

GALERIE MARIA BERNHEIM

TOPOLOGY - Nick Oberthaler
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Other Dimensions

The main problem that geometric abstraction must set itself is that of its own historicity. The supply of geometric forms is limited, as are their possible combinations, and thus almost all geometric abstract pictures make reference to other geometric abstract pictures. In the marginal case of monochrome painting, this kind of reference is simply unavoidable. The Austrian painter Nick Oberthaler (b. 1981) is an artist who in recent years has mastered, with bravura, the difficulty of doing something fundamental while knowing it is impossible to do something fundamental without repeating history or fleeing into idiosyncrasy.

For his new exhibition at Maria Bernheim in Zürich, Oberthaler has further intensified his relation to geometric abstract painting. This relation functions on two separate levels.

On the one hand, Oberthaler makes reference to the artists of the 1980s Neo-Geo movement, who consciously wanted their work to be seen to convey meaning. One example would be Peter Halley's works, which came accompanied by postmodern discourses, and whose exaggerated colorfulness is picked up by Oberthaler.

On the other hand, one can also read Oberthaler's new works as referring to work, above all that of Günther Förg, which itself refuses any reference to any physical reality. For these artists, as for most postmodern painters, any idea of "an essential reality behind the positive real of things can no longer be rescued, including any notion of showing - even symbolizing - a cosmic, spiritual or neo-Platonic world."¹ Oberthaler's works with arrows and points appear to join forces with this postmodern departure from any and all transcendence. These works gesture toward compositional conventions - for example, an emphasis on the center - while suggesting an immanent legibility of images, perhaps even a formal analysis, something almost unknown today. It is impossible to infer references from these works, other than the dynamics and structures of the rectangular, mostly monochrome images. On the other hand, Oberthaler's new pictures also contain echoes of the aforementioned artists, for whom geometric abstract images still guide the viewer toward meanings, even if no longer metaphysical ones. For example, Oberthaler repeatedly integrates clearly legible letter and word fragments into his paintings, while sometimes also disrupting their legibility, in this way establishing an ingenious interplay between the fragments and the composition as a whole.

Oberthaler's most complex working through of these interconnected problems can be found in one particular picture: a grid-based image into which four human profiles have been integrated. The grid, of course, along with the monochrome, is the prototypical modern image structure. But as Rosalind Krauss said about the grid: "Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid can *only be repeated*."² In other words, even during modernism, the grid was no longer truly original. In this particular case, Oberthaler's grid is more closely affiliated to Blinky Palermo's "Flipper" than to a mature work by Piet Mondrian. The grid's placement suggests a continuation of the structure beyond the edges of the picture; unlike Mondrian's work, this is not a self-enclosed structure. The four profiles - abstract, but realistic nonetheless - further extend the interplay between modern and postmodern positions. Of course the profiles disrupt the pure geometry of the grid, but they are so formally integrated that it would be wrong to speak of a clash of styles in a genuinely postmodern sense. Instead, recalling many modernist legitimation strategies, the profiles here seem to allude to the interrelation of abstraction, human beings and society. That Oberthaler uses topology, a spatial concept, as the title of an exhibition of very planar paintings is another hint to us: we should be on the lookout here for dimensions going beyond the purely positivistic.

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1 Johannes Meinhardt, "Säkularisierte Moderne," in *Monochromie Geometrie*, ed. Ingvild Goetz (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1996), 7.

2 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 160.