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Endless Inventory:

A Conversation with Florian Slotawa

by Robert Preece

Conceptual artist Florian Slotawa does not make his work from scratch. Instead, he assembles his sculptures and installations from what already exists, rearranging and recontextualizing found material with a keen sense of form and color. He began with his personal belongings—everything from pencils to clothes and furniture—and over the years, he has expanded his range to include a full inventory of other items, incorporating industrial objects, figurative and abstract sculptures (including works by Mark di Suvero and Anthony Caro), and even a Porsche into his installations. Other works remake, or translate, works by modern masters such as Picasso and Mondrian into compositions of ordinary, everyday objects. Slotawa's keen, playful engagement with Modernism gives a new currency to formalist concerns, celebrating its aspirations while bringing them down to earth.

Robert Preece: What is the story behind *Obi-Picasso* (2018)? How did you go about selecting and arranging the elements?

Florian Slotawa: I developed *Obi-Picasso* for “Stuttgart sichten: Skulpturen der Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,” a 2018 exhibition at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, where I arranged a broad selection of sculptures from the collection of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. Due to conservation issues, it was not possible to borrow Picasso’s 1956 *Bathers* sculpture, which is one of the centerpieces of the collection. With a kind of DIY spirit, I decided to do the *Bathers* myself, using material from OBI, a chain of hardware stores in Germany and a mecca for all DIY enthusiasts. The idea was to find suitable products in the store and to rebuild the work, keeping the dimensions and shapes of the original figures.



q/a



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COURTESY VON BARTHA
AND THE ARTIST

Obi-Picasso,
2018.
Metal parts, ironing
board, and
various tools, approx.
180 x 579 x 405 cm.

“ I didn't damage or modify the things while working on the installation; after the exhibition, they could be used in my everyday life again. ”



Lager,
2020.
Various objects.
310 x 560 x 240 cm.

RP: What was your process like? Were you looking at a wide range of possible found objects? Did you have to do a lot of adding, removing, and replacing, and how did you know when it was finished?

FS: First of all, it was fun to go to the store with a print of Picasso's work in my hands and look for suitable objects. In the studio, the figures were growing day by day, and for some of their sections, I had two or three alternative objects. Of course, the work is not a copy of Picasso's *Bathers*, but a translation. Finally, it came to the point where I saw that the individual figures were working together like a family, that they were speaking the same language. This was when it was finished, and when I could return the things that I didn't use.

Mannheimer Bestandsaufnahme (Camping equipment), 2002/04.
Gelatin silver print, 63 x 83 cm.



RP: *Lager* (2020), in contrast, seems to mass elements together more haphazardly. Did you approach this work in a different way?

FS: "Lager" is the German word for storage. My 2020 exhibition at von Barthä gallery in Basel marked the move of my studio from Berlin to a new location in Italy. The complete inventory of my studio was first moved to Basel, where I used my objects to construct pedestals for sculptures from the gallery's collection. The things that I didn't use for the pedestals were piled in the center of the exhibition space. The idea of *Lager* was to make a compressed, space-saving arrangement. At the same time, it was the largest element in the exhibition, a heavy visual weight that structured the space. After the exhibition, my inventory was transported to my new studio.

RP: Three installations from 1999 at hotels in Munich, Trieste, and Strasbourg were key early works in the



Pension Josefine, München, Zimmer 18, Nacht zum 5. Juli 1999.
Gelatin silver print, 20,5 x 26 cm.



Besitzarbeit XII: Pier and Ocean, 2009.
View of installation at MoMA PS1, Queens, New York.



development of your practice. Why are they important to you, and what did you learn from them?

FS: The earliest key works were the “Besitzarbeiten,” like *Besitzarbeit IV: Heimatrelief* (1997). The series includes 12 works, and in each one, I used the inventory of belongings in my private apartment as material for an installation. A major aspect of the series is that I didn’t damage or modify the things while working on the installation; after the exhibition, they could be used in my everyday life again. This way, the objects circulated between the art world and normal life.

This practice was quite time-intensive, so I found a new solution with the “Hotelarbeiten” works—a series of 12 works that I did in hotel rooms in Europe in 1998 and 1999. Without asking permission, I used the room as a studio, with material included. I checked into the hotel with my tools and photo equipment and rearranged the inventory of objects in the room during the night. The idea was to build a small hut or habitation like children do when they play. After documenting the arrangement, I returned everything to its original location, so room service wouldn’t notice what had happened during the night. One thing I learned was how to move heavy pieces of furniture without making any noise. I chose to use black and white images because they have a more sculptural and documentary character.

RP: Is it true that in 2002, you sold all of your belongings to a German collector, leaving no memory of your past?

FS: Selling my belongings was a consequence of the first eight “Besitzarbeiten.” The collector contacted me because he wanted to buy one of the installations made with my inventory. When I explained the system of the work to him—that all of the installations were made with my belongings and that the inventory of my apartment worked as a kind of depot for these works—it became clear that he could not buy a particular installation; he had to buy all of my belongings in order to possess the work. At the time, I thought that selling my belongings would be the end of the “Besitzarbeiten” series. But two or three years later, it was obvious that I would use my new inventory for the next installation, and so the series continued.

RP: *Mannheimer Bestandsaufnahme* (Camping equipment) (2002/04) resulted from this sale of your belongings. What was the purpose of this work, which was part performance, in a way, and part documentation?

FS: *Mannheimer Bestandsaufnahme* consists of 92 photographs showing all of the objects that I gave to the collector. They are in black and white, again because of





OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:
**Besitzarbeit I:
Gesamtbesitz,**
1996.

View of installation at
Hochschule für Bildende
Künste Hamburg.

**Besitzarbeit VI:
Mutter,**
1999.

View of installation
at Museum
Fridericianum, Kassel.

**Besitzarbeit V:
Wohnvorschlag,**
1997.

View of installation at
Möbel Böhmler, Munich.

THIS PAGE:

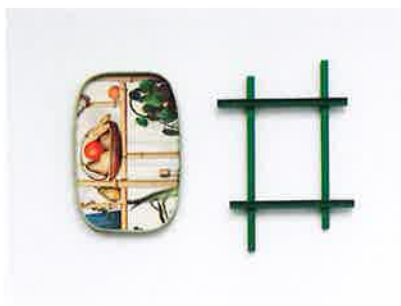
**Besitzarbeit VIII:
Jüngstes Gericht,**
2000.

View of installation at
Kunsthalle Mannheim.

the documentary character. The objects are grouped by function, like in a warehouse catalogue. I took the photographs during my solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Mannheim, using the exhibition space as a photo studio during the night when there were no visitors. I shot with an analog Linhof large-format camera, which forces you to work slowly and precisely. This was my way of letting the things go—every object that was documented was then packed and sent to the collector. So, it is not true that there is no memory of my past; *Mannheimer Bestandsaufnahme* is my inventory.

RP: Many of the “Besitzarbeiten” works allude to art history. What is the reference for *Besitzarbeit XII: Pier and Ocean* (2009)?

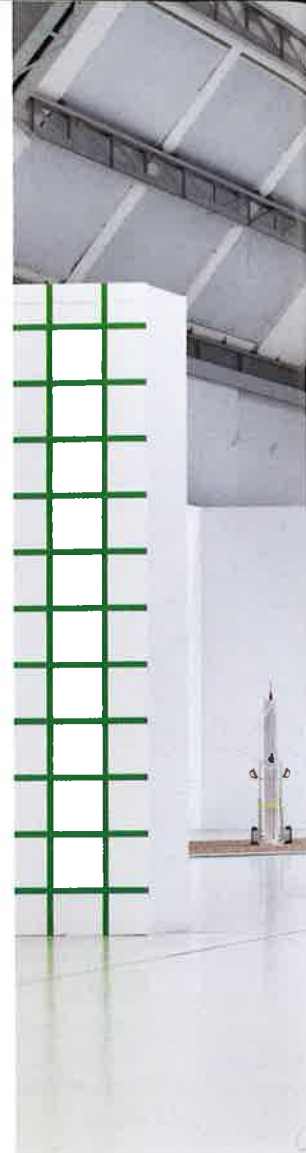
FS: With *Besitzarbeit VIII*, *IV* and *X*, I dealt with subjects from earlier art history. I did a Last Judgment, an Annunciation, and a Lamentation of Christ. After that, I was interested in finding a different, less pictorial



subject. *Besitzarbeit XII: Pier and Ocean*, which was conceived for MoMA PS1, was all about the tension between figuration and abstraction. Mondrian's oeuvre marks this transition, and his drawing *Pier and Ocean*, which is part of MoMA's collection, is really on the edge between the two. I wanted to deal with this wonderful work. For me, it was one degree more to reconstruct its structure in the space by using everyday objects.

RP: What led you to the minimal approach in *Renault 901 (Vert Vertigo)* (2016), which focuses on industrial products?

FS: Here, it is about color. I don't use it like a painter, who takes paint out of the tube and mixes it on the palette; instead, I find it on the street when I see a car passing by—a kind of found, readymade color. This color corresponds to the decor of the found object, a slightly kitschy 1970s tray.



THIS PAGE, TOP:
**Renault 901
(Vert Vertigo),**
2016.

Car paint lacquer on
metal and tray,
53 x 78 x 4 cm.

LEFT AND OPPOSITE:
Installation views
of “Florian Slotawa:
Stuttgart sichten.
Skulpturen der
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,”
Deichtorhallen
Hamburg, Halle für
aktuelle Kunst, 2018–19.



OPPOSITE, TOP: COURTESY VON BARTHA AND THE ARTIST / OPPOSITE, BOTTOM AND THIS PAGE: ACHIM KÜLLIES, © VIG BILD-KUNST BONN, 2022. COURTESY GALLERIE NORDENHAF, BERLIN/STOCKHOLM/MEXICO; GALLERIE VON BARTHA, BASEL/COFENHAGEN, SIES & HÖKE, DUSSELDORF

RP: In 2018, you continued your use of industrial products as material/form with washing machines arranged as supports for sculptural objects, set against a gridded backdrop. How did this come about? Could you explain your thinking?

FS: This is also from “Stuttgart sichten,” where I presented sculptures from the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart collection at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg. I wanted to bring not only artworks from Stuttgart to Hamburg, but also everyday objects. Porsche and Bosch are two large companies with headquarters in Stuttgart. I asked to borrow their products for the exhibition. The washing machines from Bosch served as pedestals for the sculptures—Kaspar-Thomas Lenk’s *Objekt 33a für Alberto* (1964), Otto Herbert Hajek’s *Farbwege 67/12* (1967) and *Raumknoten 75* (1958), Rudolf Hoflehner’s

Massives Objekt (1960), and Julio González’s *Le Baiser* (1930). A bust by Rudolf Belling—*Kopf in Messing* (*Portrait Toni Freedan*) (1925)—was installed inside the brand new Porsche 911.

First of all, I was interested in the dialogue of materials and surfaces. The technical design details of the washing machines corresponded with the forms and colors of those sculptures from the 1950s and ’60s; and the shiny brass surface of the Rudolf Belling bust contrasted in a wonderful way with the black lacquer of the car. Belling was also an automobile enthusiast—he drove race cars and designed a hood ornament for a German car manufacturer. This was another reason for me to present his work as if it were the driver of the sports car. It was a pity that Belling couldn’t see it, I would have been curious to hear what he thought.



THIS PAGE:
Installation view of
"Florian Slotawa: Stuttgart
sichten, Skulpturen der
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,"
Deichtorhallen Hamburg,
Halle für aktuelle Kunst,
2018–19.

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:
**Besitzarbeit XI: ohne
Titel,**
2004.
View of installation at
VRIZA, Amsterdam.

Installation view of
"Florian Slotawa: Stuttgart
sichten, Skulpturen der
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart,"
Deichtorhallen Hamburg,
Halle für aktuelle Kunst,
2018–19.

**RP: The Porsche in this exhibition was also
juxtaposed against a group of various figurative
sculptures.**

FS: John Adams-Acton's *Pharaoh's daughter* (1864), Rolf Szymanski's *Madonna von Ephesus* (1967), Karl Begas's *Büste einer Italienerin* (1877), Clara Rilke-Westhoff's *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (1908), Antonio Bisetti's *Venus ins Bad steigend* (1844–45) and Aristide Maillol's *Tête de Venus* (1928) were lined up behind the Porsche. Together with Dirk Luckow, the director of the Deichtorhallen and curator of the exhibition, I discussed the works that we wanted to borrow from the depot of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. Of course, as an art historian and former museum director, he had different criteria than I did as an artist, but I think that it was an exciting process of negotiating and selecting for both of us. Finally, 70 sculptures were shipped

to Hamburg. I decided to group these six figurative works in a straight line, in a sequence according to their formal aspects. It had to do with the height of the individual sculptures with the pedestal, with the color of the material, and with their line of sight. While number five and six in the row looked straight ahead, all of others looked toward the back wall of the space, away from the entering viewer.

**RP: Another installation in the show featured a line
of abstract Modernist sculptures. Could you explain
what you were after?**

FS: This was the second line of sculptures—a row of five huge, heavy works starting with Mark di Suvero's *Homage to the Viet Cong* (1971), followed by Hans Arp's *Nombril d'étoile* (1958) and Otto Freundlich's *Komposition* (1933). It continued with Anthony Caro's *Rouge*

(*Rot*) (1972–73) and ended with Norbert Kricke's *Grosse Raumplastik F VI* (1980). The technicians at the Deichtorhallen constructed pedestals in order to level the sculptures—to bring them to the same height. The pedestals also had the function of presenting and supporting the sculptures. I decided to draw attention to them with a strong blue color. Now there were two sculptural lines corresponding in the large space: Walter De Maria's *Beginning and End of Infinity* (1987), which looks like a thin, elegant horizontal line, and my installation with the leveled sculptures, which was visually heavier and more playful with the different shapes and materials of the individual works.

RP: Finally, a large-scale Modernist sculpture and a delicate mobile were juxtaposed with a massed form of packing crates.

FS: All of the packing crates that were used to transport the sculptures from Stuttgart to Hamburg were piled in the exhibition space. Similar to *Lager*, two years later, this created a large element that helped to structure the huge exhibition space. At the same time, the pile of crates worked like a support for Gustav Seitz's *Geschlechter Catcher* (1963/1966).



RP: You live and work in a village in the Italian Alps, near Switzerland. What brought you there, and what benefits and challenges does this location bring to your work? What sorts of visual juxtapositions are you focused on now?

FS: I moved in 2019–20, after living in Berlin for 18 years. Berlin is a wonderful place with a strong impact on an artist. But, for me, it came to the point where it was more interesting to look for an alternative. My wife and I, along with our four children, ended up in a small village in the mountains, which is, of course, the complete opposite of the city. I was interested in the contrast. I also find it very inspiring how, in our new place, the cultures of Italy, Switzerland, and Austria come together; it's a very rich mixture.

The landscape is another important aspect, and it's a factor you have to deal with. The visual impressions at the different times of the day and over the course of the year are strong. It clears the mind. I am still curious to see what kind of impact it will have on my work. ■■■

