

IN BETWEEN AND BEYOND

ASPECTS OF TIME IN THE WORK OF WOLFRAM ULLRICH

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Beyond connotes the concepts of *on the other side* and *outside* on both a temporal and spatial level. Applied to art, *beyond* refers, then, both to that which is shown and to the picture itself.

In the visual arts *beyond* incorporates the surroundings on a spatial level, and the past, the future, and the observer's period of perception on a temporal level – aspects, that is, which have not been visually set down by the artist. Unlike space, time can only be grasped with the help of individual temporal concepts, such as now, moment, duration, incident, memory, lifetime, transience, infinity, cyclical time, and the big bang, to name just a few.

Wolfram Ullrich's works, in particular his multiple-part paintings, represent various temporal concepts: a successive perception of time, the temporal concepts of simultaneity, now, and duration, and the spatial-temporal notion of observation.

How is the experience of time linked to the experience of space? Is time conceivable without space, and vice versa? It was Karl Valentin who put his finger on the paradox and impalpable nature of time when he said: "I'm not sure, was it yesterday, was it the day before yesterday, or was it on the fourth floor?"

How do we perceive Ullrich's work? Do we scan each painting inch by inch? Or do we first take it in as a whole? I would say it is both, a gaze that alternates between simultaneous and successive viewing. It makes no difference which visual process is dominant. What is important is that both of these temporal phenomena are inherent in the paintings. Ullrich knows how to use the surfaces

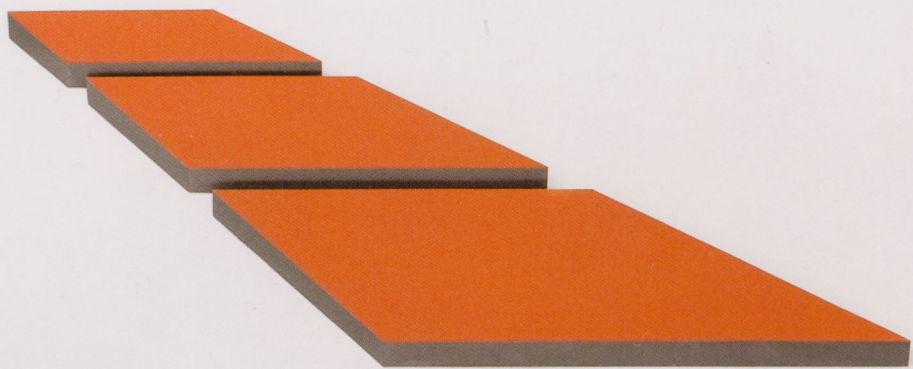
of the sharply slanted edges and the variously dimensioned main surfaces to guide our gaze, i.e. to channel and give direction to the temporal process of perception. In each case the color has been applied so evenly that the eye has no urge to scan the image surface. Thus, temporally speaking, the process is a gliding across the color surface.

All this takes place in our brains; we merely move our eyes. Whether the viewing direction is from left to right or the other way around, whether one sees the painting as a whole first or takes it in successively – these are irrelevant to one's understanding of the work. What counts is that the work gives access to several equally important temporal experiences.

It is easy to name the visual parameters of Wolfram Ullrich's work, they are all readily visible: the steel painting surface, the paint application method, the slanted edges that reveal the painting surface, and the clearly defined ground. From here, one is led directly to the conclusion that these paintings point to something beyond what is actually shown. The ontological phenomenon of time is just one topic, though it is the only one that shall be mentioned here.

The works are a visual manifestation of the "expansion of time". We can ascribe the concept of *now* to each of the color surfaces. The *now* is repeated, employed serially, and is in this way transformed into the concept of duration.

In his first book *Time and Free Will* (1889) the French philosopher Henri Bergson expounded the concept of *durée*. *Durée* is the tenet underlying the various forms of his philosophy. It is a heterogeneous and



ZIN, 2008
Akryl på stål / Acrylic on steel
3-delad / 3-parts, 179,5 × 71,5 × 3 cm

qualitative duration as opposed to a numerical, quantitative notion of time. In *Time and Free Will* *durée* is attributed to the psyche. It is not to be seen as a span of time outside of us but rather as being associated with a continuous process of becoming. Translated into English, *durée* connotes such attributes as continuance, permanency, persistence, and immutability. To Bergson, the conscious experience of reality can only take place if one can project him- or herself into the duration. This he calls the method of intuition. And this experience is exactly what is verified in the perception process of Ullrich's work. *Durée* is not equivalent to the English word *duration* because in the latter the concept of time signifies a measurable span of time. "*La durée*", by contrast, is not measurable. It is the personal internal time that Bergson also calls »experienced time«.

Wolfram Ullrich's paintings exemplify the Bergsonian model of time. The time we need to perceive a given work is different in each case; it cannot be measured. It is, as Bergson put it, dependent on the form of activity of the intellect of the person in question. The neurophysiologist Otto-Joachim Grüsser wrote in his book *Zeit und Gehirn* [Time and the Brain] (1983) that perception of time not only depends on one's genetic makeup but also on individual experiences. By the age of 8, according to Grüsser, we have learned that the nature of time is systematic. Sleep, for example, is attributed to night; time is therefore cyclical. By this age, however, we have also learned that time is linear, that it leads from the past to the future and brings with it irreversible changes. Moreover, from this age on, we know that the subjective duration of experienced time, i.e. the Bergsonian concept of *durée*, does not correspond to the time measured by clocks. It is

not difficult to find visual models for measurable time; the clock is the best example of this, but what about models for the elusive concept of *durée*? Here, music represents the ideal discipline; one need only consider John Cage's famous piece *4'33"*. A musician comes out onto the stage and performs the piece *4'33"*. He simply sits down in front of his music stand and proceeds to not play his instrument. We hear no music whatsoever. In the allotted span of time we are focused on our own experience of time and each of us perceives the passage of the 4 minutes and 33 seconds as being variously long. How do we communicate about time? In his 1905 lectures the Belgian philosopher Edmund Husserl claims: "Naturally, we all know what time is; it is the most familiar thing of all." One might respond to this in the words of St. Augustine, a church father who lived around 400 AD and to whom this famous line is attributed: "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know."

Both quotes demonstrate that the phenomenon of time is difficult to grasp on a linguistic level. On a visual level, by contrast, there are many models, among them, the multiple-part paintings by Wolfram Ullrich which produce a perception of time in his viewers that is as individually structured as that of Cage's audiences, alternating equally between a *now* and a *durée*. Not even the subjective experience of time can be repeated, for this moment of observation varies depending on our momentary emotions. What do remain the same are the artistic parameters set down by the painter. They possess duration in the Bergsonian sense of the word.

