

Eric Snell
The Fact of the Matter

"Economy is the most professional form of awareness" - Paul Klee

When confronted with a Christian Frosch lid from a pot of paint presented on the wall of 'the gallery', I can't help but think about an exhibition I saw in London, some years ago, by the French master of Minimalism, François Morellet.

Although hardly known in Britain, Morellet is, and was even then, in the early 80s, regarded as a heavyweight amongst friends in the French art scene. At the opening of Morellet's show at Annely Juda Gallery there was a hum of excited nervous energy. I'd taken along with me to the reception, Teresa, a young dancer from Toronto, who had little knowledge of contemporary art but was keen to learn - or so I thought. However, on seeing the price of one of the paintings she exclaimed very loudly, in broad North American accent (and with a bit of theatricality thrown in for good measure): "£8000 for a black line on a white canvas! How long did it take him to paint that?" Instantly there fell one of those hushes of the kind we all dread, and all the heads in the room turned our way. It was a moment for merging into the wallpaper. But there was no wallpaper, only white walls and a sea of suits and sweaters above which Teresa, tall even for a dancer, was highly visible. She did not know that François Morellet himself was standing right behind her. The awkward moment was quickly defused by Morellet who turned to her and quietly whispered, "Forty years".

I'm telling this story because from an everyday perspective Teresa was quite justified in asking her question (although she could have been a little more diplomatic, but that wasn't her style). But in her eyes, things just didn't stack up. She was making a value judgement based on time and applying time's usual associations with effort and value.

Time and time structures fundamentally underpin our work ethic in the western world. The value of much that we do is based on how long it takes to do it, as we are paid by the hour - often regardless of what we actually do in that time. So when confronted with a work of art that appears to have taken very little time or effort to make, and the skill required to make the work appears limited, the Teresas of the world move quickly to the opinion, 'A two year old could do that!'

When Christian Frosch presents as an art work a paint pot lid which is normally left on the artist's workbench, the viewer's concept of the time - effort - skill correlation relative to value of work is thrown into confusion. When an artist clearly has done nothing to an object except display it, as in the historical context of Duchamp's 'ready-mades', the viewer's ability to access the significance of the work comes under threat, because the rules that everyone has come to trust in the evaluation of a work process or work product are being challenged.

As a formally trained art student following the traditional studies of nude drawing and painterly techniques, Frosch was himself challenged in the 1990s by the widely current academic and critical debate of the question, 'Is Painting Dead?' This was first discussed by Norman Rosenthal with the exhibition 'New Spirit in Painting' in 1980, and to this day the question remains under close examination.

Christian Frosch picked up the gauntlet and took himself off to his studio, or should I say laboratory, as Frosch refers to his work as 'research painting':

"In contrast to scientific research which is undertaken for a specific purpose, my work is most nearly comparable to pure research, without a goal. It is about experimentation, play and searching without a specific end in mind. Thus, it is about analysing approaches i.e. in experiment arrangements. Ultimately, the working title 'research painting' is a catalyst by which aesthetic-visual

results are achieved. In this sense, the studio increasingly develops into a laboratory. Finding new concepts where initial experiments determine new work areas.

In this work the process is the product. Frosch has used paint in a variety of ways, including various glass works, where he takes one sample of acrylic paint and presses it between two panes of glass:

'The paint dries and holds the glass panes together.... In the course of time, the colour undergoes a process of change which cannot be influenced. I do not know how the paint dries, nor do I know when the process is completed.'

Another research series was the oil painting on paper.

'In this series of so-called 'colour wipes', I apply oil colour to a glass pane and wipe it with a piece of paper..... The oil in the colour undergoes a process of change - it is absorbed. This is reminiscent of a process used in science (paper chromatography), in which single components of a substance become separated because they are transported at various speeds. Thus, time makes differences visible..... The trace of oil becomes a trace of time'.

Effectively, Frosch is addressing the question, can anyone say anything new in painting that hasn't been said before? This question takes us into a new area of discussion. New reference points have to be discovered - and we don't have to look beyond Klee's statement on economy.

Frosch is in his element with the simple - he strives for economy. But 'simple' most not be confused with 'easy'. Nothing is easy when it hasn't been done before. When Pollock broke new ground with his splash and drip painting it was a radical point of departure, but once done then of course it looks all too easy. Frosch is an artist who works with paint in new way. He makes paintings but he is not a painter. He is interested in the material itself. Unlike Pollock however, he allows himself no control over the outcome.

Constantly testing and re-examining the same problem time and time again with the idea of finding new solutions in otherwise uncharted territories, he claims, and he is right, that the inside of a lid from a pot of paint is a painting. It is material on a surface.

In many ways Christian Frosch is the Jason Martin of Germany, but without the trimmings. Frosch is more rigorous, there is no attempt to prettify, no attempt to make a painting. What happens happens - the painting makes itself. For example, in Guernsey Frosch is working on a new series called 'Interdeck'. Interdeck is the name given to a type of boat lacquer. This nautical link is in keeping with the spirit of an island residency.

There are only five colours in the Interdeck range so the length of the series is self-determining. One colour is sandwiched between two wooden panels and oozes out from the sides like honey from slices of bread. The boards are hung horizontally and left. After a period of time, the weight of the lower panel overrides the surface tension and the panels separate. The experiment has taken place. This process is repeated five times, once for each colour, until the series is complete. Frosch does nothing to the surfaces. They are what they are.

Once dry the two panels are shown as a diptych, one painting in two parts. The process and the presentation unite as the panels in Frosch's arrangement are seen to be inextricably linked, although at first the viewer is not sure how or why. There is a reminder of the image of the two heads in Gregory's seminal work on perception, *The Intelligent Eye*, where he is discussing the idea of drawing in three-dimensional space and stereoscopic vision and shows a normal photographic image of a face alongside an image of a hollow mask. When viewed through coloured filters the two images fuse to form one three dimensional image. In Frosch's work the images were one before they were separated.

Frosch also reminds me of another British artist of his generation, Turner Prize winner Martin Creed, as both artists state that they wish to minimalise any personal intervention. Christian Frosch's works become statements about process; they are self-determining, a marriage of material and the natural forces at work. The results are a 'fait accompli', the inevitable consequence, as in the 'Interdeck Series', and as in Robert Ryman's work, is that any meaning is in the material itself.

I would hope that were Teresa to discover Christian Frosch's work she would not be so concerned with how long it actually took Christian to realise the piece, but would be more interested in understanding the essence of his work and following statement:

"Material is the starting point of my work. The process by which material changes over time is as much a part of my work as are the visible changes which determine the result".