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Gernot Wieland on the couch



Bruce Nauman on the fence

Plus Luc Tuymans, Mexican Macabre, Susan Cianciolo

Gernot Wieland

by Mark Rappolt



In 1945, Allied forces, about to occupy Austria, were issued a guide to the country and its people. 'It is no good expecting Austrians to be punctual and reliable, as we understand those terms,' it reads. 'They are not made that way. They will be quite sincere when they promise to do something; they will be equally sincere when they apologize for not having done it. But they will have a sense of "style".' The guide as a whole reduces the people to a type, defined by the geographic space they inhabit (the country looks like a shoe and its western border is 'quite a small stream'), the climate of that place ('hard to describe') and its sociopolitical history (it has only been a 'self-contained country' since 1918 and 'therefore there has not been much time for Austrians to get the feeling of being a nation'). It's these restricted, prejudiced ideas of identity and the way in which it is constructed that the Berlin-based Austrian artist Gernot Wieland seeks to confront in his work. Though the previous statement in itself represents a limited view of his recent output of expansive lecture-performances and films. He does, however, have a definite sense of 'style', one that juxtaposes fact and fiction, horror and humour, profundity and bathos, and a sense that art and artmaking can be at once useless and useful in navigating between these poles, but either way can play a role in humanity's search for its place in the world.

In the performance *Speaking in Places (Ink in Milk)* (2017, which presents a schoolboy's traumatic account of a fellow male pupil being shamed for coming into class wearing lipstick, through to the village's obsession with forming their bodies into healing crystals in order to expunge their sorrow over his eventual death), currently being made into a film, Wieland describes how, shortly after moving to Berlin, he discovered that he lived around the corner from Grunewaldstrasse and that house number

13 on that street was where Franz Kafka once lived. As he walked past the property and obsessed about it he became 'closer' to Kafka (even adopting what he imagined to be his walk and his 'Praguish' accent), ending up convinced that the author could only have written what he did because of the fact that he lived in this particular house. (There's a sense here, as there is in much of Wieland's work, of Gaston Bachelard's famous description of Victor Hugo's Quasimodo as a person whose deformities are shaped by the building he inhabits, the relation between the two being 'like a turtle to its carapace' and posing the issue of whether or not an animal is shaped by its environment or cage.) Later, Wieland reports, he discovered that there is another Grunewaldstrasse in Berlin and that it was on this street that Kafka had actually lived. Ultimately, the Kafka Wieland had constructed

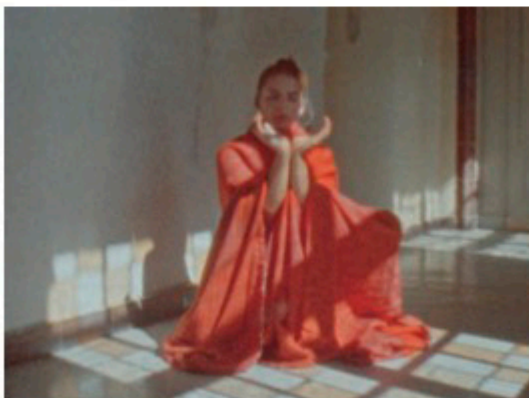
Facts, fictions and how they are instrumentalised in art as in life lie at the slippery heart of Wieland's work

was a fiction based on a misunderstanding, doubtless influenced by the author's own fictions, and tethered to nothing resembling a fact. Although, at a certain point, Wieland's Kafka was a fact, as far as the artist, possessed by the writer's shuffle and talking in tongues, was concerned.

Facts, fictions and how they are instrumentalised in art as in life lie at the slippery heart of Wieland's work. He might have made up the entirety of that Kafka stuff, the street address aside. Although his generally emotionless, somewhat monotonous delivery in the performance, combined with his Germanic accent, help to enforce the sense, psychologically (but based on no essential truth), that facts are in the air. *Thievery and Songs* (2016), a 23-minute film that won Wieland first prize at last year's Mostyn Open, entwines the story of Hilde Holger, a pioneering Jewish dancer who fled Austria for Bombay in 1939, with the story of the artist's great-aunt's bondage to a cruel and violent Austrian farmer (as told to him by

Thievery and Songs (still),
2016, video, 22 min 40 sec.
Courtesy the artist

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his father), a folk tale collected by the Brothers Grimm, a therapy session, the perceived relationship between NASA and Leonardo da Vinci, that between religion and postwar Austrian art, the question of to what extent the past informs the present, the extent to which the experiences of childhood shape the form of an adult, and the relationship of character to place.

At the core of this tightly interwoven ball of problematics is an exploration of how people and the power they wield shape environments: the Anschluss and with it the arrival of the National Socialists in Austria creates an environment that can no longer provide sanctuary to Hilde Holger. When the artist's great-aunt is sold to the farmer (who loses all his 'property', including his wife, to a 'good' farmer over a game of cards in the prewar era, before returning as a member of the Nazi Party to take it back) he shapes her identity and existence. A Hitler-Eiche to which the artist and his brother played Mendelssohn as an act of childhood atonement (for the sins of Austria) is wiped from the landscape and has been replaced by a shopping centre when he revisits as an adult. The Berlin psychiatrist that the artist consults concerning his dreams of imaginary landscapes, whose meaning Wieland can't interpret, demonstrates an obsession with his patient's Austrian dialect and his having lived in Vienna, the home of Freud, even as his patient exhibits mounting anxiety and anger while he seeks to reframe the session around the artist's own problems, all the time sweating on the couch.

The narrative is accompanied by a series of illustrations: Plasticine animations, childish naive paintings, textbook illustrations, scientific-looking emotional diagrams that attempt to make sense of the therapy session, photographs belonging to the artist's father and a filmed performance of a dancer (in a dress that might approximate some of the costumes worn by Holger). At times they introduce visual links between the various narratives, at other times their childlike execution serves to highlight the absurdity of those narratives, while at other times still they're presented as evidence of the purported facts of the tale. For example, we're shown a man waving his right hand as pictured on the plaques that accompanied NASA's Pioneer 10 and 11 probes into outer space during the early 1970s. The artist claims to have confused these messages for extraterrestrial life with Leonardo da Vinci's illustration of *Vitruvian Man* (c.1490), an ideal image that he then obsessively perpetuates (we're shown several childhood drawings) so that any man he draws is pictured holding up his right hand. This image crops up again, in Plasticine form, illustrating the artist's discomfort during the therapy session and, as the narrative turns to National Socialism, has uncomfortable echoes of the infamous Nazi salute. By the end of the film the image of a waving man comes to mean comfortableness, friendliness, discomfort and hostility: everything and nothing at the same time. Gernot's imagery in general comes to operate in such a way as to leave you questioning whether it's the 'plot' that gives meaning to objects presented or the objects that give truth to the plot. And similarly, does

memory define us or do we define our memories? In both cases the one nourishes the other like an Ouroboros gnawing its own tail.

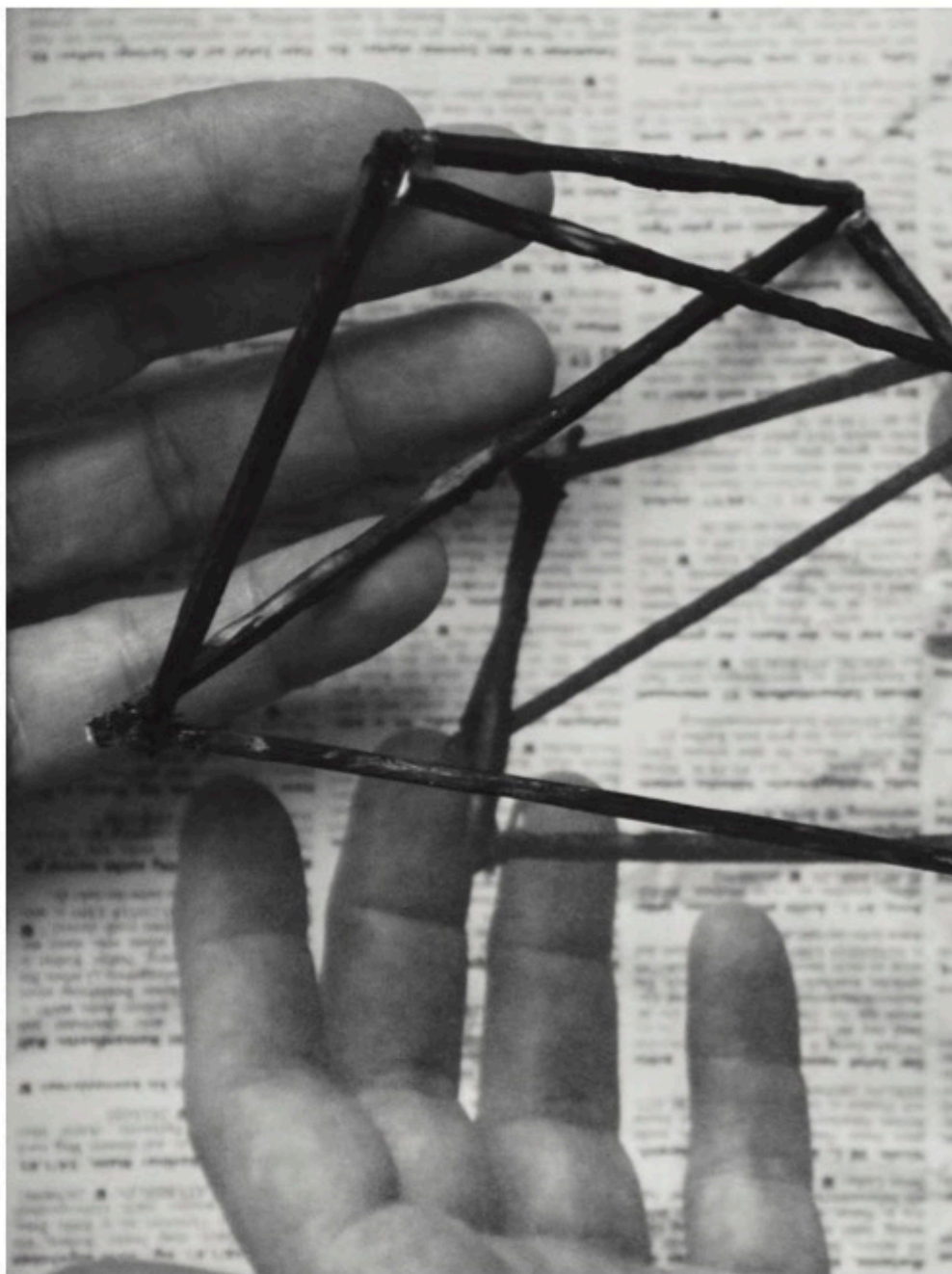
The relation of art to artificiality is something that Wieland pursues in all his work. In *Thievery and Songs*, the artist recalls the much-discussed connection between actionist performance and the Catholic Mass (while digressing on the fact that you are allowed to eat the body of Christ in the form of the host, but not allowed to chew it); in the lecture-performance *Depression in Animals* (2016, in which the artist examines depression in animals as a transference of human problems and a sign of humankind's estrangement from nature) he describes the stuffed animals in an Austrian classroom as being 'like an art installation'. All of which leaves you questioning what is more absurd, the art or the customs and traditions it imitates. And if it's the latter, then what does that say about the society we inhabit? In *Thievery and Songs*, the artist recounts the folk tale 'The Town Musicians of Bremen', in which four domestic animals – a dog, a cat, a donkey and a rooster – having reached the end of their 'useful' lives on a farm decide to go to Bremen and become musicians. Along the way they stop at a house populated by robbers. To scare them off and take the house for themselves, the animals stand one atop the other, leading the thieves to confuse them for a witch, a judge, a giant and an ogre. To a story that ends with the animals living happily ever after, Wieland adds an Orwellian coda: after a while the animals can't decide who should be on top of the other; they go to therapy to resolve their issues; therapy doesn't help so they go their separate ways. Their occupation of the house and what followed, Wieland suggests, is a parable for Occupy Wall Street. Although given that 'The Town Musicians of Bremen' was collected in Grimm's *Fairy Tales* in 1819, perhaps the fairy tale is more truthfully a precedent.

Ultimately it's not just the interhuman dynamics of power and hierarchy that the artist seeks to confront, but also humanity's speciesism and dominance over the rest of the world. At the beginning of *Thievery and Songs*, the artist describes feeling that he is in reality a snail and only attempting to fit into human society. 'I eat your food and pretend I share your taste. I talk and show affection, and imitate a normal life,' he proclaims, all the while suggesting that ideals of human society are as much a performance as his artwork. At the end of the film he confronts his dreams about landscapes he doesn't recognise and cannot interpret saying, they are 'the opposite of fear and I do not exist in them'. Oh and by the way Wieland does have a habit of being punctual and reliable.

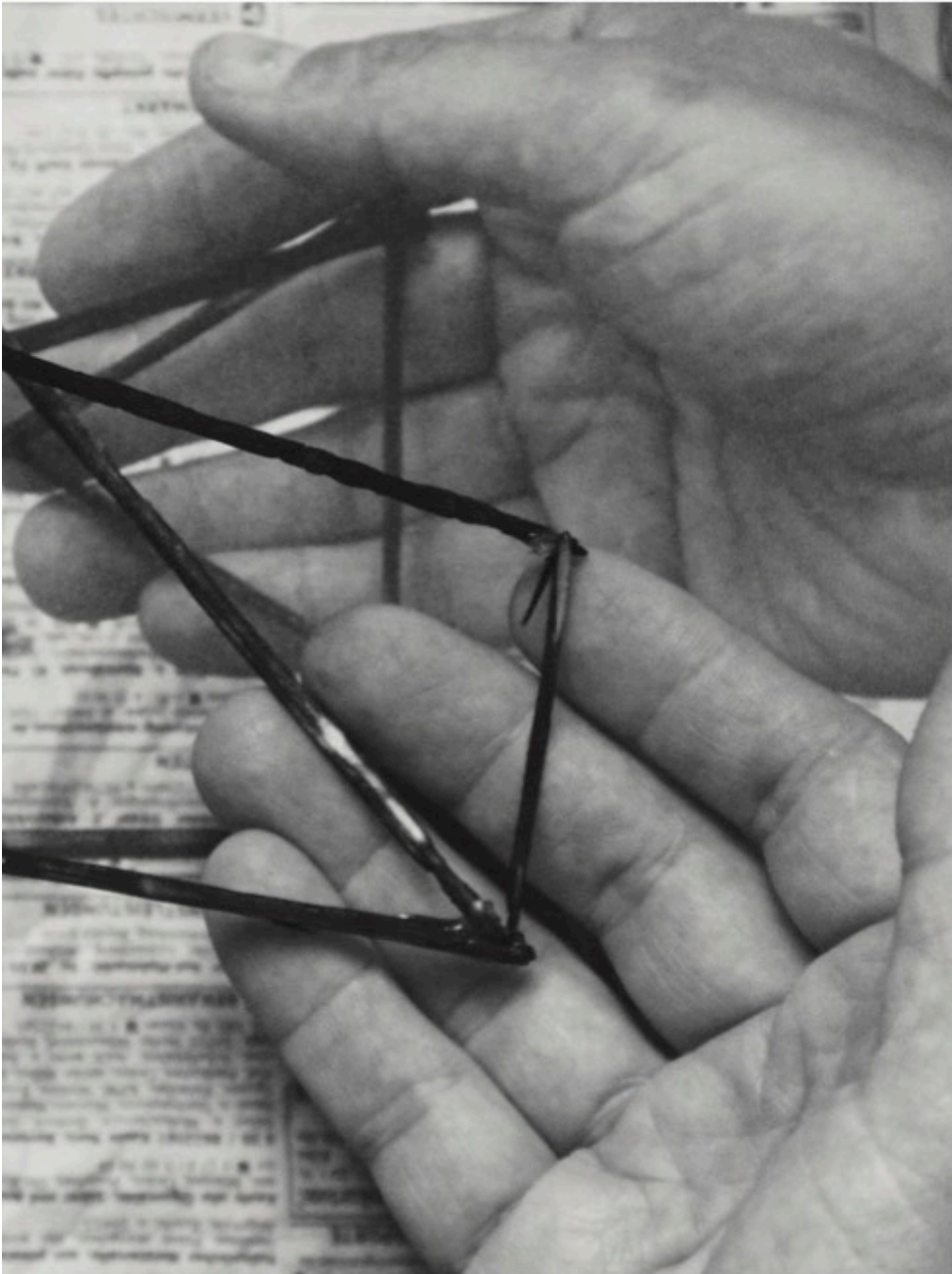
Mark Rappolt is the editor-in-chief of ArtReview

Gernot Wieland will perform the lecture *Depression in Animals* at OGR Torino on 5 June. The film *Ink in Milk* will be shown as part of *Shame* at Künstlerhaus Bremen, 30 June – 26 August. The artist's work is also included in *Zeitspuren* at the Kunsthau Centre d'art Pasquart, Biel/Bienne, 9 September – 18 November

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Thievery and Songs (stills), 2016, video, 22 min 40 sec.
Courtesy the artist



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these and preceding pages Ink in Milk (stills),
2018, forthcoming film.
Courtesy the artist