

Angela Glajcar's Paper Installations – a Synthesis of Opposites

by Andreas Beitin

The paper installations by the sculptor Angela Glajcar represent an extraordinary position due to her innovative use of paper as a material, the works' expansive scope and the resulting aesthetics. In her distinct way, Glajcar demonstrates that paper is not only light and fragile, but can also be very heavy and robust. With her works, she provides viewers with an immediate perception of these diametrically opposed characteristics of the material.

As a sculptor, Angela Glajcar began by working with materials such as steel and wood (1997-001 intermittently until 2006-028). However, she has mainly used paper as her raw material for many years now, and has recently also begun to use glass fabric (2010-083, 2011-009). Paper as a material, which remains the material of choice for her installations, has a special meaning for her due to its ability to absorb the ambient light and accentuate its various hues. This is why Angela Glajcar predominantly uses white paper; she "has no need of coloured material."¹ The artist is fascinated by the presence a seemingly light material such as paper can have, when long sheets or great stacks of it dominate its environment. This is why working on-site is the most important part in the creation of her works. Her intuitive reaction to the space, its proportions and lighting conditions whilst negotiating the architectural volumes, and also the reaction to and the surmounting of any disruptive factors that may be present at the given location are decisive aspects during the creation of her installations. Occasionally, the artist is not confronted with a white cube, but with spaces that are not museums, but multi-functional, and which often serve other purposes than that of presenting art, such as churches (e.g. 2009-072, 2010-022, 2011-072) or banks. Although Angela Glajcar prepares for her monumental sculptures and installations by making a small-scale model and by going through various possibilities of how to set them up in her studio, it is ultimately the phase of the site-specific installation when the sculpture takes its final shape. When working on an installation, the artist is particularly fascinated by the changes the paper undergoes, for example when reacting to the ambient humidity: the paper curls and buckles, changes its surface feel and thus reveals its transience. It is precisely the finite nature of paper that keeps Angela Glajcar returning to the material. She is not interested in art's claim to eternity.

Originally, paper was the material used by graphic artists. Ever since it replaced the far more expensive parchment at the beginning of the modern age it has made a unique, triumphant advance across the globe. As early as 1620, the British philosopher Francis Bacon in his *True Directions Concerning The Interpretation Of Nature* enthused: "A singular instance of art is paper, a thing exceedingly common. [...] Paper [is] a substance that may be cut or torn; so that it imitates and almost rivals the skin or membrane of an animal, the leaf of a vegetable, and the like pieces of nature's workmanship. For it is neither brittle like glass, nor woven as cloth; but is in fibers, not distinct threads, just like natural materials; so that among artificial materials you will hardly find anything similar; but it is altogether singular."²

Starting with the early days of Modernism, paper began to be used in painting, too – be it in the form of collages or for actual paintings. Early instances of paper used for sculpture occur at the beginning of the 20th century, for example with Pablo Picasso's sculptures from the 1910s onwards, made of paper and cardboard. He even had some of his paper sculptures re-cut in tin to give them greater durability. One of the fascinating aspects of paper for Angela Glajcar is the fact that most people attribute properties to it that are only part of the story, as it were. It is not only light and fragile, for example, but it can also be heavy and robust. Consequently, the artist frequently uses heavy paper weighing up to 800 g/m² (e.g. 2010-026), which is almost ten times the weight of regular printer paper.

Angela Glajcar's use of long sheets of paper for installations clearly references painting, despite its

enormous scale. Thus, her oeuvre encompasses a constant material and conceptual synthesis of the realms of two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, of painting and sculpture, and in a wider sense, of the sphere of illusion associated with painting and the realm of facts and reality inherent in material and substance.

On this note, permit me to indulge in a brief detour via art history: At the beginning of the 20th century, art experienced a fundamental paradigm shift. The actual revolution in visual aesthetics did not, however, merely consist of the transition from concrete to abstract painting – for artists still worked quite traditionally with paint and canvas – but of the change from illusionist art to representative art.

Whilst for example light in painting had been rendered for centuries by means of white or yellow paint, the 1920s saw a change towards artists using light itself as a concrete material in art. The use of actual light in the visual arts was preceded by an increase in the range of materials used in painting.

As early as the 1910s, light-reflecting metals were used in painting, although these still depicted light indirectly, that is, passively. A painting by Gino Severini from 1913 can be considered as one of the key works of this development. The abstract painting entitled *Dancer + Sea = Bouquet* was largely painted with paint, but at its lower section Severini used light-reflecting aluminium. The development of modern materials such as acrylic glass at the beginning of the 20th century has also promoted the actual use of light in art. For example, constructivist and concrete artists have combined it with the most diverse materials. This interest not only in the use of the latest technical materials but also in the use of everyday materials such as paper, emerging at first sporadically in the 1910s, and then more frequently in the 1920s, paved the way from canvas paintings to material paintings. After the Second World War, Italy in particular became the scene of intensive and varied approaches to the material discourse. The artist and theoretician Enrico Prampolini, for example, in 1944 demanded a “polymaterial art,” intended to “replace painted reality in its entirety by the reality of the material,” in order to “drive art to its most extreme consequences, and to invoke the emotional and evocative value of the materials for its rhythmic-spatial play.”³ The vibration of the materialised surface up to what can almost be described as its violent breach or destruction, as seen, for example, in the works of Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, and also Agostino Bonalumi, Gianni Colombo and Agenore Fabbri, has dominated the artistic discourse in Italy since 1950. This historical facticity may serve in part to explain why Angela Glajcar’s works are particularly appreciated in Italy.

Angela Glajcar, too, engages in a destruction of the material by producing holes by means of ripping the paper sheets. The destruction of the form of the originally plane, undamaged paper represents a historical reference to the practice of iconoclasm, that is, the destruction of the image. In this case, the “image” of the originally whole, undamaged material is paper. The monochrome image of paper to be interpreted is partly, never wholly torn by Angela Glajcar, and always disturbed and destroyed. On this artistic process the cultural philosopher Boris Groys comments quite generally that “most Modernist paintings have been produced by means of iconoclasm,” for they were “be it symbolically or in reality – sawn apart, cut, fragmented, pierced, stabbed.”⁴ This is the art historical background that represents the substrate for Glajcar’s works. It is also a position which dovetails neatly with the transience of paper and the artist’s critical stance with regard to the claim for eternity of some works of art.

One of the major artists applying iconoclastic practices to his work was Lucio Fontana, whom we already mentioned above. Whereas he pierced and perforated his canvases from the late 1940s onwards in order to overcome the materiality of two-dimensionality and achieve infinite space, in Angela Glajcar’s works two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, materiality and immateriality

are not mutually exclusive but exist simultaneously – indeed, are their reciprocal constituents. While the torn edges that result from tearing the holes emphasise the materiality of the remaining paper, the missing paper is at the same time documented, not concealed, by the gaps.

Eventually it comes down to the philosophical dialectics of illusion – in the sense of what is not (here: the holes) – and what is (here: the paper). Philosophically speaking, the perception of non-reality or illusion has always varied throughout the cultural history of the Western world, depending on the time period. Plato – the quintessence of his allegory of the cave springs to mind – condemned all that is illusory, because it stands in the way of truth, or, more precisely: the knowledge of truth. The young Friedrich Nietzsche, in contrast, glorified all that is illusionary, for in non-reality, in illusion, he saw a basic prerequisite for human existence.⁵ Finally, Theodor W. Adorno in the middle of the 20th century did not conceive illusion and truth as mutually exclusive opposites, but emphasised their mutual dependence, for truth could only be defined through being differentiated from illusion.⁶ Along these lines, the works of Angela Glajcar stress the materiality of paper precisely through the absence of some of it. In addition, Glajcar strips the sheets of paper of their property as industrially mass-produced objects and, by ripping and tearing, turns them into individual works of art.

Absence is a key term that applies, for example, to the artist's large installations *Ad lucem* (2009-072) and *Arsis* (2009-001, 2009-073, 2009-085), as well as to her *Blocs* (e.g. 2009-055, 2009-056, 2009-087): the absence of material that simultaneously serves to increase knowledge, for it is a "space of the visual" as well as a "space of the thinkable" – to use Plato's words once again.⁷ It is the void, the empty space, whose intellectual comprehension at a physical, biological, philosophical and also at an artistic level has a long and varied tradition. Almost like a paradigm, the constructed void or emptiness, the blank, is a recurring theme of 20th century art, from Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Ad Reinhardt's monochrome black paintings, Yves Klein's *Leap into the void* (1960) up to today. The constructed void is replaced by the conceptual void. In Glajcar's case, we are confronted by a sculptural void. Not for her the horror vacui. Similar to how a sculptor removes unnecessary, unrequired material from a wooden or marble block, Glajcar rips off paper to produce an empty space – production by means of reduction.

Paradoxically, this is a produced void. In today's world, overwhelmed by the oft-quoted torrents of images, this represents an almost provocative position, subjecting the viewers to a double-negative, a two-fold void. For on the one hand, the large paper installations of Angela Glajcar mostly consist of blank paper or sheets, which are then also torn and ripped and thus presented as fragments adjoining the empty spaces. However, the void can be a useful calibration instrument, calming the viewer's gaze, directing it to what is essential and thus evoking a focused way of seeing. Of particular interest in this context are several paper installations from 2004 to 2005, where Glajcar made use of sheets of paper that are white on one side and painted black on the reverse (e.g. 2004-001, 2004-015, 2005-005, 2005-046). Here, the principle of materiality and immateriality is subjected to a fresh artistic scrutiny, for the material is negated by the light-absorbing colour, thus being turned into a void, a non-material. This is another variation on the theme of reality and non-reality and represents another reference to the illusionism of figurative painting. The actual material conditions are (seemingly) inverted, for where you would expect the hole of non-existence to yawn into space you now find material existence. And this material presence in turn has its existence reinforced by its outline, its edge, that is, its border to the actual void.

Despite the rips, the differently sized paper sheets used by Angela Glajcar largely retain their outer shape of an industrially mass-produced product, both in the airy, suspended installations (e.g. 2010-002) or with the monolithic *Blocs* (e.g. 2008-153). Straight lines and right angles are the external principle of these works. The artistic signature is revealed in the tears and rips of various sizes. Thus, her works are the culmination of two other principles of Modernism or Post-Modernism: on

the one hand, the minimalism negating any individual style, whose proponents have their works produced by others, and on the other hand the expressive subjective perspective of Expressionism, combined with some tendencies of Western painting of the 1950s and 1960s, described by art historian Lazlo Glozer as “exit from the picture,”⁸ or with the New Image Painting of the 1980s. Here too, further parallels with painting are revealed: the geometric quadrangle of the sheet of paper is analogous to the canvas, and the image area is the actual field of expression.

The first time Angela Glajcar realised an installation in a church was for the Kunst-Station Sankt Peter: *Ad Lucem* – to the light.⁹ Into sheets hanging at intervals of 7 cm, the artist tore out lateral openings of various sizes, revealing glimpses into and through the work. In the section hanging the lowest, the holes had been torn such that visitors (to mass) were able to enter the hanging sculpture and look into the tunnel of paper and reflected light. The curvature made it impossible, however, to look out of the installation, leaving the visitor to sense and imagine what might be beyond. It is fascinating to see how the pure white paper – without any additional lighting – actually absorbs the colour of its environment, for it glows in the warm yellow of the sandstone blocks of this late Gothic church.

While the artist responded to the Gothic arches of the church in Cologne with an undulating and yet strictly cubic installation, her reaction to the KunstRaum Hüll, more of a modernist white cube, was *Arsis* (engl. rising), a large installation more aptly described as painterly. Numerous paper sheets eight metres long were hung in the shape of parabolas. Crossing fan-like, they appeared like great brush-strokes of white paint, freely suspended in space. Some of the sheets had lateral tears, stressing the material’s fragility. The sheets also absorbed the light of their environment, but the large windows of the exhibition room meant that this light was more dependent on the weather than on architecture. This provided the installation with an almost infinite amount of hues.

Marcel Duchamp, one of the major artists of the 20th century, created one of modernity’s incunabula in 1911 with his painting *Nu descendant un escalier*. A female figure descends a staircase fragmented into several individual figures. Three dec-ades before that, the English photographer Edward Muybridge and the French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey also succeeded, with their chronophotographs, in permanently documenting movement. This fulfilled one of painting’s desiderata: depicting dynamics and time through movement in space. Looking at Angela Glajcar’s installation, such as the one in St. Peter in Cologne (2009-072), in Castelbasso (2009-084) or in the Sint-Anna-ten-Drieënkerk in Antwerp (2010-022), one is struck by the dynamic effect they have, despite the severity of their cubic outline: for the impression is that of a multiplied sheet of paper that changes its appearance with every sheet, moves through space in an undulation and has been captured as if in a snapshot.

Another look at the installation in St. Peter reveals the sensitivity shown by Glajcar when dealing with the different characteristics of each room. For it is not only movement that represents time, but also sound – in this case, an acoustic movement, a sound wave in space. It is very fitting that Angela Glajcar has placed her installation directly in front of the organ loft: like a visualized note, the materialised sound wave oscillates through space into the direction of the choir. Immaterial sound is transformed into material, into paper which, through its gaps and its properties, absorbs light, and dematerialises once again towards the choir window. To use a theological-liturgical term befitting the sacred space, a two-fold, virtual transsubstantiation occurs: sound – paper – light. Thus, Glajcar’s site-specific works in particular impress the viewer with their physical presence in space, and exhibit an almost performative character, since they prompt the viewer to move. Although it is eminently possible to establish numerous art-historical reference points in Angela Glajcar’s works, her way of working and her works are far from eclectic. The sculptor has embarked on her own path, which, as her site-specific works demonstrate clearly, not only reveals a great variety of artistic options, but also deals with various spaces in a most reflective and careful

way. The versatile material paper may be at the centre of her artistic endeavour, but it also expands our perspective to include the environment, the immaterial, the “spaces of the thinkable.”

It is easy to find points of reference, associations and interpretations for Angela Glajcar’s oeuvre. Although the following pairs of opposites may not always be true opposites and although they may sometimes overlap in their meanings, the works of Glajcar, some of which were discussed above as examples of a whole, can be described fittingly with the following opposites and sometimes even paradoxes: quiet/dynamics, beauty/destruction, lightness/heaviness, painterly appeal/sculptural expansion, movement/contemplation and fragility/strength. This variety of different terms, descriptions and properties alone illustrates the complexity of the artist’s work. It has nothing to do with indecision, but instead embodies the artistic precision with which Angela Glajcar selects her materials and her procedures. These pairs of opposites can also be found in human existence, and are two sides of the same coin, reflecting life in all its complexity. In addition to the extraordinary artistic position, this is one of the most convincing characteristics of Angela Glajcar’s oeuvre.

- 1 Angela Glajcar in a conversation with the author on July 7, 2009, in Cologne.
- 2 Francis Bacon, *Neues Organon*, lateinisch – deutsch, Wolfgang Krohn (Hrsg.), Meiner, Hamburg 1990, S. 419.
- 3 Enrico Prampolini, „Polymaterielle Kunst (Auf dem Weg zu einer kollektiven Kunst?)“, in: *Materialbild. Italia 1950–1965*, hrsg. v. Peter Weibel, Mailand 2009, S. 186 [erstmalig publiziert unter dem Titel „Arte polimaterica (Verso un’arte collettiva?)“ in: *Antizipazioni*, n. 7, serie Arti, O.E.T., Rom 1944].
- 4 Boris Groys, „Der Kurator als Ikonoklast“, in: Peter Weibel (Hrsg.), *Boris Groys. Die Kunst des Denkens*, Hamburg 2008, S. 96.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, „Sämtliche Werke“, in: *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, München u.a., 1988, Band 7: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1869–1874*, S. 199 [1870/1871].
- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann (Hrsg.), Frankfurt am Main 1997, Band 7: *Ästhetische Theorie*, S. 154ff.
- 7 Platon zitiert in: Karl-Heinz Barck u.a. (Hrsg.), *Ästhetisches Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, Band 1: *Absenz – Darstellung*, Stuttgart, Weimar 2000, S. 2.
- 8 Laszlo Glozer, „Ausstieg aus dem Bild. Wiederkehr der Außenwelt“, in: *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, Ausstellungskatalog Köln 1981, Köln 1981, S. 234.
- 9 A wave-like construction of two parallel metal rods was suspended along the nave of the almost 500-year-old church, from which 150 paper sheets 250 cm high and 130 cm wide were hung at regular intervals.