

ART AS PRETEXT —THE ACCESS TO THE BODIES

The installation *Art as Pretext* was first realized at the Volkskundemuseum Vienna in July 2021 and was presented in 2023 as part of the group exhibition *On-Stage* at mumok Vienna, providing contextualization for a work by Otto Muehl.



Kunst als Vorwand Gruppe MATHILDA, 2023

MATHILDA ist eine Gruppe ehemaliger Kinder der sogenannten Mühl-Kommune, einer von 1970 bis 1990 von Otto Mühl geführten Sekte. MATHILDA strebt an, ergänzend zur bisherigen Rezeption auf die Anwesenheit von Gewalt in der Kunst Mühls aufmerksam zu machen. Als MATHILDA wurden wir eingeladen, für die Ausstellung *ON STAGE – Kunst als Bühne* eine Arbeit von Mühl zu kontextualisieren. Dafür konfrontieren wir die sich in der Sammlung des mumok befindende Videarbeit *Kardinal* (1967) mit einer Videoaufzeichnung aus dem Jahr 1984.

Die Videoaufzeichnung zeigt die gewalttätige, öffentliche Misshandlung eines etwa zehn Jahre alten Kindes durch Mühl und stammt aus dem dokumentarischen Fundus der Sekte. Sie zeigt einen Vorgang, der über einen Zeitraum von mehreren Jahren dem Wesen nach alltäglich war und dem wir selbst ausgesetzt waren. Mit unserer Gegenüberstellung möchten wir Sie zu einer formalen Betrachtung einladen, welche die oft behauptete Trennlinie zwischen Mühls aktionistischen Arbeiten und den Vorgängen in der von ihm geführten Sekte in Zweifel zieht.

Der körperliche, psychische und sexuelle Missbrauch in der Sekte fand nicht nur in der Öffentlichkeit statt, sondern war explizit in ein bürokratisches soziales Setting eingebettet. Bei den „SD-Abenden“ versammelte sich ein Publikum, um sich an einem von Mühl angeleiteten Schauspiel zu beteiligen. Aus der Perspektive der psychologischen Sektenforschung manifestierte sich in diesen Veranstaltungen die narzisstische Missbrauchsstruktur zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen. Sie waren ein zentraler Ort für die an den Kindern verübte Gewalt. Gleichzeitig wurden sie – wie auch die Sekte als Ganzes – von Mühl explizit zur Fortschreibung seiner aktionistischen Kunst erklärt. Unsere These ist, dass sie das auch waren. Nur macht das in der Sekte verübte Gewalt selbstverständlich nicht zur Kunst, sondern wirft die Frage auf, inwiefern auch in Mühls aktionistischen Arbeiten die Gewalt Selbstzweck und die Kunst Vorwand ist.

Art as Pretext MATHILDA Group, 2023

MATHILDA is a group of people who grew up in what was known as the Mühl Commune, a sect Otto Mühl led from 1970 to 1990. MATHILDA strives to draw attention to the violence present in Mühl's art as a supplement to its reception to date. We in MATHILDA were invited to put a work by Mühl in context for the exhibition *ON STAGE – All the Art World's a Stage*. We decided to focus on the video work *Kardinal* (1967), part of the mumok collection, juxtaposing it with a video made in 1984.

The video recording from 1984, part of the sect's archived documentation, shows the violent mistreatment of a child of about ten years in public by Otto Mühl. It reveals a procedure the nature of which was commonplace at the commune for several years and to which we ourselves were subjected. With our juxtaposition of the two videos, we invite you to undertake a formal contemplation of a scene that casts doubt on the frequently claimed dividing line between Mühl's actionist works and the events in his sect.

Physical, psychological, and sexual abuse not only took place in public in the cult; it was explicitly embedded in a stage-like social setting. At what were called SD-evenings, an audience gathered to participate in a theatrical play directed by Mühl. From the perspective of psychological cult research, these events manifested interpersonal relationships with a narcissistic abuse structure. They were a central site for the violence perpetrated against the children, while Mühl for his part explicitly declared these events—as indeed the sect as a whole—to be a continuation of his actionist art. Our thesis is that they were in fact such a continuation. Only, of course, this does not turn the violence committed in the sect into art, but instead raises the question of the extent to which violence in Mühl's actionist works was likewise an end in itself, with art as pretext.

<https://aboutmathilda.com>



The installation *Art as Pretext* presents two videos running simultaneously side by side.

On the right screen, we see Otto Mühl's material action „Cardinal“ (1967), part of the video compilation „Zock-Exercises“; shown without sound.

The camera focuses closely on the head of a young man. Mühl operates in the background; only his hands are mostly visible. He begins by wrapping the model's head in cords, then proceeds to slap various liquid, slimy, or dusty substances onto his head and face. Mühl's hands repeatedly drum on the model's skull; he spits liquid into his ear and onto his face — until the young man's nose, eyes, and mouth are entirely covered in matter.

The left screen shows footage from the documentary archive of the Mühl sect, with audio accessible via headphones. The scene unfolds as follows:

Mühl is seated in a leather armchair in a large hall, surrounded by a crowd. Some sit on folding chairs, children on their laps, others stand at the back. All eyes are on the cleared center of the hall — a stagelike area — where several men with instruments stand at the edge.

Mühl calls a boy, about ten years old, to the center. The boy jumps up from his seat and runs forward. He is not smiling and stares blankly at the floor. Someone adjusts a microphone to his height.

Mühl's tone is sharp, almost military: “That's right! My dear friend. Don't look so dull. Or you'll get a kick. Let's see what you need. Let's go! Play! Tempo!”



left: Kardinal, 1973; right: Stills from the documentary *My Fathers, My Mothers and Me* by Paul Robert

The boy drops his shoulders and lowers his head. He doesn't want to play. "Play, or I'll pour the glass on you!" Mühl stands and walks toward him, holding a glass of water. "Laugh! Hehe," he says, forcibly pushing the boy's mouth into a smile with his fingers. The boy reluctantly echoes, "Hehe," then collapses inward again. "What's wrong with you, boy?" Mühl shouts, hitting him. "You can't talk to me like that! Face up! What is it!" The boy begins to cry. "Where's my whip?" The crowd cheers. In the background, the band plays a light jazz tune. Mühl raises the glass threateningly above the boy's head, points to the microphone, and shouts: "Sing! Sing! Sing!" He presses a harmonica into the crying child's hand. The boy resists, unwilling to play. "I'll count to ten, then I'll pour the whole thing. 1, 2, 3, 4..." The crowd grows louder. The child cries harder, finally placing the harmonica between his lips and beginning to play a blues tune.

When he stops, Mühl pours an entire bottle of water over his head. Soaked and in tears, the boy tries to play into the microphone but cannot continue through his sobbing. "We'll do it again tomorrow. Bedtime!" The boy runs out of the circle.

The video documents the violent, public abuse of a roughly ten-year-old child by Otto Mühl. What is shown here occurred regularly over many years in the sect's everyday life — an experience many of us were personally subjected to. By placing the two scenes side by side, we invite museum visitors to reflect on the formal structure of the images and to question the often-claimed boundary between Mühl's actionist works and the events that took place within the sect he led.

Together, the two scenes underscore Mühl's desire for violent, unconditional access to the body of the other. Pure violence serves only itself — it closes in on itself like a sealed block.

And it is on this that people choke.