

## HEIMO ZOBERNIG

### From A(rt) to Z(obernig) and Back Again

Inert and enigmatic, a black rectangle is difficult to decipher without the ghost of Modernism coming to mind. Or could it be a small chamber for torture? Or a black Neolithic stone, emitting radio signals like the one buried four million years ago in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)? Could it just be what it seems – a rectangular object made of cardboard and varnished in glossy black resin? Heimo Zobernig's *Untitled* (1986) is none of these. A medium-sized box, big enough to fit a person sitting, it was built following the dimensions of Wilhelm Reich's orgone accumulator, a controversial device celebrated in America in the 1950s as the 'orgasm box'. The Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who was persecuted by Nazis, psychoanalysts, Marxists and the FBI, invented the accumulator for medical purposes. Following his belief that sexual repression was bourgeois in character and that all neuroses were caused by repressed blockages of orgone energy, Reich maintained that people would be able to emancipate themselves and transform the world if they managed to free their own genitals.

The difficulty in deciphering the meaning and implications of Reich's speculative and therapeutic work is analogous to the difficulty in classifying Zobernig's practice. Mainly shown and discussed within German-speaking art circuits, Zobernig's production consists of paintings, texts, objects, graphic and architectural designs, videos, symposia, furniture and even musical performances shifting back and forth from theoretical seriousness to deadpan humour. Often described as engaging in an ironic deconstruction of a formalist vocabulary, Zobernig has produced a free, reticular system of associations between form and content in over twenty years of activity. The apparently inexpressive, silent materiality of his visual style may be demanding to consume but, in tune with the postmodern impulse to negate previous negations, it consistently attempts to instil a broad cultural indexicalism into the historical effort made by abstract art to evacuate meaning from geometry. Transferring his interest in Neo-plasticism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Neo-geo to specific subject matters, his aesthetic illustrates what Jacques Rancière defines as 'a regime of art combining forms of visibility and enunciative possibilities'.<sup>1</sup> Reich believed that his chamber harnessed a universal and creative force in nature that was at the base of human life and death: the transformative effect of a gratifying sexual life. Similarly, in 1981, Zobernig believed in his – or art's – therapeutic power to influence other people's lives for the better, having introduced himself as a counsellor distributing visiting cards under the pseudonym of 'Dr Sommer'.

The visual pleasure that results from the experience of Zobernig's work is not caused by positive vibrations, as in Reich's box, but by objective, quasimathematical visual systems that consist of harmonious or incongruous compositions of light, colour and formal arrangements in either two or three dimensions. And unlike Reich's box, which was constructed out of layers of galvanised steel, wood and paper, Zobernig's work is a sheet of cardboard painted with black varnish, deceptively giving weight and substance to a material whose poverty and precariousness could make it look like an improvised, ramshackle structure. As one of the functions of Reich's accumulators was to absorb positive orgone energy to treat terminal illnesses, Zobernig similarly employs black paint to allude to the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'What Aesthetics Can Mean', in Peter Osborne (ed.), *From an Aesthetic Point of View*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2000, p.19.

colour's ability to absorb 99 per cent of visible light, as well as for its association with negative cultural attributes.

By the mid-1960s artists like Eva Hesse had rejected the austerity of fixed *tabula rasa* and cool fabrications characteristic of hard-edge Minimalism, a position that drew her and others toward Arte Povera's informal organicism. The rawness and sincerity of the cardboard in Zobernig's *Untitled* also discards the key avenues of thought or possibilities proposed by Minimalism, and indirectly reflects the problems involved in making sculptures. In the mid-1980s, contemporaries of Zobernig such as Peter Halley, John Armleder or Haim Steinbach, in conjunction with the popularisation of 1970s post-structuralist theories and the desire to invent new meanings for functional objects, employed geometry as a strategy of appropriation or a critique of mass consumerism.<sup>2</sup> Zobernig rejected this approach, and moved a step further: he opted for using objects, texts, figures, diagrams, stripes, grids and spatial arrangements in order to comment, from an insider's position, on the emblematic character of abstraction concealed behind the flatness of the picture plane, or the iconicity of text. In other words, his works operate as semiotic signs, born from overlapping forms, motifs and images that encourage reflection by way of stylistic riddles and formalist anomalies. Even though this strategy seems to suggest an understanding of abstract art as an open visual code that can only find its locus of enunciation, representation and signification in external contexts (which viewers, readers or listeners can traverse freely), Zobernig doesn't just comment on his predecessors' search for a formalist vocabulary, or his contemporaries' critique of a Modernism based on unbridled capitalism. Instead, his unforced, provocative way of thinking about abstraction reflects a phenomenological understanding of the way we experience the world we live in.

## C for Colour

Since the beginning of his career, colour has had a central position in Zobernig's work, in its praxis as well as its theory. He has elaborated his own scientific take on colour, as if wanting to offer an inventory of the whole spectrum of possibilities within the pictorial plane and to test how colour and form affect each other. His investigations of colour led him to commission Albert Oehlen's 'Farbenlehre III' ('Colour Theory III', 1987), a poetic manifesto examining the links between formal properties and meaning in painting. It was later followed by a more analytical study of colour by Zobernig inscribed in the diagrammatic classifications of his artist's book *Farbenlehre* (1995).<sup>3</sup> Written in collaboration with the Austrian writer Ferdinand Schmatz, *Farbenlehre* brings together an archive of colour models that, without ever employing colour illustration, laconically indexes how colour has been visually and culturally perceived throughout history, from Pythagorean theories to the Pantone system.

The year 1987 was productive for Zobernig, as he began a number of important series of works: the 'stripe paintings'; the 'sculpture colours'; and sculptures made of toilet-roll tubes whose looping, twisted compositions recall a Möbius band gone crazy. Whereas colour is at issue in the first two series, it is entirely absent in the third. The 'sculpture colours' are geometric objects of different sizes that employ an 'uncolourful' palette of neutral whites, greys, blacks, browns and oranges. They resemble pedestals so much so that Franz West used them as plinths for his sculptures in 1988, and again in 1997 as scenic props for the set design of an artists' television studio initiated by Joseph Zehler, Hans-Christian Dany and Stephan Dillemath at Galerie

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<sup>2</sup> Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, allegory and other models of 'textuality' became the lingua franca for critical reflections on the arts and the media at the time. They were considered cultural forms in which pictures occupied a position between paradigm and anomaly, as models or figures for other things (including figuration itself) and as unsolved problems.

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand Schmatz and Heimo Zobernig, *Farbenlehre*, Vienna and New York: Springer, 1995. Both perspectives are brought together in a publication by Zobernig that appeared on the occasion of his solo show at the Peter Pakesch gallery in Vienna in 1987. Heimo Zobernig (exh. cat.), Vienna: Galerie Peter Pakesch, 1987.

Christian Nagel in Cologne.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the 'stripe paintings' consist of vertical stripes of pure pigment of different widths, suggesting television test screens. The stripes are arranged according to specific criteria referring to the darkness of the hues, the levels of contrast or the presence of complementary colours. Generally placed alongside one another, these canvases are painted with colours chosen randomly from pre-existing lists, and have a modular square format. This formal continuity also reappears in the 'grid paintings', which hang obliquely in diamond shapes at different heights and intervals. The silent and pure optical nature of the grid, a classic system of organisation from Max Bill and Sol LeWitt's chequered boards to Piet Mondrian's grates, thwarts the spectators' thirst for visual pleasure. At the same time, it reflects Zobernig's penchant for what W.J.T. Mitchell has called a 'de-purified artistic opticality accompanied by a de-throning of the notion of the artist as the creator of an original image, a novel visual gestalt that bursts fully formed from the mind of the artistic "seer" to dazzle and fixate the spectator.'<sup>5</sup>

The composition and rhythm of his 'nets' are constantly reinterpreted, for example, through the use of chroma-key colours derived from video technology that he has been regularly using since the 1990s – in particular the ultramarine tone that is commonly used for weather forecasts. This blue background is employed in place of a white canvas. The fabric's blue colour appears to be progressively erased by thick coats of white acrylic paint; in other instances, the white canvas is covered by different layers of transparency and opacity. These pictures give the impression that the grids, ranging from a simple painted cross to strips of fabric sewn together, are blocked off by white squares of what would be otherwise considered negative space (i.e. raw canvas). Lately, this technique has been abandoned in favour of lines made with masking tape, a method Mondrian used in 1918 in the preparation of his works, and which Zobernig reintroduces to allude to painting's enquiry into three-dimensional space.<sup>6</sup> According to Zobernig, stripes, grids and monochromes belong to an 'encyclopaedia of painting'. Another series made of round stones of Swarovski crystals functions as a reminder that the dialectic between elite and mass culture adopts diverse forms, and that the dichotomy between the rarefied practice of art and the more 'vulgar' realities around it is crucial for both Modernism's discriminatory norms and postmodernism's anti-bourgeois protocols.

In 1810 Goethe published the scientific essay *Theory of Colours*, in which he argued that light, shadows, grey and complementary colours affect both the eye and the feelings. According to his thesis, the colour we see depends on light and an object's properties, as well as – and equally – on our perception of those two variables. Colours are subjective phenomena related to perceptual psychology that, in turn, depends on a matrix of conditions through which we discern external factors such as the blue of the sky. In 1963 Joseph Albers published *Interaction of Colour*, an influential contribution to the development of colour theory, in which he introduced the idea that colours are governed by both internal and deceptive logics, such as illusions of transparency, reversions or the vanishing of boundaries and contrasts – phenomena created by the interaction of colours in the foreground and background of a picture. Interestingly, in the same year that Albers's essay was published, Hélio Oiticica began his *Bólides* (1963–69), painted wood and glass boxes that contained, among other elements, sediment of raw pigment. In these hybrid paintings and sculptures, viewers could experience colour by touch and smell as much as by sight, a sensory experience that, embodying a radical approach to understanding colour, suggested a potential to liberate society from the restrictive conditions of late capitalism – an idea not far from Wilhelm Reich's model of an unconditional regime of biological freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> Respectively, at a group exhibition at Isabella Kacprzak Gallery, Stuttgart, in 1988 titled 'Franz West, Neue Skulpturen, Kollaborationen Herbert Brandl und Heimo Zobernig', and 'Ein Fernsehstudio für UTV' ('A Television Studio for UTV') at Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.245.

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Mondrian, who removed the tape in the finished works, Zobernig leaves it on the canvas.

For Zobernig colour is also a sensual experience, as illustrated by his *Video Nr 18* (2000). As in his earlier *Video Nr 12* and *Video Nr 14* (both from 1996), Zobernig uses a technique of digital keying to compose a surreal, impossible scene. (In digital chroma key, colours are separated in order to accentuate the difference between figures and background, enabling video-makers to juxtapose numerous shots into one image.) Similar to Oiticica's film *Parangolé* (1964), which represented the idea of the bodily emancipation of colour from painting into wearable costumes for 'sandwich men', Zobernig films himself rolling around naked in *Video Nr 18*, constantly moving large surfaces of fabric 'painted' in chroma-key colours. Every sixty seconds a colour is digitally screened out of the image and replaced with white, in allusion to the blankness of the white canvas, to erasures or changes of mind – all pragmatic aspects related to the daily practice of painting, which here assume a critical coding.

## D for Display

Like painting, sculpture and the moving image, architecture and exhibition design are also spatial arts. Zobernig's approach reflects the formal lexicon and concepts around exhibition design as a discipline in itself. In her book *The Power of Display*, Mary Anne Staniszewski writes: 'A work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone: it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition created in accordance with historically determined and self-consciously staged installation conventions (in other words, time and site-bound character).'<sup>7</sup> Zobernig understands the notion of display not in terms of the creation of a support structure, and therefore secondary, but as a spatial and optical demarcation of places.<sup>8</sup> For him displays are sculptural installations, architectural 'corrections' or modular mass-produced office and home furniture that claim their own aesthetic autonomy within an interior, and integrate the artworks with ordinary screens, partition walls and platforms. For instance, *Weisses Kubus* (2002) is both a sculpture and an architectural component. Invited by the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna to connect two galleries divided on the same floor by a lift shaft, Zobernig responded by creating a white passage that allowed visitors to walk from one gallery to the other without perceiving any spatial interruption. For the exhibition 'Jetztzeit' at Kunsthalle Wien in 1994, he made a purpose-built room illuminated by red fluorescent lamps; in this immersive atmosphere hung fifteen paintings by Albert Oehlen which, because of the unorthodox lighting, lost almost all colour, their surface reduced to shades of lightness.<sup>9</sup> For *Untitled* (1999) at Kunstverein München, Zobernig turned the exhibition space's grey floor, ceiling and walls into a classic white cube out of which a 'cinema auditorium' paradoxically emerged from the reversed tone of a black projection screen. He arranged one hundred white chairs in rows, placed two tables on a podium-like structure in front of a black Molton fabric (the textile used for theatre curtains) stretched into a three-by-four-metre projection screen, and hung seventy large Styrofoam balls from the ceiling. With such means of intervention Zobernig departs from the canonical, idealised and fetishised space for presenting contemporary art, and does it from within – by adding white to white. At the same time, by reversing and disorienting the formulaic colour palette of the film space – the 'black box' – he destabilises the separation between audience and screen, and reclaims the physicality of cinemagoers who no longer are invisible bodies swallowed by obscurity.

Most of Zobernig's installations acknowledge artists, architects and graphic designers who, between the 1920s and 70s and in conjunction with the rise of mass media, conceived innovative

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998, p.xix.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of display has been a subject of enquiry in his lecture 'Displaced Display: The Drama of Display', given at Lisbon's Centro Cultural de Belem in 2000, and of an artist's book of the same title published by Kunstraum Innsbruck in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> This intervention was inspired by Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which was painted in black, white and grey tones, as he considered colour inappropriate for portraying the horrors of the Spanish Civil War.

presentation designs, from Herbert Bayer and Friedrich Kiesler to Allan Kaprow and Michael Asher.<sup>10</sup> They also suggest a familiarity with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, which had a significant impact on artists working in New York in 1960s (including Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt) who redefined and revised the triad of art-space-viewer. However, Zobernig's Spartan sobriety rejects the idea of an environment as a formal framing device or psychological situation that demands the viewers' participation, as those artists' works do. The emotionless, demystifying character of his elementary syntax (floor slabs, pillars, mirrors, room dividers, curtains, pavilions and so forth, characteristic of the Minimalist programme), its rigid formalism, naked physicality and frequently de-skilled production incorporates the exhibition site itself into its formal parameters, position and orientation. It also triggers an alienation effect that warns viewers not to take for granted the authority of Modernist aesthetics, and to be alert to its dominant position in visual culture. Viewers are asked to refine their sense of critical inquiry by assessing, evaluating and judging the dialectic between the Minimalist canon, concerned with works that demand a physically active viewership, and the socially aware strategies of spectatorial agency typical of institutional critique. However, Zobernig suggests that it would be a mistake to include his works within either movement. Through their clerical rigour and disciplined precision, these installations engage in self-critique while simultaneously critiquing the dangers of an autistic hyperabstraction and high-Conceptualism. For instance, his bed-like sculptures (such as *Untitled*, 1992) are both 'mere' forms and interior design, even though they don't claim to be of any use. Their 'quasi-functional form' doesn't completely abandon the proto-Conceptual strategy of the ready-made, which heralds the death of craftsmanship in art and simultaneously welcomes the logic of industrial production.<sup>11</sup> This is also the case with the many shelf-like sculptures he made in the late 1980s and 90s, the stacking chairs he began making in 2000 – imitating the classic shell-shaped plywood seats by Arne Jacobsen and painted in classicistic gold – or the IKEA 'Billy' modular shelf units arranged in L-shaped configurations.

## F for Form (and Function)

Zobernig often leaves the base of his works visible – to reveal, for instance, the physicality of raw canvas or particle board, suggesting that the material exists as part of the artwork before the work itself is added to it. Like his reconsideration of the status of exhibition design, Zobernig undoes the traditional hierarchy between object and support.<sup>12</sup> Transportation crates become plinths; poster- and toilet-roll tubes become sculptures; Styrofoam rectangles serve as scenic props for an artists' television studio; sheets of half-transparent mirror foil or black rubber blinds become room-dividing screens or curtains. Such versatility is made possible by Zobernig's tendency to use commercial prefabricated construction materials of standardised measure, so that a slab of wooden chipboard painted white can be both a single piece and part of a larger installation, like the stage set he designed for documenta 9 in 1992. This was the first of a series of functional platforms built for the following two documentas: a conference room made in 1997 for documenta X. and an information lounge for one of the initial platforms for Documenta11 in 2001. The hybrid

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<sup>10</sup> In 1961 the Austrian graphic designer Herbert Bayer wrote: 'Exhibition design has evolved as a new discipline, as an apex of all media and powers of communication and of collective efforts and effects. The combined means of visual communication constitutes a remarkable complexity: language as visible printing or as a sound, pictures as symbols, paintings, and photos, sculptural media, materials and surfaces, colour, light, movement (of display as well as the visitor), films, diagrams and charts. The total application of all plastic and psychological means (more than anything else) makes exhibition design an intensified and new language.' Herbert Bayer, *Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums*, 1961. Quoted in M.A. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, op. cit., p.38.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Winckelmann, 'Intuitive Formalismen', Heimo Zobernig: *Kunst und Text* (exh. cat.), Bonn, Leipzig and Munich: Bonner Kunstverein, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig, Kunstverein München, 1998, p.33.

<sup>12</sup> This principle is equally valid for the paintings, in which emulsions, primers and synthetic resins climb to the finished surface, even though their seemingly careless brushwork looks like a paint-job. If until the 1990s most of his works were characterised by an industrial colour palette, later more varied colours appear, such as blues, browns, oranges and yellows.

appearance of these works reveals Zobernig's increasing association with socially-engaged aspects of art, which involve a set of 'services' designed and regulated by the artist. However, the resemblance of these projects to information and recreational areas within art institutions has often been mistaken for a critique of the institutional frame. Already in 1992 at Kunstverein München he restyled the ticket desk at the entrance, installed a large mirror above the cafeteria and designed shelving units and a reading room. Though the change to the ticket desk was simply a modification of the desk itself – it was painted orange to emphasise its volume, while the mirror gave an illusion of an enlarged space – the other two interventions made more noticeable changes. The shelving units involved tilted display boards to present the covers of books rather than their spines, and the reading room consisted of a bench running along the entire length of the wall of one of the galleries, with seating at the same height as a large table in the middle of the room.<sup>13</sup> Although appearing as functional improvements of the interior design, in reality these 'corrections', as he has often called them, attempt to resolve the ideological impasse caused by the dominance of the white cube. Maintaining his usual, zealous control, Zobernig interrogates the specific nature of this kind of space. On the other hand, his deconstructions of exhibition galleries are formal endeavours that do not perform any strategic critique or comment on the inner workings of art institutions. Differently from Kontext Kunst and institutional critique artists, whose attention focused on the social relations between public and institution, his systematic enquiry deals with the aesthetic autonomy or neutrality of the white cube as the assumed normality of art.

## T for Text

Zobernig's interest in artist's books, catalogues, editing and graphic design identifies an alternative manner of dealing with spatial arrangements. Most of his printed work is neither literary nor purely visual. His *Lexikon der Kunst 1992* (*Lexicon of Art 1992, 1992*)<sup>14</sup> is an alphabetical list of visual art terms and names of friends and acquaintances – a use of language so strict that it reads like a version of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1911–13) for the art world of the time. Reminiscent of the synthetic alphabets by Italian designer Bruno Munari, which demonstrated how graphic structures gave letters meaning, Zobernig's textual layouts can also seem three-dimensional, as his wall painting on the façade of Klagenfurt University demonstrates (*Untitled, 2002*). He seems to have a sentimental attachment to the Helvetica typeface, which he has employed since 1986 for exhibition titles, invitation posters and catalogues, and which he seems to cherish for its neutral, clear and flexible character.<sup>15</sup> Since its invention in 1957 by the Swiss designer Max Miedinger, Helvetica has been a popular choice for signage and commercial advertising worldwide, as no obvious stylistic meaning has been assigned to its form. Throughout the 1990s Zobernig used single upper-case Helvetica letters to title his exhibitions and projects; large black vinyl letters would be placed 115 centimetres high at the entrance of his solo exhibitions, acting as a signpost or wall tattoo. This designation gives an idea of progression, limited to 26 glyphs, and is a means of indirect branding, or subtle corporate identity that returned in a large wall-display system created for a show at Secession, Vienna in 1995 that spelled out '95 HZ', only 'readable' from above.

Book editing also has been an important facet of Zobernig's practice. For instance, the catalogue of his solo show at Kunsthalle Bern in 1994 was modelled on the catalogue for Harald Szeemann's exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form', which took place in the same venue in 1969. Like that catalogue, Zobernig's bound together hole-punched sheets of A4 paper in a

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<sup>13</sup> All these architectural 'modifications' were removed later but reconstructed in 1999 on the occasion of his solo exhibition at the Kunstverein.

<sup>14</sup> See Ferdinand Schmatz and Heimo Zobernig, *Lexikon der Kunst 1992*, Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> The same applies for most of his catalogues, which appear in standard paper size DIN A4.

cardboard ring binder (the cover is blue rather than the original pale yellow). But instead of sections including artists' pages, his book contains black-and-white views of the building's architecture, installation views of the exhibition, and a reprint of a photocopied brochure produced for his solo exhibition at Villa Arson in 1991. That brochure included transcripts of lectures discussing the relationship between art practice and its social surroundings, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'art world', understood as the social legitimation provided by cultural institutions for their public.<sup>16</sup> This type of artistic activity reveals Zobernig's role as performative curator, focused not only on inventing new presentation formats but also oriented towards a dialogical and discursive understanding of art. The same unorthodox procedure applies in his strategic reintroduction of older works into new formal solutions, graphics, texts and objects, thus creating a conceptual continuity in his work. Migrating from one exhibition to the other according to a sequential process of revisions, ideas integrate within an invisible curatorial process that takes place in time rather than in space.

## W for Witz

Are Zobernig's works agents of parody, paraphrase, irony or indexicalism? They certainly flirt with the postmodern penchant for incessantly quoting forms and sizes, or specific rules and ways of thinking from the past. They also pay homage to a relevant 'literalness' that – from De Stijl to Minimalism and Conceptualism – has shown how art's meaning resides in objects and images rather than in an epistemological framework extrapolated from the world outside. Despite such inclinations, wittiness is more suitable for describing Zobernig's art, as it differs from citation, satire or literalness. Adopting a semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visual and social constructs, theoretical discourse and figurative images, his work engages the internal logics of apparently opposed binaries; in other words, it discovers and organises similar ideas through difference.

In *The Birth to Presence* (1993), Jean-Luc Nancy writes that *Witz* is neither genre nor style, nor even a figure of rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> As a derisive manner, it avoids becoming a concept, but can nonetheless have all these roles because it is always unpredictable. A procedure to make comments through unexpected combinations, *Witz* is a skill dependent on intellectual sagacity and subtlety – its origin goes hand in hand with different forms of reading and observation (deciphering, decoding, interpreting, etc.) that must meet with the viewer's ability to grasp ideas lucidly by way of unconventional or inexplicable models of thinking. Like *Witz* according to Nancy, Zobernig's work is obscure, deceptive, confusing and even 'brilliant'. The heterogeneous nature of his works begins with the inclusion of language and finishes with systematic disrespect for artistic styles, or their familiar methodological approaches. The science of *Witz* is here applied through recognisable resemblances, however succinctly disguised in a seriousness that seems to exclude any possibility of self-mockery. His works are both ingenious and dangerous – similar to Wilhelm Reich's inventions – and seduce by way of exaggeration. Zobernig's organised *Witz* satisfies the promise of a fragmentary knowledge, one that does not result from the immediate assimilation of motifs or genres, but is rather the work of a spirit of explosive genius.

Diana Baldon

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<sup>16</sup> This formula was also adopted for his solo show in Chicago's Renaissance Society in 1996, where he organised the symposium 'Planned Obsolescence' to discuss his exhibition as well as issues that at the time preoccupied the speakers (Joshua Decker, Kathryn Hixson, Ann Goldstein, Mark Wigley), indirectly related to Zobernig's own concerns.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (trans. Brian Holmes), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp.248-65.