

NICOLAS  
KRUPP

## THE BOOK ON THE SHELF

Curated by Kaspar Müller



10 May 2025 - 23 August 2025

Artists: Leidy Churchman, Nikolas Gambaroff, Michelle Grabner, Joanne Greenbaum, Richard Hawkins, Jörg Immendorff, Adriana Lara, Beatrice Marchi, Franco Mazzucchelli, Susanne Paesler, Michael Stevenson, Walter Swennen, Peter Wächtler, Heimo Zobernig, Andreas Zybach

### The book on the shelf

My gaze searches for something in the room to anchor my thoughts, now having to write a short text, I feel the urgency to resist impulsive conclusions, as it catches on an extremely thin paperback on my shelf: Stefan Zweig's Chess Story. Reflexively, I read the blurb on the back.

"For only ambition is sparked by the accident of success and easy accomplishment, but nothing so magnificently uplifts the heart as the downfall of a person in battle against the invincible power of fate— this most sublime of all tragedies, which is sometimes crafted by a poet, and a thousand times by life itself." Stefan Zweig

The quote reads generalizing, but I've also never actually read the book, even though I possess a collection of his works. As the famous book is really incredibly thin, the thinnest in my entire shelf and it sits right in the middle, I finally read it.

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However, I never come across the abstract from the back inside the book itself, and that Zweig shows little technical interest in the titular game itself, but rather in its emblematic dimension, is indicative, as behind the allegory, the abyss of the symbolic order opens— turning this psychologically charged voyage into a veritable serenade of (self-) castration. Zweig, unsurprisingly, doesn't want to mingle on the field of the semiotic, the pre-verbal, the very realm he is describing. The story talks about madness, but it never lets language itself go mad. The book is a symptom. A condensation of affect— perhaps this is why it draws so much toward a Western culture that no longer believes in tragedy, only in its reproduction.

Zweig has a virtuosity in emotionally abstracting human failures and heroics in his literary biographies and novels— offering a dubious yet strangely comforting reconciliation with the chaotic injustice and vulgarity of history, transfiguring it into a kind of superficial, artistic fate. The demands of high vividness and sonic elegance, and— in the endurance of the most horrific and meaningful experiences— his characters are delivered to their fate with an unflinching, linguistic relish. The concealed surface of the language, like a purifying force, triumphs, ridiculing history and its human confusions and entanglements, rendering it strangely distant, yet never mystical. Certainly an exquisitely morbid cast of reality. This high-stakes endeavor, in *Chess Story* though, seems to become a judgment upon itself, and since, *Schachnovelle*, originally probably a terse black-and-white sketch, has become something like a collective working title.

His pleasure in downfall, the quote on the back of the book, his fascination with powerlessness in the face of fate— and its craftsmanship...

The punishment, in any case, seems devastating, as if the full malice and inertia of Western culture, with its compulsive death drive toward reproduction and self-destruction, had condensed and pounced upon this little book. The novel has undeniably become one of the most popular, most translated, most read, most accessible, most published, and most adapted books in the world— a fact that likely also has to do with the circumstances of its posthumous release. Since then, line-by-line versions have been published, new editions continue to appear each year, like waving flags. Woodcuts, interpretations, overarching themes are appended. Forewords and afterwords inserted. Millions of school essays written about it. I'll use it for a press release. The book is now a placeholder for something far more significant? Ultimately, it was the sheer thinness that made it appear on the shelf.

Art is a zone of tension— between language and body, order and chaos, symbolic and semiotic, life and death. The icon becomes a threshold between human and divine— a kind of "border" experience that transcends ordinary symbolic systems and this is a subject that is fundamentally treated and evaluated in very different ways throughout this exhibition. The idea of openness as a dynamic, never-finalized relationship between subject and language, self and others, a state in which identity, meaning, and sense remain in flux.

PS: Please don't ask me again whether you should help me formulate the text in the style of Stefan Zweig.

I would like to thank all the participating artists and everyone who helped bring this exhibition together, and to Nicolas for the invitation.

Kaspar Müller, May 2025

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