

PHOTOGRAPHING LIGHT – ON DO PALADINI'S PHOTOGRAPHS

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For eight years now, the artist Do Paladini (born in 1970 in Interlaken, Switzerland) has been creating photographs that are unique in the way they capture light in all its ethereal beauty and about which the artist herself says: “The images of light photography are abstract, real-surreal, showing subtle materiality and its colors.”¹ But how can these works be described more precisely? In his 1954 book “Über das Licht in der Malerei” (On Light in Painting), the German art historian Wolfgang Schöne succeeded in coming up with a system for categorizing the artistic treatment of light that still applies in research today.² For instance, he coined the concept of self-light or transmitting light in paintings from the Middle Ages with their gold ground, as it is “...as if the imagery itself were radiating immanent light onto us as observers.” He contrasts this with the projected or illuminating light of modern painting, which radiates from a visible or invisible light source onto the objects in the image, shedding light onto the illuminated imagery of the work of art. Finally he describes positional light, which is the kind of light under which the observer sees the artwork and which is therefore not actually immanent to the piece of art itself.

The light of images

If we wanted to apply just one of the concepts devised by Schöne to the early works of the artist Do Paladini, we would soon discover that none of these concepts truly fits, as there is neither a transmitting light emanating from a radiant background nor does the positional light under which the image is seen play a significant role. The best option for describing the effect of light in these photographs would be to categorize it as illuminating light. At first glance there are admittedly few illuminated objects that could

constitute the subject of the photographs, but it is more a case of the light itself “materializing” as spheres in Do Paladini’s pictures. These circles of varying sizes, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow, overlap and intersect with each other, appearing to float upward as light as feathers, or to dominate a large portion of the composition as a single, stationary form.

Convention and perception

In these works, Do Paladini is following in the footsteps of classical modernism in a dual sense, both by making reference to the self-reflexivity of the medium and by visualizing that which is not usually visible. Artists of the classical modernism movement such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) hoped to open up new ways of seeing the world by, for example, distancing themselves from everyday subject matter.³ As such, Moholy-Nagy understood correcting our cognizant vision to be a central function of photography: as he saw it, the eye and brain automatically put everything we see into “correct,” meaning conventional, relations with one another and we become so accustomed to this that we no longer recognize them for what they are, i.e. relative conventions. The camera, on the other hand, simply does not perform this function: according to Moholy-Nagy, if we hold a foot or a hand in front of our face, our prior knowledge immediately transforms the dimensions appearing in front of us, putting them in “correct” proportion to the rest of our body – the camera, however, does not perform this kind of adjustment. For Moholy-Nagy, photography in this respect offers the possibility to see the world without the filter of our previous knowledge. He also saw photography as capable of making things that we cannot see with our physical eyes visible, an idea summed up concisely by Paul Klee in his

1920 text “Creative Confession”: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.” According to this theory, art plays a key role in human perception, granting insight into realms not otherwise accessible to us, as they are not perceptible by sight.

The basic principles of the medium

The fact that Do Paladini seeks to capture light itself in her pictures hearkens back to the origins of the medium itself. In the early days of photography, the objective was to identify a photographic principle whereby light could inscribe itself onto the photographic plate. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the English pioneer of photography William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877) named his foundational work on the new medium of photography “The Pencil of Nature,” suggesting that light plays an active role in the image-making process. This idea of personifying the forces of nature takes us back to pre-modern conceptions of the world whereby the entire cosmos is imbued with a soul, and offers an insight into the esoteric side of classical modernism.⁴ It could be argued that Paladini is not showing light itself at all, but only the effect of light refracting in particles floating in the air. The circular forms portrayed in Paladini’s pictures, known as “orbs,” occur particularly in digital photography due to light reflecting off dust particles, which digital cameras are capable of focusing on individually.⁵ However, this argument can be countered by the fact that the light can only become visible by means of the obstacles in its path, through by which it is refracted and becomes able to express itself in vibration⁶; Paladini’s art also does not reproduce what is visible, but makes things visible.

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¹ <https://www.prontopro.ch/de/blog/kreativer-mix/>

² Schöne, Wolfgang: Über das Licht in der Malerei [On Light in Painting], Berlin 1994(8), p. 12f; it is worth noting briefly here that, while Schöne explores the topic of positional light only in terms of presenting artworks in a museum context and without considering its artistic effect in any way, a young generation of artists, such as Group Zero, emerged who made this positional light a crucial factor in their work.

³ Varnedoe, Kirk: “Overview. The flight of the mind”, in: A fine disregard. What makes modern art modern, London 1990, pp. 216–278, p. 262ff.

⁴ For more about the esoteric sources of classical modernism, see for example the following by Mary Max: “Das Fadennetz, in das der Künstler seine Visionen hineinwebt. Mondrian, Hodler und die Theosophie,” [The Web of Threads Into Which the Artist Weaves His Visions: Mondrian, Hodler and Theosophy] in: Ferdinand Holder. Piet Mondrian. Eine Begegnung [An Encounter], edited by Beat Wismer, exhibition catalog Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau 1998, Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1998, pp. 121–149.

⁵ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/panorama/esoterik-das-geheimnis-der-orbs/1331146.html>

⁶ Perucchi-Petri, Ursula: “Zu den Bildvorstellungen von ZERO” [On ZERO’s Conceptions of the Image] in: ZERO. Bildvorstellungen einer europäischen Avantgarde 1958–1964 [Conceptions of the Image in a European Avantgarde 1958–1964] exhibition catalog Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich 1979, pp. 41–89, p. 46.