Heimo Zobernig

Selected press
ANNE TERESA DE KEERSMAEKER, NICK MAUSS, HEIMO ZOBERNIG AND CATHERINE WOOD IN CONVERSATION

A conversation about the relations between art, dance, and theater: about the movement between the spaces and values of these disciplines, and what is lost and gained.

Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker (1960 Mechelen, Belgium) is a contemporary dance choreographer.

NICK MAUSS' diverse artistic practice encompasses drawing, sculpture and performance along with some curatorial projects that he initiated in the last years.

The work of Heimo Zobernig spans an array of media, from architectural intervention and installation, through performance, film and video, to sculpture and painting.

Catherine Wood is a critic and as Senior Curator (Performance) at Tate Modern she works on performance projects, exhibitions, collection acquisitions and displays.

If performance in Western visual art was founded upon ideas associated with experimental collaboration between different disciplines, a “theater of mixed means” since the 1950s (the Rauschenberg/Cage/Cunningham model), it seems that we are in a fascinating, evolved moment where single practitioners move between the spaces and rituals of those disciplines. Dance is presented in the gallery, but often without the collaboration of visual artists; artists make theater plays. A more fitting historical precedent for this mind-set might be the attitude of the Gutai group in their Gutai on the Stage (1957-1958); a group exhibition as theater presentation.

CATHERINE WOOD
We seem to be in a situation now that is less about that cross-disciplinarity colliding in a single space, and more about how dance or theater practice might appear within the space of art, or how art might appropriate the format of theater, or use choreography. What does this mean for your own practice?

ANNE TERESA DE KEERSMAEKER
I have spoken a lot about the kind of framed, limited time and space you have in the theater. In the museum, you have instead duration and continuity. You have the state of “availability”: that the work of art is simply there. This raises, then, the question “do you also continue to perform even when there is not one spectator?”

CW
That’s a nice characterization. Could you say something about the relative satisfaction of the two formats? Because your practice has long been about working in the theater, and that specific discipline. What do you lose from that in a gallery? I ask because I think that there is often an idea now that dance gains from the museum or gallery some kind of freedom and lack of constraint.

APK
And that, generally speaking, this idea of a day practice and an evening practice is quite crucial. Museum people are about daylight and visibility. Theater people go into the night…they go into the darkness. They make a campfire. The museum is a time of reflection, of celebration or of mourning during the daytime. In the museum, it’s normally a time when people work. And in the theater, it is after working hours. The distinction is to do with what appears in the light. What appears in the darkness…

In terms of my own work, I was quite skeptical when there were these first propositions to perform in the museum at MoMA and Tate. Yet for both the dancers and myself, it was a transformative experience. You definitely get to a different relationship with your spectators, visitors. With the public, you approach the ideal duration and continuity, the aspect of proximity, the freedom of as many people… everyone can decide individually in his or her time and organize his or her time and space. There is the fact, also, that as a performer, you see the people that are watching you. This is nice. You know, when you are on stage, you basically have a black space with anonymous people, and you rarely see how they react. Someone who decides to walk away in the theater is quite a strong statement. Someone who goes away in the museum is liquid space and liquid time.

NICK MAUSS
An idealistic response to your question about where we are now is to see our current moment as a point of undoing, or at least a moment of serious reevaluation of the terms of the relations between art, dance, and theater. But there is also the suspicion that the way in which dance and elements of theater appear in the spaces of art is a desultory engagement. What do we do with the glib language of performativity that circulates so freely now, with hollowed-out words such as immersive, activation, livens, engage, intervene, even queering, applied so freely, and whenever convenient?

I believe that a central tension in the recent vogue for dance and stage performance in the spaces of art has to do with the very strange and shifting status of spectatorship, and with that, of attention and disinterest. The question of how an audience is constituted, on the one hand, and how attention can be modulated, on the other, calls into question how traditional spaces for art, such as museums, will function in the future.

CW
But Nick, what about the way in which “theater” figures in your work in installation, painting, sculpture, and also live performance?

NM
My own interest in theatrical notions of space, and in dance, came from a wish for a larger framework, both on the level of history and of the experience of the artwork, or of the exhibition as a form. I started making exhibitions in which my “work” became the arranging of dissonances between artworks and nonartworks by friends, known artists, and anonymous practitioners, in which the objects on view enacted new relationships, or took on the character of performers. But I was also looking at the “applied” role of painting in theater and dance, and this appeared as a trapdoor out of a solipsistic painting discourse to a space where decoration, irrevocably, traversed, and contamination gain resonance.

CW
I agree, and I like how bodily movement in relation to artworks, or in the space of art, implies shifting positions that are emblematic of questions about value or meaning. I think it a cluster of very recent presentations is relevant to this question: Anne Imhof’s German Pavilion in Venice and her use of non-dance-derived movement
and choreography; Maria Hassabi’s live dance installation, combined with her theater-lighting and carpet sculptures, at Documenta; and Trajal Harrel’s Barbican exhibition (developed after his MoMA residency), in which the gallery spaces are set up with different performance situations (seating, stages, plinths), which are activated according to a complex, overlapping schedule, daily.

NM

Trajal Harrel’s work is deeply affecting—as dance, it manages to be both fragile and adamantine, and it derives great power from the precise economy of its staging. As a viewer, one feels as though one has been invited personally to a special event, and the dances feel independent of, or even in defiance of, the institutional spaces that host them and for which they have been constructed. With simple make-do props, sleights of hand, and transformative gestures and expressions, Harrel conjures entire atmospheres and then pulverizes them.

Ralph Lemon’s exhibition at the Kitchen in 2016 was by far the most important artwork I have seen in recent memory. Not only did Lemon completely undo and blur the purpose and order of the “white cube” upstairs and the “black cube” downstairs, it was hard to leave the various experiences presented during its duration with a sense of how to capture it in a category—dance, lecture, exhibition, reading, casting, performance, installation, reperformance, political fantasy, and fiction were all held in play. This splinter stays with me: Yvonne Rainer cast to read the Marquis de Sade, almost as if she were one of those drag queens in Pasolini’s Salò, interrupting her reading to wonder aloud why she had been asked to do this.

CW

Yvonne embodies all of this in one person! In the works we’ve mentioned here, the codes of black box and white cube are scrambled in ways that unsettle the position of the viewer and the experience of time and duration. Interestingly, Imhoff and Harrel both move on from the looping strategies of artists like Tino Sehgal’s enactors’ permanent presence. Instead, they create arcs and pauses of attention within this context, modes that are calibrated in a much more theater-like way. It’s not that flat work-time of daylight, actually. I’m curious as to how you see this: as a merging of disciplinary specificity or the movement from one kind of practice into the space of another, a “contamination”?

ADK

My collaboration with Ann Veronica Janssens has been important, not in terms of adding objects or “décor,” but to find ways to work with what is already there in a space. It has always been a very strange thing, for me, that when you create dance, you work for months, you work during the day in the daylight, and you construct everything, the whole moving architecture of the dance, during daylight in the working hours. And then at the last moment you go into the black box of the theater, and you make it all black around, and you start to put artificial light, and you start to create a whole thing around it. I was always frustrated by that. Then it was Ann Veronica who made me think differently: to empty that space and look at ev-
and its movement to come in. And she systematically always takes things away. In the theater also, when we worked together, it was always operations of taking things away but not adding objects. Sort of scrape things away and you get to the DNA of things. Whether you come in a theater or in a museum space, just first looking at what is available. So it’s nearly also an aesthetic, ecological, ethical thing. Since my first collaboration with Ann Veronica about nine years ago, which was with Keeping Still in the theater, we have this joke going on that in the last decade we don’t have a technical crew anymore. We just have a cleaning crew. We throw everything out, you know, all the dust and all the draperies and so on.

CW

Heimo, what does this characterization of the white cube gallery-time as “daytime” or daylight mean for you? I’m interested because it focuses less on the usual question of theater as fixed ritual versus the gallery as autonomous, ambient. I wonder how you think about this daylight mode of viewing in relation to “pictoriality”? 

HZ

In my work now, I totally do not refer to the theater. Theater, dance, film, etc., are some of many art forms that reflect on reality as such: The body takes in reality with every sense. Next, there is the brain that finds combinations for everything and creates perception: the “presentation.” We then know what is behind, above, below us. We have a rough vision of our position, in space and time. The things, the spaces, the city lead our way through the world. And this is reflected in very different art forms.

CW

Of course, the behavior/performance of an audience/viewer of sculpture can be seen as dance performance. And, evidently, all art forms are part of our reality. Additionally, I like to make references to the routine/behavior of people in the situation of theater, dance, music performance. But not in the sense of genre crossover.

HZ

Light has a predominant role in theater. In its qualities for composition, it is a highly complex medium. In my early works as stage designer, I repeatedly searched for very simple but effective solutions in lighting. I wanted to make sure that the light design is easy to understand—only one light source, for example. But even simple light settings have complications.

In an exhibition, I am looking for the opposite of dramatic light. No shadow play. I want to have a situation where you do not think about it at all. It is bright, and everything is obvious—a pragmatic point of view.

On other occasions, I was using the light and its color as the dominant figure or medium in itself. My contribution for the Kunstverein Bonn was a huge space with nothing but engulfing heavy lighting. For the CAPC Bordeaux, my installation was dominated by a red: the vibrant red light in the space originated from a red curtain on one side and a video projection of an animated red curtain on the other.

CW

Related to this point, recall that Claire Bishop wrote a few years ago in her Brooklyn Rail piece, “dance satisfies a yearning for skill and seduction that visual art performance rejected in its inaugural refusal of spectacle and theater.” Is it an extension of the “reskilling” that she says it is? Or a real moment of deep rethinking about how we segregate these disciplines? (Or is art just sucking up and claiming everything else?) Anne Teresa has described learning something from the conceptual and material discipline of Ann Veronica. What is art learning from theater? (And perhaps to Nick specifically, since you so productively borrow from theater and dance in your
« Point of undoing | Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Nick Mauss, Heimo Zobernig and Catherine Wood in conversation »,
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Opposite - Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Work/Travail/Arbeid at WIELS, Brussels, 2015. Photo: Anne Van Aerschot
 POINT OF UNDOING
C. WOOD

Disciplinary specificity is essential and rare, especially if it manages to reinvent the discipline. As a spectator of Anne Teresa’s work, I polarize specificity; this specificity is crucial to the work, and distinguishes it from other occurrences of dance in the museum that tend to look imported.

Perhaps I am motivated by a kind of envy to look to fields outside art that appear truly rigorous. To study the costume of Madame Grès, for example, as though I had been Gersten’s sculptures in mind. I am trying to think and see together what is otherwise seen apart, so I tend to move across or in combinations of disciplines. But a specific disciplinary framework can be a great excuse to articulate new ideas. In the twentieth century, ballet and avant-garde dance sparked new possibilities for criticism in the voices of Edwin Denby and Jill Johnston. Johnston herself admits that “...while my column was still headlined DANCE, or DANCE JOURNAL, my subjects were anything but.” She goes on to say, about the “confusion of roles (artists making dances, dancers using artists as performers),” that “those games of identification are usually substitutes for seeing...they arise from fear.”

One thing that is now possible, rather than the experimental, cross-disciplinary collisions of the classical avant-garde you refer to, is the construction of historical collisions, by which I mean the active reworking and re-presentation of histories—“what if” or “as if.” Trajal Harrell performs such an operation in his cycle The Twenty Pack or Paris II; Burning at the Judson Church, by taking the synchro-nism of Judson Dance Theater with the development of vogue balls as a way to mutually interrogate and assign new values to both forms and histories.

I had such an experience years ago when I watched a VHS tape of Saturday Night at the Baths and noticed Robert Morris’s infamous bare-chested self-portrait in helmet and chains decorating the bedroom wall of one of the protagonists, somehow perfectly out of place and in place at the same time. Alvin Baltrop’s photographs of men cruising on the West Side piers under Gordon Matta-Clark’s giant cutout of the pier facade, or even the thought of George Balanchine cruising on the West Side piers under Gordon Matta-Clark’s giant cutout of the pier facade, or even the thought of George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham choreographing during the same historical moment, have a similar effect of almost unaffoltable corporeality history as heterotopia. We can take our current vantage point as a position from which to radically reconfigure, or think together, previously unthinkable relations.

I’m interested in deep discipline, whatever form that may take. I am trying to imagine, for example, a museum that could show the charged spaces between a painting, a perfume, a gesture, a dress, and a film. Your question about how we segregate disciplines is crucial, particularly in a global situation tending more and more towards polarization and essentialism. But I don’t want to acquiesce to the notion that art is a single, steam-rolling entity that has it within its power to suck up and claim other forms, without regard for their specific histories and economies. To do so would give the current notion of art too much power, and would mean that it is no longer possible to think of other kinds of art.

But it’s interesting to consider how the matrix of relations that is “theatre” morphoses in new ways too. Nick, in terms of your works that don’t involve actual live dance, where you use tape or metal structures to articulate a provisional space, or move and install curtains, often in relation to painting: could you say a bit more about what you hinted at earlier in terms of utilizing ideas of theatre to “simulate” painting? And maybe also you could say a little about your work for Frize Projects, which—perhaps unlike Anne Teresa at WIELS—put the dancers very much on display?

I think it doesn’t really think of an art viewing experience that is not theatrical. But a particular relationship to theater in my work comes through in my focus on the frame. In making exhibitions, I put a great deal of emphasis on the presence of people looking at my work, apprehending it but also becoming the figures in the work. Protocols of spectatorial were warped or rerouted by structures such as the ones you’ve described, this banister-like sculpture that is a drawing of the movement of the eye through the space, or hanging, collapsible rooms made of ribbons that impose themselves on a space while delimiting another kind of possibility. I think of the way one might move through the space, and what can be encountered along the way, or how this experience can be frustrated. The automated curtains are large paintings running on automated tracks programmed to open and close at varying intervals, creating volumes of air between them. They open and close, revealing nothing but the different spaces they create.

The most directly theatrical work I can think of is Concern, crush, desire, a velvet appliquè reiteration of a proscenium-like antechamber designed by Christian Bérard for Jean-Michel Frank, invoking the overlay of stage design with interior architecture with surrealist. The work is installed in such a way that the viewer enters the work and finds herself looking out the “fourth wall” into a space in which the objects are made to adhere. But INVERSIONS, in 2014, the work I made for Frize Projects, was the first time I made what would normally be called a performance. The work was entirely shaped by the context of the fair and by my questions about how a performance might exist within its particular environment. It also became a frame for a set of invitations I was able to make to two ballet companies, to choreographer Lorena Randi, and to...
Kim Gordon and Juliana Huxtable, none of whom were intended to be compatible with one another, but rather singular in their roles within the setting I devised. Juxtaposed in the entirety of their internal and external contractions—to bring a way of working over from “curating,” I resisted a performance with traditional staging conventions, turning the process of a ballet inside-out, rather than presenting it frontally and temporarily. There were long pauses and interruptions, things let to happen as they happened, and also simultaneous interplays—rehearsals and improvisation. And moments that also felt “on stage.”

The antic ebb and flow of the art fair’s audience became an important element of the work. It was fascinating to see people try to negotiate this kind of time and viewership that was very different from how one is supposed to “use” and “do” an art fair, and what to do with that space of uncertainty as well as the pleasure of viewing something that is forming without a purpose.

Well, firstly, I am a choreographer; therefore I work on organizing movement through time and space with a certain energy. The time and space of a theater and the time and space of a museum remain fundamentally different. Secondly, what I like so much about dancing is embodying; the presence of the body as a medium. Thirdly, I am interested in collective experience: in relations, relationships between people, whether in the theater or the museum. Ultimately, in the museum, the space and time allow you as an individual to decide how to attend to the work. When people get connected, the intensity of it can be really quite beautiful. I feel that at WIELS, you had people coming back day after day. People said, “I want to be here.”

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I’m talking more about sharing a work. I was thinking, for example, of the artist Senga Nengudi, who used to collaborate with a dancer, Maren Hassinger. She’s part of the African American Studio Z movement in the 1970s. She chose to make sculpture out of women’s tights and sand: stretching the nylons and pinning them on the gallery wall because she said that she liked the idea that she could turn up with her handbag and open it and make her work. And her sculpture was as much about portability and disappearance as the performance that she staged with Hassinger around it. But of course, you’re right, galleries are selling them as objects. But that comes after the intention of the artist.

Yet my point is that “performance” is the catchall under which live art, dance, theater appear in galleries and museums. Shannon Jackson identifies the elements of performance (describing an emergent context of performance studies) as “gesture, image, space, voice, facial expression, corporeal motion, and collective gathering” but leaves out materials, which in my view (and in both of your work) can appear as performers or performative elements.

Without wishing to replicate the casual application of terms to do with performance in the art world that Nick describes, is the “choreographic” a better term to approach this continuum between bodies moving and things? What does choreography mean for you both, in terms of considering our encounter with an aesthetic space that includes all of these elements, as well as / in relation to the art object? The idea that beyond dancing per se, choreography is a way of stabilizing or ritualizing a “state of movement” seems more and more important—as does the idea of witnessing, and collective gathering as the foundation of the experience of art.

I think that performance is a kind of de-materialization of the art object in the sixties, art needs to learn some things from theater and dance. Learning about calibrating time and configuring spectatorship. These issues are relevant to objects, too, I think.
POINT OF UNDOING
C. WOOD


Heimo Zobernig ir Julia Haller paroda „Paveikslai“ galerijoje „Vartai“

2016 m. birželio 21 d., Antradienis
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Birželio 22 d. 18 val. galerijoje V ARTAI (Vilniaus g. 39, Vilnius) atidaroma Heimo Zobernig ir Julia Haller paroda „Die Gemälde / Paveikslai“. Parodos kuratorius Amer Abbas.

Reinhold: ši vadinamoji mintis visuomet yra ne pats dalykas.

Iš August Wilhelm Schlegel knygos Paveiklas, 1798

Ne „matymas yra tikėjimas“, kvailėli, bet „tikėjimas yra matymas“ – tai moderniam menui tapo visiškai literatūriniška; paveikslai ir kiti kūriniai egzistuoja tik tam, kad iliustruotų tekstą.

Iš Tom Wolfe knygos Nutapytas žodis, 1975


Julia Haller gimė 1978 m. Frankfurte, šiuo metu gyvena ir kuria Berlyne bei Vienoje. Menininkė yra...

Amer Abbas

Paroda veiks iki liepos 30 d.

Iliustracijoje: Heimo Zobernig, The Untitled and the Titled Untitled, 2015. Akrilas, drobė, 200 x 200 cm

25-mečio parodų globėjas
Ministras Pirmininkas Algirdas Butkevičius
25-mečio parodų partneris
„Lewben Art Foundation“
Heimo Zobernig is undoubtedly one of today’s leading contemporary artists. He has, perhaps more than any other artist, been highly influential not only within the Austrian art scene, but has also been an equally successful protagonist in international discourses on art and the wider exhibition world. More recently, Zobernig was awarded the Roswitha-Haftmann-Preis, Europe’s highest endowed award in visual arts. We met him in his studio in Vienna, where we spoke with him among others about his years at the theater, whether one should prepare art students for the art market, and about Vienna as an art metropolis.

Last year was quite an exciting one for you. You participated in the Venice Biennale staging the Austrian Pavilion. That must have been both work intensive and emotionally quite exhausting.

Yes, last year was very exciting. The days preceding the Biennale and the Biennale itself were truly exhausting, because people expected me to answer many questions. The management of the Biennale wasn’t really a problem because I had a wonderful, very professional team.
I've organized larger exhibitions but there is usually less hype than in Venice; that is what distinguishes the Biennale. In Venice every one is interested in you and has an opinion about your work. In a museum's exhibition things are more specific, also public perception and subsequent feedback are not as immediate.

On the one hand it is an honor to stage the pavilion of a country in the Venice Biennale. On the other hand one receives the label “state artist”. I don’t believe that one still thinks in these categories today, things have changed. The art world has very different borders. We live in a democratic society in which the label state artist no longer exists; I have never had it thrust upon me. In Austria and many other European countries the curator’s decisions are completely free and independent, and accepted by the cultural authorities, although this is certainly not true for all countries that participate in the Biennale.

Long before you knew that you would stage the exhibition in the Austrian Pavilion in the Giardini in Venice you had played with the idea and even mentioned in another interview that your concept could have been quite different.

That’s true. But these ideas were already obsolete at the time when I received the official invitation. I more or less began completely anew. However, in addition to the two large sculptural installations that form the floor and ceiling, another sculpture might have been installed in the space. It was an opportunity to realize a first large bronze sculpture that I had planned for quite some time and included the idea for the architectural conception but with the option that I could decide whether I wanted to show it or not as soon as I saw the result. For me it was clear from the beginning that I had to have this option until the end.

What would have changed for you?
Had this bronze sculpture been additionally installed in the pavilion, it would have been clear that the conception was about this sculpture, but that was precisely what I did not want. It was Yilmaz Dziewior, the curator of the Austrian Pavilion, who adhered to the idea of adding the bronze sculpture the longest, but eventually it was installed at Kunsthaus Bregenz where the interaction of the intended relationship was possible because the bronze sculpture and the black object were placed at some distance from each other. The figure looked towards the black cube so that a similar situation resulted as in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona with the Georg Kolbe sculpture.

You are an artist who develops very concrete concepts that determine precisely how a project is to be realized in an exhibition space? Which role does the curator play in your case?
While it is certainly important for an artist to develop clear concepts, one may possibly underestimate all the other necessary conditions that have to be coordinated for an exhibition to be successful. This is the curator’s achievement. Curators are very important and helpful as partners in the dialog when discussing the work.

Interviews with you began in 1977 when you moved from Kärnten to Vienna. What happened before that?
The wish to move to Vienna! I visited Vienna for the first time when I was in fourth grade. At the time it was customary for students from the city to spend one week in the country and for students from the country to come for one week to Vienna. When we stood in front of the Art Academy at the Schillerplatz in Vienna, my teacher who was also my German, drawing and sports teacher said, “One day Heimo will study here!” The next day, we stood in front of the Technical University at the Karlsplatz and he said the same thing. That irritated me because I wasn’t sure if he had forgotten what he had said the day before. Eventually he was right, I did both; at age fourteen I went to a school for machine engineering.
Before you studied art you studied set design?
That was not really my intention: it was something of a detour because I was not accepted into a painting class. I was interested in literature but literature was not offered in other study branches, however theater set design was offered, I found it to be congenial. There were many who studied set design and did not, like myself, appreciate the theater that much. I may have only been in a theater twice before that.

You didn’t find access to the theater through the theater per se?
No, certainly not out of love and passion for this art form, because the two times while I was in middle school did not inspire in me a passion for the theater. Yet I turned relatively quickly into a theater person, because everything that happened at the time was very new and interesting. The theater of the 1970s was quite avant-garde. Much was in movement at the time and one anticipated from the theater that the visual arts and performance would develop a new art form. However, as we now know it did not quite develop that way. I have worked early as an assistant for various theaters and I soon had the opportunity to create my own stage sets. At age 23 the city of Frankfurt invited me to the Schauspielhaus for really spectacular plays like Heiner Müller’s »Quartett« or Peter Handke’s »Über die Dörfer«. As a young artist you could not have imagined anything better. But very quickly I found out that I did not want to do this over a long term. With some foresight I believe, I therefore decided to stop the theater work. I am quite certain I would not have been taken seriously as an artist otherwise.

Your teacher prophesied that you would study art. Was there ever a specific time when you realized that you would like to earn money with art, to support your life with it?
During my studies and also afterwards I did not think about such existential things. There were scholarships and promotions to apply for and on which to survive. That still exists. At that time we didn’t have much money, but I’ve never felt it. On the contrary! I have felt very rich. When I created my first public work together with Alfons Egger in the »Dramatic Center « in Vienna we were asked how we intended
to realize it, were we the sons of millionaires? We had just done our work and not thought about things like that. We researched the right institutions and addresses that would be prepared to provide support to us and we were able to realize what we had intended. However, not-doing was rather the thing to aspire towards at the time. Vienna’s art scene was quite transparent, a few intellectuals and artist-bohemians. The highest art was to be clever and to be able not to reveal oneself by somehow having to sell something. Not-doing was the highest art.

You’ve taught in Hamburg and Frankfurt am Main. Now you are a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In comparison to the earlier part of your career, how have times changed today?

Everything has changed radically! There is no comparison to how national and regional art once was and how international it is now. When I began to teach, the predominant language in the classroom was colloquial German, today it is English. Education too, has changed tremendously. Since its foundation, there has always been an extensive theoretical education - philosophy, mathematics, geometry, and similar disciplines have always been taught, but in recent years, theory and history have been greatly extended. The range is now fantastic. These days we actually have to watch that the artistic practice stays remains as the main subject.

Has the relationship between professors and students changed?

Yes, the hierarchical distance between students and teachers is not as great as I have experienced it in the past. During my time one was happy to leave the academy and go where one could receive a true response to what one was creating as a young contemporary artist. Today teachers and students understand each other so well and the students feel so comfortable that they don’t want to leave the academy. As might be expected, revolt is no longer intrinsic to the academic experience.

One may get the impression that self-marketing as an artist or thinking in terms of market strategies during training is playing an increasingly bigger role. Is this impression deceptive?

Yes, it is deceptive. I experience my students rather as interested in cultivating the improvement of the quality of artistic thinking and practice. In the process of speaking about what one is doing communication plays a big role. This was not the case thirty years ago. During their education, architects for example are taught how to speak with their clients, how to understand them and how to be able to present their plans better. That is exemplary. However, I tell the students time and again that talking about art is very important, but that it may be wiser to say nothing at the right moment. The artistic intention should be communicated primarily through the work itself. Strategies of marketing are not a complicated matter; they don’t need to be taught in a seminar.

In your opinion students should not be involved in the art market too early?

What the art market offers as a temptation or promise is not a central theme for our education. It is rather about finding out what one wants to do in order to build an existence that is based upon solid artistic work, or one will have difficulties. I consider it very important, that during their years at the academy students have the freedom to find out what they are capable of, to compare themselves to others in order to see whether what they are doing may be enduring. And that is exactly what the students want to know and experience: - the development of a work in which they can believe and which is relevant in the discussion.

Have you ever doubted your decision and questioned art?

No never! I have always felt it to be right. To this day, I can truly say that making something is really magnificent. When I was young it was not that important, I mean the making, at that time I thought more of being. From early on my life plan was to be able to determine my obligations myself and now it is so: I make and I have the freedom to wait for the indication that shows me what it is I want to make, but do not have to.
Have you ever doubted your decision and questioned art?
No never! I have always felt it to be right. To this day, I can truly say that making something is really magnificent. When I was young it was not that important, I mean the making, at that time I thought more of being. From early on my life plan was to be able to determine my obligations myself and now it is so: I make and I have the freedom to wait for the indication that shows me what it is I want to make, but do not have to.

You often work with simple, cost-effective materials – even cardboard or plywood. Is this based on pragmatism or is the choice of material only a means to an end?
That is not easy to answer. If it hadn’t included the provocation not to use the traditional materials of sculpture I would probably not have tackled it the way I did. Sometimes I was convinced that there was also an ecological component involved that I still find exciting as an ethical component of the trade. But art can’t be determined by these aspects as one cannot answer everything that results in questions. Material is always a means to an end. It is the medium of what one wants to realize. In the early days I often used to build in a model-like way. Model building materials have a rather transient character. One achieves results faster or immediately. Perhaps that has something to with the impatience to achieve quickly what one wants. To build something solidly and with an expensive finish naturally takes time – and it must be paid for.

Are you impatient?
Well, to wait for a long time until something is finished that is … (laughs) … one way or another. Patience – I do have it. I have made sculptures from toilet paper rolls. Sometimes that took two, three years before
I felt they had reached a sense of completion. I started with one roll and had no idea where it would lead. The first roll I let turn to the left, the next to the right and this went from one piece to the next. Here the material determines the process, because the glue that I used to connect the rolls dried slowly. It could have been done faster with a glue pistol. But in this case I didn’t want to do that because it was not a suitable tool for working with cardboard.

Since you came to Vienna both art education and the Vienna art scene have changed tremendously. Yes, that’s true. Vienna is turning more and more into a lively contemporary art city. When I came here years ago, I had no idea how the whole thing functioned, which role galleries played. At the time there were only a few and most doors were closed. That has changed tremendously. More and more professional galleries established themselves, like Peter Pakesch with whom I’ve worked with for a long time. At the same time, producer galleries have been founded by artists who have created their own locations – so-called off-spaces. Very exciting institutions like the »Depot« have established themselves, they almost act like academies, organizing lectures and initiating projects. All in all, in both education and training as well in the art scene, Vienna has become much more international.
You are one of Austria's most important artists. Would it not have been easier for your career to go abroad and to work directly in the cities in which the art market booms?

That is really not so easy since these regional centers are often very hermetic. It is not easy to make a career in London as a non-British person or as a non-American breakthrough in New York. I realized that quite early. Many of my colleagues who followed this call have failed there. If I were living in New York for example my resources might not be sufficient to exist as a successful artist. Besides, it was always very important to me to travel a lot and I have always taken the opportunity to spend time here and there. And I haven't received a lot of attention in Austria – I've been much more successful abroad. When my son was born it became clear to me that I wanted to be were my family was. I taught in Frankfurt and Hamburg, but I was commuting.

You have several studios in Vienna. How may we imagine a typical workday of Heimo Zobernig? Are you in your studio every day?

I am in my studio when I know what I want to do. I don't go into the studio and wait for something to happen. Where I have to go follows its own accord, I don't have to think about it. I go to the painting studio because I want to paint a picture. Or I spend a day in the office or I am in school or traveling, or nowhere ...

Your publications follow one conception and therefore become part of your work. My books are not merely documentations. I found many catalogs in the 1980s quite uninteresting and therefore wanted to create publications that had more character. In the process I learned a lot through making mistakes. I also wanted to simplify things, to liberate myself from too many decisions, therefore I decided to always use the same script. Right now a publication about my publications is in process. It was a tremendous amount of work: to get out all the books, to photograph everything with the accompanying small texts.

You work a lot. That is the impression. Where do you get the inspiration?

I am quite surprised that I give this impression. My inspiration as well as my recreation derives from the excessive demand as well as from the condition of exhaustion that comes from both extremes: It can also come from films, concerts, lectures, and of course especially books. But I also like to go to places where absolutely nothing is happening.

Interview: Michael Wuerges, Silvia Jaklitsch
Photos: Maximilian Pramatarov

PABLO LARIOS  Der wohlgemeinte Ansatz von Ebner ist zwar hochaktuell, doch statt der angestrebten „produktiven Profanierung“ kommt dabei eine eigenwillige Ästhetik der Ablenkung und Irreführung heraus. Man nehme nur die Hochglanz-Videoinstallation von Steyerl. Es sind gerade die visuellen Anreize ihrer Computerspiel-Parodie – eine umfangreiche Mischung aus Motion Capture, technischer Virtualisierung und sogar einem fiktiven, von der Deutschen Bank gestarteten Drohnenangriff –, die mich abschrecken. Bedenkt man, dass die heutige Kriegsführung ähnlich virtualisiert
PT There is a none too subtle allusion to the title of the exhibition ‘Invisible’ by Michael Kreinos, which was installed in the Swiss Pavilion. The idea is to draw attention to the invisible nature of the pavilion, which is largely determined by the way it is perceived and understood by its visitors. The pavilion is designed to be a space of reflection and contemplation, where visitors are encouraged to engage with the work on a deeper level. The use of light and shadow, as well as the use of materials, is carefully considered to create a sense of depth and intimacy. The pavilion is a place of empowerment, where visitors are encouraged to think critically about the role of art in society and the impact of art on the world.

PT The film ‘Invisible’ is a powerful commentary on the invisibility of the pavilion. It explores the idea of how art can be seen as invisible, yet still have a profound impact on the world. The film is a meditation on the nature of art and its ability to transcend the physical world.

PT The pavilion is a space for reflection and contemplation. It is designed to be a place of empowerment, where visitors are encouraged to think critically about the role of art in society and the impact of art on the world. The use of light and shadow, as well as the use of materials, is carefully considered to create a sense of depth and intimacy. The pavilion is a place of empowerment, where visitors are encouraged to think critically about the role of art in society and the impact of art on the world.


PL Statt Widerstand demonstriert der Schweizer Pavillon zweifellos Uniformität. Im Kontrast der benachbarten Haupträume, die sich mit einer Art wunderbaren Schelmen in Bezug auf Fragen zu pluralis- mus, Unterrepräsentation, Anlagemuster, Rassismus und Migrationsbewegungen bemer-
of the biennale's fabricating 'becomings' and occasionally tossing them out into the Giardini. Every week a number of these objects will be given to local street hawkers to sell. It seems that the retreat to the roof resisted 'engaging' with the spectacle of the event, the audience, the curator's expectations. Work as a form of shy assistance. I quite liked that.

Pl. Instead of resistance, the Swiss Pavilion, in contrast, presented a rather dulcious uniformity. In the context of the neighbouring main exhibition that grappled with a kind of graceful failure with questions of pluralism, underrepresentation, amalgamation, race and itinerancy, Pamela Rosenkrantz's title felt coolly ignorant from the get-go — Our Product. Just who is this 'we', and who determines such a grouping? I might have read Rosenkrantz's bubbling pool of 'flesh'-toned pink liquid — derived from the skin tones of Renaissance paintings — as a comment on racial homogeneity. Instead, the accompanying booklet reverted to fascist-sounding sci-fi poetry that didn’t hold water: 'It’s taken millions of years for nature to build us'; 'Our common foundation'; 'burn off the surplus'. The work seems to invite the viewer to engage in a sensory experience, but it’s so burdened with its own absolutist thinking it bars any reading outside of the artist's dogma.

PT. Heimo Zobernig's Austrian pavilion, on the other hand, couldn’t have been more open. It had a kind of macho difference to it: a quick look at the architectural blueprints, a grumpy line here, another there. Done. Don’t bother me till May.

Pl. Zobernig's 'floating' ceiling construction vaunted the exciting details of Hoffmann and Kranerl's 1954 Austrian pavilion. He also installed a new floor that leveld the pavilion into one clean, black plane, supporting four aggressively plain white benches. In the blink of denial of history through this museo-um-like intervention, the work pointed to problem of representation in a pavilion context that seems increasingly anachronistic. Quietly self-negating, it was among the better national pavilions this year.

PT. It seemed a rather petty refusal of any form of expected showmanship or egoism tied to representing one’s nation at Venice. 'Let them roll and admire the garden. The weather will be nice, it will be an enjoyable experience.' He was right.
This is (not) Heimo Zobernig’s project for the Austrian Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale

by Joshua Decter
Heimo Zobernig will represent Austria at the 56th Venice Biennale. At the initial time and place of this writing — Thursday, 12 March 2015, in Mexico City — I have no idea what Zobernig is planning for the Austrian Pavilion. And it is better not to know in advance. Why give it away before it needs to be given away? Several days later, as this writing continues in New York City, I remain in the dark. There’s really no doubt that Zobernig is an excellent choice: he’s arguably Austria’s most significant living contemporary artist, having received a survey show in 2013 co-organised by the Reina Sofía, Madrid, and the Kunsthalle Graz. For his 2011 non-retrospective show at the Kunsthalle Zürich, the artist bathed the entire exhibition in red light, thereby playfully recoding the works and suggesting a kind of new-millennium gemeinskunstwerk. These recent shows, by the way, should be a cue for us institutions: it’s about time for Zobernig to have a survey there too.

Still, I’d prefer to add something more than just another hagiographic essay to the already voluminous amount of writing (including my own) produced about this artist over the past few decades. And so it occurred to me that to spice things up a bit, another path could be taken: speculate about what Zobernig might do in Venice. Of course, writing is not a crystal ball, and this text is not predictive engineering, yet it’s possible to offer clues regarding what he might have in store for us at the Biennale. Or, rather, what will just have opened by the time this text goes public. At least one thing seems certain, even if this is more projection than speculation: Zobernig will engage with Josef Hoffmann’s original design of the 1934 pavilion building. Given the artist’s history of cannily rethinking art’s interdependence with design and architecture, Hoffmann’s early-modernist building would seem to be an ideal site for surgical tweaking.

Since the 1980s, often in dryly humorous, occasionally self-mocking neovuudovillian ways, Zobernig has deftly manipulated the modernist codes that underpin geometric abstraction in visual art, design, display and architecture. He amplifies this language not to destabilise the social space of art presentation, or to perform an orthodox form of institutional critique of the museum’s power, but rather to underscore how exhibitions are always in some way constructed, even theatricalised situations. Zobernig synthesises supposedly opposed characteristics: a rigorous analysis of the spaces of art as a way to rethink interconnections between painting, sculpture, architecture, design, place and utilitarian things (ie, appartenances and furnishings) on the one hand, and an irreverence regarding his own mastery, on the other. It’s the contradictions simmering just beneath the surface that make Zobernig’s work crackle and pop. I identify something of Michael Asher’s context-driven dialectical spirit in him: the reality that art frames the institutional spaces it appears in and that those spaces in turn reframe the art (the architectural frame occasionally becoming the art, per se).

Zobernig seems intuitively to grasp spatial design both as a discipline with its own set of aesthetic principles, as well as an instrument for reengineering how publics encounter the places of contact between art and its frames. In his oeuvre, exhibition design can become ‘the art’, and art can become the ‘exhibition design’. Zobernig allows space to perform itself back to us, as a platform for art — even if the art, itself, becomes the platform, stage, podium, chair or other seemingly innocuous element to navigate built space. And though his work exudes the confident intelligence of a well-engineered grammar—a grammar developed through recursive, tautological reworkings of the language itself—there is also something that suggests it is not completely comfortable in its own skin. Or maybe I’m just thinking about Zobernig’s videos, such as R. 12 (1995) and R. 24 (2007), wherein he appears, a bit awkwardly, only in his own skin, stripped naked to the world — the artist’s body as an almost accidental vehicle for the performance of intersections of televisual media, painting, sculpture, theatre, comedy and other phenomena. The body as the first and last architecture.

In 1995, I authored an essay titled “Unmistakably Art, Anything But Art: Zobernig’s Subversive Doubt”, which originally appeared in the catalogue of the artist’s exhibition at the Vienna Secession that year. What follows is a reassembling of fragments from the text, serving as a preamble to my speculations about what might happen in Venice:

— Art, for Zobernig, has at the very least a double life.

— Is Zobernig a conceptual artist? And what does it mean to be named a conceptual artist today? Is he producing meta-statements, or something akin to meta-art? Does anyone really know the difference between art and meta-art, anyway? And what do we make of Zobernig’s smooth integration of painting into architecture— or is it the other way around? For his 1994 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, Zobernig deftly set into motion a number of conceptual and material conversions: painting into place, place into painting, painting into object, architecture into painting, painting into object, and architecture into object.

— Is this thing what it appears to be, or is it something else? Is it a painting? Architecture? A sculptural object? None of the above?

— Take away the apparent order established through systems of cultural distinction, and things begin to fall apart in the loveliest way imaginable.

— When is architecture both architecture and not architecture? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of architecture.

— And when is sculpture at once sculpture and not sculpture? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of sculpture.

— For instance, when is a café at once a café and not a café? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of a café.

— Zobernig produced the similitude of a café, and yet this similitude was also a real, functional, café.

— As a complex object/art object located within an architectural field of visible and invisible structural relations, a Zobernig painting becomes a material signifier for an intervention—a sign that becomes the index for site.

— For Zobernig, painting is camouflage for an art activity or an art condition. Painting is a mask that makes art look more like art.

— A Zobernig painting is certainly an actual painting, but it is also quite possibly something other than a painting.

— When is a painting at once a painting and not a painting? When it is the product of an art activity that creates the similitude of a painting.

— And when is an art object or art activity at once an art object/art activity and not an art object/art activity? When allegory takes over.

— The allegorical function of an art object or an art activity brings it into a narrative (or meta-narrative) relation with both everyday life and art. Art cannot be taken for granted. Why? Because it no longer takes itself for granted—if it ever did.

— As art begins to distance itself from itself in order to become more like an everyday thing, it moves closer to what it is already.

— In other words: an extraordinary-everyday thing.
And to conclude: my speculations, educated guesses and questions regarding what Zobernig might do in Venice:

- A performance of the production of the exhibition; the exhibition conceived as a performance.
- Reconstructions of early theatrical pieces in which elements of conceptual art and performance art converge.
- A selection of early geometric abstract paintings.
- Sculptures that play with minimalist tropes wherein painting and object merge.
- Shall we play tennis on a concrete slab conceived by Zobernig?
- The exhibition space as discursive and social space, as an exhibition.
- The White Cube Is Always a Temporary Construct Until It Is Noe.
- Are these tables, sculptures, both, or something else?
- The use-value of art determined by the public within the frame of a social contact zone engineered by the artist.
- A room within a room: the museum-as-architecture composed rooms for art inside other rooms.
- Documenta 9 restaged within the Venice Biennale: the public’s access to the artworks is blocked.
- Backstage as frontstage as backstage: all the world’s a stage, including the pavilion.
- Reconfiguring the extant walls of the pavilion to resemble the artist’s initials: Hz.
- A video of the artist walking naked through Venice projected onto the exterior and interior walls of the pavilion.
- Event-space pavilion: a podium, seating, Internet café and other functional appurtenances doubling as art objects assembled for a series of readings, discussions, talks and other social gatherings during the Biennale.
- The exhibition as the grammar of the exhibition.
- The pavilion is furnished with chairs. The chairs may be repurposed from other places within the Biennale ecosystem, or from elsewhere in Venice. The chairs may be custom-made according to the artist’s specifications, or designed in collaboration with another artist.
- A tribute to the late Franz West, with whom the artist collaborated, most notably for Documenta X.
- Chairs are artworks too. And not. And.
- Multiple projection screens placed in relation to one another to suggest a constellation of projection screens. The exhibition is always a screen for something else.
- A monochromatic painting is always just a painting and also a screen for something else.
Visitors to the pavilion are invited to design a Zobernig poster for the exhibition; the designs are displayed throughout the duration of the Biennale.

Zobernig places reflective materials on the walls of the pavilion, mirroring the space. The space is doubled, and publics are doubled.

A video showing the artist, naked, wrestling a malleable object; the video is accompanied by a presentation of the object itself, a kind of artwork-prop-artwork.

Halfway through the run of the Biennale, Zobernig deinstalls the exhibition, and reengages the space with a different set of actions, gestures, works or things. The process is documented, and the video screened for the remainder of the Biennale.

An immense white cube is built into the space, connecting two extant walls. It becomes a permanent feature of the pavilion.

Mannequins are distributed throughout the space; some are displayed within structures, some clothed in T-shirts, while others are partially painted. The mannequins are stand-ins for the artist, or a surrogate public welcoming the public.

Zobernig restages—in compressed and respatialised form—his entire 2003 Mumok survey in the pavilion.

The pavilion becomes a black-box theatre for a series of theatrical productions and screenings.

Zobernig redisperses replicas of three cabinets originally made for the 2003 exhibition at Kunsthall Zug, Josef Hoffmann and the Wiener Werkstatte; the cabinets were designed and produced in a prison workshop in Switzerland by the artist, a master carpenter and two inmates of the prison. The pavilion as prison?

Red curtains (theatrically lit) are draped over the extant walls of the pavilion, suggesting a stage set for an exhibition about to take place. Videos are presented behind certain curtains, and the artist’s publication designs are archived in glass cases. The exhibition is a layering of facades.

A bluescreen video features Zobernig, naked, accosted by three anonymous figures in chroma-key jumpsuits; they tape over his mouth and genitals, erasing body parts. The three tormentors heap art magazines and catalogues onto him, and wrestle him down, enacting a symbolic obliteration of the artist.

Various grid paintings are installed on a large gridlike armature. Grids over grids. Additional paintings are displayed within cage-like structures that connote art storage systems; each day, a new work is taken out of ‘storage’ and displayed on the structure’s exterior.

The artist introduces a new wall into the Hoffmann building that exists, almost invisibly, as both sculptural object and architectural element, altering the public’s experience of the liminal qualities of the pavilion space.

Zobernig delegates all curatorial decisions to the commissioner of the pavilion, as an artistic-curatorial gesture.

The commissioner decides to delegate back all curatorial responsibilities to the artist.
Biennale

Austrian Pavilion
Heimo Zobernig, commissioned by Yilmaz Dziewior

Maybe it’s the stark simplicity and austere beauty of Josef Hoffmann’s 1934 pavilion; maybe it’s the consistence and continuity that has made the Austrian pavilion (I’ll admit I love that slightly secluded part of the Giardini) such a dependable high-quality art destination year in year out, ever since I first visited the Venice Biennale back in 2001; maybe (well, not exactly “maybe”) it’s just Heimo Zobernig, that trusted purveyor of, indeed, stark simplicity and austere beauty, updated for the plebian present — whatever, whoever, however: his understated, low-key spatial rearrangement of the architecture into blacks and whites, surfaces and planes, made for an idiosyncratic, anachronistic highlight in this year’s biennial. And did anyone mention the centennial of Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square, by the way? No one?

Dieter Roelstraete is part of the curatorial team for documenta 14.

Heimo Zobernig
Installation view Austrian Pavilion

Christoph Büchel
Installation view Icelandic Pavilion
Daniel Baumann. «Portrait Heimo Zobernig, No requirements», *Spike*, n. 43, Spring 2015, pp.100-111.
Daniel Baumann. «Portrait Heimo Zobernig, No requirements», *Spike*, n. 43, Spring 2015, pp.100-111.
It’s happened: everyone’s an artist. It isn’t creativity that has led to success, but rather the employability and willing exploitation of the all-rounder. At least this is what Daniel Baumann claims, in conversation with Austrian artist Heimo Zobernig. Zobernig keeps his cool and sees, above all, feuilleton-thought at work. Are they going to fight? Whoever is right, one thing is certain: all this endless talk about context is eating up art.
Daniel Baumann: What is the role of the Künstlerin? 
Heimo Zobernig: It is fascinating, if you think of the role that the Künstlerin plays today, it is very different. The Künstlerin, in her own way, is trying to find a way to express herself. 

You have been variously described as a painter, stage designer, draughtsman, sculptor, performer, video artist, architect, book and exhibition designer, and theorist, and have worked in these fields for over 30 years. What interested you in taking on these roles? Were you interested in subjecting yourself to other requirements? 

No requirements. Somehow these many roles are actually one; I can pursue them all freely, driven by a compulsion to make. The material, or medium, provides resistance during the shaping process – a sculpture is a painting in a film ... When I started out over 30 years ago, the disciplines had become thoroughly mixed up as a result of what happened in the previous decade. At the time, it was more of an exception to limit yourself to just one. For some people, it also had to do with making a living – for example, they did graphic design jobs to earn money. At the beginning of the 1990s, I think, the term “slash people” was in common use. It referred to the way people listed several practices on their business cards: designer/sculptor/video artist, and so on. But actually it’s normal for an artist to do a bit of this and a bit of that. 

I’m asking because it seems to me that your work articulated and played with this idea of the “free artist” right from the start. You had a self-assured modesty regarding materials (carbonized, primary colours, and so on) and the idea of putting yourself at the service of others. But it never came across as solicited – unlike those works that timidly proclaim the start or end of something. Am I mistaken, or does nobody talk about the role of the artist anymore? Everyone talks about the market, or how the economy determines relationships, but the artist as a figure has disappeared, or has become irrelevant, or both. Nowadays artists write their own press releases, buy their own works on the secondary market, and produce trailers for their own shows. Everyone is more of a slash person than we first thought. Or is this description off the mark? 

As I already mentioned, I am driven by a compulsion to make. My relationship to this has become very professionalised over time. It is based on skill and of course an ethics – often called attitude. But attitude isn’t talked about today as it was in the 80s. I think that’s good enough; at the time, attitude was pushed to the forefront, and it took priority over the formal. It was better to do nothing than to make a wrong move.

I don’t think in the least that everyone is talking about the market. When I talk to my friends or students, it isn’t really a big topic of discussion, and my day-to-day life is determined by what I make, and not by counting money. Of course I have also noticed that the newspaper feuilletons are currently obsessed with this subject. I find it rather tedious that so much fuss is being made about such a small part of the overall art scene. It would make more sense to ask these journalists why they can’t find anything more interesting to write about when it comes to art.

Writing one’s own press releases and being concerned about art as a com-
Denn das oben beschriebene Modell des stabilen Künstlers, der unsichtbaren Künstlerin, ist doch genau Ausdruck des Zustandes, wie er das Festlhorn beschrieben und beschönigt. Es ist magiescherweise ein ideales, streckenweise selbstmordsprächtiges Klang, aber mittlerweile luxuriöse Aushandlung und Vermittlung auf diesem Künstlerbild auf, haben es internalisiert. Da kann man ja gleich die Akademie schließen. Ich bin mir auch nicht mehr sicher, ob es sich wirklich noch um Selbstmachtigung handelt. Gibt es nicht viel mehr um Selbst-Promotion, um ein uriges sich „Liken“?

Wieso Akademie schließen? Sollen die Künstler wieder naïv und dumm sein? Den eloquenten Selbstbeschreibungen der Autoren muss man ja nicht glauben. Das ist sicherlich falsch, dass...
modesty is a step towards self-empowerment for any artist; it's about not being at the mercy of the art industry's goodwill. And I should add that successful artists have always done this — there's nothing new about it, as a bit of historical research will reveal. But it's always obscured by the myth of the free artist. Of course finances play a role in this profession, too. The whole industry has changed, of course: you only need to look at art schools. The well-educated artist is prudent, far-sighted, dependable, and has a stable character — and this has become a model for the present.

The model artist described above — stable and prudent — expresses precisely the condition that the art world is describing. Admittedly it is a tedious, slightly self-pitying lawsuit, but nowadays art education and art discourse are based on this image of the artist — it has been internalised. In which case you might as well close the academy. I'm also not sure anymore whether it's really about self-empowerment. Isn't it far more about self-promotion, about constantly "liking" one another?

Why close the academy? Should artists be naïve and dumb again? You don't have to believe an author's eloquent descriptions of themselves. Surely it's disastrous if critics and those working in
Daniel Baumann. «Portrait Heimo Zobernig, No requirements», *Spike*, n. 43, Spring 2015, pp.100-111.

UNTITLED, 2014
Acryl auf Leinwand / Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

UNTITLED, 2013
Acryl auf Leinwand / Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna

the field no longer make an effort to look closely, to read and check whether the text even fits to the work, or whether it should be interpreted as a subtext. In the past, self-promotion was practiced in exactly the same way, if not with more arrogance.

I'm interested in the role of the artist today, whether it really has changed as much as it seems. In 1992 and 1997 you were invited to documenta, and in 1997 to Skulptur Projekte in Münster. For all three of these major events you created "applied art"; for Münster the big billboards, which functioned as advertising and signage, for the first documenta, a stage set for concerts, and for the second, a lecture hall and café. Your work encapsulated how the artist at such exhibitions is also always a service-provider – for the location, for the curatorial concepts, and for himself. These projects were therefore also an analysis of the position and function of the artist. Other artists have tried something similar, but none of them with your lucid precision. Now this approach has become mainstream; it has become a model supported by art schools and has led to greater permeability. Was this your intention?

It was to be expected that it would enter into academia. If it hadn't been successful, then perhaps it would not have. It became an art genre. Some artists developed it further, while others just pretended to. Even at the time, I emphasised that in addition to the functional aspect, these were sculptures. It turned into a topic of debate at the time. Now of course it's established and has become part of art history. Whether I meant it like that or not is irrelevant. Even if it was barely visible at first, I worked to make it more visible.

Do your students continue to orient themselves using texts? Are there certain theoretical,
UNTITLED, 1991
Karton, Holzkiste / Cardboard, wooden box, 50 x 60 x 90 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery
Orientieren sich Deine Studenten weiterhin an Texten? Gibt es Theoreti-
ker, Philosophen und Kritiker, die besonders viel Aufmerksamkeit erhal-
ten, oder hat die Theorie ein Ende verloren?
Das ist je nach Temperament verschieden. Manche brauchen
das nicht. Manche haben profunde Vor- oder Parallellstudien
und sind tolle Denkerinnen. Insgesamt ist das Niveau besser als
früher, weil das mittlerweile zum Akademieprogramm gehört.
Und gibt es Autoren, die oft aufsehen? Themen? Und die selbst? Da bist
oft betont, das Text und Buch wichtig sind, bis hin zu deinen Künstlerbü-
chern über Bücher. Gab es in letzter Zeit Publikationen, die dich begeist-
ren oder verwirren?
Viel wird im Internet gelesen (lacht). Ich lese die ganze Zeit
Wittgenstein ... nein im Ernst, das Feld ist weit. Viele Studen-
tinnen sind in ihrer Lesekultur sehr gebildet ... von Georges
Daniel Baumann. «Portrait Heimo Zobernig, No requirements», *Spike*, n. 43, Spring 2015, pp.100-111.

Bataille, Karl Mannheim, Michel Serres, Svetlana Alpers, Jens Soentgen bis Bacon Brock. Sehr selten bin ich mit Theoriegele-
er konfrontiert. Das Bewusstsein vom Unterschied zwischen
Theorie und den Erfahrungen mit dem eigenen Tun ist meist
sehr entwickelt. Bei mir liegt immer eine Vielzahl von Büchern
neben dem Bett. Seit einer Weile lese ich immer wieder in „Pat-
tio and Pavilion“ von Penelope Curtis, begeistert habe ich
Bernd Steiglers „Belichtete Augen“ gelesen – sehr kurios. Eine
Zeit lang habe ich in Peter Biers „Das Handwerk der Frei-
heit“ gelesen, und nun ist mir von Juliane Rebentisch „Die
Kunst der Freiheit“ in der Buchhandlung begegnet – da kom-
me ich sehr langsam voran – mal eine Seite vorne, mal eine
Seite in der Mitte … liegt mehr als Dekoration da.

Kehren wir nochmals zum Künstlerlassen zurück. Es gab in deinem Fall
drei Karrieren. Eine erste, internationale, bis Anfang 2000 mit wichtigen
Einzelm- und Gruppenausstellungen und sogar Retrospektiven. Größere
Galerien interessierten sich für dich, du bist aber nicht gewohnt. Dann
veränderte es merklich. Vor ein paar Jahren ging es wieder los, wie du selbst
gesagt hast, auch in den USA mit der Friedrich Petzel Gallery und einer

Bieri's Das Handwerk der Freiheit [the craft of freedom], and recently I came
across Juliane Rebentisch's *Die Kunst der Freiheit* [the art of freedom], but I'm
only making slow progress with it – a page at the beginning, a page in the
middle ... it's lying around more as
decoration, really.

Let's go back to talking about being an artist.
In your case you had two careers: The first, up
until early 2000, was international, with im-
portant individual and group shows, and even
retrospectives. Bigger galleries were interested
in you, but you didn't change over. Then your
career started flagging a little. A few years ago
you picked it up again, as you said yourself, in the
USA, with Friedrich Petzel Gallery, and
with a younger generation of artists who redis-
covered your practice. Did this have an effect on
your work? Would it be easier to say that the
appearance of the human figure in your sculp-
tures and the more recent appearance of gestu-
ral painting are connected to these developments?

Or should they be regarded as inimical to the
work?
No, your interpretation isn't quite right.
My career didn't die down. In 2002 and
2003 I had large exhibitions in Vienna,
Basel, and Düsseldorf. After which I
could take a break for a while. But
during that time I had exhibitions in Ja-
pan, Australia, and Korea. The frequen-
cy of the exhibitions increased all the
time – just not as quickly as before. Too
much success can be negative for a good

HEIMO ZOBERNIG, BORN 1958 IN MAUTHEN, AUSTRIA. LIVES IN VIENNA. EXHIBITIONS: Austrian Pavilion, Venice Biennale; Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna (2015); Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (2015); Kunstverein für Gegenwartskunst, Basel; Museum Ludwig, Köln (2014); Kunstverein in Stuttgart; Kunsthaus Graz (2013); GNO-POST, Vienna; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Meyer Kainer, Wien; Simon Lee Gallery, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Galerie Gendtzaub, Prag; Galerie Michelle Staudinger, Brüssel; Galerie Nicolas Krupp, Basel; Galerie Joanna de Airouarn, Madrid; Galerie Christian Nagel, Köln/Berlin; Galerie Bärbel Grässlin, Frankfurt/Main; Galerie Christiana Meyer, München.
Daniel Baumann. «Portrait Heimo Zobernig, No requirements», *Spike*, n. 43, Spring 2015, pp.100-111.
Le top 5 des expos de la semaine
Chaque semaine, le meilleur des expositions art contemporain, à Paris et en province.

Heimo Zobernig, “Untitled”, 2014, Acrylique sur toile, 200 x 200 cm, HZ15 9, Courtesy de l’ artist et Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Heimo Zobernig

A ceux qui s’empressent d’enterrer l’abstraction géométrique, qui considèrent que tout est dit et que l’on vient trop tard, Heimo Zobernig, né en 1958 apporte un déni vigoureux. Inspiré des recherches de Piet Mondrian et Ian Burn, il livre dans ses peintures la vision d’un formalisme qui se fait lyrique : la ligne courbe envoie valser la grille. Il investira simultanément les deux espaces de la galerie Crousel à Paris, celui de la Douane et de la rue Charlot, pour une intervention autour du thème du double, entre réinterprétation d’œuvres des années 1980 et nouvelles toiles. Une leçon de peinture par une figure incontournable de la scène autrichienne, choisi pour représenter l’Autriche à la 56ème Biennale de Venise cet été.

HEIMO ZOBERNIG

Interview by Karin Bellmann
Studio photography by Florian Rainer

IN THE STUDIO
AUSTRIAN ARTIST HEIMO ZOBERNIG is tirelessly productive, although he is lesser known stateside than his sometime collaborator Albert Oehlen, the late Martin Kippenberger and the late Franz West. Zobernig has been involved in some 25 exhibitions or projects in each of the last 20 years. This year will be little different. As of June, he will have shown in nine group exhibitions around the globe. This month alone, his work is featured in three solo exhibitions, at Petzel Gallery in New York, Nicola Klippert in Basel, and Musée d’art moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Mudam), Luxembourg.

Since the beginning of his career, in the early 1980s, Zobernig has worked across disciplines—from painting and sculpture to video, performance, architectural intervention and design. His exhibitions almost always open expectations in some way, as he persistently questions the boundaries of art, while incorporating its history by drawing upon and interrogating 20th-century art movements, from modernism to Post-Minimalism.

Born in 1958, Zobernig studied set design at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts, after being rejected from the painting department. Yet, in the mid-1980s, he made a name for himself with paintings of abstract geometric forms and minimalist cardboard objects. In the late 1980s, he created tall monoliths, lacquered in black monochrome resin and covered in feathers. Recently, Zobernig has taken up this motif again, with “turred” and feathered objects made of cardboard sheets folded to resemble portable room dividers or open plinths into which the viewer can poke.

Zobernig moves with seeming ease between graphic, architectural and interior design. He is well-known for his sculpted chairs and bar stools that straddle fine art and design. He has been asked frequently to design museums, including the entrance areas at the Kunsthalle München, in 1992, and at the Kunsthalle Braunschweig, in 1999. A more recent example is his design (in collaboration with architect Michael Wallraf) of the new cinema at MUMOK, Vienna, commissioned in 2011.

In 1994, he and six other artists living in Vienna were asked to collaborate with a non-Austrian artist of their choice for the exhibition “Jetztzeit” (Now-Time), which appeared at Kunsthalle Wien and de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam.

Zobernig decided to work with Oehlen. Inspired by the limited palette of Picasso’s Guernica, Zobernig installed 15 Oehlen paintings bathed in red fluorescent light. The multifaceted works then appeared to be monochrome, as if painted in the light-dulling modulations of the red spectrum.

How does Zobernig, known for his rigorous inquiries into exhibition-making and for his thorough engagement with art history, keep up? He seems to take a systematic, pragmatic approach to everything he does. A lot of the works follow sets of self-imposed rules. For instance, he never titles his pieces; he uses “neutral” colors for sculptures; all of his self-made catalogues and graphic-design commissions employ A4 paper and Helvetica font. His restrictions have led to an almost scientific approach to color. Since 1987, he has limited himself to a fixed palette of 15 pigments for a series of stripe paintings.

In these works, vertical monochrome stripes of equal width are arranged according to criteria such as tone or contrast of hues. He creates a written list that predetermines their organization on the canvases.

Since 2000, Zobernig has been occupied with the creation of square “grid paintings.” Initially he applied white acrylic to chroma-key fabrics—commonly known for their use as backdrops for TV weather forecasts—producing checkerboard or grid structures with red, blue and green lines. In 2004, after being struck by the work of Australian artist Ian Burn, he abandoned the chroma-key fabrics in favor of strips of masking tape, which remain on the canvas to make patterns. In 2011, after seeing a Picasso show at Kunsthalle Zürich, on view during his own show at Kunsthalle Zürich, Zobernig started a new group of paintings combining grid structures with free lines.

A less familiar aspect of Zobernig’s output is his mannequin sculptures. For these, he uses parts from male and female mannequins to construct hyperbolic, figures, presenting them fully-dressed or naked. Painted with a white acrylic finish, these often feature superimposed grids of blue masking tape.

In March, Zobernig and I met at his studio at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he has been teaching since 2000, in order to examine the objects he has selected for his exhibition at Petzel. We then went to his other studio—a spacious loft, where he makes his paintings—to talk in more detail.

KARIN BELLMAN. You are premiering three new groups of work in your Petzel exhibition—display dummies, minimalistic sculptures covered in feathers, and paintings. Do you define the mannequins as sculpture, too, even though they are found objects?

HEIMO ZOBERNIG. Yes. I take them out of shop windows but not without a twist. Through my manipulations...
I introduce elements that turn them into sculptures. As a result, they become featural objects.

BELLMANN: When did you start using mannequins?
ZOBERNIG: When I was studying at the Academy in Vienna, I wanted to have showroom mannequins in my studio but didn’t really know why. I had little money so I asked various department stores if they could spare mannequins that were no longer in use. I got arms, legs, torsos—not a whole figure. I had all these parts in my studio, but I did not know quite what to do with them. Eventually they were lost. When I returned to the Academy as a teacher in 2000, I was invited to participate in an exhibition about sculpture in Austria after 1945 at the Belvedere [museum in Vienna]. I had just taken over the academic post of Joanna Avramidi—a modernist sculptor who divided the human figure into modules for use as idealized abstract segments. So, I bought a dummy for the show to try taping a grid onto it. I wanted to use my own body this way in a video [No. 49, 2001].

BELLMANN: Scary! Did this frighten you?
ZOBERNIG: It was a brief but powerful sensation of alarm. It occurred to me that objects could appear alive. I think of it as an instance in which the unconscious enters consciousness. It really fascinated me, particularly because my approach to art is usually very sober. When I started to teach at the Academy, I asked myself why the tradition of figurative representation had been abandoned. It used to be the only valid approach to sculpture, but the knowledge seems to have been lost altogether.

Two students from Milan, who came from more conservative backgrounds, caught my attention. As a daily routine, one of them modelled faces based on plaster casts. I asked him to make a cast of my naked body. A realistic representation was the outcome. This exercise was an attempt to draw the other students’ interest back to the figure. As a consequence, I turned to the figure myself. That was when I started working with mannequins.

BELLMANN: Can you tell me about making No. 19?
ZOBERNIG: For the video I covered my body with a grid of blue adhesive tape, which I had tried out on the mannequin. Using the chroma-key process, the grid could be manipulated in postproduction, resulting in the disintegration of my body into abstract fragments in the video. Additionally, I wore a latex wig to increase the effect of abstraction.

BELLMANN: What relationship exists between segmenting your body into fragments and the grid paintings? Did you want to experiment with the grid in different media?
ZOBERNIG: Yes, the grid sticks with me. Ultimately, the world can be grasped through grids and geometrization. In today’s digitized world, particularly, lines become an increasingly important means of rationalization.

BELLMANN: Do you trust the mannequins to anything in your early work?
ZOBERNIG: One of the mannequins I’ll be showing in New York is wearing a blue T-shirt with the word “Sale” printed on it. Only recently, I discovered this motif in a very early work of mine. In the 1980s, I kept a visual diary. Each day I made paintings or drawings in A4 format. Everything that came to my mind was chronicled this way. Among these images there is a drawing of a young, melancholic man with one arm shorter than the other. He wears nothing more than a shirt. The half-dressed mannequin is a reference to this early image of shameful nakedness.

BELLMANN: There are two more figures you will be showing in New York. Both are partially covered with grids—one on the face, the other on a leg.
ZOBERNIG: Yes, the grids are made of the same blue tape I used in No. 19. Originally, I did not conceive of the mannequin parts as a whole. In 2003, I showed them at Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin. At the time I had no idea what to do with them, so I spread them out on the floor of the gallery. Years later, I reused the fragments, assembling them in my studio and arranging them in different postures. One of the mannequins lifts its arms as if embracing an imaginary space—a sort of nothingness, a void.

BELLMANN: And how have you come to the paintings at Petzel, in which you combine the grid with free forms?
ZOBERNIG: My painting has undergone a simple development. My engagement with color theory and color ordering systems led to monochromes—paintings that are also empty, naked—and eventually to black monochromes. The grid came out of this.

A painting is not always seen from an ideal viewing position. When passing by an image, the frame is necessarily...
perceived as an integral part of it. This change of perspective is apparent in my early grid paintings. I wanted to paint frames slipping into the images. Mondrian’s grid originates from a view out of a window. In 1917, he painted a stained-glass window. It was not an invention; he tried to reproduce a perceptual phenomenon.

BELLMANN What made you change your approach to the grid paintings? You gave up the chroma-key fabrics and started using masking tape.

ZOBERNIG Mondrian used tape to hold the pieces of his linens, but he never exhibited them that way. Since Barnett Newman, using tape has become ordinary. In 2004, I was in Brisbane, Australia, for an exhibition. There I discovered the work of Ian Burn. In his painting Yellow/Blue Equivalence (1965–66), which he described as “bringing Mondrian to the modern space,” he references Mondrian’s diamond paintings. Burn’s image is painted bright yellow and blue though. Additionally, he handled the divisions differently from Mondrian. Burn’s divisions are odd in number rather than even, which decentralizes the picture. You can divide Mondrian’s grids by two again and again. An odd number is a more complicated geometric task. For me, this was a peculiar irritation that I only came to realize by imitating Burn and by counting the divisions. The encounter with Burn’s works was deeply inspiring. After that there was a lot to do.

BELLMANN Infinite divisions?

ZOBERNIG Yes, countless possibilities opened up. You have to decide what the interesting cases are. After discovering these geometric possibilities, bringing the frame into the picture was not important anymore. It was a totally new field.

BELLMANN How does the grid fit with the gestural forms in your new paintings?

ZOBERNIG The free line adds something like expression to the painting. Furthermore, the classic topic of figure and ground seems pertinent. In my new paintings, some guidelines appear to be in the foreground. Actually, I had to decide on those first. But the tape for those is the last to be removed from the canvas. This can cause a fantastic confusion. The straight grid lines appear to be a reliable system. The free lines, the curves, provide obsessive interpretation and open up the whole problem of aesthetics: is it a beautiful, an ugly or an awkward line?

BELLMANN After you saw the Picasso exhibition in Zurich, your work took on expressive, subjective gestures, with direct references to Picasso. Are the new paintings at Perzel a continuation of these?
ZOBERNIG. The new ones grow out of those paintings, but they bear little relation to Picasso. Every now and then, an exemplary artist triggers a new painting. One of the works at Petzel alludes to Gustave Moreau. When I started this cycle of works in 2011, the paintings were made after Picasso and his forms. Simple lines can evoke certain forms. A curved line inevitably suggests a guitar. I try to bring the form into the present. In Zurich, I discovered a relation between geometric and free forms in Picasso’s paintings. I started to see regularities in the free forms. They appear to be spontaneous but are actually quite deliberate. In my newest works, I wanted to combine free forms and grids without relying on any existing artistic model. My aim was to realize something similar to the depictions of nature.

The immediate, expressive gesture is a fiction. One isn’t surprised and satisfied right away. If I succeed in realizing a certain idea, I always want to know whether I can repeat it.

BELLMANN. Is this the reason why certain themes surface again and again? Is it why you work in series?

ZOBERNIG. Series are unorthodox. I always work on one painting at a time, rather than working on various paintings simultaneously. Not until one is finished do I start the next. This is the reason I’d rather speak of a cycle, which enables me to branch in different directions.

BELLMANN. In your studio at the Academy, you showed me your feathered objects. Why have you returned to this idea you experimented with once so many years ago?

ZOBERNIG. This in a question I ask myself, too. On the one hand, it refers to the problem of the series versus the cycle. The minimalist sculptures made out of cardboard are all very different, despite their common surface. The feathered sculptures were a move to a different type of finish, if you like. They generated distinctive and humorous feedback. At the time, I thought, that’s it, and I did not follow up. Today, certain issues have resurfaced. I draw from a rich pool of work I’ve done over the years. And of course it intrigued me to see how these specific forms would work today. In contrast to pieces from the 1980s, the new feathered sculptures are more complex, architectural forms.

BELLMANN. The works you are showing in New York appear disparate, but they have a lot in common. How do you think the individual pieces are perceived as a whole in the exhibition?

ZOBERNIG. It remains to be seen if the works complement each other. Sometimes, I want to make a single statement in an exhibition. That is why I will show only white monochromes on chroma-key fabrics at Nicolas Krupp in Basel. At Petzel, I am showing sculptures in one room and a selection of monochromes and more recent paintings in another one. The show ends with paintings that can be considered the starting point of the works I will send to Zurich. Over the past several years, curious and gallery owners have asked to do historical surveys of my work. They wanted to show the artistic development and I acquiesced to their request. When the work is shown in chronological order, a golden thread is discernible, but discontinuities are fine as well.

BELLMANN. Why does the square play such a big role in your work?

ZOBERNIG. For one thing, the square format is neutral. In the 1990s, I limited myself to that format to see how I could set it in motion or stabilize it.

BELLMANN. Because a square format does not lead to an interpretation right away?

ZOBERNIG. Yes, in a way. The vertical format is used in portrait painting, the horizontal in landscape painting. I did not want to prescribe a meaning—not even with a title. Within the confines of the square, my aim was to place emphasis on color and form in order to expand it irregularly to the left, to the right, to the top and to the bottom.

BELLMANN. In the stripe paintings, the grid paintings and the monochromes, you have experimented with the possibilities of painting and challenged art historical precursors.

ZOBERNIG. Challenging models is essential. Sometimes it can be great fun to paint "the painting after the last painting."

BELLMANN. You seem to be working without ever taking a break. How is this possible?

ZOBERNIG. I am surprised myself, since being lazy has always appealed to me. In my daily routine, progress seems to be very slow. There is beauty in cultivating that slowness. Things that are well done need time. And I always take the time.

BELLMANN. Your art is very allusive. Is there an artist or person who deeply matters to you—someone that could be called a role model?

ZOBERNIG. In many respects, I’d say Sol LeWitt—both in his artwork and as a person. At the start, his work followed strict rules but later it became more cheerful and free.
In the words of James Brown’s 1970 funk classic, Zobernig’s works are ‘talkin’ loud and sayin’ nothin’. Borrowing from the Robert Indiana school of typographical tweets and, at the other extreme, from the modernist tradition of minimal monochromes, Zobernig treats both work-types as throwaway gestures, easily appropriated and slickly executed, but no more significant than the canvases he leaves blank. We find them hung on scaffolding and curtains (lots of curtains), framed by paper scrolls, propped against walls or assembled as sculpture. Or else only present by their absence, as in his museum-style storage racks that remain conspicuously vacated. And not only paintings. When even the curtains are parodied by video representation, it is clear that Zobernig’s irreverent scavenging regards nothing as sacred.

Significantly, all the works here are untitled, the show slipping seamlessly from one installation to the next. In Untitled (1998), stretched canvases of loosely woven jute combine to form an enclosed structure hinting at Richard Deacon’s 1980s aesthetic, while a vast arena of black curtains enshrines nine monochromes executed between 1993 and 2005 (although the dates are extraneous, the works being interchangeable). From 1992, a four-metre cardboard cube richly painted in black gloss references Leo Castelli’s Kaaba and thus Gregor Schneider’s aborted 2005 project for Piazza San Marco in Venice. Mirrored walls in polished aluminium evoke Michelangelo Pistolesi; the metal grids of the painting racks recall Bruce Nauman’s Double Stel Cage Piece (1974). Even the one canvas in which the brushwork lets rip could be a take on Juan Uslic or Bernard Frize.

However, Zobernig’s appropriation of contemporary art is at best generic. These are artworld Rosochach tests, inconsequential in themselves but inviting our collusion in contextualising them within the familiar canon; quotations that, like his monochromes, have been whitewashed so that their reading barely bleeds through.

Voiding the work leaves only the methodology of display and its context. The iron superstructure of the nineteenth-century exhibition hall and the single partition wall, preserved from the previous exhibition, became as important as the works they enclose. In this theatre in the round where the props are laid bare, we become implicated in the staging, the sleights of hand that vouchsafe the seeming neutrality of the white cube and which here are replaced by relational aesthetics-style user-friendliness, interactivity and DIY: a kind of honest shabbiness that points up the tricks of the trade.

This laboratory-like openness draws obvious comparisons with the curatorial modus operandi of the Palace of Tokyo, Paris, except here there is no danger of the insubordination and framing upstaging the artist. Zobernig’s deadpan humour has taken over the asylum mad, as in Peter Weiss’s Marat/Sade (1963), turned it into a site of theatre all his own.

KEITH PATRICK
Heimo Zobernig

in conversation with Beatrix Ruf
Problems of Form

HEIMO ZOBERNIG'S PERSPECTIVE
I liked everything about the show. I have always been an enthusiastic museum visitor and have spent a lot of time in picture galleries, as I find much inspiration there. Up until this time I had never really had any particular interest in Picasso, but this exhibition surprisingly offered me a new perspective. Especially important was when I saw and retraced how the artist himself hung the pictures, reflecting the development of his work in strict chronological order. I also discovered paintings that I hadn't known. I was fascinated above all by works from the late 1920s. Some are like playful anecdotes about abstraction and figuration. The provocative effect that they must have had back then can still be felt today. The joy and lightness that comes through in the works captivated me. For many years I have been working with monochromes and screens, and then some time ago the stretched line got torn and twisted into free forms in front of and behind the screen. When you look at the forms you can't help but see figures. What is allowed and what is to be avoided is always the question. With this personal development, and with the elevation in drawing lines that I discovered in Picasso's pictures, I went to work in my studio and tried to see what could be done. One thing led to another—and the work is still going on.

Your works offer a great variety of approaches: from great precision and the soothing in on details to complex compositions that combine color fields, iconographic inner structures and extended pictorial phenomena from the modern history of painting.

Initially I painted wildly, in all imaginable styles, but later on I settled on radical geometric abstraction as my preferred technique. My sources back then often had nothing to do with art, which led to clear deviations from convention. Only gradually did I come to the monochrome, and from that point onward certain sources became apparent. In all the new techniques of young artists this assemblage with phenomenological painting is evident. In monochromes the ghosts and demons of the resistance movement emerge. The attempt at noncompliance, the continual failure to achieve the goal, is inscribed in the monochrome. No monochrome or empty picture that doesn't reveal the traces of its own creation can continually deliver a historical statement. In Madrid I've now put together a series of white-and-black pictures that have been emptied out. I'm excited to see what the result will be looking back.

You say that your sources and references often have nothing to do with art. What goes into your work then?

Well, I said that off the cuff, of course. I meant observations and models from nature—those kinds of things. It can be diagrams or different reconstructions of an architectural nature. Sometimes this includes things that we don't consider art, but instead what stands behind or next to it. Sociology and politics are, in the end, also problems of form.

Your work is often associated with the terms "Neo-Geo" and "contextual art.” How do you feel about these terms and their attempt to capture categories and movements? Who do you think belongs to such groups?

My first exhibition worthy of mention was my inclusion in a group show in the early 1980s at Galerie nächst St. Stephan. The title was "Zeichen. Flüster. Signaletik. mesokonstruktiv und parallel!" (Signs, Tides, Symbols: New Constructive and Parallel), and the artists Helmut Federle and John Armleder, who in their approaches stood at opposite sides of the spectrum, were primarily responsible for the selection of the works. The attempt was made to make a statement with the label Neo-Geo. After Neue Wilde had dominated the painting of the early 1980s, this exhibition was the first concentrated presentation of contemporary "non-Wilde" works in Vienna. Above all, it brought together pictographic, figurative works that examined the potential connotations of signs in the field of tension between the sublime and banal, emotionality and distance, representation and abstraction. The participating artists were Federle and Armleder, as well as Ecke Bank, Brigitte Kowanz and Franz Graf, Imi Knoebel, Peter Kogler, Matt Mullican, Heinrich Pichlar, Gerwald Rockenschaub, Romana Schaffrath and Dieter Taesch. Those are some of the names that came together there. Each then went on in his or her own individual direction. After that I exhibited at the Galerie Peter Pulskes. That's where I met Sol LeWitt, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, Günter Förg, Marcello Simon, Herbert Brandl, Otto Zitko and Beatrix Burkowsky, and that seems to be the right environment for me.

Do you see any connection at all to so-called "appropriation art," which with artists like Sturtevant or General Idea found a significant formulization in the 1980s—though they themselves categorically rejected this term?

I don't think that this term really applies to the way that I work. I don't just take things and use them, I reinterpret them and insert them into new contexts. Things are transformed or ellenated. It's not about
What is allowed and what is to be avoided is always the question.
MAIN THEME

In monochromes the ghosts and demons of the resistance movement emerge. The attempt at noncompliance, the continual failure to achieve the goal, is inscribed in the monochrome.
The internet is perhaps somewhat overrated as a source for speculations.
Authorship will always become evident despite the dissolution of artists.
co-opted readymades. What I do is better described by the word "paraphrase." This applies as much to the things I directly create as it does to the works based on models, as it's a classic technique.

1. What does "appropriation" mean for you now?

H: Like I say, that's not my method and I don't think it's an accurate description anymore of a young generation that uses the World Wide Web. I follow developments with some curiosity, but I have the impression that the correct terminology hasn't emerged yet. "Copy" and "sample" aren't right anymore either.

1. Yes, I have always thought that the label "appropriation" was too one-dimensional. Sturtevant's or General Idea's early exploration of the subjects of difference, repetition and questioning of authorship in the face of new digital reproduction and the indistinguishability of the original and the copy are quite distinct from the use of media materials by the Picture Generation starting in the 1970s: the appropriative methods of Richard Prince in the 1980s that deny authorship; the repetitions of Sherrie Levine; and the use of digital and analogue models of the first generation for which the Internet was an everyday phenomenon—Wade Guyton, Seth Price, Kelley Walker and Josh Smith, among them, though one could add many more names to that list. The newer generation, for whom the Internet is no longer a technical element but almost a full-fledged part of reality in a different aggregate phase, work very differently with pre-existing images and material, as well as with styles and historical continuities. I often speak with Helen Marten, whose work is currently being exhibited at Kunsthalle Zürich, about the difference between college and inlay, about surface and the differentiation that define surfaces. This also applies to historical lineities and chronologies, which now portray repetition, appropriation and reenactment quite differently, and perhaps make them obsolete.

1. The enthusiasm for new media in the 1960s led to a repetition of artistic forms and descriptions of methods that then slowly lost their usefulness. Painting was declared dead. It's now regaining its status. But the break seems to have done it some good. The strained discussion coming out of New York in the 1950s has come to an end. Such basic approaches as pictorial, photographic, sculptural or cinematic don't limit the medium; they provide an indication of an artistic approach. The term "new media," on the other hand, has long since been declared obsolete and I don't think it will come back again. Authorship will always become evident, despite the dissolution of artists. I believe that the idea taken from psychology that thoughts are created of their own volition is still quite true. For example, Guyton uses a printer, a machine used as a tool for reproduction, like a paintbrush. Or Michael Krebber takes a brush, begins to make a gesture and then abruptly stops because his uncertainty about the return prevent him from continuing. A new form is created in the process. Sarah Morris's screen is well known, but it gives rise to new interpretations all the time.

1. What kind of future development do you see? What artistic approaches do you find interesting in this context?

H: I have no idea how things will develop. I can only say something about some of the comments I've made: that such completely different artists as Merlin Carpenter, Florian Pumhösl, Esther Stocker, Martin Erik Andersen, Lone Haugaard Madsen and Lucie Staël have all set out in a profound search for forms using their academic and intellectual training, and with familiar artistic methods. I believe that such approaches are influential for an even younger generation. The Internet is perhaps somewhat overrated as a source for speculation.

1. But do you have a new term for what repetition stands for today or what it will become in the future?

H: Well, some time ago the term "informalism" occurred to me: it is a kind of word play and combines contradictory phenomena. I don't want to say anything else about it. In any case, it only works if the term becomes loaded with meaning by different sources.

1. What have you been working on since the Picasso exhibition?

H: My retrospective exhibition in the Palacio de Velázquez of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. It features a series that is paradigmatic for me as a further attempt to bring the works together—partly as a new formulation—to create an exhibition as an exhibition and in this way to show the potential genesis of my painting. The thing with Picasso will occupy me for some time. A lot is still open there.

HEIMO ZOBERNIG'S PERSPECTIVE

Ces toiles minimalistes de Heimo Zobernig répètent et déclinent de façon quasi-hypnotique diverses associations de mots, en suivant le même procédé créatif. Effectivement, ces tableaux ont été réalisés à partir de lettrages adhésifs qui ont été placés sur les toiles et recouverts de peinture. Puis, une fois ces adhésifs retirés, un effet de relief apparaît alors entre les mots composés et leur toile de fond. Se donnant tour à tour sur fond blanc, bleu ou brun, ces inscriptions en police Helvetica créent ainsi un effet de retrait ou d’avancement.

Les compositions de Heimo Zobernig explorent donc une dialectique de l’effacement et de l’apparition. En effet, soit les mots sont noyés dans leur fond, cryptés, et toute notre attention est retenue pour tenter de les déchiffrer et de les faire émerger du brouillard. Soit les mots se déchangent de leur fond et apparaissent instantanément comme une surface visible.

Les fonds blancs peuvent complètement engloutir les tracés et la visibilité des écrits, qui semblent alors absorbés dans une sorte de voile nuageux. Mais ces fonds blancs peuvent également mettre en avant les mots de Heimo Zobernig, comme ce «Lavatory» jaillissant sous notre regard de toute sa splendeur immaculée. De même, les fonds bleus peuvent présenter un velours sombre ou une mer pétrole dans lesquels les inscriptions se perdent ou, de quelques touches fluorescentes, les mettre en exergue.

Dès lors, les mots se balancent entre deux significations possibles. Soit ils sont pur dévoilement, et se livrent quasi-instantanément dans un mouvement de pure immanence. Soit ils se donnent de manière plus énigmatique, comme si leur véritable signification ne pouvait se découvrir que via le décryptage d’un sens caché ou d’un tissu métaphorique plus opaque et complexe à saisir.

Ces toiles semblent ainsi reprendre à leur compte des problématiques proprement poétiques, où il serait notamment question d’une possible «objectivation» des mots. En fait, il semblerait qu’il ne faille pas tellement dissocier inscriptions et fond de couleur, en essayant de discernir un texte lisible sur une surface colorée. Il faudrait bien plutôt se rendre compte que les mots sont eux-mêmes peintures. Apparaissant à la fois comme formes et couleurs, ils seraient de pures apparitions phénoménales, tantôt fantomatiques, tantôt détachées.

Et les lettrages calibrés et uniformisés ne doivent pourtant pas nous tromper: Nous n’avons pas affaire à une exécution automatique suivant un procédé purement objectif. Car les mots se chevauchent parfois, empiètent les uns sur les autres, se coupent, se répètent comme un écho, ou jouent encore avec de grandes lignes rouges traversant la toile, preuve d’un mouvement carrément spontané et subjectif dans l’acte créateur.


— Heimo Zobernig, Untitled, 2011. Huile sur toile. 200 x 200 cm
— Heimo Zobernig, Untitled, 2011. Acrylique sur toile. 200 x 200 cm

http://www.paris-art.com/marche-art/heimo-zobernig/zobernig-heimo/7670.html#haut
Since the late 1970s, Heimo Zobernig has played a multilayered game, using a system of his own devising, to pit various historical references, media, and artmaking strategies against one another. Deploying a reduced formal language based on basic geometric shapes, simple materials, furniture, and Helvetica typefaces, Zobernig explores art’s relationships to design, architecture, theater, and the public sphere. At first glance, the objects in his exhibitions can seem like laboratory apparatuses pinned for an experiment, but the permutation of the individual elements is never entirely unambiguous. Something that appears painterly might turn out to be a sculptural construction, only to fade into the background a moment later as the institutional or gallery space itself is laid bare; or the it might become a video projection surface, or a support for neon pieces.

This diversity of encounters could be seen in four shows on view this past spring: The room of the Kunsthalle Zürich primarily featured videos and sculptures bathed in ambient red neon light, while his recent show at Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York contained almost exclusively pictures, as is typical for Chelsea, at Galerie Meyer Kastner in Vienna, Zobernig skimmed the relationship between painting and theatrical staging, and finally, in a show on view throughout mid-June at the East Museum outside Vienna, he considers the relationship between small and large objects, between model and space. All four presentations taken together form a sort of superperspective. They not only provide an overview of his past work but also indicate the range of what can be expected by the format and presentation of an exhibition.

Zobernig studied set design in Vienna, after which he worked in various theaters until, in 1986, he put together his first artworks, post-erotic action shots which theater served as a medium-reinforcing conceptual framework that rendered visible the ideological dynamics of the art industry as if from the outside. He has since engaged in what one might call institutional critique from a bird’s-eye view. In this way, Zobernig has been able to unite what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

Galerie Chantal Crousel

Achim Hochdörfer, “1000 words, Heimo Zobernig talks about his recent work”, Artforum Summer 2011.
calls the traditions of "allotorical procedures" with strategies of "parody and appropriation," or, to put it more poetically, to bring together Michael Asher and Martin Kippenberger. In this freewheeling play with the genealogies and sensibilities of critical modernism, Zobernig's interventions are interspersed with carefully orchestrated slippages, dissonances, and productive misunderstandings. The titles of shows are written incorrectly, for instance: plates are shifted during the printing process; hierarchies of "good" and "bad" taste are spooked. For some exhibitions, Zobernig intentionally disrupts the ostensible minimum requirements for the presentation of art. At the Eos Museum, for example, a group of paintings are mounted on sliding walls within a metal cage, as if they were in storage. They are literally behind bars. Regardless of the humor of their presentation, such gestures always involve the violation of boundaries; the awkwardness that ensues makes those boundaries visible and reveals our aesthetic prejudices.

To some extent, Zobernig's art displays a paradoxical desire to dissect a joke. His transgressions are not straightforward parodies, however, and unlike Kippenberger's projects, they are not defined in a liberating punch line. It is, rather, as if Zobernig were trying to systematically use the production of error as a tool of analysis. The resulting embarrassment depends, on the one hand, upon the emotional investment of both artist and viewer, while on the other, it reveals unconscious aesthetic and social codes. Zobernig's mode of institutional critique is not merely an intellectual game that might run aground in a navel-gazing meta-reflection on the art industry; instead it is a means of maneuvering through various ideological dynamics as they have played out in recent art history: or navigating trends and processes of canon formations (as well as what is excluded from them). Zobernig's work pushes you to the point at which you are forced either to get involved and take a stand—or else to be satisfied with mere commentary.

—Achim Hochdörfer
WE GENERALLY EXPECT ARTISTS to have a position: to stick their necks out and create something that then stands there, vulnerable to attack. The opposite of this is refusal or failure, the unproductive artist. Isn’t it seductive to consider a notation that is nonetheless productive—just living one’s life, allowing something to happen that was never intended? By way of example, let’s consider the moment of uncertainty upon waking that leads to our suddenly leaping out of bed to do something. I ponder the question of whether I should get up or not, and while I’m still thinking it over, I’ve already gotten out of bed without realizing it and have missed this transitional moment. How and from where does this thing we call intuition or inspiration arrive? Can we catch up with it by an act of self-reflection? Or is it a matter of submitting unconsciously to constraints? Sometimes I read about the psychic and neurological aspect of human nature, the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious. I find it surprising, for instance, that this moment of waking, brought about by some sound or other, induces a reversal in the temporal structure of our dreams. In the briefest of moments, a story is constructed that retrospectively leads up to this sound. Around 1980, I built a machine using a film camera, a light, and a timer set to awaken me repeatedly during the night. The period of time I felt was passing between the moment of waking and my reaching for the camera to turn it off seemed to me unbearably long. But the film document shows that I lasted only a fraction of a second.

It may be that I am a person who thinks very anecdotally. Sometimes what I’m doing seems like engineering or research. That’s one side of things. On the other hand, interesting results often come from making leaps rather than following a step-by-step process—that is, when ideas arrive by surprise. This explains the great pleasure we take in absurd, spiritual constrictions. In the early works I made for the theater in collaboration with other young artists, we picked out the most difficult stories possible in order to interpret them visually, the temptation of Saint Anthony, for example, or the book of Revelation. How can these crazy visions be represented? For me, the solution lies in reversal, creating an atmosphere in which showing as such is rejected and instead placeholders are created that will call up these stories obliquely, keeping the metaphoric and symbolic on the outside, but only in order to reveal how unavoidably they keep slipping back in. I’ll put myself in a particular situation—as in one video where I’m naked with a blue sausage, say—I am creating abstract elements. We have a blue sausage one hundred meters long. I’m naked, and I’m quoting the form of a Greek figure, wearing a wig whose shape recalls a Greek sculpture. These are all more or less abstract ingredients that then, in context, produce the effect of an aesthetic expression. No snakes to Greeks, no pain—and nonetheless the entire Laisovos story is there.

Making things intentionally means raising a statue, placing something front and center. So-called installation art may blur the boundaries between objects and their surroundings, but the objects and materials being used nevertheless remain, for the most part, positive acts of placing that define space as aneutral container. I prefer to speak of a display in which the atmosphere of the entire surrounding area becomes the material. The display concept struck me in the early 1990s as a suitable basis for a new way of thinking about sculpture. No longer make sculpture because it is already there. I look at a place and can see how it moves me, disciplines me, what feelings it summons. And of course the part that interests me is the matter of keeping on the one hand, in the sense of a free interpretation of the fundamental Marxist principle that physical objects influence people’s behavior, and on the other, in terms
Achim Hochdörfer, “1000 words, Heimo Zobernig talks about his recent work”, Artforum Summer 2011.

Just as simple abstract means suffice in painting to produce the illusion of pictorial space, in sculpture it’s often almost unavoidable for the work to take on the character of an anthropomorphic interlocutor.

In order to make all these things visible and legible I recall myself of the usual model. I have no interest in multimedia clutter, where quantity usually wins out over quality and you can go badly astray. Sometimes like just looking at the paintings and forgetting about the space that surrounds them. To make this clear, it is my last show at Friedrich Petzel in New York. I exhibited only pictures in the main gallery, while at the show taking place at the same time at the Kunsthall Zürich, I didn’t show any paintings at all. Just a simple abstract means suffice in painting to produce the illusion of pictorial space, in sculpture it’s often almost unavoidable for the work to take on the character of an anthropomorphic interlocutor. In the second room at Petzel I had two sculptures, and to one of them I twisted a ghostly, informal figure through a shelf. This is an unexpected hiccup in m occur. Something mysteriously alive entered in, in animate effect. I’ve found such encounters fascinating for almost thirty years now, and it’s only been a couple of years since I first gave these modified mannequins a swirl. Who knows! Maybe they could b something for my late work.

(Translated from German by Peter E. Doggett)
Heimo Zobernig spricht mit Kirsty Bell über seine Skulpturen, Gemälde und Videos aus drei Jahrzehnten – und über Rotlicht, Schaufensterpuppen und die Literaturhinweise Oswald Wiener's

Heimo Zobernig talks to Kirsty Bell about his sculptures, paintings and videos from the early 1980s to the present – and about red light, mannequins and Oswald Wiener's literary sources


„Warum stellt sich mit Weglassen des Überflüssigen keine Eindeutigkeit her? Die Ausstellung, in der alles weg war, gab es, aber das Problem des Eindeutigen war nicht gelöst.“


KB Hatten euch bei der Beleuchtung im Museum Bärengrasse den gleichen Eindruck?


KB Auf der einen Seite gibt es in deinen Arbeiten den Wunsch nach Struktur und indirekter Systematisierung, auf der anderen Seite widersprechen sie sich jeglicher strukturellen Kategorisierung und schwemmen häufig zwischen Bühnenbild und Malerei oder zwischen minimalistischer Skulptur und atemberaubendem Objekt.


KB Der Widerstand der Objekte gegen die Abstraktion führt zu einer Art gegenwärtiger Verwendung, die auch durch die Gegenüberstellung von Videos mit Skulpturen oder Malereien besteht.

HZ Ja, als ich begonnen habe, meine Ausstellung zu sagen, war man kaum so zu machen, so dass man nicht nur auf Skulpturen oder Bilder trifft, da habe ich das Video dagekommen, als eine Art Kommentatordie, die die Mängel in Sachen Relevanz der Medien heraus- stellt. Was bei einem fehlt, das wird durch etwas anderes eingesetzt. Das Videosbild kann etwas, was das Malereibild nicht kann, da treibt hier das Anthropomorphe auf, das der Mensch.

KB War es klar, dass du der Haupt- darsteller sein würdest?

KB Wie kam es dazu, dass du Schaufensterpuppen verwendet hast?


KB Unheimlich...

HZ Ja, es ist absolut unheimlich. Dieses „lebendig oder nicht“, so eine seltsame Sache. Was können andere Gegenstände in gleicher Größe im Vergleich? So wurde die Puppe immer interessanter.

KB Hat sich das wie ein großer Schritt angefühlt, die menschliche Figur neben den geometrischen Malereien oder minimalistisch wirkenden Skulpturen einzuführen?


KB Als ich eine Schaufensterpuppe in der Nähe einer Skulptur entdeckte, die wie ein Bächerregal ausnah, er貓chen sah wie eine weitere standardisierte Einheit, wie ein weiteres Regal. Sie sah gar nicht so fremdartig aus, wie ich es möglicherweise erwartet hätte.

HZ Die Proportionen eines Bächerregals folgen doch sehr denen der menschlichen Figur. Oder denken wir an den Kli

KB Es stellt sich auch ein kulturelles, Verhältnis ein zwischen dem Betrachter und der Skulptur, wo\nde dieses figurative Element entfällt, die sieht, und was zur Gesicht gezeichnet.

HZ Ja, man fühlt sich berührt. Diese architektonischen Regalskulpturen mit den Puppen darin werden über die Rückseite der geöffneten Freischau. Es hat mich mit diesen Figures divers geprüfelt. Einer Schaufen
terregal zeigte Physiognomen um Anordnung, das Gesicht verändert, die Schau beruhigt, wie ein Stumpf hufe gestaltet die Brüste abgenommen. Die Figures in Zürich sind eingeme

KB Während sich die Zürcher Ausstellung auf die skulpturalen Aspekte deiner Arbeit konzentrierte, wird die Ausstellung im Esl Museum eine stärker architektonische Form annahmen und Fragen der Display oder die Bühne als Ausstellungsstrategie und Verderben richten. Beide Ausstellungen scheinen auch eindrucksvoll.

Lesarten deiner Arbeit abnehmen oder verstärken zu wollen. Warum diese Abwendungstrategie?


For Helma Zobernig, 2011 began with five solo exhibitions: gallery shows in Antwerp, New York and his hometown of Vienna as well as exhibitions at the Basel Museum in Kloten near Zurich and the Kunsthalle in Zurich. For an artist whose work engages so heavily with the structures of exhibition making, this seems like an enormous undertaking. Or is it a conceptual play?

Zobernig’s solo show inaugurated the Kunsthalle’s temporary premises in the Museum Bärengras, two adjacent, four-storey 17th-century baroque buildings in downtown Zurich. Zobernig exhibited only sculpture and video works selected from the last 25 years, and some of the paintings which have been a staple of his practice since the early 1980s. No doubt the constraints of exhibiting in these listed premises with their wood panelled or plasterwork ceilings, centrally-located doors, windows or doorways—played a role in this decision. Crucially, he also decided to revisit a work made for an installation of Albert Oehlen’s showings in the show ‘Zeitgeist’ at Vienna’s Kunsthalle in 1994: Zobernig installed red fluorescent lighting, which created a considerable brilliance to viewing Oehlens’ work in Zurich, each room in the Museum Bärengras was lit with red fluorescent light, providing a coherent and dynamic solution for this historical building as an exhibition space for contemporary art, while casting into doubt the viewing conditions for his sculptures. The lighting accentuated how the works question aspects such as surface and autonomous form through their cheap materiality (cardboard, styrofoam or MDF) and their structures which recall Minimalism, furnishing or display.

Such pragmatic decision-making features repeatedly in Zobernig’s work, where conviction is often put to productive ends, the most formative example being the artist’s involvement in the set design department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna after his application to the painting department was rejected. This unconventional start ensured that cross-disciplinary contamination would become a cornerstone of

"Instead of presenting painting and sculpture alone, I added video to expose the flaws in the supposed purity of media."

KB: Did you have the same idea in mind with the light in Museum Ébouregasse?

HZ: Yes, the thing was that the museum didn’t have a proper lighting system, the lighting problem still needed to be addressed, and dealing with it has now been positioned slightly by my exhibition. There were only improvised lamps and illuminated vitrines. And I thought: when something is already that bad, then you might just as well make the conditions even worse. And this building can do something other exhibition venues can’t do: To create a specific light atmosphere, it must be possible to darken the entire, and if the more or less typical Swiss house has wooden shutters on the windows which can all be closed. It’s an added attraction to be able to present the building closed and hermetic like this for once. Also, old buildings like this are often isolated in places far from the hustle of modern commercial areas and become integrated into red light districts. This free-standing house in this setting also took on the character of a ‘Moulin Rouge’. Such ‘red windmills’ are places of escapism where people follow their wishes and desires, outside of everyday life, off the paths of day-to-day business.

KB: On the one hand, your works are driven by the desire for structure and intentional systematisation; on the other, they defy categorisation and defy the ever-changing nature of the text as a political act that wants something specific, that wants to produce an effect. That was one of several motives for showing painting under difficult conditions.

HZ: The quest for abstraction is a fundamental endeavor, but it seems very important to me to omit all that is superfluous. A lot of effort is invested, but there’s always something working against it, the material or some element of content keeps getting in the way. This is basically the question: why doesn’t less lead to greater clarity, in art, in painting? There was a time in the early 1960s when I tried to get rid of the end and worked towards a monochrome, while painting that isn’t even painted, just a primed canvas. This exhibition took place, where everything was gone, but that didn’t solve the problem of clarity.

KB: The objects’ resistance to abstraction leads to a kind of cross-contamination that is also underscored by the juxtaposition of videos with sculptures in the Zurich show.

HZ: Yes, when I began to make my exhibition I knew, so to speak, I presented not just sculptures and paintings but added video as a layer of commentary that exposed the flaws in the supposed purity of media. What’s lacking in one is supplied by something else. Video images can do something a painted picture cannot; that’s where the anthropomorphisation is, the human, appears in my work.

HZ If you want to obtain empirical certainty, the work has to be that way—you have to make the experiment repeatable. If there’s too much chaos and if there are loose ends, then it’s hard to judge and filter out effects because they’re always disrupted. So you evaluate adjusted, pure conditions, but with the knowledge that it’s difficult to achieve such purity. If you place a table in the middle of a room, then its effect can be gauged in relational terms. What happens? How do viewers position themselves throughout the space because this object occupies a central position, and how do they respond to it? And precisely with such a seemingly simple thing a table it’s interesting how people react to it. In contrast to a sculpture, that people immediately put their hands on it, because we start using it, as a useful everyday object, putting glasses down on it and flowers...

KB How did you start using mannequins?

HZ I’m not entirely sure any more, but I’ll try to tell the story. Around thirty years ago, I wanted for some reason to have a mannequin, but, due to a lack of money at the time, all I could get was cheap fragments—a torso, an arm, etc.—not a whole figure, and I didn’t know what to do with them. I bagged them from one studio to the next and eventually lost them. Then, many years later—and once again, I don’t know why—a mannequin turned up in my studio. In any case, I made a discovery that really surprised me—that the presence of this mannequin triggered in me an awareness of a living presence. For a split second or so in my studio, especially at dusk or dawn, I didn’t feel alone. The experience and intensity of this sensation intrigued me. This moment when I’m slightly distracted and there’s someone there, but it’s just this mannequin...

KB Uncanny...

HZ Yes, it’s absolutely uncanny. This living thing, a strange business. What can other objects the same size do by comparison? So the mannequin became more and more interesting.

KB Did I feel like a great leap to introduce the human figure alongside geometric paintings or Minimalist-looking sculptures?

HZ I can’t say which approach wins: I need to step back and look at what’s there. I also see that not everything is possible at equal value. To me, there are developments that become visible in a chronology. What, for example, is the impact of an idea I’ve already laid on future decisions? The issue of consistency is certainly something I try to pursue. I don’t assume chaos. In my early years I was of course very interested in and enthusiastic about the Vienna Postmodernists and their focus on behaviorism. There is a book, a novel, by Oswald Wiener – Die Verbesserung vom Mittelmenschen (The Improvement of the Average Man, 1991) — he appended an in-depth bibliography and wrote how much he would have liked to include everything else he had heard, seen, etc., as a way of offering later generations the possibility of studying how this text came about. Perhaps this provides an idea of how the artistic process could be explained. Reference and reference, respect and historical question are factors that exert a consistent and uncorrelated influence. As we know, if you are even a little too far from the paths set by these factors, then the work is no longer perceived as art; it doesn’t become part of the discussion. It may be existential, but it doesn’t exist; it leads a subsistence, a private passion or hobby.

HZ I’m not entirely sure any more, but I’ll try to tell the story. Around thirty years ago, I wanted for some reason to have a mannequin, but, due to a lack of money at the time, all I could get was cheap fragments—a torso, an arm, etc.—not a whole figure, and I didn’t know what to do with them. I bagged them from one studio to the next and eventually lost them. Then, many years later—and once again, I don’t know why—a mannequin turned up in my studio. In any case, I made a discovery that really surprised me—that the presence of this mannequin triggered in me an awareness of a living presence. For a split second or so in my studio, especially at dusk or dawn, I didn’t feel alone. The experience and intensity of this sensation intrigued me. This moment when I’m slightly distracted and there’s someone there, but it’s just this mannequin...

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KB Did I feel like a great leap to introduce the human figure alongside geometric paintings or Minimalist-looking sculptures?
HZ It did take something like a leap, from the figure to abstraction — from abstraction to the figure. Before I moved in, my studio was used by a classical Modernist sculptor, Joanna Avramidi, who divided the human figure into meridians, made them abstract and turned them into rotational mouldings. With that in mind, I made a video in which my body is split up by meridians of blue adhesive tape and moves through the blue video space. I tried out the geometrical patterns for this work on that first mannequin, which paved the way for exhibiting that part of my work.

KB When I saw a mannequin displayed near a sculpture that looked like a bookshelf, the mannequin appeared like another standard unit, like a shelf, so it didn’t look as alien as I might have expected.

HZ The proportions of a bookshelf follow the proportions of the human figure very closely. Or think of a wardrobe. This is a nice topos. Hanging up clothes or putting away books — these are tasks for the “dumber servant”, deputy of guard. In my video Nr. 23 (2007), I collapse under the weight of these tasks and a great amount of colour.

KB There’s also a tautological relationship between the viewer and a sculpture that includes this figurative element. You’re watching while being watched.

HZ Yes, one feels observed. These architectural shelf sculptures with the mannequins inside stand guard, making sure borrowed books are returned. Then I tried out various things with these figures. Masked my face onto one, altered the sex, made the public area look like it was covered by a pair of stockings or removed the breasts. The figures in Zurich are fairly neutral. Most mannequins are designed to match the tastes of a given period, from haircuts to postures. But of course there is also a notion of some ideal average beauty; a kind of classicism in the design of these mannequins. I was interested in that — classicism inspires a certain reference, but it also enters one’s artistic practice at the point where repetition of one’s own work occurs.

KB While the Zurich show concentrated on the sculptural aspects of your work, the show at the East Museum will take a more architectural form and foreground questions about display or the stage as an exhibition strategy. Both exhibitions also seem to deter attention away from a definitive reading of your work. Why this defective strategy?

HZ I’m not sure decisions came out of the circumstances I’ve already mentioned, and on the other hand, I also like to follow intuitive impulses which I don’t like to rationalize. At the East Museum, I’m showing very small, older sculptures in a new, large-scale installation including invitations to various musicians to perform on a stage. A central element here is a rood curtain that was shown three years on the stage at Vienna’s MUMOK as part of the performance series Nicht IST AUFREGENDI. Nichts IST SEX. Nichts IST NICHT PEINLICH. (Nothing is exciting, nothing is sexy, nothing is not embarrassing). In my piece Heimo Zobernig erklärt seinen Double Die Non rive Performance nach (Heimo Zobernig explains his double die non rive performance) I show a passage from... (Translation answer: Nicholas Grödel)

Kirsty Bell is at ATM and lives in Berlin.

Fibo Viel
Installation view
Galerie Meyer Kassier, Vienna, 2011.