# The Relativizing of the Object-Reference

ON THE PHOTOGRAPHED MONITOR IMAGES BY DIETER BALZER

The presentation of pictures on monitors has changed the visual arts. Inevitably, technical equipment has been exhibited since the sixties, and is evidently aging more quickly than the artistic idea that is being manifested through it. Video installations from that period are by now having to be serviced by specialists; when spare parts are no longer available one improvises. Even today, no physicist or restorer is able to give reliable information on the length of time that digitally and ink-jet produced picture information may be preserved for. While progressive minds stress how unproblematic it is to restore digital works of art, discussion on the Benjaminian Aura of the artwork arises anew and negotiates the value of photographs in times when they are digitally reproducible.

Be that as it may both in theory or practise. Dieter Balzer toys with the modular possibilities offered by digital techniques and, by photographing the monitor pictures produced on the computer as they appear on the monitor with a camera, subsequently chooses the analogue way. However, even armed with this awareness, his shots remain mysterious. The parallel lines are 'concrete colour poetry', seemingly lacking any reference to reality. But in fact, the photographs are real representations of a monitor's surface with a regular line pattern. Our eye follows the lines of this decentralised picture composition until it reaches their end; one gets the impression of facing a detail cut out from a large, infinite system. However, a small disturbance, stylised by Balzer, lends the picture series depth: the lines, given a convex appearance by the monitor, are turned slightly downwards at the upper edge and vice versus, slightly upwards at the lower edge. This minimal divergence from a strict parallel lining modifies the principle of linearity within the detail and thus the sense of infinity of the all-over-principle. This differentiates the photographs from his other works as are oriented on geometric exactitude. This is so because in his three-dimensional pictorial objects he arranges standardised, with coloured foil foliated MDF-plates into complex small architectures. The objects have manually been so perfectly executed, that they imitate industrial production. Only upon closer inspection one discovers minuscule divergences from supposed manufacturing norms. These faults, as are accepted by the artist, turn into a game centring on the unequivocal and the indeterminate.

He thus creates new pictorial worlds beyond iconographic or symbolic meaning; this holds true for both his objects as well as the photographs. In this, Balzer's work is related to the generative light diagrams of a Gottfried Jäger of the sixties and seventies. Already in the twenties, and since the fifties in particular, has the conjunction of scientific and artistic photography into an abstract picture been in existence. In the sixties, the study of electro-microscopic photography, x-ray photography or oscilograms lead to generative photography, a "conscious and methodical creation of visual aesthetic structures based on photographic means and processes." The

goal, according to Gottfried Jäger, was the "creation of optimised structures for perception". While Jäger was striving for the technical creation of pictures as a visualisation of logical rules, Balzer, in deciding to yet again create an analogue picture from a generated one, takes the next step.

Today, every child is familiar with the alphanumerical system, the alphabet as has been extended by numbers, as well as the simple 0-1 information that lies hidden behind the most complicated computer calculations. This microelectronic development has, however, simultaneously changed society and the arts in such a lasting manner as before perhaps only the industrial revolution or the two World Wars did. Even while many are very enthusiastic about the facilitation of work where the new user surfaces are concerned, a deeper understanding of the related, large-scale calculation processes behind them gets left behind - and therefore, too, does the ability to orientate oneself in a virtual, digital world.

Balzer's monitor pictures, however simple their creation may appear in view of the final art product, are also based on a data processing capacity which until a few years ago was not available. In fact, his aesthetic models and picture principles are becoming increasingly complex: coloured lines turn into multiple horizon lines.
In developing a branched structure, Balzer lends a mysterious, new order to an initially meaningless, geometric sign. Slight superimpositions or crossing of lines at their borders, within the lining up (Reihung) suggest spatiality - and the colour pattern on the computer did indeed originate in a layering process, as may, for example be created with the program "freehand."

Whereas in his early work Balzer used to paste or paint coloured foils in geometric forms, mostly narrow stripes, onto transparent foil, and then layer them, the computer today calculates these structures. With the aid of image processing programs, the two-dimensional colour combinations turn into virtual spatial structures. In a certain sense Balzer generates a 'in front' and a 'behind'. Where this illusionary line progression is concerned, human perception helps: one colour appears to be positioned in front of another. Discordances, or the emotions or meanings traditionally associated with colours, certainly may, in the reception of the photographs, be neglected.

Contrary to his pictorial objects and modular sculptures, which, owing to dozens of potential permutations or viewing angles allow for ever new optical approaches, Balzer in his photographic images fails to create a factual connection to the surrounding space. It is only in extended viewing of details that the complex pictorial space of the photographs becomes evident. The divergences from symmetry's 'concrete' dictation, such as when the chosen composition schemes are thrown into a disorderly state, turn his picture series into medial experiments and structural modifications.

Already during the First World War, the artist's group 'De Stijl' was founded by Theo van

Doesburd, Piet Mondriaan and others. As part of their theories, a new plastic order for art was formulated. Everything was reduced to colour and form; for an abstracted representation of reality and the artist's demand to transform the viewer into a state of calm and harmony, this was initially sufficient. Within Op Art; Concrete Art, or the American colour field painting, precursors to Dieter Balzer's photographic work may be made out; such as the fundamental idea of freeing colour and form from the object, or, in concrete: Bridget Riley with her timeless, confusing line pictures, in which since the sixties she has also been relying on the physiological characteristics of the human viewing apparatus to create that flickering effect so characteristic for her pictures.

As with Riley, Balzer's photographic details of seemingly open systems leave a meditative impression at a first glance and at a second glance an exciting one. Due to the rhythmic composition, they, too, are hard to focus on and thus produce, in the course of viewing them, irritating 'after-images'. But the (non-mimetic) similarity between Op Art and Balzer's virtual-analogue pictorial worlds remains purely formal.

Upon a closer inspection of Balzer's contemporaries, formal analogies to the American landscapes by photographer Michael Wesley are noticeable. However, here one is dealing with layered landscape formations created by a moving camera and very long exposure times. And thus Balzer's and Wesley's structural photographs could hardly be more different as regards their content's orientation. While Wesley abstracts the real landscape and shifts the focus of his work to the temporal aspect, Balzer is exclusively concerned with non-representational, system-inherent distribution of colour within the picture. Their work is thus based on a completely different concept of reality: modified reality and computer-generated reality.

With Balzer, the infinite possibilities offered by logical, numerical programs for image creation and processing manifest themselves through the translation into the photographic image. This transformation of a working process performed on a computer into a single picture is concept. If one were to plot the monitor picture via an ink-jet printer, the divergences of the lines' parallelity would of course not be visible, they only arise through the slight curvature of the monitor in the picture. If, on the other hand, one were then to scan the analogue representation of the monitor picture with a scanner and print it without any further changes, the result would be a digital picture. The visual result could also be changed a second time on the computer and be photographed on the monitor. This mental experiment reflects the changing relationship of analogue and digital image production as presents itself in large areas of contemporary artistic and applied photography. The results are hybrid pictures, hermaphroditic creatures of an interactive media world.

Dieter Balzer has been pursuing his timeless work independent of current trends since the mid-eighties. Considerations of concrete principles related to visual drawing systems, such as cyclical and linear ones, lead to his modular sculptures, while his photographic pictures docu-

ment a computer-generated reality. Here the lines are on top of one another, each one is characterised by a colour-coding in magenta, cyan and yellow on a scale of 0 to 100. These almost infinite permutational options as regards the mixing of colour and distribution of lines are varied by enlarging details, making lines appear to be somewhat wider, as well as modified by 180° turns. Everything is concentrated on horizontals and verticals , diagonals do not exist in Balzer's geometric pictorial language. The absence of demarcation definitions in the outer form lead to a reciprocal superimposition of lines, to connections and condensations. Other, seemingly monochrome pictures are made up of finer lines of almost the same colour, and thus visually appear like a surface. These simple composition rules lead to a large number of new, linear structures, partially in formally similar variants.

Balzer's photographs are neither reproductions, representations nor documentation of worldly appearances, they are concrete images with serial colour patterns of generated computer programs generated for this image. Thus these photographed monitor pictures do not show abstractions of the real, but on the contrary: true images of the non-representative. In the realm of contemporary image-production, this transformation process probably stands on its own.

Matthias Harder