Dianna Frid, skylight and spectra, neues Kunstforum

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A text presented on March 25 at the inauguration of Dianna Frid’s exhibition skylight and spectra, curated by Dorothee Joachim, at the neues kunstforum in Cologne, Germany.
The neues kunstforum curators are known for inviting artists who are invested in the capacity of installation art to engage dynamically with the site. To be sure, this arises from the particular characteristics of the space: due to its sheer dimensions and prominent architectural elements such as the stairwell and the encircling upper balconies, the walls have marginal potential as hanging surfaces.

The concept of installation art is not only to be understood in terms of site-specificity, but also as manifesting a development within visual art practice that has become ubiquitous. Today many artists produce exhibitions that respond to the particularities of a given space, thus opting out of a monolithic concentration on a single object or a body of objects made apart from the space in which they are to be shown. These concerns – either a focus on singularity or a reference to site specificity – complement rather than oppose each other. However, we still have difficulties finding clear-cut terminology with which to conceptualize such multidimensional experiences vis-à-vis a location. Over the centuries, our ways of perceiving art have been formed by looking at singular coherences, and this continues to be the primary mode of art appreciation, including within the discipline of art history.

The border-crossing practice at play in skylight and spectra applies not only to the spatial context, but also evidences myriad simultaneous aspects of art making. The piece deploys classical means of execution including drawing, sculpture, painting and architecture, merging them into an indissoluble whole. Frid neither shuns references to design nor insists on a qualitative differentiation between industrially produced materials such as foil and cloth and manually produced components such as hand-painted paper. Already the title of the work, skylight and spectra, alludes to the tension between two terms that are associated with two distinct perceptual systems: that is, the world of concrete physical elements versus that of ephemeral time-bound phenomena. In addition, the title names two points of reference that are
not situated on the same plane: first, architecture—which not only subsumes the specificity of the local context but also the surrounding urban setting—and second, the color spectrum of visible light.

Natural light is one of the main sources of artists’ inspiration, and consciously deployed here as a pivotal material. Therefore it is essential that, as far as possible, the exhibition be viewed in daylight. In *skylight and spectra*, It is indeed the fleeting, irretrievable manifestation of sunlight at play on the foil – and vice versa – that causes spectral reflections and quavering, ghostly projections across the exhibition space: on its walls, stairwell, and floor. This play of light and reflection is further enhanced when viewers stand on and in the floor drawing and it, in turn, affects their sense of their own physical presence. The magic moment that this exhibition holds as hidden experience is neither bound to a particular kind of light, but to the unpredictability of what natural light may do at a given moment. It is by virtue of the groundwork laid by the artist that this remains possible.

The elements deployed are of a rather ephemeral nature. The artist’s intervention, although very intricate, is simultaneously restrained. Seen from the entrance to the exhibition, only a bare wall can be discerned towards the back. Akin to an architectural point of reference, this wall functions like a landmark amidst the expanse of the exhibition space. At first, the large-scale drawing spread on the floor in front of it remains invisible despite its proportions. Upon moving closer to the wall, suddenly the lattice-like network on the ground enters our field of vision. The subtle materiality of the thin, partially transparent foil strips gives way to a shimmering and colorful appearance. The strips form an almost immaterial, elastic and porous membrane—an interface between the space and the light, a filter that spreads colorless light into the color spectrum of visible light. A viewer standing on the plane of this membrane of light reflection is engulfed by the atmospheric field of the drawing. Standing here, it is impossible to grasp the field of color in
its entirety as the different materials and hues reflect light in different ways: some areas shine chromatically, while others seem to seep into the black surface of the tiled floor. As the viewer moves onto the upper levels of the stairwell or the balconies, the bird’s eye perspective affords a different perception of the refracted light. The floor drawing now becomes less fleeting and reveals itself cohesively, even sculpturally. As in a rainbow, the angle of light incidence determines its appearance and disappearance. Seen from above, the colors seem quite different in their intensity; for example, the more saturated orange strips look wider than those of other colors, even though they are not.

The geometric structure of the drawing, which is anchored on the 30 x 30 cm black floor tiles, refers, however remotely, to the norms of serial art. By and large, twentieth century art was divided into two fields: natural and cultural aesthetics, as exemplified in the antipodes of minimalism and pop art. While the former focused on the appearance of materials, the latter was more concerned with the complexities of content. This dialogue between form and content became a constant of modern art, with partisans siding with one approach or the other. Dianna Frid’s works keep this dialogue suspended, refusing to settle it too precipitately. She sees the dialogue between material and meaning, between specific detail and formal whole as a vehicle for the exploration of the ways in which reformulated material, patterns and diagrams condition our thinking. The hexagon and complex star structure, key elements of the floor drawing, are not so much representational of an idea or an object as references to our relation to our surroundings. These are forms with which we apprehend the world and through which we draw out our conceptions and proclivities. The structure of our knowledge of the world is linked to such patterns.
Thus to Dianna Frid, every new work implies an open negotiation of materials and form. Intimations of the mystery within certain phenomena of experience trigger in her a curiosity to search for materials and forms that can circumscribe such immediate intuitions. Many have located the source of all artworks in the archaeology of individual experience, reaching back to the beginnings of childhood. Frid’s materials, such as glittering, metallic colored foil, mirror this notion: all these sensuous and scintillating elements provoke a disarming identification with child-like wonder. The artistic challenge lies in simultaneously achieving detachment from these materials, finding a form for their autonomy that endows them with a new critical certitude.

Our individual perceptions of the work are further complemented by the visibility of the surrounding location: that is, the urban space and architecture not only inside but also outside the neues kunstforum. The ways in which interior and exterior intersect are inextricable from our horizon of experience. Consider the interaction between the light that enters the space from the skylight above and the large floor-to-ceiling windows at the north and south of the gallery. These do not only allow for further incidences of light, but also cast shadow patterns in the space by virtue of their structural frameworks. On one of the glass panels at the southern end of the neues kunstforum, Frid has created a small window piece with colored square filters. The contained reference to Richter’s famous stained-glass window at Cologne’s Cathedral is intentional, just as the only wall bound work, situated near the entrance to the forum seizes a connecting thread to another, less spectacular, but no less beautiful and formally consummate architectural aperture in the city of Cologne: the ornamental skylight atop the staircase of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, by Rudolf Schwarz. Thus our gaze is guided from the exhibition space to the city, and back into the kunstforum, so that its floor, walls, stairwells and even its mundane or unremarkable elements turn into a projection screen on which all the metaphoric dimensions of light become visible.