

Heimo Zobernig

April 1 — May 25, 2023



Heimo Zobernig, *untitled*, 1981. Photo: Archive HZ.
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“Drawing, painting, sculpture, object, photography, film, music, architecture, furniture, display, collaboration, social practice, study, teaching and how everything is connected in different ways. A narrative from the beginnings until today.”

Heimo Zobernig thus describes, in his objective and laconic way, his fifth exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel, perfectly summing up this complex framework, free from any strictly retrospective layout, made up of samples, of input across different historical, biographical moments, across techniques, things, and forms.

The exhibition revisits roughly forty years of Heimo Zobernig’s production. Often associated with major contemporary aesthetic movements (conceptual art, minimalism, geometric abstraction, etc.), here, the artist endeavors to examine the interrelationships between the works and the narratives, junctions, transfer and displacement underpinning heroic accounts and theoretical divisions.

It is also and above all a space to reflect, where one can view or review what has been playing out since the 1980s, on the early inquiries into issues of theatricality, display, autonomy. Where one can perceive how Heimo Zobernig experiments with intermediary, resolutely ambiguous forms, always avoiding a dominant outside position, developing a body of work that undermines, with both humor and engagement, definitions and typologies from within.

The choice to show two series of works on paper—comprising ink and gouache drawings on A4 sheets and geometric figures in pastel, made successively in the 1980s—points to that inaugural transitional moment between figuration and abstraction. Putting them into perspective reveals variations, the development of an ongoing, often unresolved investigation of the problems raised by representation, line, color, background, and empty space. It also raises the recurring issue in Zobernig's works of the artist's subjectivity, his body, and nudity, all present in the drawings of his "youth" as well as the videos and performances he later did.

These early works coincide with several radical decisions, such as no longer titling the works, a potential way of doing away with the dead ends of identification and interpretation.

Through this body of drawings, it is also possible to recognize their specific relationship to architectural forms. The exhibition retraces that point of development when the artist grasped the significance of showing the conditions and difficulties of production, the crafted materiality of colors, the flaws and failures, with all of the textural effects or cracking, like so many traces of the process of making, which can then be found in his early paintings.

This is the total ambiguity, the enthralling paradox of Heimo Zobernig's work, which involves producing unfinished precarious forms in a set of more or less strict frameworks, governed by systems of modernist grids. He seems to be the lone author of the obligations he gives himself, only following personal rules that are valid with regard to a temporary ethics, with this constant concern for production, whereby the quality of making, its imprecision, have demonstration value.

Like for example *untitled* (1986/2014), this painted cardboard column at the upper end of which appears a photographic portrait of a woman, which draws its dual inspiration from the architecture of a bus stop at the opera in Vienna and the pillars of romanesque architecture. The piece, reworked and coated several times with black varnish, examines the dual relationship to photography and sculpture, its photogeneity, its frontal position, its quality as object or image. Heimo Zobernig expresses his doubts about the search for any interaction between sculpture and painting like this: "Dissatisfied with this situation, over time I tried different things with this sculpture—affixing other photographic material to it, pouring paint over it, and various other approaches. For example, the prominent holes in the lower part of the pillar are the result of kicking it with pointed shoes—a measure that was brought about by the negative remarks of an art collector about my cardboard sculptures... The work *untitled* (1986/2014) adopts the dimensions of the column and the original photos from 1986. Everything is painted over in black lacquer; I completely forewent the speculative expression of the original.

The barely visible form of the four photos under the thin layer of synthetic lacquer leads the viewer with foreseen curiosity around the object. Perambulation: a classic moment in the percipience of sculpture.”

The polarity between visibility and invisibility runs throughout the artist’s body of work, and is especially embodied in the form of the folding screen, of which he has made several versions, another of these transitional objects that are both functional and symbolic. The folding screen *untitled* (1991) participates in the basic arrangement of a display, in the same way as the curtains, doors, screens, furniture, pedestals, storage and displays, wall space and partitions, which have architectural, sculptural, and scenographic qualities all at once, and where the boundaries between the areas and contexts are deliberately kept indeterminate and equivocal.

Several pieces along the exhibition itinerary evoke the specific context of the studio, both the artist’s space and that of the art school, and reflect the significance of teaching as an experience and a site for Heimo Zobernig. Art school is not so much a place for producing knowledge for him as a situation generating materialities, new hybrid, undecidable forms. A seemingly insignificant cardboard architectural model *untitled* (1981), sitting on a plain black table *untitled* (1983), bears witness to his years of studying the applied arts, when he was formulating a language in between sculpture, set design, and architecture. Modeling, or maquette making, joins this aim to create autonomous form of its own, reduced to its most basic expression. These uninhabited, stripped down forms reveal a reductionist radicality, a spectacular anti-theatricality.

The bar *untitled* (2012), exhibited several times, also attests to this endless fluctuating between art and the everyday environment, reality and its reproduction. Furthermore, it references, not without a kind of irony, those gestures and art conventions in the 1990s, when *relational aesthetics*, partying, conviviality became the norm for a new exhibition language.

Using this same shifting logic, large stones permanently placed in the garden of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna were duplicated in wood and *papier-mâché* by the artist Florian Mayr into various exhibition displays, for example plinths, showcase-like objects or video projector housings, and finally being adapted as pedestal for *untitled* (1991).

The exhibition layout thus reveals strategies, makes transparent certain decisions and logical structures, the syntactic construction of these objects devoid of decor or effects, and at some points makes perceptible their collaborative dimension, the value that Heimo Zobernig has always assigned to context, to the experience itself, a critical practice shared with others, artists, students, and friends. In this fragmentary framework, one discovers here and there a painting made after Albert Oehlen *untitled* (1994), or else the residual piece of a two-person show with Franz West *untitled* (1999), but also the logo for the noise band Halofern, founded in 1983 with Richard Fleissner and Marcus Geiger, the first computer-generated graphic sign by Zobernig and Helmut Mark *untitled* (1983).

Stéphanie Moisdon, art critic.

Heimo Zobernig

Born in 1958 in Mauthen, Austria.
Lives and works in Vienna.

His major exhibitions include Mumok, Vienna (2021); Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah (2018); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2016); Malmö Konsthall, Malmö (2016); Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz (2015); Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover (2014); Mudam Luxembourg, Luxembourg (2014); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2012); Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich (2011); CAPC, Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux (2009); Tate St. Ives, London (2008); Kunsthalle Bâle, Basel (2003).

He also participated in the 56th Venice Biennale, Italy (Austrian Pavilion, 2015); the Busan Biennale, South Korea (2006); the Sydney Biennale, Australia (2004); the Istanbul Biennale, Turkey (1992); documenta IX (1992) and documenta X (1997).

Heimo Zobernig was awarded the 2016 Roswitha Haftmann Prize in recognition of the relentless productivity and heterogeneity of his output and eloquence of his work.

His works have been acquired by numerous institutions, including the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Salzburg; Kunsthau Graz, Graz; MAK (Museum für angewandte Kunst), Vienna; Mumok, Vienna; S.M.A.K, Ghent; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; CAPC, Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux; Brandhorst Museum, Munich; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Mudam Luxembourg, Luxembourg; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; MAMCO, Geneva; FRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine MÉCA, Bordeaux; FRAC Grand Large - Hauts-de-France, Dunkerque.