

## THE VARIATIONS OF GOETHE BY CARRERA.MAUL: PROCESSES AND INVERSIONS

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Bern, Switzerland

2016

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*It is that I have finally had understood that first one has to approach the colors as physical phenomena, begin on the side of nature, if one has the intention to obtain and produce something for art.*

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>1</sup>*

### INVERSIONS

Like only a handful of contemporary artists, Luis Carrera-Maul is fascinated by the models of thinking in Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, which he reworks in various and surprising ways in the processes of his artistic production: the artist's hand transforms theorems of art into a piece of the natural world, like when the 12-part color wheel of Goethe becomes a circle of colored stones.<sup>2</sup> These are not didactic illustrations, but findings, aesthetic constellations and processes that seem to appear with instinctive ease, even though Luis Carrera-Maul later exhibits in a fully programmatic and explicit manner the reference to Goethe in the title: *Color wheel (Theory of Colors, J.W. Goethe, 1810)*. What Luis Carrera-Maul reveals and deploys in his artistic work is not the intellectual construction, but the delight in the encounter between material constellations and mental reflections. They may be stones found in nature, colored with India ink, which summon the dialectical cross-over of art and nature, and which automatically lead us to become aware of how Goethe understands colors, the order of which is established by nature itself, and which is indeed based upon the physiological disposition of human eye. They may be the large format paintings that show traces of color and that belong to the cycle *Círculo cromático II (Teoría de los colores, J.W. Goethe, 1810)* [*Color Wheel II (Theory of Colors, J.W. Goethe, 1810)*],<sup>3</sup> in which India ink runs in many ways, penetrates the rice paper, transforms and reveals itself as a primary phenomenon of color: inking becomes an open pictorial process, which in its textures and structures unfolds and illustrates different constellations around the monochromatic hue employed. At the same time the trace, the copy in color, shows itself in its complex structures as a prototype of mimesis. A painting cycle that from the pictorial process itself provokes mimetic associations and sets in motion the free play of fantasy.

## PROCESSES

It is surprising how multiform and at once complex, and yet also determined and consistent Luis Carrera-Maul is in the processual transformation of his analysis of the order of Goethe's colors into works of art. Materials, structures, constellations, work processes, textures and the succession of working phases change; and yet in the end all the aspects remain related in a consistent manner with Goethe's universe of color. Another example of this is the impressive installation he created in fall/winter 2012-2013 in the inner courtyard of the National Museum of San Carlos in Mexico City:<sup>4</sup> fine paint droppers, suspended by weights with pendulums, which over a long period sprinkle with colored Indian ink stones wrapped in rice paper, until both paper and stones become a *color wheel*, which continues to mutate over time. It is difficult to say if here art is inscribed into nature or nature into art, since in this constellation both are inseparably woven. Luis Carrera-Maul creates artistic constellations of the highest precision, in which the pictorial processes unfold without requiring further human intervention. Art and nature remain at the mercy of themselves, until the order of the apparatus staged by the artist, becomes a reality in them and the artist presents the results to the public.

Because of this, it would only be from a limited perspective to understand the stones and rice paper merely as (material) objects of art, as paintings in a traditional sense. Rather, they are testimonies of an artistic processuality, in which an intellectual operation is put into practice, which immediately leads to constellations that can be experienced by means of the senses.

With meticulous dedication, we recognize how consistent Luis Carrera-Maul is as he explores—in the works on Goethe's color wheel exhibited here—a conceptually broad and differentiated artistic process, which probes very specific possibilities in the limits between Land Art, conceptual art and the abstraction of Color Field Painting, and that opens up more than one horizon of interpretation, beginning with the film record of the research into the materials, carried out in Veracruz on the banks of a river, 300 kilometers away from Mexico City. At the beginning of his work process, Luis Carrera-Maul found the twelve large erratic stones in nature. The careful, almost ritualistic, packing in rice paper ensued, before integrating the stones into the technical constellation of the twelve paint droppers. In a process only somewhat controlled by the artist, over months the drips continually color the paper and stone, which are later separated again. From this processual root arise two homages to Goethe's color wheel, divided into a duality of paint and sculpture, which has not lost its reference to nature.

## GOETHE'S COLOR ORDER

Goethe's *Theory of Colors* is indubitably the most fundamental contribution to the aesthetic reevaluation of color in 19<sup>th</sup> century: Goethe not only aimed to establish a theory of color for artists, but pursued the broad and universal goal of an aesthetics of color that turned the legitimacy of color perception itself into an object of study. Deriving from the physiological characteristics of the eye the principles of coloring, he enquired into the "moral and sensorial effects" of color, which led him to the idea that the aesthetic structure of color should be reestablished: "Ultimately, I recognized that one has to approach colors, considered as physical phenomena, from the perspective of nature first of all, if one wants to gain something about them for the purpose of the art."<sup>5</sup> For color is "a natural phenomenon, basic for the sense of sight" that under "natural, general laws can be seen and understood better"<sup>6</sup> and it is "by means of the physiological colors and the moral and aesthetic effects of them" that Goethe finds the "way back to art."<sup>7</sup> Let us not forget that from this fundamental concern, which is undoubtedly of primordial importance for the aesthetics and the processes of the artistic production of Luis Carrera-Maul, the conflict of Goethe with Isaac Newton arose. Goethe opposed the way in which Newton understood colors as a prismatic refraction of light, his interpretation of colors as "facts and sufferings" of light, and at the same time, as "half-lights and as half-shade(s)."<sup>8</sup> Even though Goethe sought in this basic, anthropological constants, laws for color perception that were beyond the historical, at the same time he was aware that the history of color "as, of course, the history of human spirit" is built "at a small scale."<sup>9</sup>

Goethe argued that "color viewed as an element of art can be utilized as a co-agent of the highest aesthetic purposes" on the grounds that "it defends a place so high in the progression of natural phenomena, as [...] it produces in its most common elemental phenomena, [...] one by one [...] a significant effect in the sense of sight, which it is mainly devoted to and by means of whose mediation of spirit, is immediately connected with the moral."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Goethe was convinced that with the regulated harmony of the color wheel and the principles of polarity, intensification and totality of color the artists were "directly communicated a natural phenomenon for their aesthetic use,"<sup>11</sup> because "in painting for a long time there has been a need for knowledge of *basso continuo*, there is a need for a formulated and approved theory, as in music."<sup>12</sup> Taking these elements as starting points, Goethe was able to reestablish the traditional aesthetic category of regular harmony in coloring from the physiological circumstances of the sense of sight: "Whoever first develops the harmony of colors from the systole and diastole of

the retina, from this syncretism and diacritic of speaking to Plato, that person will have discovered the principles of color.”<sup>13</sup> In the works of Luis Carrera-Maul this basic correlation activates time and again for viewers. Both Goethe and Diderot rejected the “subdued, soft color” and that derived from the reduction of color in pictorial effects, as an “escape from bright colors,” as this speaks “of a weakness of nerves in general.”<sup>14</sup> Although Goethe took for granted that colors reveal their “moral and sensorial effects [...] in their most common elemental phenomena, without referring to the nature or form of a material, whereupon we notice them,”<sup>15</sup> for pictorial representation he insists on the fact that the painter’s “principal art” is to be found in “that it imitates the presence of the precise material and destroys the general, the elemental aspect of the phenomenon of color.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, “colorfulness [...] in a strict and restricted sense, only means the artificial mixture of [the colors] themselves and the faithful representation of nature.”<sup>17</sup>

Already in the 19th century Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* experienced a dual reception, with opposing assessments: while the polemic of Goethe against Newton’s *Opticks* quickly loses importance in the frame of the encyclopedic descriptions for the optical-physical reflection of color,<sup>18</sup> Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* consolidates itself as a basic bibliography to understand color in relation to art and aesthetics; to such an extent that the 1845 *General Encyclopedia of Sciences and Arts* asks if it is actually necessary “to question point by point the theory of colors of Goethe, this being accessible to everyone.”<sup>19</sup> The scope of its artistic acceptance can be studied in the theories of colors of Adolf Hölzel, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, among others, and continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Luis Carrera-Maul reasserts that lengthy tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in an impressive manner, taking it to the terrain of the conceptual installation that leads onto the processual. In his color wheels, the Goethe’s order of colors does not appear like the remains of a European cultural tradition, but as a vital spoils of the extra-European reception of an idea, which can be appreciated in a new and direct way in elemental artistic constellations.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Geschichte der Farbenlehre” (1810), in *Goethe*, vol. 14. Munich: Hamburger Ausgabe, 1981, p. 256. [Own translation.] <sup>2</sup> See Luis Carrera-Maul’s work, *Círculo cromático III (Teoría de los colores, J.W. Goethe, 1810)* [Color Wheel III (Theory of Colors J. W. Goethe, 1810)], 12 river stones and India ink, 2.0 x 2.0 meters, 2015. <sup>3</sup> See Luis Carrera-Maul’s work, *Sin título-Violeta. Círculo cromático III (Teoría de los colores, J.W. Goethe, 1810)* [Untitled – Violet, Color Wheel III (Theory of Colors J. W. Goethe, 1810)], India ink, rice paper on linen, 1.2 x 1.2 meters, 2015. <sup>4</sup> See Luis Carrera-Maul’s work, *Círculo cromático (Teoría de los colores, J.W. Goethe, 1810)* [Color Wheel (Theory of Colors J. W. Goethe, 1810)], work in progress, 12 river

stones, rice paper, India ink, bleach, glass bottles and micro-droppers, 8.33 x 8.33 x 5.00 m, 2012. <sup>5</sup> Goethe, in *op. cit.*, vol. 14, p. 256. [Own translation.] <sup>6</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Zur Farbenlehre. Didaktischer Teil" (1810), in *Goethe*, vol. 13. Munich: Hamburger Ausgabe, 1981, p. 324. [Own translation.] <sup>7</sup> Goethe, in *op. cit.*, vol. 14, p. 267. [Own translation.] <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315. [Own translation.] <sup>9</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Goethe an Wilhelm von Humboldt (7. 2. 1798)," in E. Beutler (ed.), *Goethe, Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, vol. 19. Zurich / Stuttgart: Artemis, 1949, p. 324. [Own translation.] <sup>10</sup> *Goethe*, vol. 14, p. 494. [Own translation.] <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503. [Own translation.] <sup>12</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Goethe, Gespräch mit Riemer (19. 5. 1807)," in *Goethe*, vol. 22. Munich: Hamburger Ausgabe, 1949, p. 451. [Own translation.] <sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen," in *Goethe*, vol. 12. Munich: Hamburger Ausgabe, 1981, p. 477. [Own translation.] <sup>14</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Goethe, Diderots Versuch über die Malerei" (1799), in *Goethe*, vol. 13. Munich: Artemis, 1949, p. 247. [Own translation.] <sup>15</sup> *Goethe*, vol. 14, p. 494. [Own translation.] <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513. [Own translation.] <sup>17</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Goethe, Geschichte der Farbenlehre. Historischer Teil" (1810), in M. Wenzel (ed.), *Goethe, Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, vol. 23/1. Frankfurt am Main: Artemis, 1991, p. 766. [Own translation.] <sup>18</sup> See "Farbengebung (Colorit)," in *Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyclopädie für die gebildeten Stände (Conversations-Lexicon)*, vol. 3. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1819, p. 604; "Farbengebung," in *op. cit.*, vol. 4, 1834, pp. 29-32, and "Farbe (color)," in *Krug*, vol. 2. Ciudad: editorial, 1833, p. 9 and f. [Own translation.] <sup>19</sup> "Farbe," in Johann Samuel Ersch and Johann Gottfried Gruber (eds.), *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 41. Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1818, p. 434. [Own translation.]