

White and out of the white: structure

Visual artist Aja von Loeper (* 1971) is an inventress. The essential being of ingenious explorers is one of curiosity, exploratory longing and perseverance. And indeed! When you pay the artist a visit in her living and working space in Nuremberg's winding alleys all these characteristics seem to be present in her welcoming smile. The title of a text Eugen Gomringer once wrote for Günther Uecker is: "How white is, only the sages know". ("Wie weiss ist, wissen die Weisen".) Whiteness (or wisdom) is something von Loeper understood a long time ago. For decades she has been an expert with paper and its stronger variant: cardboard.

In her formative years at the art academy and some years after, one place in particular, to which she would return again and again, was existential for her: a tree, more exactly a birch tree, near the premises of the academy. Day after day von Loeper would sit by the trunk of the birch tree, watching, learning, becoming a witness. As the years went by, the tree changed and so did von Loeper's perception of nature's processes. She found, refined and extended her technique which, at the end of this period, allowed her to create the large-sized works the artist is living with now. Onlookers marvel at whole catalogues of structure, which all of the works display. If there was ever an official institution to commission an inventory of the structures and characteristics of snow, paper, glaciers or fur, Aja von Loeper certainly would be ready to provide information because she has worked on such an inventory for decades, has understood and refined it to such an extent that in her work all of nature's phenomena might be translated into art.



Aja von Loeper, „Hommage an Lucio Fontana“, 2018, Installation (7 „Weiße Blätter“ à 240 x 105 x bis 7 cm), Paper
Biennial Rijswijk, Museum Rijswijk, Den Haag, NL, Foto: Paul de Boer



Aja von Loeper, Detail „Weißes Blatt“, 2013, Foto: Aja von Loeper

Aja von Loeper, „Weiße Blätter in Farbe“, 2015,
Exhibition in the old synagogue Schwabach within
the scope of “ortung IX”, photo: Stefan Hippel

There is something monumental to it. And like many monumental things it is at the same time delicate. By means of stylus-like tools of beech wood (Buchenkolben), which the artist shapes herself, so that she can use them for scraping and stroking and also to make them fit well in the hand and allow for a direct power transmission, she works up the surface and the different layers of the cardboard in such a way, that the paper seems to surrender.

It discloses even more of white and while it is excited in the true sense of the word by rubbing and pressing it opens up and unfolds for us. Over the years, von Loeper has found out the characteristics of the material and in what kind of nuances they affect her work. She can talk about paper in a way which is extraordinary with regard to precision and reverence. Poets talk about leaves and trees as images in a world of thoughts. Von Loeper seems to communicate in an intimate way with the white sheet itself and to liberate it from its rigidity and compactness in an act of “persuasion”, which is also an overcoming of material limits. A work of art for von Loeper is the result of longterm physical and intensive work with the sheet of paper. In most cases the sheet is lying flat on the floor offering enough resistance for her lightweight body kneeling if not almost lying on top of it. The paper bends, but does not crease or tear. Patiently the artist roughens big surfaces of her cardboards using her beech wood tools. Unbelieving onlookers may rashly prejudge the work process as a kind of embossing. But quite the opposite is true!



The artist does not emboss the paper, she rather excites the surface of the 250 gram cardboard into rising or bulging, offering her wooden stylus even more surface, which is then dissolved by a kind of hatching movement. The dissolution has always to do with transformation, not destruction. The material is not being “wounded”. For years von Loeper has been thinking, together with patent agents and art historians, how her method may be best and most precisely described in order to claim the status as an inventress for her. Her method allows for amazing things: A three dimensional body seems to rise from its surface. It becomes evermore defined and offers to the eye smoothness in one spot and roughness in another spot. These complexities, however, aren’t the result of embossing like in relief maps from school – this has to be emphasized – but rather of an intense excitement or maybe better enticement of the material itself. Von Loeper uses the characteristics of the material with its long fibers, which are rigid and flexible at the same time, with expertise and virtuosity to create smaller, at times colored works and also large sized ones. As a role model and basis for her works the artist sees for instance Argentina-born Lucio Fontana, who ultimately slashed and stabbed the canvas in order to let the behind come forth and to show different layers of reality, to emphasize the attitude of the artist, to use the brush like a knife and to juxtapose the act of cutting against the cutter of technique or subject matter. “Spatial Art” came up in the 50ies and artists are still working on the power of the white sheet and its imperative, its accusation, its meditation, its silence which emanate from it. These may also have been the reasons which brought Aja von Loeper back to the birch tree near the grounds of the academy again and again. A magic dwells in each beginning and thus also in the white sheet. But the thing with magic is a little bit tricky. The powers which guide us and which we release, are – according to Goethe’s Sorcerer’s Apprentice almost uncontrollable.

The wordplay from the beginning with the words wisdom (Weisheit) and whiteness (Weissheit) with regard to the German sculptor Günther Uecker is also true in this context. It almost seems, that for the artist, after he has added some color to the canvas and after he has finished his philosophical contemplation of the surface, there is nothing else left for him than to attack it and to extend it into another dimension by working directly on its materiality. The attack as an artistic gesture has been formed and predominated by men, though. In contrast to this von Loeper’s way of working seems to be a kind of diplomatic extension, which she creates with great persistence, strategic skills as well as aesthetic reflections adding to the surface – rather than destroying or injuring it. The paper offers up its characteristics by free will to the negotiations of the artist. Expression, shape and aesthetic effect are contributed by both partners, the artist and her material, in equal shares.

The artist thus creates great monuments of time and entropy and all power which goes into the works emerges from them, becomes visible, almost touchable but without leaving them. Aja von Loeper is the translator of this power and she really knows about the essence of white – that’s for sure.

NORA GOMRINGER

Nora Gomringer, Swiss and German, lives in Bamberg. Her literary work includes poetry, libretti for opera and radio as well as numerous musical renderings of poems of other poets. She has been awarded many prizes for poems and performances, in 2015, among others, with the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize. She has been commissioned by the Free State of Bavaria as Directress of Internationales Künstlerhaus Villa Concordia. In this position she promotes artists and she met with Aja von Loeper in her work shop in Nuremberg for an interview and to get some insights into her work.

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