

OTTO MUEHL

HITLER • STALIN & SEX IN EGYPT

THREE GROUPS OF WORKS BY OTTO MUEHL FROM 1984

CURATED BY THEO ALTENBERG

JUNE 9 – JULY 10, 2010

In his art Otto Muehl is held in particular esteem as “destructor”, as one who breaks taboos. As a protagonist of “direct art”, as “shaman of painting” and as anarchist of language he gained a position among the outlaws of the Vienna actionists of the 1960s who were formative for modern art history. Together with Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler (and artists Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth) Muehl had revealed the dark sides of symbolic power by uninhibited use of previously “ugly” materials and toppled the hierarchies in aesthetic categories.

In 1971 he declared with heightened self-assurance that the goal was now to make art a part of life Muehl founded a commune and broke with the art scene in 1971. He preferred to commence the next attempt at overcoming old normative agendas to becoming an ossified in the scene as scandal performer.

What followed was the utopian, “paradise-experimental” and tragic history of the Friedrichshof commune in Burgenland. After the members of the commune had invented a new form of human communication in their self-performance evenings, this style of life took its course throughout all of Europe. In the 1980s Otto Muehl took up classical media –this time with a vengeance. Painting, video and dance.

After having worshiped spontaneity he sought to redefine the conceptual. Muehl became the central entertainer of a new commune culture. He wrote scripts, directed, invented fairy tales, danced, played different roles and also taught a course on nude drawing. Daily. At the opulent dance and theater evenings he appeared as Joe Karner, an artist figure he himself had invented, performing in quick succession as Gigolo, “Maximo Lider” and “lascivious Wotan”.

1984 he was busy working on new forms on action film. First there were ideas and comments regarding the films made by the next generation and the children (1980-1983). With his project for a feature film on the (un)real inner life of Vincent van Gogh a phase began in which painting became part of the script and the story. In the film Muehl painted the pictures of the hero (May – August 1984).

Parallel to the film he created the “van Gogh series”, which took up the taboo themes of the pictures of the “12 Aktionen Mappe” (12 actions portfolio) (1970/71). What can be painted when the action in the picture goes beyond what is conceivable? When the lascivious, sun-saturated and messianically charged canvases of saint Vincent depict stories relating the dregs of human existence.

In the fall of 1984 press photos made Muehl aware of the body languages of the leading symbolic figures of monstrous and destructive force – Hitler and Stalin. He began to juxtapose the two in poses and anti-poses. Hitler: hysterically gesticulating with grotesque and screaming in agitation. Stalin alias Koba: a stoic, rigid, almost petrified figure, with only his eyes constantly seeking, with paranoid attentiveness, possible opponents.

This is where the exhibition begins. Theo Altenberg juxtaposes examples of three successive work groups by the artist: “The Dictators”, “Papyrus 55001” and “Mother with Child”. In all paintings of this series the same technique is used: shadowless color surfaces against a “brutal” outline. Muehl is able to depict the structure of the bodies in the painting only by nuancing the colors, the different qualities of the impasto pigments applied and the various definitions of the rhythm of a line, enhancing the significance of his motifs.

OTTO MUEHL

»VERSUMPfung EINER VENUS« (PALUDIFICATION OF A VENUS), 1963

»MAMA UND PAPA« (MUMMY AND DADDY), 1964

TWO PORTFOLIOS

EDITIONS OF THE OTTO MUEHL ARCHIVES (DANIÈLE ROUSSEL)

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"My 1st action [**Versumpfung einer Venus**, 1963] was based on the idea of integrating the human body in a sculpture. Instead of the bulky material used to make the junk sculptures I now mainly worked with soft materials such as cooking oil, margarine, tomatoes, raspberry juice, milk, whipped cream, eggs sunny side up, raw eggs, flour, semolina, meat, vegetables, cacao, oranges, ground chocolate, marmalade, cream, peas, cucumbers, fish, insulating bands, strings, towels, skin cream, dust paint, paste and water. The creative process became increasingly foregrounded, there was no more final point. The picture and the sculpture had become superfluous. I called these staging's with bodies and materials 'material actions'."

- Otto Muehl, in: *Aktionismus – Aktionsmalerei 1960-65*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Peter Noever / MAK, Vienna 1989, p. 26

"The material action "**mama und papa**" (1964) differs in principle from the preceding material actions. Mama und papa is the first material action that addresses the following themes:

1. Act of procreation: balloons, condoms, filled with different materials, burst by piercing, symbolizing ejaculation.
2. Birth: head appearing between the mother's thighs.
3. Child growing up: the oral phase: the child fills a balloon with air, sucks on it and on the breast. Freud's insights are translated into the language of the material action. The sexual act between mama and papa is objectified by the sculptural material, an event that obliterates all privacy. The action represents the infantile development of sexuality: birth of the child, development of sexuality to oral phase. The genital phase is depicted by the act of sexual intercourse of mama and papa. The social role of the man who uses the woman as a machine of procreation is shown here unwittingly. Only now, after 42 years, I have become aware of the socio-critical relevance of the situation shown here. The mother is the shell that is inseminated. Mama is naked, exuding lasciviousness and papa, in his "Sunday dress", appears as a saint, almost like a churchgoer. He "sullies" himself. In reality, papa should be just as naked as mama. Papa now becomes funny: He transforms mama's behind into a grave hill by means of a rose. The mother of his children is sullied and humiliated. Obviously, mama has put up with too much."

- Otto Muehl, "mama und papa", 1964

**FRANCESCO CONZ PAINTED BY OTTO MUEHL,
OTTO MUEHL PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANCESCO CONZ
IN MEMORIAM FRANCESCO CONZ (1935–2010)**

JUNE 9 – JULY 10, 2010

In July 2010 Italian publisher, collector and photographer Francesco Conz would have celebrated his 75th birthday. To commemorate his passing on April 5, the Galerie Krinzinger will be showing exhibits from the Archivio F. Conz in a separate room as part of the Otto Muehl show. “in memoriam Francesco Conz” will show documents of a unique encounter: painter and photographer portraying each other.

In 1973 Conz, at the time the owner of a furniture factory and of the Galleria di Arte Moltipliccata in Venice, visited action artist Otto Muehl at his Praterstrasse studio on Hermann Nitsch’s behest and was immediately taken by his actions.

Conz followed the development of the Muehl commune from the very beginning as a photographer and regularly visited the Friedrichshof.

Among the first editions produced by Conz with performance and fluxus artists Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneeman, Geoffrey Hendricks, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles but also visual poets such as Gerhard Rühm, one also finds ten large-format portfolios documenting Otto Muehl’s actions.

When Francesco Conz spent several weeks at Friedrichshof in the summer and winter of 1985, he let himself be portrayed in series by Muehl and members of the commune – children, youth and adults.

The result were portraits of a many-sided collector and extraordinary documents of the artistic potential that Muehl was able to tap in his students.

On his last visit to Faro in April of 2002, Conz, the untiring collector and photographer, portrayed Otto Muehl the artist. A large series of photographed staging’s of “Grimaces” provides access to an artist who was demonized and who found it difficult himself to hid his private sphere behind poses and grimaces.

THEO ALTENBERG

FAT OR GAS

CURATED BY FRANZ GRAF
JUNE 9 – JULY 10, 2010

Altenberg, born in Mönchengladbach, Germany (1952), left his hometown where he had been an enthusiastic supporter of the revolutionary offensive soccer team – Borussia Mönchengladbach, for Vienna. There, at action artist Otto Muehl's commune, he was able to translate his artistic experiences from the Werkkunstschule Krefeld in aesthetic practice.

The radical ideas of this visionary community - free sexuality, communal property, self-portrayal, joint upbringing of children - were aimed at a utopian departure from "petty bourgeois" reality in all realms of life.

The photographic works created by Altenberg between 1973 and 1978 are early experimental, artistic approximations to free spirit, reflecting the desire for new forms of individuality within this community. In his seemingly staged collective depictions he moved as closely as possible to the then omnipresent theory of "life is art, art is life".

For Altenberg, the spontaneous self-portrayals in the artistic articulation of the dancer, actor and musician and the accompanying role games were all part of this liberation. The potential that was set free in the process was manifested in performances, the feature films produced by the commune (in which he played leading roles such as Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Richard Gerstl and Andy Warhol). From 1980 to 1983 he collaborated closely with Joseph Beuys and participated most notably in the organization and implementation of the action "7000 Eichen" (Documenta 7, Kassel).

In the later years of the commune Theo Altenberg, in a phase of inner isolation, turned to linguistic works in which he explored the hidden meanings of word formations. "I first arrange the letters like on a game board so as show the concepts their isolation in this situation of panic. A sort of trauma poetry on the demise of our utopia."

After the communal experiment dissolved in 1990 Altenberg concentrated on his own video work. Since 1995 he is involved in various projects of electronic music (Oder Nice, Das Es, Collaborations: Burnt Friedman, Kreidler, Tosca, Aphex Twin, DJ Hell, etc.)

In the "FAT OR GAS" project shown at the Galerie Krinzinger, Franz Graf, artist and curator of the exhibition, juxtaposes a selection of photographs from the commune with works from the past thirty years and the linguistic pieces implemented as embroidery pictures from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were created by the artist's mother.

Theo Altenberg lives and works in Berlin.