2003) you stated that your basic concept is the question: Where is the boundary between graphics and painting and between painting and sculpture." Now 10 years later, can you give an answer to this question? Has your answer changed over the years? Have you been able to extend these boundaries? Which boundaries would you still like to abolish?

JG: In my works with tissue and carbonpaper I question the boundary between graphics and painting, my acrylics do the same with the boundary between painting and sculpture. But I am not especially interested in giving answers. Thirty years ago, when I started with this concept, I attached more significance to it. Since then my artistic activity has become independent, now I can draw on my wealth of experience. I do not want to eliminate boundaries either, I was interested in recognizing these boundaries in my work, but I did not intend to abolish them.

KDJ: When you are 'researching' the boundaries between painting and sculpture, the concept of space must be an important discussion point for you – if only as a consideration of the 2- or 3-dimensionality of your work. What does space mean to you?

JG: The beauty of Japanese art lies in the "Ma", the negative space or gap. It is considered to be a "filled emptiness". This has inspired me as much as Japanese or Chinese tissue papers or lacquer painting.

KDJ: Artists such as Hermann Nitsch, Toshikatsu Endo and Rene Rietmeyer have a strong urge to say something, wanting to be heard to create awareness and accomplish some change in humans and the way they think about the world around them. This is one of the reasons why Rietmeyer started PERSONAL STRUCTURES, for example. Maybe I am mistaken, but I have the feeling that you make your work for different reasons. It seems you are more introvert and create your works as a research for yourself. Am I right? Is there something you want to change in human thinking?

JG: As an artist, I hardly have a missionary urge with my work. However, I would like to change human thinking a bit. Worldwide there are about twenty wars and more than a hundred violent conflicts. We are experiencing racism, discrimination, intolerance and violence all over the world. With my work as an artist there is nothing I can do about these problems, but as a politically conscious person I can express my disgust at this state of affairs.

KDJ: In 1978 Marcia Hafif wrote the essay "Beginning Again", in which she describes the situation of painting at that time as no longer being relevant. Her aim was – and seems to have been for the past 30 years – to go back to the question of what painting actually is. Although you seem concerned with the same subjects as she is, you are one generation younger than Hafif is,

and were born in another part of the world. Was your situation different than hers? Why do you have this urge to question 'painting'?

JG: All questions of art reappear cyclically. How often has the end of painting been proclaimed... But every generation faces its new tasks which have to be analyzed in accordance with the time and for which new solutions have to be found. Abstract or non-representational painting is probably the greatest achievement in the art of the 20th century, and it is still relevant to me and my work.

KDJ: In texts about "Radical Painters" and related artists, often there is a reference being made to the German word "Farbe", which in English denotes to both paint and colour. Being Austrian, having German as your mother tongue, is there for you an existential difference between paint and colour? Or can we not see them separately? How does colour relate to material?

JG: Paint is just material to produce my paintings. In this context, color does not carry meaning or content. A red painting is for me nothing more than a painting that was created from a material whose color is red.

KDJ: When I visited your studio in Vienna, it had the impression of being a laboratory. It seems that developing new ideas, coincidences are sometimes important to get further in our development. When you work in such a clean space, is there still room for coincidences? What role do precision and exactness play in your work? To what extent is the act of making a new work an analytical practice?

JG: I see myself as an architect who is planning and designing a building. It must comply with his ideas and it is not supposed to collapse. Nevertheless, there are many unexpected problems during the construction that require new decisions.

KDJ: For making his brushstrokes, Lee Ufan grinds stone to make pigment out of it. You also sometimes use 'unusual' pigments to create your works, such as copper, glass, aluminium or iron. Why do you do that?

JG: I already answered your question about paint and color stating that a red painting does not carry meaning or content. But a red image (or whatever color) nevertheless evokes in the viewer a mood, a feeling. I use different materials, grated to powder, that are atypical as pigments in painting. Copper, iron, glass, aluminum are commonly used for sculpture. Copper has something old-fashioned and reminds one of copper kettles or copper roof sheeting, while aluminum, as the metal of the 20th century, lets one think of airplanes or cars. One of my aluminum pictures is "faster" than one made from copper.

KDJ: Joseph Kosuth once remarked about Rene Rietmeyer's VENEZIA glass Boxes that they "suffer from aesthetics." Opinions are always different, but to me, with regard to your choice of colour, your work does not seem to 'aim' for 'beauty'. What role does beauty or aesthetics play in your work?

JG: Especially with my graphics and my works with paper I try to keep to a dilettante approach. Whether the results are "beautiful", I do not know. I believe that the terms "right" or "appropriate" are more suitable. Viewers have probably their own opinion about it.

KDJ: The colours you choose for your work are – in my opinion – quite sombre. Having lived in Vienna for some time, for me these colors go very well with Vienna as a location. To what extent do you think your colour choices – or your work in general – is influenced by the location where you create your works?

JG: I am not influenced by the location of my studio. My choice of colors is also not dependent on my whims and moods. Since I started to use iron, glass, copper, etc. as pigments some years ago, the colors do get a completely different meaning. There was one exception once: I made Yves Klein-blue images because I wanted to break the taboo of his ultramarine. But it was just a quote, I did not refer to Klein's metaphysics.

KDJ: Instead of a brush, you use a comb to apply paint to the canvas. What attracts you in this 'tool'? Why not use your fingers directly, like Arnulf Rainer did?

JG: When I started to occupy myself with analytical painting, I also questioned the tools to apply the paint with and I have tried various other tools instead of the commonly used brush. I wanted "impersonal" tools, so fingers were no option. I used timber, boards, nails or a saw-blade to work with the paint. Later I cut comb spatulas from cardboard, I still do that today.

KDJ: In the PERSONAL STRUCTURES catalogue for the 55th Venice Biennale, Florian Steininger writes about your work

that it is about “painting as process, aloof from the emotional and personal gesture.” What is meant by “painting as process”? Do you look at the process of this particular painting? Or is it also about the process of your œuvre?

JG: I believe both. The ever-repeated gesture of applying and structuring the paint material to create my images is a repetitive work process and to some extent the growth of my œuvre in small changes is also a process over many years.

KDJ: I have met you a few times in Vienna and Venice and you made a very “soft” impression on me. To me, you as a person seem quite receptive of emotions and it is hard for me to imagine that your works would miss this ‘emotional’ aspect. I think that always emotions have at least a small influence on the decisions we make, even when it is just from being hungry or wanting to have an orgasm. Is it your aim to exclude these emotions as much as possible – even though it can never really be accomplished?

JG: Instead of “soft” I would rather say “well-disposed”. It applies to artists as well as to politicians or other people: those who shout, quickly lose their voice. I prefer tolerance and respect myself and other people as well.

Making art is like an expedition. It is planned and prepared, and the expedition leader should keep a clear head. On the way you have to react to something unexpected or you must choose a detour. This is, more or less, my situation as an artist for over thirty years. But still it is not certain that the expedition reaches its destination. You could also reply with the famous quote that the journey is the reward.

KDJ: In 2009, I interviewed Marcia Hafif in her New York studio. She told me about her work in relation to time and space. The concepts of time and space were understood by her in a very ‘concrete’ way: the actual location of the work, and the time necessary to produce a work. It seems that time has a broader meaning in your work. An important element in your work seems to be ‘change’, the change of yourself as well as from your work. Change is perceived over time. How do you understand time? What does change mean to you?

JG: Of artists is expected that they always come up with something new. “New” receives much attention. I did not want to live up to these expectations, so I adopted an attitude of denial. I began to produce the same pictures again and again, to repeat myself. That worked out well, because soon people started to say that “Gasteiger makes always the same”. But because I am basically non-dogmatic, I have expanded the range of possibilities to express myself in the course of time.

KDJ: In an interview for PERSONAL STRUCTURES: TIME SPACE EXISTENCE (2009), Joseph Marioni states that “the element of time, is that my paintings involve a visual transition.” In your paintings, is change only a visual transition? Or does it go beyond that and are they in fact different?

JG: Works of art are rooted in the time of their creation. Good art is resistant to zeitgeist and fashions and keeps its importance beyond the time of its origin.

KDJ: Being very interested in time and existence myself, for me it is quite difficult to imagine that a person like you or Marcia Hafif spend their life ‘researching’ materialistic elements of painting. After a certain number of years and having painted a certain number of paintings, I know that for me it would become boring. Why does this research matter to you? What keeps you from continuing? Or have you changed over the years and adapted your main concept accordingly?

JG: Of course I have changed over the years, at least I hope so. In my art, however, changes are not an intentional decision. I let them happen. There are outstanding works – of myself and others –, they are a benchmark for my work. Working in the studio always means self-reflection and a commitment to high quality standards. Mistakes happen nevertheless, and over time there have been works that I would rather not have shown.

KDJ: In 2003, you have stated that “art is man’s activity of creating something new, of researching, of discovering.” Are you still this same opinion? Why do you think it is necessary to create something ‘new’?

JG: It is not necessary, it happens.

KDJ: Seemingly having a similar concern in your art as Hafif and Marioni, what is so ‘new’ about your work? Is it not rather the fact that it is made by you, that makes the work particular?

JG: Yes.