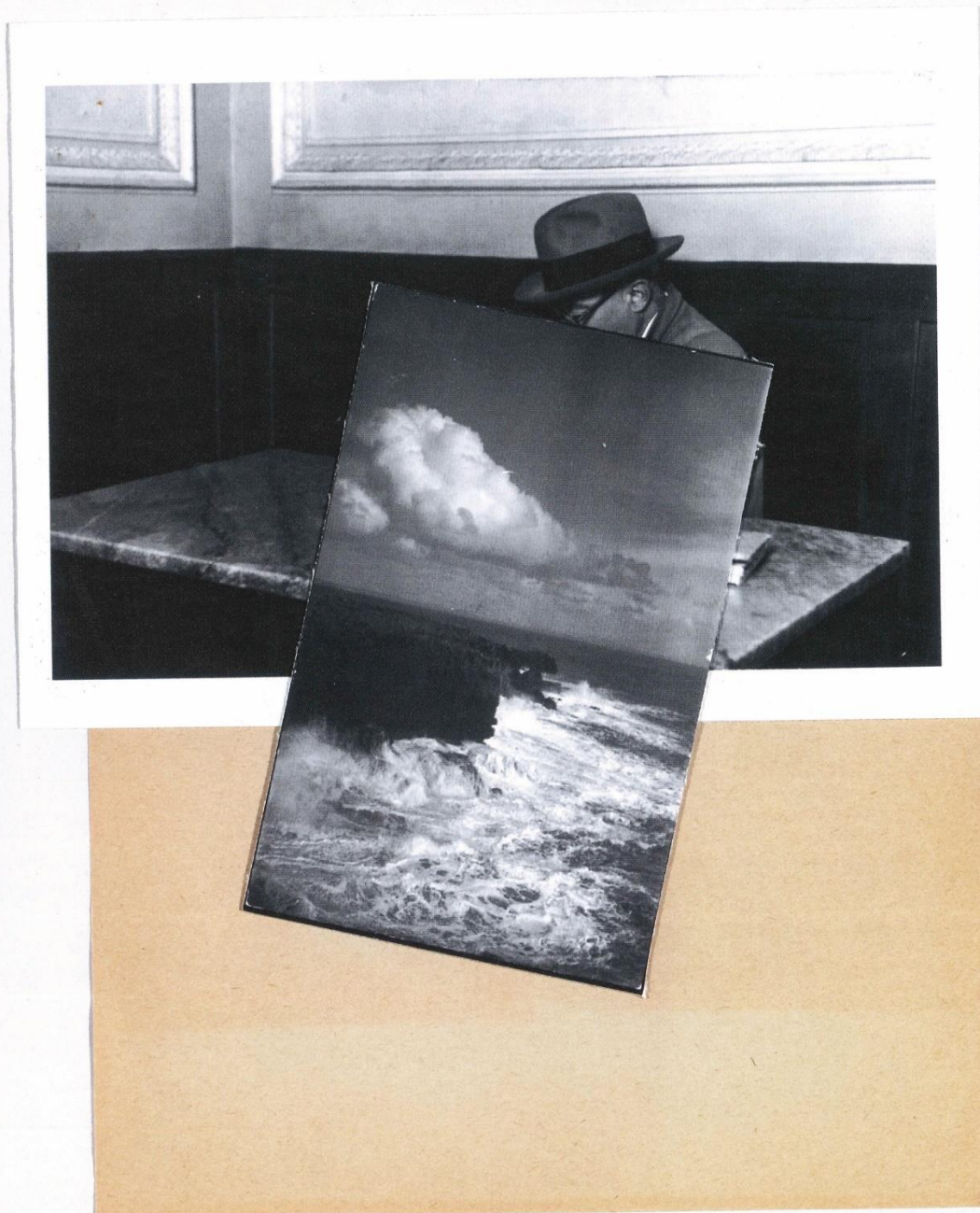


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PORTFOLIO

# Heimo Zobernig

## *DRAMA DISPLAY*

This portfolio presents the work of an artist whose oeuvre expands (in and of itself) when exhibited, as only then does it become fully visible and properly challenged. For Heimo Zobernig, the most international of Austrian artists, painting, sculpture, film, video, performance, architectural models and design are multiple and at times contradictory modes of questioning and discovery. As the curator, Karola Kraus, notes in her essay on the artist, 'Heimo Zobernig's works encompass processes of art production and material aesthetics as well as issues of display and architecture, and question the mechanisms whereby museums and galleries function.' For the portfolio section of *Electra*, Zobernig 'selected the images focusing on installation shots from important exhibitions', creating a continuum that comprises both his artistic work and exhibition practice.



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Painting is one of the central components in Heimo Zobernig's cross-media art, along with sculpture, film, performance and design. Since the inception of his artistic practice in the early 1980s, he has developed an extensive body of painterly work, always based on efforts to explore colour like a 'scientist'. Painting thus becomes a mechanism for generating knowledge. The hallmarks of the artist's approach in this context encompass strategies of simplification, standardisation and systematisation that involve applying pre-determined rules, along with artistic appropriation of industrial standards and widespread patterns, such as TV test cards or the CMYK colour model that underpins modern four-colour printing. Alluding to Minimal Art, Zobernig also dispenses with narrative titles, instead numbering his work as if in an inventory with consecutive years and numbers for each piece.

References to motifs from art history, especially modernism, can be identified in Zobernig's art. However, his oeuvre also draws inspiration from everyday culture. 'My works are clearly oriented towards familiar models and are often quotes in terms of their form and size,' the artist explains. 'However, the ideas and models do not necessarily have to come from art. I have a particular way of dealing with them and introduce a small difference. These works make up my art history and the displacements are intended to show my scepticism or criticism towards the familiar models'.<sup>1</sup> Zobernig has a preference for materials and standard formats from the hardware store. In addition, in his shelf sculptures, he clearly references the inexpensive *Billy* shelf that has sold in its millions, originally developed in 1978 by Swedish designer Gillis Lundgren for Ikea and launched in 1979. Echoing Warhol's fascination with

the superlative renown of Chinese CP founder Mao Zedong, whose facial traits he integrated into his art, Zobernig has been incorporating the features of the world's best-known piece of furniture into his work since the early 1990s.

Heimo Zobernig's concept of painting does not focus solely on 'painting in the narrow sense', as the art theorist Isabelle Graw has noted. This concept needs to be understood more broadly in order to grasp its radical nature as well as its humour. Instead, to cite Graw, Zobernig's

artistic spectrum extends from the early set, through geometric painting, by the way of the known proto-minimalist objects to contextual installations and architectonic interventions. Accordingly, materials other than canvas have taken on the role of the support, and these works can only be considered painting if we posit an 'extended concept of painting'. However, this should not be mistaken for arbitrariness.<sup>2</sup>

She notes that Zobernig also 'pulls all the painterly stops' in applying emulsion paint, synthetic resin or asphalt varnish to the surfaces of his objects, which are made of seemingly random materials, such as cardboard, polystyrene or pressboard. This begins with use of a 'purposefully incidental brushstroke', and subsequently ranges 'through expressive gestures' to 'unfinished painting, which establishes the painting's foundation as an element of the design'.<sup>3</sup> Even showroom dummies, transposed into the art context, thus become substrates for paint and appear 'painterly'.

It has repeatedly been emphasised that painting cannot be viewed in isolation from the other media

1. Wenn die Kunst spricht.  
Ein Interview von Isabelle Graw  
mit Heimo Zobernig', in: *Kunst  
und Text*, Verlag der Galerie für  
Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig,  
1998, pp. 43-94 (45)

2. Isabelle Graw, 'The Guided  
Hand: On Painterly Techniques in  
the Work of Heimo Zobernig', in:  
*Heimo Zobernig, Katerlog*, exhib. cat.  
Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung  
Ludwig Wien, Cologne, 2003, pp.  
401-403 (401)

3. Ibid.

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that play an equally prominent part in Zobernig's practice. As Achim Hochdörfer put it, 'it would be impossible to write about Heimo Zobernig's painting without first putting it in relation to the other media employed in his art—to the sculptures, architectural models, books, video and design projects'.<sup>4</sup> Everything in his oeuvre thus appears to be interrelated and not infrequently also traversed by recurring motifs that are played out on various media-related levels. Zobernig's aspiration to treat display issues as an immanent component of artistic production lays the foundations for these compelling internal references within his work.

I have increasingly brought into the foreground something that initially perhaps seemed to me to be only a kind of subtext, namely, how the ambience influences the perception of objects. The paintings become walls, the sculptures turn into people or furniture.<sup>5</sup>

The 'museum as a housing', the supporting structure that generally goes virtually unnoticed, is also brought to the public's attention in an exhibition which will open this summer at mumok, through comprehensible as well as radical positionings. For example, Zobernig may opt to install paintings so that they protrude into and block doorways. Alternatively, he may utilize existing museum partition walls in a way that turns them into material currently involved in his spatial intervention. A wall element is laid flat on the floor, an elegantly minimalist way to transform it into a plinth. A large structure like a room-divider screen, its eight frame sections covered with an industrial-looking silvery and semi-transparent fabric, mutates into a fulcrum between art and

architecture. This tipping point, also inherent in the bench sculptures, is a signature feature of Zobernig's artistic approach.

After the large-scale exhibition at mumok in winter 2002/2003, which presented the development of probably the most internationally renowned Austrian artist working today, who from the outset has produced a consistent yet simultaneously multifaceted oeuvre, in the upcoming exhibition at mumok, the spotlight is turned onto painting in an exhibition architecture conceived by Zobernig and based on selected blocks of work from recent years. Through the display architecture, Zobernig references the classical-modernist architecture of the Sonsbeek Pavilion, created by Dutch artist Gerrit Rietveld for a sculpture exhibition in Arnhem in 1955. When Zobernig was invited to the Sonsbeek Festival in Arnhem in the mid-1980s, he discovered the architecture of the Rietveld Pavilion, which had been rebuilt in the mid-1960s, and noted that it 'has no actual interior and only forms a background and environment for sculptures'.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the artist has taken a particular interest in these specific building typologies designed explicitly for staging art.

An expanded concept of painting can already be clearly recognised in Zobernig's early work from the mid-1980s, when he created paintings with abstract geometric forms, as well as his first sculptural works in cardboard painted with monochrome synthetic resin paint. In 1987, he defined a five-part colour palette specifically for this group of objects, made up of 'achromatic' colours that he called his 'sculpture colours': grey, black, white, brown and orange. He thus engaged in a hybrid painting practice between two- and three-dimensionality, expanding this once again around 2016 through the chequerboard blankets

4. Achim Hochdörfer, 'Fuck Painting', in: *Heimo Zobernig*, exhib. cat. Palacio de Velázquez/Reina Sofía, Madrid und Kunsthhaus Graz, Cologne, 2013, pp. 171–179, (174)  
5. Claudia Herstatt, 'Identität ist eine wandernde Sache, Ein Gespräch mit Heimo Zobernig', in: *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 170, 2004, pp. 196–207, (200)

6. Nina Schedlmayr, *Haus und Hof*, Profil Magazin, Nr. 17/2005 of 20.04.2015, pp. 120–121



in an approach that was as radical as it was subtle. For the 'stripe paintings' on the other hand, which he started to create in 1987, the artist established a fixed palette of 15 pure pigment paints, which he designated with elementary colour names: red, green, yellow, blue, brown, orange, violet, black, white, grey, ochre, purple, light green, light red and light blue. Even in these early paintings, omnipresent technical images coincide with the one-of-a-kind flair of painting.

Against the backdrop of the artist's engagement in the early 1980s with the 'expressionless' language of geometric abstraction related to the Zurich school of Concrete Art around Max Bill, it was in the 1990s that his artistic language mutated towards forms of geometric abstraction with the REAL / EGAL pictures that emerged and were inspired by Robert Indiana and General Idea. Temporally, these paintings coincide with the 'linguistic turn' in those parts of the art scene with a conceptual thrust. However, they can also be interpreted as links to a specifically Austrian tradition of modern 'painting with language,' such as that represented by the 'Wiener Gruppe' [Vienna Group] around H. C. Artmann and Ernst Jandl.

In the mid-1990s, Zobernig brought the transfer principle into play again by transposing what are known as chromakey colours from video technology (Bluebox Blue, Video Blue, Video Red and Video Green) into the field of painting. Although references to the avant-garde's traditions and variants (monochromy and grids, Minimalism, Colour Field painting, gestural and geometric abstraction or text-based images) are hinted at and proposed in the various phases of his oeuvre, contemporary culture and its technical visual media can be clearly recognized as an important influence too. This ambivalence is also

a recurring fundamental motif in Zobernig's work. He refers to this as his 'unambiguous commitment to ambiguity'.<sup>7</sup> In the grid paintings he began to create in 2000, chromakey nettle fabric is again used as a paint substrate, covered with white acrylic paint to create various chequerboard and grid structures. Emerging from the enduring impression left by a visit to a Pablo Picasso exhibition in 2011, a third motif becomes increasingly visible alongside the principal motifs of monochromy and grids he had pursued previously: the gestural. However, Zobernig deploys it in a reflected and controlled form. 'If you want to obtain empirical certainty [...] you have to make the experiment repeatable'.<sup>8</sup> This means that Zobernig would never adhere to a naive belief in the 'immediacy of expression'. That is because in his view even this purported immediacy is actually also 'based on knowledge and method'.<sup>9</sup> It is precisely in the constantly renewed repetition of supposedly spontaneous gestures, for example in the work of expressive classical artists, that Zobernig sees proof of the exact opposite.

In Heimo Zobernig's oeuvre, the field of art appears as a major, contradiction-riddled object of research to which one must relate in different ways. Art becomes visible both as a demonstration object and as the subject matter of analysis. In this spirit, the artist described himself early on as an 'historian' and 'scholar'.<sup>10</sup> To stay with this image: Zobernig's artistic investigations are conducted on almost all levels, and concern details as well as the big picture. He forms his own analytical system and targets the interplay between aesthetics and society, the question of the conditions under which art is created.

7. 'As Well As. Yilmaz Dziewior in Conversation with Heimo Zobernig', in: *Heimo Zobernig*, exhib. cat. Kunsthau Bregenz, 2016, p. 78

8. Kirsty Bell, 'Stumme Diener/ Showroom Dummies', *Frieze* d/e Sommer 2001, pp. 112–121, (116)

9. Anne Katrin Fessler, *Heimo Zobernig. Die Ideen kommen immer auf mich zu*, derStandard.at, 23.04.2018

10. Quoted in Ulrich Loock, 'Zobernigs Kunst', in: *Heimo Zobernig*, exhib. cat. Kunsthalle Bern, 1994, p. 4, p. 78

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My aesthetics, my art is the result of my work;  
it develops by questioning and kneading content  
and formal elements until I arrive at a valid form  
and do not follow the templates of theory but  
think for myself.<sup>11</sup>

Heimo Zobernig's works encompass processes of art production and material aesthetics as well as issues of display and architecture, and question the mechanisms whereby museums and galleries function. Even catalogue design is subjected to this system and is thus also an important part of Zobernig's artistic practice. His own role as an artist appears as an attitude in flux that must be constantly reviewed and developed. The planned publication for the upcoming show at mumok, (co-)designed by Heimo Zobernig, is a conceptual companion piece to the book accompanying the 2003 retrospective. It continues painstakingly encyclopaedic lists of Zobernig's artistic work and exhibition practice up to the date of publication. Following this artistic practice, Heimo Zobernig has selected the images for his portfolio section of *Electra* magazine, focusing on installation shots from important exhibitions.

11. 'As Well As. Yilmaz Dziewior in  
Conversation with Heimo Zobernig',  
in: *Heimo Zobernig*, exhib. cat.  
Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2016, p. 78