

BEYOND BLACK
The Creative Power of Black in Works from Baselitz to Warhol

29 March - 3 May 2014
Opening 28 March 2014, 7pm

Black – many a dispute has been conducted as to the question of whether black is a colour or not. Its connotations are just as diverse, since black has been perceived in very different ways as far as cultural traditions are concerned.

In European art, black as a colour (and not as a non-colour) was introduced in the Renaissance as a means of contrasting colours, and it was thus used to highlight the intensity and brightness of colours. Black was also used in mixing darker hues in colour. However, first and foremost, black was an essential element in helping to discern other colours – the colours were to appear in a more intense and brilliant way. Centuries later, Henri Matisse, known for his use of bright colours, wrote: “Black is a colour! Black is a force: I depend on black to simplify the format of the picture” and “... I began using pure black as a colour of light and not as a colour of darkness.”

Standing in front of an entirely black painting can be compared to a situation in which you find yourself in an absolutely dark room. You cannot see or rather you do not see “anything” – your eyesight is swallowed up by the darkness, it does not find any reference point and, thus, turns inward. “Shut your eyes and see” is a famous citation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; it suggests a “genuine” form of seeing on the basis of darkness and of a gaze turned inward.

Friedrich Schiller, likewise, writes about this effect in *Über das Erhabene* (On the Sublime). However, he assesses it in a totally different manner, as something uncomfortable, since objects are concealed by the darkness, challenging you to use the full force of your imagination.

Nevertheless, it is this strong imagination that has triggered a fascination for the colour black time and again. Its arcane attraction can be found in the fact that many cultures attribute a metaphysical importance to black – black standing for the beginning, for the primordial, and in some cultures for the end as well.

The mathematician Louis Bertrand Castel (1688–1757) describes the original character of black in terms of a process: “Everything originates in black and disperses in white.” His concern is not only the origin of things, but also the beginning of a development with a clear transformational quality.

If one were to compare the colour black with night, then night would embody the origin and it would simultaneously be the mother of the day. The ability to transform into the “other” is part of the inherent and incredible creative potential of black. It represents the archetypal idea of creation – in other words, of birth, chaos and artistic creativity.

This opening quality is exemplified in Imi Knoebel’s exceptional work *Heaven’s Door* (1999), in which a “gate” hints at further possible dimensions whilst blazing colours appear and blend in – in a process of expansion. The invitation arises to open the gate and to make the experience of the realm behind.

Günther Uecker's schematic *Portrait* (1957), very rarely exhibited, seems in its darkness to suggest the formation of the human face, and yet it appears like a mere breath. The human condition emerges in connection with darkness; it is a part of it and is visible through it. This interconnection in Uecker's work forces mind and matter to become one in an unusually striking fashion.

Similar proof is found in Günter Umberg's deep-black work *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 1990), directing the eye into a world behind the colour black – beyond black. Uncommon in the world of art, Umberg's work has a physical – indeed, almost magnetic – effect; it innovatively illustrates the existential nature of art, namely, of reaching another level of consciousness by means of pictorial visualisation.

One of the most famous black paintings – or even one of the most famous paintings, in general – is Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square on White Ground* (1915). On account of the special hanging during its first exhibition – mounted like a traditional icon in a corner high above the room – it has gone down in art history as an icon. Interestingly, this work found its origin in a stage design by Malevich that the artist created in 1913 for the futuristic opera *Victory Over the Sun* by Michail Matjuschin. For this set, Malevich used a black square as a motif for the first time – and, in the artist's own words, it is exactly this motif that exemplifies the victory over the sun. Black defeats the light! Black liberates the world of the dictator of reason characterised in the libretto by the sun!

Entirely in line with the futuristic ideal, Malevich emphasises the formidable force of black as the embodiment of modernity and the driving force of progress in society.

In our exhibition, we are particularly pleased to present Sebastian Riemer's work *DSSQ* (2011), which represents an inverted photography of the legendary black square by Malevich hanging in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow today. It is not only the impressive materiality of the painting that distinctly surfaces through the technique used, but the inverted photograph also allows a virtual view beyond the colour black.

As different as the dimensions of black may be interpreted, the colour remains both impenetrable and timeless. This is a clear indication of the strong influence exerted by the colour – for ultimately, it is impossible to define the colour black.

BEYOND BLACK presents works by:

Hans Arp, Georg Baselitz, James Lee Byars, Lucio Fontana, Hugo von Habermann, Hans Hartung, Volker Hüller, Imi Knoebel, Markus Lüpertz, A.R. Penck, Francis Picabia, Otto Piene, Diego Pimentao, Arnulf Rainer, Sebastian Riemer, Peter Royen, Emil Schumacher, Sean Scully, Richard Serra, Turi Simeti, Juli Susin, Hann Trier, Günther Uecker, Günter Umberg, Bernar Venet, Andy Warhol, Fritz Winter, Herbert Zangs

We deeply thank Turi Simeti for creating a new piece for this exhibition.