

HEIMO ZOBERNIG

Why I Have Not Done More Particle Board Works

Opening: Friday, March 17, 2023

Ausstellung: March 18 – May 5, 2023

Galerie Nagel Draxler Cologne

PRESS RELEASE

One has to flee modernity for fear that it won't save itself.

Frank Perrin, Symposium Villa Arson, Nice, 1991

Heimo Zobernig started his artistic practice at the beginning of the 1980s, at a time when skepticism about what art can do (or be) was already rather old. Since Hegel it has been clear that art is made, but no longer true; since Adorno that nothing else about it can be taken for granted. What can be salvaged of Modernist art's Enlightenment claims if it served as a "substitute religion" in its day, to which some kind of free-floating, (metaphysical) substance was ascribed? Even the twentieth-century avant-garde ideologies that took aim at the bourgeois art institutions and ascribed art political efficacy, tacitly presuppose an art charged with substance.¹ So at no time since Modernism has art been apace with its own theory.

The exhibition brings together works from different periods, beginning with early works from the second half of the 1980s. What was then the West saw the marriage of postmodern theories, the final phase of the Cold War in terms of world politics, and the kick-off of globalized capitalism with a neoliberal bent. Dissolution of the old blocs was imminent. Zobernig distanced himself from a substantially charged concept of art by calling himself a "historian, a scientist."² His works refer not to worldly or political events, but purely to questions of what might be considered a precarious possibility of art, taking into account various strategies of his abstract predecessors. And yet this stringency and asceticism—unusual in the time of the Neue Wilde (New Wild Ones) and then of Context Art and institutional critique—does not make him an outlier with regard to the usual discourses; he could more accurately be described as right in the middle of them, and spectator to them at the same time.

After the distant avant-garde currents of Constructivism, a visible point of attraction for Zobernig, and after the institutional critique of Michael Asher and Martin Kippenberger's

¹ See Helmut Draxler, *Gefährliche Substanzen: Zum Verhältnis von Kritik und Kunst [Dangerous Substances: The Relationship between Criticism and Art]*, (Berlin: b-books, 2007).

² Heimo Zobernig quoted in "Vorwort," Heimo Zobernig: Neue Galerie Graz, 1.3.-21.-3.1993, Salzburger Kunstverein, 2.3.-18.4.1993, (Salzburg: Salzburger Kunstverein).

extremely fruitful, critical affirmation of late capitalism, how can a stance assert itself that takes all of this into account, but does not want to set any of it as total? Zobernig clearly saw no future in the negative pathos of refusal, a kind of conceptually-justified stagnation for which the much-evoked myth of dandy (affluent society's version of the sceptic) was created. Zobernig, by contrast, is always productive, a doer.³

For example, by working together with Austrian writer Ferdinand Schmatz⁴ on an expert breakdown of color theory philosophies, only to ultimately abolish all their rules in his striped and spotted paintings and exploit an almost infinite combination of colors, the only requirement of which is that no constellation be repeated exactly. In doing so he empties to equal degrees both the theories and the art as the subject of their localization. What remains are stripes and spots serving as quasi scenic media, not to present a certain system, but to "act as if" a system is based on meaning while simultaneously disavowing it.

If the system is void, does art appear at its edges? It more likely stands to reason that Zobernig's penchant for the grid, as it is visually manifested later on, owes to a fascination with the fact that nothing shows through the grid but the grid itself. It has to suffice, and it does. Production continues.

Translation Amy Patton

³ "Giving up ideological content does not mean losing a feel for the possibilities of ideas. A simultaneous rejection of the modern dogmas of truth (unity, identity, totality, ...) and the carefree emptiness of a stale repetition: the indifference, the simulacrum, the special effects of the new ... Zobernig marks the unconditionality of an extremely exaggerated position. That position, namely, which consists in reformulating the modernist conditions so as to ultimately (...) retain the impetus. Art, as Zobernig understands it, no longer has a goal; it is the goal itself (...), an élan." Olivier Zahm, Symposium Villa Arson, Nice, 1991.

⁴ Ferdinand Schmatz and Heimo Zobernig, *Farbenlehre [Color Theory]*, (Vienna: Springer, 1995).