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random objectivations

having reduced my paintings to such a degree that they existed merely of white surfaces by the late fifties, i wanted to return to form after achieving this emptiness. i made a number of re-liefs and collages with a homogenous distribution of elements, the homogenous structures.

the form could not be developed further without giving up the absolute openness and freedom that i had just attained. while preparing a biological test setup – at that time i worked for the institute for applied biological research in nature, itkon – i used a random distribution and thereby discovered, 1962, the possibilities of also applying this visually. thus the ‘random objectivations’, reliefs, collages, drawings and several three-dimensional objects were created. as the source of chance i used the same tables of ‘random numbers’ as in the biological test setup¹. to work with these i needed a programme to make decisions and chance possible. in the first programme i made, i decided that the numbers 1, 2, 3 indicated red, 4, 5, 6 yellow and 7, 8, 9 blue (and simply omitted the 0). on this basis i placed lines, side by side. the result was interesting and invited further experimentation. the next was a +- programme, i.e. i applied square elements side by side and under each other, whereby i placed an element for odd numbers and left a space for even numbers: +- + + + + - - - - +- + - - - + + - - etc.

compositions were created in which i no longer expressed anything. the freedom of the white empty paintings was preserved. i called the results ‘random objectivations’, from ‘objective’ and also from ‘object’. after this i continued working with various programmes that were often derived from observations of nature. so they also became models of realities. when repeating the same programme, the element of chance led to considerable

mutual differences. i was also aware of this from nature observations. at that time i was frequently in the hoge veluwe. around the kröller-müller museum there were drift-sand landscapes where scots pines were established. in a random programme, i was able to simulate the distribution of the old and the younger individuals by the wind.

i walked across dykes, saw their position in the landscape and constructed random lines placing the random numbers as coordinates on the x and y axes and joining these dots together and saw how different their effect was on the image surface. the position of one dot on the surface also had an influence on the visual experience of that surface. i called these dots, after wittgenstein (tractatus 2.0131) ‘argumentstellen’ (‘argument places’). the position of the various dots was determined in the same way as with ‘de lijnen’ (‘the lines’) (1948). here again the visual result was highly variable. i also made dot grid structures: e.g. on a square grid i placed dots of different, randomly determined sizes. thus i was also able to construct random fields in which the programme was based on observations of the distribution of plant species in vegetation. transitions from one plant species to another (‘succession’) could also be simulated.

eventually the programmes became more complicated and more speculative. we – because susanne played an active role in this work² – found the models too much snapshots of the simulated, actual, natural and cosmic process. a third and fourth dimension was needed to arrive at clear models of reality and so one evening we concluded smiling that nature, reality, is the best model of itself and we began documenting natural processes, incl. series of leaves that displayed variations, i.e. constantly new realizations of a single programme. in the autumn we laid a sheet of paper under the tree and glued

the falling leaf on the spot where it fell. that was the start of much of what we still do today – and the end of the random drawings, the ‘random objectivations’. i also called these random drawings philosophical models because they had to do with processing experiences of reality that had a major influence on my/our world-view and because they also visualized this experience process.

the drawings on display at the kröller-müller museum are from the period 1970-1975 and are the point of departure for my current work.

1 r.n. fisher / l. yates, statistical tables for biological, agricultural and medical research, edinburgh / london 1927, table xxxiii, random numbers.

2 susanne is the partner of herman de vries.