Real Space, Picture Space – a Conquest
Alois Mosbacher and Installation

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If one considers Alois Mosbacher's period of development as an artist, there stands at the beginning an apparently unconditional shift towards the medium of painting. It has been widely noted that a sudden renaissance occurred in painting internationally at the end of the 1970s. A conscious contrast was established with the idea art of conceptualism and with the performance art of the preceding decades. The aim of these avant-garde movements was the dissolution of the artwork with its sensual perception. It would seem significant here that Graz occupied an important position as a place where these questions – they all ultimately had to do with the expanding or dissolving of the traditional artwork – were subject of fervent discussions. A number of trigon exhibitions – "Ambiente / Ambiance" in 1967, "Architektur und Freiheit / Architecture and Freedom" in 1969 or "Audiovisuelle Botschaften / Audiovisual Messages" in 1973 – showed what direction the development of art might be taking. The director of the Neue Galerie Graz at the time, Wilfried Skreiner, helped to push forward this development by giving it space in his institution and documenting it in his theoretical work.

So from today's perspective it is hardly surprising that fairly soon afterwards a completely new movement developed in Austrian painting: once again in Graz, and under Wilfried Skreiner. It had also started to emerge internationally and was called "Neue Malerei", New Painting. In Germany the young movement was known as "Heftige Malerei" (Vigorous Painting) and in Italy as "Transavanguardia" – a term coined by Achille Bonito Oliva. It was once more a trigon exhibition that ignited the debate and ultimately contributed to the breakthrough of a young generation of painters – the 1981 show "Auf der Suche nach den Autonomien. Der Regionalismus in der Kunst / In Search of Autonomies. Regionalism in Art." Italy was represented by Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi and Mimmo Germanà. The Austrian painters at the show were Hubert Schmalix, Josef Kern, Hannes Priesch and Alois Mosbacher. Skreiner wrote in the exhibition catalogue at the time that a new generation of artists "[…] have emerged with a new painting, a new work concept that not only subverts the positions of the 1970s avant-garde; to a large extent, it nullifies them. the 70s avant-garde is perhaps being forced into the background by the transavant-garde more than it deserves. but the longing for the sensually visual works of fine art, which has for so long been stirring not only in artists but also in the public, now finds its fulfillment."[1] Here is an early expression of postmodernism, which advocates a variety of heterogeneous concepts, language games and

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Wilfried Skreiner, in: *trigon 81 – auf der suche nach den autonomien der regionalismus in der kunst*, cat., Neue Galerie, Künstlerhaus, Graz 1981, o.S.

ways of life. Wolfgang Welsch calls postmodernism a "constitution of radical plurality."[2] A set procedure within the development of art, as the avant-garde previously seemed to postulate, was in this way nullified and the options became richer – or at least more diverse. Plurality was the consistent focus of postmodernism. At the beginning of this development, Skreiner still had the idea of differentiation at the center of his argument, although he accepted that the avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s could not be dispersed and would remain at least as a foil. On an international level it was also clear that the legacy of the avant-garde could not be denied and would continue to influence new ideas. This is how Umberto Eco expressed it: "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently."[3]

When we incorporate Alois Mosbacher within this informal group of new painters and see him in relation to his closest associates of that time (Hubert Schmalix, Siegfried Anzinger, Erwin Bohatsch, Josef Kern, Alfred Klinkan) then the differences are immediately apparent.

Each painter approached the avant-garde movements in very different ways, and made them present in their own works in very different ways. From Alois Mosbacher's work it is clear that he was in no way turning his back on, or totally rejecting, the conceptual. Whether consciously or unconsciously, he built his work on the basis of both the avant-garde and the history of painting generally. Many of the aspects that were formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, such as investigating space, an interest in technical media as a basis for painting, the dissolution of the space dividing the public from artworks, the thematization of space in general and the associated discussion concerning real space and picture space as well as the element of the performative – these are all issues that were addressed with varying measures of intensity and critical attack. From today's perspective, one has to grant that Alois Mosbacher dealt with all of these questions in varying intensities and from the outset attempted to resolve them in painting, as will be demonstrated here.

Mosbacher was and is of course an eminent painter. His focus is today still on painting, however he conceived this early on as something that exists parallel to photography, media images, sculpture, performance and installation art. While in the 1980s the impression might have been that painting was aligning itself again with its original position as a "window" (Alberti), it was also clear that the "White Cube" (O'Doherty, 1976) also posed new deliberations for artists. As a location in which art happens, the "White Cube" is the sphere that must be considered – similar to the white canvas in painting.[4] Brian O'Doherty's thoughts on gallery space and its material and institutional conditions, which determine the functionality of art, highlight an important point that should become critical both for the production and the reception of art. In other words, this means that as art gets older, the more context becomes text and thus surroundings become content – "context becomes content."[5] Here the developments of the 1960s also naturally form an integral part of the analysis, since the question of art and its context had already been posed by that time.
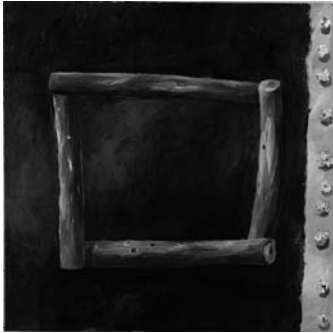
At this point, however, Alois Mosbacher shall not be dismissed from painting and misunderstood as a conceptualist or the like. It is much more the case that diversity and openness determine Mosbacher's oeuvre from the start, and these are what should be emphasized here. This diversity, particularly noticeable since the 1990s, relates to the content but also more importantly to the formal matter of his work. Today we look back at over three decades of his work and can see far more clearly

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Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Wertheim 1987, p. 4

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Umberto Eco, *Reflections on the ›Name of the Rose‹*, trans. William Weaver, London 1994, pp. 67–68

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See: Brian O'Doherty, *In der weißen Zelle – Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, 2000

5
O'Doherty, op.cit., p. 15

Die Falle / The Trap, 1986

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See the essays in this catalogue by Robert Fleck, Annelie Pohlen, Konrad Tobler and the artist's interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist.

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In his radical 1436 book about painting, *Della Pittura*, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) instigated a redefinition of the picture, determining it to be one of the possible intersection planes through the visual pyramid and its projection, which he called "window." In doing so he created the theoretical basis of perspective representation.

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See: Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window – From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge, MA 2006

that his painting never sought to eradicate the medium or abandon it, but rather to include both past and current developments outside of conventional painting. His work has been widely analyzed and described in terms of its content and the eminent nature of his painting.[6] Less has been said about the installative aspect in relation to Mosbacher's painting, although this would appear to be a crucial feature of his art. This can be seen as evident in the last two decades at least.

Alois Mosbacher saw and sees painting as a heterogeneous field that allows activities beyond the canvas or the white wall. The history of painting demonstrates how certain elements have been dissolved, others isolated again, some have been temporarily diminished in relevance or have been completely new. From a historical standpoint, during some phases of its development painting has changed almost beyond the point of recognition. For Mosbacher painting has increasingly become a picture. This is also shown by the increased use of graphic and other elements within the picture, of photographs and images taken from the Internet as conceptual pre-stage to painting and his work with moving images in the form of videos. All this is indicative of a rather more general pictorial concept. It might lead into painting but it also makes the additional levels palpable and/or visible. Extensive image research before the painting process is an integral part of the work – and is considered by the artist as important over and above the visual. Once seen and gathered, these images derived from a range of sources must be processed, organized and defined as suitable in relation to their new context, before they are put onto canvas, where, separated from their original content, and sometimes considerably changed in terms of their form, they depict a new reality. Within the discourse of painting one could propose a variation of Alberti's "window" simile[7] here: the window is not the result, but an instrument for producing a picture, i.e. the painter's aim is not to reproduce what is visible when looking out through the window, but rather to reflect the impression after looking out through the window. In this way formal elements might appear mimesis-like but the original picture has changed. Thus the photos, media images or the monitor become the window. This window analogy is particularly palpable in the case of the computer. One even talks of "windows" – of which one can open several and at the same time – "from Alberti to Microsoft."[8] Alois Mosbacher makes use not only of the function of the window – like many artists – but also picks it up as a theme in his painting, repeatedly showing windows, views from caves etc. The openings, however, are always depicted as empty, to be seen at most as a view of clouds or the sky. Here too the theme is the instrumental value of the window and/or its architectonic qualities, and not the view from the opening. It is, however, also a question of the picture in the picture or consequently the position of the picture in relation to the space. Alberti ultimately understands the task as the reproduction of real nature in the painting. Hence the picture space should be considered inseparable from the real space and one can apply it here in the original sense too. The window and/or the opening of a space or part of the space into another also becomes visible in the exhibition at the Künstlerhaus. Both the central wall of the exhibition architecture, which was designed by the artist himself, and also the picture walls that are added to the Künstlerhaus in the form of a cabin, feature views in the form of windows. In one instance, the view looks out onto the surroundings (trees, shrubs, road etc.) of the exhibition space, in the other instance one looks from one part of the exhibition into another, where once again pictures become visible. It is no coincidence that the openings are located where one would normally expect to see a picture. The impression is further enhanced by the paintings that surround the openings. Mosbacher even seems to be playing with the way one tends at first glance to see them as pictures instead of windows. This arrangement clearly

signals that the window does not necessarily have to lead to an established, fixed view. Much depends on the viewer. In this respect, the viewer's position is conceived as dynamic. The viewer is not motionless when he is looking through the openings. Instead the shift in motif is subject to the viewer's motion. Two decisive factors are implied very subtly here. On the one hand the dynamics of the picture, and on the other hand how the user becomes involved. Both of these appear in avant-garde ideas in various forms. Movement in artworks can be traced back to kinetic efforts at the beginning of the 20th century – film being the most obvious to spring to mind. The involvement of the public is dominant above all in the 1960s and culminates in Umberto Eco's concept of "the open work", in which the public is assigned a creative part within the work. It is only in its sphere that the artwork is totally complete. Mosbacher's approach with regard to the viewer is somewhat subtler and more universally valid with respect to the history of painting: "[...] but of course that's also a fundamental characteristic of painting, of a good picture, that the viewer can jump in, that's always been the case."[9]

In this way one can see that picture reality exists in interaction with actual reality. As early as 1938, Martin Heidegger published his treatise claiming that we are living in an "Age of the World Picture". He related this to modern times. Only in modern times did the world develop into a systematized and representable object that had elevated technical scientific rationality into a basic principle. Heidegger, who does not yet formulate the "pictorial turn" here, but does touch upon it de facto, does not take "world picture" as meaning "picture of the world" but rather "the world as a picture." Thinkers such as Günter Anders, Jean Baudrillard or Paul Virilio further formulated this notion of world becoming picture, and hence it is clear today that pictures – including world pictures – were always with or in us and/or were always forming inside us. It does not seem possible for us to leave pictures behind and in this way achieve a more authentic relationship with the being, with reality and with the world. Ultimately it is pictures that allow us access to things and objects. This also leads back to the previously mentioned open-minded characteristic of Mosbacher's painting, which has an intense focus on the general concept of picture and hence how thoughts become pictures. The fact that in his case this primarily relates to painting is one facet. For other artists, the main medium can for example be photography and the discussion proceeds from this side through to the pictorial concept.

Here one could argue with Gottfried Boehm, who describes the "iconic" thus: "The status of the image is both unique and mysterious: it is simultaneously an object and a non-object, positioned somewhere between sheer actuality and airy dreams: the paradox of a real irreality. This is where the 20th century "exit" from the picture is located. It attempts to split the hybrid existence of the iconic into its components."[10] This is the point where Mosbacher's effort to expand the sphere of painting becomes more understandable: the aim is to arrive in the picture once again through three-dimensionality and/or installation. In the Künstlerhaus Graz exhibition we are precisely at this position, where the picture is present in the form of the paintings, while the exhibition space and even the space around the exhibition venue is addressed in terms of its pictorial quality – and belong to the sphere of the picture. This is extremely topical and focuses on the fundamental issue exploring the boundary between reality and the image of reality. In following the discussion, one is inclined to believe in the possibility that this boundary only appears to exist. The 1996 "Geisterhaus / Spook House" is a project that illustrates this phenomenon well. Alois Mosbacher painted an enormous picture in the woods. In terms of painting history, which had already witnessed "plein air painting" in the 19th century, this was nothing out of the ordinary. However,

... die blume, die leiter ...,
MUMOK, Vienna, 1997

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Alois Mosbacher in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in: *Out There*, cat., Secession, Vienna 2004, p. 73 and in this catalogue, p. 151

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Gottfried Boehm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen – Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin 2007, p. 37
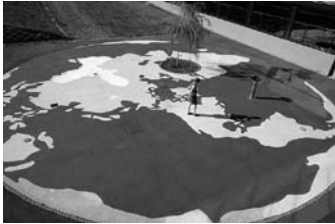
Die Mitte der Welt / The Middle of the World, Art within Architecture, Mistelbach, 2007

*Vienna Fair,* installation with Frenzi Rigling, 2009

Mosbacher's approach is different. Firstly he reflects the situation, the location, in the painting, since it shows a similar arrangement of trees, boards, slats, ladders and tarpaulins just as actually imaginable at the scene. In reality, too, the stretched canvas stands mounted on a makeshift construction and is covered with a tarpaulin for the night after painting sessions. Furthermore, the artist made the painting process into a painting performance without an audience. A working process similar to that of forestry workers, who go logging day in and day out in order to get through their workload. The picture surface is divided into several parts, which do not appear connected in the background. It is only the elements in the foreground that round off the composition and give the impression of a finished composition and of a place that might actually exist. The colors in the individual parts of the picture do not correspond to local colors and make the scene even more surreal. Finally, within the context of the exhibition, the picture is not presented on the wall, but rather leaning on a makeshift construction that stands free within the space. The working location is therefore referred to once again, this time within the exhibition. In terms of content, "Spook House" alludes to a mysterious, secret action under cover of the woods. It is also reminiscent of the habit children have of building cabins in the wood and thus refers generally to man's encounter with the wilderness. As a whole, however, it also explicitly emphasizes the process of reality becoming picture as already mentioned, which is condensed in the painting. While the discussion was previously of moving pictures and likewise moving viewers, it is probably exaggerating to speak of the medium of film and/or moving pictures generally. Nonetheless, speculation is permitted at this point. In the case of the window, just as the movie screen or the screen, there is the supposition of the motionless viewer in front of the moving picture. This even applies to the computer; although the surface can be further dynamized – with the help of the user – and several windows can be opened at the same time, the viewer still sits rigidly in front of the monitor. From the point of view of painting, a picture is twice as rigid – the pictorial event is a fixed detail and in principle only allocates the viewer an ideal observation point from which the event in the picture can be experienced. In addition, the frame actually separates the picture from the surrounding space. Starting from this point of view, the expansion of the picture only makes sense if it results in flexibility both on the level of the picture and on the level of the viewer. From the perspective of film, similar experiments were conducted in the late 1950s and arrived at "expanded cinema" of the 1960s and 1970s. In painting we could assume a similar development of expansion and we would arrive at installations. Which brings us back to O'Doherty's "White Cube", leading to the installative nature of painting. You can experience pictures individually as a closed-off happening and ignore the surrounding space; however, it is also possible and O'Doherty's intention that one experiences the totality of space and painting together and so perceives the one as part of the other simultaneously. The special quality of Mosbacher's work is that all of this occurs in a very subtle fashion and that it is not something one immediately recognizes. The artist maintains the event in a kind of limbo, since the pictures ultimately do still all function when removed from the spatial situation. But particularly in recent years – in 2004 at the Vienna Secession ("Out There") and currently at the Künstlerhaus Graz ("Outside Fiction") – Alois Mosbacher designed the exhibition architecture and positioning of the pictures and sculptures very carefully himself. Thus the exhibition functions as an overall concept, as an installation. It is calculated with a large number of reference points involving the dynamic of the public. Artistic practice and the entailing number of existing pictures allow the artist to accord new perspectives on much older artworks – the inventory of pictures becomes an archive, and ultimately installation

Outside Fiction, model, Künstler-
haus, Graz, 2010

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Alois Mosbacher in
conversation, op.cit.,
p. 73 and in this cata-
logue, p. 150

material. In addition, this procedure is linked with Alois Mosbacher's basic practice of creating an extensive archive of images. From this archive, which, as already mentioned, is derived from a huge range of sources – mainly the Internet – he produces his painting. Even the individual parts within picture compositions (timbers, flowers, ladders, heads, swarms of bees, plaits, stones, animals, items of rubbish etc.) come from this stock and within the pictures often result in surreal scenes reminiscent of René Magritte. One could think of these scenes very remotely as pictorial documentations of previously constructed installations – although much of it is unimaginable in reality.

With regards to installation, his own pictures also become part of this archive, creating another level to it. A system such as this is hugely flexible and makes rather full use of the medium of painting. Ultimately, it is a question of a kind of expansion of painting, but without abandoning it, which would be too simple. The continuation of painting into space has a long tradition, which from the outset understood space as an expanded sphere of the painting – El Lissitzky ("Proun Room", 1923), Piet Mondrian ("Salon Madame B", 1926), Marcel Duchamp ("Porte, rue Larry 11", 1927), Kurt Schwitters ("Merz Building"), 1933) or later the design of the "International Exhibition of Surrealism" in 1938 in Paris. This is also the reference in terms of earliest painting spaces.

Two historic positions appear to be more important and more interesting with regard to Mosbacher's work, however, which also take exhibition practice as a theme. One is Claude Monet's "Nymphéas" cycle (produced in the 1920s, first presented to the public in the Jeu de Pomme in 1929), which is a complete picture system including a total of twenty-two canvases divided into eight larger cycles as components; the other is Kazimir Malevich's 1915 "Black Square on White", of crucial importance here. This was originally planned as a stage design for the opera "Victory over the Sun." Due to the very specific way in which it was hung in "0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition" in Petrograd, it became the space-forming segment of installative character. Clearly exposed in the way it was mounted, the painting stretched across an upper corner of the room and seemed to float in pictorial space. In fact the installation of the square is reminiscent of the mounting of religious icons, and is thus a symbolic gesture that was utterly familiar to contemporary visitors to the exhibition – from the context of religious ritual.

One could see, for example, Alois Mosbacher's 1988 group of sculptures "Thürn-thal" in this context. The objects in this installation are based on objects that have also appeared in several of the artist's pictures. Here it is a case of painted objects that pretend to have a function, recalling a toy or models for architecture. They were each presented on a plinth-like stand and occupied the entire space. Here the artist reckoned with the visitor's movement pacing across the space, going symbolically from one place (sculpture) to another. This has no direct reference in terms of content to the religious, however in structural terms a connection does exist, as in Malevich. "[…] it was all about walking through a certain place – it was almost a religious moment. It was about how you cover a certain route. The route was broken down into its individual sections, that is, into a lot of individual places."[11]

What appeared here as rather a conventional sculptural presentation was much further reaching in its conceptual dimension. In sculpture too, how the public move when experiencing a sculpture has been an issue since at least the 1960s and Robert Morris. The viewer is not allocated a front side, instead the aim is that by walking around the object, the picture of the sculpture develops. Unlike Malevich, Morris did not raise a religious component; instead his own activity as a dancer was crucial in the element of movement. Mosbacher seems to lie in between here, or at least to stand in relation to the two positions.
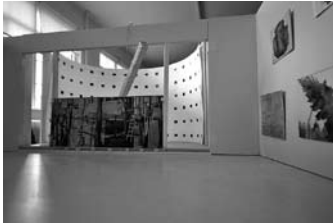
Outside Fiction, model, Künstler-
haus, Graz, 2010

For the "Outside Fiction" exhibition in the Graz Künstlerhaus, the position of the previously mentioned Claude Monet seems once again to be strained. In his water lily pictures, Monet transported the viewer from his secure inner distance, making the distance from the world of color and form unclear, blurring the traditional distant and close views and so inspiring immersion in a water landscape.[12]

Alois Mosbacher builds a roofless cabin from weathered boards onto the side of the Künstlerhaus and on it hangs paintings depicting sections of trees and shrubs – a woodland setting. If Monet takes us to a water landscape, here we are taken into a woodland landscape, which nonetheless in its coloring, which does not match local colors, also appears surreal. Mosbacher concentrates here exclusively on the thicket of tree formations he reproduces in extreme close view and in cropped sections. Monet attempted something similar in that he concentrated on the surface of the water. In Monet's work, the omission of the horizon is important: the pond's surface occupies the whole canvas. As a result, the position of the imaginary viewer on dry land disappears. The attempt to bring the picture visually closer to the viewer and so entirely to occupy his field of vision is in both cases a key concern. What applies in the two instances is the fact that the space depicted is opened up by the expansion of the internal pictorial space using selective enlargements. The suggestion of spatiality, achieved by the impossibility of seeing all of the picture ensemble, forces the viewer into movement. This verges on the technical possibilities of virtual spaces, as experienced within advanced media art. Monet's experiments point to the investigation of the relation of picture and surroundings that would later become symptomatic of the avant-garde.

Mosbacher's intention to shape a space artistically shows that the aim should not be placed within the tradition of decorative exhibition staging, but rather is based in the perceptual experiments of painting and/or of the picture in general. In Monet's work a completely new connection between architectonic surroundings, picture series and viewer space resulted. Alois Mosbacher seems here once again to be investigating in order to allude to the technical pictures and/or to the virtual space based on it, which ultimately is clearly embedded in the consciousness of today's viewer. In doing so, he throws open the dispositive of painting, without abandoning it. Which is something the viewer might perhaps like to fulfill.

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See: Oliver Grau,
*Virtuelle Kunst in
Geschichte und
Gegenwart. Visuelle
Strategien,* Berlin 2001,
S. 102