

Paint Project

Start at the beginning. That would be fine advice, wouldn't it? Easier said than done if, as Imi Knoebel says, 'everything has already been made.'¹ Malevich has already painted the black square, gone beyond the requirement for representation, untethered painting from ideas and emphasised the central importance of utilitarian and intuitive reasoning; Yves Klein has already found his colour, his blue – never mind that what you search for is a green – and he has leapt into the void; El Lissitzky has already told the story of the two squares arriving on earth, colour and form sailing through space to make a new world; Lucio Fontana has already slit the canvas to show that there are small and large secrets waiting to be revealed, demonstrating that through that opening we will find both limitlessness and the limit, the abyss lurking behind the surface and the wall rising behind the painting ; and, in case you have forgotten in the short time since you tried to begin at the beginning, Malevich has already painted the black square. It is not true, of course, that everything has already been made. It only always seems that way when you need to start, because you naturally want to start at the beginning, proceed from the ground up, learn a craft, be a worker, be a painter even though you are convinced that you have no talent for it. So, the old question: what is to be done? You have to do something, and it has to be done on that ground that has – you know this really – only been prepared, not wholly appropriated.

Nineteen sixty eight. You have seen this photograph before.² It is grainy black and white. It is history. Eight tall, narrow, flat rectangular hardboard panels are propped against the wall, butted neatly up against one another to fill an area maybe 5 metres wide by 2.5 metres high. A tall ladder reaches up to lean against the wall above the panels at the left hand end of the arrangement. Imi Knoebel is on the eighth rung up from the floor, his dark clothes contrasting strongly with the white of his shoes. Up there, too, is a small, square stretcher partly obscured by his body, and two lengths of wood fastened at right angles to one another. These are perhaps two sides of what could become another, larger stretcher, and they are hung with the angle uppermost so that they sketch a roof over Knoebel's head. Standing on one leg he stretches his right arm up and over to the right while his left leg hangs out to the other side for balance. You can trace a straight line on a diagonal from his left foot, up the leg, through the torso and along the arm to the right hand, which is positioning another stretcher, rectangular this time, high on the wall.

The body is balanced and it is dynamic. It is in space, moving in space, but it is not floating free. It is not Yves Klein launching himself into the void. One foot has to stay on the rung, and the ladder stands on the floor. 'I always had that,' said Knoebel. 'The real world, or keeping your feet on the ground – that was always a very important aspect.'³ The photograph was taken in Room 19 of the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, the room where Knoebel made the eponymous work that has, in its various iterations, accompanied him throughout his career. It is a part of that work that can be seen in the photograph. In the same year Knoebel made *Schwarzes Kreuz*, the cross formed from four square black painted panels set on the wall at a diagonal similar to that of his ladder-top reaching body. *Schwarzes Kreuz* stands as something of an accommodation with those exemplary intuitions of Kasimir Malevich, and with the Russian artist's conviction

that a painting was not a representation of a living form since a painted surface was a living form itself.⁴ More recently Knoebel has made a series of acrylic paintings on six-sided aluminium panels in each of which a white square is topped with a red or black trapezium. They could be seen either as flat irregular hexagons with two distinct areas of colour, or as perspectival renditions of an open cube with a white exterior and a black or red interior. Or maybe they are straightforward renditions of red and black roofed houses such as might be drawn by a child, or then again shapes reminiscent of the houses you can find in the background of Malevich's later paintings. Actually, they are all these things because they are flat six-sided aluminium panels painted in two colours. Keep your feet on the ground and don't allow yourself to get carried away by fancy or fanciful ideas. Those things will find their way to the work without any help from you.

Knoebel continues to be guided by the need to remain grounded, to practice painting as a craft and to resist any temptation to get carried away by ideas. Even now, nearly fifty years after that photograph was taken in Room 19, he describes his recent exhibition at Haus Lange, Krefeld, as 'the ground', which is to say, an exhibition that is at one and the same time both a statement of the essential aspects of his practice, and a singular realisation of and out of that practice.⁵ Begin, again, at the beginning.

What can we find in the Haus Lange? There is a horizontal line and a vertical line drawn directly onto the wall, a sculpture (an iron block), a wall panelled in hardboard, a tall box, also of hardboard, such as can be found among so many other things in *Raum 19* and also perhaps like the plywood cupboard in *Eigentum Himmelreich* (*Property Kingdom of Heaven*) – the one that hides the hare on the wall behind it. And there is another box with hardboard faces, this one a plinth, a sideboard, something upon which something else might be placed, such as the black square, acrylic and box in *Schwarzes Quadrat auf Buffet* (1984). In this case that something is a found object (also a cardboard box). Then there is paint, a simple area of painted wall, there is measurement – 60 x 60, again painted directly onto the wall, and there is light. In the beginning, which is to say in the 1960s and 70s and according to the technological possibilities of the time, light was beamed onto a wall or onto the façade of a building from a slide projector. Nowadays it is digital, emitted by a data projector. What was light and an image of light has been stretched through time to become light and a film of light. Pixelated and beamed it is therefore doubly both particle and wave. In another part of the Haus Lange several panels have been stacked against a wall in a gesture with which we are familiar. Carefully placed, they acknowledge both floor and wall without committing entirely to either. They are ready for something more, something further while resting content with their present condition. Their surfaces have been painted with red lead, a paint Knoebel has been using since 1976 with the first of his *Mennigebilder*. It is an undercoat, a preparatory surface ready to accept colour; it is, as described in the catalogue to his 2015 retrospective at the Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, 'pre-colour, protective colour, non-colour, under-colour, colour before the colour.'⁶ It does not indicate or specify or make demands. Lastly, with insistent significance, there is the small square stretcher, first made in 1968 as we see in the photograph, remade and issued in an edition of 1,000 in 1989, and now made again here. Knoebel's stretcher is Janus-faced. It is a painting beyond painting, and a painting before all painting.

Taken all together, what does this exhibition amount to if not a syllabary, a collection of fundamentals, a set of painterly axioms, a spectrum of potential and possibility, a beginning?

To stress the need for grounding is not to say, however, that Knoebel is not forever looking up. Think, if nothing else, of the collective title given to those works from 1983, Knoebel's so-called 'junk period': *Eigentum Himmelreich* (*Property Kingdom of Heaven*). But then there are the *Sternenhimmel* (*Starry Sky*), photographs of the night sky to which he added a single additional white dot, the *Drachen* (*Kites*), quadrilateral white panels placed high on the wall, testing the boundaries of the gallery space, and the panels of the various versions of *Kadmiumrot* moving not just up the plane of the wall, but into and through the optical space they generate. The *Drachen*, by the way, are projections, too – literally so, given that their irregular shapes derive from the plotting of lines from points on adjacent sides of a regular rectangle. More recently there are the paintings that have appeared under the collective title *Asteroiden mit gespaltener Persönlichkeit* (*Asteroids with Split Personality*). The series title is taken from the headline to a newspaper article about the type of asteroids known as contact binaries due to their comprising two distinct but contiguous bodies. The key thing about asteroids, Knoebel says, is their 'unformedness'.⁷ (We find something similar with icebergs.) This is not to say that they are without shape, but rather that any irregularities are integral to their identity. They are not trying to be anything other than they are. They are not a failed version of a more regular solid. The paintings in this series combine straight-sided polygons with curved forms – blobs, distorted annuli, amoeba-like shapes. They are intercut so that the surface is flat, unlike the layered construction of so many of Knoebel's paintings that actively withholds and obscures parts of them. The impression, of course, is of one thing laid upon another, but it is just that, an impression, an unavoidable effect of the physical structure of the painting combined with the colours in play upon its surfaces. The tension Frank Stella spoke of that exists between the painted surface as image and the painting as a literal object sharing gallery space with the viewer is felt intensely in these works.⁸

If you proceed with rigour from the outset, a space is cleared for things to come. Notably, colour comes, and when colour comes, all colour comes. Even before the first of the *Mennigebilder* in 1976 implied colour without stipulating what it might be, colour had already appeared in the first *Grünes Siebeneck* (*Green Heptagon*) the previous year. What had until then been a practice conducted in black and white or in the browns of wood and hardboard, found a vivid spread of hues and tones. Later, for instance on some of the panels set within and on the complex paintings built from lengths of box section aluminium Knoebel has made since 2000, the use of interference paint suggests a continuing active refusal to place limits. Depending on lighting conditions and the position of the viewer, the iridescent and glossy panels of a painting such as *Molani* (2001) can appear to be of a colour located anywhere across the full visible spectrum, with its position shifting from moment to moment. (We should note that this chromatic comprehensiveness echoes the experience of entering Knoebel's studio, where the walls are covered with colour swatches that systematically chart the innumerable steps from the infra-red to the ultra-violet.) What we recognise here, as we move, is that colour is spatial, not only in the sense that it works optically to create space, but also more fully in that it occupies and articulates our

environment. As free standing corners and bays to be entered, the *Orte (Places)* embody this understanding. *Rosa Ort* is, as its name suggests, a pink place, a corner, a painting into which the viewer can step. It is painting as space and space as painting. It is El Lissitzky's *Proun* and Barnett Newman's use of colour on an all-enveloping scale. And it is Blinky Palermo's dispersion of colour out and away from its fixed location on a wall-hung canvas into the room. Rosa – a colour, a flower, light, and a girl's name; a sensation.

Michael Archer

¹ Imi Knoebel in conversation with Johannes Stüttgen, in Henning Schapper et al, *Imi Knoebel: Works 1966-2014*, catalogue to the exhibition at Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, October 26, 2014 – February 15, 2015, p 18

² Reproduced, for example, in Johannes Stüttgen, *Der Keilrahmen des Imi Knoebel 1968/89*, Galerie Christian Lethert, Köln, and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2014, p 111

³ Schapper et al, p 20

⁴ Kasimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*, in C Harrison and P Wood (eds), *Art in Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p 172

⁵ In conversation with the artist 03/02/15

⁶ Schapper et al, p 66

⁷ Conversation 03/02/15

⁸ 'Questions to Stella and Judd' in Gregory Battcock (ed), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, E.P. Dutton & Co, New York, 1968, p 158: 'My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object. ... But ... I also want my painting to be so you can't *avoid* the fact that it's supposed to be entirely visual.' (Stella's emphasis.)