

## THE ART OF ULRICH PANZER: THE SYNERGETIC SUBLIME

As if in answer to the not infrequent experience within us of a chaffing curtailment and limiting apportioning of the five senses, requiring that each predictably act within one sphere of responsiveness or another, there is posited, as a challenging, liberating possibility, the invigorating idea of synaesthesia, the so-called “union of the senses”.

Synaesthesia, as the term is usually employed, refers to a richly sensuous experience whereby two or more of our five senses are involuntary and perhaps automatically joined together - even for a moment. This can occur in the hearing of sound when experiencing, for example, a colour. In synaesthesia, similar crossovers can happen involving taste, words on a page or touch. The combinations of possible mutual affect are apparently legion.

To expand the senses – and our enjoyment of them – is not a new idea. And it was not born either in the hectic psychedelic 1960s as an adjunct to universal love and omnidirectional peace. In fact, the synergetic apperception goes back hundreds of years, and can be said to have come to a small but powerful epiphany in a poem by French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), in a massively influential piece called “Correspondences” from his *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), published in 1857. In the second stanza of the four-stanza poem, Baudelaire writes:

Like long echoes the mingle in the distance  
In a profound tenebrous unity,  
Vast as the night and vast as light,  
Perfumes, sounds and colours respond to one another.

The exploration of the ways and means of synaesthesia has for some considerable time now, a central axis running through the visual work of painter, musician and theoretician, German-born artist (now resident in Canada) Ulrich Panzer. From the time of an intensive graduate research project while he was still a student in Germany – his *Colour, Sound and Architecture in Asian Cultures* – to his year-long residency in a studio 11,000 feet above sea level in Tibet, Panzer has diligently pursued the complex interactions between colour, sound and space.

He has continued to examine these effects and responses in the form both of numerous exhibitions in Europe, The United States and Canada, and also – central to his work – as a series of very successful workshops in which the exhibition of his characteristic disc-shaped paintings (usually in acrylic, ink and pigments on aluminum) are extended to include considerations of adjacent experiences of sound-and-colour vibration. Employing sound-oriented objects such as tuning forks, Tibetan and Crystal

singing bowls, as well as the human voice, Panzer invites his audiences to open themselves to the rich crossover vibrations inherent in colour, space and sound in ecstatic admixture.

The resulting post-workshop discussions invariably range far and wide, often delving into matters touching not only upon the meditative, but also upon the metaphysical, the healing imperative, right up to the probing of certain ontological questions about the nature of existence.

Reactions to a recent workshop called “Hearing Colour, Seeing Sound” held at the Tett Centre in Kingston, Ontario, ranged, for example, from comments such as “Silence, I discover, is something you can actually hear”, to “The paintings draw me in as if they were moving”.

The fact that Panzer’s big circular paintings are not moving is important here. Unlike Marcel Duchamp’s Rotoreliefs of 1935, the Panzers are not supposed to be hypnotic in that obvious, optically come-hither way. If they reach out to the viewer, it is because the artist’s concentric rings of soft but intense colour – rings made of thinned colour in varying widths and densities of hue – set up a chromatic radiance of their own – a radiance which radiates. And which resonates.

Nor are Panzer’s circular paintings meant to function as merely formal structures in the way certain tondo-shaped paintings by Canada’s Claude Tousignant did (his massive “gongs” from the 1960s and 70s for example, or the way the relational tondo paintings by American painter Fritz Glarner did, or certain works by Sol Lewitt, Kenneth Noland and Damien Hirst’s entertainingly perverse “centrifugal” paintings did. The programs of these paintings inevitably remain within the paintings themselves; they “perform” formally, and the viewer simply witnesses this performances.

Formalist tondo paintings, in other words, offer a *theatre* of painting practice. Ulrich Panzer’s circular paintings offer, by contrast, something more akin to a *salon* for the viewer (who is often the participant).

Panzer’s synaesthetic interests draw, to some extent, from a noble river of aesthetic exploration running deep beneath the world of the Avant-garde during the last two hundred years. One thinks of Russian composer Alexander Skriabin’s ecstatic colour-light-sound program for his *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, op.60, of 1910, wherein mechanically generated light effects would echo and literally extend the “colour” effects of the music.

One thinks of the vigorous non-representational art of the Czech painter Frantisek Kupka (1871-1957), who liked to describe himself as a “colour symphonist”.

One thinks of the work of French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and his compositional dalliance with birdsong, and who said he perceived colours when he heard certain musical chords and that the combinations of these colours were “important in his musical process”. One thinks of Kandinsky’s alliance of word and sound and shape – see his book of prose-poems titled *Klänge* (Sounds) from 1912. Think of old Mondraian dancing wildly around his antiseptic de Stijl studio in New York and painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942-43).

In a recent statement, Ulrich Panzer has noted that his circular works, full of soft concentric rings of luminous colour make up an individual monad-like form that “radiates light and colour frequencies” that is the locus the site, of Panzer’s current exploration of synaesthesia in art. He talks about how the paintings develop a life of their own and “as such they do nothing less than draw the viewer into the Present Tense of seeing”.

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