

# Experimental Set-up Picture

## Open Passages in the ‘New Order’ of Imagination

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On the Neue Galerie website, there is someone in a picture shooting at the picture, to be more exact from the lower right corner an outstretched arm with a pistol in its hand is taking aim at the ‘picture’ of a wood rather feebly sketched on a white backdrop. “Outside Fiction” is the laconically short title for the preview of the presentation of an artist who, unperturbed by repeated proclamations that painting is dead, has been pushing ahead with his series of lab experiments on painting for the last three decades. Let’s leave the art history “medical bulletins” to one side and talk about Alois Mosbacher, who showed the said image at the Secession exhibition, with the equally laconic title “Out There”, in 2004.

The result is short circuits. In everyday life, the reduction or redistribution of the energy supply helps. In the brain different rules of the game apply, as it’s not even clear where ‘out’ is and where ‘there’ is, what’s ‘outside’ and what’s ‘fiction.’ Is fiction outside, or should it be driven outside, and where is outside, and where is or what is “there”? What should be thrown outside if there is nothing but a “sketch” in the picture anyway, and there’s no one in it? The “Egosooter”, as this 2003 work is called, is anyway standing ‘outside’ in this picture – as in mirror images, which show only extracts from ‘real’ space. Where does this hand come from, to whom does it belong? For centuries now, grown-ups have been trying to create a clear division between reality and fiction, while children float smoothly back and forth between ‘realities’. In their brains there is endless room for universes inside and outside fiction.

This painter’s early portraits include “Flammenkopf / Flamehead”, 1983. A darkish blue face hovers on the horizon between heaven and earth. From the skull blaze flames of red, white, green and yellow. Five glowing red apples have appeared around his chin. They are a bit big for the spindly tree on the right of the picture, but for the disembodied head they are just the right size. The painter has added it to the picture as more of an incidental feature. There are other heads dating from this time, also landscapes with and without figures, nude drawings with and without other living beings, classical motifs from the ‘paradise’ age of painting in updated Expressionist outfits. The blazing flames do not reveal whether there is something burning, or even burning up, in the “Flamehead’s” brain. They are all recognisable ‘from nature’. Even the green seems halfway natural – like burning poison. In painting, whose raw material is colored paint, its validity is not measured by the material reality outside, but rather the fictional reality within the



*Flammenkopf / Flamehead, 1983*



*Out There*, Secession, Vienna, 2004

picture. What meaning should be attached to gold in Byzantine and early Medieval art or the blue of Franz Marc's horses, if not that of a reality or fiction of reality of painting experimenting in the here and now?

In a Western World rich in fictions, one of the great fictions is Plato's cave allegory. The people in the cave see only shadows, which they believe to be reality. The shadows originate from ideas, from reality outside the cave, perhaps "out there" or "outside fiction." In Plato's comprehensive world-picture, the shadows are still sending "messages." There follows a cross-cultural history of fiction worshippers and iconoclasts. "By 'fiction' I mean more than just the German concept of 'Fiktion': history in the sense of *Historia* and *Story* – narration, content, memory."<sup>1</sup>

Images congealed as souvenirs flood a person's everyday life in the form of 'déjà vu' at all times. In 1987 this aspect became the title of an exhibition. What are these shadows without ideas doing with imagination? Among all the shadows, which is the hand supposed to be shooting at, and which images made the brain burst into flames? Can 'proper' images be filtered from the flood of images which sleep, or perhaps only dream, in museums, which swamp public and private space as calming decorations or consumer temptations and which in digital spaces surpass even the wildest notions of endless growth? What is the egoshooter doing restlessly in a forest, in this quickly sketched setting that can at best be going through as a shadow on the canvas 'screen'? What makes the painter, who has placed his 'model' as other 'déjà vus' in the picture, trust the imago?

In the Secession, a 2002 wide-format picture entitled "Investigators" hung alongside the 2003 "Egoshooter" draws the visitor suggestively into events at the crime scene. Three figures are looking for something on the ground. Two are kneeling, one is standing and pointing with a stick at the ground. Two small flags mark the terrain. The background of the picture is 'occupied' by a bit of woodland. The wood is the crime scene for everything in "Out There". From a historical perspective, it is a location in landscape painting that is more than others loaded with fairy tales and myths, merry stories and threatening stories, everywhere, behind every tree and under every leaf, at any rate 'out there' for the imagination. So the "Investigators" take likewise plausible positions as the hand from nowhere taking aim, and more so because all the exhibition architecture on site is composed from views in and through, from passages and diversions, as if it were a matter of airing a secret. The walls are painted an atmospheric green for the presentation of the works. As a figure in the space, the visitor joins the sometimes familiar, sometimes mysterious figures in the picture and like them searches for the "key" to events – and ultimately for the reason for the gun in "Out There".

Of course, the story here unfolds just as little as in other equally carefully displayed projects by Alois Mosbacher. The 'narrated' events are nothing but fragments of 'stories' from a rich archive of collected images that the painter can use through his experiments in painting: for example, a man is running across some railway tracks, between the trees is a "Volvo" with a heap of grass laid on its roof, a fight scene like a fading x-ray over several canvases, more drawn than painted – and finally all the "guys", the "brides" and the "walkers", the last of which could count as a single "breed" just because of their uniform cap.

More or less in the middle of the "Investigators" crime scene is a huge tree trunk, whose top evidently does not fit into the picture. Perhaps it isn't even a trunk, but rather just a piece from which the picture is assembled. It is so strikingly placed that ultimately all the protagonists cannot hide the fact that nothing is hidden on the ground, but that a pale red expanse is spreading like an unfinished picture whose boundary with the 'actual' forest floor is provisionally secured by the two flags. If the mood in this scenario, illuminated by the colors themselves, were

<sup>1</sup>  
Alois Mosbacher in an  
e-mail to the author,  
15/02/2010



Trailhead, 2002



Warte / Wait, 2004



Die Brücke / The Bridge, 2005

not so unsettlingly undefined, one could be inclined to imagine a meeting point of all of the walkers and guys and brides roaming the woods there. “outside’ is not just ‘not inside’, it is also the periphery of something, ‘outside’ of ‘fiction’ functions like an additional colored paint”.<sup>2</sup> In any case in “Out There” this leads to individual short circuits through the tracks laid out in “Trailhead”, 2002, and “Müll / Rubbish”, 2003, all of the déjà vus as one recognises them as a result of asocial flytipping in the ‘real’ wood. Indeed, when Mosbacher arranges a sofa, a mattress, a toilet bowl, a kitchen unit and a television in the clearing, the legacy of asocial behaviour outside tips into a subversive still life, a life arrested in the picture by – ‘outsiders’ of the ‘déjà vu’ for and through painting. The signboard at the junction is common as an orientation aid for walkers. Less common are the three rectangles around it. In this painter’s forest luxuriating in ample green and yellow, light and shadows, with its circling and vertical traces of color for the treetops and the vertical trunks, whose drips, wherever they still can, run downwards, those empty rectangles – temporarily stored in a unperturbed way – demand attention as if still unpainted pictures. “Wait here for me” is written in pale green running through a glowing white lane in a wood shimmering primarily in cold shades of green. It is possible that the bridges which are likewise horizontally composed into the forest only later short-circuit with the quickly read writing and finally the so titled mirroring passage from 2005 as well as the positive-negative ‘placed’ mixture of white and green in “Warte / Wait” from 2004 are touching perception just like a mirage.

Words are made into texts, poetry, stories, novels – but also instructions (for use). As objects in a picture they spark further images of objects, which are not in the picture themselves. It is not only in this picture that Mosbacher makes use of the floating transition between word and image. In 2008 he produced a whole series of scenarios ‘painted’ with charcoal on canvas, mostly of grim legacies in the forest. This group of works with mysterious bits of text strewn in the rubbish in the name of “New Order” mutates into a form of scavenger hunt, which goes far beyond this group. From whatever position the viewer engages himself on this course, which is open in all directions through this forest of pictures, the trail ends “out there” in the ‘empty’ picture, free of all ostensible short circuits. Because its surplus value is not down to any stories from the fund of the deluge of images that are constantly recycled by everyone and anyone in some way for some purpose or other. The viewer can be unmoved by the fact that the “Egoshooter” in the picture is just a hand with a gun, because its ‘model’ hunts across the screen in computer games of the same name, driven by a mouse. The painter does not have to invent anything any more, he researches in the fund of images, like the “Investigators” he follows all the texts and traces temporarily stored there in the search for the right ‘paint’ for the presumably forever unfinished valid picture.

If you acquaint yourself with Alois Mosbacher’s work via his website, the first thing you find is the image of a wide-format picture positioned in front of a ‘natural’ wood. “Geisterhaus / Spook House” really did originate “out there” in the wood in 1996. The inspiration – up to a certain degree – is a mixture of his own experience and documented stories. He could also have painted it in his studio in Vienna. Mosbacher arranges a summer in green surroundings, holes himself up with the tools needed in a tiny space, positions the canvas in the clearing and paints for a whole summer on this huge picture, day after day. He builds it, as he puts it – just like an outsider or children who still find places for their world in the woods. At night he protects it with the cover which protects the building site in the picture. The wood provides everything the outsider could need for his house – and the painter

<sup>2</sup>  
Alois Mosbacher in an  
e-mail to the author,  
15/02/2010

could need for his picture. “And when the summer comes to an end, the picture is finished.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1997 it is part of an exhibition entitled “el muro la mosca la leche el sol the rock the cow the bridge the sky die Blume die Leiter die Henne der Weg le feuille le coq la pierre le feu” at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna. The word sequence, like a text banner on international stages, streaming from the back inside flap over the brown tinted photo of an unfinished cabin to the front inside flap of the catalogue, reads like an inventory of the picture motifs the visitor can expect to see there. Wherever they come from, in the picture that is finished when the summer comes to an end, text and object tell nothing about what one has to do with the other in any form of illustration. The hen is certainly not the hen, but rather a range of possible concepts in and of a form of painting that is also examining the house, the dog or the wood ‘outside fiction.’ This leads us on contemplative strolls through recent art history, to René Magritte’s pipes that do not ‘want’ to be pipes, via Marcel Broodthaers’ meticulously listed cows and collected eagle species through to Gerhard Richter’s “Atlas” with its exuberant conception of sublime, banal, useful and unsuitable picture possibilities. Whether hens or dogs, flowers or trees, bridges or huts, for Alois Mosbacher, the painter as researcher on his own account, they are understood as worthy of depiction in themselves mainly because they no longer have to be invented as a form. Their ‘biodiversity’ fills coffee-table books and encyclopaedias, their prototypes are found in scientific analyses and in sample catalogues for draftsmen, handymen, professionals and laymen and so on ... In 1996 Mosbacher painted 100 hen pictures on various small-format canvases. They are equally suitable for museum walls as for clothes pegs. And if one or more are no longer available for representational purposes, he simply draws them again with a light touch. After the hens, he spent three years “just drawing these dog’s heads” – and now for “Outside Fiction” birds. “For me as a painter it is very pleasant to have found a subject which I can use time and again, which allows me to work within a limited canon. To arrive at the studio in the morning and say to myself: today a little blue one from left to right ... Can I paint one in any color?”<sup>4</sup> It doesn’t work, not with dogs, or hens – nor with the various Leos’ caps. It doesn’t work precisely because they are not a representation of reality, but instead form their own reality “as a projection screen ... that the viewer has to first charge up.”<sup>5</sup> They are fictions outside fiction, constantly renegotiated in the vice versa between wherever it is that they come in from ... and what the picture does also with painting as fiction/imagination. Pictures are not neutral. They all have more to do with the viewer’s more or less diffuse, individually determined ‘image store’ than with the origins of the pictures – whether they are from the Internet, photo archives or real or supposed memory. Birds are more charming than dogs and possibly less banal than hens. Tree houses patched together by children are more sentimental than “Unabomber” Theodore Kaczynski’s cabin in the woods of Montana and the egoshooter species in digital game player communities more harmless than the militias marauding around the world, at least at first glance. However much the contemporary knows of the dubious “realities” of all pictures, taking what you can see in the picture as what it is counts as one of the indelible needs of the human species.

The stable ‘stock exchange value’ of their artistic surplus value can rather be calculated through a metaphorical reinterpretation of Mosbacher’s comment on the above-mentioned “Müll / Rubbish”: “It’s a reality that some people simply dump things in the woods [that] other people use [...] and even need”<sup>6</sup> – for example, for a subtle concept of constructing pictures. From the point of view of art, it allows one to define all of the birds, the ladders, the boards, the huts ... as things that

**3**  
Alois Mosbacher in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in: *Out There*, cat., Secession, Vienna 2004, p. 71 and in this catalogue, p. 147

**4**  
Alois Mosbacher in [www.golles.at](http://www.golles.at)

**5**  
ibid.

**6**  
Alois Mosbacher in conversation, p. 74 and in this catalogue, p. 151



have been thrown away in the “forest” of pictures, things which the painter, just like the outsider, can use to build his architecture – of the picture. The problem is only that these prefabricated parts do not fit as well at the first attempt as the standardized bits from the DIY store. There are no sufficient instructions for use illustrating the construction story point by point in text and pictures; it is a case of constantly redefining “things like composition, style, bravura, incidentality, sloppiness, precision and all the other stuff that constitutes painting.”<sup>7</sup> And precisely because of these things, which are in themselves just ‘dèjà vus’, it is not sufficient simply to paint an ‘object’ blue or a wood just green according to all of the post-cards and calendars after Franz Marc. It is also not enough to swap an Expressionist-style flaming artist’s portrait for a Surrealist-dyed sheep crowned with shoes. What noble art history has stored in its archives is now far too dusty simply to be put to any use again. All this ‘dèjà vu’ only functions “like an extra color paint”<sup>8</sup> if painting manages to recharge its energy store.



*Cabin 16, 2005*

So now Mosbacher constructs a forest of pictures again – this time “true to scale” for the Künstlerhaus at the Neue Galerie. At first glance the ‘outside’ factor is the continuation of the inside exhibition on the outside. Where the visitor usually enters, access is blocked by a more or less house-height, timbered construction similar to the “Cabins” shown in 2005. Entrance to the subtly staged series of open spaces and small intimate rooms is gained through a rather banal door round the corner to the right. Thus begins the presentation of a work as a creative experimental set-up in a vibrating system of communicating vessels between pictures, drawings and sculptures from over three decades. The “Spook House” blithely obstructs access to the noble semicircle where the birds have alighted from floor to ceiling, like mosaic stones in church spaces charged with aura. Directing its front side into the central space, the “Spook House” becomes the central switch for observing possible events – and be it those that are encrypted in the pictures in its vicinity. Suddenly another forest becomes the focus.

Densely packed from floor to ceiling, painted sections of trees – trunks, tops, branches, undergrowth – occupy the walls of the ‘outside’ log cabin construction blocking the entrance. This forest of pictures is more aggressive even than all of the sections of forest before as a crime scene in painting, a tree-picture-wall like a puzzle whose pieces do not really fit together into a perfect wood. Almost nothing about this wood refers to people. Without any distraction in the stories of “outside fiction”, the creative players’ experience is of a growing desire to swap the pieces on the wall around, to force them to fit together into a coherent picture. Of course one knows from the outset that all of the details in the picture will not produce a tree, and all of the pictures together will not make a forest, not even a ‘fiction’ of a tree or a forest. Thus the eye no longer wanders through the trees, over trunks and branches to the sky, does not search the undergrowth or the bare treetops for legacies; instead, it wanders over the brushstrokes, which – sometimes more graphic, sometimes more sculptural – move vertically, horizontally, diagonally or are even wildly flung into the playing field and beyond, sometimes suddenly interrupting their game, only to pick it up again in another place, or in a different way. What pretends to be an imposing tree trunk turns out to be nothing more than an abstract composition made up of many light/dark shadings. From the interaction of the criss-crossing white lines with the yellowish surfaces that they intersect and the vertical brushstrokes reaching upwards, from which one in red on the right hand side forces its way into, or perhaps out of, the playing field, the result is not one of the familiar illustrations of bits of wild woodland, but rather an abstract projection of possible pictures shoot off in all directions. In this way the “inside” sections can

<sup>7</sup> Alois Mosbacher in conversation, p. 72 and in this catalogue, p. 148

<sup>8</sup> Alois Mosbacher in an e-mail to the author, 15/02/2010



V, 2008

be examined one after the other and ‘outside’ beyond the pieces like an unfinished and above all unquantifiable “story” of what the tree is doing with painting and vice versa.

It would be obvious to see the “birds” as a version of the alchemistic “breeding” of the “hens”. This is however certainly not the case, since the painter concedes ‘his’ birds the appropriate aura of ‘flying’ lightness even in the picture. This must have something to do with the small formats that are lined up on the wall from floor to ceiling, as if it were a matter of presenting all of the kinds of birds from the conventional and digital encyclopaedias at once. Certainly, it is the colors that give the birds their brightly exotic look. According to the history of language, the German word ‘Bild’, meaning picture or image, derives from the Old High German ‘bilidi.’ This gave the term ‘Bild’, before it acquired the meaning of representation or portrayal, the status of miracle or omen, which was why religious societies afforded the figure in the picture merciless battles. It would be foolhardy for contemporary painters to wish such times back. The Modernists’ harsh attacks on the figure in the picture also belong in the past. It is also not to be expected that these alighted forms in light or dark, bright or diffuse canvases present themselves as birds, they are neither miracle nor omen, even if the painter helps one out of this collection into a golden outfit. They are not even illustrations; at best they are ephemeral forms composed of paint or shadows of their “lexical biodiversity” for the crime scene of painting.

Rarely before has Mosbacher placed this in focus in such a complex and also radical manner as in this parcours leading through more than three decades of painting experiments, ‘inside’ and ‘outside fiction.’ “... I have a fundamental believe in the image, that’s why I’m a painter.”<sup>9</sup> In this parcours there is no linear chronology, which is why the exhibition definitely does not serve as a retrospective. Between the “birds” produced for “Outside Fiction” and the “forest” for the specially built ‘outside’ of the art institution, the fictions compressed in the autonomous picture from history and the present, culture and everyday life run into a subversive and – occasionally somewhat humorous – game, in which the “Egoshooter” might “have control over who comes in or not and how the whole thing’s designed”, but still leaves it up to the visitor to orient himself as a researching tracker of these “utopian models or these counterworld models”<sup>10</sup> of painting outside fiction. On leaving this laboratory of ambiguous readings inside fiction, even the side door mutates from emergency exit into the subtle pivot and hub of a passage open in all directions in the ‘new order’ of the imagination, in which painting plays off the déjà vus of the pictures as subversively as the ‘déjà vus’ of social norms – of outsiders between spaces in there and out there.

<sup>9</sup> Alois Mosbacher in conversation, p. 72 and in this catalogue, p. 148

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*