

Helmut Kieseletter – a short introduction into his life and art

Helmut Kieseletter works as a painter, photographer, object and installation artist as well as in the performative arts. His works comprise ice and video installations, theatre projects, art actions, drawings, over-paintings and also classical oil paintings on canvas.

Helmut Kieseletter is born in Frankenhain, Thuringia, later part of the GDR, in 1947. The scenery of the Thuringia Forest influences him strongly: woods, brooks, snow. His painting stems from the graphic arts, which may have to do with his experience of winter seasons there.

From early childhood on the boy draws and paints. His mother is a teacher, drawing on the black board a lot. In his father's engineering office there are always pencils, coloured pencils, India ink pens. A painter from the neighbouring village shows the boy in his second year how to do watercolours. A watercolour of a bird feeder in snow is his first achievement.

At the age of nine, he flees with his family to West Germany. The adjustment to his new life is very hard for him. Children mock at him because he speaks Thuringian dialect. He withdraws into painting.

At the age of ten he sees Dürer's early self portrait and begins to draw deliberately, with silver pencil, of course. Later, staying with his grandma, he draws flower bouquets, lemon squeezers, faces, and he listens to the broadcast on the landing on the moon.

But before the boy gets his first camera, a Bella. He occupies himself with black-and-white technique, takes photos of trees, flowers, a cactus that blossoms one day only. This interest in photography will remain all his life. As a youth he works in a nursery during school holidays, planting seedlings. He buys a tape recorder with the money earned. He interviews people, records music. It is his way of creating his own radio programme and a way of getting in contact with people: "The tape recorder saved me." He starts showing an interest in radio plays and modern literature.

At the same time he collects art postcards as models for his drawings, they are his treasure. In "Lux-Lesebogen" volumes he finds biographies of artists which he studies closely. When he enters a museum for the first time with his parents, he is already acquainted with Picasso, Braque, Bonnard, and many great masters. "At the age of 13 I was sure: I'll be a painter."

Difficult experiences in hospitals after severe accidents and early political activity following the students' protests in the seventies and eighties have a strong impact on the youth and young adult. When he is conscripted in the army he refuses service and becomes an acknowledged

conscientious objector.

For a short moment he thinks of studying medicine, has already registered at a university but soon gives up this idea. While working on his portfolio of application for the academy of arts he studies philosophy, art history and archeology at Cologne University. In 1971 he is accepted at Düsseldorf Art Academy; it is the era of Joseph Beuys whose influence on the academy and the world of arts is enormous. Kiesewetter closely follows everything that happens around Beuys. As a painter and sculptor to be he studies with his teacher Beate Schiff in her sculptor class and later with Ed Callahan. He learns how to make egg tempera and oil paint, enlarges his expressive potential and finishes his studies as a master student. After passing his final exams in philosophy and art with distinction he starts teaching at a grammar school. In his free time he develops his art further. In 1992 Kiesewetter presents his first solo exhibition. A period of extensive exhibition activity in art clubs, galleries and museums begins. Exhibitions take place in Trier and Berlin, Winterthur (Switzerland) and Rome (Italy), where he shows his works, together with Jan Fabre, in the renowned Opera Paese Gallery; in Perth (Australia) in the Institute of Contemporary Art or lately in the Museo Calle O'Daly in Santa Cruz de la Palma (Spain). In his adopted hometown of Wuppertal he shows his works in the Von der Heydt Museum resp. Barmer Kunsthalle and, every year, in his artist's workshop.

At the beginning of the nineties the long-term cooperation with director Roland Brus and the theatre group of homeless people "Die Ratten 07" at the Berliner Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz begins. For over ten years aesthetic experiments test the limits between politics, society and art in various arrangements. Here Kiesewetter plays a great role as a dramatic advisor, a conceptual and creative partner and as a source of inspiration for dealing with texts, actors, space and aesthetic means. In 1995 this work is awarded the "Förderpreis der Akademie der Künste".

This cooperation leads to a series of productions such as "Anatomie der Morgenröte" at the Prater/Volksbühne in 1996; "Schwarze Löcher", Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2000; a performance together with the renowned representatives of modern music Chiyoko Slavnic and Ute Wassermann as well as the performance of two old men in a public place acting how to survive in a black box.

At Alexanderplatz in Berlin and in Tegel prison the double project "Tegel Alexanderplatz" is created as a cooperation between prisoners and actors and reminiscent of the great Berlin novel by Döblin. Another project called "Was bleibt ist große Zuversicht" in a new form of documentary theatre, based on original documents, stages the party funding scandal of the Kohl era. In 1996 "In den Augen eines Fremden" by Wolfgang Maria Bauer is staged at the Lee Strasberg Institute in

Los Angeles and in 2001 "La Noche continúa", a production with fringe groups, is presented at the Festival del Mercosur as a world premiere at the opera Teatro San Martín of Córdoba (Argentina).

Introduction into Kiesewetter's work

If there is some kind of artistic intention intrinsic in Kiesewetter's work it is, perhaps, the idea of affecting the viewer in his physical existence and of activating all his senses through the plasticity of objects. With the help of different artistic procedures the artist intends to create situations and experiences that can, in fact, touch human beings. What he wants to achieve is to convey new

ideas, to make visible and perceptible what is hardly noticeable, to sharpen people's perception of life in all its different forms: Kieseewetter's aim is to make existence itself vibrate.

His artistic practice therefore aims at creating atmospheres. In the process he applies various principles of composition. The painter often works with diptycha and triptycha. In general, his paintings seem to grow across the frame into space as they seem to deny their boundaries. They tend to expand. The painter is pleased when his paintings seem to relate, quasi through the air, one to the other, because of the way he has arranged them. He calls this phenomenon "moments of vibrations" like in music. In this process it is of vital importance to him to create ambiguity, balance and dynamic movement.

Kieseewetter also combines painting or photography with art installation. He creates different atmospheres by changing the floor material in the exhibition rooms. Thus a "walk-in" space comes into being, the floor covered either with water, or paper, or wood chips, or hay or salt. The floor becomes a sculpture, a "walk-in" painting, a zone of experience for the visitor. The material is always very consciously chosen in relation to the place. Thus a dynamic interaction takes place between the material on the floor, the media exhibited and the place of exhibition. An example: For the exhibition of drawings and paintings – mainly linear at the time – at the Brühler Kunstverein Kieseewetter chooses hay because of its linear structure. Or he spreads ten tons of wood chips on the smooth floors of Simmern Castle in order to bring the surrounding woods into the building.

The rooms have a very sensual appeal: the smell of paper, the fragrance of wood, the splashing of water. These installations enable the viewer to easily leave his everyday life behind and enjoy a different kind of contemplation. Kieseewetter appeals to the viewer's physical state. In 1996 he has ten cubic metres of used paper shredded and spread on the floor of the Trierer Kunstverein. The visitors sink in deep. They pick up snippets reading them as if there were secret messages written. Children do somersaults. The abstract paintings on the walls smell of fragrant essences. The used paper smells musty. The artist gives out masks, not only for allergic people. This protection hints at a possible contamination: " ...the contamination of painting, floor, and viewer." At the same time the masks stress the presence of the olfactory dimension.

In the exhibition "Trockne meine Füße" (1996) Kieseewetter presents abstract photography in a room whose floor is covered with water. The photographs are reflected in the water. Barefoot or with overshoes the visitors enter the basin (8x5m); doing so they enter another element. In this room installation Kieseewetter brings up the topic of the camera as a mirror and reminds us of the development of the photograph in the lab where suddenly something becomes visible, something appears that has already been there. An action at the opening day completes the scene and highlights Kieseewetter's holistic approach. The artist invites visitors to ritual foot washing: kneeling in front of them he balms their feet with fragrant essences.

Photography

As a photographer Kiesewetter is nowadays only interested in abstract subjects. It is important to him that his photos keep a certain strangeness. The artist wants to change the medium considered representative of reproducing reality into a world of "adventure, imagination and new dimensions". He aims at setting into motion the creative potential of the viewer. Instead of witnessing his focus is on presence. In contrast to painting it is more difficult to address people in a holistic way by photography. The haptic perception is missing and one always feels the mechanics of the apparatus. But through the choice of the subject and the way of printing Kiesewetter tries to give the photograph "its own existence". What he exhibits should be something that "I don't know, that seems so strange to me that it gets me interested." At a time in which we are overfed by millions and millions of pictures Kiesewetter is looking for pictures taken in our world but, nevertheless, appearing new: photographs that bring in something unexpected thus challenging anew the artist himself as well as the viewer.

Plug-in objects

"Plug-in" objects have been part of Kiesewetter's work since 1993 and shown in exhibitions since 1996. The artist has always been a passionate collector of "objets trouvés", taken from nature as well as from the world of ready-mades. He puts objects together that do not belong together. They come from very different contexts. Their characteristic quality: form and material have to be fitted in such a way that the chosen parts are fixed only by plugging them together, without using any adhesive agents.

One element of the object "Easy Rider" is the skull of a roe buck. A tuning fork sticks in one of its

nostrils. The work is presented on a high, thin rod. The skull is bent forward a bit so that the work reminds us of a motorcyclist racing through time. The tuning fork resembles an antennae. It seems as if a sound is introduced into the nostril of the skull. Thus the artist hints at the senses of hearing and smelling and at a heightened awareness that allows him to receive signals which otherwise cannot be identified.

The tuning fork, a tool that helps every orchestra worldwide to be tuned, embodies the world's acoustic awareness focussed on the standard pitch and thus representing cultural norms and discipline. The roe buck's skull, a relic of nature, is called "Easy Rider" and therefore represents an American cult object. Kieseewetter conjures up reminiscences of Walt Disney's Bambi: how the artificiality of the comic makes Bambi to a global symbol of innocence and purity. The plug-in object playfully suggests a closeness to nature of Hollywood's culture industry and opens up a scope of reflexion about man, nature, technique, death and about sound and experience beyond norms and discipline.

Art Installations

In 1996 Kieseewetter creates his first ice installation. In "Helpi, Kalle und Lampi, Trier minus 37°" Kieseewetter refers to his work experience in the perennial cooperation with the theatre company of homeless people "Die Ratten 07". A newspaper announcement saying that three homeless people from Trier froze to death was the starting point of this spectacular and provocative installation. The group exhibition is called "Heilig Rock"; it refers to Jesus's shirt that is shown on the occasion of a historical pilgrimage in Trier Cathedral. Kieseewetter establishes another context by asking three homeless people to let him have their clothes. He freezes these clothes in a big water basin reminiscent of and installed like a tomb. Dimly, the clothes are hidden underneath the ice, like a corpse. A shoe protrudes a bit. Unease spreads and a child is scared. During the exhibition the visitors watch the ice melting, a process that takes seven days. The topic of the installation is the danger of people freezing to death in the streets and hints at interpersonal cold-heartedness. Influenced by Beuys Kieseewetter certainly wants to remind us, like Beuys, of warmth and energy. At the same time we see another typical element of Kieseewetter's art in this installation: the apparition of objects- the apparition of basic human substance and of an underlying truth. Kieseewetter develops other ice installations: To create "Die Entscheidung der Ingenieure" in the Opera Paese Gallery he meets a life-long prisoner in a high-security prison; for "Iceolation" in Perth he meets an HIV-patient. He asks both persons for their clothes. In both cases he meets with resistance and difficulties. Kieseewetter's text written for the opening of the exhibition in Italy exemplifies his conceptual thinking and demonstrates the political dimension of this work. Quoting Pasolini he describes modernity as a cold storage house, civilisation as a machine meant to discipline human beings. Against the mechanisms of structural violence, power and equalisation Kieseewetter positions art as a counterforce. Here the artistic process of thawing becomes

elementary and vital in the defence against numbness and insensitivity.

However, in his artistic practice Kiesewetter is never concerned with clear-cut statements, but with what he calls keeping options open. That is why his paintings do not have titles at all whereas his installations generally have ambiguous titles.

For the exhibition "Weltausstellung" Kiesewetter creates the installation "hört auf". He contrasts abstract modern oil paintings with a video installation. Six monitors are in a water basin. Kiesewetter has prisons filmed on each of the continents, always in the last hour of the day, at dusk. We listen to the original sound track, we hear sounds of the surroundings, sporadic cries or calls of the prisoners and their families waiting in front of the building. It is about prison as the exemplary place in the world and the world as a prison. Only the monitor with the picture of an iceberg in the Antarctic does not yet show a prison. In this way the artist tells us about the flow and standstill of time and about the silence of pictures. A lot of things remain mysterious. The ambivalent title of the work means 'stop it', but also 'listen'. It means a statement and an appeal. It hints at an end, at death, but at the same time it is something open-ended.

"In der Schwebe" from 1997 is also about the controlling power of time. Moreover the installation is a reference to one of the most famous means of transport in Wuppertal – the suspension railway. On the floor there is a big mirror that reflects the visitors, above there are two pairs of steps, reminiscent of columns. On one pair there is a birth cloth of baby, on the other a burial cloth of a dead person. In between there is a metronome ticking in the rhythm of the artist's pulse beat on the opening day. Thus the work explores the beginning and the end of life and tells us in a poetic and existential manner about the length of our lifelong way, about presence, absence and moments of human anxiousness.

Painting and Drawing

Painting is the central part of Kiesewetter's work. His painting comes from the graphic arts. At the beginning there is pure pencil drawing: the early pencil drawings dating back as far as 1971 often emanate something romantic. Though the drawings are abstract they are often reminiscent of mountains, clouds, fire. Kiesewetter often experiments with shades of grey from dark to light grey in search for plasticity, which goes back to his study of sculpture.

Copy-Art

From 1985 on Kiesewetter starts experimenting with photocopying. He creates "copy-art" works which he shows in his first exhibition in 1992. He uses the copier as a kind of static camera to

render surfaces and volumes: drawings, but also small objects serve as models which he moves on the copier during the copying process. In this way he blurs, draws and changes the form. What has been a concrete object becomes blurred and abstract. Dynamic works come into being that show various layers composed like a montage.

Kiesewetter is fascinated by time and blurredness. And he thinks that like in sculptures it is motion that creates the form. Years later he will move not the object but the camera when taking photos: in so far these works of copy-art already anticipate what will develop later.

New Materials for Art: Tipp-Ex, Fragrant Essences and Cochineal

Kiesewetter introduces new materials into his art. In 1987 the discovery of Tipp-ex as a painting material opens up a new dimension in the work of the artist. The chemical substance of Tipp-ex inspires him because of its malleable quality. It can do both cover up and remain transparent; it mixes well with the paint and dries quickly. "It is the perfect binding agent in order to mould and shape the paint coats and their crusted surface." (A.M.Bonnet) At that time Kiesewetter works only on paper, mostly soft hand-made paper, which he imprints and digs in with his pencils: in this way tears and cracks, wounds and scars form on the paper surface.

At the same time, since the mid-eighties, he starts mixing Eichenmoos, iodine tincture, fragrant essences into his paint, studying the effect closely, or painting exclusively with essences. A quasi alchemistic process which aims at appealing to the viewers' senses and conveying olfactory experiences.

In the nineties, on the island of La Palma, Kiesewetter discovers the natural dye of cochineal for his painting. In a cumbersome process he collects the lice from the cactuses and works the dye of the tiny animals directly on the surface of the painting. The substance is very sticky, if put on very thickly little bumps form, highlighting the plasticity of the surface.

It is the cochineal that leads him to colour. When working with Tipp-ex and pencil grey was prevailing whereas now the deep purple hues add a new energy to the paintings and fascinate the artist.

The crumbly Tipp-ex on the smooth surface of the painting and the energetic colour of the cochineal gradually lead Kiesewetter to oil painting. He tries to stress the plasticity of the Tipp-ex. He tries acrylic paint but finds it "too artificial, powerless and obtuse."

In contrast oil painting allows for more forming and working through of the material; he is able to create three-dimensional paintings by drawing the paint three or four centimetres from the surface of the canvass into space. The expensive resinous Mussini paint helps that the paint strokes stay exactly like they were drawn by the painter.

When trying out and mixing Tipp-ex and oil paint he notices that paper as a carrier of the painting is no longer strong enough. And as, at the same time, his paintings continually gain in size, he decides to start using very stable, industrially made canvass.

This carrier enables Kieseewetter to apply more and more layers. With a fine pointed brush he draws the paint and gives the surface very complex relief structures. The industrially manufactured canvass is transformed into an organic body. The painting becomes an object expanding into space.

The forming of shadows that one can already see in the Tipp-ex paintings becomes very distinct and part of the painter's composition. Depending on the light incidence there are either diffuse or hard shadows which change colours essentially. For instance, yellow turns into pure olive in the shadow. Kieseewetter keeps working on to enlarge the colour range by including shadow effects. Working with a fine brush allows him to create very delicate effects. And the finer the brush points the more fascinating it is for the viewer's sense of touch. The immediacy of Kieseewetter's latest paintings makes the viewer want to touch the little oil colour peaks to find out if they are really so pointed or if it is an illusion.

Thus there is a broad spectrum of colours available to the painting process. Also the application of various layers of oil paint enlarges the painter's creative potential enormously: sometimes he works into the moist, mixes colours, forms streaks, other times he lets the paint dry up in order to accentuate existing structures.

Right from the beginning Kieseewetter loves the colour grey because of its ambiguity and potentialities. Grey already contains all the other colours. Paradoxically he thinks that, although he works with all colours, it is his particular task to contrast the colours in such a way that they neutralise each other so that, in the end, he succeeds in creating the quality that the colour grey owns. When using complementary or neighbouring colours Kieseewetter wants to avoid unambiguousness trying to create a kind of oscillation in a continuous process of balancing different colour effects.

Therefore the process of painting is very time-consuming. Often Kieseewetter spends hundreds of hours on one painting because he is concerned with creating both friction and complexity. At the same time the artist reveals the process of painting which becomes visible like layers in archeology : underneath the painting there are lots of others. On top there is the latest version, beneath there are older layers, only partly visible. Kieseewetter invites the viewer to explore minutely the excavations of colour, to do excursions into foreign areas; across mountains of colours, valleys, caves, calderas and vast plains.

It is very time-consuming to read these pictures in their complexity. But how does the artist succeed in attracting the viewer's attention and making him interested in an abstract picture? One answer may be that Kieseewetter's work does not convey clear-cut messages and emanates a strange fascination. This helps the viewer to concentrate on a painting even if he was not interested in the first place. Kieseewetter's paintings do not only appeal to our sight, but to deeper layers of experience. The polyvalence and openness of his work offers the viewer a broad spectrum of points of reference to his own experience in the world of art and in life. The experience of strangeness and familiarity almost occur simultaneously.

Another aspect of fascination may be the following: Kieseewetter's paintings are understood as individually made. Like in handwriting the artist's personality becomes visible. In the painting each area is different; the dimension of the unique and the distinctive is emphasized.

In a world of serial industrial manufacture, mechanical and structural equalisation, and continuous repetition we find originality and authenticity in Kieseewetter's work. All his artistic practice can be understood as a contribution against the increasing disappearance of the individual in modern times and against the danger of rigidity.

Kieseewetter's holistic approach combines the analytic-conceptual with the sensual-haptic element. With his art works and his theatrical productions he touches the viewer individually in order to set into motion in him a creative process of developing and deepening of ideas: a sculpture-like process that the artist understands as the genuine elixir of life.