

HEIMO ZOBERNIG

Senza titolo, 2015

23.6.–29.7.2023



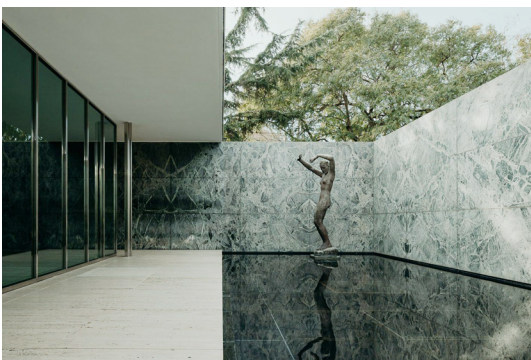
Heimo Zobernig, untitled, 2015, bronze, steel, 223 x 110 x 74 cm

The sculpture – though originally intended for the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2015, Heimo Zobernig decided to not show it there – was on view for the first time at Kunsthau Bregenz. It is the cast of a human figure composed of various, processed mannequins, displaying injuries, screw connections, and traces of production. »The figure is made a bit larger to appear real«, says Zobernig.



Heimo Zobernig, exhibition at Kunsthau Bregenz, 2015

Penelope Curtis in her contribution to the catalog of the Venice Biennale¹⁾ quoted here in part:
Zobernig has flirted with figuration for as long as he can remember. In the twentieth century, an excellent example of this sculpture problem is the Barcelona Pavilion, an official commission which did the job of representing the German state at the Barcelona International Exposition of 1929. Its representative qualities were signalled by its luxurious materials, its promise of repose and refreshment, alongside its quality of delight and discovery.



Georg Kolbe, *Morgen*, 1925, installed in the German Pavilion for the 1929 World Exhibition in Barcelona, built by Mies van der Rohe

Mies van der Rohe's pavilion housed, and still houses, a single sculpture, by Georg Kolbe. Kolbe's figure of *Morning* (1925) lifts her arms, almost tentatively, as if to shelter her eyes from the sun. It is interesting in this regard to come across a strikingly comparable work by Anton Hanak, a sculptor cited by Zobernig (and who was a predecessor as professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna), in its central position on the staircase in Vienna's Belvedere museum.



Anton Hanak, *The Last Man (Ecce Homo)*, 1917–1924, bronze, 230 cm; © Belvedere, Vienna

Mies's choice of Kolbe's *Morning* was hardly accidental. This is a sculpture which pulls up from the ground as well as sinking down into it, and which echoes the Hanak in its ambiguous energy. Zobernig's most recent mannequin figure also echoes the ambiguity of the Kolbe and the Hanak, as well as their oddly androgynous qualities, as if their sexuality were partly effaced. Caught between rising and falling, its arms in a strange state of inertia, the pose of *Ecce Homo* seems to echo Zobernig's wish to give his inert mannequin at least a potential sense of energy.

Ending (a)

The pavilion is darkened, its view confined. Its latent axiality is strengthened, and it becomes more cinematic, giving on to a screen of nature. It has no 'content' as such. Instead, it asks people to stop awhile, to rest their weary feet and their weary eyes. Its penumbral quality may encourage people to see it in a way that is more three-dimensional than usual. Rather than offering up three or four differentiated spaces, it solidifies one. The repetition of anterior and posterior galleries is clarified, simplified, concretized. Above us is a work that will become a sculpture when it leaves Venice for Bregenz and leaves the ceiling for the floor.

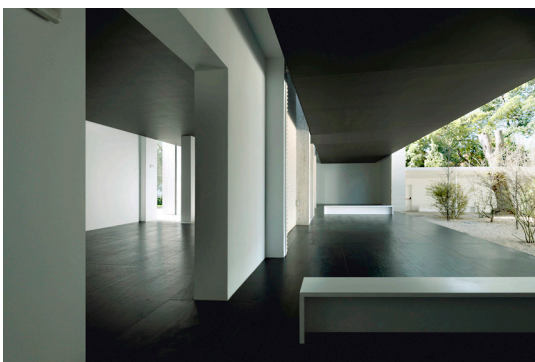
Ending (b)

After moving around the pavilion, stopping in the first long gallery, moving through the second, drawn by the garden view, and circling back, the visitor stops at the sculpture. The only obvious 'artwork,' the figure is a little like a *cadavre exquis*, put together from four parts. S/he/it proposes itself as the subject of the pavilion but instantly undermines this proposition. Combining found elements with the made, the anonymous and the authored, it is nonetheless overtly a 'work in process' and no help at all in answering our questions about the pavilion. Apparently there to set up some kind of equivalence with historic examples, it instead throws us back on the pavilion itself, making us want to see it 'empty,' but equally full of 'art.' The very fact that it can do this so well makes me wonder how we will ever escape this hopeless need for the figure as subject and as object, this continuing impasse for sculpture.

Ending (a) + (b)

Whether or not it would be possible to provide an ending which offered (a) + (b) is questionable. Zobernig is realistic on this point, as he is about so much. He knows that Hoffmann's building is good but not perfect. He understands its reliance on symmetry and has decided not to try to alter that. He knows it is necessary to catch his visitor, and a little off guard. A figurative sculpture, only just visible from the entrance but central to the return, will do that, and indeed this resembles the 'classic' solution to the problem posed by the classicising modernist pavilion. The figure looks, directs, holds, and extends. But if the pavilion can do this job without the sculpture, then so much the better. If it does, Zobernig may have superseded his apparent need for the figurative gesture within the staging of his space, by successfully transferring it onto the architecture and its users. If he does, he will have subsumed (b) in (a), or taken it away.

¹¹ Penelope Curtis *Secret Sculpture in Heimo Zobernig Austrian Pavilion Biennale Arte, 2015*, Edited by Yilmaz Dziewior, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, pp. 26



Heimo Zobernig, Design of the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennale Venice, 2015