



Press Release

BRIGITTE KOWANZ ERWIN WURM IN THE AUSTRIAN PAVILION AT THE 57th INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

(11 May 2017) With Brigitte Kowanz and Erwin Wurm, commissioner Christa Steinle has chosen two artists who, since more than 30 years, have made internationally important contributions to the development of an expanded notion of sculpture by reacting to the changes in the experience of space caused by machines and media over the last two centuries.

INFINITY AND BEYOND

BRIGITTE KOWANZ'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE AUSTRIAN PAVILION

Brigitte Kowanz developed her own artistic vocabulary of light over the course of more than three decades of artistic work. Vocabulary is meant literally here to the extent that Brigitte Kowanz deploys light as language, as code. She employs pure light as an autonomous media, just as in former times the painters worked with pure colour. One important aspect of her light art is the use of language deriving from the experience of urban spaces and the ideography of Conceptual Art. Her work for the Austrian Pavilion at the 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia represents the culmination of her vocabulary – the use of neon light, mirrors, reflective metals, writing, codes, and informations.

Kowanz is a poet and architect of light. Her light space at the Biennale Arte 2017 presents the interlocking of physical material space and immaterial virtual space. The body is situated in real space. This space is simultaneously expanded for the body into a virtual space by means of mirrors, two-way mirrors, artificial light and so forth. The words conduct the visitor in a conceptual space, in a fictional space, in a mental space. She models or references the Internet's global data space.

With this light installation, an extension of her previous light boxes, Brigitte Kowanz not only offers a sensory experience but also addresses a technical development that radically altered human life: the Internet. Brigitte Kowanz thus made use of two statements about the Internet, which she translated into Morse Code. With the date 12.03.1989, she referenced the presentation of the Internet at CERN, Geneva, by Tim Berners-Lee. With the date 06.08.1991, she commemorated the moment when the first website went online, when the Internet became accessible for all.

Civilisation increasingly finds itself in a space beyond writing. Compared with "real space" created by the data processing performed by natural sense organs, this space is quite different. The new electromagnetic media, from telefax to telephone, from radio to TV, have given rise to an immaterial electromagnetic data space whose apogee is today's internet.

Light is immaterial and an electromagnetic wave. Morse code makes use of electromagnetic waves. The symbols of Morse code travel on electromagnetic waves with no body, pure signs in a virtual space. Hence, it is of compelling artistic consistency and logical stringency to combine light and Morse code so as to highlight essential common features: immateriality and virtuality.

Morse code thus becomes a work principle of her entire oeuvre as Morse code, the interruption of signal sequences, embodies the states of existence and nonexistence, presence and absence, reality and virtuality. The communication structure of the electromagnetic age and the concomitant experience of space becomes apparent: immaterial communication and mobility of messages with no physical messengers.

This reflecting light space is aptly titled *Infinity and Beyond* because it represents the opposite of a black box, a virtual infinite space. Before the Big Bang, before the genesis of light, the universe was probably what still threatens the universe today – a black hole. The black hole is the cosmological place where mass implodes and light disappears. To some extent, the universe represents the victory of the light box over the black box. As such, Brigitte Kowanz's light installation *Infinity and Beyond* is a cosmological model, a miniature of the universe about which we only know what light tells or shows us. The cosmic messages of light also require receivers. Light is the message of the universe and Brigitte Kowanz is a messenger of light. (Peter Weibel, from: Biennale catalogue Brigitte Kowanz, 2017)



PERFORMATIVE ONE MINUTE SCULPTURES ERWIN WURM'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE AUSTRIAN PAVILION

It is the task of sculpture to produce spatial experiences. Nonetheless, the question arises as to what kind of space this is—because spatial experience has changed. The old spatial experience, and therefore also classical sculpture, were body-centered. The new spatial experience, on the other hand, is centered on machines and media.

Erwin Wurm is one of the few artists who translate changing spatial experience into spatial art itself. The automobile is the main cause for the shift in meanings between mobile and immobile. Hence for Wurm it becomes a favored medium of expression. Unmovable houses, conversely, can suddenly rise up, landing on a hotel or a museum. The states of mobility and immobility become variable. Wurm's whole oeuvre reflects an apt response in spatial art to the transformation of spatial experience from being body-based to being machine-based. But Wurm has also already entered the territory of media-centered spatial experience with his *One Minute Sculptures*: instructions to the public that are photographically documented. In front of the pavilion a huge truck stands vertically on its head, i.e. on the driver's cab, the hood, immobile. Erwin Wurm's accessible sculpture, a truck that visitors can climb up through the inside and onto its platform, allows them a threefold spatial experience: of body, machine and media. Once they get to the top, the visitors can take a selfie. They experience the socio-political and psycho-political dimension of every spatial experience. The psychological experience of space can range from the confinement of an elevator car through to the expanse of a prairie, evoking commensurate emotions: the sense of imprisonment, or freedom. Especially today, global migration movements have made the political and psychological dimensions of space more current than ever. Space is now being defined in geopolitical terms again. On the one hand, we once more have borders, fences, and walls. On the other hand, a migrant lives in the unlimited space of information provided by the smartphone. As a result, in Europe we are experiencing the unique spectacle of hundreds of thousands of people arriving on European soil without a passport but with a smartphone, because this smartphone helps them to move and navigate across spaces and countries.

Since messages have been able to travel without bodies, by phone, by Internet, and it is signals and not bodies that invisibly fill spaces, physical space has been perforated, riddled with holes. Restricted space, it turns out, is only restricted for the body. Information space is infinite. And so our living space also becomes different. We take part in events at which we are not physically present. Also living space is perforated. This is why a caravan riddled with holes stand inside the Austrian pavilion. The caravan is per se the paradoxical cross between a dwelling, i.e. immovable property, and a car, i.e. mobility. A caravan that is confined within a space, within a pavilion, has had its purpose removed. A pavilion is not, after all, a garage. The visitors as performers experience both settledness and nomadism, containment and exclusion, mobility and immobility. Since this takes place in a caravan (in German: "Wohnwagen"), this experience clearly also calls on their social and psychological experiences. In the word "Wohnwagen", "Wohnung" means dwelling and so has connotations of home and homeland, of family, domicile and domestic country. The "-wagen" part of the word, meaning car, implies "on the road," traveling to foreign people and distant countries, going abroad. Will the performative public in the Austrian pavilion have a cosmopolitan experience between limitation and dislimitation, between roots and future, between departure and arrival, between resettlement and migration? (Peter Weibel, from: Biennale catalogue Erwin Wurm, 2017)

AUSTRIAN PAVILION, BIENNALE ARTE 2017

Commissioner Christa Steinle

Artists Brigitte Kowanz Erwin Wurm

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OPENING

Austrian Pavilion, Giardini della Biennale, Venice

Opening on Friday, May 12th 2017, 3pm

Preview days on Wednesday, May 10th - Friday, May 12th 2017

Exhibition dates Saturday, May 13th - Sunday, November 26th 2017