



FIVEechoed

It all began with a New Year's card. FIVEechoed is a new work by artist Dagmar Varady, conceived for the director's office of Prof. Dr. Claudia Perren on the seventh floor of the Academy of Art and Design in Basel. In an intensive exchange between the artist and the director, a work of art emerged in 2021 during the pandemic that is many things at once: drawing, painting, installation, and sculpture in space. Art historian Julia Rosenbaum met Dagmar Varady and Claudia Perren for an interview.

Julia Rosenbaum How did your collaboration come about?

Claudia Perren It started with a New Year's card from Dagmar. I've known Dagmar and her work for a long time and this was a completely new and surprising work for me. I didn't receive the card as a postcard, but digitally. Something about it fascinated me right away. I had a very emotional reaction to this blue and also an understanding of materiality.

JR... and then you replied to her?

CP Yes, I wrote her back and said: This is such great work, let's talk about it. And this gave rise to a dialog between us, which subsequently led to this work by Dagmar in my office.

JR The motif unfolds its power in three blue dots, or splotches, on a white background. The color is reminiscent of Yves Klein's blue.

Dagmar Varady I wasn't thinking of Yves Klein, but this comparison is made again and again. From an infinite palette of colors, I chose that particular blue relatively quickly. It was purely intuitive. I deliberately placed three shapes in the format in such a way that a flow was triggered by the movement, only to stop immediately afterwards.

JR In the summer of 2020, you both arrived in a new spatial as well as professional situation.

CR Exactly. Dagmar had just moved into her studio in Leipzig, and I was sitting in my new office at the Academy of Art and Design in Basel. First, we showed each other our new surroundings—that was an important moment. On the one hand because of the change of space, and on the other because of the pandemic, during which we always stayed in the same places.

JR So that's how you touched base?

CR At that point, everything was still very vague. Dagmar showed me many works with the blue on different substrates—on photographic paper, on fabrics, framed and free in space. I showed her my new surroundings and told her that I really like the transparency here, but that it's always breached and disrupted. Your view is blocked by various things. Still, it's a very open, flowing space and we both felt it could play a role.

JR You had these conversations on a regular basis.

CR Yes, always on Sundays, because then we had some free time. I think we exchanged ideas for over two hours, maybe once even three.

JR So it was a fortunate circumstance that it was in the middle of the pandemic. You had more time and peace to engage with each other. But I imagine it's challenging to dialog in a digital space about a work that was supposed to be created in real space.

DV That was a completely new experience for me. With a phone camera, it's incredibly easy to walk from one corner to another and photograph the work from the back, from above, from below, from every corner of the room, crawling under each picture. For me, there was something familiar about it, knowing my work, but I thought it would be really challenging for others. At the same time, we liked the vagueness; we could try out lots of things at that stage. Digital communication doesn't have the same immediacy. Imagination and real spaces, analog and digital, everything happens simultaneously. That naturally flows into the work. I made endless sketches, studies, drawings, tested things on different materials. It was good to be able to withdraw again and again, so that each of us could get a clearer idea for herself.

JR Your communication about the work had something processual about it. Did this mediation contribute to its genesis and growth?

CR A mediative aspect was certainly our ongoing understanding of space. In addition to exchanges via phone camera, we also took photographs and made drawings which we sent back and forth. The distance remained, of course, but we still needed to understand the space. Sure, it's easier if you're actually in the space—then you understand everything immediately. But this kind of translation is also interesting because your understanding is always shifting—that went on until the end.

JR And it requires a high degree of abstraction, doesn't it?

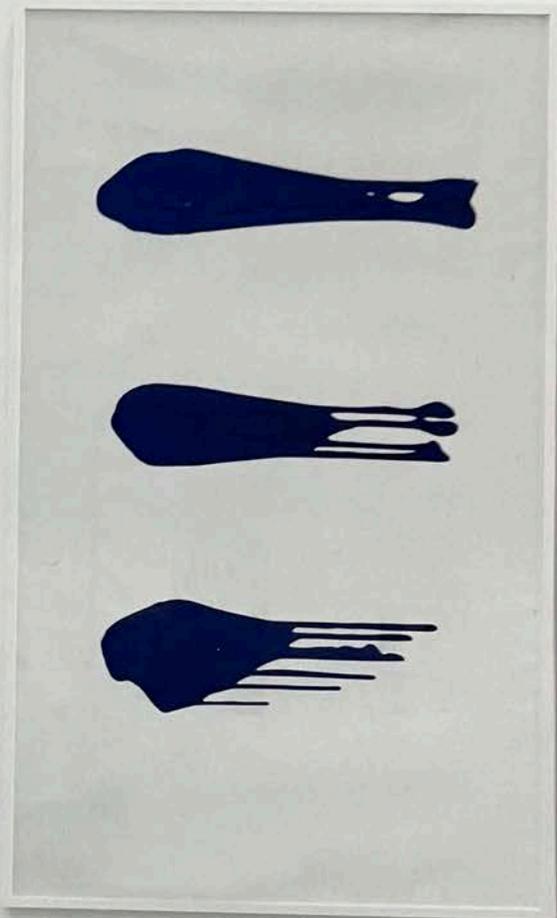
DV It's similar to speaking; some things remain unsaid and unanswered. The drawings, photos, and sketches helped us a lot. Nevertheless, there was always this "layer" in between. We approached it on several levels.

JR Did you consider an intermediate step?

DV I felt the need for a kind of „test hanging“. My new works are connected to visual choices that lie in the production process itself. Seeing, making, reacting to what I have right in front of me. So, I relatively quickly felt the need for a proximity to real space.

JR What was it like when you were in the space for the first time?

DV I was surprised and not surprised at the same time. I liked the space at once because it has similar light to my studio in Leipzig. I work almost exclusively in daylight. There's a lot of light in both rooms. I had prepared enlargements that we could install, view, and discuss in the space. This process also took time.



JR Did you have any formal or structural requirements?

CR In the beginning, everything was open. It wasn't clear yet that it should be this one wall. It could also have been the window or a framed picture—we discussed and simulated various things. Then it dawned on me that the artwork should be part of the room. A spatial element that changes with the room, depending on the lighting conditions, for instance.

DV Yes, these things could be discussed and decided on in advance. I found the connection between the body and the movement in the picture out into the space to be particularly important. A kind of opening, which we both wanted.

JR Was there a desire from the beginning for the work to become an organic part of the space? It merges into the space, flows into the space. Was it easy for you to follow Claudia's wish?

DV The logical consequence was to go beyond the format into the space. My work already paved the way. When I began experimenting with color in this format, it became clear that the aspect of physicality, of whatever kind, that transferred to the space was crucial.

JR Color has a special significance.

DV The blue is one thing. In choosing color as a substance, I wanted to move away from purely conceptual approaches. Instead of starting from a specific idea, I wanted to engage with a process in the medium itself. I didn't want to constrict the process from the outset. The choice of this exact blue, this brilliant blue, can be understood conceptually, as a reference to language, script, writing. But the properties of the color have a life of their own. That's what I wanted to get into when I started working with it.

JR What did you find fascinating about the materiality of color?

DV The viscous consistency, which was completely unknown to me but appeals to me very much. You can thin the paint, liquefy it, but I didn't want to do that at first. I wanted to use it in its pure form. And in the huge color palette I identified one particular color that matched this consistency. This is something that, looking back, I've always included in my decision-making processes. A particular color corresponds to a materiality. For example, the *Sieben Synthetische Steine* (Seven Synthetic Stones, 2005), a sculpture made of silicone rubber using rapid prototyping, was an intense blue and gold. Likewise, in the work on Luther titled *Es kann sein, die Tinte ist aber neu* (It Can Be, But the Ink Is New/Perhaps, but the ink is new), blue is associated with very thin paper, similar to a pamphlet. These are purely intuitive approaches. Blue and materiality have always interested me. In the current work with enamel paint, a prolonged drying process creates internal structures that look like a relief and retain their fluid feel. As I found out later, Jackson Pollock used this very paint for his drip paintings. He, too, was looking for an unmistakable liveliness that would be immediately perceptible.

JR Your artistic background is conceptual art, in which a theme is often first defined before an appropriate medium is found. What were your first thoughts?

DV Thinking now, with a little distance, about the purely conceptual works, they were created in a different way. There is a question as a trigger, a phenomenon, something I have been dealing with for many years. The transformation into an artistic project is the challenge: how do the elements of text, film, animation, video—I've also worked a lot with videos—how do they come together in a space, in an installation? They are very heterogeneous elements. Getting to the heart of something is often a very long process. The execution was always secondary and didn't have to be done by me. I was able to leave

the execution out of my hands. Now I wanted to break through something, perhaps a certain routine that bothered me. I was looking for a medium, for a substance that would allow me to do that.

JR Here it was the other way around ...

DV Yes, it's the other way around. I circle this process in a different way. I make studies, drawings, vary things over a longer period of time. Rehearsed and stored, the preliminary work is present during production. I don't file away a concept that is waiting to be implemented.

JR It sounds so simple.

DV I want to challenge a process that leaves a lot open, and make decisions directly during the actual production. It happens ...

JR Guided by your intuition? You take a risk.

DV Yes, but the unpredictable has always been a theme in my conceptual work as well.

JR How important is process to you?

DV I focus on essential aspects such as material, size, time. Not infrequently other things flow in from the outside. I also often make films. I choose from this material. The working process is a prerequisite for concentration, quick decisions in the moment, which must be made in the situation during production: repetitions, interruptions, how to continue. Questions that I constantly ask myself and that are limited by the material, the size of the whole, as well as time constraints. In this space, the unpredictable happens, which I want to provoke.

JR How did you stay so open in creating this work?

DV By means of two attempts. I prepared the work in my studio so that I could repeat the casting.

JR ... and then you began!

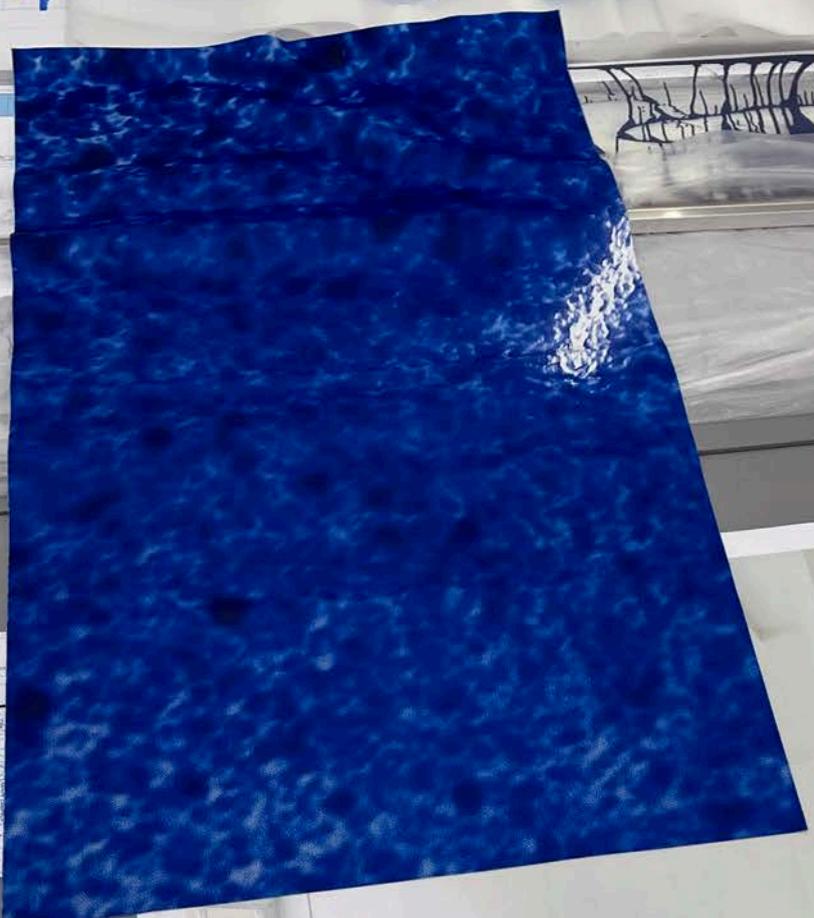
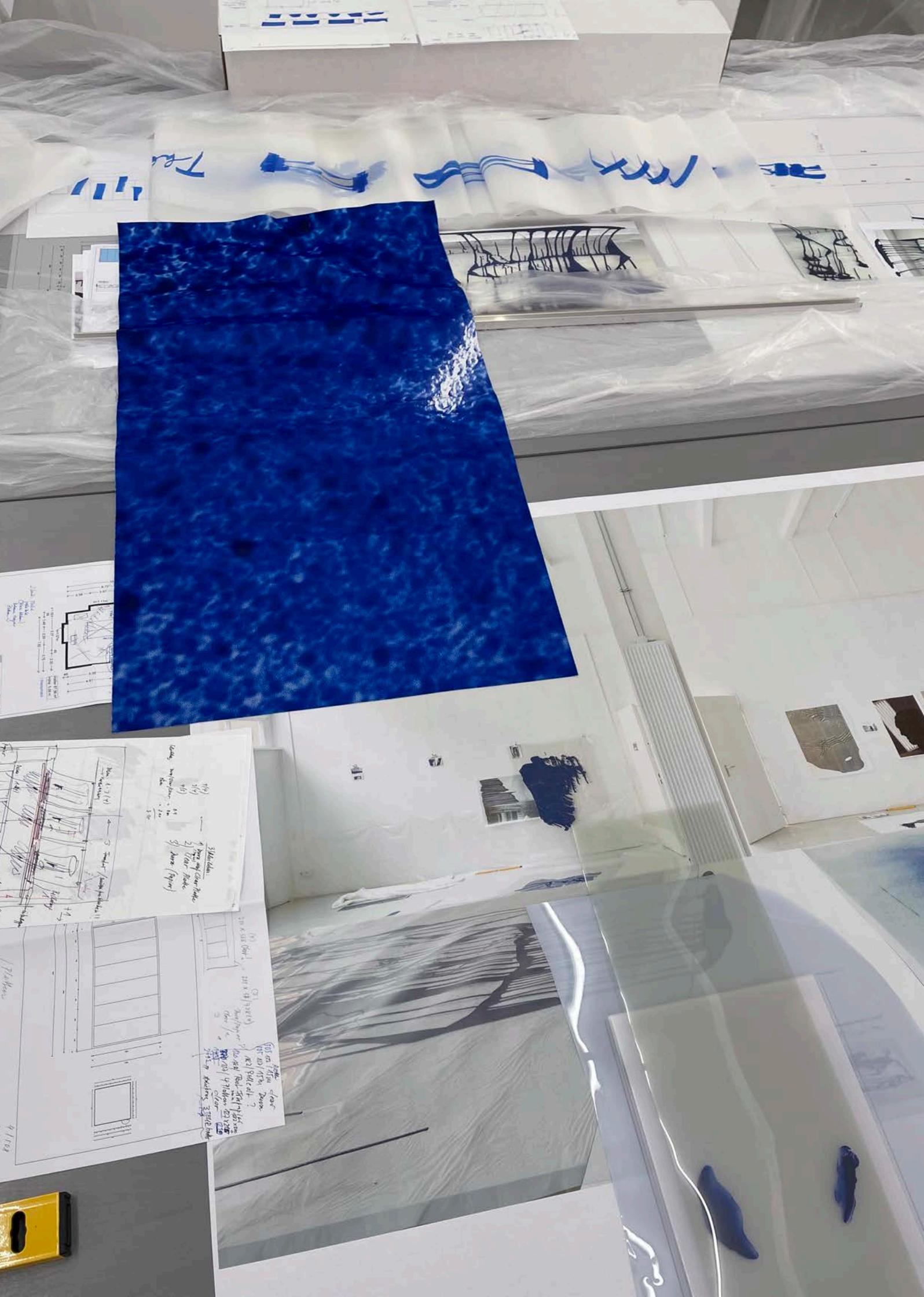
DV Yes, and after four weeks I repeated this process.

JR Was the transparency in an office that looks like a glass box problematic for you?

DV We weren't sure how much transparency the space and the artwork could tolerate, so we decided to use two substrates for the casting. Clear, transparent, and translucent substrate material, which has more of a whitish semi-transparent feel. I currently use it as a substrate for many works, because the materiality is familiar to me. Whole groups of works have been created on it, executed as light boxes or large-format slides. Since it comes from the photo industry, it can be cut very precisely. It was just what I needed to start this rather uncontrolled process and yet not lose sight of the space for which it was created.

JR The movement in which the work was created can be read very well in the final work.

DV I walked over it, moved the foils and hung them on the walls of the studio, so that the paint in turn triggered its own movement. Gravity was added. Anything can happen as long as the paint retains its fluid consistency. It has to be quick, because it sets quickly. The movement remains visible.

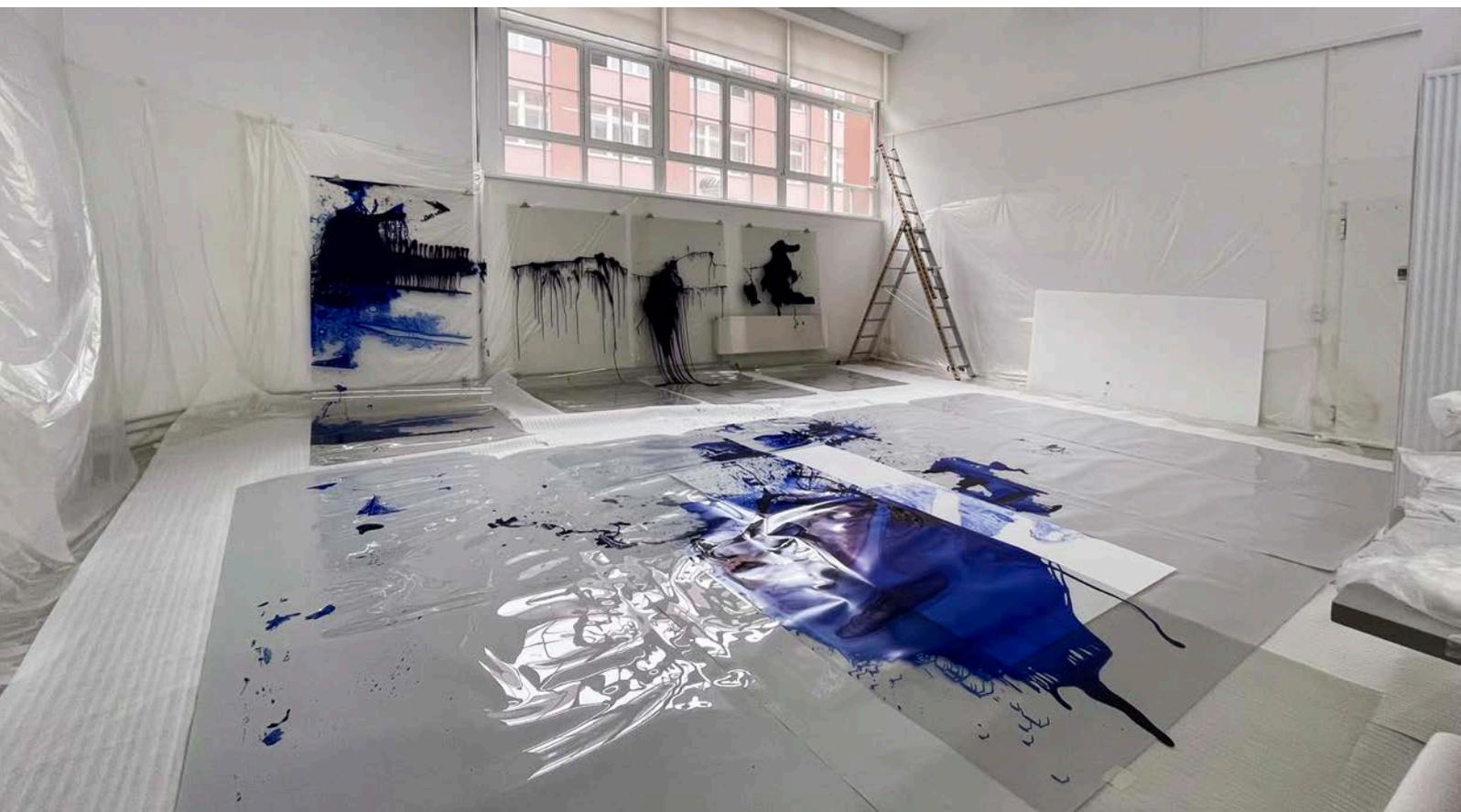


JR I'd like to learn more about the relationship between predictability and chance, which are both important themes in your work. How did you strike a balance between them?

DV This contradiction embodies an exciting aspect. What can be planned, controlled, when do breaks occur and when does control fail? I am currently trying to shift this into the production process. Balance in concrete terms arises through the option of repetition. I plan several attempts, but corrections are excluded from the outset.

During this work, a panel slipped off the wall and flipped over. I was sure it wouldn't work now. After two days, while the paint was drying, I hung the panel back on the wall. This was the work that was the least predictable and the most interesting to us as a result. You create a balance, prepare the process—and then it turns out completely different than you thought. You can plan things, but here it was clear that it would only work to a limited extent. I could imagine a lot of things and think them through, yet something always remained open.

CR It was very exciting to see how Dagmar translated her ideas into an arrangement. Everything was prepared very precisely, the cutting of the panels, the layout, the color. Then there was a moment when everything was concentrated and manifested in an action. For me, the essential thing is that I could read this action, although I wasn't there. There is, for example, movement that causes parts to be mirrored while others abruptly stop. When you see the work now in a space like this, it's quite clear that the paint could never have stopped on its own, but that there must have been another process, another spatial constellation, that made this possible. At the same time, this mixture of action and materiality has not ended, everything is still in motion—the paint is still drying and will change due to light exposure, the foil will stretch, undulate, and contract depending on the temperature in the room; the perception of the artwork changes depending on the viewing angle, reflections, the time of day. The work is framed and held in a certain way, but deliberately not stretched and protected behind glass.



JR The large format also shows the physicality and concentration. That sounds like competitive sports.

DV Yes, it's an insane concentration on the moment. I can't have anyone next to me. It's a kind of vacuum, with no distractions from outside. Everything compresses at the exact moment when the body takes over. After twenty minutes, the work is basically done. This is a dimension that sets limits for me. I have to be fast in order to be able to handle the panels given their size.

At the same time, many circumstances must fit for the work to emerge. I make one work a year.

JR ... which would not have been possible without preliminary work.

DV No.

JR Are your works most successful when you don't know what you're doing?

DV Provoking this kind of unpredictable state appeals to me.

CR Dagmar's work took a long time to prepare. On the one hand, there were many conversations, as well as sketches, rehearsals, material arguments, and experimental arrangements. There were lots of layers in the preparation phase. At the moment of the action, however, I had the feeling that all these layers were transferred into physical action, which was certainly also very emotional. And what follows now is hindsight, which will probably turn out to be just as multilayered as the preparations.

JR When the work was finished, more decisions had to be made.

CR Initially we had considered whether to attach the panels to the glass wall with magnets in order to strengthen the fluidity in them. But in the end we opted for the large frames that are now "loosely" leaning against the glass wall and in which the panels are flexibly mounted.

JR This makes it almost a sculptural work, not least because it is somewhat removed from the wall. There's an ambivalence between complete integration into the whole space due to the foils and the glass, and the fact that it has a physicality of its own.

DV That was our intention. Quite deliberately, the dimensions, the height of the panels, correspond with the height of the office room. In the next step, it became clear that the panels could not hang or stand parallel to one another on the wall. Pulling them away and placing them at an angle was an important decision. We simulated this with a 1:1 model.

CR That's an important observation. The work claims its space in the room. In other words, it doesn't fit in completely. At the very beginning, we had considered placing the work directly on the glass wall as a substrate material. But then there wouldn't have been many moments and qualities. The flow wouldn't have been able to take on the many directions and concentrations as they are now realized, and it wouldn't have enabled relief-like moments and undulating refractions of light. A great deal would have been lost.

JR Should the artwork throw the room out of kilter?

CR I think the architecture here is very good and suitable for an art academy. At the same time, the rooms shouldn't be too reduced, because then they wouldn't say anything anymore. When I started here about a year ago, the entire office floor was mainly white. I think it's important to bring in things that have an emotional effect, that grow crosswise, that stimulate, that open something up, and that also throw situations off kilter once in a while. It's

not by chance that there are so many large plants here. We decided together that we wanted plants on this floor. And the plants love it here and have grown enormously in a short time. Dagmar's artwork has now become part of our work environment. It's not just a picture in the director's office, it's seen by everyone else as well. And many people have noticed it and we are often asked about it.

JR Art's task to open up conceptual spaces also applies in the context of art in the workplace. Part of the artistic practice can be a concrete solution to a problem as well as references to processes that everyone experiences in everyday office life. How can this transfer be fruitful for one's own work?

CR I wouldn't have chosen Dagmar's work and worked on it with her if it didn't suit me. It feels good that it surrounds me every day in the office, without every aspect of my work being constantly reflected in it. It's not like that at all. But it does help me let my mind wander and think about things that fundamentally interest me and that also flow into my work.

JR How do you feel, Dagmar, now that the work has been installed? Can you let it go? Is something new germinating now?

DV It happens pretty quickly. At first, you get completely involved in the process. With great concentration. After that, it's easy for me to let go. I'm open again, and something new comes along that I don't know yet or I don't know about yet.

JR The process shows that nothing can emerge alone, everything is interconnected—which is a nice analogy to the work that takes place here every day. In the university, nothing can exist alone; everything works in a context and not least in a dialog.

DV Without our dialog, I probably wouldn't have moved so quickly to the next dimension, to the large formats. It's a stroke of luck when a work can develop in this way. Along the lines of: We bring our knowledge and can focus it on a common idea.

JR What is the title of the work?

CR The title was not fixed from the beginning, but was also part of the process. The starting point were Dagmar's two actions on different substrate materials. It was only here on site that we decided in which combination the work would be realized. Dagmar had made various suggestions. Spontaneously we were both of the same opinion. We chose four panels, although we actually wanted to use five. At the same time, it was important to us to see the four parts as a whole. For us, therefore, there are five. That's how the title came about: FIVEechoed.

JR What happened to the fifth part?

DV It's now in my studio and refers to the four elements that you don't see, and vice versa. As a part in the process, it's the trigger for a new work of mine.

JR The work was created at the height of the first coronavirus wave. Would it have been a different work if there hadn't been a pandemic?

DV That's quite possible. I don't know if I would have had the tranquility to retreat to my studio in such a concentrated way. I always wished for this, but when it became unavoidable I began to work differently. In the pandemic situation, something was prepared that I continued to work on intensively even before we could talk about it in concrete terms. We started at the point when it became visible with the card. The card helped me send the new work outward.

CR As soon as I received the card, I would have approached you. If it weren't for the pandemic, we might have visited each other sooner and chosen other forms of dialog. We probably wouldn't have worked with such concentration and everything would have taken longer.

JR Any idea what the New Year's card for 2023 will look like?

Dagmar Varady
FIVEchoed, 2021
Color (1 Shot Lettering Enamel Brilliant Blue)
Foil (transparent)
Frame (aluminum)
116,4 x 52,7 x 1,18 inch

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