

Surfaces of Space. Reflections on Depth

Ulli Seegers

Height x width x depth = volume. The multiplication of these three coordinates describes the circumference of an object; they determine the three-dimensionality of space in elementary geometry where space itself is imagined as an expansive area without defined borders. The absence of the element of depth results in a two-dimensional area, which represents the opposite of three-dimensional space. Mathematically, surface and depth are mutually exclusive in a logical either – or. So what is the content of depth? Has space a surface?

Black

Since the 1990s, Hella Berent has been exploring the hidden layers of the depth of surfaces. In this pursuit her interest initially focused on the (non-) color Black. Black is the epitome of totality, of nothingness – the origin of all colors and the mother of all that exists. The velvety, deeply saturated black paintings (cf. *XXXIV NERO*, Rome 1992) evolving from the ground black pigment allude to the inscrutable infinity of the universe into which one can immerse oneself through the deep black pigment surface. Here the impact of Black, which surrounds the viewer existentially, does not depend on the image on the canvas. Hella Berent investigates other materials as well, for instance the sensuous appearance of black rubber which she uses for various book objects as an image ground and in installations (cf. *Glut der Unterscheidung [Fervency of Differentiation]*, Nuremberg 1992). The thin raw rubber sheets' surface texture evokes a peculiar spatial impression, which in some works is enhanced further by delicate, white pastel drawings. Besides rubber the natural materiality of black granite has inspired the artist's interest. Smoothed and polished, the stone reveals an almost lucid transparency. Its heaviness and compactness in particular lets Black become a passageway to other worlds (cf. *ATHANASY – The Fire-consuming Otherness*, New Delhi 1993).

The impervious Black draws the views, seemingly absorbing them into its interior and bonding them in an incomprehensible amalgam of abundance and emptiness. Whether in the form of loose pigment, supplely floating rubber panel, or massive stone – Black inheres a compactness that is reminiscent of primordial unformed matter. The non-color appears like a pure potentiality, not revealing but already containing everything. Its depth effect penetrates through all layers towards the interior core where, in the most hidden recess, the center can be sensed, shrouded by dense matter – Black as the infinite material and pure existence.

Reflection

In the installation *Tree of Life* (New Delhi 1995) the glance into depth suddenly turns into a glance up into the heights. Hella Berent placed twelve panes of bullet-proof glass across twelve rectangular holes dug into the earth, leveling them precisely with the surface of the earth. The branches of the surrounding trees and the sky reflected in the glass panes on the ground. Here the earth not only appeared like a piece of

sky, but an unfathomable depth flared up through the surface: opposites reflecting each other, relinquished in sensual appearance. Reflection from above and below is also the subject of the installation *Have sunk*, created for the Neapolitan Castel S'Elmo in 2000. Here 160 mirrors laid out on the tuff-stone room's floor dissolve the low medieval barrel-vaulted space into a dance of light reflections that mirror the ceiling, merging ceiling and floor, perforating the brick walls, evaporating the space into a fathomless depth.

Reflection and mirroring are also a theme of her photographic double exposures in which two different places and times are superimposed, merging in a complete cross-dissolve. The motifs flow into each other, emerging as something new – a third. Coincidence is always part of these image amalgams when the merging of two motifs takes place in the darkroom. For her double exposures, which began evolving in the 1980s, Hella Berent likes to choose completely different objects, situations, and cultures: architecture, landscapes, and interiors change as do the geographical locations of the photographs.

In these double exposures the ephemeral nature of the glass and mirror installations is manifest and preserved and the reversed perspective finds a permanently synchronized reception as the subject of the temporary light reflections. Space, time, and cultures coagulate in the contemporaneousness of the non-contemporaneous in a new way that sees the divergence simultaneously. In the changing places she visited and the times she experienced, the photographic superimpositions transform into topographies of the imaginary that open undefined spaces of experience and, as dynamic sampling, mirror the perspectives and reflections of all that it.

Blue

Renunciation of the representational and dissolution of matter find their opposing correspondence in the manifestation of the ephemeral. Through reflections and superimpositions that which exists is set into motion while the process of transformation seeks completion in mutual penetration. Bringing down the Blue of the sky to the earth is so audacious! And yet, at the same time, it is as plausible as the harmonization of her striving, thinking, and sensing. In this consolidation of opposites the individual energies combine to a single force, ready to take up the impossible.

Experimenting with the material clay since 1998 opened up new possibilities for the artist to ban the elusive. In a double sense the blue glaze on the fired ceramic generates a process of materialization that bonds firmly what is differing: material-iconographical Blue as the color of distance is quite literally fired into the humid, pliable clay at high temperature. The visible result of this extremely haptic production process is a stunningly vivacious range of the most diverse hues of Blue that imparts a depth impression on the otherwise rather dull surface of the clay, reminiscent of the depth perception of watercolor. Like the azure surface of the coastline, the ceramic seems to undulate under the blue shades, without moving on the surface. Laid out on the floor or hanging on the wall, Hella Berent's blue-glazed clay bricks don't convey the impression of a massive building material; they appear rather like smooth, transparent surfaces of water, or like a glance up into the blue

sky, which is out of reach. The artist, who had the opportunity to experiment extensively with blue glazing techniques during her artist's residency at the ekwc. in s'-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands, has developed an entire canon of blue shades and surface textures in past years and is now able to apply the various nuances intentionally. Her glazed clay appears less as a material or spatial object, but rather as a colorful volume that seems to open up spaces. Even an entire wall made of blue-glazed bricks is capable of transforming associations of *limitation* or *obstruction* into their opposites; for instance the installation *Blaue Mauer I [Blue Wall I]*, Cairo 2001 does allude to a passage into infinite worlds. The impression of the blue-glazed clay brick no longer resembles polished granite used in previous installations.

Beside forms made of ceramic bricks, Hella Berent has also covered round *wall slices* and hollow forms with blue glazes. These ceramic sculptures which resemble vessels thematize the subject of space both through the blue glaze of their surfaces and their volume. The objects create space: they give space a place. The standing or lying sculptures form more or less hollow spaces that open into the space, defining an inner and an outer, without determining something definite. Although the sculptural forms are empty they seem to contain and preserve something precious and create, at the same time, a place that offers repose. Foldings, convolutions, and interspaces invert and evert and, because of their glazed surfaces, unfold into a depth perception that reaches beyond their physical volume. If the notion of a warped cosmic space-time-continuum could be perceived, it could be imagined as a dynamic spatial structure, expanding on one side while contracting on the other, forming bulges through these pulsations. Thus a hollow body of clay appears as an infinitely expanding universe that finds its center in every place in the finite space. Blue – as the glance into vast space, as the color of the eternal, of life, and the divine that is venerated in many religions and cultures, even as a symbol of heaven and water. Blue always creates a connection between the evasive and the manifest. As 'fired Blue' it becomes a 'tender material' in Hella Berent's ceramic objects and can be experienced in its depth dimensions through the senses. Blue not as a color attribute, but as the poise of knowing and the condition of infinity.

Head

The curvature of the skull protects the sensitive interior and defines the boundary against the exterior. And yet, especially the head is the part of the body that, with seven openings, connects most with the exterior. The sense organs enable a continuous exchange between the inner and the outer that expresses itself in thinking, sensing, and wanting. The sense perception forms a bridge between the spheres, making the head the interface between inner and outer, above and below, intellect and feeling. Processes of diffusion enable the flight of thought into eternity. The motif of the head surfaces in Hella Berent's work since the 1970s. Entire *Kopfbücher [Head Books]* emerged, focusing page after page in ever new appearances on the form and gestalt of the head. Departing from figurative drawings, in which the head can be recognized as a leitmotif, she arrives at abstractions in Black and the non-figurative of Blue. The fascination 'head' has lost none of its actuality: the artist takes it literally into her hands when she forms and kneads sculptural heads of clay. Covered with a blue glaze, they take on a spiritual

expression whose sensual-ethereal appearance places them in proximity to the sky. For the exhibition in Oldenburg, the artist created, for the very first time, large-scale ceramic heads which are locked in silent dialogue. The blue heads have their prequel in the installation *Greek Field*, which was shown in Cuma, Italy, in 1999. The snow-white heads, which pick up on the identical marble head of a Greek youth, seem to emerge from the floor, connecting the earth with the sky. The youth's classical, delicately modeled face forms a strong contrast to the dark, rough soil on which the head is positioned. Thinking and perception seem to oppose the ground of reality and are at the same time firmly rooted in it.

Flow of thought as movement in space – the photographic series *Hair* returns to the motif of the head by way of the long flowing black hair of a female figure, seen from the back, depicting the artist herself who moves seemingly away from the viewer into the depth of the picture space. Her erect figure and her long hair emphasize a vertical which, in the symmetry of the image, is crossed by her horizontal movement. The physical movement in space creates a field of tension to the movement of thought visualized by the long hair as the extension of the head. The flow of thought and the course of things result in an imaginary system of coordinates consisting of a network of connections and relations.

Hella Berent has visualized the stream of movement in many drawings: swellings and linkages, interrupted dotted lines, and intersections appear like the courses of rivers, streams of thought, strands of hair, or bloodstreams. The drawings, which seem to have entered the sheet unfiltered and directly from the subconscious, allude to maps of geological conditions, like seismographs of the intellect or the emotion – energy fields of movement that generate spaces with one single line.

There is no objective space. Space is a subjective form of assumption that does not have an exterior reality outside perception. Thus the place of space is the head; its surface is mirror and reflection. These surfaces are magic formulas which express nothing yet have everything in view: surfaces, which don't stay on the surface but lead deeper into the subject. Understood in this way, the content of depth is nothing but consciousness. Thus thinking and perception never remain without consequences: they are the vital forces of the conscience which is able to create an infinite space, a universe, in which Black and Blue pervade each other. Hella Berent has offered the surfaces for this experience of space that can be perceived with the senses.

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