

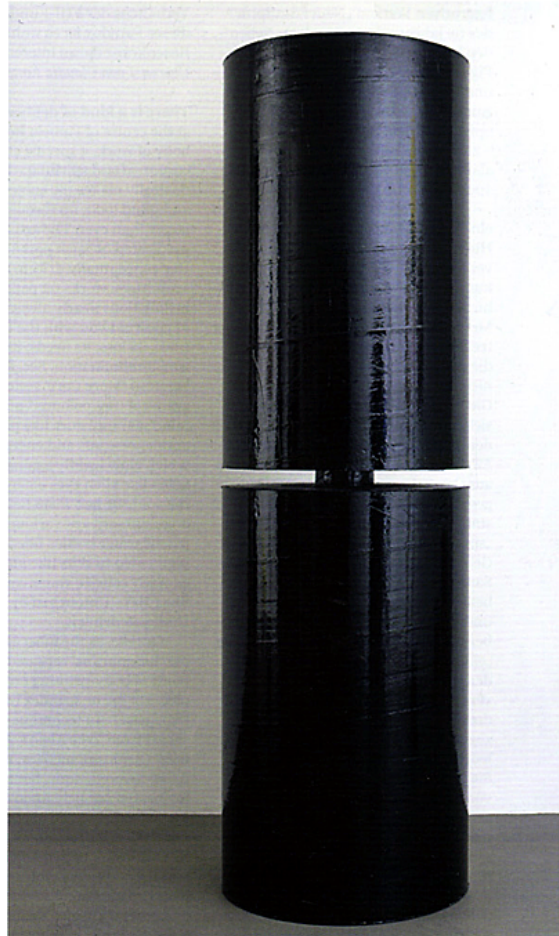
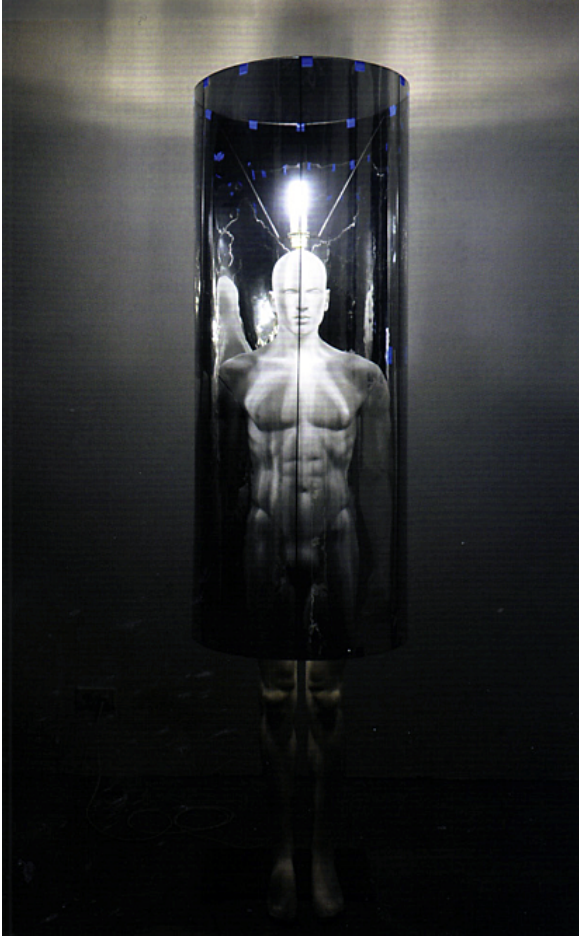
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Showroom Dummies

INTERVIEW

Heimo Zobernig talks to Kirsty Bell about his sculptures, paintings and videos from the early 1980s to the present and about red light, mannequins and Oswald Wiener's literary sources

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Heimo Zobernig, *Nr. 24*, 2007, Video still

For Heimo Zobernig, 2011 began with five solo exhibitions: gallery shows in Antwerp, New York and his hometown of Vienna as well as exhibitions at the Essl Museum in Klosterneuburg near Vienna and the Kunsthalle in Zurich. For an artist whose work engages so keenly with the structures of exhibition making, this seems like an enormous undertaking. Or is it a conceptual ploy?

Zobernig's solo show inaugurated the Kunsthalle's temporary premises in the Museum Bäregasse, two adjacent, four-storey 17th-century baroque buildings in downtown Zurich. Zobernig exhibited only sculptures and video works selected from the last 25 years and none of the paintings which have been a staple of his practice since the early 1980s. No doubt the constraints of exhibiting in these listed premises – with their wood panelled or plasterwork ceilings, domestically scaled rooms, ceramic ovens and walls punctuated with windows or doorways played a role in this decision. Crucially, he also decided to revisit a work made for an installation of Albert Oehlen's paintings in the show *Jetztzeit* at Vienna's Kunsthalle in 1994: Zobernig installed red fluorescent lighting, which created a considerable hindrance to viewing Oehlen's work. In Zurich,

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each room in the Museum Bärengasse was lit with red fluorescent light, providing a coherent and dramatic solution for this historical building as an exhibition space for contemporary art, while casting into doubt the viewing conditions for his sculptures. The lighting accentuated how the works question aspects such as surface and autonomous form through their cheap materiality (cardboard, styrofoam or MDF) and their structures which recall Minimalism, furnishing or display.

Such pragmatic decision-making features repeatedly in Zobernig's work, where coincidence is often put to productive ends, the most formative example being the artist's enrolment in the set design department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna after his application to the painting department was rejected. This unorthodox start ensured that cross-disciplinary contamination would become a cornerstone of Zobernig's practice; he may wrestle with fundamental questions of abstraction but persistently confounds them with borrowings from performance, interior design, furnishing and display. The perennial painterly problem of foreground and background is itself a central theme. The background (especially the vivid colour of the blue, red or green screen used in chroma key video technology) takes on a role, while objects more often accorded negligible status the bookshelf, the conference chair, the pedestal become central players, re-designated as autonomous sculpture. Indeed, in Zurich, the lighting itself, not usually an explicit feature of an exhibition, was cast as a protagonist, albeit with a Machiavellian twist: Zobernig's choice of red fluorescents did not so much light the works as render them barely visible.

Zobernig often revisits certain key forms, materials and strategies; works that may initially appear cryptic, if not flippant, grow in density and weight with greater knowledge of their predecessors. Over time, this self-reflexivity becomes another element of contingency, preventing the objects and paintings from being simply what they appear to be. Zobernig has exhibited prolifically throughout continental Europe since the 1980s and is an authoritative figure in the German-speaking world (he has been a professor at the Academy in Vienna since 2000 and won Austria's prestigious Friedrich Kiesler prize in 2010).

Yet he remains less well known outside Europe, a situation that has led to a somewhat lopsided appreciation of his work. Perhaps the nature of his work self-conscious abstraction complicated by its contingency supports this split appreciation. Each work performs its assigned role the sculptures acting out their awkwardness, the videos locked in their repetitive loops, the paintings stating their compositional structure, the stage displaying its tautological self and waits expectantly. As artist and media

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theorist Peter Weibel aptly put it in his contribution to a catalogue published in 2010 by CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux: in contrast to Post-Modernism, [Zobernig] does not overcode but undercodes. It is up to the audience, wherever it may be, to determine the code.

Kirsty Bell Simultaneity appears in your work in various forms, through the different media used or concurrent meanings occurring within one work. Was it another kind of conscious simultaneity or strategic decision to have so many exhibitions taking place at the same time?

Heimo Zobernig The fact that all these shows came so close together was a coincidence, not a deliberate strategy. But it worked very well for me, as my studio is currently unusable due to building work, and this situation solved my storage problems. I was obliged by circumstance to divide things up between the exhibition venues. You can maybe compare it to the difficulty of starting to paint on an empty white canvas; if there are marks on it already, everything else unfolds as if of its own accord.

KB Although the Zurich show is more or less chronological, I was struck by a reformulation of certain key ideas from your oeuvre: painted cardboard columns or pillars; objects that look like tables or pedestals; even the identical display for each of the different video works which is designated as an 'untitled' work from 1989 consisting of a Hantarex monitor and table. All of these themes may be traced throughout the exhibition

HZ and are of course reformulated through the specific situation. Even if these works are from different periods which can be considered chronologically, I don't see it as a retrospective. In a retrospective, more effort would be made to contextualise the works, or at least to somehow mention the contexts in which they were originally made. This is not at all the case in Zurich because the conditions at the Museum Bärengasse are so dominant that the works appear in a totally new light, quite literally.

KB The red fluorescent light was also your key contribution to a joint installation with Albert Oehlen back in 1994...

HZ The statement with the coloured light and Albert's paintings was much clearer, in the combination: How can painting be subjected to scrutiny when the only available light is in the red range, giving a totally different view of the pictures? Does the work stand up under these conditions? Of course, there are also historical precedents, such as Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), painted under the shock of the Civil War; he avoided the

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Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, Installation view, Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, 2011

beauty of colour and reduced the palette to black, white and grey to reflect the extreme nature of the disaster. This is a basic motif in a type of political art that wants something specific, that wants to produce an effect. That was one of several motives for showing painting under difficult conditions.

KB Did you have the same idea in mind with the light in Museum Bärengasse?

HZ Yes, the thing was that the museum didn't have a proper lighting system, the lighting problem still needed to be addressed, and dealing with it has now been postponed slightly by my exhibition. There were only improvised lamps and illuminated vitrines. And I thought: When something is already that bad, then you might just as well make the conditions even worse. And this building can do something other exhibition venues can't do: To create a specific light atmosphere, it must be possible to darken the rooms, and this more or less typical Swiss house has wooden shutters on the windows which can all be closed. It's an added attraction to be able to present the building closed and hermetic like this for once. Also, old buildings like this are often isolated in places far from the bustle of modern commercial areas and become integrated into red light districts. This free-standing house in this setting thus took on the character of a 'Moulin Rouge'. Such 'red windmills' are places of escapism where people follow their wishes and desires, outside of everyday life, off the paths of day-to-day business.

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KB On the one hand, your works are driven by the desire for structure and indexical systematisation; on the other, they defy categorisation and often hover between set design and painting or between Minimalist sculpture and the quotidian object.

HZ The quest for abstraction is a fundamental endeavour, so it seems very important to me to omit all that is superfluous. A lot of effort is invested, but there's always something working against it, the material or some element of content keeps getting in the way. This is basically the question: why doesn't less lead to greater clarity, in art, in painting? There was a time in the early 1990s when I tried to get right to the end and worked towards a monochrome, white picture that isn't even painted, just a primed canvas. This exhibition took place, where everything was gone, but that didn't solve the problem of clarity.

KB The objects' resistance to abstraction leads to a kind of cross-contamination that is also underscored by the juxtaposition of videos with sculptures in the Zurich show.

HZ Yes, when I began to make my exhibition impure, so to speak, I presented not just sculptures and paintings but added video as a layer of commentary that exposed the flaws in the supposed purity of media. What's lacking in one is supplied by something else. Video images can do something a painted picture cannot; that's where the anthropomorphic, the human, appears in my work.

KB Was it clear you would be the main protagonist of your videos?

HZ While I was still studying at the Academy, I started making performances with a friend. In the performance series devised with my friend at the time Alfons Egger, the fleeting quality was of course very important. After the show, nothing remains. As for the question of whether or not to document, whether or not to have an audience, video was the solution. That way, I could do what I wanted in the studio without time pressure or the stress of an audience with a medium that can be used relatively unpretentiously. The character of the videos is more that of recorded actions, with no great filmic structure; in most cases, it's a static camera looking at something in motion.

KB Slapstick is very pronounced in your video works.

HZ Humour is important. A joke has a special capability because it can be about something one doesn't understand. And yet the joke manages to generate something akin to understanding, if it succeeds in making people laugh. The deeper meaning may

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Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, Installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich, Museum Bäregasse, 2011

remain hidden. A good joke is sometimes more beautiful than a logical philosophical conclusion.

KB Certain aspects come up regularly over longer periods, or works are reused in different contexts. These threads of reappearance suggest that your work develops not so much linearly but in a spiralling, self-contained way.

HZ I can't say which approach wins; I need to step back and look at what's there. I also see that not everything is possible or of equal value. To me, there are developments that become visible in a chronology. What, for example, is the impact of an idea I've already had on future decisions? The issue of consistency is certainly something I try to pursue. I don't assume chaos. In my early years I was of course very interested in and enthusiastic about the Vienna Positivists and their focus on behaviourism. There is a book, a novel, by Oswald Wiener, *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa* (The Improvement of Central Europe, 1969), he appended an in-depth bibliography and wrote how much he would have liked to include everything else he had heard, seen, etc., as a way of offering later generations the possibility of studying how this text came about. Perhaps this provides

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an idea of how the artistic process could be explained. Reverence and reference, respect and historical quotation are factors that exert a conscious and unconscious influence. As we know, if you stray even a little too far from the paths set by these factors, then the work is no longer perceived as art, it doesn't become part of the discussion, it may be existential, but it doesn't exist, it leads a sub-existence, as a private passion or hobby.

KB Some subtleties and jokes may be lost on a non-German-speaking audience. If they cannot be recognised, does your work risk leading this 'sub-existence'?

HZ Irony or humour is just one aspect, a communicative element, it's not central to understanding. Nonetheless, I'm always curious how translation mistakes influence the work. Some misunderstandings can be productive. 'Abstraction as a lingua franca,' a slogan from the 1950s, pinned its hopes on the universal quality of the visual. Now we know how much this, too, depends on culture and context, but who wants to be forever reading between the lines.

KB Your works seem almost hermetic through their carefully thought-out conceptual structures which don't allow much space for accident or coincidence.

HZ If you want to obtain empirical certainty, the work has to be that way you have to make the experiment repeatable. If there's too much chaos and if there are loose ends, then it's hard to judge and filter out effects because they're always disrupted. So you create adjusted, 'pure' conditions, but with the knowledge that it's difficult to achieve such purity. If you place a table in the middle of a room, then its effect can be gauged in relational terms. What happens? How do viewers position themselves throughout the space because this object occupies a central position, and how do they respond to it? And precisely with such a seemingly simple thing as a table it's interesting how people react to it in contrast to a sculpture, that people immediately put their hands on it, because we start using it, as a useful everyday object, putting glasses down on it and flowers.

KB How did you start using mannequins?

HZ I'm not entirely sure any more, but I'll try to tell the story. Around thirty years ago, I wanted for some reason to have a mannequin, but, due to a lack of money at the time, all I could get was cheap fragments, a torso, an arm, etc., not a whole figure, and I didn't know what to do with them. I lugged them from one studio to the next and eventually lost them. Then, many years later, and once again, I don't know why, a mannequin turned up in my studio. In any case, I made a discovery that really surprised

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Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, Installation view, Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna, 2011

me: that the presence of this mannequin triggered in me an awareness of a living presence. For a split second or so in my studio, especially at dawn or dusk, I didn't feel alone. The recurrence and intensity of this sensation intrigued me. This moment when I'm slightly distracted and 'there 's someone there,' but it's just this mannequin.

KB Uncanny...

HZ Yes, it's absolutely uncanny. This living or not, a strange business. What can other objects the same size do by comparison? So the mannequin became more and more interesting.

KB Did it feel like a great leap to introduce the human figure alongside geometric paintings or Minimalist-looking sculptures?

HZ It did take something like a leap. From the figure to abstraction & from abstraction to the figure. Before I moved in, my studio was used by a classical Modernist sculptor, Joannis Avramidis, who divided the human figure into meridians, made them abstract and turned them into rotational mouldings. With that in mind, I made a video in which my body is split up by meridians of blue adhesive tape and moves through the blue video

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space. I tried out the geometrical patterns for this work on that first mannequin, which paved the way for exhibiting that part of my work.

KB When I saw a mannequin displayed near a sculpture that looked like a bookshelf, the mannequin appeared like another standard unit, like a shelf, so it didn't look as alien as I might have expected.

HZ The proportions of a bookshelf follow the proportions of the human figure very closely. Or think of a wardrobe. This is a nice topos. Hanging up clothes or putting away books, these are tasks for the 'dumb servant', deputy or guard. In my video *Nr. 24* (2007), I collapse under the weight of these tasks and a great amount of colour.

KB There's also a tautological relationship between the viewer and a sculpture that includes this figurative element. You're watching while being watched.

HZ Yes, one feels observed. These architectural shelf sculptures with the mannequins inside stand guard, making sure borrowed books are returned. Then I tried out various things with these figures. Moulded my face onto one, altered the sex, made the pubic area look like it was covered by a pair of stockings or removed the breasts. The figures in Zurich are fairly neutral. Most mannequins are designed to match the tastes of a given period, from haircuts to postures. But of course there is also a notion of some ideal average beauty, a kind of classicism in the design of these mannequins. I was interested in that classicism inspires a certain reticence, but it also enters one's artistic practice at the point where repetition of one's own work occurs.

KB While the Zurich show concentrated on the sculptural aspects of your work, the show at the Essl Museum will take a more architectural form and foreground questions about display or the stage as an exhibition strategy. Both exhibitions also seem to deflect attention away from a definitive reading of your work. Why this deflective strategy?

HZ On one hand, decisions came out of the circumstances I've already mentioned, and on the other hand, I also like to follow intuitive impulses which I don't like to rationalise. At the Essl Museum, I'm showing very small, older sculptures in a new, large-scale installation including invitations to various musicians to perform on a stage. A central element here is a red curtain that was shown three years ago on the stage at Vienna's MUMOK as part of the performance series 'Nichts ISTAUFREGEND. Nichts IST SEXY. Nichts IST NICHT PEINLICH.' (Nothing is exciting, nothing is sexy, nothing is not embarrassing), in my piece *Heimo Zobernig erklärt seinem Double wie man eine Performance macht* (Heimo Zobernig explains to his double how to make a

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performance). This curtain was then shown at the Tate St. Ives, the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon and in a very large version at CAPC in Bordeaux. Now I have the opportunity to bring a selection of texts written for these exhibitions together in a catalogue, another repetition of one's own work.

Translation answers: Nicholas Grindell

—by Kirsty Bell

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<http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/features/stumme-diener/?lang=en>