

Dark grey suit, white shirt open at the neck, black shoes (sockless during summer), hair slicked back. This is the type of appearance one associates with the artist Meuser. The name itself, the pseudonym, is also an instance self-identification with the artist figure. Not only that, he shares his motto—the “extended workbench”—with his namesake *Meuser Maschinenbau*, an engineering firm from the Lower Rhine region.

The name stands for tradition. Hardly anything has changed for almost thirty years in the abstract, constructive vocabulary of form, which fashions his iron sculptures and spatial installations. And why should it? Surely that’s also precisely where the Meuser brand’s reinsurance lies. To be sure, the preponderance of certain playful elements from the early Eighties—such as free-form appliances—has diminished, having been reduced to the measure of their necessity. However, the principles remain unaltered: the object found at the scrap yard mounted on the wall, in front of the wall or in connection with certain components cut to size and welded together. And then again in detail: the object on a support, like the sculpture on a pedestal, rather like a cup on a table.

At first glance Meuser’s easily assayable work can be ordered in the wide-ranging repertory of Eighties neo-constructivism, which, analogous to the violent gusto of the *Jungen Wilden*, accrues gestural dominance over time in order to counter—in the manner of an Hegelian dialectic—the diffuse nature of the 1970s with something definite, which in turn can appear to be striking, but also obtrusive. The open structure of international post-constructivism is thus capped, so to speak. Meuser shared a spatial affinity with Beuys’ students Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel, who themselves had embarked upon a new path, and contact was made soon enough during the mid-Seventies. Admittedly, they were a few years Meuser’s senior and hence already moved in wholly different circles through their gallery connections with Heiner Friedrich. Meuser was very impressed by Blinky Palermo’s work. Some of the painted found objects around 1980/81 and the earlier painted sheets of iron use inflections from this particular language. However, Imi Knoebel provided the dominant influence for him by virtue of the pair’s lasting friendship in works such as *Raum 19* (Room 19), 1968, but also *Vincent’s Ohr* (Vincent’s Ear), 1976, and *Heerstraße 16*, 1982. Whereas Knoebel works with Masonite, Meuser uses iron and sheet iron. However, whereas Imi Knoebel developed many sculptural elements at the end of the Seventies and beginning of the Eighties by means of drawings and also touched upon the spirit of the era with his found objects from the early 80s (*Radio Beirut*, the title was Meuser’s), Meuser stuck with the original use of material of the found object and the individual piece. If one has interpreted the catalogue illustrations of his first exhibition from 1983 correctly,¹ then the individual pieces enter into a close relationship with the specific properties of the exhibition space. Interior walls between two windows and pilaster strips are integral to the compositions. Both artists—Knoebel und Meuser—are shown in the aforementioned catalogue setting up the exhibition at Max Hetzler’s in Stuttgart (1982), inseparably melded with their dark jackets.² I saw both artists in similar guise together with Horst Münch for the first time in Georg Jiri Dokoupil’s studio in Cologne around the same period. “Ah, the Düsseldorfers” said Dokoupil, whilst I was browsing through a pile of paintings.

Andreas Schulze, who was also present, enlightened me as to the identity of the artists—Meuser gesticulating verbally, Knoebel taciturn. At that time the pair’s communal utopia was Russian constructivism, which had enjoyed a new and increased return to general consciousness during the late Seventies and early Eighties. In Imi Knoebel’s

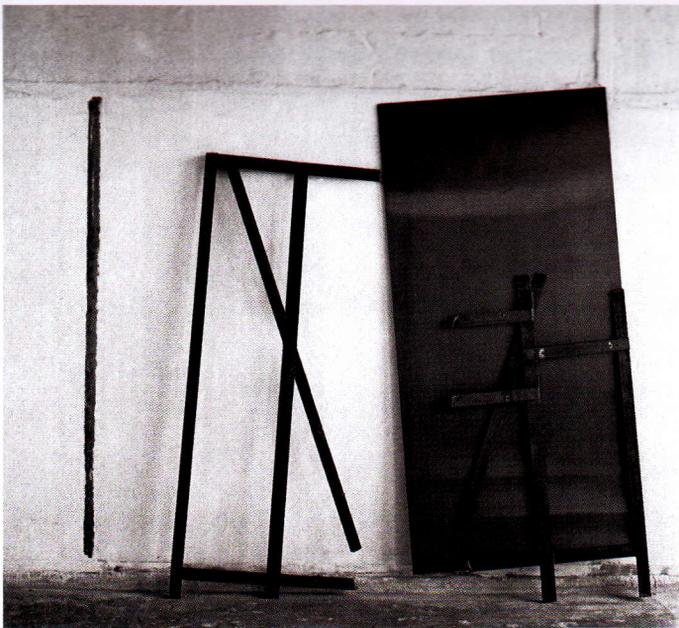
case it was primarily an admiration for Kazimir Malevich and the Black Square. His artistic homage used the White Cube as a spatial stage for Suprematist “particle paintings”. Meuser for his part likes to recall the gamut of Russian sculptors: Tatlin with his counter-reliefs, Puni, Stenberg, Naum Gabo, Rodchenko and Katarzyna Kobro. However, if one envisions the legendary photograph of the Obmokhu Exhibition in 1921, then it becomes clear that the sculptural apparatuses served as spatial designs and models for utopian architectural projects.

Meuser’s casual constructivism is—to use the argot of the minimalist and White Cube mentality—concerned with literal presence in space. It is only when one goes beyond the surface of the works that further ideas, possibilities and utopias reveal themselves. The inchoate presence experienced literally and haptically in the Munich Kunstraum paves the way for contextual excursions by means of association. Alongside the stars in minimal art’s firmament there were also artists such as Anthony Caro, Alexander Calder, David Smith, who were of interest as forerunners in this regard. Even if the installations and objects fabricated by Meuser’s teacher, Joseph Beuys, operate within artistically and conceptually different territory, it is nonetheless possible to detect traces of their asceticism and being-in-the-world with an albeit altered intention in Meuser’s work. Even Meuser’s contemporary Reinhard Mucha is ideologically close—a sculptor, who, in parallel to Meuser though differently in terms of concern and concept, alters the flow of the interface between industrial culture and bourgeois conceit, in order to leave an alternative back door open to the Constructivist system. Meuser has staged many exhibitions in conjunction with Mucha, prominent examples being the *Dreiundzwanzigste Ausstellung* (Twenty-third Exhibition) held at the Galerie Grässlin-Ehrhardt in Frankfurt 1987 together with Helmut Dorner, Axel Kasseböhmer—and Mucha.³ Two years prior to that Peter Pakesch staged the exhibition *Günther Förg Georg Herold Hubert Kiecol Meuser Reinhard Mucha* in his gallery in Vienna as a conceptual idea put forward by Martin Kippenberger. The fact it was an exhibition of sculpture in spite of a large-format photograph by Förg is evidenced by the title of Peter Weibel’s essay “Spatial Sculpture” in the catalogue. Kippenberger, Weibel and Pakesch had set the bar pretty high for the show. It was

more or less nothing short of an attempt to define a new concept for space. “Förg, Herold, Kiecol, Meuser and Mucha are a heroic team, heralds of sculpture, who, with extreme precision and a direct quality that has a strikingly classical effect, steer sculpture to that place where it belongs, namely the ‘place/space’ topos.”⁴ It is determined by the idea of a fourth dimension that has fascinated artists since Einstein; spatial art is “logography” and its proponents no longer work with volume, but with “codification, semiotisation and verbalisation”, concepts which approximated to the terms “Signs, Waves, Signals” that presided over Neo-Geo’s baptism one year earlier in the Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Vienna. According to Weibel, the sculptors moved from photos to letters, from glass to light, from iron to underpants—“all of which are materials that are not *per se* sculptural, but that could well become signifiers of space”.⁵ The agitatory artists were carefully offset by the “bombastically painted and chopped wood”, but also with a “flood of sculptural architecture and furniture models”.⁶ Kippenberger’s missionary zeal went so far that he arranged for the publication of a new catalogue through Pakesch one year later with Weibel’s text in English and some of his own

e Aus-
-Ehrhardt,
ber,
t Dorner
photo:





Ohne Titel, 1980, in Axel Hüttes Atelier/in Axel Hütte's studio
(siehe S./see p. 12/13)

drawings of the sculptures, removing them thus from the reality of the exhibition and even lending a certain dimensionality to Günther Förg's photo.⁷

What is noticeable however is the fact that by contrast to the other artists, Meuser has contributed an existing wall painting, which had previously been shown in one of Axel Hütte's halls in 1980. However, the impetus of "Emptiness of the Empty"⁸ was able to appear as a new sculptural programme, which certainly had an effect on Kippenberger's own sculptural oeuvre from 1985.

Since the beginning of the Eighties, Meuser and Kippenberger had enjoyed close contact, indeed it was Kippenberger who introduced Meuser to the Galerie Max Hetzler. Notwithstanding his tendency to sneer at Minimalism he always al-

lowed his attention to be drawn in his own way by the abstract painters and constructivists—above all after 1984 during the Neo Geo's boom period—especially with regard to linguistic connotation. His tie to Meuser was more of a personal nature. Both of them grew up in Essen. As children of the *Ruhrpott* (the industrial Ruhr Valley heartland), they were both able to force the world they beheld into a mould of linguistic absurdities comprising a corruption of proverbs, sayings and film titles.

It was no accident then that Meuser had to travel to Stuttgart to visit Kippenberger in order to "churn out some titles". The photograph *Gehobenes Statistenprogramm/Besser als Asmagruppe* (Advance Programme for Extras/Better than The ASMA Group) came about during one of Martin Kippenberger's visits to Meuser's studio in Düsseldorf. It features Kippenberger in front of the studio wall, upon which three of Meuser's sculptural compartments are hanging, standing there in his underpants bracing himself with flexed muscles and wearing a rubber ring, which he is holding. The supposed denigration of Meuser's works can be meant to imply the actor, who is lifting the inner tubes as an extra or subject in a photograph—later they became part of *o.T.* (Untitled, 1981). The ASMA Group was an Austrian firm for plastics technology that invented a rubber-like material with high mechanical resilience. To Meuser, the title was more an absurd play on the word asthma.

However, it wasn't just Kippenberger who had his fun and games with Meuser, so too did Franz West. It is possible to recognise him straight away in two collages, holding an adapter in front of him, the libidinous intention of which is impossible to overlook. The photograph was presumably taken in 1985 on the occasion of Meuser's exhibition at the Galerie Peter Pakesch. Years later Franz West mounted a large yellow aluminium sculpture onto a Meuser sculpture entitled *Gucci* (1998). The sculpture exhibited at Schloss Ambras is called: *Meuser erweitert* (Meuser extended, 2000). It is possible to come across several appropriations of this sort in West's oeuvre, metaphorically speaking a form of cannibalism with the aim of ingesting the inherent potential of the original work.

If the world of constructivist sculpture is silent, then Meuser's special realm is distinctly verbal. *Sculpture parlante*—but not merely because of titles such as *Herr Ober zwei Doppelte* (Waiter, two Doubles) or *Attraktiv und Preiswert* (Attractive and reason-

ably Priced) are so appealing, but because the rhetorical element represents one of the essential characteristics. Meuser writes in his introduction for the Munich Kunstraum catalogue: "The value of the works subsumes all adjectives available in the mother language (General Level). In the more delimited context of an individual work it evokes a chain of adjectives either of similar or contrary character. A structurable syntax obtains here."⁹ It is possible to home in more closely on Meuser's often tensionless sequences by using such linguistic analogies. And if Meuser's works made their entrance in the late Eighties and early Nineties in collections with a Neo-Geo image, then only because the intention of the minimalised formal language had been overlooked. Written in chalk on one of the stelae from 1988 made from two steel beams placed above one another, it is possible to read the word "Schrott"—scrap.

And already in 1984, Neo-Geo's inaugural year, Meuser entitled two somewhat quirky wall pieces *Neue Abstraktion* (New Abstraction). Kippenberger also found it difficult to follow the well-balanced *tête-à-tête* between the objects. He reproached the Meuser exhibition in the Zurich Kunsthalle in 1991 for exhibiting works, which were all simply too good. There should be at least two bad efforts, which would thus cast a better light on the others: "Meuser has always profited from the fact that there always were a couple of things that didn't work out, which he then chucked back on the scrap heap after the show or he reworked and used elsewhere. That makes the whole thing into more of an adventure."¹⁰

When Meuser speaks, then it happens in a sort of sculptural way, as though he were working with invisible objects, which he orders and rearranges. He peels his objects from the world of the tactile, out of the material itself and returns a form of uncertainty to them, likewise countermanding concepts such as "abstraction", "constructive" and "figuration". That is why the term ready-made is inappropriate. The works are too open and swept clean of their original content for it to be possible to interpret their references to the world of artefacts in the sense of a ready-made. Besides, associative elements—shovel, tripod, chair, scales—are used less frequently. However, in the presence of the arrangements it is possible to filter out words from German usage, such as *Beistelltisch* (occasional table), *Konsole* (console), *Bücherbord* (bookshelf) or apply the term *Beilage* (garnish) from a German menu. For one part explains the other, whether it is beef roulade with red cabbage or the erotic *Dreilochlösung* (Three-holed Solution) with the red T-shaped girder at the ready. Meuser's retreat into the horizontal positioning of the *Hänger* (Hangers) and the questionable initiative on the vertical *Ach, so* (2006) are insights made by a mature artist into art and life's lament.

1 Meuser. Kunstraum München (Munich, 1983), p. 33.

2 Ibid., p. 33.

3 *Dreiundzwanzigste Ausstellung*. Dörner, Kasseböhmer, Meuser, Mucha, exh. cat. Galerie Grässlin-Ehrhardt (Frankfurt a. M., 1987).

4 Peter Weibel, "Spatiale Plastik", in: *Günther Förg Georg Herold Hubert Kiecol Meuser Reinhard Mucha*, exh. cat., Galerie Peter Pakesch (Vienna, 1985), n. p.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 *Martin Kippenberger. Zeichnungen über eine Ausstellung: Günther Förg, Georg Herold, Hubert Kiecol, Meuser, Reinhard Mucha*, Galerie Peter Pakesch (Vienna, 1986).

8 Martin Kippenberger, quoted by Weibel (cf. note 4).

9 Meuser, "Über den Wert von Kunst", in: *Meuser 1983* (cf. n. 1), p. 5.

10 Martin Kippenberger, *B—Gespräche mit Martin Kippenberger* (Ostfildern, 1994), p. 142.