

## **Daniela Hardmeier: Beauty’s Foundation Runs Deep. Reto Boller’s Temporary Vinyl Paintings**

Like a sea of dense, lush color, the rolls of vinyl sprawl out, gush over walls and floors, engrossing the space and transforming it into the pictorial ground for a work, whose dimensions are defined by length and width of the sheets, but no longer exactly delimitable and definable by them. Does the surface actually stop at the edges? Or does the color reach further, engulfing the airspace and its surroundings, the artworks present—even the visitors—and immersing them in a chromaticity that descends upon everything like a great stillness, encasing us and plunging us into a depths, whose profundity we neither know nor can conceive how to free ourselves from? Where, in fact, we are standing offside, denied access to the actual surface, pushed aside: approach and entry is neither welcome nor possible.

Reto Boller has entitled his solo exhibition at Kunst(Zeug)Haus in Rapperswil-Jona “Touchdown point” — a title that rouses various associations and yet has a singular background.<sup>1</sup> Concretely, “Touchdown point” could indicate a precise point in the exhibition, initiated with the viewer’s perception<sup>2</sup>, at which the reception of the individual works begins. In all likelihood this will be with the saturated surface that stretches out across a large part of the room, emerging at one wall, ending in a surge at the library and tapering off throughout the rear end of the exhibition space. Resonating with full force upon the viewer’s senses, the surface dominantly asserts itself in the room and takes the architecture into its service. It douses everything—even the surrounding works—in its color: it is at once an autonomous work and a plane of reference for the other works in the exhibition. To create a surface that is so sleek and unaffected per se, the artist has turned to industrially manufactured vinyl sheeting, which unlike direct paint application does not betray any signs of autography. Ultimately, the question of the surface’s purpose remains unsettled. Could this be a marking out of zones with specific properties within the space? This inscrutability, the suggestion of an alleged purpose, is also discernible in Boller’s newer pictorial objects.<sup>3</sup>

Reto Boller’s work with colored vinyl sheeting constitutes an area of his artistic practice, which function and development has drastically changed over the last ten years. He first realized a temporary painting in the group show “Die Pracht erwacht—Beobachtungen zur Malerei” at the

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<sup>1</sup> In aviation, “touchdown point” refers to the point at which an aircraft touches down on the runway with its undercarriage. From this point until the front wheels set down a distinctly demarcated black rubber surface abrasion forms. Due to the impossibility of planes consistently touching down at the exact same point on the runway, the contiguous abrasions clearly demarcate the variance within the touchdown zone. This is a subject often touched upon in Reto Boller’s work.

<sup>2</sup> This term is used specifically because perception describes the totality of processes of perceptual awareness. Besides apprehension, cognition, and assessment, the term encompasses subconscious and emotional processes of sensation. It is this totality of processes that seems important to me in the confrontation with Reto Boller’s immersive paintings.

<sup>3</sup> Invar-Torre Hollaus highlights this aspect of the pictorial objects in his article.

Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen in 2001.<sup>4</sup> In a prominent location of the exhibition space, an intense yellow, amorphous form stretched from wall to floor, evoking a tub of paint being emptied on the floor (ill. 1). In the exhibition, Reto Boller was showcased as a representative of a new generation of painters, whose approach to painting is mediated less through the classical treatment of the pictorial panel and the parameters of its expandability, and more as derived from perceptions of new media. The wall and the floor do not simply make up the painting ground; rather the space is dilated through the visual extension of painting.

Reto Boller's first vinyl works still make reference to the classical pictorial frame in that their forms are clearly demarcated. They function as autonomous works in space, placed either on the wall or the floor and thereby not bound to a specific site. Consequently, the artist forcefully pushes beyond the dimensions of this parameter, refining the relation between the artwork and the space. In his 2003 solo exhibition at the Museum zu Allerheiligen<sup>5</sup> (ill. 2), the central work consists of a series of rolls of carpet unfurled across the floor of the entire exhibition space. In places and at irregular intervals, lanes have been cut out and rolled up. No longer distinct from the space, the color immerses the walls as well as the achromatic artwork<sup>6</sup> hanging on them in a blue undertone. Thus, the rolls of carpet are at once autonomous work and specific part of the exhibition situation and attunement of its space, as they no longer engage merely partially with it, but in its totality.

The intervention in space and the redefinition of a particular site are central aspects of Reto Boller's vinyl works. Not only do they change the sense of architecture, expansiveness and characteristics of these spaces, they also mold them, embossing the properties of floors and walls with the thin membrane of vinyl, revealing textures and irregularities, edges and corners. In the case of the temporary painting in the Kunsthalle Winterthur (ill. 3), the artist even changed the basic structure of the exhibition space by building a partition wall that obstructed one passageway into the next room. This intervention further affected the visitor's movements, which were already constricted by the surface of color that spread across almost the entire floor.<sup>7</sup> Contradictory effects define the spatial experience of Reto Boller's work. The huge surfaces of color are immersive and elusive at a single glance. Enclosed and surrounded by them, the viewer is submerged in color and engrossed by the work. The color's intensity is a strong sensory stimulus; one almost has the sense of feeling it physically. At the same time, the works have something immaterial and elusive about them. They change according to light conditions and

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<sup>4</sup> See "Die Pracht Erwacht – Beobachtungen zur Malerei", Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen, Schwabe & Co., Basel 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See "Reto Boller", Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen, Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg 2003.

<sup>6</sup> This draining of color from the pictorial objects initially played a minor role in the past three years it has subsequently become an important subject for Reto Boller.

<sup>7</sup> Reto Boller not only challenges the viewer visually—because walking on the vinyl is not permitted—he also compels the viewer to desert familiar paths within the exhibition space. The viewer must move within peripheral zones and paths, thus experiencing new points of view.

over time. There is no definite, no enduring state culminating in finitude of existence.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there is the question of the paintings' two-dimensionality and depth, whereby this raises a problem crucial to painting since its inception. Not the represented nor the materiality, but the immateriality of the color and light procures a tremendous depth within Reto Boller's works. One might compare them to Dan Flavin's neon works, which similarly dematerialize painting and use it as an elusive and expansive medium<sup>9</sup>. The means by which the adhesives are glued also achieve depth and physicality. At the Kunsthalle Winterthur, fixed across the gap between the floor and wooden partition so as to form a slender cavity, the vinyl sheets do not run flush with the edge. The vinyl is never cut along this border and transition zone because it is precisely this that creates the impression of a skin: stretching across, tracing and embossing the subsurface. Thus, with this precise placement, the artist pushes the work beyond the plane, expanding it into space and allowing for it to flow more freely.

By increasingly addressing the space, the vinyl paintings also change shape. Reto Boller gradually breaks with the closed form, by making the width of the vinyl sheets and how they taper along the floor and walls central and placing this in correlation to the process of affixation. Therefore the beginnings and ends of the vinyl rolls no longer form a clean line, but are determined by a prefigured cut (i.e. in the work at Fri-Art, Centre d'Art Contemporain in Fribourg, 2006, ill. 4). The artist determines a minimum mark to be met by the vinyl and works with the randomness of an exact intersection point. Whether the contingency is ultimately met depends on the impact of the room; the artist leaves open the possibility of intervening after the fact.<sup>10</sup> Alongside this, "the real" increasingly enters into the works. The pictorial objects take on more angular shapes. Materials like wood or aluminum become more and more visible, whilst integrating real objects such as motorcycle helmets, restraint straps and clamps. In Reto Boller's practice, reality is not just the point of departure and reference point. The works no longer simulate a virtual space of painting—however devised—but engage in a constant trade-off with real life. This means that by taking up and engaging with the space the vinyl works become projection surfaces and fragments of a reality where inside and outside are no longer clearly discernible. Thus, they no longer exist beyond reality, but become part of it.

In his practice, Reto Boller operates with complimentary and often contradictory qualities: like physically present and ephemeral, smooth and torn, flat and deep, immaculate and raw. Through his use of industrial vinyl sheeting, the artist manages to dissolve the boundaries of painting, whilst operating on the sharp edge of beauty. As a concept that has been vehemently shunned, in the past few years beauty in fine art has become more and more of an issue—no longer to be displayed uncritically, but instead shown to reflect the condition of living in a world that itself is hardly unragged.

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<sup>8</sup> At the end of each exhibition, the vinyl is removed, resulting in the work's destruction. It is the experience of the space alone that reverberates in the memory of a visitor returning to a particular exhibition space.

<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that Reto Boller's color radiation indirectly affects the space in opposition to Dan Flavin's use of colored light.

<sup>10</sup> The idea that not everything can be controlled, that chance ought not be dismissed, can be found throughout the artist's work.

