

**Hubertus Gaßner**

**Four-course field rotation: black, white, and coloured**

Imi Knoebel once said he would have rather become a farmer than an artist. Then he would have been able to tend the farm yard and till the fields. Together with Imi Giese, a kindred spirit, in the mid-1960s he painted a future for himself in which »the artist pursues a quite normal profession. Like a farmer, a carpenter, or an architect«. (1)<sup>1</sup> And it is quite possible that he did indeed believe this. Even if nothing came of the dream of farming or building – Imi Knoebel has certainly built images.

The perfect precision and the quality of the materials of the pictures he builds undeniably do justice to the art of carpentry. Moreover, they attest to the mind of an architect who thinks and plans spatially, even if everything the artist does is intended to be viewed as an image.

The starting point and recurrent archetype of the two or three-dimensional images created over a period of thirty years is the square. Imi Knoebel has frequently pointed to the original model in art history for this square: the "Black Square" on white ground painted in 1915 by Kazimir Malevich. Periodically Knoebel takes up this formal zero point as the basis of new formal ideas and thus »honours« its creator. The most programmatic example is probably the different variations of "Russische Wand" [Russian Wall] which consist of black and white squares, "Kreuze" [Crosses] consisting of four squares, and "Doppelkreuze" [Double Crosses], which is made up of seven squares, all of them made since 1968. The most intimate but no less honourable use of the motif is the three-dimensional pictorial stele entitled "Mein Freund" [My friend], produced in 1985. The black square leans against the white wall, resting on a masonite cube that is well over six feet high and in front of which a second, somewhat lower and deeper cube has been placed. The positioning on the sideboard as if the artist had wished to ensure that the black »friend« was not directly accessible and had wished to place it in a more protected zone which we can only contemplate and reflect on, but not reach. The result is a symbiosis of an uplifted, sublime monument to the revolutionary of Russian art, a sacred altar to the icon

of the 20th century, as Malevich once himself termed his "Black Square" on white ground, and a banal sideboard upon which an irrelevant and insignificant piece of wood had casually been left.

Imi Knoebel himself remembers that he gave the group of pictorial sculptures to which "Mein Freund" belongs the serial title "Buffet" [Sideboard]; he was thinking of the sideboard in his grandmother's house in Grumbach, a village not far from Dresden, where he spent his childhood. The boxes and frames collected on Knoebel's formally clear but quite modest plinths bring to mind something of this quite personal reminiscence of the most important things of life and the carefully arranged mementos on such a domestic sideboard. Here, where he passed his youth, we come across the autobiographical roots of the rectangular form which then became so central for his creative work.

First memories of childhood: the view out over the fields with Dresden burning in the distance through the skylight in the house in Grumbach. For the five-year-old, the enormous halo of light from the night-time blaze was »great fun«. The light captured in the four sides of the skylight is rekindled in the brightly luminous rectangular fields which in 1970 Imi Knoebel cast onto the dark walls of interiors or onto outside facades and roofs by means of slide projectors. When projected at an angle, the slides create radiant parallelograms or irregular trapezoids, which appear to hover magically like immaterial phenomena of light in the dark space. Inevitably they bring to mind the Grumbach skylights preserved in his memory, which projected the exciting reflection of the inferno on the horizon onto the walls of the dark loft in the form of an illuminated rectangle.

Distorted rectangular fields that float freely in the empty space of the white ground of the picture can also be found in the Suprematist paintings of Malevich. In his book »Suprematism – The immaterial world« published in German for the first time in 1962, Knoebel, an art student in Darmstadt, was able to study illustrations of these distorted rectangles which seemed to oscillate freely in space. And he did so intensely, as if experiencing an awakening. Finally, he hung the white "Drachenbilder" [Kite pictures] like the materialization of projected light, high up in an exhibition room, directly beneath the ceiling. There, the rectangles,

which seem to have been distorted by their own dynamism, hover and are apparently weightless. It is an answer to Malevich, who in his legendary exhibition "0.10", which went beyond the zero point of abstraction, placed the zero form of the "Black Square" as a new reality in the upper corner of the room. For it is there that in any small Russian farmer's house the icon hangs, before which people cross themselves when entering. These were signs of a permanent earthly meta-physics, which caused the supernatural splendour to be exuded by pictures with a golden ground which by no means deny their physical pictorial bodies, consisting of thick wooden panels. Malevich, forever the Polish-Russian mystic, never denied the rural roots of his Suprematist sensibilities with regard to nature and the cosmos. Imi Knoebel purges the surface of the picture of any last vestiges of painting. He leaves the wood panels intact, or just the empty square stretcher frames. The body of the painting, previously concealed beneath a layer of paint, now forms the square, the wall around it the white ground. Now, for the first time the process Malevich initiated of leaving pictures behind us is complete. The intrinsic pictorial relation of figure and ground flows into the relation of panel to panel, of panel to wall, of panel and cube, of cube to cube, of cube and space, and so on.

Only at this point can we truly speak of four-course rotation. In the "Linienbilder" [Line paintings] from the 1966-1968 period, Knoebel, just embarking on his career as an artist, initially »derives« the rectangle again from new first basics – from the line. From the egg, as it were, as if there had been no black or white rectangles in art before that. In each of these "Linienbilder" the black lines on the white lawn over the masonite are set at a different distance. The greater the distances, the more the picture approximates a white rectangle, the more narrow the lines, the more it becomes a black rectangle. There are an infinite number of gradations between the twin poles of homogeneous white and homogeneous black. This first series of pictures already extensively explores and provides justifications for the relational principle which was then to form the basis for Knoebel's entire oeuvre. The white surface, the black surface and the connecting links are not the result of the surface being painted monochrome white, black or grey, but of the relationship of the black lines to one another and to the

white ground. The image is devised by virtue of relationships being devised. Once the black or white pictorial field has been created, as a next step the relationship of the homogeneous white field to its four borders is investigated and a relationship defined by painting some of the four respective edges either black or white [ill. 7]. Knoebel plays the series through until all possible relationships between field and borders have been exhausted. This process of exploration of the structure generates a tableau of four by four pictorial fields which are uniform but yet disparate. The principle of four-course rotation in agriculture: an increase in yield, in harvest with a constant field surface is attained by systematic crop rotation and crop rotation on four fields. Knoebel's artistic harvest emerges in an analogous way. He farms art according to the same economic principle in order to obtain a maximum yield with a minimum input. Black and white, always the same format, the same lengths of the sides of all the pictures, but sixteen different pictures, not to mention the seventeenth: the tableau which relates all variants to one another and unites them in one relational pictorial field.

New structures are engendered by using different parameters and different variables. The structure becomes ever more flexible as of 1968. The systematic progression through a structure gives way to the dynamic generation of variants that are found and defined more intuitively and are less planned or methodically presented in terms of logical rules.

It is interesting to note how Knoebel's efforts to render the systematic structural formation in concrete and minimal art more open and dynamic occurred at the same time as the French post-structuralists' philosophical critique of the schematics of structuralism, who thereby entered new postmodern terrain. 1967 saw the publication of Derrida's »l'Écriture et la différence« [Writing and difference], which emphasizes that the unsaid, the hidden, the blank spaces in the text and silence are as significant as what is expressed and represented, the only two categories which the structuralist method was prepared to perceive and pin-point. Derrida also criticized the structuralism of a Lévi-Strauss, for example, because he »wished to give the structure a center and refer it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. This center not only had the task of giving the structure orientation, of balancing and organizing it ... but it was

above all meant to ensure that the structure's organizational principle set limits for what we could call the play of the structure .... With the center, permutation and transformation of the elements ... is forbidden«. (2)

As early as the group of more than eighty "Linienbilder", Knoebel starts to integrate the blank spaces, as well as inarticulate and yet nevertheless visible properties into his structures. Moreover, he starts to extract the structure from its claim to a totality which endeavours to define and encompass all variants. The closed schema of the tableau is opened out into relational interplay.

The artist himself demonstrates his playful approach to structure and blank spaces in a diagram for the catalog for the "Blockade '69" exhibition in the René Block gallery in Berlin. Three vertical rectangular panels of the same size, are set at an equal distance from one another to form a triptych. The position of the three vertical lines on the panels is the only irregularity in this uniform triad: each of the lines divides one pictorial field into two vertical sections with different widths. However, this irregularity itself is subject to a hidden regularity, which only becomes discernible at second glance. Seen together with the two similar blank spaces between the three panels, the six sections of the three panels – similar in terms of outer proportions, but different in terms of inner structure – constitute a new, regular sequence of four equal sections. Four identical surface areas are created by the first section together with the last section, the second section and the first intervening blank space and the third section, the fourth section on its own, and the second intervening blank space along with the fifth section. From this interplay an open and a concealed order emerges, an order which is just as visible as the first order. It is a double organizational structure, the product of an explicit and an implicit order. »My pictures«, Imi Knoebel says by way of explaining the relation between individual picture and overall sequence (a relation which started with these first examples and still holds true today), »are composed of 16, 10, 4, 3, or 2 pictures, or at least 1«. (3)

The open, playful structures thus generated intuitively continue the legacy of Malevich, who always defended the »intuitive reason« of his *ars combinatoria* against

logocentrism and any constructivist attempts at a mathematical codification of the combinative processes. For Imi Knoebel, the "Black Square" on white ground has always been »the point of no return«. »Back then,« he remembers, »this book came out, ›Die gegenstandslose Welt‹ [Suprematism – The immaterial world] by Malevich, with texts by him. We were fascinated by the "Black square". It was *the* phenomenon for us, it completely absorbed us, that was the real moment of change. With this awareness we quite literally went around championing Malevich. Nobody knew his work. And with it, we also didn't know about the Russian movement .... It was not by chance we then shaved our heads ....« (4) IMI & IMI had, gripped by the revolutionary fever, their heads shaved the way the pupils and supporters of Malevich – Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Klutsis, Senkin, Maiakovsky and many others – had done after the Russian Revolution. Purged canvasses, sheared skulls. The decision in favour of the "Black square" and its filiations manifested a radical lifestyle and not merely an interest motivated by formal concerns. Instead of a reduction of forms they opted for a concentration of powers in order to gain a vantage point for all that followed.

Completely in accordance with Malevich and unlike the American Minimalists, such as Donald Judd or Robert Morris, Knoebel does not treat the square as a geometric figure that is neutral in terms of value or feeling; instead, for him it is the embodiment of a state of excitation in which the subject and object, the inner world of sensation and the outer world of the human body, objects and the entire universe meet. »The pure excitation, which causes people to act, is immaterial«, Malevich wrote in his book and continues, »the result of the action is material, without it being able to convey this fact«. (5)

In 1968, Knoebel created the "Schwarzes Kreuz" [Black cross] as the conclusion of the "Linienbilder", which develop between the poles of white and black squares. It also marks the point in his work when he shifted from the line to the surface. Four black, similar square panels are placed up against one another and mounted at a slight slant diagonally along the wall in such a way that they appear to float there like a mighty cross. The weight of the cross, which paradoxically seems to enhance the floating impression, is intensified by its voluminous proportions. They result from

the grouping of the four squares: one above, one below, and two in the middle.

"Schwarzes Kreuz" creates a relationship to the viewer simply by virtue of its enormous height – more than three meters – but also thanks to its pure mass and its vertical axial symmetry. Thus, it addresses the viewer both visually and physically.

There is an analogy here to the pseudonym Wolf Knoebel adopted in the mid-1960s. The order of the letters IMI has the same pivotal axis as the cruciform shape if we imagine a central axis running through the middle of the M. Phonetically speaking, there is also a symmetrical positioning the both stressed I's and the unstressed but long M in between. If we also bear in mind that for years IMI Knoebel and IMI Giese called the word to each other as a form of password, then this phonetic symmetry is especially striking. Seen vertically, "Schwarzes Kreuz" reveals a rhythmic sequence of 1:2:1 squares. There is an analogous rhythm in IMI. The structural analogy suggests an understanding of the cross as self-image of the artist.

The close friendship and spiritual affinity between the »large« and the »small« IMI not only prompted both to move jointly from Darmstadt to Dusseldorf, to share an apartment there and to divide the legendary working space Raum 19 at the Academy, the room Knoebel named his first large work after. They also adopted the same pseudonym, to demonstrate unity in duality and difference in community. As if there were further need of proof of how intensely the two artists lived out the form and did not treat it merely as an aesthetic arrangement, of the great extent to which they equated life with the form and the form with life, there is their joint "Film von IMI + IMI über IMI + IMI". In 1969, at the Intermedia manifestation in Heidelberg, they demonstratively appeared in public as an inseparable couple for several days – and for several nights in bed as well; each answered any question on when their film would be shown with the answer: »It is on now«. Since the »film action« was more real than a film can be, the latter had to remain imaginary. It was organizationally composed of the actual movements of the double IMI. Transposed onto a frozen image, this would be to imagine the movement of the couple with the shaved skulls and the white cloth coats as a double IMI cross, as it moves across the wall.

This structure is indeed presented by "Schwarzes Doppelkreuz" [Black double cross], made in 1968. Instead of being composed, like the single cross, of four squares, it is made up of seven equal squares, positioned so that the right arm of the left cross and the left arm of the right cross coincide in the middle square. This overlapping brings the two crosses so closely together that the two original shapes, to say nothing of the seven squares, are hardly discernible any longer. Needless to say, the double cross is not only an image of IMI+IMI, but also of human relationships per se, an image of the simple but yet so complex unity which emerges when two people meet. It is an image of the geometry of the sexes, in which forms ideally match and complement each other as in the double cross, a process which, however, also always involves disproportions, ambivalences and tensions. Imi Knoebel's squares and their constellations do not illustrate some abstract morphology or the central geometrical principle. They enable us, for all their reserve and the reduced character of their shapes, to experience the power of relationships quite physically. This makes them so stimulating. In his »Wahlverwandschaften« [Elective affinities] Goethe presents the simple and complex symmetries of human relations with all their ups and downs as if they were the order of a landscaped garden. »Provided it does not seem pedantic,« the captain said, »I think I can briefly sum up in the language of signs. Imagine an A intimately united with a B, so that no force is able to separate them; imagine a C likewise related to a D; now bring the two couple into contact; A will throw itself at D, C at B, without our being able to say which first deserted its partner, which first embraced the other's partner.«(6) Understandably, the book is one of Knoebel's favourites. His works transpose the cosmic and inner-psychological excitement of Suprematism onto a bodily and inter-subjective plane, without completely eradicating the cosmic trait entailed.

This is shown by a work made of 54 photos of the northern and southern firmaments, made in 1974 [ills. 23,26,27]. The grouping of the photographs provides a complete overview of the night sky, and thus the entire cosmos – rounded out with an additional 54 stars which the artist added by making dots on each negative, dots which can no longer be distinguished from the real stars on the paper prints. In other words, the view shows more than the universe actually has to offer and

which causes the artist, with his own gesture which gradually becomes anonymous and invisible to disappear into this cosmos. "Sternenhimmel für Olga Lina" [Sky with stars for Olga Lina] is the full title of the photographic work. Imi Knoebel dedicated it to his first daughter, who was born in 1974, the year of his photographic depiction of the cosmos, and who thus, according to an old belief, added a new star to the heavens. In the same year, the star of Imi Giese, who had held the baby in his arms, ceased to shine. In 1974 he committed suicide. How close life and death are to each other. At one fell sweep, Imi Knoebel had become both poorer and richer.

It can hardly be coincidence that the following year his art also attested to a fundamental shock. In 1975, he made his first pictorial panels with free-hand and no longer geometric outlines and coloured painting: "Grünes Siebeneck" [Green heptagon], which was ostensibly covered with a young »fresh« green, the colour of nature and of life, as intense as possible. When Knoebel was unable to find what he himself termed the »most existential« of all colours among the customary paints on sale, he painted irregular heptagons, all of which have a cut of their own and are therefore individuals, in differing hues. Only a very few of the 126 individual items are green, although they are all included under the same title. Here, the vivid, unmistakable shape and colour of each individual copy win out over the abstract general notion of "Grünes Siebeneck"; indeed, numerous colour hues clearly oppose the dominion of the abstract name and possessive classifications. The particular colour and form of each unmistakable example take the systematic claims of a series to the point of absurdity, and depart quite anarchistically from the compulsion to be part of the green group.

Blinky Palermo, along with Imi Giese, Knoebel's closest friend from his days at the Academy in Dusseldorf, accompanied and advised him down the path to colour. Again, the tragic and yet joyful duplicity of events. In 1977, Knoebel's second daughter, Stella Lisa (her name itself bears a star within it) was born. And, again, death swiftly followed. Palermo died the same year, not yet 34 years old, of bodily emaciation during a stay on the Maldives. The series which Knoebel produced the same year, entitles "24 Farben – Für Blinky" [24 Colours – for Blinky], expands the palette used in "Grünes Siebeneck" to

include cheerful bright colours with pastel overtones and hues that struck strident colour chords. They are all applied to large-size coloured panels and the work as a whole dedicated to his friend, who had so tragically died. This act of liberation from the previously self-imposed restriction to regular geometric forms and the uncoloured black and white, is a testimony in favour of life and the individual. The 24 highly personal forms and colours also shatter the fetters of the previous ascetic approach.

This group of two dozen colourful singular objects again reaches for the stars, as its idiosyncratic use of colour is meant to represent all the colours conceivable. The expanse of the cosmos corresponds to the limitless variety of forms and colours in art – and these simply enable the inexhaustible diversity of an inventive individual to flicker through.

A year before Knoebel's work burst into the vivid and inexhaustible colour which shines out at us in the form of energy from the 24 panels, not unlike in Malevich's work, Knoebel started creating the first drafts for his extremely extensive series the "Mennigebilder" [Red lead paintings], a series that can essentially never be complete. Since 1976, he has presented on paper more than 2,000 combinations of five or six uniform rectangular fields that fan out like playing cards, but are somewhat more irregular in that they have ›slipped out of place‹. The irregular, many-sided outlines reveal the five or six original shapes – here more clearly, there almost disguised beyond recognition. The irregularity of the order allows Knoebel to engage in a never-ending game with the structure. The cards can repeatedly be re-shuffled, a new hand dealt. The sole criterion for its acceptance is whether the reciprocal relationship between the individual parts is intrinsically logical, as they must together yield a dynamically mobile overall form. It is irrelevant whether they are ascending or descending, hovering or at rest, are simple or complex, closed or eccentric, light or heavy. The ambivalence between the visible, factual two-dimensional plane of the overall constellation and what is invisibly concealed but which the viewer simultaneously thinks of and sees, generates an insoluble tension in perception. The synchronicity of the dys-synchronous, the coincidence of spatial stratification in three dimensions and absolute flatness in two dimensions, engenders the irritation that

attracts the eye. Our gaze oscillates between the suggestive impression of space and the actually planimetric section shown, without being able to resolve the tension and calm.

With his "Mennigebilder" Imi Knoebel introduces the principle of stratification so characteristic of his later work. The traditional panel emerges through the superimposition of layers of paint on a ground, whereby both when glazing and when applying the prime coat, a closed painted skin emerges that utterly covers and seals the ground. This principle of the homogenizing application of paint also applies to watercolours, which are decidedly more permeable, and related painting techniques in which the ground is still visible or is even in part left without a coat of paint.

Imi Knoebel takes a different quite contrasting approach. In the case of the monochromatic "Mennigebilder", the surface remains flat as with the traditional skin of paint on canvas or on wooden panels. At the same time, the contours of the many-sided picture create an impression of quite material superimposed rectangular surfaces. This impression turns out to be an illusion when studied close up. This illusion of superimposed rectangular surfaces in one monochromatic ensemble of shapes turns the structure of traditional paintings on its head, for the latter seem flat although they consist of many-coloured coats of superimposed paint. In the case of other groups of pictures which he has produced since the mid-1970s, Imi Knoebel places and hangs panels painted in different colours and cut-out completely at random behind or over one another, such as in the "Rot Gelb Blau" [Red Yellow Blue] made in 1978. This consists of six panels hung or placed side by side, which are in turn composed of further, superimposed coloured pieces of wood.

The structure of the individual picture is the product of intuitive composing, which places the red, yellow and blue cut-out shapes in a rhythmical »oscillating« balance. The layers of paint and surfaces of paint which are normally blended inseparably in a painting are dissolved here to yield an ensemble of panels placed behind or over each other (each of them bears one of the three primary colours). As a consequence, the layers of paint given material form on these boards no longer seem to be firmly connected with one another, but only to be loosely associated, manipulatable at random or mutually interchangeable. Notwithstanding the size and massive

nature of the coloured panels, as a constellation on the wall they have a transient feel to them, so that the relations between them seem not to be permanent – this impression is reinforced by the fragmentary character of the individual cut-out shapes. It seems quite possible to change the individual panels to try out new formal and colour configurations; perhaps this is even expected of us. The work consists of the interplay of the hovering lightness and intrinsic weight of the parts, of coincidence and logical clarity in the configuration, of coloured visuality and material objectivity whenever the three panels with their primary colours and cut-out forms are assembled anew to create yet another constellation. Each constellation seems to be one of innumerable possibilities, as the outcome of the potentiality of the playful material, given these conditions of an easy encounter of red, yellow and blue surfaces in space or on the wall. What had been the case with the black and white ›four-course field rotation‹ persist after the introduction of colour: the relationship of constancy and variance defines the pictorial structure. The colours can remain constant and the forms variable, like as in the "Rot Gelb Blau" series from 1978 or the "Mennigebilder". Or, at other times, the forms remain constant and the colours vary, as, for example, with the "Grace Kelly" series and the "Portrait" series. But both the forms and the colours can potentially vary within a pre-determined and therefore constant framework, as with the "Odyshapes", the "DIN" pictures and the "Aluminiumbilder" [Aluminum pictures]. To this day, Knoebel's fundamental creative principle, in addition to the stratification and series, is that of freely trying out open or closed structures with a greater or lesser number of constants and variable. Within this structural frame given by the forms, colours, materials, measurements and relationships, Imi Knoebel plays through the possibilities with great improvisational inventiveness and masterful precision – like a poet who has the 26 letters of the alphabet to draw from when building poems, or the musician, who has all eight tones of the scale available in order to compose a symphony.

The principle of stratification so central to Knoebel's creative approach as of the 1970s ensures that certain parts of a work are always concealed, while others remain visible on the surface of the picture. But we would misunderstand the

method of stratification were we to regard the hidden parts as the more essential and more cryptic and the visible parts as merely shallow. For a picture by Knoebel is always what you see. The concealed does not simply escape the gaze of the viewer in order to be tracked down and then ultimately seen, after all. Its function is instead to trigger a reference to a totality in our minds, so that when perceiving the visible we also know of that which is concealed and discern that it is the potential of further, not yet realized pictures. The layers of boards or canvasses along the wall and the stacks on the floor serve as a storage medium for pictures that have not yet been realized but could be combined and thus created. Paul Klee's famous dictum that »art renders visible« has to be given a temporal dimension and should not be understood as a call for the invisible to be rendered visible, but as a demand that we should render that visible which has not yet been seen. This factor of stored materials is particularly poignantly deployed in "Genter Raum" [The Ghent]. The carefully ordered stack of panels form a reservoir for the colour panels visible on the wall, which are combined according to colour and texture, and represent only one of an infinite number of possible combinations. Further possibilities are preserved in the horizontal stack of stored panels, which seem to intimate that they are awaiting their realization. This distinguishes these storage media from Beuys' storage stacks, which symbolize energy – Knoebel's layers and stacks are bereft of any symbolism but full of energy.

It is not the individual square form preferred by Imi Knoebel but rather the formal principle underlying each of his families of pictures that resembles the magic square in Dürer's engraving "Melancholie". Although each of the squares in the magic square bears a different number and therefore sets itself off from all those next to it, each of the columns of numbers with their respectively different four squares adds up to the same figure: 34. And this is true of the vertical, the horizontal and the diagonal columns. Jean-François Lyotard believes this magic square is the mirror of the post-modern soul. »The magic square implies the end of narration, the appearance of the structure, the neutralization of intense differences. Narration is, as ever, possible, but only as the realization of one structure among others, as the performance

of competence. The diachronic, like history, belongs on the surface. The melodic statement, the historical development of a subject start to despair.«(7)

Imi Knoebel also does not tell stories about a subject in the sense in which a diachronic novel showing the development of a character would – even if he does not exclude portraits and allusions to real people from his work. One need think only of "24 Farben - Für Blinky". The structure of the two series of portraits, both entitled "Grace Kelly" – the two series consist of twice seven groups of pictures and twice 38 individual pictures respectively – resembles more a magic square than it does a description of the biographical development of an individual. The image Imi Knoebel conjures up with these means of Grace Kelly brings to minds much more the volatile change of identities (such as, for example, Cindy Sherman presents with respect to her own person using photographic means) than it does a record of actual lives (such as in the vast series of portraits by Rembrandt or Van Gogh, who explored the hidden nature of each character while developing and changing the physiognomies of the portraits. Just as the artist has withdrawn from his work, so, too, the subject that gave the work its name seems to have withdrawn from the portraits. Or does Grace Kelly, by virtue of her disappearing from the individual pictures, become all the more present for us precisely in these constantly repeated shapes and the delicately matched colours that oscillate between loud contrasts and subtle nuances? Here, all pictures are the same, and yet none is the same as any other. Seen together, they create the complex image of a variety of identities. Given the plurality of lifestyles today, the individual is more likely to re-encounter him or herself in such a series than in the model of linear personal development culminating in final maturity. For all the role-playing, which is particularly apt in the case of an actress, the "Grace Kelly" series also intimates an idea of the identity of the non-identical, with its colourful transformation of the formal scheme, in which the easily comprehensible and repetitive geometry of the frame enters into fluid relationships full of energy and grace with the iridescent palette of nuances and incredible harmonies of colour.

The five sections of each picture are set off against each other not only by colour. They are also set apart by a

joint. These joints are hardly perceptible on the surface of the pictures at first glance. On closer investigation we find that they provide a clue for the way the body of the pictures has been made. Each is made up of five components, a flat box and four slats. The still visible joints emphasize the autonomy of the parts, something that is already highlighted by the colours, and heighten the intrinsic value of the colour by leaving a little space between the various colour fields. Henri Matisse made use of such joints left free of colour in order to breathe a little more life into the colours on his canvases. In the "Grace Kelly" series, however, it is not only the skin of paint that breathes but the whole body of the picture with its sturdy unpainted wooden side sections. The painting is thereby instilled with the density, warmth and physical presence needed for it to enter into a sensuous relationship with the body of the viewer.

The interaction of the two-dimensional surface, composed of five monochrome colour fields, and the visible three-dimensional body of wood suggests that the picture leads a double life: as a face and as an architectonic facade. When the surface is viewed *en face*, one is reminded of the highly abstract outline of a human face: the broad upper horizontal stripe stands for the forehead, the lower, shorter stripe the mouth. Knoebel leaves that part of any face which really communicates and conveys individuality, however, namely the section including the eyebrows, eyes and nose, empty. Or rather, it is replaced by the choice and interaction of colours. The moment you look at the piece from the side, the tectonically organized image suddenly takes on the form of architecture. The vertical slats create a door with an architrave emphasized by colour. Opposite, at the lower edge, the threshold is positioned between the two pillars, posts or pilasters. Given that the large-format pictures are over 2.5 meters high, their height alone brings a doorway rather than a face to mind. We tend to associate the human face with the considerably smaller formats of the second series and with the portraits produced after or parallel to the "Grace Kelly" series.

Does this shape, both anthropomorphous and architectural, not to mention the clear and comprehensible arrangement and symmetrical relation of the precisely defined and perfectly fitted areas and stripes amount to more than a mere play of

shapes?

»What could be more mysterious than clarity?« Socrates asks in Paul Valéry's dialog on architecture, and he adds: »For us Greeks, all things are shapes. We only retain their inter-relationships, and, as if invested with the clarity of this day, like Orpheus we build by means of words temples of wisdom and science that must satisfy all reasonable people. Great art demands of us a wonderfully exact manner of speech. Even the name which designates it is used by us also to designate reason and mathematics; one and the same word refers to these three things. For what is reason other than speech itself, if the meaning of the expressions is carefully delimited and its permanence ensured and if these inalienable meanings suit one another and are clearly composed?«(8)

Logos was the Greek word for rhetoric, reason and mathematics. For all these disciplines of the human mind take great care how their component parts fit together and make certain that they are fitted together with great clarity – like the architect who knows how to form a »shapeless heap of stones« into a temple as a »world of precise forces«. Valéry's Socrates also imagines the face which would best match Logos and the temple as a shape of clarity: »Out of its rounded mouth it should squirt a jet of eternal water, clear as crystal; it would have the most noble features ...«(9)

The geometrical figures of the "Grace Kelly" pictures unite Logos, temple and face by means of that clarity and severity which Valéry also aspired to find for the art of writing. It is colour which first instills this extremely clear geometrical order with the appropriate disorder. It is colour which transforms the series of »simple units« into an assembly of unique individuals, each with its own form and unique charisma. As it is a series, what unfolds before us is what Valéry called a »rich and varied soul« that is averse to any kind of uniformity. This compellingly confirms Valéry's assumption »that order and disorder, handled appropriately, explain many things or at least bring them closer to one another«.

Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and 17th century philosopher, distinguishes in his "Pensées" between »esprit de géométrie«, with its tendency towards severity, clarity and system, and »esprit de finesse«, the preference for finer distinctions and the refinement of the senses, for

imponderable nuances and a multifold valences in the moods and colours of life. Knoebel's "Grace Kelly" pictures – and others, too – unify what appear intellectually to be seemingly opposite positions in Pascal's higher »logique du cœur«. They achieve this through the harmony they strike between a clear, stringent and systematically repeated form and colourful brilliance, delicate valences and a wealth of nuances, transitions, contrasts and consonances.

Grace – the name itself indicates under which star this actress and true princess led her life. Grace, the goddess of the same property, has, since the days of Homer, embodied that sense of beauty which, through joy, a sense of tact (that knows how far you can go) and discreet ornamentation, invests those moments when people sit together with a higher sensual aspect. Without the presence of Grace, a sacrifice to Venus becomes an orgy, the cult of Bacchus a drunken orgiastic Bacchanal. The goddess of grace alone lends the charm of enjoyably good proportions to what would, without her, only be raw sensual stimuli; she transforms crude instincts into refined pleasure. Grace is a question of the beauty of lines and of the appropriate harmony of colours, of the balance of proportions and the balance of temperaments. In other words, it is a question of finding the right relation – and it is relations, namely relations of form and colour, which are the subject of the pictures of this series.

The elegant proportions of facial features, the well-shaped body and graceful gestures all express the inner constitution of a person. And it is precisely this muteness which ensures that body language is so eloquent. Grace only surfaces where it is unintended. Because it is not a property that can be deliberately created and is the very opposite of artificial, wherever it raises its perfect head it strikes us as attractive and makes us very happy. After all, Grace in its unintended shapeliness attests to the instinctive unity of inner and outer attitude, the quasi-natural unity of body, mind and soul, without at the same time being subject to the compulsion and effort to form an identity.

Imi Knoebel's "Grace Kelly" pictures present grace in all its purity and radiant intensity. They, too, rest perfectly in themselves, depict and represent nothing and yet they have an exceptionally strong aura coupled with grace, that it enchants and captivates us. These pictures are both distant and near.

They radiant appearance, renders them impenetrable and inaccessible and yet cloaked in a captivating aura. The richness of the colours, their subtlety and delicacy, their glaze and sparkle, their elegance (which on occasion verges dangerously on the pleasant and the cute) all radiate the very grace for which the name Grace Kelly stands. Yet some of those pictures seem to be overly made-up, as if they had jumped out of the artificial paradises of a Baudelaire or had been designed in the elegant fashion studios on Fifth Avenue or the Königsallee in Dusseldorf.

These pictures thrive solely on colour. The continual unwavering arrangement of five geometric fields is dominated by the five colours and decisively changed by them. The colour references break, confuse or invert the colour scheme. The energy of the colours is the driving force behind these pictures. In group IV, for example in IV-4, the axial symmetry of the colour scheme is only slightly disturbed by the affinity between the two vertical side stripes in orange and red and the way they contrast with the turquoise of the lower and the Neapolitan yellow of the upper strips. However, in VI-3 this basic symmetrical shape becomes completely imbalanced, because here the two red bars, close both spatially and in terms of colour, link up to form an L that has been stood on its head. This connection creates an imbalance that can only be offset by the black strip, which thus functions as a counterweight. This pale threshold, bereft of colour, makes the picture seem open at the lower end. The transposition of the same grey shade into the upper zone of picture IV-5 seems to open it outwards in the upper section, while the lower section is distinctly closed off by a red bar of colour. In IV-1, on the other hand, the function the vertical colour bar has as a border and frame is almost eliminated by its white colour, and the picture threatens to fray here at the edges, while VI-4 and VI-6 appear to both be equally »solidly« framed on all sides.

On the one hand, it is the arrangement of colours that invests the "Grace Kelly" pictures with their gracefulness. On the other, it is the colours that undermine the evenness of form and the balance of the formal scheme, generating electric, asymmetrical constellations of the five colour fields. What is especially stunning is the seemingly inexhaustible way the colours transform the basic underlying

form. What we see is diversity in uniformity, the complexity and openness of inter pictorial relationships for all their tangible coherence and the readily comprehensible clarity of the shapes.

Pictures, when part of a series or group, need to be seen in relation to one another, for that is how they have been conceived and made. Which is not to forget that they also retain their validity as individual works. However, only by virtue of comparison can we pin-point the relation between multiplicity and unity, between unique pictorial shapes and a recurring basic form. It is this playful approach to identity which makes the "Grace Kelly" series a reflection of our own subjectivity.

How many faces does Grace Kelly have? How many do we have?

»Sharp and mild, coarse and fine,  
Familiar and strange, soiled and refined,  
The rendezvous of the fool and the wiseman:  
All of this I am; all of this I want to be.  
Both pigeon, snake and swine«(10)

This is a somewhat awkward attempt by Nietzsche to couch his views on the »subject as multiplicity« in verse. In each of us, or so he believed, there resides a »multiplicity of subjects ... the interplay of and struggle between which forms the basis for our thought and for our very consciousness«. (11)

Imi Knoebel's remark that »beauty is always in-between«(12) has the same thrust. Because only relations can be beautiful, since only relations are alive and kicking; the core, assuming there is one, is colourless, hard and bereft of life.

Since the very beginning, Knoebel's works have opposed the theological Platonic tradition of distinguishing between phenomenon and idea, surface and depth, sensuality and intellectuality, the visible and the hidden. The essence of these works are readily visible on their formally accentuated surfaces. Their meaning is not hidden, but is an open secret. From the beginning up until the present, these works have neither simply been a matter of inner meaning or outer meaning. While reduction and abstraction in art are often considered the »search for the absolute«, »IMI's works do not

try to engage in ... reduction in this sense. He isn't a person who peels an onion and then stops at the last segment because he knows there is nothing more behind it«. In Knoebel's works, »the ›conception‹ has emerged fully on the surface, has become form«. (13)

They are all visibility – and yet they are not. Because you have to learn to recognize relations; it takes time, at least as much time as the artist himself needed to discover the appropriate relations and to give them a firm shape. What became visible encourages meditation on conditions: relations between forms in terms of sizes and proportions; between form and surface, space, material, colours; between materials and colours, forms etc. Art makes use of visual relations. Seeing and being seen. Imi Knoebel's most recent series shows us both vantage points: the view of earth from a spaceship showing its small and somewhat bigger problems. And then a change of view from the most distant to the closest at hand: »Self-contemplation« and, finally, pin-pointing it, earthing it in a relational matrix. Our worries and pleasures in the here and now: »You are here«.

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