



Reto Boller

«Strömung» (current, movement)

April 23 – June 4, 2016

This exhibition at Galerie Mark Müller offers an opportunity to view the most recent developments in Reto Boller's oeuvre. Works located across the two exhibition spaces link the two spaces not only in terms of content, they also inscribe a precisely conceived path through the show that refers back to the exhibition title on several layers. At the same time, this arrangement underscores the links between several work groups, allowing the media and the issues that define Boller's work to comment on one another.

The exhibition opens with a self-confident gesture: a virtually quadratic grid of steel right-angled pipes leans against the wall opposite the entrance, a structure, larger than a human being, where the shimmering metallic surface gives it an elegance and supposed lightness. The dirty oily weight straps in turn that stretch down to the ground from their point of fixation correct this notion, attesting to the material weight of the work and anchor rough conditions, sweat, and effort in its spectrum of associations. And although *G-15.1 (Abschluss)* only can stand on the "edges" of the pipes, with minimal contact to the floor, the impression of weight, physical reference, and masculine presence defines the exquisite construction of the metal grid, placed here for the moment, taken from a different context—a sewer, an industrial plant?—perhaps even torn away violently and transported here. With its positioning, the work not only signals its temporary stay, its fleeting placement, but also tilts common categories of painting and its discourse. In Boller's work, the grid as one of the formative topoi of twentieth century art, which has been explored in many ways not only by concrete-constructivist positions, but also in terms of social paradigms and developments, undergoes a unique contemporary renewal. Constitutive elements like the pictorial quadrangle and geometric precision retain their relevance, and yet they no longer appear as normative rules, but as references and supports of narrative and (material)-semantic layers of meaning. Robbed of canonic dominance, they offer Reto Boller an occasion for subversion and critical transformation. This work can also be read differently against the backdrop of political realities: as an ambivalent position that neither denies its seductiveness nor its limits, communicating both aspects as mobile, transitory arrangements.

This engagement with (genre) traditions of the painting and the object, as complex as it is resistive, shapes the other works in the show as well. Present in both exhibition spaces, the large-format "panel paintings" that all bear the same title supplement (*Strömung*, current or movement), establish a link between questions of the painterly and the object-like / sculptural. Cut or centrally placed, the visual motifs refer to elements of non-verbal communication, to visual codes and their



cultural determinacy. The formal reduction corresponds to the limited palette of colors, which on closer inspection exhibits clear differentiations. For black is not always the same: it can reveal a warmer or cooler shade, drift towards bluish or reddish, it can seem duller, more dense, or lightly floating, shiny. This open group of works in particular reveals Boller's interest in studying paint in or on the picture as a concrete material with specific physical and optical characteristics, whereas the resulting process also includes moments of gravity and insecurity, of chance and confirmation. For Boller places colorful markings on the aluminum plates, some of them grounded in white, so that he limits the shapes using a base of tape, into which he pours glue tinted with acrylic paint. In light of the size of the picture, the physical constitution of the artist, his mobility and precision with his hands, takes a central role, but also environmental conditions and material characteristics. The self-evident justification for these paintings' existence derives from this: the paint that clumps in the previously defined, lined form does not reveal a perfectly homogenous structure. The surface and margins show traces of a material dynamic that ultimately, despite their haptic presence, evoke the impression of genuine vulnerability. In this group of works, Boller explores not just the impact of visual symbolism, he also interrogates the possibilities of how a picture can have an impact in the field of abstract, but pictorial painting, and counteracts that at the same time with painterly techniques.

For this reason, these assemblagesque objects and sculptures deserve closer inspection. In these works, tactile and optical experiences enter into interaction so that the physicality of the viewers is addressed. Various materials and premade objects of use enter into a relation of tension that radiates via formal-aesthetic, material or thematic aspects towards a kind of "body-body transmission" Works like *PR-15.3 (Löschblatt)* or *PR-16.1 (machine head)* thus create an immediate affective stimulation that extends towards physical perception. In both works, this level is evoked especially by the use of textile materials, or more precisely pink and flesh-toned elastic bands or torn, tied up T shirts, that are applied to the wood boards or their points of transition and thus evoke disablement and (emotional) fragility. Hard and soft, mobile and rigid collide against one another, evoking images of bandaged extremities, prostheses, or injured machines. The fact that these associations are not limited to the (psycho)somatic and affective dimensions is due to the unhidden, almost pragmatic use of the applied everyday objects, materials, and components. This lends the works the impression of a virtually defiant self-affirmation, an emphatic articulation of existence.

Several works communicate in addition their inherent manageability, for example the already mentioned *Löschblatt*, where the wrapped boards become handles that can be used to raise and maneuver the bathroom rug, like blotting paper. *HG-16.1* even more clearly suggests a use: with the red paint on a vertically mounted metal



handle, that in its positioning recalls the handle on a massive door, at issue are not painterly signatures like traces of tears or drippings, but traces of action carried out on part of the artist, the effective attack on the object, tactile grasping of its formal and material characteristics. And yet, despite all bodily transference, despite all experiences of associative empathy in the works, a distancing rest remains effective that opens them for other contexts of reception.

After walking through the exhibition, perhaps one returns to the title and arrives at the conclusion that with the term *Strömung*, “current” or “movement,” Reto Boller not only referring to trends in art history, but also to processes immanent to the work and to social and political phenomena. If we take the term as synonymous for climate or temperature, then the exhibition shows that active, physical reference, and in a metaphorical sense political positioning, achieves a presence and effectivity that can link artistic and social or everyday questions. Reto Boller’s works position themselves neither via project contexts nor via their titles explicitly in this field, and yet they suggest that there is a link between artistic questions and direct life reality that is processed in the works, perhaps on a subliminal layer. And in this very way, Reto Boller asserts his independence not just within art-immanent discourse, but also in the context of everyday experience and a decided relation to the present.

Irene Müller, April 2016