

In terms of my own pictorial experience I believe that abstraction faces no limits to expansion and extension, either in the direction of magnification or of reduction. It is innately well suited for growth.
Frank Stella, Working Space 1986

A GAME STRATEGY, A STRICT FRAMEWORK

On Per Formo's series *Figur* and *Metamorfoser*

For both series the grid is the point of departure. The grid has been of tremendous importance for classical modernism in painting with regard to quantity as well as quality and ideology (See Rosalind Krauss). It has been used by a great number of artists, such as for instance Piet Mondrian and Agnes Martin. The grid has also created the illusion that painting has moved beyond interpretations of landscapes and the rendering of reality – that it does not refer to anything other than itself – and it has therefore been important on an ideological level. Per Formo paints his way through a long tradition of abstraction starting toward the end of the 19th century and continuing all through the 20th century. The works have obvious links to, among others, Frank Stella, Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly. The references are numerous, but not importunate. They are there, providing certain contexts and possibilities – and a repertoire spanning from classical modernism via minimalism, neo-dada and pop art to op art, a repertoire that may be constantly expanded and varied. Many very different contemporary artists have engaged in an active discourse with this tradition, like Jonathan Lasker, Marianna Uutinen and Jon Arne Mogstad.

At the same time Formo's pictures indicate a movement away from the classical flat painting. Some works may remind one of Bridget Riley's «landscape paintings», others give associations to Don Judd's cubes. Some may even have much in common with textile arts or origami. The formalist Clement Greenberg, a dedicated advocate of flatness as a major characteristic of painting, would hardly have applauded Per Formo's paintings.

None of the paintings are easily accessible. They require an effort on the part of the spectator, a will to become deeply absorbed, a will to endure. Actually, some of the paintings are positively painful to look at, others may be defined as existing somewhere between joy and pain. The colours sometimes seem poisonous, rarely harmonious. Beauty is not irrelevant in these pictures, but it is not of the classical kind and it is mixed with pain: the paintings provoke the eye. And yet we are fascinated. And yet they work. They slip away when we try to fix them; they are difficult to relate to visually but they do work.

Per Formo is a musician as well as a visual artist, and there is much music in his paintings. He also picks up some composers' way of working, employing variations over a basic theme. Each of the two series are constructed on the basis of a primary form, a form that may or may not be detected after some effort: geometrical relationships are analyzed, visualized – and hidden once again. For even if we are presented with the «solution» in the shape of patterns and structures, it is not evident that we will recognize it immediately in the paintings, nor that we will manage to keep the basic pattern in mind while looking at the different variations.

Per Formo works extremely strictly and precisely with his projects, following certain selfimposed rules. He has worked with *Metamorfoser* (Metamorphoses) for about four years, both in the shape of sketches and as realized pictures in various formats. *Figur* (Figure) was started in the autumn of 1997 as pencil drawings. During the winter of 1997/98 he made colour versions of 4-5 pictures and in the course of the last two years, using a Mac, he has worked on with the series. The first versions of *Figur* have later been changed.

The computer is a handy tool and offers possibilities of testing out colours and versions quickly. Painting becomes result orientated; one may point and click, change over and over again. How does this affect our view of painting? Our view of the time aspect? We often associate painting with a slow process, an «aesthetics of slowness». What are we faced with here? One might assume that the longest phase is the one in front of the screen. But it is actually the critical evaluation in front of the various drafts: evaluating, reflecting and trying out the aesthetical

effect. So even if a computer speeds up some parts of the working processes, Formo still needs to take his time – he does not go back on the «aesthetics of slowness». On the contrary, maybe things take even longer time? Making active use of a computer apparently makes the process more facile. However, it also gives him a far greater material to relate to, many more sketches and drafts. Formo himself says that the computer represents a challenge to – and an intensification of – his critical sense. The computer as a tool makes it harder to be a painter. Digital technology and digital images have become omnipresent in our society; in this case they infiltrate painting. But maybe they also contribute to it.

However, even if it is the paintings that are presented in an exhibition, it is not always the painting that comes last in the process. And we are not necessarily dealing with a hierarchical structure where the digital image ranks at the top and where the painting becomes a mere imitation. At least it works both ways: the paintings are not always painted exactly according to the print-out, and sometimes the digital «prototype» is changed in accordance with the painted image. The format is of no importance; the same painting can be made in several formats and copies. This takes us to questions concerning the original and authentic work of art. Where is the original? Is it the image on the screen, the print-out or the painting on the wall? Could the computer just as easily have been exhibited, allowing the audience to look through the different variants on the screen? In that case, what would the sensation and experience of the audience have been like? They would not meet the «same» pictures even if they resemble one another: paintings as physical objects on a wall are qualitatively different from images stored as digital information on a screen. In Formo's work there is an interesting relationship between the digital and the analogous.

Per Formo has given himself a game strategy, a strict framework. The game has rules, but innumerable possibilities for variation. In some ways it may resemble a sonnet: the most rigid verse form imaginable, but one where the strict rules may offer a unique scope for play and allow us to do things we would not otherwise have done. Or we may compare it to games like chess and bridge. The systems are innumerable, as are the possibilities for modifications. But we need to have some rules, and the better we know the game, the greater the challenges.

Hege Charlotte Faber, July 2000
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