

Wolfgang Ganter and Julius Weiland: The Alchemical Imagination.

The material language of glass-based sculpture and the development of bacteria and/or chemical-based *inter alia* painting-photography, may in the first instance appear to be relatively unrelated. In fact they seem initially to suggest counterintuitive polarities. Thus imagined there is the counterpoint of the organic and the inorganic, that of a visually inert substance in contradistinction to a motile force, a confrontation between the static and the dynamic. Yet one obvious residual aspect that does remain in wider consideration, namely that of the shared aspect of transparency. Hence the natural and ever variable translucency of glass, the use of the laboratory petri dish and the creative platform of photographic transparency—images are referred to as transparencies—in turn draw upon the utilisable affinities of ambient light. In fact cosmologically speaking material presence and living existence derive from particle emissions of light (photons), which is to say that light is the most fundamental of all interstellar realities, or, as stated in popular chemical terms “chemistry begins in the stars. The stars are the sources of our chemical elements, which are the building blocks of matter and the core of the subject (Peter Atkins, *Chemistry: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press. 2015). Strangely, then the starting point for a discussion of the works of Julius Weiland and Wolfgang Ganter must begin with a consideration of the

“particular” (the particle) in the fullest meaning of the term. The cosmology of elements, macrocosm-microcosm, material and the microbial, express an interconnectedness that adheres in the current exhibition. To place it under a wider human umbrella of the psychical elements (fire, earth, air and water) we are speaking both of the alchemical universe and the parameters of the human imagination. It is the aesthetic logic behind the naming of the exhibition ***Prima Materia*** referring to the formless primeval substance regarded as the original first material (substance) of the universe. In alchemy *prima materia* (formless first matter) is the starting point of creation, an ongoing search for the philosopher’s stone. It constitutes the base of all subsequent matter, the quintessence (aether) emerging from chaos to become the so-called *anima mundi*—the intrinsic connection of things—and the spiritual animus behind all living things.

Therefore, we may consequently state that: this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence...a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related.
Plato, **Timaeus** (30-33)

Alchemy traditionally begins with Paracelsus (1493-1541) out of which developed two-and-a-half centuries later modern chemistry. Alchemical ideas or relational similes inflect subsequent major philosophers, each stressing the singularity of a first source, an a priori, Spinoza (Natura Naturans), Leibnitz (pre-established

harmony), Schelling (Naturphilosophie), and Hegel (Spirit or “Geist”) all infer an underlying unified force.

To begin with Julius Weiland is to understand therefore that glass is not in fact an inert material, contrary to what I suggested earlier. This is no matter how it appears when seen in its current settled and solidified state. Glass is the veiled entity of transparency, but more than that it is a form of arrested transmutation, a liquefied and aqueous object that Weiland has shaped into a given form, but which is capable of being returned to its molten viscosity at any given moment. To transmute means the fluid process of change in form, nature or substance, and is subtly distinct from “transform” which implies either the given completed form and/or a teleological outcome. This is the reason why the concept of transmutation is so commonly linked with the alchemical system and process. If transmutation is the material process, it expresses itself also through the imagination. For the creative human mind transmutes the world in psychological terms, and this was the reason why it is so essential to understanding modern symbolic functions in Jungian psychology. Glass like the alchemical metals, gold, silver, copper, tin, iron, mercury and lead, are also transmutation materials, with states of stable solidity and instable liquidity, and subject to the fantastical search for the philosopher’s stone as the fulcrum of conversion—converting base metal (lead) into gold. The laboratory or forge and the element of fire remain the site and first principle

associated with alchemical transformations. As we all know glass in apportioned percentages is realized with silicates (quartz), and glass is a familiar commonplace material used in daily life. Yet from the outset it is of the Earth, and associated with igneous sources and embedded in plutonic processes. Weiland has been involved in the creative development of glass sculpture, and made it uniquely his own, for the last twenty or so years. Born in Lubeck (1971) and having trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg, under the glass sculptor and specialist Anne Wolff (someone I have written on in two publications in the past). He has come to master all the numerous procedures of glass production, whether blown or cast, collaged or the bricollage of pre-manufactured glass elements. He has received major public-private commissions, and his work is found in major museums and public collections. An artist who is in love with and mastery of molten glass and its processes of formal solidification is but an extension of the alchemical psyche, a desire through imagination to expand further the material limits posed by his medium.

Wolfgang Ganter's work conversely can be said to focus on the inner cosmos, the inner materiality that is **prima materia** by creative extension. Ganter (born 1978, Stuttgart), comes from the tradition of painting, though as a master student of Andreas Slominski at the Fine Art Academy in Karlsruhe (1999-2005), he was very free to expand his practice. The early work was therefore

painting, later linked to kinetic forms of sculpture. Nonetheless from the outset Ganter has always been fascinated with the microbial world of bacteria and chemical effects, the infinite variety and potential worlds of different states of developmental microcosm. The notion of mutation through unicellular bacteria or amoebas (a change neither beneficial nor negative), represents a view that distinguishes it from the Lamarckian tradition of evolutionary formation which rejected the role of randomness. Hence the works (a mere part of his wider output) in the current exhibition are what he calls **Micropaintings**, and are the product of chemical reactions on glass plates, born of the principle of self-organization (referred to as a variable form of chaos theory) based on localized forms of organization. Therefore the self-organizing principle is unpredictable and created by chance encounters of errant localization, allied to the photographic idea of combination using magnification and subsequent superimposed layering. The result is a rich and unique image that compliments the interaction between the artist and the chemical process. Transferred to large board cut outs they are realized as highly detailed pigment C-Prints of great visual and cosmological intensity. The images reinforce the artist's primary concerns with the interchangeable optics of microcosm and macrocosm. Hence these works constitute a small body of practice within a wider scope laboratory art-science understandings, innovations reflected in the introduction of

bacteriological material onto to pre-existing images transparencies —see the current catalogue publication **Afterglow (2019)**.

The use of microscopes, scanners, and Ganter's mastery of enhanced computer-based photographic processes became the dominant practice of his work after 2007, following his move to Berlin. The aesthetic impulse is therefore both alchemical and organic, since the material sources of the bacteria may be various rotting food sources, or even extraneous body waste, where the artist elevates the role of abjection. That is he takes the "abject" from "abjectus" the past participle of the Latin verb "abicere" meaning to "cast off" or "reject" generally inferring a low state of condition, degradation, debasement, or servility. Ganter thereafter elevates it as an aesthetic and determinant principle. Which is to say the artist takes what to many what might seem base source material "bacteria or chemical effects in a petri dish" and translates it through chemical-microbiological "transmutation" into a new aesthetic reality. It was the 1980s that saw the revival of and expanded theories of abjection (see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982). Kristeva's text saw the developmental theory of the "abject" mediates the idea of human psychical formation, between subject and object, while remaining outside the symbolic order—though in her arguments are mostly feminist oriented (Kiki Smith, Janine Antony et al). What Ganter has done is to take the language

of microbiology and laboratory science and transform it into a creative studio-based science of artistic imagination. The analogous relationship to alchemy and its psychological origins therefore becomes self-evident (see Jeffrey Raff, *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination*, 2000). The introduction of different forms of bacteriological matter onto transparencies of old masters, suggests another act of creative extension, a Durer portrait, a Botticelli “Venus Pudica”, or a Gessi “Madonna”, all provide sites of ravenous and completely unpredictable transformation (see, **Afterglow**). The asymmetry of these exhibited **micropaintings** touches on and in some instances mirrors in many respects visual forms of single cell amoebas, an optically realized presentation that is the result of intense magnification. For an extended discussion of the abject in the post 1980s, see also *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Whitney Museum, New York, 1993

In this expanded aspect showing Julius Weiland and Wolfgang Ganter together, introduces the earliest psychical and philosophical principle of material things—the idea of a singularity of source that is central to all pre-Socratic Western material thought. The world of glass with its conflicting molten nature and subsequently realized material volume to form presentation, glass as mass versus transparency, echoes the ambiguities of those seen in Ganter in the expanded field of the microcosmic seen in macrocosmic scale. While the alchemical imagination has existed for millennia in all

world civilization(s), and where, its fantastical or magical parts have been largely debunked by modern science, its alchemical legacy is closely tied to the theory that vindicates the **Prima Materia** as first cause and title of this exhibition. As a result almost all alchemical handbooks start with depictions and argumentation of the prima materia.....

"That there abides in nature a certain pure matter, which, being discovered and brought by art to perfection, converts to itself proportionally all imperfect bodies that it touches."
(Mary Anne Atwood, quoting Arnaldus della Villa Nova (c. 1240-1311), in *A Suggestive Inquiry into Hermetic Mystery*)

We can speak therefore of the role of complex similes ("sameness") at work in the art of Julius Weiland and Wolfgang Ganter, and in both instances these are born not of the abstract conceptual but the material world. As the production of glass serves one principle of alchemy, an alchemic blend of sand and metallic oxides combined with heat (fire). When molten it seems alive, fluid in movement, when solidified it is static and most often transparent, difficult to work its limits are those of the imagination born of the material itself. The first principle of glassmaker is fire and the forge, while that of the biologist is the microscope and laboratory, whereas the artist's studio has become a third median space. Ganter's has integrated the most commonplace usually non-visible sources, the bacteriological/chemical and chance directed interactions of the hidden bio-organic world, unified them with the procedure of photography, a form of representation that was first

realized through a development in chemical processes—since early film was once called the alchemical science. Digitalisation has changed this somewhat, but at the same time opened up the seeming endless potential in Ganter's scanner and layered computer superimpositions through the magnification procedures. Though I feign to call Julius Weiland and Wolfgang Ganter modern alchemists as such, as creative artists they carry it forward like many famous German artists before them (Beuys, Polke, Keifer, et al). Similarly, the intellectual role Germany has played in the alchemical literature is enormously important as was seen in *Alchemy: the Great Art*, 6 April-23 July, Kulturforum, Berlin, 2017. These artists therefore continue the **prima materia** of the alchemical imagination, while at the same time they bring to it qualities that are uniquely their own.

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