

1.

We are discussing Ferdinand Penker's works of the past ten years: from 1990 until 1999.

At first sight and in general, the changes within this period seem to be only minor, and also the differences from former periods do not seem to be spectacular. The change becomes really significant once the eye releases its primary fixation on the surface structure of the painting, the postulate of the parallelism between the planes of painting and wall, and comes to accept the inclined, even surface as a para-sculptural element in three-dimensional space.

At the beginning of the seventies, it was more obvious to discuss Penker's work in connection with minimal art and analytical painting; it was high time to systematise the symbolic character of his figurative elements in a review. At the end of the century, after more than thirty years of Penker's painting, the long-predicted end of painting has not yet come. Painting does not have one end, but many ends, the perpetuation of which it celebrates. The more strongly it reduces its parameters, the greater becomes the pressure for differentiation and hence the trend towards a series.

The so-called new painting of the eighties chose the opposite direction and, by and large, managed without differentiation. Instead, those artists focused on a few indifferent formulae of image-rhetoric and slavishly inflated them. In this way, the principle of the series was replaced by the principle of accumulation, and variety was replaced by permanence.

In the nineties, people tried to influence Penker's differentiation strategies with a retarding model of so-called "unfinishability". Even the logical concept of assessment of variants evidently does not offer protection from historical metaphysics.¹ The category of vital and artificial 'pleasure' is not included here.

A development of surface structure, in which the new can be derived from the preceding, contrasts with the precipitate escape of the painted surface into space. Nevertheless, Penker's oeuvre has not changed as quickly as the circumstances of its observation.

2.

First we ought to review Penker's technique during the eighties. It was back then that he introduced those formal and structural criteria that also participate in defining his present works.

In the background of the painting there were broad brush tracks, laid out in a transparent manner, existing in a rather complex relationship with the succeeding image layers on top.

The expressive stroke with a broad brush is a formal reference to the brush stroke of abstract expressionism. Numerous small sketches, however, proved that this stroke had been carried out consciously and that what seemed to be spontaneous was actually particularly deliberately planned.

The brush stroke also creates blank white stripes that adapt to its course. They had already been set in the background, taking on the character of symbols, and managed to resist subordination to the prevailing form by means of a mutation of brightness.

Applied dark lines, mostly flanked by colour bars, were implemented as disruptive factors against the structure of the background. They would adopt its flow, then suddenly change or even cross it, in order to establish themselves as an individual system.

Parallel brush hatching asserted itself even more radically against the background - often covering the whole surface, sometimes aiming only at confined areas.

¹ See: Peter Weibel, Penkers Projekt. Die unvollendete Malerei, Graz 1994

In the eighties his monochrome technique was also so extreme that no second hue was included in the layer relevant to the painting, apart from the white of the foundation or the colour of the canvas. However, in a few rather noticeable places, the application of washes yielded a result analogous to the use of multiple colours. It achieved this through its apparent influence on different levels of colour density and pigment concentration, although in reality only steps of saturation of one hue were present.

Penker worked the surface *'from edge to edge'*: In most cases, the linear structures were continuous forms with a tendency to continue beyond the edge of the painting, albeit often guided back to the rectangle of the painting by means of a border motif.

3.

The date of 1990 does not mark a breakpoint in the oeuvre. Rather, its choice is set by what was happening in the art world and the rhythm of publications.

In Penker's work, the continuity is much more obvious than the breaks. And even the breaks are not of a sudden nature, but rather transfer mnemonic signs to a different context, for instance from a wall-bound surface onto the room-bound level. Even if the plane stretches out into space, the internal structure of the painting is largely preserved.

Penker's work of the nineties is determined by three blocks. This is complemented by an extensive set of printed graphics, with numerous links to the painted works, but also having media-specific characteristics that cannot be realised in painting.

- * the painted brush tracks show a very high affinity to the work of the eighties. The brush stroke background is replaced by a streaky opaque foundation. The element of the gesture is maintained.
- * the works characterised by blots offer with their white framing the possible location of an inserted track, and
- * the works, which stretch out into the third dimension, sometimes relate to the venue of the exhibition. The positioning of each of the levelled surfaces relates to the surrounding brush tracks.

The work blocks are connected by partial affinities and are in this way connected with the previous work phase, primarily due to the various possibilities of realisation of the *brush stroke* – mimicking the form of the painted brush track, making reference to painting at large in a surface reserved for them, achieving illusion in a water-thin brush track, which is positioned in space on a fiat medium.

4.

Whatever the surface organisation of Penker's works of the past fifteen years, it opens up the question of the relationship between large and small scales.

This question has been of relevance ever since painting freed itself from the idea of representing the surfaces of objects in the most realistic way possible. Thereafter a system of colour/shape analogy to objects was created, in which the overall form of the object is built of painting's micro-elements. In the works of Paul Cézanne these were colour hatchings, Vincent Van Gogh used small arcs, Georges Seurat coloured dots. Within one shape, one surface area, these micro-elements were formally homogenised. They vary in size, inclination and colour density, very rarely in their hue.

Despite their relative homogeneity, they are not interchangeable, because they have a determined place on the surface and would have a different extension, density and inclination in a different place.

Penker no longer has a natural model to describe, but rather wants to depict an overall form, and to differentiate it from an environment that is formulated with the same means. It consists of stripes, bands and arcs which are inserted into the surface.

Large scale and small scale behave ambiguously in their genesis: micro-elements congregate to make the overall form, and the overall form breaks down into micro-elements.

Similarly, the form is also continuous, because it is always based on movement, which itself imposes structure on colour and form.

Characteristic is the analogy of the form to the brush stroke, which is itself a continuous form, albeit now simulated in Penker's painting of the nineties. The stroke is constructed from micro-elements, not actually created with the broad brush.

Penker has always striven to achieve a dissociation from hyper-realistic representation of the brush stroke on the one hand and, on the other hand, from the texturally extreme pasty stroke with the 'rake', a coarse-toothed comb, which emphasises the substance of the paint itself.

The shapes of these brush strokes are inserted into the image space, only to leave it again. Whether created within or encountering other shapes in the picture, perhaps reacting to them or then again not, and sometimes competing with each other in the arena of the picture.

Very often, the shapes run parallel with each other or evade one another. In the more recent works, they seem hardly ever to divert one another, and don't show any tendency to intersect.

Penker's brush strokes are, in terms of painting, derived from an approach. Their constellation leads to a dramatization of the shapes, though missing are the conflicts between shapes seen in Penker's works of the late eighties. The nineties trend towards harmonisation predominates, as against the disruptive factors of the eighties. Today, Penker sees painting as a way to act, realised in his own work more as *'flow'* than as collision.

5.

Penker's œuvre is characterised by series. He bases his work on the idea that, for each problem, there are several solutions, indeed Penker says "*many*" and not just one. The one that is formulated in the painting at any time, is understood as a "*momentary picture*" within a process in which the forms are in a state of flux.

On the other hand, the colour properties stays constant within a series. Works on paper in particular, show that formal solutions can be reduced down to a few variables:

- * the position of the inserted tracks in relation to the edges and to each other
- * size and position of the micro-elements
- * interrelationship between the arranged image elements
- * the disruptive and harmonisation factors.

Penker has found an explanatory model in which the image variants can be stacked one behind the other, in such a way that changes of position, extension and colour density can be understood as a spatial procedure: "a space criss-crossed by one shape" says Penker. One could also imagine a block cut into image layers.²

In the construction of series, Penker follows the principle of smallest possible differentiating steps and compares it, when asked, with the principles of minimal music. However, their works do not have a musical structure as their basis. It is rather the case that changing states are recorded by continuous processes.

The disposition of the picture elements also stays constant for long periods. The breadth of formal variation is kept tight.

Even the painting series differ only little from each other, in the position of the main shape, i.e. the brush tracks, and in the formulation of the micro-elements. Penker draws a trite analogy between the variation of formal elements and simple household items having one function but numerous variations of shape, for instance graters, carpet-beaters, pestles, roiling pins, darning mushrooms etc.³

² The range of variation can be seen in Penker's books.

³ Penker has a comprehensive collection of these devices.

6.

In Penker's three-dimensional works, individual brush tracks step outside the image surface, leaning forward as slanting tracks, or sometimes back, and ignore their borders. That which enters the surface from the outside does not end with the painting's edge like in two-dimensional paintings; the edge, which cuts all shapes without fail.

This eliminates the hierarchies of the image surface in which the inserted main shape of the brush track was subordinated to the rectangle of the painting.

Brush tracks and image surface are equal here; now and then, the erected tracks serve as a support to the surface.

The works are equipped with volume, consisting of a flat wooden box covered with canvas, the images continuing over and beyond the folds at the edges.

In previous works, Penker had realised the slanting tracks in the shape of strips of corrugated metal. De facto they were homogeneously coloured, the shadows were the simulation of darker shading on one side of the corrugation, and the structure of the brush stroke was preserved by the linearity of the corrugated sheet.

The spatially extending brush track on the surface of the hollow body is in the real space pictorial and equally material. Penker creates a contradiction between the thin sheet of the image layer and the volume of a three-dimensional medium presenting itself as an object. Penker never assigned volume to the colour material when applying the paint with apparent surface relief. In most cases, it is a film of paint on one level – even when the surface is carried by the volume of a flat body.

The extension of the wall-bound image surface began with the extension of smaller surfaces connected to it. These surfaces, however, did not stick to the same level or remain parallel with the plane of the primary surface. In more complex works, the dominance of the wall-bound surfaces is put into question. The work takes on a para-sculptural character: it is neither exclusively fixed on the wall like a relief, equipped as it is with a supporting structure reaching the floor, nor it is accepted as a three-dimensional body. It is located in the interstitial space on and in front of the wall.

Amongst other things, the angle of vision onto the objects sets the position of the sculptural and pictorial aspects. Looked at from an inclined angle, the object presents itself as a sculpture; from the front, the projection of the stripes reaching out of the painting at the wall, reduces the distance and confuses the spatial position of the slanting elements.

The colour tracks reaching into space leave the surface of the painting but do not leave the rectangle of the image, which acts as border.

They create a relationship with the shell of the space surrounding them, with the wall, the ceiling, the floor. This is an extension of the relationship of the shapes in the image with the edges of the rectangle of the image.

With the colour tracks leaning against the shell of the space or the parallel image plane, a seemingly unstable sculptural state is created. Then again, the individual colour tracks are set/leant precisely. Still the impression of a rather temporary positioning remains even when the functionality of the support is physically substantiated. Pictorial stability and sculptural frailness are juxtaposed.

7.

Amongst other considerations, the series are differentiated by means of their colour properties.

There is no strict assignment of colour properties to particular categories of shapes or micro-elements.

Virtually all shapes can be expressed in all colour types in Penker's preferred range.

Very rarely are these pure saturated hues. Penker prefers earthy colours.

The variety in the implementation of the colour is based on very few parameters.

The primary decision is the one between the use of colour and the use of no colour, which, in a 'from edge to edge' technique, is limited to a few blank areas. Here, the mostly white background shows up and the chromatic colour counteracts.

The restricted use of one paint hue is the rule. Mixed levels of colouration in the micro-elements hinder a homogeneous monochromatic result.

Within the surface, there are no more decisions or conflicts regarding colour, once the sole colour is set; from that point, there are also no more interactions of colour. Penker achieves dual colours by separating pigments whose components settle at different levels according to the flotation principle, due to their respective specific gravities.

Penker avoids dark shading. He always uses unmixed pigment. Lighter hues are created by reducing pigment density.

He only works with two dimensions of the colour – the hue and the brightness. He avoids the third dimension, saturation, i.e. the mixing of complementary hues towards pastel or grey, by sticking to monochromatic pigment. On the one hand, the density of pigments and hence brightness varies within the micro-elements whilst, on the other hand, the brightness is distributed over the entire surface - there are no centres characterised by particular brightness or darkness.

8.

The concept of the European form is applicable only to a limited extent for Penker, who has lived and worked in San Francisco for ten years. It might be accurate to use the concept of the *shape* from US-painting, because there is no form on top of a background like in occidental painting. Here, the images stretch from edge to edge. The European ideal of the composition does not apply as Penker does not juxtapose forms to balance them out, but organises colour in tracks of movement.

In Penker's work, the figure/ground scheme is replaced by fields in which he concentrates the act of painting. Formally, these fields don't strive for centralisation, but show a trend towards lending structure to the image surface, in which all positions are equal. Penker shifts the act of painting towards the periphery, particularly where shapes are inserted via the edges. The devaluation of the centre, the sometimes empty middle, can be seen as a European paradigm of Mannerism. US-painting has taken it up again by means of reference to the edge.

Leaving the rectangle of the image has been a criterion of US painting since the sixties. In Penker's work we don't find any shaped canvasses; he would always stick to the rectangle, but liberates it from parallelism with the plane of the wall. In whichever way it stretches out into space, it always remains a film-like painting bound to the plane, even when taking on volume and lending structure to the surrounding space by means of its support, the fiat box.

The change of paradigm towards monochrome, the reference to the edge and the breaking up of the rectangle and the image surface took place in Penker's generation.

He renders monochromatic pigmentation polychromatic by means of successive dilution, he tilts the image surface into the room and analytically pursues painting as a means of expression in a series of sections. Penker seizes these contradictions; they provide for a variety of solutions.