

Tassilo BLITTERSDORFF

HERMANN JOSEF PAINITZ
(1938 – 2018)

Hermann Josef Painitz was born 1938 in Vienna. Middle class families coming from the east of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had often settled in the capital due to their creative and technical professions. Painitz's family had Polish (Galizian) and Czech roots, his mother had a fashionable milliner's shop and his uncle was a goldsmith.

Hermann Painitz had been educated as a gold-and silver-smith (1952-56) and worked then in this profession. He worked for a jeweller's studio in Bern (1958-59) and in London for some months (1962/63), where also his first artworks came into being. Also later he occasionally did jewellery pieces for friends. The experience of exact handcraft work with three-dimensional material influenced his *oeuvre*, specially his sculptural work. Already in his earliest collages, he assembled abstract forms according to the principles of series, permutation and progression. With numerical sequence systems he created his 'serial-image-concepts.' They defined the positions, qualities and colours of the elements in the final work. At the beginning, he had visions about creating an objective art and tried to avoid all kinds of subjectivistic motions and coincidental features. With numerical sequence systems, he encoded

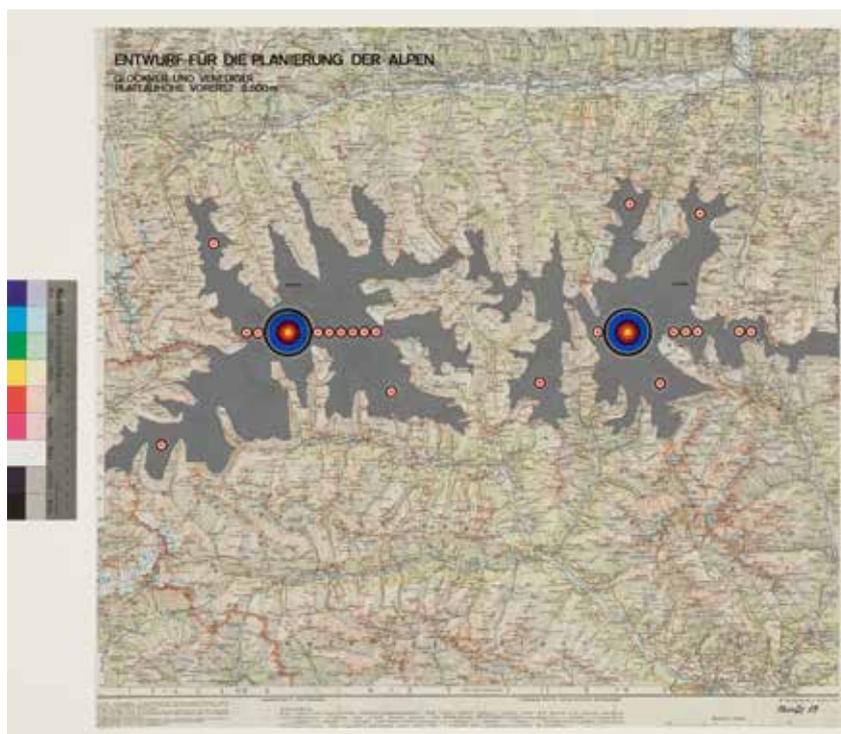
also words, which are often present in his works. Hidden contents could challenge public, which is able, and patient enough, to find out the complete meanings of artworks, interacting visually and intellectually with them. At this time Austria's post-war cultural scene was dominated by expressive and Informel Art tendencies. Painitz practiced uncompromisingly an analytic, methodical and constantly increasingly complicated art, which was then quite unusual. Some of his innovative ideas were connected with international theoretical discourses, which came up in the sixties, like Max Bense's and Abraham Moles' information-aesthetics or Norbert Wiener's cybernetics. In 1964 and 1966, Painitz had his first personal exhibitions in the Galerie im Griechenbeisl in Vienna, which was then an important meeting point for young artists. In the year 1965, he introduced concentric circles in different colours to the abstract elements in his pictures and got stronger signalization-effects. He edited his first manifesto: "Einzahl-Mehrzahl-Vielzahl-Unzahl" in which he described the function of numbers for his serial-image-concepts for the *Griechenbeisl* exhibition in 1966. He had then also a one-person exhibition at the Forum Stadtpark in Graz.



Picture-Language, installation view, Secession, Vienna, 1974 © state collections of lower austria, Hermann J. Painitz

For Painitz, art was an instrument of universal cognition. He perceived art as an objective and specific human value that is in a complete contradiction to nature. In his "Manifest und Gründungsdeklaration für den Klub 10" from April 1968, he demanded the liberation of humans from the dictate of nature. Another of his texts from 1968 in *Die Manuskripte* is titled: "The contrasts between art and nature or constructive proposals for the abolition of nature." It is not easy to guess that a radical claim of exclusivity of technology, resembling of Italian Futurists or a revolutionary irony, was behind these ideas. In 1969, he created a project titled *Levelling of the Alps*, a tentative attempt to change radically earth's surface. A series of drawings and collages shows, like planning sketches, the levelling of the highest Austrian mountains, the Großglockner and the Venediger. After their blowing up their site would be occupied by "a large flat surface, on which a large signal circle could be painted, visible to humans living on the moon," as Painitz said in 1997 in an interview for the catalogue of the exhibition

Alpenblick (Kunsthalle Wien).¹ Painitz's designs for the *Levelling of the Alps* and an opening text from 1969, were partly published in 1971 in the *Protokolle*, an Austrian journal for contemporary art and literature. He also presented the project of 1969 in actionist demonstration-evenings in Oberwart, then in Graz (Forum Stadtpark) and in the Galerie St. Stefan, at this time one of Vienna's few avant-garde art centres. In 1968, he had a one-person exhibition there. In another of his art projects, Painitz dealt also radically with elementary conditions: 1971 he wrote the "Knallkunst" (Bang-art) Manifesto and carried out several actions under the title *Information-explosion*. A styrofoam-head with a small signal circle in front and on a base the inscription "Knallkopf" (Bang-head) was blown up and produced a bang ("Knallkopf" is in German also a synonym for "Dummkopf" - imbecile). Not by chance, his interests crossed a lot different fields, spanning from philosophy, logic, information theories and arts including art history (for a while he frequented even art history lessons at the Vienna University) and literature to



*Design for the Leveling of the Alps. Glockner and Venediger massifs. Provisional plateau height 2.500 m, 1969, acrylic, leterset on map, 59x62 cm
© state collections of lower Austria, Hermann J. Painitz*

a deep knowledge about nature (specially on birds, plants and mushrooms). At his countryside house in Kirchstetten/Weinviertel, he observed bird-life. Often he picked up small birds, fallen out or their nests and fed them until they grew up. He was in close contact with the Austrian ornithologist Otto König and his teacher, the ethologist and Nobel-Price-Winner Konrad Lorenz. In 1965, Painitz participated also in two important group exhibitions, the 4th Biennale de Paris and the in the *Trigon* in Graz. In 1967 he exhibited at the *Kinetika*, the famous first international exhibition about Op Art in Austria held in the Museum of 20th Century in Vienna, the combination-sculpture *21* consisting of 21 metal-cubes, conceptualized as geometric series with the quotient 4: the 1 big cube had the half volume of 4 smaller cubes, which have again the half volume of the 16 smallest cubes.

At the beginning of the 1970s, he adapted for his aims the "Viennese method of image-statistics," introduced in the 1920s by Otto von Neurath, a philosopher of the Wiener Kreis, who visualized statistical facts by diagrams and

organograms. This new tool in Painitz's image language made it possible for him to show processes that normally are not visible. At the XII Biennial de Sao Paulo (1973) he showed already some 'statistical portraits'. The portrayed person had to document repeating actions of her daily life, which the artist transferred into an image-concept, in which each day had 24 circular elements and each activity had a sign. In 1965/66 he taught at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna and in 1969/70 he had a British Council scholarship at the Hornsey College of Art in London. In 1975 he had a one-person exhibition under the title *an Stelle von* (on the place of) in the Wiener Secession. One of his biggest and most complex works entitled *Bildsprache* (Image-language) - a summary of all his encoding methods, consisting of 126 canvases, was presented there together with other variations of alphabets, like a hammer or a bread-alphabet. Signs or letters are forms to express contents, both are changeable, it is always an "in the place of." From 1977 to 1983, he was the president of the Secession. He tried to open



Hermann J. Painitz, *Einundzwanzig / twenty-one*, 1967
 Aluminiumguss / cast aluminium
 21-teilig / 21 parts
 27 x 16 x 16 cm
 Inv.-Nr. 0782
 © Collection Liaunig

this artists' association more for international art. For example in 1979, he organized there a big documentary show about Christo's *Running Fence* project. From the later 1970s onwards, he started to apply also photographs in his series and used his image-languages for analysing visually different situations. In the 'encoded landscapes' a series about the Northern Weinviertel (1978) he worked with cartographic quotations and photos, in the graphic cycle *The Birds* (1987/88) he analyzed the signal effects of birds feathers, in his cardboard reliefs, he dealt with moving or developing processes (1993). His series about Austria (1995/96) confronted the shape of the country with different sign or concept situations. In 1987 he had retrospectives in the New Gallery in Linz and the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna. In 1988, he exhibited

at the 3rd International Cairo Biennial. In 1998 he showed *More than the sum of the parts* in the New Gallery in Graz and in the year 2000 *The sum of the parts* in the Künstlerhaus Wien. In the Chobot Gallery in Vienna in 2004, he showed works under the title *Bilde, Künstler, schmiere nicht* (Form, artist, don't smear). For him these works were a programmatic group of works on the theme of "how meaning emerges and constitutes itself" (Thomas D. Trummer in the opening speech). In the years 2010 and 2018, there were exhibitions in the Artmark Gallery in Vienna, which also represents his work now. In 2013 he had a single presentation in the 21st Haus in Vienna. In 2014, there was a big retrospective presentation of his work under the title *Selbstverständlich* (Self-evident), together with the edition of an almost encyclopedic catalogue. In 2017 was another retrospective in the Liaunig-Museum in Neuhaus/Suha. Herbert Liaunig was for over 50 years a friend of Painitz and collector of his works. Apart from his large output of visual work, in which also words and sentences were important, Painitz produced a lot of typescripts, beginning with serial-poems in the early 1960s to manifestos, theoretical texts and poems. It is highly desirable that this interesting material is published soon. His series *The parts of the whole* (2014) seems to be a good epilogue. Six big canvases with the same image and a signal-circle have in their lower part encoded words, forming together the sentence: "behind the appearances/is located the/reality all swans are/white bread feeds all/humans are mortal/every eye is a sunlight."² (author's translation from German).

Kraków, 30th March 2019

Notes

¹ Hermann J. Painitz, „Eingriffe in der Natur sind grundsätzlich sinnlos,“ interviewed by Wolfgang Kos, in *Alpenblick. Die zeitgenössische Kunst und das Alpine*, ed. Wolfgang Kos (Kunsthalle Wien, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld Verlag, 1997), 165.

² Hermann J. Painitz, *Selbstverständlich / Self-Evident*, ed. Alexandra Schantl (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2014), 123. Exhib. cat.

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