

Thinking Outside the Box The Museum Haus Konstruktiv Collection (1986 – 2016) and Guest Interventions

curated by Sabine Schaschl and Evelyne Bucher
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The year 2016 is an important one for Museum Haus Konstruktiv: we are celebrating our 30th anniversary. To mark this occasion, our constantly growing collection is acknowledged in the extensive group exhibition "Thinking Outside the Box". In this exhibition, we deliberately avoid using external loaned items and concentrate exclusively on works from the collection. The selection was made from over 900 works, more than 100 of which have been added since the last major anniversary year, 2011. We intend to focus, in particular, on these new additions and on the historical legacy of several key figures in constructivist-concrete art. In the "guest interventions", we position the selected exhibits within the echo chamber of contemporary art. This includes various artistic strategies and media (video, performance, painting, sculpture and conceptual text/image works) that produce contextual shifts and breaking points, and which can be seen as humorous subversive commentary.

This collection presentation encompassing all floors is divided according to a number of themes that are of central importance to the orientation of Museum Haus Konstruktiv's content. This structure is one of many possibilities and most of the works could also be grouped on the basis of other interwoven thematic relationships.

Curated interventions by invited artists who look at the present from history, and at history from the present, thus causing us to think "outside the box", so to speak, are integrated into this collection presentation. For example, Christian Jankowski's neon works from the 2011 series "Visitors" are on display. For these works, the artist has taken remarks from museums' guestbooks, along with the corresponding scribbles, and converted them into neon writing. Positioned at specific locations within the collection presentation as anticipated comments, they refer to the dialog between work, curator and visitor in a self-referential manner. In Martin Walde's guest intervention "Timeline 201.6" (2008/2016), questions are asked about the temporality of works and collections. Calendar pages fly from the ceiling at programmed time intervals, bearing drawings specially produced for the exhibition and dates that lie in the future. Here, the pages provoke contemplation about not only the temporal relativity of collections, but also about the ephemeral nature of one's own existence. On the occasion of the 2015 Kiev Biennial, artist Yves Netzhammer, who works with computer animations, addressed Russian constructivism for the first time, producing the installational work "Das Kind der Säge ist das Brett" (The Saw's Child is the Board), in which the hybrid language of digital media encounters the formal aesthetic vocabulary of the 1910s and 1920s. Netzhammer has adapted this piece for his room-filling intervention in the museum and supplemented it with selected works from the collection. Sylvie Fleury combines the wall painting "The Eternal Wow" (2005/2016) with the painting "Free Buren" (2008/2016) to create a site-specific wall piece, gets women to walk around at the opening in cocktail dresses with a design reminiscent of the Mondrian dresses from Yves Saint Laurent's 1965 autumn collection, and exhibits a painting based on Mondrian's neoplasticism with a strict visual composition interrupted by a small red plush surface. Martin Creed's interventions are made from mass-produced materials, such as commercially available adhesives, nails, Lego pieces and balls which, on the basis of provided instructions, are either piled up on site to form so-called "stacks", or else used in other ways. Nedko Solakov's drawings

on the steel girders in the exhibition spaces on the 5th floor were produced shortly before the opening. These are comments on art, on the location that the artist discovers, and on the world we live in. Claudia Comte presents a wooden sculpture from the series "Giant Bone" (2015), with which she reinterprets Sol LeWitt's lattice structures. At the opening and anniversary celebration, Olaf Breuning conducts his "Smoke Bomb" performance: a fireworks display created with bags of colored powder. During the exhibition, visitors also receive a free adhesive tattoo based on his drawings and can thus take a part of the exhibition with them on their skin. A wall installation on the 6th floor shows posters, invitation cards and flyers that the graphic design agency WBG AG has produced during the 30 years in which it has worked together with the museum.

On the 5th floor, works by the Zurich Concretists, from the museum's collection, constitute the thematic starting point of the exhibition. The term "Zurich Concretists", which came from exhibition practice and, to no small extent, via journalistic reports, gradually took hold from the late 1930s onward. The artists who are referred to as the Zurich Concretists never officially formed a group together. In 1930, the Dutch artist and theorist Theo van Doesburg, together with a number of colleagues, had published the manifesto of Concrete Art: "The Basis of Concrete Painting". One of its key phrases is as follows: "We speak of concrete and not abstract painting because nothing is more concrete, more real than a line, a color, a surface." He thus made it clear that Concrete Art does not strive toward the depiction or abstraction of nature's paradigm, but instead creates from the concrete means of art themselves. He provided the stimulus for further theoretical and artistic engagement, and this is precisely where the Zurich Concretists played a decisive role. They formed a kind of internationally networked nucleus for constructivist-concrete art in Europe, which continues to have an impact to this day, as demonstrated by the contemporary art in our collection.

Incremental methodical construction of visual concepts and variations thereof constitutes one of the main characteristics of concrete artistic practice, as shown, for example, by Max Bill's "quinze variations sur un même thème" (1938), in which Bill sees "evidence that there are an infinite number of possibilities within concrete art". Richard Paul Lohse's artwork focused on modular and serial arrangements based on systematically defined rules of operation. While strict theoretical approaches formed the basis of Bill's and Lohse's work, Camille Graeser and Verena Loewensberg chose a strategy with more freedom. Graeser not only described Concrete Art as "purity, law and order", but also as "visibly composed painterly sound", thus also emphasizing his engagement with music, to which several of his painting's titles also refer. The oeuvre of Verena Loewensberg, the youngest representative of the Zurich Concretists, is characterized by the greatest breadth of visual invention.

Among the earliest works in the collection are those by Walter Dexel, one of the pioneers of constructivism in Germany. Well acquainted with the Bauhaus in Weimar, he was a friend of Theo van Doesburg's. In the 1920s, he demanded that people be "given the information that they need, concisely and clearly". In 1923, Dexel and Erich Buchholz organized an exhibition on constructivist art in Jena, one year after Buchholz had abandoned painting and turned to architecture and design. A model of his 1921/22 Berlin studio from the museum's collection shows a formally reduced, painterly/sculptural spatial ensemble that is considered one of the earliest works in the context of constructivist-concrete spatial concepts.

In 1917, before the manifesto on Concrete Art was written, Theo van Doesburg, together with Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo and other painters, architects and designers in Leiden (NL), founded the art movement De Stijl, which was committed to a geometric abstract form of representation, and to a purism based on functionality. The colorful version of the "Red and Blue Chair" (1918/1923) by Gerrit Rietveld, who joined this Dutch avant-garde group some years later, became one of their showpieces. With a drastic modification of this design classic, re-issued today by the furniture manufacturer Cassina S.p.A, Swiss artist Christoph Büchel indicates the considerable extent to which such a heritage can also be perceived as a manacle. But just like Rietveld's oeuvre, Piet Mondrian's was also highly significant to

his contemporaries, as is clearly demonstrated by our collection's centerpiece, the concrete spatial design of Fritz Glarner's magnum opus, the "Rockefeller Dining Room", based on his "Relational Painting" concept.

Eugen Gomringer, one of the founders of "Concrete poetry", came into contact with Concrete Art while working as Max Bill's secretary at the Ulm School of Design. In 1953, together with Dieter Roth and Marcel Wyss, he founded the magazine "Spirale", which combined concrete poetry and art. Works by Ingrid Isermann demonstrate its continuing influence today.

The columned room on the 4th floor addresses themes such as "Breaking open the space—kinetics and play sculpture" and "Monochromy", which are interwoven and illustrate the pursuit of space-defining strategies in visual art. Here, monochromatic painted surfaces (Olivier Mosset) and differently nuanced color fields (Frank Badur) can suggest just as much spatial depth as conceived networks of lines and color fields with geometric deviations (François Morellet, Rita Ernst), ascending and descending formal progressions (Heidi Künzler) and reliefs made from either three-dimensional geometric objects (Klaus Staudt) or individually combined cardboard squares (Gottfried Honegger). The term "play sculpture" refers to works that can change their appearance with regard to form and color. "Das rote Exzentrum 1/3" (The Red Eccentricity 1/3, 1956) by Karl Gerstner consists of four rotatable circular forms, each of which produces a new variation on the image when moved. The appearance of Pierre Keller's "Pyramide continue (positiv/négativ)" (1969) can be playfully altered by swapping the individual magnetic elements. Another one of the main works in the collection is Victor Vasarely's "Sorata-T" (1953), a sculpture comprising three transparent glass panels with black linear drawings that overlap. On walking around the sculpture, the observer experiences the optical illusion of motion, which is a characteristic feature of kinetic Op Art. For artist Charlotte Posenenske, objects had to have the objective nature of industrial products and to represent nothing other than what they are. Due to this requirement, she and her 1960s sculptural paintings made from sprayed aluminum sheet metal are intellectually linked to the ideas of the Zurich Concretists. Andreas Christen, a designer and artist who painstakingly kept these two fields of activity separate, pursued a reduction of artistic means. His monochromatic white wall objects stand out from the wall at certain points and let the light play on the surface.

One adjoining room is devoted to Mexican artist Rodrigo Hernández. For his wall objects, which play with formal and spiritual ambiguities, he refers back to very different paradigms, such as illustrations by Miguel Covarrubia, futurist, cubist and dadaist works, and pre-Columbian art. The second adjoining room shows a representative cross-section of work by Thurgau-based artist Natale Sapone, who developed visual systems from geometric forms and vibrant hues, beginning in the 1950s. His main claim to fame was the 1968 piece "Achtzentrische Kreise" (Octocentric Circles), a construction made from various arcs and lines, from which three-dimensional objects were also produced in the 1970s.

On the 2nd floor, works are grouped according to the thematic perspectives "Science and research" and "The softening of ordering systems". Here, the use of the line as a design element is visually predominant. Daniel Göttin's differently colored wooden slats form a linear image, in which the wall constitutes an integral component. Thomas Moor uses the lines drawn by the museum's hygograph as the starting point for his conceptual piece, in which the temperature and humidity in the room where the recordings are displayed were measured throughout fourteen exhibition weeks. Vera Molnar, one of the 20th-century's pioneers of computer art, used the algorithmic development of her line to produce a horizontally and vertically oriented meandering pattern and to weave this into two wall hangings. In contrast, Jürg Stäuble has combined a line found in a grid fragment with a circle, which becomes a wall drawing. Andrew Bick, on the other hand, systematically refers back to a grid drawing by constructivist artist Gillian Wise. The paintings produced on this basis incorporate drawing and painting, transparency and opacity, glossy and matte surfaces, and the use of color and non-color.

Inspired by the functionalist principles of the Bauhaus and by isometric architectural drawings, Andrei Prolettski develops distinct grid drawings and paintings. In turn, Joanne Greenbaum combines systematics with expressiveness, structural design with powerful color, and geometry with gestural expression.

On the 1st floor, only new additions from 2014 onward are presented; these can be referred to as "The conceptual present". They include works by Carissa Rodriguez and Jill Magid, which are to be understood in terms of appropriation. While Magid takes the most famous series of works by Josef Albers, "Homage to the Square" and simply frames it as a book illustration, thus alluding to the intellectual and visual reproducibility of the paradigm, Rodriguez reinterprets a "Shaped Canvas" by Ellsworth Kelly. A special salt-based mixture of materials gives the work a slightly porous surface, which represents a departure from Kelly's smooth color-field paintings. After the Tobias Putrih exhibition, we acquired two translucent cardboard columns from the "Macula" series, which the artist had conceived specially for his solo show in Zurich. The piece by Carlos Bunga, whose artworks are produced in the context of architectural and graphical considerations, is also made of cardboard. Attila Csörgő investigates the interfaces between art and science. From a still life created out of geometrically folded sheets of paper, a second, two-dimensional version is made and juxtaposed with the three-dimensional object. Raphael Hefti's piece from the group of works entitled "Subtraction as Addition" (2014) is made from museum glass, which is usually used for reduction of mirroring and reflections. Here, it has been given multiple coatings, which cause mirror effects and colorful light refractions that oscillate between opacity and transparency. After his initial neo-geo paintings from the 1980s, Gerwald Rockenschaub refers back to industrial materials, and to a vocabulary created on a computer, for his spatial works. Conceptual ideas constitute the starting point of Ian Anùll's works. In "Take a Seat", the work's form coincides with its content: the stool and the letter A with the invitation portray what the text says. Marguerite Hersberger, on the other hand, translates the Zurich Concretists' sense of clarity and order into a contemporary object language.

The exhibition is accompanied by an eponymous collection catalog, which Hatje Cantz shall publish at the end of August, with texts by Burkhard Meltzer, Bob Nickas, Sabine Schaschl and Brandon Taylor, plus an interview with Margit Weinberg Staber.

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