

Heiko Zahlmann and Florian Huber – Gold is (not) a Color

Mankind's relationship with gold began in the 5th millennium BC. The oldest objects made of gold were found in Bulgaria and are dated between 4,600 BC and 4,300 BC. More than 3,000 gold artifacts were found at one excavation site there.¹ Since then, man's relationship with this precious metal has gone through its highs and lows, yet it has always remained one thing: ambivalent. What is it about gold that fascinates us so much? How is it that one chemical element can be so heavily charged with these perceived values?

The story of gold is flanked by myths, greed and envy, goldrushes, but also by dreams, promises, and hope. Gold is not just a color, but much more than that. For centuries, its shimmering surface has served as a mirror reflecting both societal desires and injustices. This is the paradox of gold, which is also the focal point of these two Hamburg-based artists, Florian Huber and Heiko Zahlmann, in their first duo exhibition together. Their works reveal a kaleidoscopic array of various associations with this element, but they all of have thing in common: they dig deep.

Perhaps at first glance, Florian Huber's golden cactus piñata, his golden curtain made out of champagne bottle wire hoods or the remnants of all-night parties drenched in epoxy resin may seem provocatively gaudy. Yet at second glance, they reveal a depth beyond their superficial appearance. Luxury, decadence, and differentiation through social habitus are recurring themes in his work. Here we encounter them in the form of 2,000 golden wire fasteners. How much does a single bottle of champagne cost? What about 2,000 of them? The golden curtain interweaves 2,000 stories that have been doused to emerged as a golden cage. Whether this cage is meant to exclude or to confine is ultimately a question of one's perspective. A bottle of champagne is just as transient as the night it accompanies. Its remnants, however, are found here in the epoxy resin works, permanently preserved. The visual symbolic power of these works is strengthened exponentially in the year 2020, when this kind of escapism not only reflects dreams and promises but has come to embody a sense of unfulfilled yearning. Dreams are fragile and can burst at any moment, which Huber also demonstrates with the hundreds of colorful balloons that have been upcycled here and are now to be read metaphorically.

Metaphors can also be found in the works of Heiko Zahlmann, whose minimalistic pieces provide the perfect complementary contrast to Huber's audacious objects. However, gold is hardly anywhere to be found in Zahlmann's work. Instead, the predominant color is a modest concrete gray, which owes itself to the material used. They don't just appear that way, they are in fact made out of concrete. The artist, who comes from the world of graffiti, has deliberately reduced his visual language over the course of 30 years. Letters are now only found here as abstract fragments and he consciously forgoes the use of color, which

¹ Cf. Tom Higham et al.: New perspectives on the Varna cemetery (Bulgaria) – AMS dates and social implications. In: *Antiquity Journal*. Vol. 81, No. 313. New York 2007, pp. 640–654.

enables a greater emphasis to be placed on the material itself. The poetry of the seemingly mundane emerges from these works, which are defined by clear linearity and abstract shaping. However, these pieces are not only subtle aesthetically, but also in terms of their metaphoric charge, which seems like less of a direct critique and instead resonates as a kind of subtle implication. Concrete, material, building material, construction, real estate, investment, luxury – the chain of associations leads directly to the term “concrete gold,” denoting the supposed security of real estate as an investment. Real estate speculation promotes the consolidation of wealth as well as of urban space, a phenomenon that ultimately puts artists and other creative professionals in increasingly precarious conditions, in Hamburg and elsewhere. The idols of capitalism no longer have to be gold in order to glitter, because gold is not a color.

But then what is gold actually? If you follow the logic inscribed in the works of Florian Huber and Heiko Zahlmann, then gold is an attitude, an outlook on life, a yearning for more. However, even the ancient Greeks recognized that this kind of yearning has rarely led to happiness, a fact that is represented vividly in the myth of King Midas. After he had offered his hospitality to Dionysus, he was granted one wish. Midas requested that everything he may touch from then on would be turned into gold. Tragically, he quickly realized that even food and people he touched were also transformed, and he ultimately starved to death despite his immense wealth. Or, to put it in terms of the title of the edition created by both of the artists in cooperation, life is “More than Champagne.”

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