

About Orientation

Thomas Lange

Notes

1. Philipp Otto Runge, *Hinterlassene Schriften*, 2 Bde., ed. by Daniel Runge, Faksimiledruck nach der Ausgabe von 1840–41 (Deutsche Neudrucke, Reihe Texte des 19. Jahrhunderts, hg. v. Walther Killy), Göttingen 1965, pp. 183–184, p. 183. See in detail: Thomas Lange, *Das bildnerische Denken Philipp Otto Runges*, München 2010.
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bildkunst und Wortkunst, in: Gottfried Boehm (Hg.), *Was ist ein Bild?* (Reihe *Bild und Text*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm und Karlheinz Stierle), München 1994, pp. 90–104, p. 97.
3. See for a brief history of the connection of astronomy, navigation and horology Dava Sobel, *Longitude*, London 1996.
4. Ad Reinhardt showed this in his cartoons entitled “How to look at modern Art”, published in the *New Yorker Journal* “P.M.” in 1946/47 in the Sunday-supplements, e.g. from January 27, 1946, in: Gudrun Inboden, Thomas Kellein, *Ad Reinhardt*, exhibition-catalogue Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, April 13–June 2, 1985, p. 88.
5. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Zweiter Teil: *Das mythische Denken*, Darmstadt, 1994, pp. 93–169.
6. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), pp. 116–128 about “space”, pp. 129–145 about “time”.
7. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 132.
8. Alexander von Humboldt brought in 1804 a drawing that he made of a Mexican calendar-stone to Europe. It shows the crossing as time- and space divisions. Anthropology of the 20th century showed how wide spread this crossing is in different cultures around the world. A basic relationship concerning similarities in the structure of mythological thinking had been discovered by the art historian Aby Warburg with his inquiries of the “snake ritual” (*Das Schlangenritual*, Kleine Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, Bd. 7, Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach 1988) of the Pueblo-Indians in New Mexico (Oraibi) in the year 1896. It occurred to him that the ancient Greek culture and this Indian culture were “relatives” in thought.
9. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), pp. 117–119.
10. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 129.
11. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 129.
12. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 130.
13. Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 132. Translated from the German by T. L. The original passage reads: “Es ist eine und dieselbe konkrete Grundanschauung, es ist der Wechsel von Licht und Dunkel, von Tag und Nacht, worauf die primäre Anschauung des Raumes wie die primäre Gliederung der Zeit beruht. [...] Wie die einfachsten Raumverhältnisse, wie links und rechts, vorwärts und rückwärts sich dadurch sondern, daß durch den Lauf des Tagesgestirns eine Grundlinie, die Ost-West-Linie bestimmt und diese sodann senkrecht durch eine zweite, durch die Nord-Süd-Linie geschnitten wird, so geht auch die Auffassung zeitlicher Abschnitte auf diese Schneidung und Kreuzung zurück.”
14. Hermann Usener, *Götternamen*, Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung, Bonn 1896, p. 192, quoted as in Cassirer 1994 (see ftn. 5), p. 132.
15. Wilhelm Worringer: *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, München 1916 (1908), pp. 45/46.

Cardinal Points,
Celestial Charts

Cardinal Points and *Celestial Charts* are two series of paintings by Steven Aalders, made between 2005 and 2009. Simple in form they unfold a complexity equal to the systems of orientation the titles refer to. Within the history of culture cardinal points and celestial charts were developed through a rational process that converged with sensual observation and the power of imagination. This cultural process thus created reductions and abstractions, simple elements, visualized in variable formations that provide complex relations both within the systems themselves as well as to the world they refer to. The need for orientation and the struggle to find means that provide orientation is basic not only for the development of culture but is also essential for maintaining culture; for culture was never a permanently achieved status but is an ongoing process, a struggle against all kinds of chaotic forces in nature as well as in human nature and history. In this essay I want to shed some light on the connection between the old problem of orientation, the forms of abstraction within modern and contemporary art, and the process of culture as the work of the human mind engaging the rational as well as the irrational forces within the struggle to create a *world*, or in Greek *cosmos*, meaning “beautiful order.”

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I.

Steven Aalders’ paintings of *Cardinal Points* were conceived between 2005 and 2009. They are a “series” in the sense of having a common theme that allows varieties, that allows innumerable variations upon that theme. Each represents the four cardinal points, as the title suggests. The title together with the individual paintings gives a hint to the infinite range of variations of a singular subject. Seeming to be a contradiction – for there are only four cardinal points which are by their very nature specific and distinct – the variations are nevertheless crucial, because they belong to the appearance of the cardinal points, to the way they are visualized, not to their actual structure or construction. Despite of the scale and the differences in color this overall structure is always the same: on a square shaped canvas four rectangular bands of four different colors are placed. The orientation of these color bands to the background and their relation to each other is specific and similar in each variation. Two of these bands are orientated