

BERLIN

Norbert Kricke and Ernst Wilhelm Nay

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What occasioned the painter Ernst Wilhelm Nay's fall from grace, beginning with attacks published in the newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Der Tagesspiegel* in 1964, was not so much his art itself as the immense esteem in which it had been held in the German art scene. It's been said that in light of Nay's prominent participation in the first three Documenta exhibitions, for the first two decades after World War II the artist was to Germany what Henry Moore was to England, and what Jackson Pollock was to the United States. An emblem of the old guard, he was considered invincible, but by the 1960s his wholly apolitical approach to artmaking was becoming increasingly out of sync with the zeitgeist. For the younger generation, Nay became synonymous with the establishment, an obvious target for a takedown.

Fifty years after Nay's death in 1968, however, we can now encounter his work on different terms, as more tentative and sensitive. This exhibition, "*Linie und Farbe*" (Line and Color), combined drawings by Nay in ink, pencil, and felt-tip pen with the delicate steel sculptures of his contemporary Norbert Kricke. Nay's paintings are all about color, so these black-and-white sketches offered a different object of investigation into the line, jagged and spontaneous, while color seemed to have escaped the wall to find form in Kricke's linear metal constructions, some bright yellow, red, or blue, others more soberly black or white, in shapes ranging from geometric to gestural.

In 1959, Nay described his work *Das Freiburger Bild* (The Freiburg Picture), 1956, which was not in this exhibition, as "the first picture of our time that shows structure as color," perhaps meaning that it demonstrated the ability of color to build an inner space on the canvas. Turning this formula on its head, these works by Kricke show color as structure—that is, as a kind of inverted trompe l'oeil; space striving for flatness, sculpture acting as line drawing. Walking through the exhibition, the spectator experienced a three-dimensionality constructed from flat planes. Each step around the plinths framed a new tableau—only for a second, but perfectly for that second.

As if soundtracking this dance around Kricke's spatial doodles, Nay's dynamic compositions of disks and splotches—some of them outlines for paintings with written notes designating the color of a given field—



View of "Norbert Kricke and Ernst Wilhelm Nay," 2018. From left: Ernst Wilhelm Nay, *Untitled*, 1953; Norbert Kricke, *Raumplastik Schwarz-Rot* (Sculpture Black-Red), 1955. Photo: Roman März.

almost read as musical scores. This quality is a significant element in his paintings as well, but where their forcefulness would have overwhelmed Kricke's minimalism, the lightness of the paper works facilitated a playful dialogue.

While such dialogue perhaps was missing during Nay's own lifetime, this encounter made for a sophisticated reintroduction to Germany's fallen patriarch of postwar abstraction. Art history marginalized Nay as part of a transitional generation unable to address the trauma of the Third Reich, yet too old to disavow implication; he was even derided as a "false master." Kricke, twenty years younger and closer in spirit to the emerging Zero movement, was positioned in critical opposition to Nay. With time, the differences have dissolved. Nay's stylistic cautiousness now emerges not as conservatism, but as thoughtful prudence, biding time. A meeting such as that between Kricke and Nay testifies to the value of revisiting history generously. It says, "If you look for friends, you will find them."

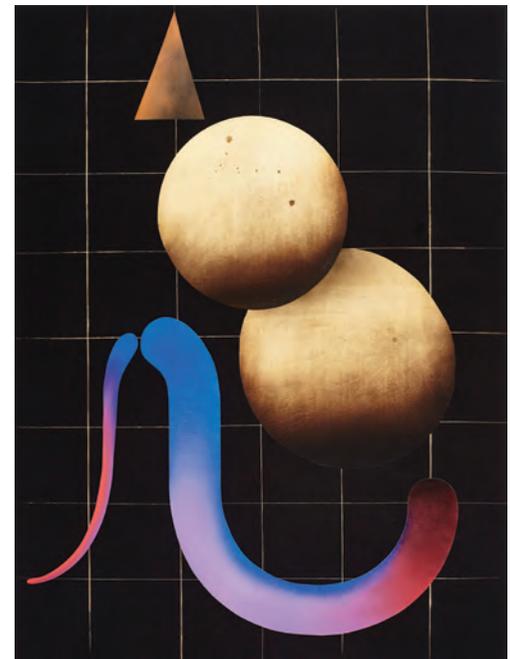
—Kristian Vistrup Madsen

Grit Richter

GALERIE TANJA WAGNER

The work of Hamburg-based Grit Richter encompasses painting, sculpture, and installation (she is also a veteran of her city's underground electronic-music scene), but her recent exhibition "The Space Between Us" put the emphasis firmly on painting. In fact, one of the works was titled *Forever Now*, 2018, name checking the controversial 2014–15 state-of-the-art-of-painting survey at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In this ensemble, the painting seemed to reinterpret the MOMA exhibition's cyberpunk-derived theme of "atemporality" as, I think, a kind of classic space opera. Whereas Laura Hoptman, the curator of "The Forever Now," saw contemporary painting as touching on all of history as a reservoir of forms and images, Richter (despite a certain knack for retro styling) seems to have her eye not on the past but on an idea of space as the future home for potential forms and images. In *Forever Now*, that (pictorial) space is hard not to read as outer space: A pair of earth-toned spheres (shadowed circles bleached into the canvas) float in a calm pas de deux in a gridded-off black field, while a couple of neon-hued vermiform blobs curve by them. At the top, a sort of triangular pointer seems to serve as a cursor trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to pinpoint this grand expanse on-screen.

But for Richter—as the exhibition title suggests and the gallery press release confirms—the wide-open and seemingly celestial space of the painting is also a metaphor for interpersonal space, the charged field in which amorous vicissitudes work themselves out. Luckily, the artist treats these lightly. The paintings take on a playfully diagrammatic quality, sometimes almost cartoonlike, as in *Sometimes I Need You Really Badly* and *Sometimes I Feel So Disconnected*, both 2018, smaller paintings whose forms and palette resemble those of *Forever*



Grit Richter, *Forever Now*, 2018, oil, acrylic and bleach on canvas, 64 × 47 1/8".