

The Grasping

With works by
Heinrich Dunst, VALIE
EXPORT, Franziska
Kabisch, Barbara
Kapusta, Peter Weibel,
Tina Schulz and Javier
Télliz; curated by
Severin Dünser.

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The 21er Raum was opened in November 2012. Located on the upper floor of the 21er Haus the room measures about 70 m². To date, it has housed 22 solo exhibitions ranging both from artists living and working in Austria to artists-in-residence invited by the Belvedere to sojourn in Vienna in order to develop and present their work, as well as to become familiar and interact with the Austrian art scene. Starting September 2016, the 21er Raum program was re-oriented: A series of thematic group exhibitions attempts to encourage dialogue between not only local and international artists, but contemporary and historical positions as well.

The expression “grasping” defines the process of intellectual realization and is used synonymously with “understanding.” Etymologically, it is derived from the physical-haptic act of touching—similar to the term “conceive,” which stems from the Latin “concipere,” and translated literally means “to grasp things together.” The exhibition attempts to pursue what converges in the terms: manual act and intellectual reception.

For example, with his work “Writing the word hand by hand,” Peter Weibel inquires into the ability to confirm the existence of things, processes, and relations—and, first and foremost, the existence of the hand. There are very good reasons for this; already in early childhood, the hand is used to affirm external reality. In the bible, for example, doubting Thomas is quoted as saying, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”¹ The philosopher Helmuth Plessner describes our perception as “eye-hand field,” which became a characteristic of humans when they learned to walk upright: “The eye leads the hand, the hand confirms the eye.”² This seeing with the hand and the experience it brings is also at the center of Barbara Kapusta’s “Soft Rope”. In the video one sees a rope that the artist explores with her hand while sketching out her impressions of the procedure in a poem. Also Javier Télliz’s film, “Letter on the Blind, For the Use of Those Who See” (which can be seen in the Blickle Kino on the ground floor) is about tactile perception. Based on an Indian parable, the film shows six people who are blind, exploring an elephant with their hands. All have a different experience of the animal before them and their interpretations do not coincide—their subjective perceptions do not lead to an objective truth.

The hand is, however, an instrument not only for touching, but also shaping. Richard Serra made the film “Hand catching lead” in 1968. In it, one sees a hand that is trying to catch pieces of lead and form them before letting them fall again. In Serra’s film, the same gesture is repetitively iterated, and no successful or failed products can be detected. Instead, focus is on the process of making, the film becomes a metaphor for sculpting per se. Tina Schulz adopts the film’s gestures and repeats them—however, without lead. What remains are the hand’s seemingly aimless motions, which only make sense when compared with the original film, and become exaggerated by the reduction.

The hand, seen as an object, is the subject’s performing agent—especially when the ego is an artist, such as Heinrich Dunst. In Dunst’s work, the hand does not “act” as it did in Schulz’s, but instead, is addressed. “Hello Hand” says Dunst to the Hand, which he has placed like an exhibit on the table. In a monologue, which he directs just as much to the hand, as the viewer and himself, he attributes the parts of his body functions that they actually do not primarily hold. He delineates a structure of relations that begins with perception and ends with communication—as a metaphor for acting, which keeps thought in balance with physical existence.³ Martin Heidegger wrote on this: “Perhaps thinking, too, is just something like building a shrine. At any rate, it is a “hand-work.” ... but the work of the hand is richer than we commonly imagine. The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes—and not just things: the hand extends itself and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign. Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness. The hand is all this, and this is the true hand-work. Everything is rooted here that is commonly known as handicraft, and commonly we go no further. But the hand’s gestures run everywhere through language, in their most perfect purity precisely when man speaks by being silent.”⁴

VALIE EXPORT also refers to Heidegger in her video “Visual Text: Finger Poem”, as she loosely quotes him by saying “Ich sage die Zeige mit den Zeichen im Zeigen der Sage” (“I say the showing with the signs by signing the saying”). She performs the sentence with her fingers in “visual sign language”. “The body can thus be used

to impart both intellectual as well as physical contents. The body as information medium. The human is adapted to the social structure by the body," she explains about the intention of her video. And also Franziska Kabisch's "Deklinationen (Can I inherit my dead parents' debts?)" is about the social communication surrounding the hand. Beginning from the gallery of professors, which exists at many universities, contemplated is how knowledge production and scientific norms are manifest in postures—especially of the hands—and how they are adopted and continued. This final quote by Martin Heidegger is also from the university context, from a lecture: "It is only to the extent to which man speaks that he thinks and not the other way around, as Metaphysics still thinks. Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore, thinking itself is man's simplest, and for that reason, hardest, hand-work, if it would be accomplished by oneself in time."⁵

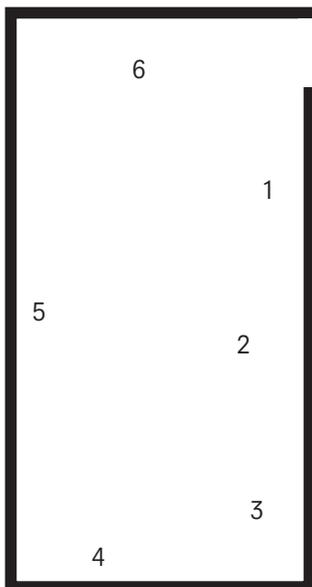
¹ The Gospel of Thomas

² Helmuth Plessner, *Anthropologie der Sinne*, (1970), Suhrkamp, 2003

³ "I think and compare; I see with a feeling eye, feel with a seeing hand." – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Roman Elegies* (1788–1790)

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "What is Called Thinking?" (1951–1952), trans. J. Glen Gray, Harper Perennial, 1976, pp. 16–17.

⁵ Ibid.



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At Blickle Kino
on the ground floor

1 Tina Schulz

o.T. (hand catching lead without lead), 2007
Video, 12 min. (loop); courtesy KOW, Berlin

2 Peter Weibel

Writing the word hand by hand, 1969
Black and white copy of a typescript to be completed by the visitor
Courtesy Peter Weibel, Karlsruhe

3 VALIE EXPORT

Visual Text: Finger Poem; 1968/73
Video, 2 min. (loop); courtesy sixpackfilm, Vienna

4 Heinrich Dunst

Die Hand / The Hand, 2015/2016
Video, 8 min. 14 sec., projected on black trousers; courtesy Heinrich Dunst, Vienna

5 Barbara Kapusta

Soft Rope, 2015
16mm Film transferred to high-definition video, black and white, silent, 3 min., adhesive letters; courtesy Barbara Kapusta, Vienna

6 Franziska Kabisch

Deklinationen (Can I inherit my dead parents' debts?), 2016
High-definition video, color, stereo sound, 30 min. (excerpt)
Courtesy Franziska Kabisch, Vienna

7 Javier Téllez

Letter on the Blind, For the Use of Those Who See, 2007
Super 16 mm film transferred to high-definition video, black and white, 5.1 Digital Dolby Surround, 27 min. 36 sec.
Courtesy Javier Téllez, New York and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich