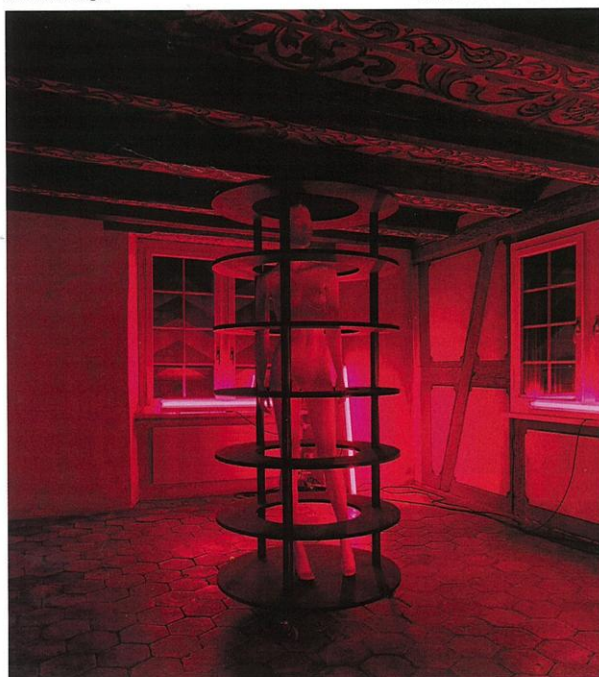


1000 WORDS

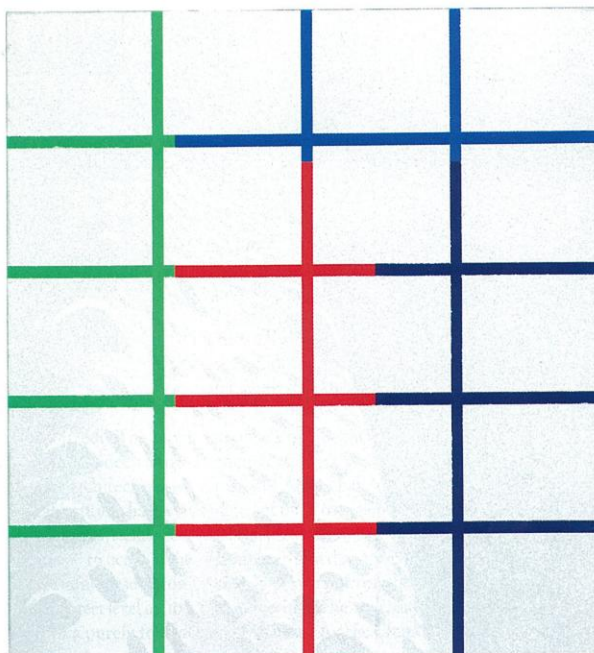
Heimo Zobernig

Talks about his recent work • Introduction by
Achim Hochdörfer

Below: View of "Heimo Zobernig:
Ohne Titel (In Red)," 2011,
Kunsthalle Zürich. Photo:
Stefan Altenburger.



Right: Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*,
2008, acrylic, projection screen
paint, projection screen fabric,
39 1/2 x 39 1/2".



SINCE THE LATE 1970S, Heimo Zobernig has played a multilayered game, using a system of his own devising to pit various historical references, media, and artmaking strategies against one another.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 primed for an experiment, but the function of the individual elements is never entirely unambiguous. Something that appears pictorial 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 else it might become a video projection surface, or a support for neon pieces.

This diversity of outcomes could be seen in four shows on view this past spring: The rooms 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 Kainer in Vienna, Zobernig thematized the relationship between painting and theatrical staging, and finally, in a show on view through mid-June at the Essl Museum outside Vienna, he addresses the relations between small and large objects, between model and space. All four presentations taken together form a sort of superretrospective: They not only provide an overview of his past work but also indicate the range of what can be signified by the format and presentation of an exhibition.

Zobernig studied set design in Vienna, after which he worked in various theaters until, in 1980, he put together his first artworks, postdramatic actions in which theater served as a medium-transcending 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

Below: View of "Heimo Zobernig,"
2011, Galerie Meyer Kainer,
Vienna. Photo: Tina Herzl.



Right: Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*,
1987, oil on cardboard, 4 x 4 x 2".



calls the traditions of "allegorical procedures" with strategies of "parody and appropriation," or, to put it more pointedly, to bring together Michael Asher and Martin Kippenberger. In this freewheeling play with the genealogies and sensibilities of critical modernity, Zobernig's interventions are interspersed with carefully orchestrated slipups, 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 upended. For some exhibitions, Zobernig intentionally disrupts the ostensible minimum requirements for the presentation of art. At the Essl 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 these 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 defused 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 metareflection 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 formation (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



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2009,
steel. Installation view, Essl
Museum—Kunst der Gegenwart,
Klosterneuburg, Austria.
Photo: Georg Petermichl.



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2007,
Swarovski round stones and
acrylic on linen, 19 1/8 x 19 1/8".

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 nonaction that is nonetheless productive—just living one's life, allowing something to happen that was never intended? By way of example, let's consider that 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 am 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 intention or inspiration arrive? Can we catch up with it by an act of self-reflection? Or is art a matter of submitting unconstrainedly 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 retroactively leads up to this sound. Around 1980, I built a machine using a film camera, a light, and a timer set to awaken me

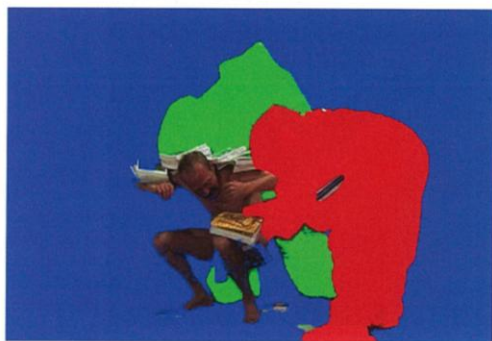
repeatedly during the night. The period of time I felt was passing between the moment of waking and my reaching for the camera to turn it off seemed to me unbearably long. But the film document shows that it lasted only a fraction of a second.

It may be that I am a person who thinks very analytically. 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 constructions. 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. If I 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, no Greeks, no pain—and nonetheless the entire Laocoön 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 a neutral 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: I 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 form-giving: 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

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.



Heimo Zobernig, *Nr. 24*, 2007, still from a color video, 14 minutes 22 seconds.



Above: Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 x 39 1/2".

Below: Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2010, plaster, cotton, wood, particleboard, 89 1/2 x 41 1/2 x 29 1/2".

of the relationship between art and design that Dan Graham formulated hyperbolically with his notion of "art as design/design as art." Admittedly, things go wrong when the engagement with art spaces gets out of hand and the space of display finds itself excessively loved. This is what happened with institutional critique in the '90s: It turned into an affirmation of the institution. I wanted to avoid this. I wasn't so much interested in providing suggestions for improving things as in just observing the situation—I'm not the improvement director, or anything like that. What's important isn't the love of institutions but rather of art itself—through which institutions can themselves be created. This can be done the way we build relationships, or like at a Kippenberger party. It can be done with violent arguments, or as a lovefest. In this way it might be possible to bring together many things that appear irreconcilable in institutional critique. As for my own approach, you could call it a dystopian institutional critique, resembling a set of rules for a game. But seeing art as a game is not equivalent to a position of cynical parody. Quite the contrary: The ideal game necessarily inscribes an ethics. If everyone stuck to the rules, our lives could be infinitely enriched. This isn't going to happen; it's a utopian promise that can't be kept. What's at stake

in this game is, among other things, communication. The failure to communicate makes one an ass.

In order to make all these things visible and legible, I avail myself of the usual media. I have no interest in multimedia clutter, where quantity usually wins out over quality and you can go badly astray. Sometimes I like just looking at the paintings and forgetting about the space that surrounds them. To make this clear, in 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 Kunsthalle Zürich, I didn't show any paintings at all. 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 the second room at Petzel I had two sculptures, and for one of them I twined a ghostly, informal figure through a shelf. This is an unexpected hiccup in my oeuvre. Something mysteriously alive entered in, to uncanny 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 whirl. Who knows? Maybe they could be something for my late work. □

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

