

HELEN MIRRA

IM GRUNEWALD BERLIN

BERLINER KÜNSTLERPROGRAMM DAAD

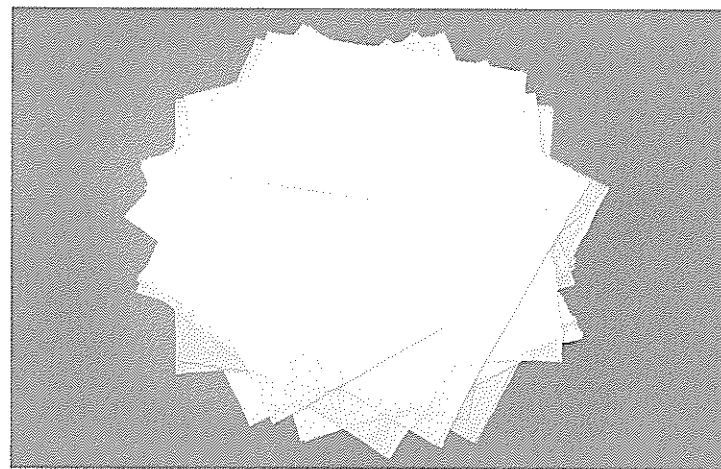
**Silvester, Transylvania,
Käuzchensteig and more
beneath the Cloud**

How can a visual form of expression be described in linguistic terms when language and text are the depicted subjects? How can primary forms be described when their basic mode of appearance is deliberately limited to form and material expression? These are the kinds of questions which provide the starting point for a consideration of Helen Mirra's work.

Helen Mirra's art can be broadly divided into two large groups: on the one hand, there are the classically sculptural pieces – those works which occupy space in three dimensions and employ particular materials to create a volume, usually extending horizontally over a portion of the floor; and on the other, the fabric-based wall works which lie somewhere between relief and picture and show linguistic terms, numbers and sentences. As is often the case with art, these two main areas of interest in Helen Mirra's practice cannot be totally separated, because combinations of the two are also found, as for example in the exhibition "Cloud, the, 3" at the daad-galerie in Berlin in spring 2006.

Helen Mirra is best known for her text-based works; she takes a keen interest in literature and philosophy, drawing inspiration from the likes of John Dewey and W.G. Sebald. During her time in Berlin she discovered the work of Robert Walser and Heinrich von Kleist; the ideas expressed here reverberate with her own way of thinking and help her to understand the world in which she lives. This reading matter provides Mirra's textual source material – borrowed words, phrases, names and fragmented thoughts, which she isolates and notes down. The list of terms is then compiled into an index.

Using a conventional manual typewriter, Helen Mirra types the texts onto lengths of fabric which she has painted; these in turn resemble typewriter ribbons, creating the impression that the artist simply came across these fragments of text inside a typewriter – a camouflage of tool and result. Mirra sews these lines of text together in such a way that the accumulated text segments with their slight differences in colour – mainly shades

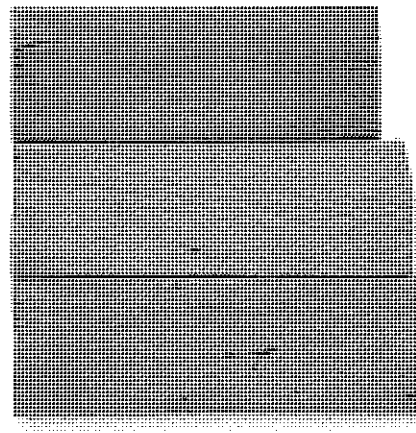


of grey and olive green – produce a complete band of text that can also be read as a rhythmic colour composition. Helen Mirra sees herself as a sculptor, and if we are to accept this self-conception then the mechanical typewriter is here being used as a sculpting tool: with each stroke of the letter key she 'hews' a symbol or character into the fabric; she strikes the words onto the background. This sculptural process, combined with her extremely haptic method of sewing together the strips of fabric, supports the observation that what she is producing is literally sculpture¹.

But to return to the form of the index. An index is usually found at the end of a publication and is designed to help the reader find key terms and ideas within it by supplying the relevant page references. An index is therefore a useful tool in the creation of conceptual order; it generally takes the form of a list of entries arranged into vertical columns. In Helen Mirra's

¹ Translator's note: the German word 'Bildhauerei' for sculpture directly expresses the notion of 'hewing out an image'.

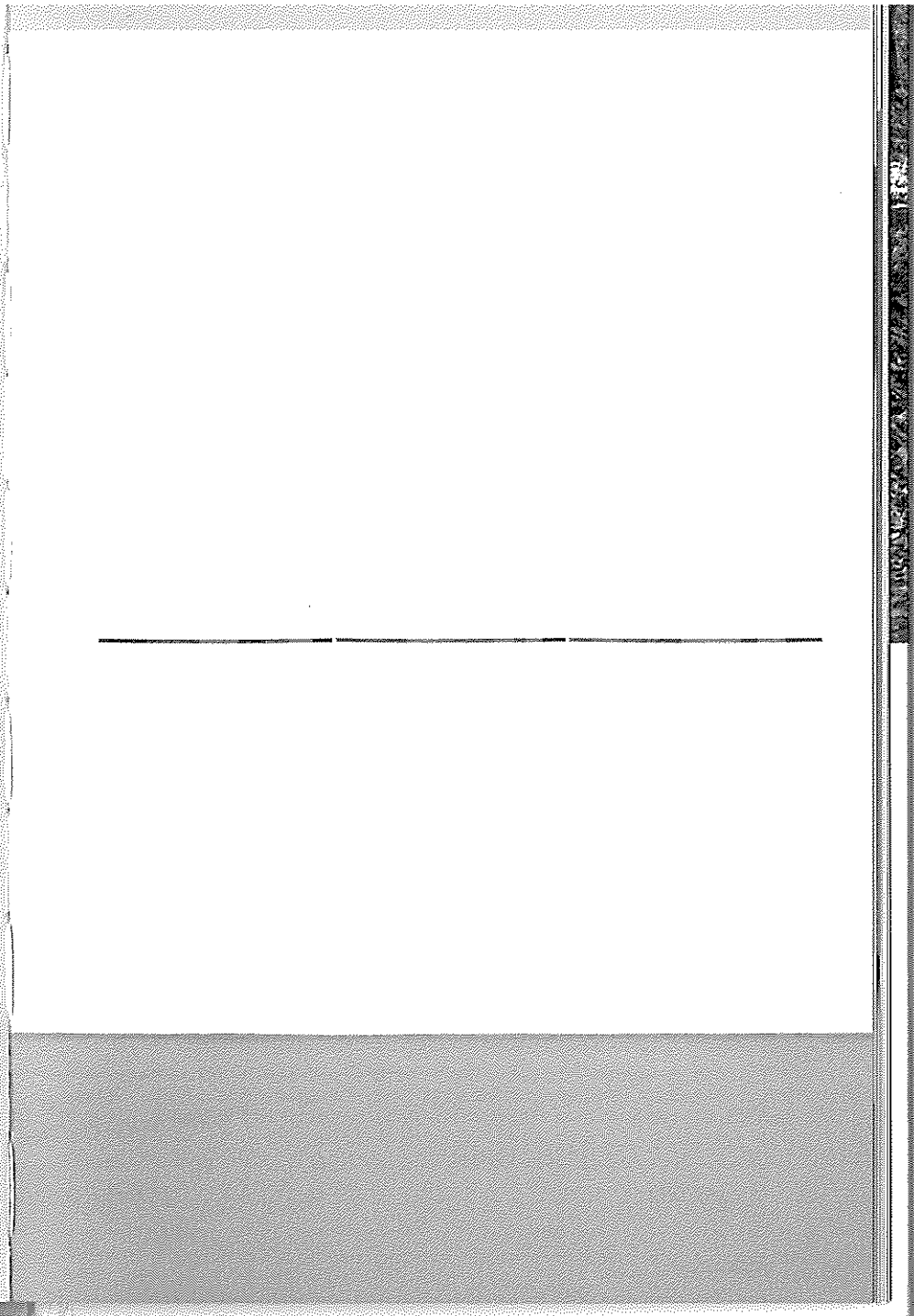
work, these entries consist of terms she has selected individually and listed in a horizontal arrangement, to be read one after another. One example is found in the title of the exhibition – “Cloud, the, 3”. These are followed by other words and sentences, and the very fact that we read these horizontally, in accordance with our normal reading habits, represents a departure from the normal vertical index. Simply by being strung together in an additive process, the selected words become linked in a chain of association, but one which makes no specific assertion. The reader is carried along from one association to the next, one fragment to the next, in a manner that provides scope for abstract thoughts. It is as if a circle is completed or extended to an infinite horizon. Linguistic expressions constantly attempt to grasp abstract concepts; language is abstraction which, here shaped into an image, shows itself to be tautological – something abstract appears in the form of language. Good examples of this can be found on the opening pages of this publication.



Helen Mirra presented one of her indexes to the public for the first time in Berlin during a reading/performance she gave at the daadgalerie on 12 November 2005. This event showed how such an index can become a game of allusion, language and musicality, and at the same time its ‘sculptural’ aspect was tangible in the sense of having a physical quality. Mirra’s body language and gestures, the rhythm of her speech and her breathing, the rising and falling stress she placed on particular words, conveyed to the audience that powerful physical and spatial expression of language which is only achieved by good recitations. Thoughts and dreams unfolded. A connection between music and image can be established – although not in the sense of synaesthetic phenomena – through an understanding of time. The categorical definition of music is the organization of sound in time. Helen Mirra brings this idea into the visual realm through the citation (in the form of an image) or recitation (as a performance) of text fragments. In order to grasp the work as a whole, one must take the time to read each fragment and trace each

inscribed letter, and one must devote one's attention over this length of time to what one sees. In addition, this process of 'retracing' the text evokes a sense of the activity in the time it took Helen Mirra to create the work in this form. One could say that in Helen Mirra's practice, a picture is – to use a modified form of the classical definition of power in physics – "work done on the picture divided by time".

This kind of enduring involvement with things, a preoccupation with the material – the meditative contemplation of its form and above all its careful rearrangement into something new – can be observed and felt in Helen Mirra's sculptures. One group of works, were initially developed as free forms in space with no connection to her text-based works. For these she used a simple material she literally finds by the wayside: used shipping pallets. In Berlin, she collected a large number of these and stored them in her studio. Sometimes the pallets are broken down into fragmented forms and separated into their individual components, making it more difficult to detect their functional origin.



The Euro pallet is, in formal terms at least, a fascinating construction. Simple wooden slats are joined together to form a surface layer, with cubic blocks of solid wood creating a space of about a hand's width between the top and a base layer of slats. The standardized form of the pallet allows a variety of uses and provides an efficient platform for stacking and shipping goods during everyday transportation and storage. The Euro pallet is a commonplace form; it has a constructive function that is also addressed by Mirra in her works. In a number of pieces from this group, the title of which – *Käuzchensteig* – is taken from the name of the Berlin street in which her studio was located, she presents stacking as an ordering principle and the resulting stack of pallets as sculptures added together to produce a volume. It is remarkable to see how the basic tectonic principles of loading and bearing are made explicitly clear by the positioning of the pallets in horizontal arrangements. The grammar of minimalist sculptural staging is used here demonstratively in order to place the work in this tradition and immediately



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break with it. The refining treatment Helen Mirra gives to basically worthless wooden pallets is an attempt to break away from the classic form of the serial sculptures whose stereotypical elements and aseptic appearance introduced technical, standardized materials into the realm of sculpture. The works on show in the daadgalerie were painted, with the result that the slats and boards appeared to have been given a coloured seal, albeit within a narrow colour spectrum. Mirra chose earth tones – or to be precise, ‘forest’ shades – as a direct reference to and reflection of the Käuzchensteig’s natural surroundings. Like the above-mentioned bands of fabric, these works are rendered in shades of grey and grey-green. The very fact that such treatment of and preoccupation with this ‘worthless’ material serves its preservation and conservation, indeed raises it to the level of art, elevates each individual piece. It evokes that expression of amazement when we realize that these processes have rendered visible something with which we are actually familiar but have never deemed worthy of considera-

tion as sculpture. In terms of Helen Mirra’s work, however, this has little to do with the frequently used formula of taking an object of everyday life and putting it in the context of the art world. Instead it is her particular insistence upon form that is genuinely provocative. Ad Reinhardt’s oft-repeated litany: “Art is art. Everything else is everything else” is brought to mind and declared a line of artistic tradition.

Looking at these industrially produced modules nevertheless produces changing appearances. First of all there is the exception to the norm: two pallets that are placed upright at an angle to the wall. *Käuzchensteig/O*, as this work is titled, emphasizes a vertical line that does not otherwise feature in Helen Mirra’s work. It represents an upright, standing position, reveals deep openings into the volume and creates a caesura in the space. *Käuzchensteig/S* consists of a pallet which, contrary to its function, is lying ‘upside-down’ on the floor, while *Käuzchensteig/D* follows the same principle with a second pallet serving as a plinth for the first. These few exam-

ples show a number of basic principles: that of simple storage, of standing together, of presenting one element with the aid of another, and the differences in colour emphasize this polarity. Over and above this, if one looks closely at the way the edges of the pallets are aligned, it becomes clear that their seemingly random position is in fact precisely calculated. Taken as a whole, the *Käuzchensteig* sculptures show variations on the 'Euro pallet' modular theme and effectively demonstrate how the preoccupation with a given character, with the arrangement and assignation of norms, can reveal diverse formal possibilities. The varying compositions may be reminiscent of a game, but the fact that these old, often weathered raw materials have been given a colour coating and as such seem to have been preserved, points to a formal intention behind the works that transforms the game into a meditation, in the sense of extended contemplation. The letter after the name of each work represents the month in which it was created: thus O stands for October, S for September, N for November and D for December.

Taken in sequence, these six examples of different sculptures produce a partial calendar, while each one individually presents the image of a month; they allude to the passing of summer into autumn into fall, and the changing face of nature around the studio on Käuzchensteig. The minimal range of colours used suddenly seems even more impressive in reference to the transformation of nature and her colour scheme. The horizontal positioning of the sculptures remains unchanged, thus it is only in combination with this knowledge of the letter code that the transformation over time is expressed through the varying colours.

In the exhibition at the daadgalerie, this notion of cyclical processes was further illustrated by a piece entitled *Wolke* (cloud), which was not only related to the exhibition title "Cloud, the, 3", and therefore formed part of the text-based wall work, but was also represented in the form of a circular floor piece. Helen Mirra made this floor sculpture from a number of (according to the artist) "dirty white" army blankets, like those used in field

hospitals, overlapping them to create a jagged-edged circular form. The work's title is *Wolke* (cloud) and its white woolly appearance did indeed make it seem like a stranded cloud. The formal principle of laying down or laying out was immediately apparent, while the work's outer form conveyed the regularity of order, a rotation upon which the composition was based. This piece clearly demonstrates Helen Mirra's associative and open approach to language, even if in this case language features only in the title. The word 'Wolke' stands for immateriality and a form that is discerned as a distant shape in the sky, and may also be seen to symbolize longing. The sculpture *Wolke*, on the other hand, consists of a certain materiality, the density of its material and its carefully constructed form, laid out on the floor like a body revolving around its own centre. What is presented is in fact the opposite of a cloud, and it is precisely this contradiction which gives it a sense of openness. In the form of its presence, the sculpture *Wolke* conveys longing and lightness in equal measure. Clouds are moving



elements set against a motionless, endless horizon; they transform our view of the horizon. Clouds produce continual transformations, whereas the single horizon remains static, and everything takes place in front of it.

With respect to the textile based works, the *Käuzchensteig* sculptures as well not only follow the inner logic of Helen Mirra's oeuvre, they also form a contradiction to it. *Käuzchensteig* is a group of sculptures that were made by the artist in Berlin when she was working in a studio in a street of the same name. In a straightforward sense, therefore, *Käuzchensteig* is first a location and a space, and only secondarily a group of works within the artist's oeuvre. The name 'Käuzchensteig' contains a reference to a species of owl and a word for 'path'. The owls are seen only rarely, and the path is in fact a dead end, a street that leads into the woods. It can be assumed that it wasn't only the reference to a species of owl which fascinated Helen Mirra – the visual camouflage of birds' feathers in the foliage – but also the acoustic sound and the phonetic pronunciation of the word itself,

a term which for her is extremely alien and contains many of the difficulties posed by the German language. This ultimately reveals the varying interpretations of place, the time spent there, the work created there, and even the surroundings in which it is embedded. The studio is located on the edge of a large forest, the Grunewald in West-Berlin. The possibility of spending extensive time in the forest, while considering our industrial, social, and built worlds, and her use of all of this in her work, transfigures everything into a concept that can only be fully decoded with reference to the artist, as only she deciphered her time and work in it. The essence of this form of interpretation may be deduced from the title chosen by Helen Mirra for this book: *Im Grunewald* rather than *In Berlin*. The works she made there carry the curious address 'Käuzchensteig' out into the world at large, for instance to an exhibition at Gallery Philip Nelson in Paris in February 2006. Käuzchensteig thus becomes a complex visual and linguistic metaphor used by Helen Mirra above all in the attempt to formulate principles of

repetition – the eternal return of the seasons for example –, of the camouflage of things and beings in nature and thus of assimilation into a higher context. It relates, therefore, to what John Dewey calls "interconnectedness": the phenomenon that ultimately nothing exists on its own; there is always a causality between things that compels us to act and to see.

Translated by Jaqueline Todd