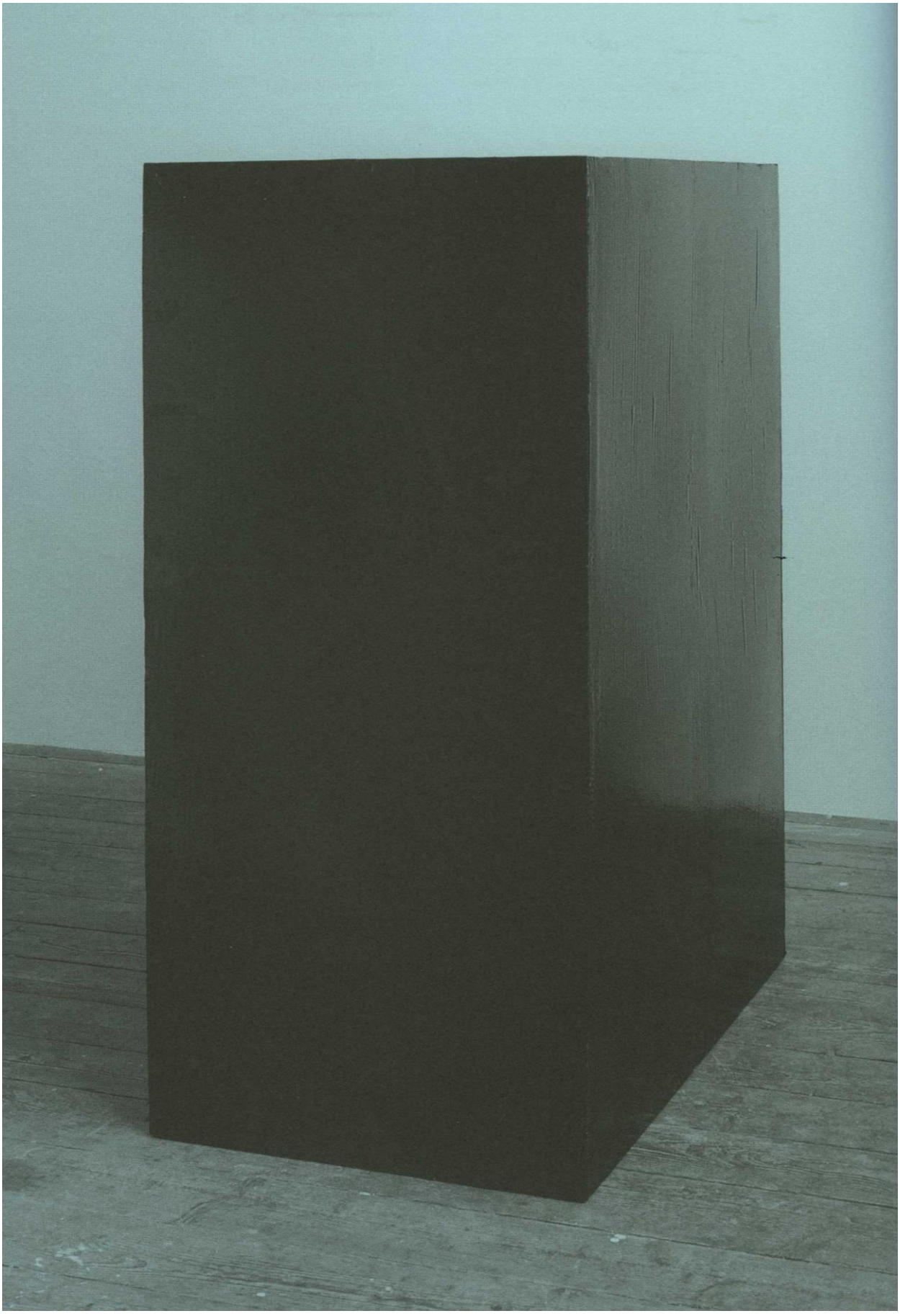
Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

45
Heimo Zobernig

47
From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again
– Diana Baldon
59
Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville:
'My God, a black square.'
– Mark Kremer

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1986, synthetic resin lacquer, cardboard, 139 × 64 × 100cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again

– Diana Baldon

Inert and enigmatic, a black rectangle is difficult to decipher without the ghost of Modernism coming to mind. Or could it be a small chamber for torture? Or a black Neolithic stone, emitting radio signals like the one buried four million years ago in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)? Could it just be what it seems – a rectangular object made of cardboard and varnished in glossy black resin? Heimo Zobernig's *Untitled* (1986) is none of these. A medium-sized box, big enough to fit a person sitting, it was built following the dimensions of Wilhelm Reich's orgone accumulator, a controversial device celebrated in America in the 1950s as the 'orgasm box'. The Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who was persecuted by Nazis, psychoanalysts, Marxists and the FBI, invented the accumulator for medical purposes. Following his belief that sexual repression was bourgeois in character and that all neuroses were caused by repressed blockages of orgone energy, Reich maintained that people would be able to emancipate themselves and transform the world if they managed to free their own genitals.

The difficulty in deciphering the meaning and implications of Reich's speculative and therapeutic work is analogous to the difficulty in classifying Zobernig's practice. Mainly shown and discussed within German-speaking art circuits, Zobernig's production consists of paintings, texts, objects, graphic and architectural designs, videos, symposia, furniture and even musical performances shifting back and forth from theoretical seriousness to deadpan humour. Often described as engaging in an ironic deconstruction of a formalist vocabulary, Zobernig has produced a free, reticular system of associations between form and content in over twenty years of activity. The apparently inexpressive, silent materiality of his visual style may be demanding to consume but, in tune with the postmodern impulse to negate previous negations, it consistently attempts to instil a broad cultural indexicalism into the historical effort made by abstract art to evacuate meaning from geometry. Transferring his interest in Neo-plasticism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Neo-geo to specific subject matters, his aesthetic illustrates what Jacques Rancière defines as 'a regîme of art combining forms of visibility and enunciative possibilities'.[1] Reich believed that his chamber harnessed a universal and creative force in nature that was at the base of human life and death: the transformative effect of a gratifying sexual life. Similarly, in 1981, Zobernig believed in his – or art's – therapeutic power to influence other people's lives for the better, having introduced himself as a counsellor distributing visiting cards under the pseudonym of 'Dr Sommer'.

The visual pleasure that results from the experience of Zobernig's work is not caused by positive vibrations, as in Reich's box, but by objective, quasi-mathematical visual systems that consist of harmonious or incongruous compositions of light, colour and formal arrangements in either two or three dimensions. And unlike Reich's box, which was constructed out of layers of galvanised steel, wood and paper, Zobernig's work is a sheet of cardboard painted with black

1 Jacques Rancière, 'What Aesthetics Can Mean', in Peter Osborne (ed.), *From an Aesthetic Point of View*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2000, p.19.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

varnish, deceptively giving weight and substance to a material whose poverty and precariousness could make it look like an improvised, ramshackle structure. As one of the functions of Reich's accumulators was to absorb positive orgone energy to treat terminal illnesses, Zobernig similarly employs black paint to allude to the colour's ability to absorb 99 per cent of visible light, as well as for its association with negative cultural attributes.

By the mid-1960s artists like Eva Hesse had rejected the austerity of fixed *tabula rasa* and cool fabrications characteristic of hard-edge Minimalism, a position that drew her and others toward Arte Povera's informal organicism. The rawness and sincerity of the cardboard in Zobernig's *Untitled* also discards the key avenues of thought or possibilities proposed by Minimalism, and indirectly reflects the problems involved in making sculptures. In the mid-1980s, contemporaries of Zobernig such as Peter Halley, John Armleder or Haim Steinbach, in conjunction with the popularisation of 1970s post-structuralist theories and the desire to invent new meanings for functional objects, employed geometry as a strategy of appropriation or a critique of mass consumerism.[2] Zobernig rejected this approach, and moved a step further: he opted for using objects, texts, figures, diagrams, stripes, grids and spatial arrangements in order to comment, from an insider's position, on the emblematic character of abstraction concealed behind the flatness of the picture plane, or the iconicity of text. In other words, his works operate as semiotic signs, born from overlapping forms, motifs and images that encourage reflection by way of stylistic riddles and formalist anomalies. Even though this strategy seems to suggest an understanding of abstract art as an open visual code that can only find its locus of enunciation, representation and signification in external contexts (which viewers, readers or listeners can traverse freely), Zobernig doesn't just comment on his predecessors' search for a formalist vocabulary, or his contemporaries' critique of a Modernism based on unbridled capitalism. Instead, his unforced, provocative way of thinking about abstraction reflects a phenomenological understanding of the way we experience the world we live in.

C FOR COLOUR

Since the beginning of his career, colour has had a central position in Zobernig's work, in its praxis as well as its theory. He has elaborated his own scientific take on colour, as if wanting to offer an inventory of the whole spectrum of possibilities within the pictorial plane and to test how colour and form affect each other. His investigations of colour led him to commission Albert Oehlen's 'Farbenlehre III' ('Colour Theory III', 1987), a poetic manifesto examining the links between formal properties and meaning in painting. It was later followed by a more analytical study of colour by Zobernig inscribed in the diagrammatic classifications of his artist's book *Farbenlehre* (1995).[3] Written in collaboration with the Austrian writer Ferdinand Schmatz, *Farbenlehre* brings together an archive of colour models that, without ever employing colour illustration, laconically indexes how colour has been visually and culturally perceived throughout history, from Pythagorean theories to the Pantone system.

The year 1987 was productive for Zobernig, as he began a number of important series of works: the 'stripe paintings'; the 'sculpture colours'; and sculptures made of toilet-roll tubes whose looping, twisted compositions recall a Möbius band gone crazy. Whereas colour is at issue in the first two series, it is entirely absent in the third. The 'sculpture colours' are geometric objects of different sizes that employ an 'uncolourful' palette of neutral whites, greys, blacks, browns and oranges. They resemble pedestals so much so that Franz West used them as plinths for his

2 Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, allegory and other models of 'textuality' became the *lingua franca* for critical reflections on the arts and the media at the time. They were considered cultural forms in which pictures occupied a position between paradigm and anomaly, as models or figures for other things (including figuration itself) and as unsolved problems.

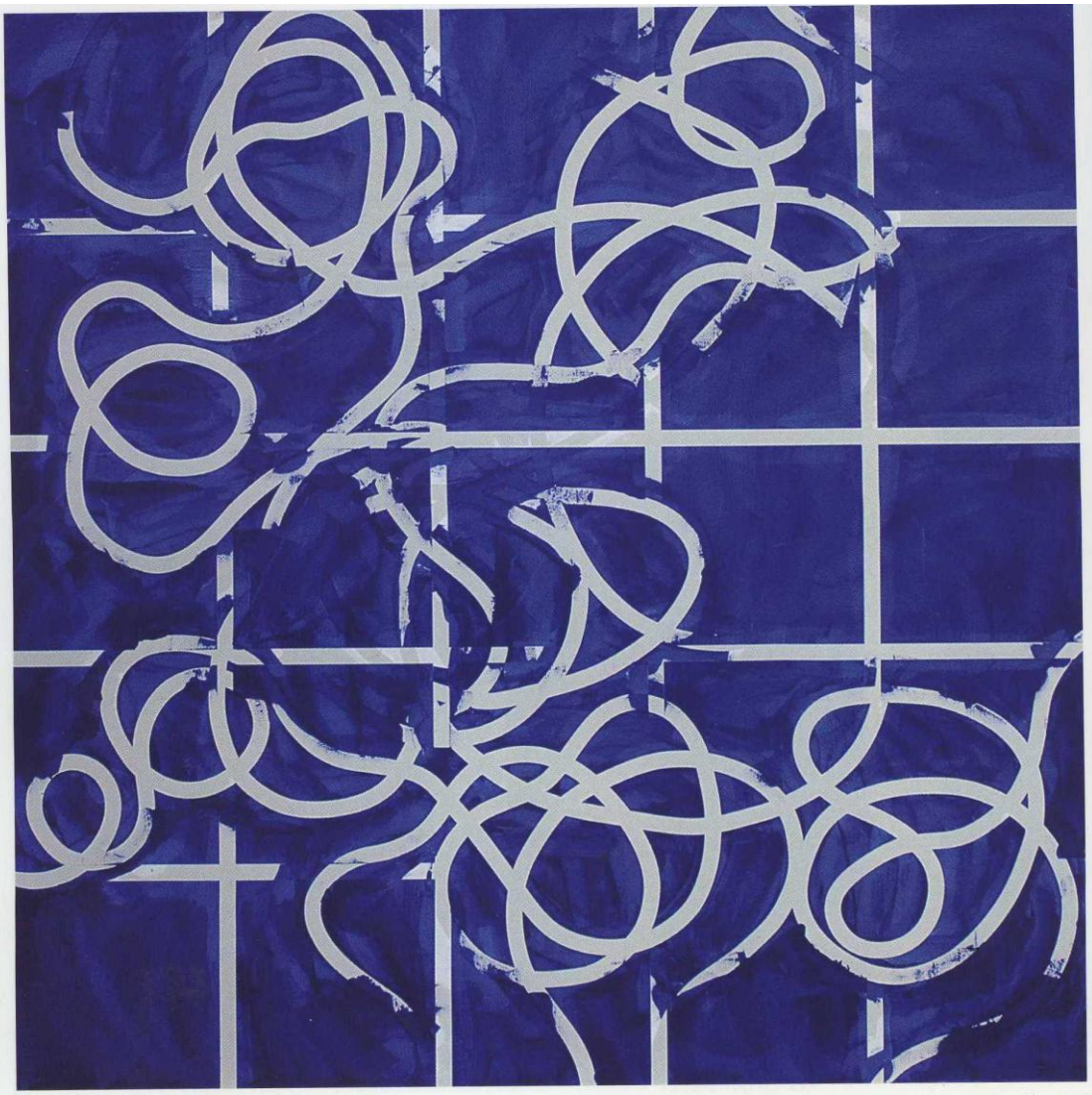
3 Ferdinand Schmatz and Heimo Zobernig, *Farbenlehre*, Vienna and New York: Springer, 1995. Both perspectives are brought together in a publication by Zobernig that appeared on the occasion of his solo show at the Peter Pakesch gallery in Vienna in 1987. *Heimo Zobernig* (exh. cat.), Vienna: Galerie Peter Pakesch, 1987.

Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1984, oil on canvas, 100 × 100cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

sculptures in 1988, and again in 1997 as scenic props for the set design of an artists' television studio initiated by Joseph Zehler, Hans-Christian Dany and Stephan Dillemuth at Galerie Christian Nagel in Cologne.[4] In contrast, the 'stripe paintings' consist of vertical stripes of pure pigment of different widths, suggesting television test screens. The stripes are arranged according to specific criteria referring to the darkness of the hues, the levels of contrast or the presence of complementary colours. Generally placed alongside one another, these canvases are painted with colours chosen randomly from pre-existing lists, and have a modular square format. This formal continuity also reappears in the 'grid paintings', which hang obliquely in diamond shapes at different heights and intervals. The silent and pure optical nature of the grid, a classic system of organisation from Max Bill and Sol LeWitt's chequered boards to Piet Mondrian's grates, thwarts the spectators' thirst for visual pleasure. At the same time, it reflects Zobernig's penchant for what W.J.T. Mitchell has called a 'de-purified artistic opticality accompanied by a de-throning of the notion of the artist as the creator of an original *image*, a novel visual gestalt that bursts fully formed from the mind of the artistic "seer" to dazzle and fixate the spectator.'[5]

4 Respectively, at a group exhibition at Isabella Kacprzak Gallery, Stuttgart, in 1988 titled 'Franz West, Neue Skulpturen, Kollaborationen Herbert Brandl und Heimo Zobernig', and 'Ein Fernsehstudio für UTV' ('A Television Studio for UTV') at Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, 1997.

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.245.

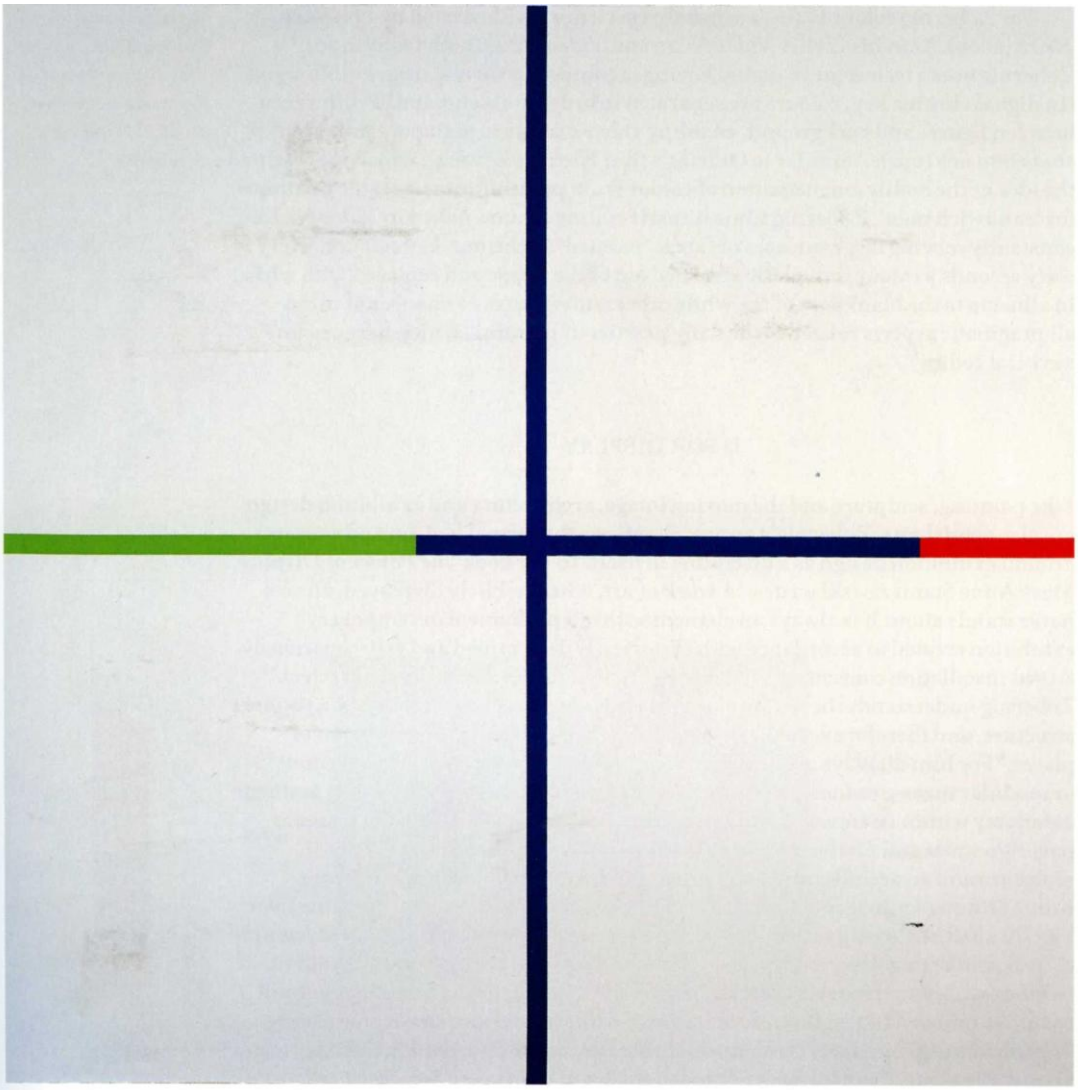


Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 200 × 200cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

The composition and rhythm of his 'nets' are constantly reinterpreted, for example, through the use of chroma-key colours derived from video technology that he has been regularly using since the 1990s – in particular the ultramarine tone that is commonly used for weather forecasts. This blue background is employed in place of a white canvas. The fabric's blue colour appears to be progressively erased by thick coats of white acrylic paint; in other instances, the white canvas is covered by different layers of transparency and opacity. These pictures give the impression that the grids, ranging from a simple painted cross to strips of fabric sewn together, are blocked off by white squares of what would be otherwise considered negative space (i.e. raw canvas). Lately, this technique has been abandoned in favour of lines made with masking tape, a method Mondrian used in 1918 in the preparation of his works, and which Zobernig reintroduces to allude to painting's enquiry into three-dimensional space.[6] According to Zobernig, stripes, grids and monochromes belong to an 'encyclopaedia of painting'. Another series made of round stones of Swarovski crystals functions as a reminder that the dialectic between elite and mass culture adopts diverse forms, and that the dichotomy between the rarefied practice of art and the more 'vulgar' realities around it is crucial for both Modernism's discriminatory norms and postmodernism's anti-bourgeois protocols.

6 Unlike Mondrian, who removed the tape in the finished works, Zobernig leaves it on the canvas.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1984, acrylic, bluebox greenbox, video red Trevira Television CS fabric, 200 × 200cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

In 1810 Goethe published the scientific essay *Theory of Colours*, in which he argued that light, shadows, grey and complementary colours affect both the eye and the feelings. According to his thesis, the colour we see depends on light and an object's properties, as well as – and equally – on our perception of those two variables. Colours are subjective phenomena related to perceptual psychology that, in turn, depends on a matrix of conditions through which we discern external factors such as the blue of the sky. In 1963 Joseph Albers published *Interaction of Colour*, an influential contribution to the development of colour theory, in which he introduced the idea that colours are governed by both internal and deceptive logics, such as illusions of transparency, reversions or the vanishing of boundaries and contrasts – phenomena created by the interaction of colours in the foreground and background of a picture. Interestingly, in the same year that Albers's essay was published, Hélio Oiticica began his *Bólides* (1963–69), painted wood and glass boxes that contained, among other elements, sediment of raw pigment. In these hybrid paintings and sculptures, viewers could experience colour by touch and smell as much as by sight, a sensory experience that, embodying a radical approach to understanding colour, suggested a potential to liberate society from the restrictive conditions of late capitalism – an idea not far from Wilhelm Reich's model of an unconditional regime of biological freedom.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

For Zobernig colour is also a sensual experience, as illustrated by his *Video Nr 18* (2000). As in his earlier *Video Nr 12* and *Video Nr 14* (both from 1996), Zobernig uses a technique of digital keying to compose a surreal, impossible scene. (In digital chroma key, colours are separated in order to accentuate the difference between figures and background, enabling video-makers to juxtapose numerous shots into one image.) Similar to Oiticica's film *Parangolé* (1964), which represented the idea of the bodily emancipation of colour from painting into wearable costumes for 'sandwich men', Zobernig films himself rolling around naked in *Video Nr 18*, constantly moving large surfaces of fabric 'painted' in chroma-key colours. Every sixty seconds a colour is digitally screened out of the image and replaced with white, in allusion to the blankness of the white canvas, to erasures or changes of mind – all pragmatic aspects related to the daily practice of painting, which here assume a critical coding.

Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1999. Installation view at Kunstverein München Munich. Photograph Archiv HZ

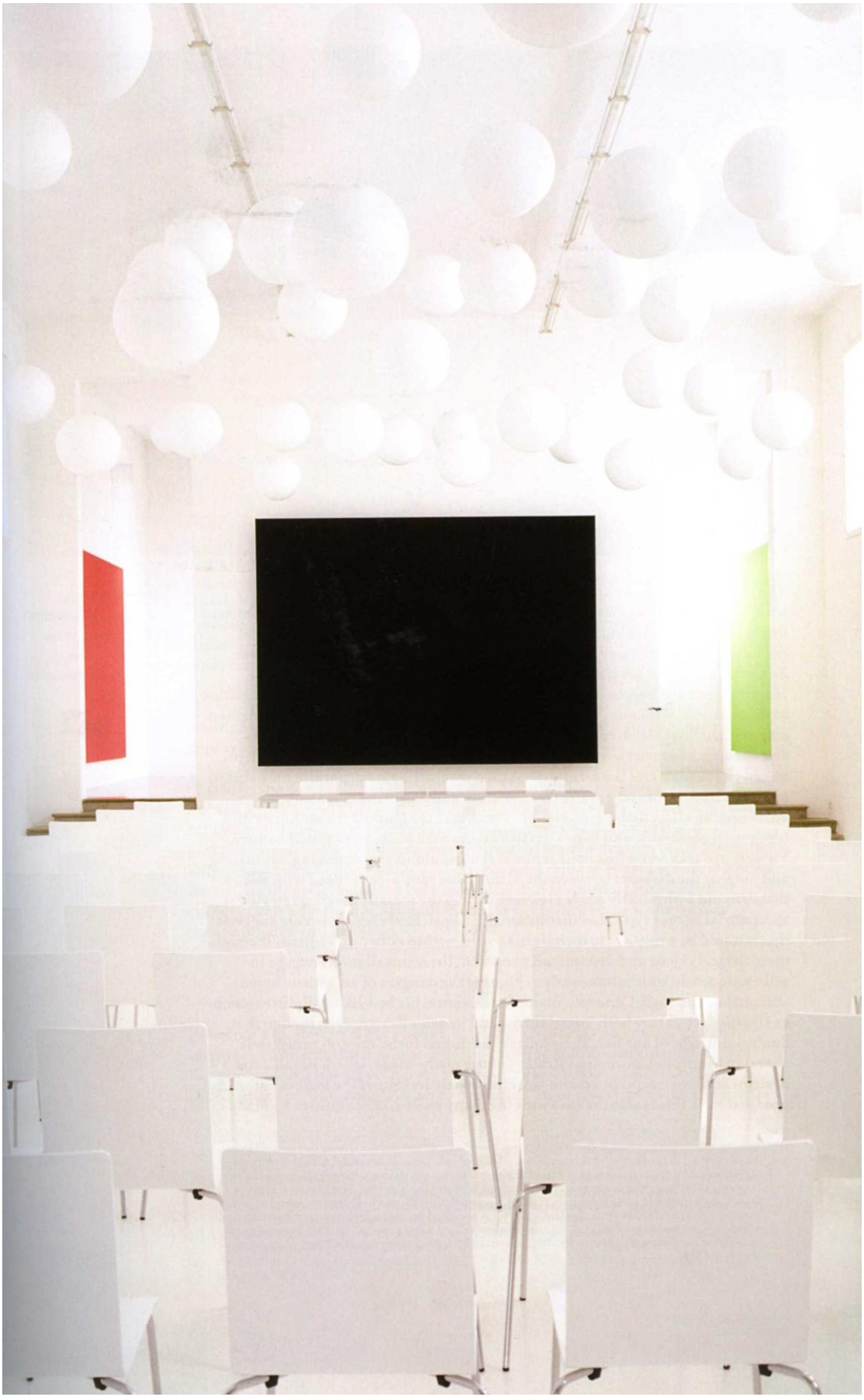
D FOR DISPLAY

Like painting, sculpture and the moving image, architecture and exhibition design are also spatial arts. Zobernig's approach reflects the formal lexicon and concepts around exhibition design as a discipline in itself. In her book *The Power of Display*, Mary Anne Staniszewski writes: 'A work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone: it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition created in accordance with historically determined and self-consciously staged installation conventions (in other words, time and site-bound character).'[7] Zobernig understands the notion of display not in terms of the creation of a support structure, and therefore secondary, but as a spatial and optical demarcation of places.[8] For him displays are sculptural installations, architectural 'corrections' or modular mass-produced office and home furniture that claim their own aesthetic autonomy within an interior, and integrate the artworks with ordinary screens, partition walls and platforms. For instance, *Weisses Kubus* (2002) is both a sculpture and an architectural component. Invited by the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna to connect two galleries divided on the same floor by a lift shaft, Zobernig responded by creating a white passage that allowed visitors to walk from one gallery to the other without perceiving any spatial interruption. For the exhibition 'Jetztzeit' at Kunsthalle Wien in 1994, he made a purpose-built room illuminated by red fluorescent lamps; in this immersive atmosphere hung fifteen paintings by Albert Oehlen which, because of the unorthodox lighting, lost almost all colour, their surface reduced to shades of lightness.[9] For *Untitled* (1999) at Kunstverein München, Zobernig turned the exhibition space's grey floor, ceiling and walls into a classic white cube out of which a 'cinema auditorium' paradoxically emerged from the reversed tone of a black projection screen. He arranged one hundred white chairs in rows, placed two tables on a podium-like structure in front of a black Molton fabric (the textile used for theatre curtains) stretched into a three-by-four-metre projection screen, and hung seventy large Styrofoam balls from the ceiling. With such means of intervention Zobernig departs from the canonical, idealised and fetishised space for presenting contemporary art, and does it from within – by adding white to white. At the same time, by reversing and disorienting the formulaic colour palette of the film space – the 'black box' – he destabilises the separation between audience and screen, and reclaims the physicality of cinema-goers who no longer are invisible bodies swallowed by obscurity.

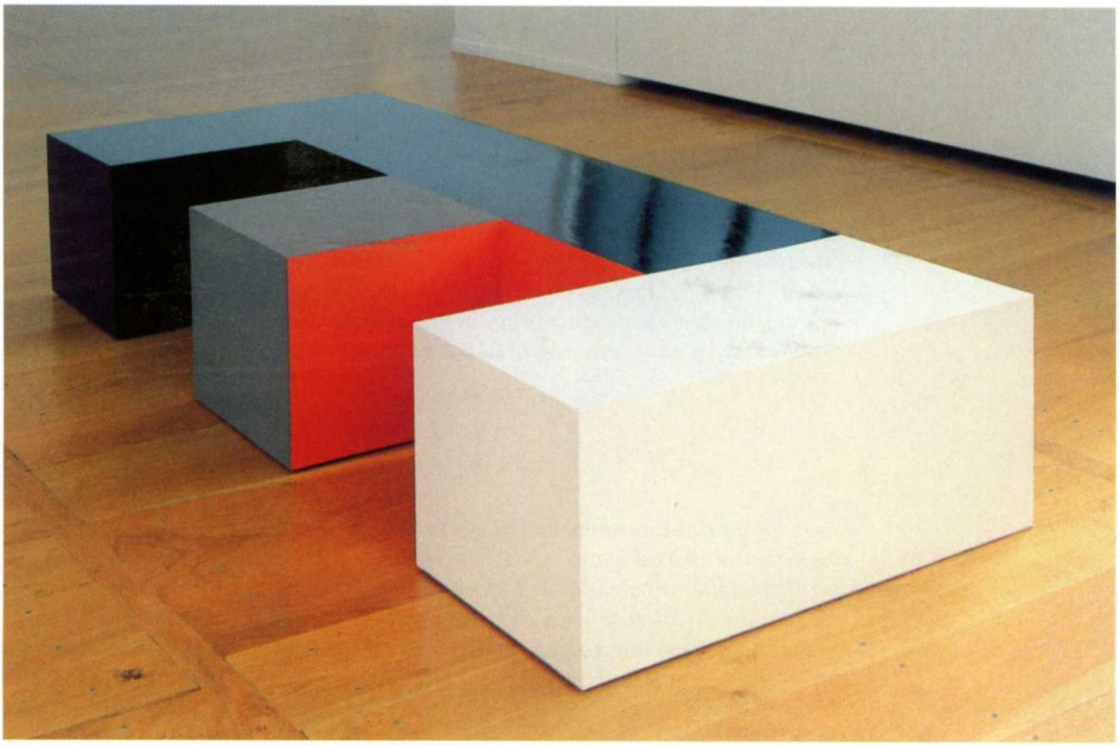
Most of Zobernig's installations acknowledge artists, architects and graphic designers who, between the 1920s and 70s and in conjunction with the rise of mass media, conceived innovative presentation designs, from Herbert Bayer and Friedrich

7 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998, p.xix.
8 The notion of display has been a subject of enquiry in his lecture 'Displaced Display: The Drama of Display', given at Lisbon's Centro Cultural de Belem in 2000, and of an artist's book of the same title published by Kunstraum Innsbruck in 2006.
9 This intervention was inspired by Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which was painted in black, white and grey tones, as he considered colour inappropriate for portraying the horrors of the Spanish Civil War

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1987, synthetic resin lacquer, wood, 40 × 80 × 200cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

Kiesler to Allan Kaprow and Michael Asher.[10] They also suggest a familiarity with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, which had a significant impact on artists working in New York in 1960s (including Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt) who redefined and revised the triad of art-space-viewer. However, Zobernig's Spartan sobriety rejects the idea of an environment as a formal framing device or psychological situation that demands the viewers' participation, as those artists' works do. The emotionless, demystifying character of his elementary syntax (floor slabs, pillars, mirrors, room dividers, curtains, pavilions and so forth, characteristic of the Minimalist programme), its rigid formalism, naked physicality and frequently de-skilled production incorporates the exhibition site itself into its formal parameters, position and orientation. It also triggers an alienation effect that warns viewers not to take for granted the authority of Modernist aesthetics, and to be alert to its dominant position in visual culture. Viewers are asked to refine their sense of critical inquiry by assessing, evaluating and judging the dialectic between the Minimalist canon, concerned with works that demand a physically active viewership, and the socially aware strategies of spectatorial agency typical of institutional critique. However, Zobernig suggests that it would be a mistake to include his works within either movement. Through their clerical rigour and disciplined precision, these installations engage in self-critique while simultaneously critiquing the dangers of an autistic hyper-abstraction and high-Conceptualism. For instance, his bed-like sculptures (such as *Untitled*, 1992) are both 'mere' forms and interior design, even though they don't claim to be of any use. Their 'quasi-functional form' doesn't completely abandon the proto-Conceptual strategy of the ready-made, which heralds the death of craftsmanship in art and simultaneously welcomes the logic of industrial production.[11] This is also the case with the many shelf-like sculptures he made

10 In 1961 the Austrian graphic designer Herbert Bayer wrote: 'Exhibition design has evolved as a new discipline, as an apex of all media and powers of communication and of collective efforts and effects. The combined means of visual communication constitutes a remarkable complexity: language as visible printing or as a sound, pictures as symbols, paintings, and photos, sculptural media, materials and surfaces, colour, light, movement (of display as well as the visitor), films, diagrams and charts. The total application of all plastic and psychological means (more than anything else) makes exhibition design an intensified and new language.' Herbert Bayer, *Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums*, 1961. Quoted in M.A. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, *op. cit.*, p.38.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

in the late 1980s and 90s, the stacking chairs he began making in 2000 – imitating the classic shell-shaped plywood seats by Arne Jacobsen and painted in classicistic gold – or the IKEA 'Billy' modular shelf units arranged in L-shaped configurations.

F FOR FORM (AND FUNCTION)

Zobernig often leaves the base of his works visible – to reveal, for instance, the physicality of raw canvas or particle board, suggesting that the material exists as part of the artwork before the work itself is added to it. Like his reconsideration of the status of exhibition design, Zobernig undoes the traditional hierarchy between object and support.[12] Transportation crates become plinths; poster- and toilet-roll tubes become sculptures; Styrofoam rectangles serve as scenic props for an artists' television studio; sheets of half-transparent mirror foil or black rubber blinds become room-dividing screens or curtains. Such versatility is made possible by Zobernig's tendency to use commercial prefabricated construction materials of standardised measure, so that a slab of wooden chipboard painted white can be both a single piece and part of a larger installation, like the stage set he designed for documenta 9 in 1992. This was the first of a series of functional platforms built for the following two documentas: a conference room made in 1997 for documenta X. and an information lounge for one of the initial platforms for Documenta11 in 2001. The hybrid appearance of these works reveals Zobernig's increasing association with socially-engaged aspects of art, which involve a set of 'services' designed and regulated by the artist. However, the resemblance of these projects to information and recreational areas within art institutions has often been mistaken for a critique of the institutional frame. Already in 1992 at Kunstverein München he restyled the ticket desk at the entrance, installed a large mirror above the cafeteria and designed shelving units and a reading room. Though the change to the ticket desk was simply a modification of the desk itself – it was painted orange to emphasise its volume, while the mirror gave an illusion of an enlarged space – the other two interventions made more noticeable changes. The shelving units involved tilted display boards to present the covers of books rather than their spines, and the reading room consisted of a bench running along the entire length of the wall of one of the galleries, with seating at the same height as a large table in the middle of the room.[13] Although appearing as functional improvements of the interior design, in reality these 'corrections', as he has often called them, attempt to resolve the ideological impasse caused by the dominance of the white cube. Maintaining his usual, zealous control, Zobernig interrogates the specific nature of this kind of space. On the other hand, his deconstructions of exhibition galleries are formal endeavours that do not perform any strategic critique or comment on the inner workings of art institutions. Differently from Kontext Kunst and institutional critique artists, whose attention focused on the social relations between public and institution, his systematic enquiry deals with the aesthetic autonomy or neutrality of the white cube as the assumed normality of art.

T FOR TEXT

Zobernig's interest in artist's books, catalogues, editing and graphic design identifies an alternative manner of dealing with spatial arrangements. Most of his printed work is neither literary nor purely visual. His *Lexikon der Kunst 1992* (*Lexicon of Art 1992*, 1992)[14] is an alphabetical list of visual art terms and names

11 Jan Winckelmann, 'Intuitive Formalismen', *Heimo Zobernig: Kunst und Text* (exh. cat.), Bonn, Leipzig and Munich: Bonner Kunstverein, Galerie für Zeitgenossische Kunst Leipzig, Kunstverein München, 1998, p.33.

12 This principle is equally valid for the paintings, in which emulsions, primers and synthetic resins climb to the finished surface, even though their seemingly careless brushwork looks like a paint-job. If until the 1990s most of his works were characterised by an industrial colour palette, later more varied colours appear, such as blues, browns, oranges and yellows.

13 All these architectural 'modifications' were removed later but reconstructed in 1999 on the occasion of his solo exhibition at the Kunstverein.

14 See Ferdinand Schmatz and Heimo Zobernig, *Lexikon der Kunst 1992*, Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1992.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

of friends and acquaintances – a use of language so strict that it reads like a version of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1911–13) for the art world of the time. Reminiscent of the synthetic alphabets by Italian designer Bruno Munari, which demonstrated how graphic structures gave letters meaning, Zobernig's textual layouts can also seem three-dimensional, as his wall painting on the façade of Klagenfurt University demonstrates (*Untitled*, 2002). He seems to have a sentimental attachment to the Helvetica typeface, which he has employed since 1986 for exhibition titles, invitation posters and catalogues, and which he seems to cherish for its neutral, clear and flexible character.[15] Since its invention in 1957 by the Swiss designer Max Miedinger, Helvetica has been a popular choice for signage and commercial advertising worldwide, as no obvious stylistic meaning has been assigned to its form. Throughout the 1990s Zobernig used single upper-case Helvetica letters to title his exhibitions and projects; large black vinyl letters would be placed 115 centimetres high at the entrance of his solo exhibitions, acting as a signpost or wall tattoo. This designation gives an idea of progression, limited to 26 glyphs, and is a means of indirect branding, or subtle corporate identity that returned in a large wall-display system created for a show at Secession, Vienna in 1995 that spelled out '95 HZ', only 'readable' from above.

Book editing also has been an important facet of Zobernig's practice. For instance, the catalogue of his solo show at Kunsthalle Bern in 1994 was modelled on the catalogue for Harald Szeemann's exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form', which took place in the same venue in 1969. Like that catalogue, Zobernig's bound together hole-punched sheets of A4 paper in a cardboard ring binder (the cover is blue rather than the original pale yellow). But instead of sections including artists' pages, his book contains black-and-white views of the building's architecture, installation views of the exhibition, and a reprint of a photocopied brochure produced for his solo exhibition at Villa Arson in 1991. That brochure included transcripts of lectures discussing the relationship between art practice and its social surroundings, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'art world', understood as the social legitimation provided by cultural institutions for their public.[16] This type of artistic activity reveals Zobernig's role as performative curator, focused not only on inventing new presentation formats but also oriented towards a dialogical and discursive understanding of art. The same unorthodox procedure applies in his strategic reintroduction of older works into new formal solutions, graphics, texts and objects, thus creating a conceptual continuity in his work. Migrating from one exhibition to the other according to a sequential process of revisions, ideas integrate within an invisible curatorial process that takes place in time rather than in space.

W FOR WITZ

Are Zobernig's works agents of parody, paraphrase, irony or indexicalism? They certainly flirt with the postmodern penchant for incessantly quoting forms and sizes, or specific rules and ways of thinking from the past. They also pay homage to a relevant 'literalness' that – from De Stijl to Minimalism and Conceptualism – has shown how art's meaning resides in objects and images rather than in an epistemological framework extrapolated from the world outside. Despite such inclinations, wittiness is more suitable for describing Zobernig's art, as it differs from citation, satire or literalness. Adopting a semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visual and social constructs, theoretical discourse and figurative images, his work engages the internal logics of apparently opposed binaries; in other words, it discovers and organises similar ideas through difference.

In *The Birth to Presence* (1993), Jean-Luc Nancy writes that *Witz* is neither genre nor style, nor even a figure of rhetoric.[17] As a derisive manner, it avoids

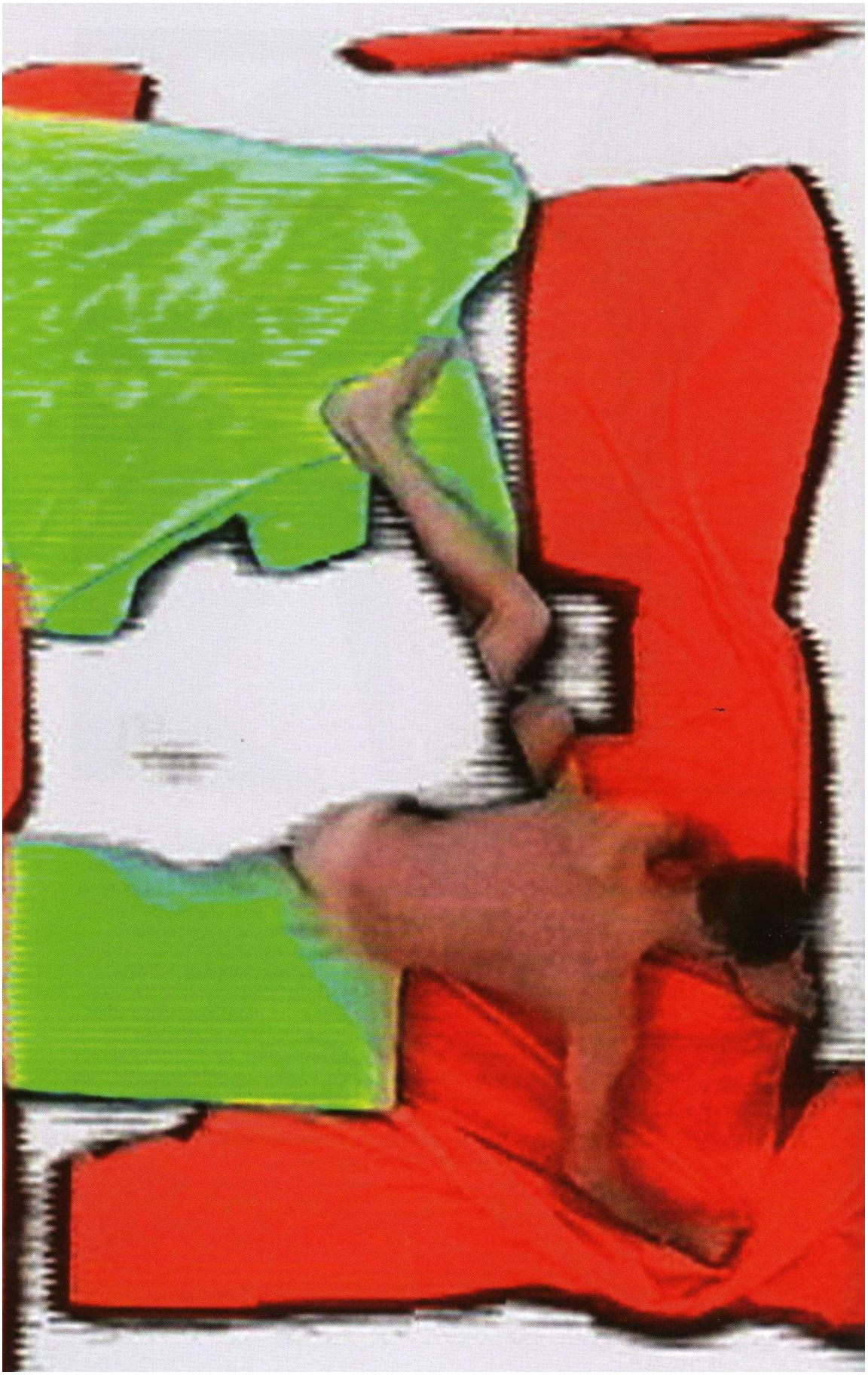
15 The same applies for most of his catalogues, which appear in standard paper size DIN A4.
16 This formula was also adopted for his solo show in Chicago's Renaissance Society in 1996, where he organised the symposium 'Planned Obsolescence' to discuss his exhibition as well as issues that at the time preoccupied the speakers (Joshua Decter, Kathryn Hixson, Ann Goldstein, Mark Wigley), indirectly related to Zobernig's own concerns.
17 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (trans. Brian Holmes), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp.248–65.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1984, acrylic on digital print and cotton, 150 × 150cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

becoming a concept, but can nonetheless have all these roles because it is always unpredictable. A procedure to make comments through unexpected combinations, *Witz* is a skill dependent on intellectual sagacity and subtlety – its origin goes hand in hand with different forms of reading and observation (deciphering, decoding, interpreting, etc.) that must meet with the viewer's ability to grasp ideas lucidly by way of unconventional or inexplicable models of thinking. Like *Witz* according to Nancy, Zobernig's work is obscure, deceptive, confusing and even 'brilliant'. The heterogeneous nature of his works begins with the inclusion of language and finishes with systematic disrespect for artistic styles, or their familiar methodological approaches. The science of *Witz* is here applied through recognisable resemblances, however succinctly disguised in a seriousness that seems to exclude any possibility of self-mockery. His works are both ingenious and dangerous – similar to Wilhelm Reich's inventions – and seduce by way of exaggeration. Zobernig's organised *Witz* satisfies the promise of a fragmentary knowledge, one that does not result from the immediate assimilation of motifs or genres, but is rather the work of a spirit of explosive genius.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



SIMON LEE

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Heimo Zobernig, *Nr 18*, 2000, video, colour, 13min, loop, still. Photograph: Archiv HZ

Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville: 'My God, a black square.'

– Mark Kremer

Heimo Zobernig's work exemplifies the potential and complexity of artistic practices that occupied a large part of the 1980s in Western Europe, a moment when artists began to take art history back on board. Growing up after the demise of Conceptual art, the Austrian artist is part of a generation for whom it was natural to reconnect with tradition, and in the mid-1980s Zobernig began an 'open artwork' in which various historical propositions of abstract art were at play (Constructivism, De Stijl, Konkrete Kunst, Minimal art). This led to a larger and lucid body of work that today covers an extensive array of experimental investigations in various media and exhibition making.

The return to tradition in the 1980s was fiercely attacked by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, who accused artists of regressive attempts to restore the visual order to one that preceded Conceptual art.[1] To Buchloh, the embrace of figurative painting signalled the art world's amnesia, and was a negative move rejecting the critical implications of Conceptualism's attempt to eradicate the visual from art practice – an act of artistic purification. But this is not the case with Zobernig, whose return to art history was done from a perspective sharpened by the Conceptual project. Zobernig's work embodies the ambivalence and hesitation with which certain artists of his generation used and processed art-historical sources. Conceptual art had confronted the naïve belief in the power and expressive potential of images, and this 'negative conviction' was carried on in the progressive propositions of the 1980s. In the same manner Zobernig's work possesses an undertone of scepticism about form as carrier of meaning *tout court* – something always seems to get lost along the way. This scepticism can be seen as a key to accessing the drives of Zobernig the artist, particularly his acknowledgement of the fall-out that accompanies the reception of the art object in the world. Zobernig embraces artistic misunderstandings, but in a methodological way. In his oeuvre, abstract art is re-enacted through ironic performances of different roles drawn from art history. The question is whether his abstractions, through the performing of such roles, could possibly forge a new relation to history.

'Stilleben mit Krone' ('Still-Life with Crown', 1983) was the title of Zobernig's first gallery exhibition at Junge Musikgalerie in Villach, Austria, a show marked by a contradictory approach to its inspirational source. This inclination recurs in his more recent work, where there appears to be both a wish to build on tradition and an urge to mock it. For 'Still-Life with Crown', Zobernig started from a painting by Max Beckmann – who at the time served as a role model for the 'neue Wilde', a young generation of German figurative painters – and was inspired by a graffiti he had seen on the façade of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna of a stick figure wearing a crown and flanked by the sentence: 'nieder mit der Scheiss Bürgerlichkeit' ('down with the lame bourgeoisie'). Zobernig symbolically 'broke' the Beckmann painting into pieces, presenting the fragments as acrylic paintings and white plaster sculptures of objects such as a crown, a sceptre and a goblet.[2]

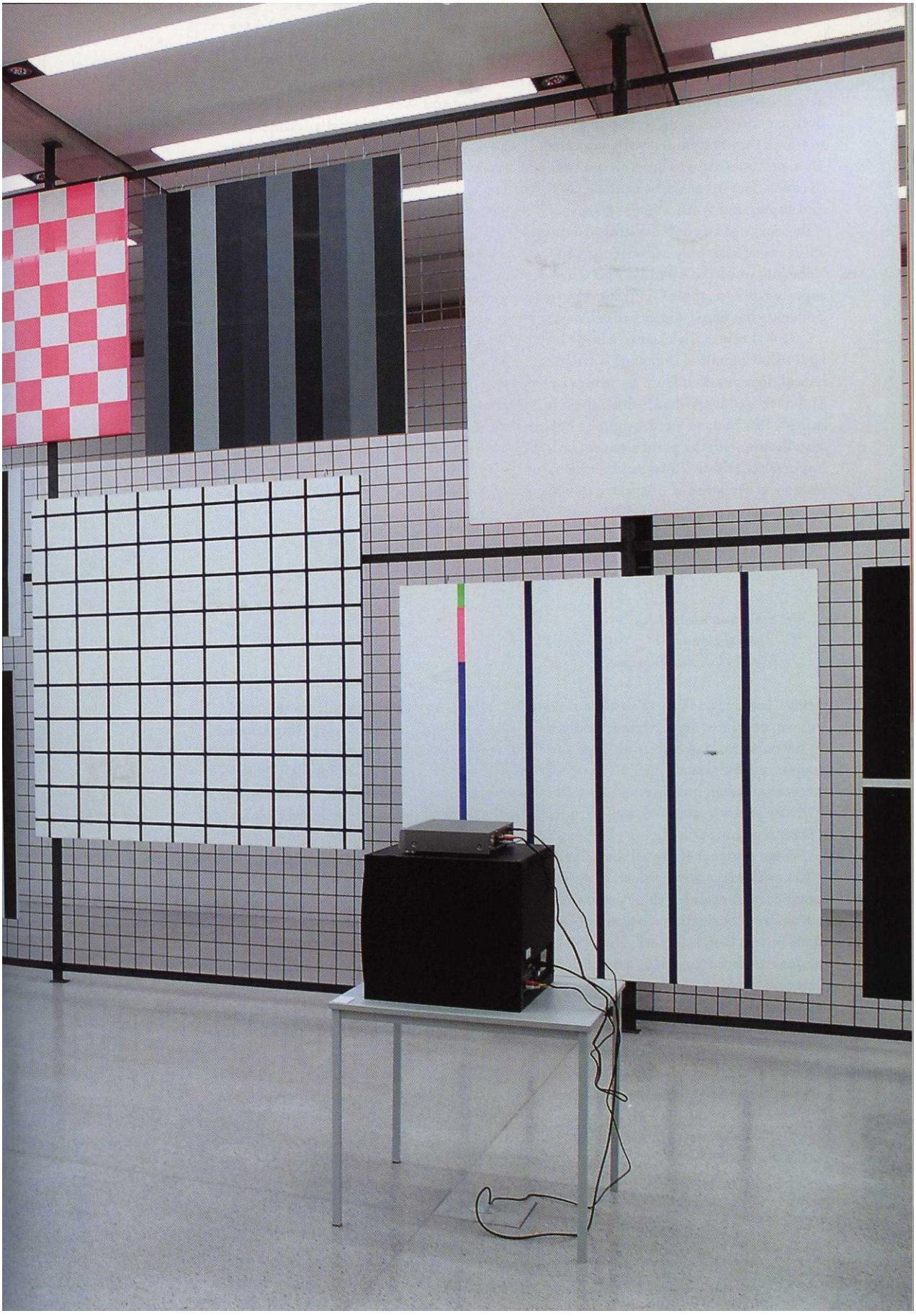
overleaf
Heimo Zobernig, installation view at MUMOK, Vienna, 2002. Photograph: Archiv HZ

1 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting', *October*, vol.16, 1981, pp.39–68.

2 Eva Badura-Triska (ed.), *Heimo Zobernig. Austelung Katerlog* (exh. cat.), Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2003, p.39. This catalogue tracks the genealogy of Zobernig's oeuvre. For what follows I have made ample use of the inventory presented in this book.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1984, oil on cardboard, 30 × 5 × 5cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

These early plaster sculptures resemble works by Franz West, whose *Paßstücke* – white plaster sculptures from the 1970s that are to be carried around in performative acts – were certainly familiar to Zobernig. Zobernig and West have much in common: both are Austrian and grew up in a politically and culturally conservative climate, to which they responded with work that mocks the idea of genres and their grandeur. Though Zobernig was born eleven years later than West, at some point the two artists saw the anarchist in each other and began to work together on various collaborative works and shows. But while West's 'disrespect' is presented in a relatively straightforward way – the image of an adult walking around with one of his sculptures makes you think of a child engaged in play – Zobernig's approach is subtle and indirect. If West were a jester, Zobernig would be a dandy. And whereas West has been consistently critiquing petrified aspects and concepts of figuration by infusing sculpture with performative elements, Zobernig has consistently broken down the vocabularies of abstract art.

This is especially clear in a large series of medium-sized paintings from the mid-1980s that signalled Zobernig's artistic maturity. The individual works seem to prolong lyrical themes taken from paintings by canonical Modernists such as Man Ray, Kazimir Malevich and Joan Miró, with a cheerful lightness that I associate with improvisation in jazz. This body of work became a beacon for Zobernig, who showed the original installation with the paintings that he did in the mid-1980s again in 2002–03.[3] What is important in these works, and in the paintings of the Modern pioneers that they openly refer to, is the sense of liberation that abstract art can convey, with forms and colours freely floating on a surface, like dancers in a space.

VAUDEVILLE

N: Someone's knocking.
C: Open the door.
N: My God, a black square.[4]

Heimo Zobernig's body of work is extremely diverse. It consists of sculptures, small-scale mock-ups of architecture, designs for two-artist and group shows, printed matter, art for public and private buildings, videos (shown as projections or on monitors), stage designs, performances, etc. All these works use simple materials and forms, and their execution is often both meticulous and casual – the surface of a sculpture, for example, might be partly unpainted, as if to indicate that, along the way, a decision was made to leave it unfinished.

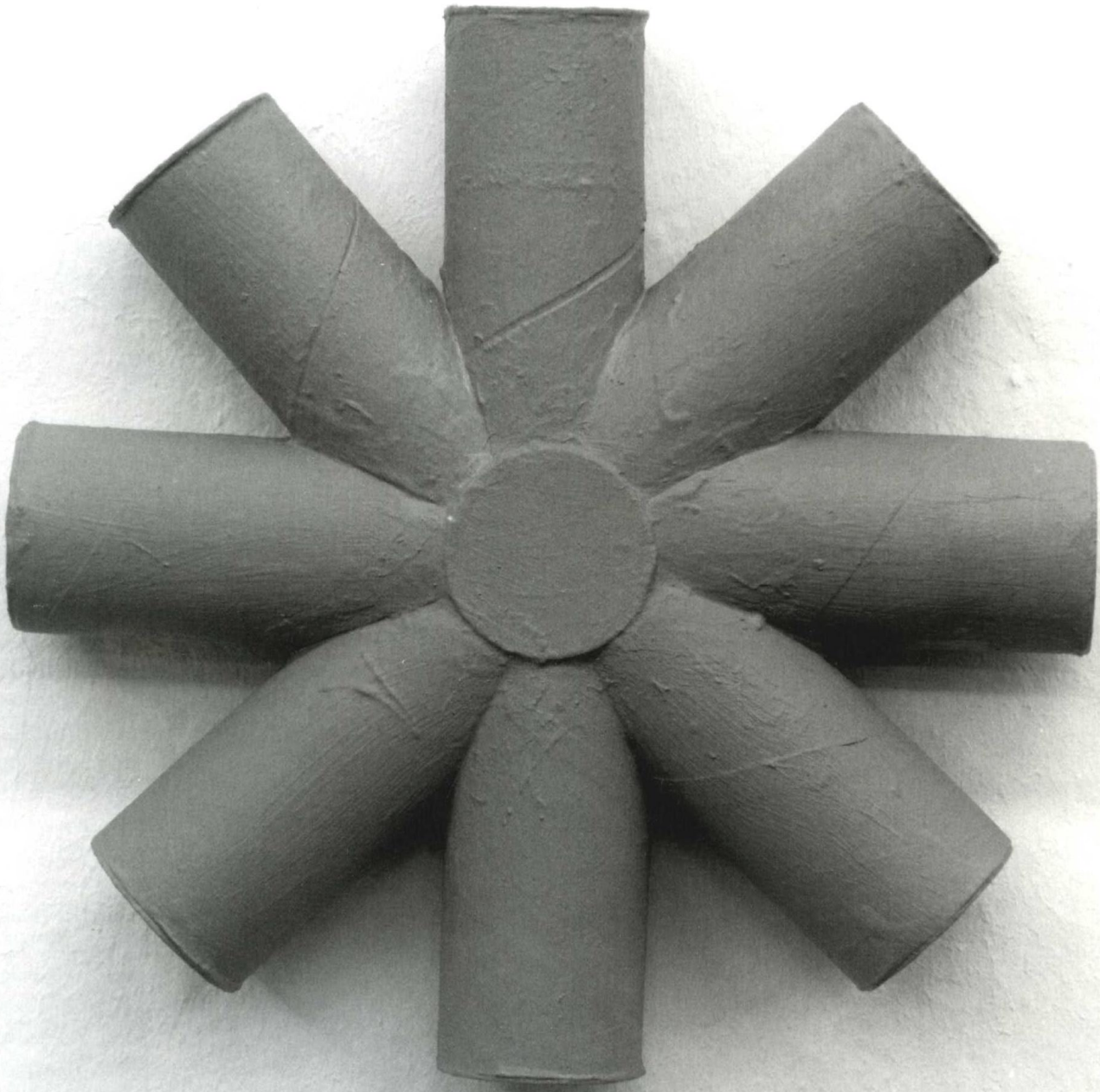
What unites them in all their differences is their shared voice of surprise and mild bewilderment, as if they, in a curious exercise of self-reflection, were speaking to themselves, confessing their puzzlement about the place where they are and the subjects they address. A similar sense of bafflement can be found in the dialogue penned in the 1970s by two Dutch writers, Henri Plaat and Cherry Duyns, which echoes Zobernig's deadpan humour as well as a tradition important to the reading of his work: vaudeville.[5] Plaat and Duyns collaborated on a series of sketches for television, written and acted from the early 1970s to the late 90s by Duyns, the artist Armando and the performing poet Johnny the Selfkicker. The television series, *Herenleed. Een programma van wanhoop en verlangen (Gentlemen Sorrows: A Programme of Despair and Longing)*, was inspired by circus and vaudeville acts.[6]

Vaudeville is a style of multiple-act theatre that flourished in North America from the 1880s through the 1920s. A typical evening's bill of performances would range from acrobats to mathematicians, song-and-dance duos to trick highdivers, giving the overall event a uniquely varied scope: music, feats of athleticism, magic, Shakespeare, comedy, operetta, banjo, acrobatics and gymnastics, animal acts and lectures by celebrities or intellectuals of every provenance. An essential element of many acts

3 'Nachbau der Ausstellung in der Galerie Peter Pakesch, Wien, 27.1.—23.2.1985, 2003', ('Reconstruction of the exhibition at Gallery Peter Pakesch, Vienna, 27 January—23 February 1985, 2003'), MUMOK, Vienna, 2002—03.
4 Dialogue by Henry Plaat and Cherry Duyns in the 1970s. See John Heymans, *Herfstlied: Over Cherry Duyns*, Amsterdam: Thomas Rap, 2006, p.110. Translation the author's.
5 See *Ibid.*
6 In 2004 the complete series was made commercially available on five DVDs.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1984, oil on cardboard, 25 × 25 × 5cm. Photograph: Archiv HZ

were the verbal gags, to which a mixed-gender audience would respond immediately, by booing or cheering. In the 1930s vaudeville fell into decline, partly because of the advent of affordable cinema tickets. Ironically, in the US the first movies were originally screened to large audiences in vaudeville halls.

With the extinction of vaudeville as a financially viable business, over the years its ideas and forms have transmigrated to other art realms and genres. One locus where they seem to have moved to is the abstractions of Zobernig. In true vaudevillian fashion, it seems possible to compose an evening's bill of the different manifestations of his work. A look at Zobernig's art through the lens of vaudeville shows that a similar punch of puzzlement is experienced: in his exhibitions it seems as if a form or a shape has just landed in the space, with the spectator surprised to find him or herself next to it. An example of this effect is an early series of untitled sculptures from 1986 that uses dry humour to mock Minimalist art. Made of toilet-roll tubes assembled into neat, pristine formations hanging from a wall, these inventive sculptures have a cool sensuality about them – even an unexpected eroticism, where tubes resemble limbs with secret openings. The works conveyed an upfront energy and courage – the guts any artist needs in order to put his hands on a venerable legacy.

Zobernig has been making work for over two decades, yet it seems to get younger as time goes by, as if the artist, year after year, were carving out the rogue within himself. As the work keeps on developing, an undercurrent of amused thought manifests itself: earnest ideas can be fun, it seems to be saying. This comes directly from the artist's formative years and his interest in and early engagement with theatre and performance. The recent reappearance of a performative element in the work, re-surfacing after so many years, shouldn't surprise us. After all, performance is often at its best as the cuckoo's egg, laid and hatched in others' nests, and one day just saying: 'Here I am.'

Recently Zobernig even 'performed' as a curator. He exhibited his own work in dialogue with, respectively, works from the collection of Tate St Ives, and works from the collection of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.[7] Both collections contain works from the classical Modernist period to which Zobernig is so often drawn, possibly because of what can easily be found in these early abstractions: the joy of experiment and improvisation. The exhibitions in St Ives and Lisbon showed a happy artist going back to his roots, chasing the free flow of forms pursued by the pioneers of abstraction.

Role play often occurs in Zobernig's work. For instance, in the Lisbon show a partition wall was taken down and turned into a plinth for a collection of Arne Jacobsen chairs and their anonymous derivatives, which were painted gold. The plinth featured all the scars of this operation, as nothing had been done to hide the traces of saws. Elsewhere a huge beam hung from the ceiling. Normally theatre lights are fixed to such a construction, but in this case it served to suspend three curtains in chroma-key colours (blue, red and green), which have since been used as a backdrop in some of Zobernig's recent videos. Here a background item – the beam connecting two separate gallery spaces – became a protagonist. Also remarkable was the way Zobernig dealt with the collection of the Gulbenkian Foundation: a selection of works he liked most was chosen from it, and each was hung chronologically on a line at eye-level, stretching across two oblong gallery spaces. As a result, some of the paintings stuck out in front of a hanging wall, their backs visible from the other side.

The exhibition became an ironic reflection on the ever-growing complexity of the art system, and the extent to which art economy, art discourse and the daily practices of art are intricately intertwined. The display of the works reflected the desire to take off and end this whole game, but at the same time they were condemned to fall back to earth. Just like the melancholic protagonists in the TV programme *Herenleed*, a sense of being lost is met by a mixture of Zen and Dada:

> ***Armando: Do you know the four-times table yet?***
> ***Duyns: Yes, I have mastered it. A beautiful table by the way.***
> ***Armando: Exactly my opinion, nice to find someone who thinks the same.***
> ***Duyns: Ah, sir, the four-times table is my favourite one. I know it inside out.***

7 'Heimo Zobernig and The Tate Collection', Tate St Ives, 2008—09 and 'Heimo Zobernig', Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, 2009. These shows were based on a collaboration between the two art institutions, which also temporarily exchanged pieces from their collections.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Armando: I think it is the most beautiful of all the four tables.
Duyns: Yes, so do I. Though I've heard the five-times table may be very beautiful as well.
Armando: Yes, there you've got it, that one I do not know. I only know four.
Duyns: So do I.[8]

'Heimo Zobernig and The Tate Collection', 2008, Installation view, Tate St Ives. Photograph: © Tate Photography. Courtesy of the artist

DOUBLING

My experience of Zobernig's art began in the 1990s. I recall his shows of that era as being reticent, as if they were built around a void. Was this because of the artist's realisation that the ideals of the pioneers of abstraction weren't alive anymore? A room with his work could look as if it had been filled only with sparse forms or shapes, but in the emptiness around them things were always happening. A sense of the legacy of refined ideas and knowledge lurked in his exhibitions, as if the works were mirrors within this realm of shadows, constantly producing a double effect. This doubling actually occurred in his work on several levels. In the first place, there was the activity of reproducing formal and theoretical elements taken from art history in studio practice – an activity that has always been at the core of his work. Secondly, at a certain moment Zobernig started to make site-specific works that abstracted from and reflected on the habits and expectations we have of art spaces. These works can be read in terms of institutional critique, but their hallmark is a pseudo-naïve blandness that mirrors the material conditions of a given art place. A recent example is a group of site-specific interventions in the architecture of the deSingel cultural centre in Antwerp, which uses second-hand set materials stored at the site.[9] This work, titled *Stellproben* (*Set Attempts*, 2009), was developed in response to an invitation by curator Moritz Küng, who in recent years has organised an international series of one-person exhibitions in a building that doesn't have an actual exhibition space. Zobernig's work doubled typical elements of a 1960s building that radiates confused futurism, with its large curved and anthropomorphic windows that seem to have come straight out of *The Flintstones*' Stone Age.

A third instance of doubling can be seen in more recent works, in which the artist holds a mirror in front of his own art practice and mimics the impulses that define it – such as his mixed exploration of different genres. A case in point is the video *Nr 24* (2007), which offers a visual allegory of the meeting of painting and performance. Zobernig appears naked, engaged in a mock struggle with three antagonists wearing oversized jumpsuits, again in the blue, red and green chroma-key colours. Through this opposition, the work functions as a parable about the condition of the artwork in an age of digital technology. The figures threaten to waste Zobernig: they put tape over his mouth and genitals, wrestle with him, and heap art magazines and catalogues upon him until he virtually collapses. A reviewer described the video as a failure in its attempt to critique the art world: 'The atmosphere is alternately clownish and threatening, and despite its allusions to amateur theatre, poking fun at the body as surrogate object and performative vehicle (Wiener Aktionismus, for example), the video is not much more than a soft critique of the art world (as well as of the putative authority of the artist), and one defeated by the saturation of irony.'[10] I disagree, however, and instead find something inspirational in the video's allegory of an artist losing track. The work emits raw energy and raw irony. Rabelais's crude laughter is projected onto the enterprise of abstraction and its fate in the twenty-first century. The work tells a story of both oppression and redemption in art – two sides of the coin that artists hold in their hands.

With the development of his practice throughout the years, a clearer image of Zobernig the artist appears – figured and spoofed by Zobernig himself. The cover of the book *Austelung Katerlog* shows him wearing sunglasses and posing self-consciously at a piano, as if he were an artist's stand-in, a body double – thus doubling again.[11] The image of the artist as a 'rebel' creates a specific contrast with the serious contents

8 J. Heymans, *Herfstlied*, *op. cit.*, p.108, note 4. Translation the author's.
9 Heimo Zobernig, *Stellproben*, deSingel, Antwerp, 2008—09.
10 Joshua Decter, 'Heimo Zobernig. Friedrich Petzel Gallery', *Artforum*, Summer 2008. Also available at http://i1.exhibit-e.com/petzel/7775f059.pdf (last accessed on 12 February 2009).
11 See cover of E. Badura-Triska (ed.), *Heimo Zobernig. Austelung Katerlog*, *op. cit.*

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

Heimo Zobernig, *Stellproben* (*Set Attempts*), 2009, installation view deSingel, Antwerp. Photograph: © Jan Kempenaers

of the book, a publication that takes stock of a practice of abstraction. The fact that this activity of doubling has such a prominent place in his oeuvre is possibly a sign of the condition of isolation that abstract art finds itself in today. To create a perspective into his work, Zobernig had to build himself a house of mirrors where ideas and motifs reflect one another from any conceivable angle.[12] The point was not to get caught in the act.

DOS AND DON'TS

In the mid-1980s, at around the time Zobernig was making the works using toilet rolls, he also started a series of freestanding sculptures made of cardboard. The sculptures take the Minimalist legacy to a mundane, do-it-yourself level. A number of them were included by Harald Szeemann in his exhibition 'De Sculptura', where sculptural positions developed in the 1960s and 70s (Minimal and Conceptual art, Land art, Arte Povera, etc.) were shown in conjunction with pieces by young artists.[13] 'Zoomorph' was how Harald Szeemann called a sub-group of Zobernig's works that consist of geometric figures in black-painted cardboard, suggesting forms taken from life, such as a cylinder placed on four rectangular legs resembling a hippopotamus.

These ambiguous shapes come with a long history. For example, you might find similar typologies combining the abstract and the concrete, the constructive and the organic in the artworks that decorate the corners of bridges in Amsterdam from the 1920s. These figures tell a story of domesticated constructivism. It is if they are saying: 'Here is an artist who tames shapes like a circus *dompteur* his animals.' Zobernig's series of sculptures has a provocative angle, as Minimalist art is ironically restaged, and the sobriety of its vocabulary is either understated or overstated. An exemplary work of this extreme is a plinth that has grown and become a tall sculpture, but which now is tarred and covered with feathers as if punished for his desire to become more than what it actually is (what the ancient Greeks called ***hubris***).

Zobernig tends to make systemic bodies of work that comprise a repertoire of forms or utterances. These corpora mimic the rules, the dos and don'ts of art, addressing blind spots of visual vocabulary, combining genres that aren't supposed to mix, setting up a confusion of contexts. His work often suggests autonomy and self-reference, but these abstract aspects are eclipsed by its concrete presence, as once in a room his objects instantly set up connections with what is around them. A particular body of work focused on this mixing of contexts is a series of graphic interventions in art spaces, for which Zobernig printed Helvetica letters in alphabetical order on a gallery wall. The series started with 'A' at the EA Robbin Lockett Gallery in Chicago in 1990, and ended two years later with 'Z' at documenta 9 in 1992. The work imitated the look of many of the contemporary abstractions by which we are surrounded in everyday life – in fashion or lifestyle advertising – and which blend concrete and abstract qualities, signified and signifier.

In 2000 Zobernig began working on a series of grid paintings. He wanted to emulate a painting by Mondrian as reinterpreted by Ian Burn – a member of Art & Language in the 1970s – in the painting *Yellow Blue Equivalence* (1965–66). This led to a series of works made with rich materials such as Swarovski crystals, with coloured linear oscillating patterns that created still and vibrant effects. This series writes a new chapter in the history of Op art, a movement that had virtually vanished from art history. In recent correspondence Zobernig wrote:

> *The trigger was a picture in the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2004. Before he went to England, Burn painted pictures in Australia using Mondrian's* Composition with Grid 3 (Diamond Painting) *of 1918 as template. Burn's painting at GoMA is a variation in dimension and colour and was described by him as 'bringing Mondrian to the Modern Space'. The lines become the foreground and background by using the colours yellow and blue.* [...] *For me Mondrian's* Diamond

12 The case of the Dutch abstract artist JCJ Vanderheyden offers several poignant parallels. See Mark Kremer, 'The Miraculous Catch', in Roger Willems (ed.), *JCJ Vanderheyden. The Analogy of the Eye*, Amsterdam: Roma Publications, 2009, pp.99ff.

13 'De Sculptura', Messepalast, Vienna, 1986.

Afterall
D. Baldon, 'From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again'
M. Kremer, 'Reading Zobernig Through Vaudeville'
Issue 21, pp. 46-70

> Painting *is as much an icon of modernism as Malevich's* Black Square *– the grid stands for the topos of happiness and unhappiness in modernism. Earlier I produced adaptations of grids in the studio. The encounter with the picture in the GoMA led to a loosening up. In the new paintings, as soon as the palette of colours reaches a certain number, a mathematical solution is almost no longer possible, that's why I let myself go intuitively* [...] *With the filling of space, the necessity of making a decision gets ever more unbearable; one of my paintings remains 'unfinished' as I no longer had the power to keep on working on it. The result takes on the appearance of the ornamental of art nouveau and the strenuousness of modernity.*[14]

It is remarkable to see how Zobernig connects art tendencies coming from the opposite ends of the spectrum, the 'lavish' ornaments of art nouveau and the 'straight' forms of abstract art, in order to open new artistic territories. The fact that Zobernig combines Jugendstil and abstraction is not new – for example, a writer such as Mario Praz, in his study on the European interior, already pointed out a proximity between the two art forms.[15] But Praz was making a connection through thinking, which is not quite the same as connecting them through making. Zobernig's explanation of part of his art practice reminds us that, in the hands of an artist, art is always an unfinished project. Or, as Paul Valéry observed: 'A work of art is never necessarily *finished* [...] He [who has made it] extracts from it what is needed to erase it and make it anew.'[16]

❁

In the Western art scene Zobernig's position is special but not unique. Other artists have revitalised traditions of abstract art, arriving on the scene in the 1980s and taking a stance in that decade. In the Netherlands there are two kindred positions that are worth noting: Klaas Kloosterboer and Harmen Brethouwer. Kloosterboer could be called a burlesque modernist. His tactile paintings, with their three-dimensional plastic forms (for instance, a coloured suit built up of various canvases and hanging from the ceiling) are rooted in an investigation of abstraction versus expression. He uses jocular rhetorical figures in his work to test abstraction and break its autonomy.[17] In the 1980s, Brethouwer made a body of work that also examined the dos and the don'ts of Minimal art. His sculptures were ascetic, made of minimal amounts of chipwood elements and painted in a grimy green colour. These works are vehicles for projections and in them can be found a poisonous combination: Minimalist taboos of form seem to rest comfortably with an emotional sphere of Protestant repression and shame.[18] Even earlier, around 1930, Malevich, inspired by Russian folk art, came to his 'vulgar' abstractions, tender images of figures with blank faces. It could be said that the degrading of the sublime and the recharging of abstract art through often unexpected sources has played an essential role in Western modernity. What makes Zobernig stand out is his ingenuity and ability to see and seize the pretexts for his art almost anywhere, making new beginnings and opening new possibilities for art at once. The ingenuity with which he has recalibrated the legacy of abstract art, and the fervour with which he continues to push its artistic envelope, makes him a postmodern master who shows how abstractions may appear anywhere. In Antwerp, in his show at deSingel, he built a booth that doubled a space made by artist Richard Venlet for a library. Inside the booth, visitors could watch a DVD of a performance called *Heimo Zobernig explains to his double how to make a performance* (2009).[19] In this last case, as a bona fide vaudeville director, he literally asked his abstractions to take the stage.

14 Email from the artist, 23 December 2008.
15 Mario Praz, *Het Europese binnenhuis*, Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1965, p.66.
16 Paul Valéry, *Wat af is, is niet gemaakt* (trans. Piet Meeuse), Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1987, p.12. Translation the author's.
17 See Mark Kremer, 'Poldergeist', *Klaas Kloosterboer: Shivering Emotions + Feverish Feelings*, Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2003, pp.138ff.
18 At the end of the 1980s Brethouwer destroyed the works as at the time nobody understood them, but just recently they were resuscitated in a suite of nine sculptures with a title borrowed from Søren Kierkegaard; *The Cares of the Pagans* (1984—89/2008) were exhibited in 'To Burn Oneself with Oneself: The Romantic Damage Show', de Appel, Amsterdam, 2008.
19 The DVD is a recording of a one-time performance on 18 April 2008 at MUMOK Factory, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, in Vienna. It was made as a part of the performance cycle 'Nichts IST AUFREGEND. Nichts IST SEXY. Nichts IST NICHT PEINLICH', 2008.