

## **TIME(LESS) SIGNS – A Tribute to Otto Neurath**

### **Curatorial statement by Maria Christine Holter**

The exhibition “TIME(LESS) SIGNS: Otto Neurath and Austrian Contemporary Art”<sup>1</sup> endeavors to demonstrate the great relevance of Neurath’s concepts to contemporary art production and global communication in general. The focus rests on the manifold strategies behind the implementation of pictograms and visual statistics: concise visualization of a social, political, global or purely individual agenda. This is the first exhibition in England, Otto Neurath’s exile country and last home, to bring together original ISOTYPE material (last shown at the V&A in 2010/11) with contemporary art.

### **Sign Table**

The origins of this exhibition project date back to 2007, when the author was invited to speak at the Austrian Museum of Society and Economy. A single artwork, *Sign:Table* by the Viennese artist Waltraud Palme, was the subject of this lecture. Palme had created this table-like image archive comprising thousands of pictograms as a homage to Otto Neurath for the 1995 exhibition “Philosophers’ Tables”. Her idea of honoring Neurath as the “inventor” of the pictogram on his 125th birthday climaxed in the presentation of her *Sign:Table* at the Vienna institution that has continued his work as a popular educator to the present day: the Austrian Museum of Society and Economy in Vogelsanggasse in Vienna’s fifth district.

During the process of conducting research into Neurath’s picture-educational work and preparing the lecture, a new question soon arose: How does Austrian contemporary art in general relate to the legacy of Otto Neurath?

### **Art Work**

It seems appropriate to focus the exhibition on artistic positions from the country in which Otto Neurath was born in 1882, and especially on those from Vienna, the city of his birth. Today young artists and scholars in Austria display a greater awareness of Neurath and his work, whereby it is quite certain that Frank Hartmann and Erwin K. Bauer’s 2002 book *Bildersprache: Otto Neurath Visualisierungen* (Picture Language: Otto Neurath Visualizations), and the accompanying international conference at the Kunsthalle Wien, made a major contribution to this new

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<sup>1</sup> This exhibition was first conceived and shown at the Vienna Künstlerhaus from December 2012 to February 2013 as “ZEIT(LOSE) ZEICHEN: Gegenwartskunst in Referenz zu Otto Neurath / TIME(LESS) SIGNS: Contemporary Art in Reference to Otto Neurath” to honor the anniversary of Neurath’s 130th birthday on 10 December 2012. The bilingual exhibition catalogue was published to accompany the Vienna exhibition, and thus it covers all works of contemporary art shown at the Austrian Cultural Forum.

cognizance.<sup>2</sup> The pioneering work of editing and publishing Otto Neurath's complete writings, spearheaded by Rudolf Haller and begun in 1981, had years before already prepared the ground for the aforementioned project. In particular, the compilation of Neurath's complete writings on visual education<sup>3</sup> undertaken in the third volume (1991) finally made theoretical foundations and primary sources available to scholarship, graphic design and art.

The establishment of the Institute Vienna Circle as a department of the University of Vienna in May 2011 represented a major milestone in solidifying awareness of Neurath. Under the leaderships of its founder Friedrich Stadler and his deputy Elisabeth Nemeth, the institute has in more than twenty years of supporting research and organizing scholarly events played a crucial role in permanently expanding the ranks of those interested in reevaluating Otto Neurath and his writings.<sup>4</sup>

While the Austrian artists Hermann J. Painitz, Richard Kriesche, Peter Weibel and Waltraud Palme – all of whom are represented in this exhibition – have long played a seminal role in the Neurath reception, the middle and younger generation of artists were able to build on their knowledge and strategies of visualization. They were in a position to profit from the events, publications and institutions outlined above, and in some cases to react to exhibitions such as “Pictograms: The Loneliness of Signs“ (Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2006/07), which treated the link to Neurath, however, as one of many.

The widespread attention attracted by “TIME(LESS) SINGS Contemporary Art in Reference to Otto Neurath” and the interdisciplinary symposium “A Tribute to Otto Neurath” – both presented at the Vienna Künstlerhaus in 2012/13 – has helped to expand interest in the power of pictograms and their inventor amongst artists, graphic designers and the Austrian public. Resonances are to be seen in a variety of fields, ranging from pictographic art exhibition posters to TV commercials for liquid soap.

Although TIME(LESS) SIGNS was conceived with an Austrian focus from the very beginning, several positions from abroad were included in the Vienna exhibition at the Künstlerhaus 2012/13, broadening its scope and setting it within an international context. Due spatial limitations at the Austrian Cultural Forum in London and the wish to feature originals from “The Otto & Marie

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Hartmann and Erwin K. Bauer, *Bildersprache: Otto Neurath Visualisierungen*, 2nd expanded edition (Vienna: Wiener Universitätsverlag, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Haller and Robin Kinross (eds.), *Otto Neurath: Gesammelte bildpädagogische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Worthy of special mention here are the publications of architectural theorist Sophie Hochhäusl, for instance the 2011 volume *Otto Neurath – City Planning: Proposing a Socio-political Map for Urbanism* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2011), which expands into book form a paper given at the 33rd International Ludwig Wittgenstein Symposium. Günther Sandner, political scientist at the University of Vienna, has recently published the political biography of Otto Neurath (*Otto Neurath. Eine politische Biographie*, Zsolnay: Wien 2014).

Neurath Isotype Collection” (University of Reading) alongside contemporary pieces, the exhibition has been reduced to Austrian based artists only – with the exception of Anthony Burrill, the only participant from the UK, who was also part of the Vienna exhibit.

The participating artists can be divided into two basic categories: Firstly, those who over a longer period of time have devoted attention to pictograms, pictorial statistics or infographics in their art, and who intellectually, visually or even textually refer to Otto Neurath. Secondly, and this applies particularly to the younger generation, many artists appropriate pictograms and orientation systems in their omnipresence with such disarming self-assuredness as to make superfluous any effort to establish a direct link to Neurath. Most recently one can observe a tendency toward wholesale rejection of the overabundance of visual information, often expressed in the ironic querying of its logic.

### **Idea Zones**

In an attempt to distill the issues and objectives around which Otto Neurath developed visual education, the show at the Vienna Künstlerhaus, was organized into seven “Idea Zones”. The individual artists’ contributions were grouped accordingly, whereby the catalogue was designed to reflect the arrangement encountered by exhibition visitors as they walked through the Künstlerhaus. Although the condensed show at the ACF London only reflects this scheme in parts, it still provides a framework of thought that might help the London visitor to grasp the various artistic concepts included in the exhibition:

***Sign Image*** is a placeholder for manifold approaches to the **pictogram** as a theme in itself.

**Wilfried Gerstl** and **Niko Wahl** reference Neurath/Arntz directly by quoting original pictograms in their work. Richard Kriesche uses a common present-day pictogram (the escape figure) in new context and in sculptural dimensions. **Waltraud Palme** develops pictogram archives according to her own individual organizational principles, whereby the symbols are undecipherable without knowledge of these principles. **Olaf Osten** has taken the exhibition title literally and invented an emblematic image for TIME(LESS) SIGNS in his pocket calendar.

***Speak Out.*** For many artists the use and development of pictograms represents more than an opportunity for creative play; it springs rather from a **sociopolitical cause**, a personally felt imperative to act. In her contribution **Ilse Chlan** thematizes the roots of the pictogram in historical diagrams, and also the relationship between “human material” and capital. Appropriating and developing Arntz’s original symbols (ethnicities, world religions), **Hazem El Mestikawy** imagines his personal utopia of the equality of all people. **Jun Yang** casts a sobering gaze on the results of the most recent political revolutions.

**Number Field** comprises contemporary visualisations of diverse **statistical relationships**. They range from **Hermann J. Painitz's** graphic rendering of the 1971 Austrian National Assembly election to a virtual roller coaster ride, in which **Christian Rupp** transforms into a bodily experience the curves, peaks and crashes of the Dow Jones Index in recent years. In his screen print **Bernd Cella** meticulously documents all activities occurring in the Austrian art world in 1993/94. **Karl-Heinz Klopff's** point of departure is highly personal: inspired by the colorful vertical stripes of his shirt, he produces an animated bar graph that lampoons the exaggerated tone endemic in the presentation of economic data. The clock becomes a format for investigating the relationship between creativity, education level and "happiness" in the installation by **Michael Wegerer**. Quantitative relationships and ordering principles are the associations (perhaps unintentional) arising in the beholder of **Christian Hutzinger's** take on hard-edge painting.

**Urban Area** brings together various artistic approaches to the **city** as a highly complex, organized and yet continually changing living environment. In graphics and installations **Andrea Ressi** explores the codes operant in the oft-cited "global polis" – using pictograms, logos, orientation systems and cartographic elements. **Anthony Burrill's** slick print presents urban fragments and technical symbols, which seem to have been borrowed from a textbook on descriptive geometry. **Karl-Heinz Klopff** gazes out of international hotel windows, combining views with schematically abstracted maps of the surrounding area, and creating a poetically charged pictogram archive of his travels.

**World Power** makes plain the relationship between **consumerism, capital, expansion and violence**. **Nikolaus Gansterer** takes the advertising flyers of a well-known discount store and blackens out all the merchandise and all the text, evoking a menacing atmosphere through defamiliarization. **Bernd Oppl** and **Christoph Hinterhuber** delve into the fears of the individual and the exaggerated need for security accompanying them – fears both rational and irrational, which lure the individual to escape into a virtual, idealized "Wonderland".

**Body Matters** zooms in from the global level to that which is most local: the **individual human body**, with its experiences and feelings – and the potential for artistic exaggeration lurking within the everyday. In paintings and graphics, **Lena Knilli** devotes her attention to socially and genetically determined identity, and to heredity as a carrier of information. At first the works by **Matthias Klos** remind one of Rorschach tests, but upon closer examination they reveal themselves to be drawings created with the graphic knife, in which processuality and multiplicity of form are preeminent. In his shellac drawings and sculptures, **Gert Linke** transforms simple objects into ironic commentaries on everyday life. **Peter Weibel** vividly demonstrates the logic of signs

and symbols in an artistic intervention that removed the symbols on the doors of the men's and women's rooms and integrated them into an installation (Museum of Applied Arts, 1988).

**Market Place** returns the gaze to the grand scale of **worldwide networks**, whereby the so-called new and social media are at the center of focus: apps, YouTube, open data and open source are the common ground of the artistic positions assembled here. The pseudoscientific, ironic animations of **Clemens Kogler** and **Karo Szmit** appropriate the aesthetics of ad clips, user interfaces and the omnipresent PowerPoint culture. In his free-floating, computer-generated visual and audio installations, the artist and VJ **Sito Schwarzenberger** translates bundled information into pictograms that coalesce to form dynamic abstract compositions. The team around **Martin Kaltenbrunner** has developed an interactive musical instrument, whose sound software can be manipulated by means of moveable pictogram cubes. As internet platforms, **open3.at** (administered by Markus Piswanger and Robert Harm) and **YouTube** exist solely online. Very directly in the footsteps of Otto Neurath, open3.at has set itself the task of making openly accessible data (particularly open government data) available to the general public in attractive visualizations. **Barbara Höller's** selection of YouTube animations and pictograms in public space (latter provided by visitors to the website [www.zeitlose-zeichen.at](http://www.zeitlose-zeichen.at)) offer a treasure trove of casual and playful reinterpretations of the picture-educational achievements of Neurath and Arntz.

Digital visualizations and open data as the true legacy of Otto Neurath? If he were here today, Neurath would probably laugh, click into the chaotic information cosmos of the internet, and set to work at actively shaping it. Hopefully the exhibition TIME(LESS) SIGNS and the accompanying events will, by drawing attention to a rich palette of associations manifested in contemporary art, awaken the desire to have a closer look at Neurath's visual and educational concepts.