

The following interview took place in Houston on September 12, 2004 between Katharina Grosse and Lynn M. Herbert, Senior Curator, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

Lynn M. Herbert: You've really staked a claim so to speak in the realm of painting. Has it always been painting for you?

Katharina Grosse: It became clearer to me during my studies that I needed something that was very immediate, where the result was visible right away, whereas in sculpture, printing or photography (with the development process), or video, you need extra tools to make your work visible. I was so much faster with painting and to split time and movement, and the relationship of time, movement and space into smaller units was easier for me in painting.

LMH: Did you always have the sense that there was a lot of potential in painting? You seem to continuously expand the boundaries of painting.

KG: Yes, I think so. I can remember that when I was a little kid, I would always expand the space on which I painted. I would paint on walls or I would take sheets from a pad of paper and put 10 or 12 together to make a big space and put it on the wall and play music in front of it ... I would always expand from one activity to another, but it was always linked to some kind of painting activity.

LMH: With regard to the different supports that you work with - paper, canvas, and architecture - does the work you do with one influence the work you do with another? Is there a dialogue between them?

KG: At the beginning, there was this simple impulse to paint on whatever I could get hold of but later, as I got more and more into the different media I used to paint on, I understood that the potential of painting was actually in stating its independence from the different supports that on the other hand define specific conditions in terms of space and time.

LMH: What about color? Have you always been this comfortable with color?

KG: Yes, I've always been completely attracted by color. I can remember that as a kid I always loved the most colorful clothes. Always. I can't remember it ever being something I had to decide about; I would just go for it and live with it.

LMH: Could you take me step by step through the process of doing a site-specific work such as the one you've done here? Assuming that it begins with the site visit, how does your thinking evolve from there?

KG: It is always a mixture of different kinds of information that interweave. The previous work has usually left me unsatisfied in a funny way. So you want to resolve things in the next one. Then you go and see the space and sometimes you discover that the project you were nourishing in your mind you can't do there. When I came to Houston I saw that the highest potential with regard to surface was the floor. Through the site visit it is easier to understand everything together, the light situation, where to paint or to move.

LMH: With regard to your palette, you gave us a list of the different colors that you wanted us to order for you. How site-specific is your color choice or do you want to bring in a broad palette from which to work once you get started? I'm thinking of the all-green work that you did at Kunsthalle Bern say vs. the many other works that have had a broad range of colors.

KG: In Bern I chose the green to artificially answer the greenish light that came thru the windows. My intention was to minimize upcoming associations. To a certain extent I was working with preconceived ideas. Today I leave most of the decisions to the moment when I start working on site. When ordering for Houston beforehand I looked at the color chart and I just decided at that minute for a certain set of colors.

LMH: Could you talk about the paint that you've come to use for these projects?

KG: Yes, the Golden acrylic. When I started spraying I used oil paint, but it was very difficult to work with and unhealthy too. But I wanted something that was very close to oil in pigment density, and I needed colors that are very brilliant. When you overlay color over color, acrylic tends to turn grayish. Spray painting is a little vulgar and to do it with this really saturated high quality product gives it an irritating twist.

LMH: How did you come to use the spray gun for painting?

KG: There was a moment when in my brushed wall painting I thought that I was following too exactly the set up of the architectural space. I felt more like a sculptor than a painter, and I wondered whether painting could make a completely different use of space than a sculpture does. If I wanted to expand the space with painting, I had to move beyond the architectural set-up. When going to see this little project space in Kunsthalle Bern, I looked up in the right corner and I thought: there should be a painting in this corner. The only way to move easily over difficult architectural crossings is the spray gun. I made a test in an old building and did the piece in Bern which was just one color, which was a green that from different angles could look like a dark red, or a dark blue, or even a black. And as it got a little less opaque it looked like a bottle green; it was a very ambiguous color. Rather than being a monochrome surface, it was a polychrome surface to my eyes. And then, after a little while, I began using a range of different colors with all different sorts of movement. I was getting away from this idea that I have to exclude things other people could see.

LMH: How do you start a painting like the one you did here? What is it like when you begin?

KG: I'm doing a floor piece here so the actual working process is very tricky because you are in your own way as you are in the painting with your body constantly. Yet at the same time wearing the mask, the goggles, and the suit excludes you from the space, so this idea of being in the process is an illusion. You're in the minimum space yourself in this suit, and you have this spray gun, and out of yourself everything is being painted so you're in a funny way confronted with your own activity.

LMH: You mentioned that you enjoy the beginning.

KG: Yes, it is great; you just go. The first 20 minutes is always fantastic because you see right away how it transforms the space.

LMH: And as you get further into a site-specific painting does it become more difficult?

KG: It's always about where do I expend the smallest amount of energy to get the most out of it. This is the point that I want to reach. So the further I get, the less decisions are left to be taken.

LMH: You used to do studies or models but you don't do them anymore?

KG: I did them during the first years. Back then I needed to decide how big the piece should be or where it should sit and I would even decide things like what colors I was going to use. Later on I realized I was preconceiving so many solutions before actually being in the space that my working process sometimes ended up aiming at an imitation of the anticipated result.

LMH: What is the difference for you between working with a spray gun and a paint brush? Does the spray gun allow you to be more intuitive? Is it a very different experience for you using the spray gun?

KG: Yes it is very different. When I was using the paint brush I was very much dealing with the idea of doing the simplest movements with the simplest tools to get a very complex structure. That was what fascinated me. I could just do linear movements. I could never go and all of a sudden interfere at some moment. I always had to take up some kind of outside movement and bring it into the painting and then cover a certain surface. This was restricting me to the point where I thought I would love to be able to go and do a dot again. And when I did the spray painting, all of a sudden I saw that the spray gun would offer me the possibility of putting together a surface out of dots.

LMH: Do the paints mix at all? When you change from one color to another?

KG: Very little in the gun itself, but the dots mix on the surface in the most fascinating ways.

LMH: In the realm of site-specificity, your work raises interesting questions about space. There's the space on which you've painted, there's our sense of the architectural space, but as we interact with your work the volume of the space is activated in a way. Are you thinking about all of these three when you're working or are you thinking more of the surface you're painting on.

KG: When I'm painting I'm not really thinking about it because I take it for granted that it does happen that way. Color has this amazing ability that once exposed and exaggerated, it has this power of energizing the space in many many ways. So it's not only the idea of transforming say a concrete floor, it's also that it dematerializes the different items that are in the space, and it irritates the notion of relations of wall to wall, say, in a corner or wall to ceiling and you might feel like it looks like there's no corner any more. It is the coming together of an architecturally built space and a painted space which is an illusionistic space, and these two conceptions have nothing in common but they coincide, and that is the irritating moment. And then you yourself are moving as well, with your eyes and body moving in different ways. But when you stand or rest for a moment, you move your eyes and do the same movements that I must have done with my arms with the spray gun so you're kind of put in a situation that I went through and this shifts you from your existence into mine, from the past into the present. This is an example of how the vitalization of the space works.

LMH: You've mentioned before that seeing Renaissance frescoes in Italy influenced you in a way when you began painting on walls. Have there been any influences in terms of painting on the floor? Does the influence of those works carry over to the floor?

KG: Yes, it was amazing when I was living in Florence to see all of these buildings that were thought through from the smallest stone on the floor to a little carving on the ceiling.

LMH: In thinking about the large floor piece that you recently did in Denmark, what was it like spraying downward? You've mentioned that it's technically different. Do you find that it is formally different as well?

KG: In the Denmark painting there is a very strong relationship between the floor and the walls with integrated paintings and objects, whereas here in Houston you walk down those stairs and look at a painting on the floor. The material of the stairs and the floor is the same, so you're actually already in the painting when you're walking down the stairs and you're looking at something that could also be the ceiling or the wall. This feeling of what you're looking at is really transformed when you come down those stairs.

LMH: Thinking about your using a spraygun, and that the paint becomes in a sense an aerosol gas with pigment in it makes me think of things like mist, clouds, fog - gasses that are found in nature. And those are things that we think of as being all around us or above us. I'm wondering about this piece that will be on the floor. As you come down the stairs are you going to feel like you're in it? Like you're floating? Or will it feel more like water below you?

KG: When you were walking on the painting in Denmark which was really huge, you could only see really well the bits close to you. The connotation of surface is constantly condensed and as you walk on it, it unfolds. As you look back to where you were standing just two minutes ago, this is gone. So where you were and where you're going to be are locations that disappear the moment that you leave them. Here in Houston the floor is cast in concrete; it's actually the first time I'll paint on an uncoated surface. The visitors will experience walking on a floor and on a painting at the same time.

LMH: Could you talk a little about the objects you've incorporated in your site-specific works?

KG: One day I decided to paint something private. So I painted my bedroom the way I had left it. There were loads of clothes, discs, cd's and books and my bed of course and everything got sprayed. In combination with these objects my painting seemed even more independent from the coherent experience of volume and space in the architectural sense: the added layers of paint split the mutual relation of objects and their surface thus interrupting their narrative structure.

When working with really big spaces I started to kind of rebuild the bed-clothes-book-situation I had at home to implement some entity of another scale.

LMH: And the performative aspect of your work? You've mentioned before that painting with a spray gun allows you to artificially enlarge your body, that that's one of the tricks it allows for.

KG: This possibility of being really big, this illusion that you generate, that's why it's kind of a private performance. People only see the result and that's what irritates them. They don't see me. So this is the trick in a way, that I've disappeared. When you see something on the floor you wonder who built this, was somebody here? You're confronted with the residue of an existence.

LMH: There's something very musical about the work. As if it is moving like music does, building up to a crescendo here and maybe a quieter passage there. And I'm thinking about how our feet will be coming in contact with it

here on the floor. Did people comment about that with the floor piece in Denmark?

KG: Yes, they were going to have a waltz class on the last day which I think is really nice. But I had a very strong feeling at the opening when there were a lot of people that I really wanted them to be in the painting, and have a group photo taken. I have a feeling that the volume of material is really good in connection with the work and becomes even more so with a floor painting. You have something on the floor and all these movements and different colors, but what puts them there is movement that is somewhere in the space. The information that you get from what you see makes you think subconsciously that something must have taken place that involved movement in the volume of the space, flying around or whatever, and it's so big and vast that sometimes you think it must have been a very large person with a very little pencil doing this. You have this kind of shift of big and small, and you experience it yourself.

LMH: You've spoken about transcendent nature of working this way. Being between a conscious and subconscious level.

KG: I don't really know what I do consciously or unconsciously. To transcend is a fascinating idea. I don't know if I understand it the way culturally it normally would be, but if I ask a question on a certain level, I'm likely to answer it on the same level. I've got to shift and get another way to look at it to get to the next step, and so on, and so on. This constant process naturally drives you to somewhere completely different from where you started. This idea of constantly being in a different status, looking about and asking questions, that's what I find fascinating, and you find that in old Indian tales in which mythical heroes can become any form - lake, sand, trees.

LMH: One author has described your work as „torrents of color“. How would you characterize your gestures in painting?

KG: Everything is a gesture - everything you do. If I lift my hand or if I smile, right? And there are easy ways to move your arm in the air. You watch what happens as the paint hits the wall and mixes with the paint that is underneath, and if you become intrigued, you stay longer; and you don't move so much and all of a sudden the paint looks a different way. It also has to do with the color that I choose. It is interesting to really be able to tell one movement from another, so this is why I'll use yellow say before a turquoise. I use different colors because it helps to retrace where the movements are. It's not so much a decision of will it look good if I take this, but what will be most visible in relationship to what I've done before.

LMH: Are you moving fast or slow?

KG: I move fast. When people take photos or there is a film crew, they see that it is very much like a performance.

LMH: You've mentioned that you want your work to greet people. How important is that generosity and welcoming aspect of your work?

KG: I think it's very important. It's a funny way of being aggressive, but also a way of getting close to things. Using paint in such a generous way is also, in a sense, absurd. It's overdone. And I think that's a fantastic artistic strategy, to over do. It's one of the simplest and most basic „tricks“ as you called it, to overdo notions.

LMH: There's a wonderful exuberant, over-the-top quality to your work with all its intense and varied color, a seeming uncontrollability as if the colors and gestures take on a life of their own. A kind of anarchy, as if you've liberated painting and you're taking it out for a ride.

KG: And I think it should be even more so. What is composition? Maybe it is the idea of making sense somehow, the idea of being readable to people. I think that is important. It's not just about being a big, beautiful, sensual experience. It does talk about a lot of other things. Like anarchy and doing things you're not supposed to in a funny and amusing way. What you would love to do as a kid: take the felt pen and paint the most beautiful furniture your parents have. I'm allowed to do what I'm doing, but at the same time, it's playing with this idea of being too big. It's about rules. It's about being intellectual and all these discussions about the conceptual or about being too beautiful. Or about the ability to not preconceive a work, but the ability of doing exactly what you do while you're doing it.

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