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Pioneers: Heimo Zobernig

By Fredi Fischli & Niels Olsen



The Pioneers series aims to shed new light on artists who have created truly innovative work, trailblazers whose legacy lives and reverberates in the current generation. In this issue, Fredi Fischli & Niels Olsen talk to Heimo Zobernig.

We recently showed your *Untitled (in Red)* (2011) in Cologne: a work composed of numerous red neon tubes. And now *schwarzescafé* ["black café"], an architectural reaction to the "white cube" of the institution, has opened at LUMA Westbau. This makes us curious as to your use of color. For instance, in his essay for your Renaissance Society catalogue, Mark Wigley explains the view of modernity in which a white building is supposed to represent an "honest" building. LUMA Westbau is just such an abstract white structure, and yet you've painted it black. So we're wondering: what does a black wall mean?

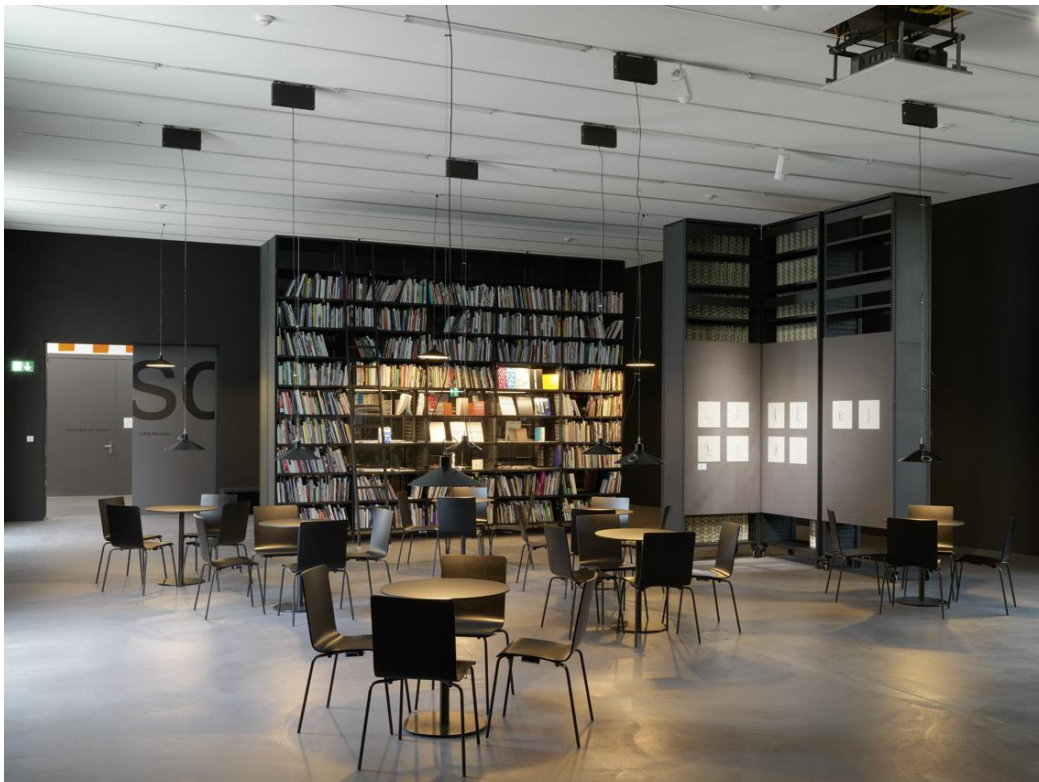
Now I'm curious to see what Mark says about black spaces! I chose the name because that's the way it is; it might also have the chic look of an anarchist café, which is OK, too. But there are simply pragmatic reasons for making the whole thing black—namely, so the space could be used as a halfway-ideal cinema.

The black room is meant to evoke the black box of a movie theater?

Yes, definitely. It also comes from the desire not to design around color.

There's a comparable avoidance of color in *Untitled (in Red)*, as the red light ends up effacing the color palette. At the Art Cologne presentation, for instance, nearby paintings by Yuji Nagai and Albert Oehlen lost the perception of their coloration. Instead, the red light yielded a new connotation, which you've described as a "murky shed". Does this mood characterize *schwarzescafé* as well?

The mood comes from our Sturm und Drang period, back when we were young artists hanging around a lot at night, forging plans for utopias, in this milieu, this Moulin Rouge light.



Is *schwarzescafé* a *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art], or do you view it more as an actual café?

Gesamtkunstwerk is a term that has a strange meaning in German. I'd rather call it Total Design: something that covers everything—the atmospheric aspect as well as the design of individual things—but not a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the Wagnerian sense.

The term "design" also brings us to the café chairs and other furnishings included in the installation. However, these aren't items you'd expect to find in a murky anarchist café; this is much more the kind of design that determines our everyday world. Is this the design of commercialized modernity?

I'm not a style designer—I do the whole thing in my own "non-style." So it's just a chair which I selected and slightly altered for my purposes, an item which has little individuality but is still in the tradition of the development of modernity. A chair for the modern world, manufactured using so-called modern technology, in terms of the plywood seat and steel legs.

Like a classic modern chair without any avant-garde character, flattened over the course of generations?

Without the tapering of the Arne Jacobsen chair, an icon of stool design with the look of a modern sculpture.

In a museum, I'm interested in the paths visitors take, the influence the objects and room dimensions have on them.

What does good taste mean to you? Nowadays, the modern Bauhaus aesthetic generally stands for "good taste," but this understanding sometimes reads as an expression of nostalgia. Your works, however, include stark contrasts: they possess a certain austere beauty, which is then disrupted by a "bad taste" attitude.

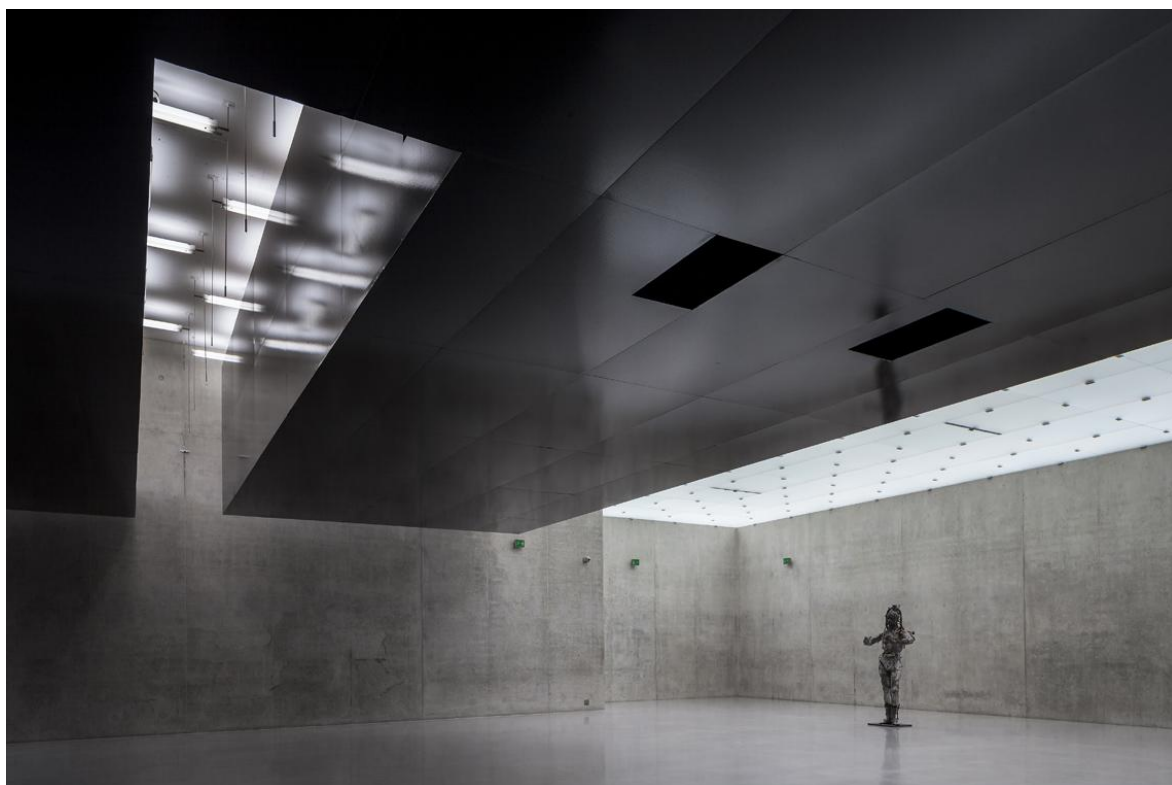
But what is "good taste" when one has the freedom to choose? For example, you have to be able to afford a purist, minimalistic lifestyle. Having a personal style is an existential matter, to be able to say, "This is me." Some people trouble themselves about it, some seek outside advice, and some don't think about it at all. One aspect of my method is laziness, stripping things down to the essentials. But ultimately, it's not as simple as all that.

What part does theatricality play for you?

None. But it is interesting that the metaphor of theatricality should be so fitting. It follows from the fact that we're compulsively interpreting all the time. I don't intend it that way, but it is clear to me. People often say, "Oh, it's like in a theater," even though the theater, in turn, refers to the real world. I see my art as part of the real world.

Something that would refute this ascription of theatricality is that you never program its activation by the viewer. This seemed particularly true of your work for last year's Austrian pavilion in Venice, where the stage-like pavilion could be misconstrued as an artwork of relational aesthetics, but was simply not animated. It remained "empty", devoid of "content," and didn't serve as a platform for events. The pavilion asserted itself exclusively through its form and materiality.

What it says is simply what you see. There's no need to look behind things, to read between the lines—it's the things themselves that confront you there. Naturally, in this case, it's a place that surrounds the viewer and has a very specific effect, but the cube that shapes the ceiling is an autonomous form that can assert itself in a different context as well.



Given that your café doesn't function as a stage on which the guests become actors, the focus of the work strikes us as being much more on its furnishings and materiality. The things, the design and the form, seem to be important elements for institutionally critical art.

Criticism requires form. There's no need for us to see ourselves as actors: you walk into a museum and you're a museumgoer, so you behave differently than you would, say, in a hardware store. And when you walk into a café that's designated as such, you abide by the rituals of café-goers and accept everything you encounter there as a matter of course. What interests me is how people approach it. When I go to an exhibition, I want to figure out how the atmosphere is created, how observing can be observed—which paths we take, what influence the objects and room dimensions have on us.

We're very interested in how your production works. Your approach seems very much applied, especially when we look at the way you work together with architects. How does your work differ from that of a designer or architect?

When it comes to making things, we're all somehow alike. The dividing lines get blurred. The difference lies in the beholder's standpoint. What interests me about a designer chair is whether I can sit in it comfortably and whether it looks good.

Your works are very often the product of commissions, which vary considerably from an order to design a corporate identity, as you did for the Secession in Vienna, to designing a café, as you've now done for the LUMA Foundation. Do your artworks result from specific ways of resolving a problem?

I don't see such a big difference between work I do for myself and for others. After all, I have the freedom to choose what I want to do. In either case, I don't do anything without a basic idea to go on.

The more exhibitions I did, the more the setting and the surrounding elements became material to work with.

We're also interested in the importance and hierarchy you attach to individual works. In a work like *schwarzescafé*, is the single chair a sculpture in and of itself, or is the entire presentation a single work?

Everything is a work of art: the chair itself, the whole ensemble, and even the surrounding elements of the exhibition. Sometimes designing a little invitation card occupies me longer than designing a whole room.

Have you been designing interiors, displays and architectural interventions from the outset?

Yes, it started early on with model-like sculptures, which were abstract forms, or architectural models and painting. The more exhibitions I did, the more the setting became material to work with.

That can be readily seen in your interior design for LUMA. The big library bookcase, for example, takes on a highly sculptural quality once it's placed in the black exhibition room, since it calls to mind your non-functional shelves. In this large exhibition space, objects like the shelving system from Vienna lose the normality they retain outside the institution.

I see the bookcase as a service provider that isn't typically noticed: it's placed against a wall and remains more or less invisible behind the books. But I open the whole thing up, so that its construction and dimensions are perceivable as you walk around it. The bookcase thus becomes a designer for the paths that are taken through the room, rounded out by its relation to library users.

It's interesting how tangible such a bookcase becomes, and to recognize its temporality as a product of modern design. Another temporality can be drawn from your use of bookcases as autonomous sculptures. One might think that something happened to them, that they have prior histories in which they were emptied of objects.

It is interesting to see how the bookcase has emerged over the past ten years as a subject of sculptural art—and, in some variations, as a rack. After all, a rack is like a skeleton that holds something up, and knowledge in the form of books can be placed in a bookcase.

It seems as though these various types of furniture in your oeuvre—the bookcases, chairs and tables—become an artistic vocabulary.

... and benches, doors, walls, pedestals, mirrors, curtains, rugs and so on.



A clear-cut logic of directly using existing objects presides over your conceptual approach, but we suspect that the final effect of an exhibition has much to do with a sort of “fine-tuning,” as in the way ceilings or walls are worn away, the way the light shines through the cracks—think for example of your recent show at Kunsthau Bregenz or your display of the Museum Ludwig collection. If you’ve deliberately sculpted these details, that would be seemingly at odds with the “honesty” of the actual materials.

I fail to see any contradiction. Interior design requires not only a good concept, but also the craftsmanship to be executed in a manner that suits your materials. Every detail counts.

You once said that practice is important in the production of art.

Yes, craftsmanship is based on practice. There’s no getting round that. Over the years, it’s grown increasingly clear to me that a good concept is not enough to ensure the successful appearance of a work. Imponderables crop up in the making again and again, to which you have to react. Experience helps in those cases.

But is there a moment in which you play with ways of beguiling the viewer in the planning of your works?

Yes, it might be compared to improvisation in music: when you have a technical mastery of an instrument, you can play with that to beguile the listener.

In the sense of manipulation?

No, manipulation has too negative a connotation. I like to show how it’s made. The actual making is always an important part, and whatever is comprehensible about it helps in understanding it. The whole ensemble creates something like atmosphere.

How do you develop your work further from one exhibition to the next? Is it the site or your own canon, as Isabelle Graw describes it in *Texte zur Kunst*, that takes priority in driving your work?

Well, first I try to approach the project without any preconceptions whatsoever, to gain a thorough understanding of the site and give in to my intuition. Then, I gradually discuss my way into the task, which automatically reinforces the canon, which in turn opens out further.