

BEYOND THE BINARY: DANIEL LERGON'S PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSE

The still-young German painter Daniel Lergon (born 1978) has presented no fewer than 20 impressively unified projects over the past seven years, each of which take forward an original blend of science and art to investigate the fundamentals of both painting and the universe and how we experience them. Grand as those claims may sound, though, they apply to a body of work which has a rather casual and indeterminate look. This essay will discuss how Lergon's work fits together by looking at a selection of those projects – not in a strictly chronological order, but tweaked to simplify the interconnections. One way of classifying them is by the investigation of an unusually wide range of alternative material means to make 'paintings': relatively orthodox acrylic leads on to the use of metal, fluorescent paint, retro-reflective materials, transparent varnish, and rust; and on various grounds from paper to satin to wall.

Oktave (2006)¹ might be seen as Lergon's first mature project. It began from the fascinating question: had man been around from the start of the big bang, what would have been the first colour he saw? He would, says Lergon², have had to wait for 400,000 years before the universe had expanded, and hence cooled, enough for light to escape from matter. He would then have seen the first colour on the ultra-violet spectrum to be visible to the human eye. That's the violet with a wavelength of 400 nanometers (nm), which was contrasted in 'Oktave' with the colour of a hot star, ie red at 800 nm. That explains the title: 'doubling the wavelengths of the lower boundary results in that of the higher one, thus including the whole spectrum in between one octave'.

The viewer, then, found herself in a space defined by the extremes of the spectrum on either hand, the focus on the substance of colours emphasised by their grounds: transparent cloth such that the frame of the painting showed through where no colour adhered. The paintings constructed an experiential space, albeit – as Lergon points out – one which could have been different, for 'the human eye has two receptors / reflectors, whereas some crabs living in the intense colour world of the coral reefs have twelve'. Just as we can't hear everything which a dog can hear, we can't see the range and intensity of colours perceived by a crab.

Cold Fire (2008)³ carried forward that fascination with a particular colour range and unusual supports. It looked at fluorescence, for which light comes from outside our visible spectrum. Four paintings generating a strong internal contrast through fluorescent green paint on black velvet were combined with the comparatively monochrome effect of four paintings applying transparent varnish to fluorescent yellow satin. Lergon explains that 'Cold Fire' is another term for fluorescent glowing, referring to how 'it is an excess of light produced without heat generation made possible by the molecular processes in such fluorescent colours'. There may be a reference here to light as the biblical source of creation.

'Cold Fire' also calls to mind the axiom 'no smoke without fire', indirectly subverting that by its refutation of the related claim 'no light without heat'. That denial has a metaphorical power, suggesting perhaps that we should think again about such natural assumptions as that significant knowledge is hard-

¹ Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne

² Quotations and references to Lergon's views are from conversation and correspondence with the author in October 2012

³ Aerea, Stockholm

won, or that social change requires ructions (compare 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'). That shows where Lergon's innovative use of materials and linking of art and science can take us: comparatively simple paintings summon up the origins of the universe and the nature of change within it.

Albedo (2007)⁴ refers to the scientific measure of reflectivity, 'used mainly', says Lergon, 'in meteorology and astronomy to measure planetary absorption or reflection of sunlight. A measure of zero albedo is completely absorbent, while a measure of one is completely reflective'. In that context, Lergon's installation of two large tondos in conversation with each other took on an inter-planetary aspect, leaving the viewer to reflect on – and then, perhaps, to absorb – her position in space. The planetary discs were in turn brought into visual contact with works on paper using powdered zinc, displaying base elements from the formation of the universe and introducing another strand of Lergon's investigations, namely the metallic.

Metall (2009)⁵ is the most systematic investigation of those qualities. Seven works each featured a different metal powder, bound in a clear acrylic so that the emphasis was purely on the qualities and colours of iron, bronze, copper, tin, stainless steel etc, all rendered in the somewhat paradoxical form – given metal's expected strength and resistance – of dust. The application of metal to paper (and subsequently directly to the wall) but not onto fabrics serves to reinforce that concentration on the ethereal quality of the pulverised metal, floating free of any association with the painting as an object. It's as if the metal powder works materialise in their place rather than being produced.

In **Nimbi** (2008: the plural of 'nimbus', the Latin for 'halo')⁶ Lergon painted with lacquer onto highly engineered retro-reflective surfaces, which, unlike conventional materials, reflect incoming light rays straight back in the direction of their source (both real and road-lighting cats eyes work similarly). This changes the normal relationship between the work and its observer, one effect of which is that when the light is at the back of a static viewer, a halo of light is produced around the shadow of his head. One might be reminded of Kirlian photographs claiming to show the aura around people. As Lergon points out, a similar effect 'also exists in nature, for example when a dewy meadow is lit by the sun'. Another effect is that a moving viewer is constantly reminded of their own motion, as the lacquered forms change size and shape, or disappear entirely depending on where the viewer is...

Those two strands of the metallic and the reflective came together in **lapetus** (2010)⁷, which made the most of the contrast between the objecthood of the former and the surprising ethereality of the latter by using them to evoke the third largest moon of Saturn. According to Lergon, lapetus is essentially comprised of water and ice, and 'it only shows one face towards Saturn. The front side appears dark, the rear side silvery white. This difference is the greatest light-dark contrast of a celestial body in the solar system. Today it is believed that the dark side is covered with trapped dust from the outer moons and that this is the reason why much less light reflects off it'. Lergon's installation paired a dark mural painted using cast iron powder with three white paintings on retroactive fabric. Not only did this present the opposing aspects of lapetus itself, it also stood in for elemental contrasts, hinting at how

⁴ Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna

⁵ Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne

⁶ Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne

⁷ Kunstverein Monchengladbach

the world can stand in for a wide range of states of mind, as typically exploited in romanticism.

Whiteout (2011)⁸ used white paint on white retro-reflective material to move in a quite different scientific direction. Let Lergon, once more, explain the science: 'whiteout is a meteorological phenomenon which results from a combination of snow-covered ground and sunlight subdued by clouds, fog or snow. The strong diffuse reaction of sunlight produces a contrast reduction and the differences between brightnesses are almost imperceptible. As a result there can be a disappearance of the horizon line and loss of orientation' – which is just what the viewer is likely to experience, trying to distinguish the fractionally different gradations of white which prevent the six paintings becoming pure monochromes. Those difficulties, moreover, might stand in for various problems of perception and interpretation in the un-snowed world: how full is the picture we have, to take the polar opposite example, of global warming?

Another natural phenomenon underlies **Antumbra** (2011)⁹: behind the cone-like umbra, or main area of shadow behind the moon, in – say – a solar eclipse, there is also an area shaped like an inverted cone – namely, the antumbra. This was the context for paintings made with varnish on black retroactive fabric, leading to the obvious question: if these paintings are but the subsidiary shadows, what are the main shadows like? Might that be a reference to Warhol's shadow paintings? Or are we talking of broader metaphors – the Second World War, for example, or the true power behind governments?

Finally, **Rost** (2012)¹⁰ combined Lergon's interest in metal with another natural process. Pulverised iron was applied to nine canvases *****?? and 'painted' with water, so that forms emerged out of the resulting formation of rust. This mimicked the process which led to mass rusting in the oceans when photosynthesis first developed. That's where our significant iron ore deposits came from, indicating how the decisive geological shifts of the past have benefited us and maybe giving some extra perspective on the ultra-long term consequences of the shifts being caused by man in the anthropocene era.

One might assume from the nature of those projects that Lergon has a scientific background. Not so: he studied art in Berlin (where he still lives) with Lothar Baumgarten. He takes a keen interest in science, but has no formal training in it. In Lergon's view, given how much they know about other matters, 'people ought to know about wavelengths, eclipses, photosynthesis and so on.'

What brings these projects together? First, the relatively trivial matters of appearance and means. There's a visual continuity, as no matter that Lergon's materials lead the outcomes to a considerable extent, a consistent aesthetic has emerged: the works 'look like Lergons.' There's no pre-drawing involved, but there is enough control influenced over the logic of materials to produce on a consistent basis what might be called an 'ethereal minimalism'. And the methodology Lergon applies is appropriately scientific: we can see how successive experiments build on or combine those which came before, and how reality is left to speak for itself before theories are applied to it.

⁸ Galerie Almine Rech, Paris

⁹ Galerie Christian Lethert, Cologne

¹⁰ Andersen's Contemporary, Copenhagen

Lergon himself points to three deeper aspects. First, there's the persistent dialectic between the basic elements of painting: material and light. Second, there are the ongoing references 'to topics which are not visually graspable' – in the nature of the scientific references made, and also in that his own painterly language falls in a tricky-to-grasp gap between the constructed and the gestural. Third, those two come together in the viewer's experience of the paintings' space as an 'eigenraum' ('own space') in which the works have a sphere of influence which is stronger or weaker according to the viewer's position. The effect, says Lergon, reminds him of movements between states of matter (solid-liquid-gas) or states of mind.

I'd point to a further aspect: how consistently Lergon wends a way between natural binary tendencies, echoing the way he tends to set the viewer between contrasting paintings. Those in-between zones include the spaces between systematic and intuitive, soft and hard-edged, minimal and gestural, colour and its absence, natural and industrial, scientific and artistic, micro and macroscopic views... Lergon's works lie between those dualities, but not in a static way: rather, they seem to engage with the question of which way to go – not dormant in the gap between states, but actively engaged with the alternative boundaries.

That's consistent with Lergon's engagement with the phenomena which stem from the nature of the universe. In that context, the most fundamental metaphysical antimony is that between the material and the spiritual, and one can read that as the sub-text to the work as a whole. Is the mental fully reducible to the physical? There are three main philosophical answers to that question: the straight 'no' of Cartesians; the straight 'yes' of materialists; and the 'ask me in another way' redefinition of the question by compatibilists such as Donald Davidson¹¹, who says that mental events are identical with the relevant physical events, but that they cannot be explained by them.

Just so: Lergon's paintings don't feel reducible to their physics and how that feeds into their experiential effects, but how does the subjective experience of the viewer survive independently of its being explained by how the *eigenraum* is set up? Might this be to speak of the independence of a spiritual dimension? That question may be the one we're left with through our engagement with Lergon's project of the universe.

¹¹ Donald Davidson: 'Mental Events' (1970)

