

ENTERING THE NARRATIVES

Contextualization as a Strategy of Resistance. A Reflection on the Work of MATHILDA.

— by Zarah Gutsch

In the introduction to the catalog accompanying the 2019 exhibition *Otto Mühl — Works 1955–2013* at Galerie Sammlung Friedrichshof, the following sentences appear: “Otto Mühl’s biography is complex and scandalous. Not only the charges and convictions with which the Austrian authorities responded to his actions in the 1960s (notably the university scandal of 1968), but above all the criminal offenses committed within the commune, undoubtedly present a challenge to the viewer of his work. To ignore his artistic achievements is tantamount to censorship and incompatible with the increasingly pressured liberal-democratic and enlightened European intellectual climate of today.”¹ These words were written by Hubert Klocker, who, on behalf of the Friedrichshof cooperative, had been responsible for selling and promoting Mühl’s work since the early 1990s. Mühl’s crimes within the sect he founded were either omitted or glossed over in this “retrospective.” Largely without critical framing, Klocker presented Mühl’s Viennese Actionism, sect art, prison art, and works from his exile commune in Portugal — where abuse of minors is known to have continued — as equally valid creative periods.

Under the banner of artistic freedom, Klocker thus continued to aestheticize and justify violence through Mühl’s uncontextualized oeuvre, framing it as a means of socially driven artistic reform. The sexual, physical, and psychological violence exercised and celebrated under the guise of art — violence that is not only foundational but central to Mühl’s work — remained unaddressed.²

The years-long efforts of some former child residents of the sect, who had been advocating within the cooperative for a responsible and

1 Translation of the German original by Zarah Gutsch

2 This volume has thoroughly examined Mühl’s role as both an artist and sect leader, as well as his actions. See the contributions by Georgia Doll, Andy Simanowitz, Esther Hutfless, and Elisabeth Schäfer

critical reckoning with Mühl's legacy in the collection, were ignored and bypassed by this fully affirmative exhibition.³

This exhibition, staged at the very site of the crimes, became the trigger for the formation of the group MATHILDA, initiated by several people who had been forced to grow up in Mühl's sect. We came together in response to our outrage and a deep need for counter-narratives, for visibility, and for demanding accountability. We called on all former children of the commune to share their own perspectives on the "artist myth" Mühl and their lived experiences with him. From these voices emerged a collective intervention into the exhibition, presented at the finissage. Our approach to the material was never one of censorship, but of adding narratives: What isn't being told? And what is actually needed to grasp the "complex oeuvre" that Klocker claims to see?

That first intervention marked the beginning of MATHILDA's in-depth engagement with Mühl's work. Grounded in our lived experiences within the sect, we examined Mühl's oeuvre for the first time through a deeply subjective lens — a lens that had long been clouded by the narratives of our parent generation and of the museums and their "experts." The former often remained entrenched in their idealization of Mühl — even if the commune experiment had failed, the artist was not to be questioned. The latter continued to promote the public narrative of the taboo-breaking artist and his importance in Austrian art history.

Our collective re-analysis of the works from this perspective of shared experience was difficult — but necessary. In preparation for the symposium *Art Reception — Strategies for Future Exhibiting* at the Volkskundemuseum Vienna (frequently referenced in this volume), we confronted, unsparingly — especially toward ourselves — every accessible video work of Mühl's Viennese Actionism. Videos we had previously only known through black-and-white photographs, and which are either not shown in full or completely excluded from the museum context — some of which now only circulate on pornographic and fetish websites. While violence may be less visible in his sect-era works, it remains the condition of their production; in his actionist pieces, however, violence is central.

3 Outside of our generation, it was primarily Hans Schröder-Rozelle and his collaborators who, since the early 2000s, have been publicly advocating for an informed public engagement with Mühl's work. See: <https://www.re-port.de>. Through the La Loba Foundation, he has also unconditionally supported the work of MATHILDA from the very beginning.

The person we experienced as a narcissistic cult leader emerges in these videos in full force — enacting violence and a lust for dominance and assault. Unlike other artists classified within the canon of Viennese Actionism — Schwarzkogler, Brus, and Nitsch — Mühl consistently used the bodies of others. His narcissistic drive for control and subjugation is plainly visible.

Despite this visibility of violence and the well-documented history of abuse, Mühl is still publicly and persistently divided into two personas: the art-historically relevant artist and the criminal commune leader. Rainer Fuchs, long-time chief curator at mumok, describes this as an ambivalence that one must simply endure: “We are dealing with a criminal, but one who created important art.” For years, mumok’s strategy was to preserve the autonomy of the work and briefly mention the artist’s crimes in small wall texts. But this form of contextualization fails — especially in Mühl’s case. The criminal’s presence within the work itself remains a blind spot in the reception and in art-historical narratives.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AS AESTHETIC PRACTICE: MATHILDA’S APPROACH

Unlike our first intervention at Friedrichshof, in which we inserted contextual elements into an existing exhibition, we no longer consider contextualization a mere supplement to existing artworks, but rather an independent, aesthetic-political practice — one that disrupts, fractures, and re-values Mühl’s works within museum spaces. This practice is based on the understanding that Mühl’s work, across all “creative phases,” constitutes evidence of his abuse of art as a tool of violence — and therefore must be understood as documentary material in its own right.

At the center of our exploration into new forms of contextualization was one key question: How can we expose the evident layers and continuities of violence in Mühl’s work — without reproducing them? We did not seek to answer how Mühl could be exhibited today, but rather to name and interrogate the gaps left by the seemingly entrenched art-historical narrative.

In our installations at the Volkskundemuseum Vienna, we shifted Mühl's works into a documentary and evidentiary dimension by intervening directly — through aesthetic strategies — in their presumed autonomy. In *Art as Pretext*, we contrasted Mühl's drive for assault and his sadistic tendencies in actionist works with a documentary scene from within the Mühl sect. In *Complicity in Visibility*, we revealed the documentary potential of a fictional film produced inside the commune through direct intervention in the material. Both works are documented in the image series that follows this text and accompanied by interpretive commentary. We understand "interpretation" here in its literal sense: to mediate and to translate.

Probably MATHILDA's exhibiting practice is best described as an *aesthetics of responsibility*. Responsibility here does not stand for moral clarity or pedagogical instruction, but for creative forms of critical contextualization. Art is not abandoned in favor of an ethical position — but changes its form in response to the ethical demands posed by perpetrator art. The work is not explained — rather, the very status of the work is interrogated.

In our most recent project at mumok Vienna⁴, *From Artwork to Artefact*, the contribution by Branislav Jakovljević in this volume served as the conceptual strategy for our project space. In his essay *Expatriation of Art to its Producers*, the cultural theorist advocates for the de-artification of Otto Mühl's art. Mühl, he argues, did not expand the boundaries of art, but exited the aesthetic realm altogether — entering the terrain of ethics. Beyond recent developments toward "ethical art," the oft-repeated notion of Mühl's "discovery" of the human body as material has mostly gone unchallenged. These works entered the canon of museums and art history. A proper public presentation, however, disentangles them from that framework and repositions them as ethnographic artefacts. Jakovljević proposes three interconnected strategies for this shift: De-periodization — refusing to separate Mühl's art into distinct phases of

4 As part of the exhibition *Never Final! The Evolving Museum*, we were invited by collection curator Marie-Therese Hochwartner to design a project space in which, in collaboration with her team, we posed new research questions about Mühl's work. As the project coincided with the production of this book, it is not documented here. See: <https://www.mumok.at/nie-endgueltig/mathilda-vom-kunstwerk-zum-artefakt> (last accessed on June 5, 2025).

a socially critical actionist and a later sect leader, and instead exposing the continuity of violence throughout his oeuvre. Contextualization — our installation documents Mühl's history of pedocriminality and his self-legitimization, along with that of his accomplices. Drawing on the principle of ethnographic repatriation — which centers the return of looted art to its makers — we began to ask how a third demand might take shape in relation to our own history. What Mühl appropriated were not images, but people: his was a predatory art that stripped individuals of their agency — and continues to do so. To give ourselves a voice today is thus an act of reclamation — of language itself, and through it, of our place within the narrative.

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