

Marco Stanke »A Little Room to Play«

Laudation · Städtische Galerie im Theater, Kunstverein Ingolstadt · 2023-07-07

Dear guests, dear members of the Kunstverein Ingolstadt,

my name is Martin Zanker, and I'd like to confess, right at the outset, that I don't feel entirely at ease with the task of introducing you to the exhibition opening tonight. Why not? Because I am, in fact, a kindergarten and primary-school teacher; your long attention spans are inevitably suspect to me, and on average you all strike me as a little too tall.

But I'm not only a teacher, I'm also a friend of the painter Marco Stanke. And it was in that role of the friend — the hopefully best friend — that Marco asked me to deliver an introduction and laudation today.

Dear audience,

allow me to take a broad sweep; let me cast a very wide arc with a small anecdote that begins with the painter Piet Mondrian in New York and ends, eventually, in — Düsseldorf.

Piet Mondrian believed that something universal was finding expression in the balanced composition of his paintings; something that would have to be valid for all people, always and everywhere. He was convinced that the health and freedom of humankind could be increased if only the social and individual life were structured according to the principles of his art. The palpable equilibrium of his compositions, the harmony, the simplicity — all of it does also sound rather like the good life.

Consistently, Mondrian shaped at least his own living space according to these principles: he is said to have lived like a monk, an art collector reported after a visit in 1941: "Everything is white and empty; only red, blue and yellow squares that he has distributed throughout the entire space. In the bedroom and in the studio."

Perhaps she also glimpsed, on that occasion, the sketch that had been created at the same time, »New York City I«; an interlocking lattice of red, blue, yellow and black strips of adhesive tape, first exhibited at the MoMA in 1945, then travelling around the world for years, finally arriving in 1980 at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf. In the autumn of 2022 the curator and art historian Susanne Meyer-Büser speaks up there. After intensive research, she is one hundred per cent

certain: »New York City I«, a work by the great visionary Piet Mondrian, has been hanging — for 75 years — upside down.

Distinguished guests, Marco Stanke does not want his work to be understood as an instruction manual for the good life turned into art. His working principles refer more to the interpretation of the concept of painting itself. But, as it happens, Marco too received visitors in his Munich studio not long ago, during the annual open-studio days. On the walls hung many of the works you see before you tonight. And one question, suspiciously often, was put to Marco: "How do you even stand it in here? Nothing is straight, everything is crooked and askew."

Dear guests,

made possible by the Kunstverein Ingolstadt, here, in the Municipal Gallery in the Theatre, Marco Stanke asks for — and opens up to us — »A Little Room to Play«.

This room to play begins with the innovations in Marco Stanke's work; it extends across the possibilities for locating his works within art theory; and it ends nowhere near the far-reaching field of personal interpretation.

The painter Marco Stanke shows us, in this exhibition, many of his so-called »Parts«. Briefly put, a »Part« is a stretched canvas that, often painted monochromatically, gains individuality through shape and colour. To call a Part into being, Marco spends strictly timed workdays in his studio, planning, building, stretching, priming and painting with an almost anachronistic love for the craft. Watching him, one is tempted to say that it is a kind of affection, a form of parental self-abandonment, which Marco brings to his Parts and which leaves behind in them an autonomously alive, organic quality of the highest material standard.

It's nevertheless important to mention that the Parts usually do not hang or stand before us as individual works; rather, many Parts together shape what Marco calls a »Collective«. Such a »Collective« often constitutes the actual work, and, moreover, always communicates with the particular place in which it finds itself. In relation to one another, in their compositional arrangement — in the correspondences, in the contrasts within such a Collective — the Parts acquire most of their singularities or, in another word, their respective identities. Formally this means that the large Parts appear large because the small Parts exist; the complicated Parts appear complicated because the simple Parts exist; the colourful Parts appear colourful because the monochrome and unpainted Parts exist, and so on.

These purely formal differences can, of course, also be translated in interpretation — for example into sociological or psychological vocabularies. Opposing pairs of various continua — light / dark, large / small, above / below, many / few, flat / spatial — can be read in categories of difference such as subject / object, action / reaction, majority and minority, old and young, hard and tender, immanent / transcendent; play and seriousness.

The Parts shown here, however, appear to give themselves »A Little Room to Play«; they seem to set themselves somewhat apart from the rest of the Collective.

Whereas Parts usually need other Parts to come into their own, here the Parts suffice unto themselves. Because they carry moments of temporality within them, they stand in difference to themselves in an earlier or later state. Many of the works let us sense what may have befallen them earlier or what might still threaten them in the future: painterly gestures, cuts; acts of balance and tension; newly appearing elements such as painted round pegs, decorative nails, ropes or slabs of stone bring a kind of inner schism into the individual works.

Some Parts linger in the incomplete; some appear, in their being, astray, disoriented, as though abandoned in the world. But some Parts also appear held, self-content and purposeful — similar to a child on a playground.

From an art-historical perspective, one can — with the Nuremberg professor Lars Blunck — likewise discern »A Little Room to Play« in Marco's works. Lars Blunck sees, in Marco's Parts, a contribution to our collective understanding of the image, which he describes under the term »Radical Picturing«. Marco's pictures, according to Blunck, belong to those rare painterly contributions that do not devote themselves to dissolving the boundaries of what is depicted, but to dissolving the boundaries of the image-carrier itself. From this point of view, the works open up a room to play in answering the question of what precisely makes a picture a picture.

The art critic Clement Greenberg answered this question, in the middle of the last century, short and sharp. Two properties make a picture a picture: flatness and its delimitation. And the essence of painting discloses itself in pigments on a flat surface. Using, among others, the example of Piet Mondrian, Greenberg observed in the 1940s that the arts were more and more forgoing depiction of the world.

By limiting themselves to the effects of their respective medium, they became ever more concrete.

Greenberg noticed a great difference here between painting and sculpture: where painting forewent the representation of external reality, it underwent a radical

reduction; it became poorer in forms and colours. Sculpture, by contrast, gained an unlimited freedom. Where plastic or sculpture was no longer bound to real forms and the tradition of its medium, new materials such as steel, iron, glass and plastic produced a sculpture of the draughtsman; a new, image-like sculpture. Marco Stanke opens up for himself, with his sculptural pictures, freedoms within painting that Greenberg believed reserved for sculpture.

In this sense, too, Marco Stanke opens up »A Little Room to Play«.

Independently of this room to play within the medium of painting, a room to play also opens up in the interpretation of the works. And this room to play, of course, remains primarily your personal space to move.

But since Marco Stanke asked me — me personally — to give today's laudation, allow me to tell you why I, personally, so value Marco's works and what they reveal to me. Marco's works share a quality that is usually ascribed to works of Concrete Art: in the philosophy of consciousness one speaks of »pre-reflection« and means by this a bodily experience that takes place before any mental or linguistic classification. The impressions that Marco's works can evoke are of such a pre-reflective character. Before any interpretation — which comes so easily — before any conscious registration, something vibrates in Marco's Parts — or rather between them — that can only secondarily, or sometimes not at all, be put into words. The works appear vague in doing so, they remain precisely imprecise, and yet one still feels — something.

The works exhibited here feel to me as though — similar to the play-drunken toddler — and as Marco once put it: they »fail forwards«. Imagine one of these works toppling over — or, better yet — one of these works turning out to be hanging the wrong way up.

That would only underline what in the subtext of this room to play can already be felt: in close-up, some of the works may seem like little tragedies. In the wide shot, however, they are more like a comedy.

Dear guests, Gustav Hämer, the architect and former chairman of the Kunstverein Ingolstadt, once found himself in a city-planning culture of clear-cutting redevelopment. Despite considerable headwind, his concept of »Gentle Urban Renewal« united the preservation of old cityscapes with the creation of new living spaces.

In an art world of great spectacle, Marco Stanke asks for »A Little Room to Play«.

The indefinite pronoun »A Little« also suggests gentleness. Where other artists demonise and discard the existing in favour of self-marketing and sensationalism, Marco Stanke illuminates the spaces in between.

Dear Marco, thank you so much for exposing your works to a public discourse that is so often shaped by people who believe they need not search any further, by people who never err and never hesitate. Thank you for having created, down here, a little room to play in which one can reconcile oneself with interruption, with exhaustion, with the wrong turn and with not knowing what to do. Marco, once more, I'd like to thank you for your sincerity, for all our conversations and for your humour. Congratulations on this incredibly successful exhibition.

One more thing that matters to me as an educator: at the Brucker Bahnhof, in Erlangen, a children's centre run by Lebenshilfe Erlangen is being built, and our Marco won the tender for public art on the building. The jury's decision reads: "Form and colour are considered particularly stimulating for the children." Here Marco, quite literally, creates »A Little Room to Play«!

Dear guests, Marco has earned this applause and this room to play in ample measure: he is already working on another exhibition here at the Ingolstädter Lechner-Haus, which will take place at the end of the year. His book »Your Parts« made the shortlist for the Young Book Design Award. And this exhibition is already his third Kunstverein exhibition this year. On top of that, at the end of March he and his newly fiancée, Heeyoung Jo, exhibited in Seoul, South Korea.

Now, the form of the laudation requires not only the praise of the laureate, but also a closing praise of the community. And this praise — your praise — comes easily to me today: civic engagement in Kunstvereine has been carried on for over 200 years; for the past couple of years the idea and practice of Kunstvereine have deservedly counted among UNESCO's cultural heritage. As a Kunstverein you contribute to the diversity of the art landscape and enable cultural participation. And because you, as a Kunstverein, have also committed yourselves to the aim of fostering the cultural education of the general public, I would like to say, as one member of that public: dear Kunstverein Ingolstadt, thank you for your efforts.

Dear guests, thank you for being here tonight.

Let Marco Stanke's Parts work on you and grant yourselves a little room to play.

Jean Paul, the writer — not the singer — once said:

»Play is man's first poetry. Drinking is his prose.«

Please raise a glass with me and applaud for Marco Stanke!