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Space Invaders: · A discussion about painting, space and its hybrids

In the past two to three years, art theory, exhibitions, and the art market in general have witnessed a renaissance of painting.

Even though the demise of painting has been postulated at regular intervals in art history, this “moribund discipline has survived all of those attacks leveled against it quite unscathed. Maybe because of these numerous announcements of its death—and subsequent resurrection— painting is striving for constant improvements, new pictorial and linguistic formulations, and ways of coming to terms with and relating to its past.

The exhibition *Space Invaders* does not focus on what is touted as the return of painting, but on contemporary examples of self-renewal, inspired by what painting can genuinely offer. What started in modernity as the notion of “exiting the picture”, an initially conceptual and material act (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Günther Uecker, Daniel Buren, Robert Barry, Dan Flavin, to name but a few), evolved into full-fledged discussions about interdisciplinary concepts and transgressions of individual media in the 1990s. The expansionary movements of framed spaces via conceptual spaces into realms pertaining to the outside world have struck a responsive chord with many contemporary artworks. Hence, as an overarching curatorial topic, *Space Invaders* explores the relations between painting, space, and its hybrid forms by interacting with the interior spaces of *Kunsthaus Baselland*—a former industrial site, transformed into a white cube featuring many references to its past. Each of the artistic positions displayed is connected to the main curatorial questions this show elucidates, and each of them also addresses its own specific issues.

Stéphane Dafflon transfers decoration and design imagery into what seem to be universally valid forms with which he converts individual spaces into hyperrealistic artificial settings. Playing with things that already exist, selected in relation to their color, form, structure, spatial dimensions, and artistic or art-historical connotations, John Armleder and Gerwald Rockenschaub generate hybrid painterly entities. Dominique Figarella also “paints” with what exists, including the vestiges of this existence. In his most recent paintings Figarella incorporates photographs showing reflections on the surfaces of his own paintings. Stéphane Calais, more so than most other artists, admirably navigates through very different disciplines and designs collage-type spatial settings which—as for the show in *Kunsthaus Baselland*—include the works of his colleague Figarella. A spatial linkage is also the route chosen by Renée Levi, who has mounted her sprayed paintings on two walls facing each other. The process of spray-painting, comparable to the act of drawing, results in spatial structures displaying internal as well as external effects. They transpose a discourse on temporality, texture, ornaments, drawing, and perception into the present. By employing architectural language, Toby Paterson resorts to common socio-cultural structures and their embodiments. As a skateboarder, whose experiences are physically determined, he has penetrated various urban spaces. These experiences and his keen interest in modernist architecture are reflected in his isometric plans painted and sprayed directly onto the wall. Shaun Gladwell also explores urban situations on his skateboard. He captures them on

video, and by opting for a slowed- down replay mode and deliberately choosing certain sequences he creates a video painting reminiscent of William Turner. For Lori Hersberger art “is always a spatial event, in terms of music, ideas, or specific visuals.” In his installation-type pictorial or video spaces he integrates elements such as broken mirrors, bales of hay, words in neon letters, processed Styrofoam bars, and phosphorescent color. Space Invaders features artistic positions that constantly challenge the making of art, directly relate to painting, examine these connections again and again, and infer their own notions from them. Conquering and dealing with spaces is a major concern for the artists represented here.

Excerpts from a talk between John Armleder (JA), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: In connection with the Christmas songs you collect from different artists on the label 'Villa Magica Records' you mentioned once that all the misunderstandings around a Christmas iconography produce hybrid forms on a global dimensions.

Do you like hybrids? JA: Santa's World is extremely complex and on darwinistic standards utterly sophisticated. It celebrates something that Santa's strictly not involved with. He impersonates Saint Nicolas, celebrated usually long before Christmas, but travels with reindeers, including from time to time a drunken one, and introduces kids to basic schizoid and paranoiac belief by scolding them while handing them presents, and having them check chimneys at night. All this on behalf of a newborn baby celebration that, from that day, triggered many counting years and centuries, including many who never even started believing the story, while others pray in churches where pine trees never grow. If you see what I mean. Now, this produces icons of all sorts, songs and ornaments, cooking recipes, and family gatherings, shared all over earth. All sorts of things similar to what and how we indulge around yearly in our art community. It's another place where one thing is fully valid when used for another. Then, put together, breeding occurs. Now, some aliens out there come as pure as crystal, but don't try to get close to it on this planet. We are hybrids for sure, and so is our art. And that makes a lot of fun. Get any pure lump of anything, it will merge or at least float within the mixed cereals or in see-through amber aspic. Jolly Jelly! ES: You share an interest with design, furniture and interior architecture with some of the artists also presented in this show, like Stéphane Dafflon, Toby Paterson, or Gerwald Rockenschaub (two of them you had invited yourself for a show). However, your roots seem to be different, as you come more from a fluxus-inspired background. Where do you see familiarities? JA: Few of us are coalminers.

Excerpts from a talk between Stéphane Calais (SC), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: One of the main characteristics of your work is the mix of disciplines.

Drawing plays an important role, followed by painting, collages, sculptures, installations, and fabricated objects. How do you decide on the use of a medium? How does the mixing of media impact artistic approach? SC: I am basically a dessinateur, that's my way of thinking. I have trained my mind to work like this, and you can do this for any kind of discipline. But this is just a "means", an approach I take. If I consider that every object, regardless of its size and function, has been—and will be—drawn before it is finalized, I can use drawing as a basis for wherever my artistic intentions and objectives will take me. Therefore I can do collages, paintings, etc. as long as they serve my purpose. Another important point is that certain ideas such as emotions are only possible for me if they take on specific forms. I navigate from one genre to the other quite leisurely in order to map or just touch upon certain places of reality, without any intention to introduce a style, a signature, or a logo. ES: Your use of wall painting, as well as your historical "bonds", like the tondi, seem to be inspired by illusionary concepts of space—almost like Baroque wall decorations and trompe-l'oeil, which aimed to negotiate the surface of the wall completely. Likewise, the objects placed in front of wall paintings (like "La Corbeille" in front of "Le Bocal") seem to extend the painting into three-dimensional space. Do you think of your use of space as being "illusionist" or "anti-illusionist", as Pierre Staudenmeyer said about your material? SC: Pierre uses this term in connection with the materials that I use, and the straightforward manner in which I do that. The weaved basket in "La Corbeille", for example, exposes the gestures that made it. Its structure is evident. The same goes for the rest of the work, all processes are apparent. Viewed from this angle, my work is anti-illusionist, there is no mystery and no sleight-of-hand.

Excerpts from a talk between Stéphane Dafflon (SD), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: ES: You are best known for your elegant, large-scale murals that have a strong relationship with wall decoration—in terms of their formally reduced, repetitive patterns, the use of color, the predilection for the aesthetics of logos, signs, industrial design, or the graphic language of techno culture...

How would you describe your artistic background, and where does your interest for design and architecture come from? SD: It's true that my work borrows heavily from design, and what captivates me most is its production methods. On the other hand, if my work appropriates architectural elements, my interest lies in particular in its organization of space, the approaches taken by it, and its wanderings and meanderings. A piece that would best reflect all of these influences is certainly *Airless*, shown at Air de Paris gallery in 2000, whose title refers to the airbrush technique. I wanted to model an entire exhibition space, an envelope, allowing the display of canvas paintings. Viewers were encouraged to enter a round-angled airlock, painted completely in a brilliant synthetic white that reflected neon lights, to discover five abstract paintings hung at different levels. This installation was designed to generate a feeling of suspension and of floating in space, providing viewers with a single point of reference—the abstract paintings. SSC: What is your relationship to classical abstract painting, like Rothko's color spaces, Barnett Newman's space-opening Zip Paintings, or to the Minimal Art sculptures by Donald Judd—do you regard them as a referential heritage? Do you have different historical models? SD: Naturally my work is connected to, and enriched by, the history of abstract painting, but for me it's quite conceivable to be influenced by art history just as much as by the sleek design of a 1965 Ford Mustang Fastback, to give you just one example.

Excerpts from a talk between Dominique Figarella (DF), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: In your latest work you include photography on the painted surface.

The photographs show real-life moments with paintings where camera lights or a TV-crew are reflected on a pictorial surface. By integrating this foreign element into the painting, you add many new interpretative layers. Which ones were important in your conceptual preparations? DF: The question was to integrate two proceedings upon the same surface—a pictorial and a photographic one. And to find a way of bringing together these two forms of two different nature in the same medium without coming up with an interpretative ranking or with whatever kind of preference of one to the other. It's as if these two techniques remained free and independent from each other (disconnected), while both inscribe forms onto a homogeneous surface. The reason why this idea crosses my mind is that it automatically evokes another one. Through this almost random interplay of materials and their techniques history may become a "subject" in my artistic practice. The painting was not supposed to revoke the photographic image in order to blend it with the pictorial space, nor was the photographic image supposed to guide or determine the composition of the painted form. I think that when faced with these constraints there are few solutions. In any case, the method I use consists in taking a picture of the painting before it is finished, a type of "making of" document. At this stage in the process, when the paint is still wet, it is possible, by taking a picture, to capture on the painted surface the image of what is reflected around it, as well as the contours, the color, and the texture of its form. What is reflected from around the painting is anything and nothing,—whatever lies scattered around, and whatever is there where I happen to work, at a studio or an exhibition space. Of course, what happens there often results from my own activity which, in return, is impacted by it. What is intriguing is this interface where two different activities—creating a painting and all the events surrounding it (taken from the triviality of life)—both impinge on the same medium, a single archive, making no intelligible comments on one or the other. ES: You integrate real objects in your paintings, you work with reflections on a painted surface, you integrate this reflection by means of photography into a painting, and you incorporate photographic representations of a painting's surface (including its reflection) into a painting....This very complex and confusing play with reality and modes of representation, with real space and spatial simulation, reminds me a lot of the Cubists' integration of reality in their collages—especially of their use of fake reality as an (anti-)illusionist trompe-l'oeil. All in all it is a very conceptual approach to painting—how important is it to you that this approach happens explicitly within the medium of painting? DF: You're right, I am very interested in Cubism, and for reasons very different from those inspired by formalism. What also intrigues me about Cubist space is what the Constructivists or Kurt Schwitters did with it. But let me come back to your very precisely worded question. I don't think that the conceptual dimension of my "tableaux" is specific to the medium of painting, or to whatever I use to paint them—which still is not painting as such. It's very difficult for me to imagine these two separately from each other. If you tried to analytically differentiate in my work the painted imprints (produced by brushstrokes or other means) from what is not done by painting in order to understand these two areas separately, I don't think you could achieve much progress. What I see, and put into practice, is always a relation. In painting I always look for the way it relates to what it is not, for the way in which it needs to find its empty slot in its practical dimension.

When I paint, objects and images become imprinted on the same surface and at the same time as paint, and that's why technical requirements and the temporality of the procedures required for one medium must be harmonized with those of the others. As stand-alone entities, objects and images have no meaning in my paintings; I don't, at any rate, use them so that they acquire this or that meaning. The meaning that they lug around becomes bogged down, loses its logical connection, and another one is found by hooking it up with a logic that pertains to pictorial processes. Therefore I wouldn't say that it's the non-pictorial dimension which creates conceptual meaning in my painting, but rather the way in which it relates to what it is not.

Excerpts from a talk between Shaun Gladwell (SG), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: Your position in the exhibition is a very interesting one, since in your work you departed from painting – which you are still doing – and started to do video works, some of them taking skateboarding as a premier motif.

You are a contest winning free style skateboarder and a trained painter. I am interested in this hybrid intertwining of these two areas in your art. Could you give me some explanations about how you have arrived at the mixing of – from most of the art world's perspective – two oppositional gestures? SG: For me, this was a smooth transition, to connect my fine art practice to skateboarding. I could always see, and participated in, the creative energy of skateboarding. Then, in art school, I started locating skateboarding's potential to move within and against several different genres- (self) portraiture, landscape and the contemporary practice of performance and video installation. I then began to make videos of skating with a range of critical concerns in mind. I didn't want the work to be easily collapsed into the skating subculture. There are other artists who sit more comfortably within the subcultures codifications, (Mark Gonzales, Ed Templeton etc.) but my work wishes to be slightly estranged from subcultural origins. I feel this estrangement happens when the conceptual and historical references are as important as the type and quality of skateboarding being performed. SSC: The video "Linework: A Road Movie" is connected with the Olympic Games held in your home town Sydney in 2000. At the time the organizers "cut" the city in different parts, preparing everything for a safe sport event, but at the same time cutting "ungrown" (unnatural) obstacles into the city's body. Could you tell a bit more about the background of this video? SG: The Olympics signaled a spatial and architectural upheaval for me – it was a moment where the city reconfigured itself for a transient event with, not only new structures and spaces, but an architecture of security and surveillance. When in place, these security strategies clearly proscribed a definition of the city's correct use and limits and consequently defined the potential for its creative misuse. The Olympic Marathon line work video was itself a video that lent itself to a notion of experimental drawing. I would film myself skating along the route of the marathon marked on the streets throughout Sydney in a bold 42km line of paint. I played with the line by calving through and around it. I wanted the piece to describe a kind of shared authorship. The city was drawing me as much as I was tracing one of its prominent lines. I wanted the piece to be playful- hijacking the marathon, with my board.

Excerpts from a talk between Lori Hersberger (LH), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: When presenting your work at the Venice Biennale in 1999 (curated by Harald Szeemann), you said that you had switched over to painting.

During your studies you started with video art and sculpting, and in your early works you already used a variety of media and content. What made you opt so specifically for painting even though you have stressed several times that you want to continue doing videos and installations? LH: My painting has witnessed a transformation insofar as this “rupture” resulted from my previous work, without adopting its methodology or patterns. I might even contend that it contradicts them. What was decisive for me, really, was to be able to work in a direct and analog manner as well as with the element of chance. If you paint without being compelled to achieve visual expressiveness, it is possible to gain new insights into your own ideas within the actual working process. That’s how you create an imaginary field from which, ultimately, your executed work will be derived. Apart from time, it’s the ritualization of time and actions that take center stage. While the time of the day used to be of secondary importance to me, its “organization”, i.e. taking daylight into account, is now a major concern for me when painting. When the opportunity arises I do feel the urge, every once in a while, to do a video. This is still an interesting activity, a kind of counter-pole. Simply because the methodology is so completely different from painting. That’s how I can better preserve the idea of finding a new approach to painting, of always putting it into perspective. Of course this was easier at the beginning. Today, with my wider focus and daily requirements, it’s not that significant anymore. ES: From the very outset, your painting has not been spatially confined, i.e. not restricted to the format of a support/easel painting, which is most probably due to your installation background. This is also reflected by your style—you work simultaneously on several pictures as well as directly on the wall. Would you call your working method “performative”? LH: It may be performative, i.e. “live”, when emphasizing the production or the process itself. The motorbike performances would then be a type of hybrid Action Painting oscillating between show and art, while the places for painting in space or on a support—unless this activity takes place in a studio—depend on the given situation. It’s difficult to paint in front of strangers, while being distracted by many things. I prefer working without any audience. What remains an intriguing question is to what an extent can I achieve the required concentration and emptiness within a limited time-span? Not just on a specific day but also on the next. Ultimately, what interests me most is the outcome. As a rule, I don’t paint on walls while doing pictures, even though some have described my work along these lines. I do make a distinction here, and the support, the ground, plays a significant role. Most of my pictures are done in my studio. Sometimes I finish a picture in the exhibition space, incorporating it in the situation, for example with a painting applied directly onto a wall to serve as background. Also, I am principally fascinated by experiments. There have been instances where I would spray paint on a white canvas directly in the exhibition space, take it off the wall, and then place the finished work right next to it; the remaining color around the area left blank formed a kind of sprayed corona around the emptiness. The process of painting and the performance thus became fully comprehensible. In this purely conceptual approach, everything revolves around intention and coincidence. Generally, it might be argued that dealing with these elements implies a performative approach to painting.

Excerpts from a talk between Renée Levi (RL), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: To me your works are pertinent to “Space Invaders” in three different ways:

Firstly, your sprayed paintings have to do with the graffiti scene, conjuring up images of sprayers who have conquered urban fringe areas, prowling the streets in the cloak of darkness to create their outlawed art, penetrating urban space in the process. Secondly, in order to perceive and comprehend your paintings in detail and in their entirety, viewers too move back and forth, roaming the exhibition space. Thirdly, sprayed strokes model highly interesting pictorial and color spaces. Do you consider yourself a “space invader”? RL: If you’re looking for connections between the graffiti scene and myself, you will not find them in the way we deal with the city or space, but in the motif of the tag or signature. My sprayed works are signatures—always—sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally (the 3-meter letters “Levi o3” at the Folkwang Museum in Essen, for example). But sprayers in public spaces use spraying cans because they are able to apply color on almost every surface with their can and because they don’t want to physically touch the ground. I use the can as a tool because it is uncomplicated and fast. Like no other drawing tool, the can dictates a distinct rhythm. Pressing the spray-head produces color, a lot of color. The moment I start a stroke with a can I have to pull it through, not as with a pencil where it is possible to just stop drawing on a piece of paper. My use of the spraying can designates time. But I don’t believe that the tool per se models an interesting pictorial and color space. Of course, I am intrigued by the diffuse sprayed dust produced by a boldly drawn line, by the way dust comes to settle on the surface, which is often in contradiction to the given context. SSC: Another important element in your work is the relation to architecture, as seen in the site-specific positioning of easel paintings, for example in the stairwell of the Hirslanden Hospital in Zürich, in directly applied spray paintings in the UBS hall in Basel, or in situations of spatial manipulation like in your exhibition in Quimper, where you had walls removed to provide for greater spatial clarity. Your keen interest in space interacts with paintings which you display in specific places, or in which—as expressed by Catherine Perret—the place becomes the canvas. Are spatial questions on an equal footing with painterly ones? How do you determine the relationship between space and painting? RL: By not separating space from painting. For me everything is a potential place for painting, and occasionally I want to—or have to—prepare the space for painting, which may be more time-consuming than the act of painting itself. Your question as to the relation to architecture is a bit off the mark. It’s true that I’m a trained architect and that after studying it I worked for two guys who were unknown back then. However, my works have much more to do with my yearning for a lost childhood which started in Istanbul and came to a sudden end in the Swiss town of Wohlen.

Excerpts from a talk between Toby Paterson (TP), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: ES: Your work shows an almost obsessive interest in the formal language of post-war architecture, mixed with floating abstract shapes, which could also be interpreted as mental or utopian landscapes. Both might derive from your practice as a skateboarder...in the way how to navigate through a city, and how modernist architecture could be best (ab-)used. Why did you choose art as your primary medium, and not, say, architecture or urban planning? Your interest in urban construction seems to go beyond formal questions... TP: I've always thought in primarily visual terms I suppose, and that usually manifested itself in the making of drawings relating to whatever I've been interested in at any given point. My route through all this has been pretty direct because I have pretty much always been aware of art, but had to make a greater effort to experience architecture and design in any meaningful way beyond just existing passively amongst it. I have very little in the way of the broader organisational and statistical abilities necessary to be an architect or planner anyway, as it happens. SSC: What I like a lot in your work is the hybrid overlapping of art historical references such as shaped canvases, works of the Russian avant-garde, of De-Stijl with modern architectural elements, storage-like shelf structures and models or objects. As a spectator one gets confronted with a load full of possibilities, which can be put together or also not in a lot of versions. I had to think especially of the "Proun"-constructions by El Lissitzky, who regarded the Proun as a "transfer station between painting and architecture". Do you also look for such transfers and do you choose specific historical elements or are they rather randomly taken as a kind of contemporary language? TP: I'm definitely interested in looking for points where painting, architecture and sculpture meet in some way. I think historical references present themselves as precedents during such cross-fertilisation. In terms of what happens within my work, the possibility of an art historical reference usually follows on from thinking about a certain subjective spatial experience. For example, looking at the work of El Lissitzky or Victor Pasmore or Ellsworth Kelly can cast new light on something I'm thinking about. In that sense it can be quite random, but it can equally be the case that an ideology running throughout a culture at a certain time is more interesting than the work of one individual artist.

Excerpts from a talk between Gerwald Rockenschaub (GR), Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (SSC) and Eva Scharrer (ES); published in the exhibition catalogue: SSC: In your artistic evolution you started as a painter, but soon you pushed open the doors leading to a realm beyond what is typically associated with art. You began to apply modes of language that also worked outside the confines of art or exhibition spaces. Here I am referring to your “eye sex” poster for the Vienna Festival, the logo design of the Viennese record store Black Market, or the orientation map for the exhibition “Jetztzeit”. In all these works, you were able to link your passion for artistic activities with practical requirements. What I would like to know is, how do you approach the connection between, to put it very broadly, life and art? GR: I might add that I also did a poster campaign for Austrian Airlines (Vienna, 1991/1992). When conceptualizing such activities, the question of how “life and art” are related to each other simply doesn’t crop up; I am more interested in what the area or space I am supposed to work in requires and allows for. I like to find out whether a work can function in a specific context or not. So my artistic activities are always linked with practical requirements, and my use of artistic instruments always refers to a situation or a given place. ES: Andy Warhol, when referring to his “Silver Clouds”, once said that he wanted to put an end to painting and felt that one way of achieving this was to do a painting which hovers, to fill it with helium, and to have it float out of the window. That would mean one object less to shift around and it would finish off painting. Were similar thoughts crossing your mind when you started to do inflatable paintings? GR: The first inflatable painting I did for an exhibition at the Galerie Susanna Kulli in St. Gallen. I had put together an ensemble consisting of two inflatable walls, one inflatable sofa, and two inflatable stools, and what was missing, I felt, was an inflatable painting. The thought was a more pragmatic one, rather than the intention of putting an end to painting. This has never been a real concern to me; for me it has always been interesting how I could put painterly ideas into practice by using means different from oil and canvas, as in my foil sheet paintings.

Sabine Schaschl