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Posing theories

Text by Franz Thalmair

With his drawings and performances, Nikolaus Gansterer moves between art and science. He consolidates his work to applied research.

A sofa with deep-red velvet wrap and a wall chart for teaching fundamentals entitled “Tree of Knowledge (Metal)”: there isn’t much else in one of the two working rooms in Gansterer’s home studio. It appears to be a space for thinking. Despite the rather large space, the Viennese Vegetable Orchestra and Institute for Transacoustic Research member says, “I need another room where I can build my installations and also leave them standing.” It’s possible in the Institute for Transacoustic Research’s practice space, but after a week, at the latest, everything has to be taken down again.

Gansterer, a graduate of the University of Applied Arts with a concentration in transmedial art at, understands his work as a fermentation process, “I am someone who works a lot and in parallel,” he says. “Because of that, I’m in a constant state of tension. But when I’m able to catalyze this pressure, I can convert it productively. Although I have meanwhile developed my own formal language, I am more interested in the process that leads to this *Formwerdung*, this formation of form.” The forms, media, and materials that Gansterer uses meander between performance, installation arrangements, and artist’s books. He also works with living organisms and plants in what are often lengthy experiments. “It always has to do with mycelia, with networks,” he says. His style is marked by numerous references to already realized artworks, one representational form runs like a red thread throughout: drawing.

Manifest Ideas

His drawing works can currently be seen at the Technical Museum in Vienna. For Memoseum (2009), he spent several nights there grappling with the museum’s collection and becoming familiar with its organizational structure. “I asked myself how I could reorganize all of the manifold contents and objects and in doing so, draft new taxonomies,” says the artist. Memoseum gave rise to a temporarily amended version of this site of memory and forgetting: based on colors, based on the spaces around the objects shown there, on figures of thought, on forgotten inventions, core theses or mnemonic devices. Gansterer presented his results as paper-thin work sheets that visitors could take with them—collect, as it were—in specially prepared bags. “In Memoseum I attempt to show ideas in the state of fermentation,” says the artist and explains the historical processes, those based in the history of ideas, formal or functional, associative ones, or even those founded in institutional history that he used for the reorganization of the collection. Whether it is lonely nocturnal research as in the case of Memoseum, or in a publicly accessible setting, Gansterer light-footedly brings together drawing and performance, “Every drawing is a performance of sorts for me, because the process of recognizing, thinking, and naming appears here in an extremely condensed form. For that reason, I also began to draw live. For me,

drawing is research in the classical sense: one feels along, experimentally, always from the start again, step-by-step

Universal Matrix

Until the end of November, at the exhibition “Urban Signs - Local Strategies,” Gansterer is showing an intervention in the public space of Vienna’s Praterstern. The artist put up *The Urban Alphabet* (2009) directly on the new, black rail track covering at the station’s rear exit. From the basic urban forms of international metropolises, from A for Amsterdam, to Z for Ziguinchor in Senegal, he developed pictograms through the abstraction of city maps, and arranged them alphabetically. Using twenty-six of these so-called urban characters, he constructed the base for a global, universal language whose morphology generates from urban structures. “In public space, one has to work differently than in the exhibition space. *The Urban Alphabet* speaks mainly to passersby. Therefore, I decided to offer a very small and fast gesture almost colossally.” The individual symbols of his alphabet appear on a black background, as though someone had sketched out their ideas with chalk on a blackboard. But *The Urban Alphabet* is not to be understood as simply a reflection on globalization. It can equally be interpreted as an ironic commentary on the site of presentation, that is, Praterstern, and the, in part, disproportionately large Nordbahnhof.

Hypothetical stencils

Gansterer’s interest in issues from the natural sciences and social sciences, as well as their overlapping with a process of artistic form finding, is currently taking form in the work on an elaborate artist’s book. The work, *Drawing a Hypothesis*, will be published this spring, and is result of research he undertook on the diagrammatic of the drawing during a fellowship at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. “For the book, I gathered diagrams, collected and archived them—without any limitations in terms of theme,” says Gansterer. He removed individual graphic forms from their original context and presented them to artists and theorists from various disciplines, with the request that they develop a hypothesis based on one of these forms. Gansterer thus pursues the opposite path, rather than from complex language of theory to diagram, he goes from abstraction back again to language.

The layout of the book imitates that of common scientific books. The goal of this mimicry is for the reader to accept the hypotheses formulated in the book on face value, at first glance. “A hypothesis is an idea that is still in a fluid state before it becomes a final theory,” claims the artist and reveals his fascination with the question of “precisely when an idea takes shape, and when this form ultimately becomes matter. With the book, I move in a very early phase of the genesis of information formation.” In his work, Gansterer encounters the complexity of scientific and environmental systems with equally complex artistic classifications. The beholder, animated by the network-like thought processes of the artist illustrated and literally traced out in various forms of representation, becomes drawn into the semantic interim space of what should be understood as a model-like world of ideas.

Finally, as the artist says, “hypotheses open up speculative and airy spaces of thought. From the history of thought one can arrive at findings, or as one would say so aptly in English, draw

conclusions." He poses his own conclusions for general discussion, and likewise, the accompanying theories. Research work on research work, or art as basic research. (fair)

On the artist: Nikolaus Gansterer was born in 1974 in Klosterneuburg, he lives and works in Vienna, Berlin, and the Netherlands. After his studies of transmedial art at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, he graduated from the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. He has been awarded the österreichischen Staatsstipendiums (Austrian State Grant), as well as the Förderpreis für bildenden Kunst (Promotional award for the Fine Arts).

Most recently, his work has been shown at the Technical Museum Vienna, at the exhibition Urban Signs - Local Strategies at Wiener Fluc, and in Brussel's Argos - Centre for Arts and Media. In early November he presented a film project about Chinese copy artists at an exhibition in Beijing.