

# The Conquest of Space through Color and Bodies of Color

Dominique von Burg

Hanna Roeckle commutes between painting, sculpture, and installation when, for example, she makes wooden panels of a depth that lends them the character of an object or when she mounts an unbroken series of colored panels on a wall. Depending on where the viewer stands, the works alternate between two and three dimensions, thus faceting the space they inhabit. The wooden panels, visibly joined either side-by-side or at an obtuse angle, acquire the appearance of a relief, while the towers integrated into the architecture invest painting with a gesture that clearly conquers space. The wooden panels have a standard format of 33 by 43 or 33 by 21.5 centimeters. Once Roeckle has applied her subtly nuanced layers of wash or thick, opaque paint, she combines the panels in numerous variations. One is reminded of Lego, except that her modules can be varied and extended. They are connected to form strips, stacked behind each other on the floor, or installed in space as "sculptures." Her palette draws on the color spectrum of crystals and quasi-crystals. Sometimes the differently colored, angled strips of wood are set up in complete or almost complete circles. Roeckle places them on the floor separately or slanted, piled up behind each other or vertically stacked. The freestanding sculptures, such as a tower of 2.3 meters that can be placed either horizontally or vertically, shape and define the space in which they are placed. The outside of the tower has a monochromatic pearl green or silver "facade." It cannot be entered, but window-like openings offer views of an intensely colorful and rhythmic interior.

## Between Genres

Roeckle's studio in Zurich's lively Binz neighborhood could be mistaken for a factory that makes construction elements, an impression that is not unjustified since visitors often see lacquerers spraying different colors and transparent varnishes. The production of the actual objects is outsourced based on 1:10 scale models created from ideas the artist has worked out in drawings and plans. Apart from that, she cultivates her ongoing interest in architectural questions by making drawings of construction sites. This has led to a system of rules for her paintings and a serial system for her constructive sculptures. Roeckle's exceptional sense of space is strikingly expressed in the rhythmical arrangement and overall composition of individual elements that are repeated and interrelated. Her panels, the modular foundation of her work, are stacked on plywood shelves. Each self-contained system always consists of seven elements. For many years the number seven was of symbolic significance for Roeckle, especially in relation to symmetry. Attached to the wall or standing on the floor, the single or joined panels mutate into sculptures. Painting extends into the third dimension without the use of illusionist devices, and color acquires a physical presence. These strategies enable the artist to explore the mutual impact of body and space as well as the potential of painting, sculpture, and, especially, the medium of color. The artist enlists methods aligned with constructivist-concrete art, as shown in the interaction of serial works and reductionist tendencies, as well as specific orders and their variations. As in concrete art, Roeckle has devised visual equivalents for antagonistic forces, investing them with harmony and balance. However, she opens up new perspectives in such series as *Wings and Waves* (both 2010–12, fig. pp. 66–69 and 70–83), in which multipartite wall-mounted works playfully jut out into space. The small wooden panels may be laid out in a grid, almost like pixels, and arranged in patterns that evoke both textiles and musical rhythms. Other arrangements show blocks of panels that are almost like regular paintings mounted on the wall or placed on the floor. They bear such titles as *Xoana* (fig. pp. 134–149 named after archaic cult images from ancient Greece that were used as mobile boundary markers) and *Askan* (fig. pp. 108–127 in reference to the *Askanischer Platz*, a symbolic, formerly divided square in central Berlin). The works all consist of several parts, some large, some wide, some small in format. Their open-ended flexibility may lead to startling layouts, as when a regular rectangle breaks

down, so that the panels missing in between reveal the bare wall in back. These empty spaces reverberate, like a two-dimensional echo of the openings in the tower.

### **Dynamic Voids**

The artist applies her paint in layers. First she primes the support in white, gray, and/or anthracite. The next layer of paint has to blend in with the primed layer. If it doesn't, the artist sands it down again by hand or machine. This creates exceptionally thin, highly transparent layers of paint or opaque layers of paint that cover a spectrum between light and shadow colors. The individually treated panels may be homogeneous and monochromatic; they may be matt, metallic, or glossy; they may look velvety, smooth, or coarse. Sometimes the painterly texture is richly nuanced by a striking line drawing, and occasionally we discover a clear sense of depth. In creating her paintings, sculptures, installations, and architectural structures, Roeckle alternates between movement and stasis. Her works gradually materialize in the course of this process until, at some point, she knows they are "right." The moment of fruition is defined by surface colors that constantly replace each other and works that oscillate between genres. Viewers are therefore also drawn into the latent changeability that marks the visual process of becoming, as, for example, when the grid-like compositions only gradually reveal the subtlety and complexity of their color and form. Often showing the same formal composition, each of these works generates its own inimitable chromatic mood. Viewers enjoy a similar experience when they walk around the artist's "towers." Successive variations in the configuration of form and color produce ceaseless changes both in the act of perception and in the perceived itself. At the same time, these grid-like structures with their system of divergent and networked formations may be interpreted as abstract images of cities. The flexible arrangements and compositions may be read as open cities characterized by expansion, growth, and reduction, in which case their voids would correspond to the "dialogic urban model" proposed some thirty years ago by Paul Hofer and Bernhard Hoesli within the context of a discourse on city planning. The term has lost none of its cutting-edge significance in describing a morphological urban process that must address not only the buildings as such but also the public spaces generated between them. With this interpretation, Roeckle's works become models of urban planning visions and counterparts for the innovative potential that lies dormant in these spaces. This applies especially when she enlists painterly means to intervene in public space, as in the central plaza of Schaan, Liechtenstein, the middle of which is covered with a distorted, tapered chessboard pattern in light blue and anthracite, a pattern that continues in varying colors onto five walls in the underground parking garage (fig. pp. 152–161).

### **Gridlike Configurations in Flow**

Everything Hanna Roeckle does is intertwined and in flux. One thing flows into another, yielding ever new configurations. Existing works resonate in subsequent ones, to which the artist adds new aspects. One inspiration leads to another so that each work segues into the next. Roeckle works out a system of forms that are compatible and can be combined at will, for instance, a kaleidoscope of configurations and quasi-crystals in combination with older works and/or in a varied spatial context. While the lying tower, *Faro C* (2010–12, fig. pp. 98–101), is distantly reminiscent of the construction site motifs of the 1980s and 1990s (like *Bahnhof Stadelhofen*), such series as *Waves* and *Wings* (both 2010–12) are informed with the artist's interest in architectural structures. The origin of the so-called *Tilings* (2009–14, fig. pp. 35–63) goes back to the geometric pictures drawn with a silver pen while in Berlin on a Landis & Gyr studio grant in 2007–08. "Tiling" is not only an engineering term but also applies to the near-perfect quasi-crystalline Penrose patterns of mosaics in Islamic architecture of the fifteenth century. The ornamentation of countless oriental buildings shows a quasi-crystalline geometry that has only recently been unraveled by scientists in the West. The British physicist and mathematician Roger Penrose was the first to describe the quasi-crystalline pattern in 1974, observing that repetition applies to certain elements but never to the pattern as a whole. Geometric embellishment of great artistry has been a salient fea-

ture of Islamic culture for many centuries, but certain ornaments that first appear in the thirteenth century are striking for their complexity. They are based on hundreds of decagons, elaborately constructed with a precision so great that they can hardly be achieved by the use of straightedge and compass alone. These complex, decagonal girih mosaics, as they are called in Persian, are created by the juxtaposition of only five different tiles. The five tiles, with a linear decoration, may take the shape of a decagon, a pentagon, a hexagon, a crystal, or a rhombus. On some buildings, as in the Darb-I Imam shrine and the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, the architects even used two different scales in laying out these five basic forms to create an overarching geometrical pattern consisting of several hundred smaller tiles with the same pattern. The resulting mosaics are known today as quasi-crystalline. The relationship between Penrose parquetry and the quasi-crystalline pattern is significant. When a quasicrystal is cut in a certain way, the cross-section shows the exact pattern of Penrose parquetry. This pattern is based on a highly sophisticated fluctuation between order and variation since the molecules in the quasi-crystals follow an unmistakable order although their structure is aperiodic. Deviations from the strictly periodic Archimedean pattern, characteristic of crystals, are generated by additionally inserting scattered bands of triangles, in a sequence that is typical of quasi-crystalline structures and is derived from the so-called Fibonacci series. This aperiodic rhythm plays a significant role in Hanna Roeckle's approach since she often smuggles barely perceptible deviations into her work. Thus, depending on the site of the Tilings they may appear as two-dimensional panels that use the vocabulary of constructivist-concrete art or as extremely sculptural, spatial, and even almost 3-D images, despite the fact that the picture space is not defined by perspective but rather consists of a diversity of geometrically faceted color fields. The Tilings are made in series of hexagonal tableaux, their surfaces subdivided by triangles, parallelograms, and rhombuses. These series provide an insight into the creative process. The artist restricts her visual idiom to triangles and polygons, a formal syntax of striking—and infinitely variable—simplicity. The light, poetic colors of the subdivided geometrical figures are muffled by such intense colors as dark red, dark blue, and purple. Slightly watery hues like pale yellow, pink, white, beige, light blue, and pale violet hint at the radiance of precious stones. But whatever the case, Roeckle's powerfully contrasting palette ensures sensual presence and changing spatial dimensions. At first sight, one is reminded of the Chinese tangram, an ancient tiling puzzle that may date back to the Tang Dynasty. It consists of seven flat geometrical shapes, achieved by cutting a square into two large triangles, a medium-sized triangle, two small triangles, a square, and a parallelogram. The shapes can be combined to form countless silhouettes resembling animals, ships, and other figures. Roeckle melds the simple geometrical shapes of the tangram with the structures of crystals/ quasi-crystals, derived from the complex periodic patterns of Islamic mosaics, and with images created by kaleidoscopes.

### **With a Microscopic Gaze**

Roeckle has long been studying aspects of the natural sciences. She takes inspiration from the structures and colors she discovers through her studies, particularly in the fields of molecular biology, deep-sea research, glass fiber optics, and digital technology. The tendency to compress and disintegrate, characteristic of these fields, overrides the artist's implicit, constructivist-concrete approach. Roeckle seeks to visualize ordinarily imperceptible phenomena like the interior of crystals and quasi-crystals. She crops and enlarges photographs of amber, whose structure and color have made their way into the modules for Faro C (fig. p. 101), while Faro B (fig. pp. 87–92) takes its cue from the color of rock crystals. At the same time, symmetrical patterns are constantly changing, overlapping, and impacting each other as they do in a kaleidoscope. For postage stamps issued by the Principality of Liechtenstein in 2012, the artist freely interpreted crystalline shapes and painted their facets in different colors. The striking simplicity of Roeckle's designs is based on the visual concept underlying the Tilings. The fact that the director of Philatelie Liechtenstein selected Roeckle to create an art print as a stamp for Liechtenstein is a great honor, the more so since stamps from Liechtenstein are internationally renowned for the excellence of their

design. The artist has an affinity for compositions that consist of modules arranged so that they fold in on themselves or reach out into space, their movement defined by a chromatic rhythm. For twenty years she has been creating images in space that explore the interaction of body and space and in turn generate new perspectives and spaces. Constructive uncertainties intensify the experience of space in a balancing act between the freedom of deviation and the sameness of repetition. Extremely seductive spatial images already made an appearance in the cityscapes of the 1980s: in urban canyons, underpasses, railway tunnels, and construction sites. Realistic representations gave way to pictures that highlight individual structures. Duality of foreground and background is linked with investigations into the placement and impact of pictures in rooms. The room dividers, the Faros, and the wooden strips laid out like reliefs initiate a dialogue between the space within and the space surrounding the pictures. In combination with the relief, which acquires renewed significance, the artist breaks down her own grid and supplements it, for example, with crystalline structures or the shape of the tank barriers along the borders of Liechtenstein. Over the decades Hanna Roeckle has created an oeuvre that is steadily subjected to process and change, an oeuvre that ultimately points its own way.