

From Dust to the Color of Light

Veronika Rudorfer and Mirjam Baker in conversation about the installation Dust

Veronika Rudorfer (VR): *The work Dust encompasses a complex artistic, conceptual process. When did the idea occur to you to deal with color itself in the medium of film? What steps ultimately led you to the pastels and your film Dust?*

Mirjam Baker (MB): *Initially, I envisioned the film as a continuation of Krikelkrakel (2014), the digitally-animated film I made for my degree at the Royal College of Art in London. At first, I wanted to keep working in digital 3D space and in it, produce a condensation of digital color lines, but technically this was not possible. After further attempts at transposing my ideas into two dimensions – both of them still using the Graphic Tablet – I finally switched to paper, drawing on it or painting abstract sequences with colored pencils and oil colors.*

Even these early sequences had an inherent movement, in the sense of a filmlike sequence from page to page. Intuitively, I placed various color surfaces on the paper, thus examining them for possible image tensions. Particularly interesting to me were the effects that resulted from blocking out forms in the color surfaces – a spatiality came about in the sense that there was a front and a back. While searching for ideal colors, I came across the basic pastel colors that are fundamental in Dust: What convinced me here was the color application, for one thing because such a velvety surface came about, and another thing was its fine, homogeneous texture. I photographed these pages in order to see how the individual

images would function as a film. In this process, a spatial effect comes about that extends far beyond the single painted image. The effect was different than with the oil colors, since now the brushstrokes were no longer visible, whose movement had covered over the immanent movement of the painted color itself. This now emerged through the pastel colors. By way of explanation perhaps: In animation you can always see best the thing that moves the most. This is why I had to make the traces of the paint application as invisible as possible, in this case from the brush. Because what I wanted to show was precisely the movement of the pigments.

Over time, around fifty-five pastel sequences came about with extremely different characters – sometimes with geometric forms, sometimes on different colored paper, sometimes departing from landscape photographs. I thought a long time about what the connection between these sequences might be and how a film might be made out of this.

At the end of 2018, I decided on a specific type of composition: An abstracted picture horizon divides the pages horizontally into an above and below. I wanted to create a spatial effect out of a single color on each page, in contrast to landscape painting that uses several colors. I thought it would be fun to do it like this. Next, by making small sketches, I examined where the respective pigments condense and what possibilities existed for shadings. I made an intuitive choice from these sketches. It became very clear to me how crucial the middle division is in the composition: For example, it makes

a great difference if the middle can be seen as a line, or whether the upper half differs from the lower in brightness alone.

VR: *After this intensive conceptual phase that culminated in your finding the horizontal composition that so characterizes Dust, you then turned to the actual work on the individual pages. Within the overall Dust installation, a central importance is attributed to the respective medium. What was the path like from the very fine pigment on paper to digital film animation?*

MB: *I ordered all 80 available colors of this kind of pastel and then tested each on a piece of paper. Not all of them had the quality that was needed – they remained on the surface and could not be rubbed into the paper layer for layer. Thus, with some colors it was hardly possible to do shadings. After this, I decided on classifying the colors according to their spatial effect: I photographed the pages and divided them into Close-up, Middle Ground and Distance. In the film, colors occur from all three of these categories. And the act of photographing also showed me what digital effect the colors have, how these would change in film. After thinking it over for a long time, I chose twelve colors for the film – it took about a minute per color in the film.*

VR: *For the exhibition Dust in the tesor at Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien in Vienna, you opted for the simultaneous*

presence of both the pastels and the animated film projection. What effect does this medial simultaneity have on the way your work is received? When you speak of digitalized pastels, you use the term "color of light". What transformational processes is the color, the pigment, subjected to here? And when you do this, what role does the technical process of projecting play in this?

MB: As the long and complex conceptual phase shows, the pastels themselves already comprise very many considerations – especially concerning the composition itself. When digitalizing the pages, the color changes then, since from pigment on paper a color comes about that functions as light. And this exerts an immediate effect on the gaze: You can stand and linger before a piece of paper but a certain distance remains. By means of projection it is possible to enter the color, and thus experience color spatially. Moreover, projected color reflects upon the person gazing, which for me signalizes proof of being immersed in color.

In the film *Dust*, the irregularities of the color application are much more directly visible than they are on paper. Likewise, the immanent movement is clearly visible in the film, which is not possible like this on the pastels.

The pastels on paper and the projected film yield an installation arrangement consisting of two works. From the dialogue between the two, each viewer can then draw his or her own conclusions. Here I see a point of reference to Josef Al-

bers, who also dealt intensively with the question of seeing and perceiving colors respectively.

VR: Here you address an artistic point of reference. For me, the film *Dust* is just teeming with references, such as to color field painting. How do abstraction's past and present enter into a dialogue here?

MB: In looking at color, for me – besides a direct emotional effect – it is about how spatial color is. This notion of the sense of space in color is also something I recognize in works by Yves Klein, Gotthard Graubner or Josef Albers, for example, though they used other artistic means. For example, Albers places color tones side by side that sometimes appear closer up or further away. On the one hand, I wanted to create spatial effects within monochromy. On the other, in the temporal sequence an additional effect comes about: There is no side by side, but rather individual sequences that follow one another. In the film, however, the light is so strong that an afterimage reverberates in a following sequence; thus, it is also about how colors mix on the retina. One color influences the next, and therefore, I have also determined the order of the sequences. To minimize the direct influence, I have set the order in a way that it looks as if you were looking at the color for the first time. I wanted the influence of the colors to be as little as possible: Therefore, no bright yellow could follow a strong red, because the afterimage would make us perceive

a green. So, a basic question came up for the film: What color can possibly follow the color I have right now? In order to reduce the afterimage, I chose a succession that pretty much goes from light to dark.

VR: Together with Carl Ludwig Hübsch you created the soundtrack for *Dust*, with the help of bass flutist Angelika Sheridan. What role does the level of the auditive play in this? Is the soundtrack more set up to give a sense of immersion, or do you see it as an independent part of the work?

MB: By including sound, I wanted to direct attention to the murmur of the pastel granulation, and that's why there is this rustling noise. But also, the rhythm of the cuts, the speed of the image sequences, is reflected to a certain extent in the sound. Within the sequences, the number of images varies, but on average there are fifteen. Because the sound follows the rhythm of the film, the spatial feeling of the colors is strengthened – and the sound per se also has its own spatial character.

VR: What color sequence surprised you personally the most with its effect? Did your perception of color change due to your intensively grappling with various pigments?

MB: Actually, I was very surprised how little movement there was with the light colors, particularly the yellow green tints.

You can also see this with the first two film sequences. Almost no movement is perceptible here, although they were cut the same way as the other sequences were. For me, this changed effect is due to the act of seeing per se. With the phthalo blue, on the other hand, the pigments stuck together cloudlike. Although you see a strong spatial depth, nevertheless the individual pigments are no longer recognizable as dust. Here I had to reduce the speed and work with a slight cross fading from the one image to the next. The case is different with the dark phthalo green or the red iron oxide where the dust is much more present.

In my painting, I notice that because of my work on Dust, color now plays a greater role. I look at colors much more closely and attribute this to a heightened awareness for the respective effect. I believe that I have begun to love color even more. I am fond of gazing at singular colors.

VR: *In conclusion, a question about your personal assessment: As an artist who grapples intensively with aspects of transmediality and media specifics in her art, I wonder: How do you perceive the reception of your own work by others? Do you see yourself as confronted with the long prevailing – also institutionally induced – striving for a medial categorization or is your work viewed in terms of its diverse transmediality?*

MB: *The work Dust is being shown for the first time as a museum exhibition at the tresor. It premiered at Cologne Fine Art & Design 2019 at sgr a. In addition to some pastels, I showed the film separately in a black box. That was well received by the audience. Now the pastels and the film are in the same room, which I find to be even better. In general, I have the feeling that I am caught between two stools regarding my way of working. Although experimental films are also included in the program of film festivals, my film is so complex and perhaps at the end too pictorial, since it calls for precise observation – and a film festival can hardly offer this due to the myriad of films shown. In the realm of art, there is a willingness towards a slow and in-depth visual study of it as well as an understanding of composition and spatial perception. Mediation is needed in order for Dust to be understood. Ultimately, the mystery is: What impact does color have on us?*

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