

Ulrich Vogl's Sparkling Adventures

Julia Trolp

Originally it was just an experiment: the first venture into the world of film by an artist whose main field has always been and still remains drawing. Considered from today's perspective though, **Lichtzeichen · Ein Skizzenbuch** (Light signs · a sketch book), a playful, fragmentary animation film from the year 2000, can be considered a key piece of work in Ulrich Vogl's oeuvre. Because all main elements are evident: drawing, light, movement. Simple materials are transformed by experimental processes and produce surprising effects. Magical worlds – fantastical. Almost everything that defines Vogl's work today is already visible in this piece of work.

Lichtzeichen · Ein Skizzenbuch was created by the artist spreading a layer of dust on a glass plate. He then drew on this directly. Vogl placed a lamp beneath the glass pane and cast light through the exposed areas. Using a 16 mm film camera he registered and animated the drawings created in this unconventional way. The four and a half minute animation, assembled from innumerable individual images, shows abstract and realistic scenes in loose succession. Shooting stars fall from the sky, water plunges into the depths. And over and over again the night sky.

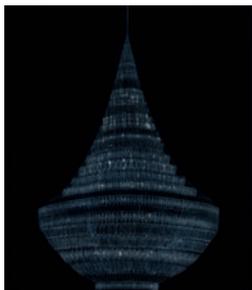
Right up to the present day Ulrich Vogl's work has been defined by an approach which is both conceptual and experimental. The sources of inspiration are often the materials themselves: everyday objects such as slide projectors, construction lamps, cardboard tubes and aluminium foil, or materials which carry a hint of "special effect" within them from the outset. Vogl "borrows" these glittering and iridescent materials from the world of theatre and show business. Whether they are simple, everyday materials or special ones: they are always presented in an unusual context and processed in unexpected ways, using Vogl's own distinctive style.

The result of this process-based and analytical approach is that each work stands for its own and develops its individual effect space. In the process, the exterior material forms also change continuously. Although Vogl's work is based

on drawing, from one instance to the next it may express itself as a room-filling installation, a film or an object. Drawings in the classical sense – works on paper – are now virtually non-existent in his work. The expression "Extension of drawing", already the title of an exhibition and a catalogue, epitomises Vogl's approach. Using sign and drawing as a starting point, he extends his work into other spheres.

Regardless of the external form of the works, they are held together by constantly recurring elements and questions, which have become more and more prominent over the years. Light, for example, plays a key role and is both subject and material for Vogl. He uses the immaterial element in such a way that it becomes almost tangible. Often it is through the light itself that his drawings come to life. This is particularly apparent in the sketch work in which small, old-fashioned slide projectors are used.¹

Kronleuchter (Chandelier) was made six years after **Lichtzeichen · Ein Skizzenbuch** and shares the same basic principle as the film and the projection drawings mentioned above. Here, too, light falls through the drawing's exposed structures. In its refinement and complexity, however, **Kronleuchter** is a testament to the distance travelled by the artist in recent years. An opulent crystal chandelier emerges gleaming from the darkness. Its size makes it a physical presence in the room, directly opposed to the viewer. For this work Ulrich Vogl painted a glass plate with black colour. He then scratched a filigree texture into the paint, which, in its totality, forms a chandelier. The glitter, which captivates the viewer, is produced by a lametta curtain fitted behind the glass pane. Each breath of air brings the curtain into movement and wakens the chandelier to life. Thoughts of grand evening balls are evoked. Like a baroque work of art, **Kronleuchter** is designed to create an overwhelming effect on the viewer. The illusion is shattered upon closer inspection: the drawing appears almost scribbled in places and the light reflexes are based on a simple trick. Illusion and its deconstruction go hand in hand.



In **Kronleuchter** Vogl makes use of the traditional technique of etching behind glass, which is linked to verre églomisé painting and can be traced back to the 15th century. As with etching techniques, this involves a process of subtraction. Vogl carves a furrow and creates space for the light. This inscription into material, equivalent to leaving a mark, is a constant element of the artist's approach. Ulrich Vogl, who has an outstanding awareness of art-historical traditions, combines age-old techniques such as etching behind glass with a more experimental approach. In the case of the chandelier, the glittering curtain is the element that makes it appear modern. Through the skilful juxtaposition of tradition and invention Vogl's works are both historically based and contemporary.

Alongside light as a central theme, temporal phenomena crop up repeatedly in Vogl's work. In some cases time plays as important a role as it does in film – alongside **Lichtzeichen · Ein Skizzenbuch** the experimental film **Pausinmaschine** was created in 2001 – or is more of a sub-theme, as is the case with **LimeLight**. The installation was created in 2008 in connection with a residency at Viafarini in Milan. **LimeLight** consists of a drawing of a microphone executed in 1:1 proportions, which was directly applied to the wall with a black pen. Three circular mirrors lie next to it on the ground, slightly tilted. Microphone depictions are attached to two of the mirrors with black foil. A spotlight points towards the mirrors, which, in its triple reflection, casts prismatic light spots on the wall and around the microphone drawing. Within the circles of light – somewhat smaller and as shadows – the microphones can be seen and join up with the deep black of the wall drawing, thus magically multiplying it. However, given their immateriality – they are after all only shadows – the presence of the wall drawing is exaggerated even further.

The microphone itself is an object charged with symbolism and one, given its simplicity and iconic character, Vogl loves using. It is a simple thing which

arouses the broadest possible range of associations. The microphone triggers thoughts of footlights, stage fright and pop culture. Any minute now a concert could begin or may have just ended. The air is full of tension.

In its installational nature **LimeLight** is a direct invitation to all exhibition visitors: as they step in closer, people's own shadows are cast on the wall. It is as if one is drawn onto a stage and asked to engage in shadow play. The installation therefore has a clear performance and time-based element to it. Even more so than in the works previously mentioned, the viewer here is directly enticed into interaction. The work is only completed by the viewer's presence and actions.

The elements time and light also characterise the series **Wolke** (Cloud, 2009) and compose its meaning in a similar way. The wall works appear almost insubstantial: a semi-transparent, opaque plastic foil is positioned some distance from the wall using a thin metal strip. Vogl stamps square and round holes into the foil – yet again something is taken away – resulting in the image of a cloud. Light falls through the holes onto a spectral mirror and is reflected back onto the foil. Amazingly the stamped drawing appears almost doubled. It extends beyond the two-dimensional space of the foil and the spatial contours of the work can no longer be clearly defined. The foil, the wall or the space between the objects – they all seem to vibrate.

In **Wolke** the time element is formed by the serial nature of the work and its interaction with the observer: in their totality, the "drawings" can be perceived as a time sequence, as film stills. The position of the observer causes each distinct work to gleam in a different hue: depending on the viewing angle, the mirror breaks the light with a different nuance. The result is a play of colours, which – in its theatricality – is reminiscent of the evening or morning sky.

Shooting stars, chandeliers, clouds ... in his work Ulrich Vogl often draws upon symbols which have a deeply romantic character. He is not afraid of the fantastical and the beautiful, which artists today



¹ A first version was created in 2006; Vogl has played through the principle of the light drawing in many variations since then.

tend to avoid and which have indeed almost become a taboo. He contrasts these elements with unusual processes and material combinations, which constantly give rise to fractures within

the works. With just the right portion of sobriety, he weaves his own kind of contemporary magic, and manages to capture what lies between the lines.

Heavenly Signs

Star constellations show us how to escape routine and travel into the vast universe¹

Julia Trolp

Watching the stars is the title of Ulrich Vogl's most recently created group of work, presented for the first time at a solo exhibition in the Paolo Maria Deanesi Gallery. The night sky, the stars and astronomical instruments are presented here in many different ways. The individual works – all from the year 2009 – are the result of a long-term artistic process. References to existing works may therefore be recognisable to a certain extent. Virtually the entire vocabulary of form which the artist has made his own over the years is played through in these works. We can therefore consider the exhibition as a distillation of his oeuvre so far.

Vogl has been steering towards stellar themes not only formally, but also thematically for some time now. For him, light and time have always played a central role. In **Kronleuchter** (Chandelier) the object itself was still the light source. In the series **Wolke** (Cloud) a heavenly body – i. e. the sun – shone its beams through the cottony mass.

With **watching the stars** we now move, in the words of Nietzsche, fully “into innumerable solar systems shimmering in poured-out space”¹.

The **Himmelscheibe** series (Sky-disc series) welcomes the gallery visitor in the form of wall-mounted sculptures. Three discs of different sizes are loosely arranged around the walls; their design imitates the principle of a tambourine: a semi-transparent and dark-blue membrane is stretched on the external edge of a several centimetre deep circular frame. It is perforated with holes of various sizes and in its totality appears to be a section of the firmament. A number of historical references are also made – for instance to the sky disc of Nebra from the Bronze Age. A mirror is placed inside the frame at a distance of a few centimetres from the opaque foil. It reflects the light that penetrates through the holes back onto the foil and creates bright points on it. The entire structure is mounted at some distance from the wall and is covered by a col-

oured surface to the rear. The reflection of the colour on the wall creates a glow that spreads around the object like an aura.

The technique of subtractive drawing is taken up by Vogl again and refined in three different ways in the works **Radioskop** (Radiotelescope), **Raum - Baustrahler** (Space - construction lamp) and **Fernrohr** (Telescope). **Radioskop** is similar to **Kronleuchter**, created in 2006. Using the technique of etching behind glass (verre églomisé), a graceful radiotelescope of considerable size is represented – the glass plate is almost two metres high. Similar to **Kronleuchter**, a glittery fabric is located to the rear, causing the drawing to shimmer. The concave mirror, used to pick up electromagnetic waves from space, is elaborated in free line work, while the base is kept strictly geometrical and linear. The functional element of the technical structure, which converts the invisible waves from space into something visible, receives a more intense and sensitive treatment at the hands of the artist. Accordingly in the artwork the radar dish sparkles strongly, whilst the support structure recedes. Energetic processes, which normally remain hidden from the human eye, are visualised and presented in an artistic form.

For **Raum - Baustrahler** the protective glass of an ordinary commercial lamp is painted black. Vogl scratches a filigree drawing into the painted surface: an interior is shown in central perspective, which – through a window – opens up to the vastness of the cosmos. The brightest star forms the drawing's vanishing point. The use of the central perspective here is a reference to the Renaissance, the age of growing rationality and the formation of artistic individuality. This rational element is contrasted with the representation of the sky, which – for its part – opens up romantic worlds. The pitch black area shown might also recall the inside of a cinema, in which the starry sky can be interpreted as a film with a temporal dimension.

Finally, in nine small drawings, framed like jewellery boxes, we can see telescopes directed towards the heaven. The fine white lines, which form the

optical instruments so that they seem almost tangible, stand on a glittering, blue-black base. The accurate drawing forms a contrast to the immateriality and changeability of the reflected light. Whilst walking up and down the **Teleskop** series, the glittering stars constantly catch new reflections, presenting a sparkling spectacle to the viewer. Each individual drawing represents a self-contained world, and in their totality they produce an alluring sight.

For **Fernrohr** Vogl used a cardboard tube that is normally intended for sending posters or photographs. He retains its external form so that the familiar object can still be identified in the finished artwork. Vogl drills a peephole in one of the plastic covers. On the inner side of the cap at the other end of the tube he attaches a round piece of aluminium foil which has been perforated with a needle. By looking through the hole, the viewer can now see a light-drawing representing the night sky pervaded by a number of linear structures. With the artist's help the viewer becomes an explorer, discovering new dimensions.

In the past, Ulrich Vogl has often chosen subjects that, in their simplicity, contain a multi-layered range of associations. So what would seem more appropriate than to open up now to the vastness of the cosmos and choose the stars as objects? After all, has not the universe been the subject of the greatest fascination of all time, one – that despite all efforts – has still not been possible to be fully explained? The artistic engagement with the stars is however not to be considered an illustration of astronomical facts. For Vogl, rather, the stars represent a metaphor for something inexplicable, romantic, sensual and unattainable. The technical apparatus, which appear repeatedly in **watching the stars**, form the rational antithesis to this. Magical and rational elements are played off against one another and are in a state of equilibrium. The new works of Ulrich Vogl thus become a symbol for human existence, defined as it is by both factual and irrational components. And they are an invitation, in our rationality-defined age, to let ourselves be seduced by the magic that surrounds us all.

¹ Erhard H. Bellermann, Gedankenreich, Engelsdorfer Verlag, Leipzig, 2004, p. 9

² Friedrich Nietzsche, Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bdn., prd. by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari, de Gruyter, Munich / Berlin / New York, 1980, Vol. I, p. 874