

Olve Sande – Laminate Works
Interview with Irene Grillo
at Herrmann Germann Contemporary, Zurich

Zürich, 06. April 2013

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Irene Grillo: Did you have any references for the exhibition here in Zurich?

Olve Sande: My last Exhibition 'Ours' at Galerie Antoine Levi in Paris was relevant for the development of this exhibition. The title of the show is 'Laminate Works' and it refers to the show in Paris where I used only materials found in the gallery to produce new works. For the exhibition at Herrmann Germann Contemporary I wanted to have a similar approach, producing all the works on site. At the point where I had to choose a title for the exhibition, I still didn't know what the show would be about, other than I wanted to make it on site. I decided to refer back to a previous body of work where the title itself I suggested something new, as at this point it was the only thing I could say for sure. The title 'Laminate Works' refers to the parquet floor that I used as material for my exhibition in Paris. Also, I liked the idea of lamination as the superimposition of different ideas. Of course you can also see a reference to Frank Stella's painting questions, which I mentioned before. Instead of the width of the brush I was dealing here with the width of the parquet.

IG: Could you make this point clearer?

OS: The only materials that I used in Paris were the 'modular' material of the parquet floor that previously covered the gallery floor, and the filler used to renovate the walls before the opening of the gallery. The parquet belongs to the floor, but I liked the idea of following the rules of the wall when I also put my works onto the wall. So after putting together the different modules of the parquet, I used the filler as I would use it to even out a plaster wall, covering the gaps between the slabs. But instead of concealing the imperfections, the filler emphasized them when afterwards they were painted. In a way these works become an abstraction of the standardized construction material by emphasizing its most characteristic qualities (the modular, the imperfection of the gaps etc).

IG: That's a very pragmatic form of the abstraction process. Did it play a role also in the exhibition 'Laminate Works'?

OS: For the exhibition at Herrmann Germann Contemporary I had a carte blanche and I really wanted to continue the research and the experience I started in Paris. I came to Zurich three weeks before the opening, and I had an appointment with the Opera and the Schauspielhaus the day I arrived as the only fixed thing. The idea was to ask them for any scrap material from the production of their plays, and then to use this as a point of departure for a new series of work.

IG: Why did you choose exactly a theatre?

OS: This was a natural choice for me because of the connection between architecture and literature. The theatre is perhaps the most specific place where architecture and literature meet, and I wanted to investigate this meeting point as a lot of my early works were circling around this point without ever going directly to the theatre. I had of course no idea of what kind of materials I would find. In the storage space of Schauspielhaus I found many different floor imitations that the theatre technicians had produced for the settings of different plays. I was surprised to find out that they always paint the floors: instead of using real flooring material the theatre technicians create for each play a kind of abstraction of the material itself. I liked the idea, that they are some kind of experts in seeing the inner quality of the materials and than painting a surface that looks like the material itself from a certain distance. They are real, professional abstract painters, working with the abstraction of ordinary building materials.

IG: Let us say that you met more or less accidentally people who were working with similar problems which you were also dealing with in your exhibition in Paris.

OS: Yes. This is also the reason why I really wanted to work with the material I got in the basement of the theatre. So I brought some of these floor abstractions to the gallery, but I couldn't start working immediately. Looking at these beautiful abstracted surfaces it was tempting to just show them as ready-mades, to just hang them on the wall as thou they were paintings. At the same time, I really wanted to figure out a way to make the material my own and to take it a step further. I then contacted the theatre again and asked if they could teach me how to paint these surfaces. I spent the following week in a corner of the paint shop of the theatre where I learned some of their tricks. I really liked this idea since I have tried for a long time to get closer to painting, but finding it very difficult since I do not have a background as a painter. I never learned painting from the professors at the art academy, but now I was suddenly in the theatre learning painting from these professional and very pragmatic painters, with a very different approach to painting, perhaps somehow closer to construction or even building construction, where I feel much more at home. Also I was really fascinated by the idea that a big part of their job is to create abstractions of architecture. This was a perfect combination for me.

IG: And which is the technique to paint these fake floors?

OS: An important point is that you are painting big surfaces directly on the floor, actually somewhat in the style of Jackson Pollock. For the first layer you choose a base. You mix the paint with water and then, using an airbrush, you go over the entire floor to get an even coat of drips distributed all over the surface. Then you let it dry. Then you mix another colour, take another layer and then you repeat the same process again, again and again. It's a very controlled form of Pollock's 'action painting'.

IG: The technique differs also from the action painting as the painters in this case have to reproduce, to imitate a given material.

OS: They have of course a reference from the scenographer, which they try to reproduce. But I wouldn't speak about imitation. At first I was also thinking that this work has a lot to do with imitation, but now I don't see it like this at all. It's more a kind of gesture to find out the inner qualities of a material and trying to reproduce it by means of paint. It's not a metaphysical, but a very pragmatic way of working with abstraction.

IG: How did you use your new skills for the production of the new works?

OS: I used the original surfaces, painted by the theatre technicians, to make my attempts in creating new surfaces. For the work 'Stiller on Amerika' I took for instance the 'floor' of the play 'Amerika' by Kafka and I reproduced the floor from the play 'Stiller' by Max Frisch on the top of it. In this way I didn't only layer different colours in order to produce the linoleum effect, but also different stories. It's somehow a kind of lamination of different ideas, as I connected different layers, different stories and different times. Reading the titles of the works you can discover these different forms of stratification. After I learned the technique I tried not only to reproduce the given pattern, but also to use the technique in a more personal way for creating new paintings. It's like in the classical academy or apprenticeship where you first have to copy the old masters in order to later be able to create something original. In the exhibitions there are two small works, which I created exploring the technique in a more subjective way.

IG: The work 'Stiller Stripe Painting' or the sculpture 'Untitled (Steps)' at the beginning of the exhibition seem also to introduce a different, more personal vocabulary.

OS: Yes, for the work 'Stiller Stripe Painting' I used another technique. This work is perhaps the work closest to a ready made, as the only thing I did here was to make some vertical cuts in the surface with a distance referring to the width of the parquet in Paris. In this case I'm superimposing my own vocabulary on top of the surface from the fictional world of Frisch and the very real world of the theatre.