

highways and byways. together again

Nic Hess creates a setting for American art from the  
Daimler Art Collection

West Coast – Washington Color School –  
Systemic Painting – New York Abstraction

Abstract Art USA: 1950s to the Present Day

Daimler Contemporary, Potsdamer Platz Berlin  
October 17, 2013 – March 16, 2014

Curator: Renate Wiehager

## Artists

Josef Albers (D), Amish People, Joe Baer, Robert Barry, Karl Benjamin, Greg Bogin, Ilya Bolotowsky (RUS/USA), Krysten Cunningham, Gene Davis, Adolf Richard Fleischmann (D), Andrea Fraser, Michelle Grabner, Marcia Hafif, Peter Halley, Frederick Hammersley, Michael Heizer, Al Held, Nic Hess (CH), Alexander Liberman (URK/USA), Sylvan Lioanni (GB), John McLaughlin, Kenneth Noland, David Novros, Robert Ryman, Tom Sachs, Oli Sihvonen, John Tremblay, Larry Zox (all artists, if not otherwise indicated, from the USA)

## Introduction

Ever since the late 1990s, Nic Hess (\*1968 Switzerland, lives in Zürich) has been using industrial paint, collaged images and colored tapes, light projections and neon elements to take possession, both intellectually and in real terms, of walls and ceilings – and of entire rooms. The artist takes logos from the commercial world (deployed in symbolic excerpts and in an alienating manner) and icons from art history and political and economic phenomena, and uses his pictorial language, which drifts freely between abstraction, ornamentation and figuration, to compose a unified visual choreography. For this purpose Nic Hess adapts contemporary phenomena in the political, art-historical or economic context – never without a touch of humor or a critical subtext.

The exhibition at Haus Huth represents a further step in this direction: In collaboration with curator Renate Wiegager, Nic Hess stages an exhibition on Abstract art in the USA from 1950 to the present day. Thereby Hess not only creates a drawing installation in a site-specific manner, which responds to the

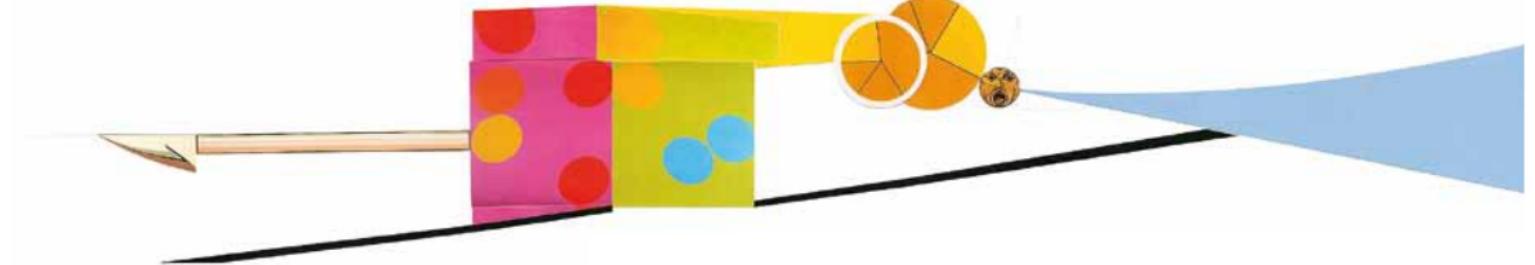


MAX/min, Daimler Art Collection at the Fundacion Juan March, Palma de Mallorca 2007

F.I.: Richard P. Lohse, Jean Arp, Oli Sihvonen, Adolf Fleischmann, Josef Albers

architecture of the Daimler Contemporary space, but for the first time also reacts on contentual assumptions and curatorial specifications.

Until the mid-1980s, the European avant-garde provided the primary focus for the Daimler Art Collection. This was to



Nic Hess, drawing installation (model) for *highways and byways. together again*, Daimler Contemporary Berlin 2013 (with works of Kenneth Noland, Oli Sihvonen, Greg Bogin)

change in 1986, when Andy Warhol was commissioned to create the series of images entitled CARS, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the automobile. The collection has since become increasingly open to American contemporary art. The focus is twofold: on the one hand, tendencies in abstraction and in minimalist and reduced art – from the 1950s to the present day – and, on the other hand, Pop Art, Conceptual art and pieces reflecting critical attitudes to art institutions.

Our first exhibition on this theme presents a cross-section of artworks: it begins with Josef Albers' early years in America as well as the work of his students and the work of the loner Adolf Fleischmann, and goes on to include the Los Angeles 'Abstract Classicists' school and the 'Washington Color School' to Minimal Art and Radical Painting, concluding with recent contemporary tendencies.

## Foundation of an authentic American Abstract Painting in the 1930s

In the 1930s, the period of the 'Great Depression', abstract painting met with little approval in America as it seemed to lack any social message. The majority of Americans struggling for survival felt in tune with art that pretended to show them the model of a carefree life. And yet these were years of dynamic change in American culture. Influential European artists like Josef Albers or Piet Mondrian immigrated to the USA as a result of national socialist persecution. They represented a culture in which abstraction had been accepted and developed to a considerable extent, for which reason they could promote it significantly in America. In 1937 the critic George L.K. Morris founded, together with artists like Josef Albers, the 'American Abstract Artists' (AAA) association, which sought to promote Abstract Art in the USA. Many members of the AAA, including Ilya Bolotowsky, were associated with the 'Works Progress Administration' (WPA), which had been securing income for artists by issuing official commissions since 1935.



*Out of Europe*, Daimler Art Collection at Stadtgalerie Kiel 2006  
F.I.: Alexander Liberman, Ilya Bolotovsky, Amish Quilt, Vincent Szarek

Burgoyne Diller, a committed advocate of abstraction, was director of the New York Mural Division of the WPA, which commissioned a mural in New York to Bolotowsky in 1936. This work (Williamsburg Housing Project) no longer exists, but is now considered to be the first abstract mural in the USA.



Amish People, *Bars* (Quilt), 1895  
Amish People, *Sunshine and Shadow* (Quilt), 1935

Early examples of an authentic US American Abstraction are represented in our exhibition by two *Quilts* (fabricated 1895 and 1935) of the Amish People, a former Swiss congregation, which immigrated to America around 1740. The story of the Quilts goes back over six thousand years to the high cultures of the Middle East. Quilts sewn together from fabric remnants

found their way via India to Britain, where they are recorded from the 17th century, and they appeared in America in the pioneering days around 1860. Amish Quilts are now world famous for their plain beauty, distinguished by simple but dynamic and geometrical design and form, and also by extraordinary and intense color combinations. Regardless of their cultural and historical importance, Amish Quilts were a major source of inspiration for 20th century American sculpture and painting. Their axially symmetrical deployed geometrical patterns, assembled in regularly repeated color sequences, fit in almost ideally with the artistic sensibilities of Modernism, and especially of Minimal Art.

## Two Germans in New York

### Josef Albers und Adolf Fleischmann

Due to his time as a Bauhaus professor and his extensive artistic contacts, Josef Albers (1888–1976) is deeply involved with the history of abstract art in Germany. In 1933, Albers emigrated to the USA with his wife Anni Albers, where, until 1976, his work as a teacher and artist made him one of the most important movers for the furthering of abstract art in the USA. Until 1949 he taught at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He was head of the Yale University art department from 1949 to 1959. He also held numerous visiting lectureships (at institutions in Cambridge, Havanna, Santiago de Chile and Ulm). As well as working as an artist and teacher, Albers built up a rich body of poetry and theoretical work, his best known publication 'Interaction of Color' appeared in 1963. Albers's pupils included Eva Hesse, Robert Mangold, Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg and Richard Serra. Albers was followed in the 1930s by artists from Europe as Fritz Glarner, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Mies van der



Daimler Art Collection at the gallery of the city Schwäbisch Gmünd, 2009  
Josef Albers

Rohe, Herbert Bayer and Piet Mondrian and they became – like Amedée Ozenfant, Alexander Archipenko or Hans Hofmann elsewhere – pioneering teachers in Chicago, Cambridge and other places. Albers was 62 years old when he embarked on his monumental *Homage to the Square* series in 1950, and produced about a thousand variations on it before he died in 1976.

Adolf Fleischmann was born in Esslingen, South Germany, in 1892. He travelled extensively in Europe in the first half of the century, and was thus able to make contact with the major artists of his day. Fleischmann found the right place in which to live in 1952, in New York, where he produced the major body of his work until 1967. One characteristic of Fleischmann's



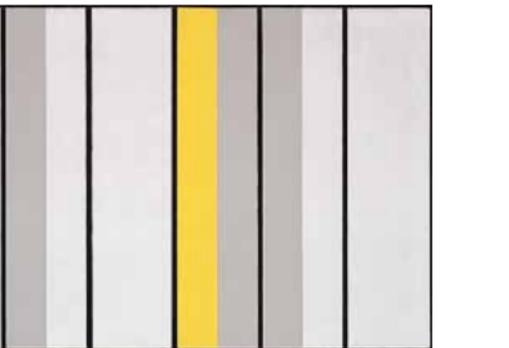
Adolf Fleischmann, *Triptychon #505, #506, #507, planimetric motion*, 1961

paintings derives from his work on Mondrian's idealistic pictorial concept of horizontal-vertical order as a fundamental expression of life, and the theme of color in vibrating motion.

## West Coast Hard Edge

Benjamin, Hammersley, McLaughlin, Novros

American abstract art's dialogue with European traditions makes its presence felt first of all and in the main in unanimous admiration by the young painting scene in the 1950s and the Minimal Art artists for the achievements of Russian avant-garde art. Works by Malevich, Rodchenko, Lissitzky that Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, acquired in Europe in 1928 for his New York Museum boosted this dialogue significantly. Camilla Grey's book 'The Great Experiment in Art: Russian Art, 1863 – 1922', published in 1962, further refined the discussion. Sol LeWitt summed this influence up by saying: "If you had to find a historical precedent, you had to go back to the Russians [...] The area of main convergence [...] was the search for the most basic forms, to reveal the simplicity of aesthetic intentions." In 1959 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized the 'Four Abstract Classicists' exhibition, showing work by four painters living on the west coast of America: Karl Benjamin,



John McLaughlin, No. 1-1962, 1962

Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley and John McLaughlin. These artists were committed to a kind of geometrical-abstract painting that was still unusual at the time, especially in California. In his catalog essay the critic Jules Langsner coined the term 'Hard Edge Painting', with reference to McLaughlin in particular, though it does fit all four artists' work. The term Classicism, wrote curator Jules Langsner in his catalogue essay for 'Four Abstract Classicists', relates fundamentally to the 'concept': "The Classicist might be described as form-conscious artist. However, form as a primary force in aesthetic

experience, is stressed in classical art [...] The spectator clearly apprehends the form as form, whether or not the form denotes a familiar object or symbol, or is wholly abstract. Consequently response to the work as an aesthetic entity cannot be separated from active perception in form. [...] The relation of form to form – the construction of the work – constitutes a *raison d'être* in itself." (Jules Langsner, in exh. cat. Four Abstract Classicists, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles 1959, p. 7) Langsner says that the artist must weigh up the various possibilities for constructing a painting carefully, select one, and ultimately follow it consistently. Thus the 'Classicists' works did not come into being spontaneously nor at one go, but step by step, with a great deal of control. When the exhibition was shown at the London Institute of Contemporary Art in 1960, curator Lawrence Alloway relabeled it 'West Coast Hard Edge'. From today's point of view, 'Four Abstract Classicists' can be seen as a milestone in Californian painting. Although Los Angeles had avant-garde exponents of architecture, photography and film, painting had never really



Minimalism and After I, Daimler site in Stuttgart-Möhingen 2003  
F.I.: Karl Benjamin, Alexander Liberman, Ilya Bolotovsky, Frederick Hammersley

got a foothold there. Until the 1950s the scene was dominated by local realism and a sense of melodrama, so the relatively surprising emergence of strictly geometrical abstraction must have come as something of a shock. And yet this was the moment when a pioneering development in painting was to start in California. It would be difficult to imagine the minimalist pictures and wall objects of Californian artists like John McCracken,

Larry Bell, David Novros or Craig Kauffman without this preliminary work, or even Hard Edge Painting, which established itself internationally from New York in the 1960s.

A pupil of McLaughlin was David Novros (\*1941, Education in Los Angeles, moved to New York 1964). He translated the division of the image into horizontal and vertical areas into three-dimensional form. For Novros, as for Minimalism in general, the close relationship between space and architecture was essential, for which reason he realized large wall paintings as early as the 1960s. The first friendly patron was, interestingly enough, Donald Judd, for whom Novros developed a mural in his SoHo studio. And series of stripe pictures started in 1959 by Gene Davis – who has remained just as unknown as Novros in Europe – could represent a reaction to McLaughlin, as well as showing the influence of Barnett Newman.



*Minimalism and After II*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2003  
F.I.: Charlotte Posenenske, David Novros



*Out of Europe*, Daimler Art Collection at Stadtgalerie Kiel 2006  
F.I.: Karl Benjamin, Michael Zahn



## Washington Color School

### Gene Davis, Kenneth Noland

In the 1950s, Gene Davis, with Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, was one of a small group of painters called the 'Washington Color School'. Its members made an extensive study of Clement Greenberg's theories, and tried in their paintings to put his demands for 'flatness' and 'literalness' in particular into practice. Even though few people in Europe are now aware of the 'Washington Color School', it influenced Frank Stella at the time (stripes) and Pop Art (color). Gene Davis devoted himself to stripes since 1959 and for decades, ultimately being so rigorous and consistent as to paint kilometers of paths in public places with stripes.

Kenneth Noland's oeuvre combines, in exemplary fashion, the European roots of Geometric Abstraction with the different orientations of the minimalist painting that has been emerging in America since around 1950. In the 1940s, Noland studied at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Josef Albers was his lecturer, and in Paris. In 1949, he settled in Washing-



*Discourses in Art*, Daimler Art Collection at the Museum of Modern Art Mumok Wien, 2010, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis (r.)

ton D.C. where he worked and lectured until 1961. In the years that followed, Noland worked away from the large conurbations, in Vermont and Maine. During his time in Washington, in 1952, he met Morris Louis whose age put him in the generation of Noland's parents, and who was one of the subsequent founders of 'Post Painterly Abstraction' with his sequence of *Veils*



Lawrence Alloway (left)  
installing *Systemic Painting* at  
the Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York 1966



*Minimalism and After IV*,  
Daimler Contemporary,  
Berlin 2005  
F.I.: Bernar Venet, Haim  
Steinbach, Kenneth  
Noland

pictures, 1954. An important precursor was Barnett Newman with the large, evenly colored canvases he created from 1948, formally subdivided solely by a narrow center strip. Between 1955 and 1965, several artists of the 'Washington Color School' were also ranking among the 'Post Painterly Abstraction' protagonists (apart from Louis and Noland, also Gene Davis and Ellsworth Kelly). Related to this was the simultaneous American movement of 'Systemic Painting'. Joint features of the artists of both movements are the focus on monochromatic areas, low-viscosity paint which combines with the canvas, often without a ground coat, so as to be planar and without individual painting gestures, and finally the restriction

to basic geometric forms. A basic conceptual orientation, working in series, and the exclusion of everything that is mentally and temporally conditioned mean that the pictures are representatives of the absolute. The acknowledgement of the picture surface as an autonomous object, the associated attention given to the edges of the picture, the circumference of the pictorial field and the borderline between picture, wall and space – all this combined to initiate the development of the 'shaped canvases' around 1960, creating complete harmony of figure and background, of the picture's content and form.

## Systemic Painting

Noland, Barry, Held, Novros, Ryman, Zox

In his introduction to the 1966 exhibition 'Systemic Painting', organized by the influential art critic Lawrence Alloway, the curator identifies a field of increasingly popular geometric abstract paintings, artworks containing a simple, methodical organization exploring repetition and pattern. The first to coin the phrase 'Systemic Painting', Alloway discusses the flexibility of the term, which can encompass anything from Frank Stella's shaped canvases, Kenneth Noland's Color Field paintings, or the Hard-edge style defined by art historian Jules Langsner, to the simple, but detailed, repetition found within early Minimalist works by artists such as Jo Baer and Agnes Martin.

Beside these artists, Alloway invited e.g. Robert Barry, Al Held, Tadaaki Kuwayama, Agnes Martin, David Novros, Robert Ryman, Larry Zox.

"A system is an organized whole, the parts of which demonstrate some regularities. A system is not antithetical to the



Daimler Art Collection at the Daimler site in Stuttgart-Möhingen, 2004  
F.I.: David Novros, Olivier Mosset

values suggested by such art world word-clusters as humanist, organic, and process. On the contrary, while the artist is engaged with it, a system is a process; trial and error, instead of being incorporated into the painting, occur off the canvas. The predictive power of the artist, minimized by the prestige of gestural painting, is strongly operative, from ideas and early



Jo Baer, *H. Arcuata*, 1971

sketches, to the ordering of exactly scaled and shaped stretchers and help by assistants." (Lawrence Alloway)



Larry Zox, *Untitled* (Diamond Drill Series), 1968

## New York Abstraction I: 1950s – 1970s

Albers, Barry, Bolotowsky, Fleischmann, Hafif, Heizer, Held,  
Liberman, Novros, Ryman, Sihvonen, Zox

The overall title 'New York Abstraction I: 1950s-1970s' is not a defined, recognized concept in the field of art history like the 'Hard Edge' and 'Systemic Painting' concepts discussed above. Instead, it is a term coined to describe our exhibition. It encompasses a group of artists, some of whom one might encounter in connection with other stylistic concepts mentioned above. In stylistic and in conceptual tones, they represent a broad spectrum of abstract painting from the 1950s-1970s era. Many of the artists have a biographical connection with New York: Josef Albers, Robert Barry, Ilya Bolotowsky, Adolf Fleischmann, Marcia Hafif, Michael Heizer, Al Held, Alexander Liberman, David Novros, Robert Ryman, Oli Sihvonen, Larry Zox.

If it is true that in Liberman's case we can detect an echo of the elemental forms of Russian Suprematism, in the pictures by Benjamin, Hammersley and Bolotowsky we are struck by the continuing effect of the principles of De Stijl and Josef Albers.

Al Held links the idea of the monochrome, empty pictorial field with elements of early Pop Art, in that it is possible to make out an abbreviated numeral in the picture's symbolic propositions. Al Held was shown, like that of other artists from the Daimler Art Collection, in the pioneering 'Geometric Abstraction in America' exhibition in 1962 in New York's Whitney Museum. Marcia Hafif was born and grew up in Los Angeles (and was, like David Novros, involved in the emergence of West Coast Painting). She has been living mainly in New York since 1971. David Novros was also born in Los Angeles, and also completed his studies in that city. However, he has lived in New York since 1964. Michael Heizer was born in California, studied in San Francisco and moved to New York in 1966, where he lived for a considerable period. Today, he lives in Nevada. Artists belonging to this context and whose artwork appears in the Daimler Art Collection but not in the current exhibition



*Minimalism and After III*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2004  
F.I.: Gerold Miller, Ilya Bolotovsky, Oli Sihvonen



*Out of Europe*, Daimler Art Collection at the gallery of the city Kiel 2006  
F.I.: Al Held, Alexander Liberman, Ilya Bolotovsky

(primarily from the LA scene) are: Arakawa/Gins, Ford Beckmann, Max Cole, Mary Corse (mainly forming part of the LA scene), Dan Graham, Robert Indiana, Mel Kendrick, Joseph Kosuth, Peter Schuyff, Elaine Sturtevant.



*Minimalism and After IV*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2005  
F.I.: Kenneth Noland, Michael Heizer

## New York Abstraction II: 1990s to today

Bogin, Halley, Lionni, Sachs, Tremblay

Painterly Abstraction, having established itself during the first three decades of the 20th century through programmatic manifestos (Futurism, Cubism, Bauhaus, De Stijl, Russian Constructivism) in Europe, gained ground in the USA – as has been described above – when major artists immigrated to the USA in the 1930s. There, it became part of a controversial dispute which went as far as the cultural policy-making circles and was echoed, on the part of art, by movements ranging from Abstract Expressionism and ‘Post Painterly Abstraction’ through to Minimalism. ‘New Art’, which had derived its content from intellectually abstract thinking or was dedicated to the project of a comprehensive renewal of society, moved into focus again in America in the 1980s. Artists like Peter Halley now occupied themselves with the more recent history of art from a historical perspective – and in the case of Halley also on the basis of Post-Structuralism, especially the papers of Michel Foucault.



Greg Bogin, *Warmth, Charm and Personality*, 1999



*Minimalism and After II*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2004  
F.I.: Anselm Reyle, John Tremblay



*Minimalism and After III*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2005  
F.I.: Vincent Szarek, Michelle Grabner



Peter Halley, *Clustering/Wallpaper*, 2003  
Daimler Art Collection at Mercedes-Benz Bank Stuttgart



*Minimalism and After II*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2004  
F.I.: Wolfgang Berkowski, Olivier Mosset, Ian Burn, Michael Zahn

Peter Halley's reevaluation of Abstraction is associated, in particular, with observations of the form of the town.

To put it differently: Beyond the mainstream of 1990s New York art production – large format painting, installation, drawing, video, photography, as it was often presented at the Whitney Biennials as a circus-like spectacle – a small painter scene has established itself, which responds to the abstract developments of 20th century art with a new quality. Here, an important contemporary mediating figure was Peter Halley, but the presence of Blinky Palermo's work at the Dia Art Foundation, the rediscovery of American positions of the 1950s/60s, such as David Novros, John McLaughlin or Oli Sihvonen also allowed for new artistic positions, as did the publications of substantial material dealing with classical Minimal Art and its environment. A key feature of the 1990s is liberalization in dealing with art itself. Young artists started to incorporate works by other authors into their own, or to interpret and reproduce cultural standards. The curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term 'postpro-



Peter Halley, *Sphere*, 1997

duction' for this strategy. He saw it as being directly linked with the phenomena of globalization, the devaluation of meaning and a permanently accelerated information flow. John Tremblay's and Sylvan Lionni's work should be viewed against this background; Lionni realizes his painting using a kind of mimetic ready-made method. The artist avoids classical painting decisions along the lines of 'arbitrary' ways of finding color and composition, and focuses upon the graphic and semantic surfaces of his immediate environment instead.

A specific position, seen from a geographical point of view, holds Michelle Grabner: she lives in Oak Park, Illinois, and is mainly connected to the art scene of Chicago und Cleveland. Krysten Cunningham lives in Los Angeles and might be seen in relation to the West Coast scene.

Other artists relating to this context, forming part of the Daimler Art Collection, even if not represented in the actual exhibition, are: Doug Aitken, Ann Appleby, Pamela Fraser, Terry Haggerty, Jim Lee, Sarah Morris, Olivier Mosset, Danica Phelps, Vincent Szarek, Hayley Tompkins, Michael Zahn.



Sylvan Lionni,  
*Structured Query  
Language I*, 2010



*Minimalism and After IV*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2005  
F.I.: Peter Halley, Jeremy Moon, Tom Sachs

## Nic Hess

History pictures of our current aesthetic-political situation

On the graphical installations of Nic Hess and their art-historical implications

Anyone who enters the space related drawing installations of Nic Hess must be prepared to travel a long way: on upward, downward and diagonal paths, on circuitous paths, on side paths – and on what Paul Klee calls ‘highways and byways’. This description applies on a physical level *and* on a mental level. Physically, a drawing installation by Nic Hess may extend over several storeys – across the full height of the space’s walls and across ceilings and floors. The viewer is expected to access the installation in its totality through movement and from different perspectives – but also to be aware of all the dimensions of the space, to look forwards and to look back in order to develop a vision that unites the miniature details with the huge, billboard-like surfaces and signs. The mental requirements that Nic Hess’s



Detail of: drawing installation for *highways and byways. together again*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013

installations impose on the viewer are still more complex – he draws his graphical rhetoric from a freely and imaginatively deployed reservoir of art history, from the language of signs, from the aesthetic of our everyday lives, from symbols from the worlds of politics, finance, fashionable brands and from a number of other spheres.



*highways and byways*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Albers, Fleischmann



highways and byways, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Held, Davis, Halley, Bolotowsky, McLaughlin



## highways and byways. Berlin 2013

In this, his most complex drawing installation to date, Nic Hess explicitly addresses the spatial context and the parameters imposed by the predetermined content of the exhibition – just as he did in many of his previous artworks. However, the physical expansiveness, the formal and material diversity and the thematic reflection of his current installation, entitled ‘highways and byways. together again’, are, in many respects, exceptional. Nic Hess, who is familiar both with the developments in American art from 1950 to the present day that form the subject of

this particular exhibition and with many of the artworks from the Daimler Art Collection, has created a kind of pictorial history, with countless chapters and with a number of protagonists. It is like a game of snakes and ladders, full of ups and downs. The artist’s meta-commentary, which oscillates between figurative elements and abstract (colored) spaces, was created using a number of different techniques and materials: sculptural interventions, charcoal drawings, collages created from various materials and wall paintings alternate with various

Detail of: drawing installation for  
*highways and byways. together again*,  
Daimler Contemporary Berlin 2013  
(with works of Novros, Davis, Halley)



*highways and byways*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Halley, Lioni, McLaughlin, Hammersley

surfaces and line configurations created by Nic Hess using diverse adhesive tapes, black and white silkscreen print films and colored self-adhesive films. This installation, which extends throughout the whole exhibition space, has the same humor and underlying meaning as its precursors, but also achieves a well-judged balance between an abundance of detail and between extensive and precise intervention in the architecture of the space. The surrealist/pop-style interventions of Nic Hess allow the viewer to perceive a wealth of connections – and also permit the development of very individual narratives.

The Berlin course begins with a curved approach road – a kind of highway – that ends where it reaches an artistic reinterpretation of the logo of Suzuki and the silkscreen prints from Josef Albers' series *Formulation – Articulation* (1972). The red squares of *Homage to the Square (Between two Scarlets)* (1962) by the Bauhaus professor is followed by an encounter with an avatar of Angela Merkel – with further early and programmatically-titled works by Albers such as *Change Direction* (1942) and *Structural Constellation* (1954) positioned beneath her black

blouson – with two large-format works by Adolf Fleischmann. Albers' passion for the square is echoed by the neighboring light switch, manufactured by the Swiss firm Feller. Hess' affinity for architecture does not stop with his qualifications as an architectural draftsman; he takes many of his 1960s motifs from the advertisements in his architect father's archive of copies of the Swiss architecture magazine 'werk'. If one's eye follows Merkel's contrail, then one discovers an ice pop rocket in the process of launching. Its flight trajectory lines up with the center of Al Held's 'close-up'. The red surface on the neighboring wall descends – at the same angle as the blue contrail rises until a small 'little Liberman men' is revealed. This abstraction by Alexander Liberman, which has been redesigned by rotating the canvas about 90° in the form of a living being, appears to be interested in the fashionable lady's shoe opposite – this is appropriate, as Liberman was for many years the art director of the American Vogue magazine. Close by, Ilya Bolotowsky's diamond-shaped canvas is on the run, taking big steps. Its sneakers leave wide 'footprints', which are expressed



*highways and byways*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Zox, Hess, Lioni, Bolotowsky



*highways and byways*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Zox, Sihvonen, Hess, Lionni

in the design of the adjoining walls and elsewhere. On these walls Hess implemented a mural design by the Russian-American artist Bolotowsky, dating from 1946, that had previously existed only as a sketch. Bolotowsky played a significant role in the emergence of abstract murals in public spaces in the USA – and this was not restricted to his role as co-founder of the AAA (American Abstract Artists) association.

Hess uses the impressive brass entrance doors of the Daimler Contemporary, which date from the second decade of the 20th century, as an axis of symmetry. By coloring their inset squares yellow, Hess has made them a part of his artistic recreation of Bolotowsky's wall mural. In the area adjacent to the doors, Nic Hess' playful linear configurations appear to give the early Hard Edge works by West Coast artists Frederick Hammersley and John McLaughlin a new spatial quality.

On the short wall of the large exhibition space, we see a palisade of oversized color pens, whose color spectrum relates to the stripes in the artworks of Gene Davis. Hess has transferred the striped motif from the canvas into the exhibition space

(appropriately, given the American artist's actionistic/political intention). Beyond the newly autonomous stripes of the Hammersley/McLaughlin wall, the artwork goes on to develop into the lively curves of a fish, which barely conceals its Christian symbolism and the reference to René Magritte. Next, the rise and fall of Hess' 'highways and byways' brings us to a tapestry constructed from thousands of business' cards, which provide a fitting staging for the work of Sylvan Lionni, a young British artist living in the US, whose painting method is, itself, a kind of mimetic readymade process – he takes his motifs from the graphical and semantic surfaces of his immediate environment. In one of the window alcoves, the white, slightly worn-out drawing cardboard of Tom Sachs meets with its 'inspiration from art history' – the shimmering gold-and-silver world of a Peter Halley canvas. By juxtaposing Halley's urban circulatory systems – which Hess extends beyond the borders of the canvas – with Sachs' aesthetic appropriation, Nic Hess succeeds in creating an ironic commentary on the networks that currently prevail in the American art world.



Detail of: drawing installation  
for *highways and byways*.  
*together again*, Daimler  
Contemporary Berlin 2013  
(with works of Zox, Benjamin)

*highways and byways*, Daimler  
Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Hess, Lionni, Libermann,  
Bolotowsky

Hess has used the whole of the end wall space in the next room for his reinterpretation of Larry Zox's linear forms. These forms, created by Hess from flat-painted triangles, diamond shapes and other geometrical surfaces make it clear that both artists share an artistic interest in the intuitive transformation of standardized geometric forms in continually new color combinations. The small-format artwork *Arrow Spectrum* (1964) by Larry Zox that served as the basis for this interpretation is



joined by a further artwork by Karl Benjamin – which finds a suitable hipped roof beneath a lozenge – and two collages by Nic Hess that he describes as 'absent friends' – Andy Warhol drawing and Vladimir Putin in an attitude of friendly greeting. Soon after encountering *Fritzchen* (2006), who serves as a kind of door guardian in the entrance area, we meet yet another protagonist from the sculptural cosmos of Nic Hess in the exhibition space's 'cabinet' space – *Swiss Reh*, 2012. This deer



*highways and byways*, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Noland, Sihvonen, Hess



highways and byways, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin 2013  
F.I.: Begin, Tremblay

fawn studded with Swiss army knives appears to like being side-by-side with the historic Amish quilt, *Bars* (1895). After all, it shares its central European Swiss roots with that deeply religious sect. The next room brings together a number of artworks that are concerned, in the wider sense, with abstractions of nature and of the landscape. The red-brown of Michael Heizer's canvas expands to cover the whole wall; at knee height, the artworks of Kenneth Noland and Jo Baer hover side by side. They are docking with the beige dots of the large-format 'maps' created by Oli Sihvonen. This two-part artwork, which, for this exhibition, is hung with one section on either side of the corner, assists with orientation only briefly – immediately next to it is a washing machine advert from the 1960s. In the final exhibition space, the walls remain white, almost untouched. In spite of this, we find ourselves entering a space full of color – one in which the conceptual artworks of Marcia Hafif, David Novros, Robert Barry and Michelle Grabner shine with unaccustomed brilliance. Hess has used his colored adhesive films to create two hastily discarded cowboy boots on the

double-glazed window frontage of the exhibition space. In interplay with the incidence and the intensity of the light entering the room, the cowboy boots appear to play games with the cool aesthetic of these artworks.

## The drawing process

**highways and byways: system and intuition**  
**Design, materials, tape rendering, corrections**

"I was never consciously influenced by Pop Art. I see myself more as a sprayer: as someone who operates in an illegal context. Of course, what I do in art institutions is no longer illegal. But I like the anarchic aspect of using adhesive tape to plant this or that symbol."

The primary factors of the initial plans – which are undertaken in the studio – are the site's architecture, and its cultural and political context. For the most complex projects, Hess builds a 1:20 model and then spends weeks testing the various funda-

mental formal and thematic concepts – which, however, are frequently revised, thrown, transformed etc. during the on-site work. Hess's preparatory work in the studio involves looking over the thousands of motifs contained in his inventory of logos, signs, trademarks, names etc. He then takes a selection of these with him to the site to assist in the construction of the installation, supplemented by elements that are specific to the site and that reflect its political and cultural situation.

What has hitherto been described, sweepingly, as 'space drawings', has, when one looks closely, a broad media base: in his drawing installations, Nic Hess works with industrial paint, with adhesive film, with masking and edging adhesive tape, with crepe tape, with charcoal, with ink and with water-color and transparencies, occasionally combining these materials with plastic and with sculptural elements onsite. He has created permanent, commissioned artworks from materials including aluminum, LED light boxes, and airbrush on PVC.

Nic Hess's key technique, however, is what is known as 'tape rendering', which involves working quickly and spontaneously

onsite using adhesive tape and a Japan knife. This may involve spreading tape over a surface and cutting the design out from the tape with a knife, or may instead take the form of 'masking', in which the outline is defined using edging tape so that paint can subsequently be applied. Modifications can then be made. One thing one can say about the sober details of the technical process at this point is that Nic Hess is a qualified architectural draftsman, and therefore understands the rudiments of technical drawing: parallel construction and axonometry, interpenetrations, the drawing of bodies and the basics of building design and of building construction. He knows the level of discipline that is required in technical drawings to produce designs that conform with all standards. This aspect clearly sets Hess apart from the street art 'sprayer' scene and from the aesthetic of artists like Keith Haring. Instead, his artwork has an affinity to tape art – a more recent development in the context of the street art scene. One interesting incidental aspect is that the 'stickers' – the adhesive lines of text that constitute tape art in the city space – is that they can be detached and are therefore



*Silberpfeile - extended and reversed*, drawing installation for Art&Stars&Cars, Daimler Art Collection in Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart 2011

not considered to represent damage to property (although applying them does constitute a public nuisance offence). Unlike the sprayers, who have to worry about their actions attracting the attention of the police, tape artists are not obliged to remain anonymous, and this has led to a boom in tape art in many cities, including Berlin: 'Klebeland' in Kreuzberg stocks 2,000 different types of tape to suit all budgets, and galleries and museums are getting in on the act. Contemporary art has made the genre its own – with live tape performances complete with a DJ – and in recent years also car designers and architecture firms have rediscovered tape rendering as a creative design praxis, holding their own live taping events.

This last development led, quite naturally, to Nic Hess working with professional industrial designers from the Mercedes-Benz creative workshop at Sindelfingen during the construction phase for his large drawing installation in the Mercedes-Benz Museum Stuttgart as part of the Daimler Art Collection exhibi-

tion 'Art&Stars&Cars' (2011) – just as he usually likes to work on his drawing installations with a small team, with ideas sketched out by him and 'interpreted' from a number of different perspectives. In this phase of onsite implementation, a further factor comes into play: the process of checking and correcting, which gives the river of thoughts and notions its proper form and expresses the inconclusive and incomplete character of Nic Hess's characteristic mode of artistic thought. Hess's symbols in the exhibition room are only the beginning of what could be described as an exponentially multiplying, context-transcending abundance of meaning; in the process, existing things are transformed into something new and acquire their own character – a critical symbolization praxis.

Every graphical installation, however, has a beginning, an implementation phase, a duration and an ending. Nic Hess likes to carry out the removal of the tape following the conclusion of the exhibition as if it were a performance. What remains is a ball of tape, which the artist lightly tosses back into the digestive/processing system of the art world.

## Pasta Berlusconi: Brescia 2013

As part of the exhibition 'Novecento mai visto' (The 20th century as never seen before) which comprised approximately 150 artworks from the Daimler Art Collection Nic Hess entitled a graphical installation as *Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen (The Simultaneity of the Non-Simultaneous)*. It was created for the stairwell and foyer of the exhibition spaces of the Museo Santa Giulia in Brescia in early 2013. His installation in Brescia opened with a typical everyday Italian spectacle: extending up the stairs, a washing line complete with brightly colored items of clothing, all fluttering in the wind (created from collaged pieces of colored plastic) directed the visitor right to the feet of an enormous clown figure. The clown figure was 'built', in constructive terms, from two lifting platforms extended to their full height, and from its unifying prismatic color scheme. Only when one reached the next storey, from which one could view the figure from above, did one see a text reading 'Pasta Berlusconi' – revealing the figure to be a contemporary political clown. This wording, however, was only seen by visitors who saw the



Detail of: *The Simultaneity of the Non-Simultaneous*, drawing installation for *Novecento mai visto*, Daimler Art Collection in Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia 2013

artwork under construction – this little political dig was vetoed by the civic authorities in view of the forthcoming election, resulting in the wording being changed to 'Pasta Censurada'. As visitors reached the upper flight of stairs, a complex graphical panorama opened up before them; a panorama that substantially stemmed from the thematic linking of three examples of



Detail of: *The Simultaneity of the Non-Simultaneous*, drawing installation for *Novecento mai visto*, Daimler Art Collection in Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia 2013 (with works of Ilya Bolotovsky and Max Bill)

concrete/constructive art of the Daimler Art Collection – Verena Loewensberg, Ilya Bolotovsky, Max Bill. Unfurled by Nic Hess with an apparently playful virtuosity, these loosely spun narrative threads extended over all the foyer walls – with the image of a laterally sinking ship as punch line: In early 2012, the image of the Costa Concordia, which was wrecked off the

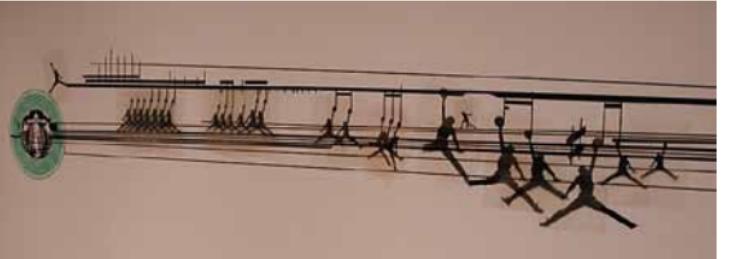
Isola del Giglio, became an epitome and indictment of Italy's imbalanced politics and finances.

## Art reference system

### Image and time. Iconic pictures and personal heroes

One might say that Nic Hess's artworks represent a contemporary reinterpretation of the historical typology of artistic narrative space: as an interplay of mnemonic space and pictorial narrative. Viewers can take this narrative space in its entirety, or, alternatively, they can 'pick and choose' among its combined and sequential elements as they walk. Nic Hess's Brescia installation, for instance, was arranged along two central visual axes, around which the abundance of abstract, colored surfaces and lines and the narrative details came together to form complex images. At the same time, the course of this visual narrative thread, which has the character of a musical composi-

tion, and the changes of scale animate the viewer, prompting a mode of perception that takes place as one walks and looks. In the case of Nic Hess, the integration of 'standing-still pictures' into a musical/temporal structure is relevant. In the Brescia artwork, the 'still pictures' were represented by the strikingly positioned paintings of Loewensberg, Bolotovsky and Bill, whilst the temporal structure, like musical notation, draws the eye through the space in a dynamic way by means of ascending and descending pictorial elements (washing line, seesaw, slide, steps etc). It is no coincidence that Hess's contribution to the exhibition 'Logo' at the Swiss Institute New York (from 2003) is structured around black stave lines with clefs hanging from them like cable cars. Hess – who, in his youth, spent ten years intensively studying of the piano – still tours on a regular basis with his band *Frankie & Tony*. Their performative show is concerned with the repertoire of Frank Sinatra and the Great American Songbook. Similar thematic references, iconic pictures and personal heroes from the history of art – primarily from the art of the



Jordan, contribution to the exhibition *Logo*, Swiss Institute, New York 2003



King Gerrit, Installation view *Trader Joe and Albert's Son*, gallery Figge von Rosen, Köln 2007

20th-century – permeate all the graphical installations that Nic Hess has created since the end of the 1990s. Among these, certain ‘favorite’ motifs can be made out, which form something like a poetology. For the exhibition mentioned above – ‘Logo’, at the Swiss Institute New York, 2003 – Nic Hess created a kind of personal emblem, in the centre of which the face of the girl from the Starbucks logo appears, transformed into a head with mouth open to scream of the type created by the painter Edvard Munch – a precursor of the frequent occurrence of the ‘Scream’ motif in Hess’s graphical installations. It is with a similar degree of regularity that we encounter Katsushika



*Icons Survive*, Mediencenter of the swiss government, Bern, Airbrush on PVC, 2006

Hokusai’s famous *The Great Wave* from the *36 Views of Mount Fuji* series (1823-29), other artworks by Nic Hess quote Cézanne’s *The Boy in the Red Vest* (1888-90), Mondrian’s horizontally/vertically structured surfaces and Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793) or put the head of Giacometti from the Swiss 100-franc note on a sculpturally transformed praying mantis.

## The art, political and economic reference system

### History images of our current aesthetic-political situation

As has been demonstrated here, one can read the graphical installations of Nic Hess in terms of narrative space, temporal composition and notation. Another term that springs to mind when one examines his artworks more closely is the ‘history painting’ in art history: images depicting historical/political events and prominent individuals, usually commissioned by the

aristocrats, by the church or by the prosperous citizens and art collectors of the post-Renaissance period. In a study published in 2009, Sven Beckstette attempted to bring up to date the image of the historical picture in the 20th century as “an artistic strategy for the depiction of history in painting following the demise of painting’s classical genre system”. (See: Sven Beckstette, *Das Historienbild im 20. Jahrhundert*, Kromsdorf 2009.) Of the spectrum of artistic philosophies that have existed between the 1960s and the present day discussed by Beckstette, the graphical installations of Nic Hess are in a number of ways similar to the artworks of Öyvind Fahlström: his system of abstract but recognizable symbols (‘character-forms’), his use of the silhouette forms typical of comic book art, his spatially extensive constellations of ‘ready-made’ material taken from the press, from poetry, from the mass media and from political events. As a further relevant issue Thomas Hirschhorn’s space installations can be mentioned here (this last artist is known for having used adhesive tape for the crude ‘personal script’ of his space-filling collages since the mid 1990s), who provide a

further discursive context for the work of Nic Hess. We can also remind us on the recent development of ‘spray-can politics’: in regions such as Syria and Egypt, city centre wall surfaces –



Detail of: *Guten Morgen Deutschland* (Good Morning Germany), Haus der Kunst, Munich 2004



Detail of: *Well done*, 2001, drawing installation for The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh 2001



Detail of: *Automatic Crash Response*, drawing installation, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles 2007

those located immediately behind Tahrir Square, for instance – are sprayed on by graffiti activists and by anarchist daily papers.

To what extent, then, can the graphical installations by Nic Hess be read as 'historical images', in which moments from history, politics and current media output are laid down in order that they can come together in an associative manner to form narrative threads? I would say that we should distinguish between two distinct levels. On the first and most immediate level, Nic Hess works with self-evident symbols and figures, which reflect the political and cultural context of the location of each exhibition and incorporate topical issues. In 2004, in the central grand Ehrenhalle of Munich's Haus der Kunst – which was the scene of the speech delivered by Adolf Hitler at the opening of the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition – Nic Hess placed a male head in a central position (the face looks like a fusion of Charlie Chaplin as Hitler and the comic-book version of 'Il Duce' Mussolini, but it is in fact a visual found object).

The black-red-gold flag waved over the graphical scenario that extended over the walls and ceiling.

The rather abstract-seeming artworks correspond to the graphical installations and to their readable political and historical content in that they use an expressive graphical language and a subtle sequence of logos and brand names taken from a variety of contexts to respond to contemporary phenomena. One might, for instance, connect the 'explosive' language of Nic Hess's wall artwork for the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 2001 – the lines, surfaces and motifs that fly through the space as if impelled by centrifugal force put one in mind of some kind of brutal force which has struck the walls at the corner of the room and exploded – with the destruction of the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center. In 2009, Nic Hess demonstrated his way of bringing together signs, logos, names, symbols and terms from a wide variety of contexts in order to create a complex yet focused message in the large graphical installation *Automatic Crash Response*, which was created for the Hammer Museum Los Angeles. The artwork's title is de-

rived from the term for a technological feature in automobiles: a system which automatically dials the emergency number in the case of an accident. On the stairs up to the museum foyer, the names of those American banks that were forced to declare themselves insolvent during the 2008 crisis could be seen. They were presented like old gravestones, or toppling dominoes. The artist comments on his webpage: "It's about: Banks that failed, Greediness, Bankers committing suicide, Armand Hammers secret Stairs, Monkeys among us, Darwin's theory, the us-mail, a room with a view, back-exercises, eternal sport-logos, and a little Californian Brass Band, and more..."

## The everyday culture reference system Sport, animals, products, tools

It is possible that texts have, thus far, paid too little attention to two factors that exist in Nic Hess's artwork alongside the economic and political implications of the icons and logos: the



*DC. Dame mi Carro*, 2003, drawing installation in the staircase of Mercedes-Benz Schweiz AG, Zurich

for Brescia in 2013, animals (like the previously mentioned pictures from the Daimler Art Collection) play a fundamental role in connecting the elements of the visual narrative: the large dragonfly/praying mantis in the stairwell, an octopus,

involvement of the viewer in the pictorial narrative by means of the everyday-life and animal motifs, and the development of a 'lingua franca', an artistic 'trade language' that transcends cultural and political differences that, as is stressed by the artist, creates 'consensus'. In Nic Hess's large graphical installation

a shark, a dolphin. These graphical, freely-drawn animal silhouettes supplement the inventory of brand-related animal images built up since 1998: bull, hare, camel, crane, crocodile, stag, dog, elephant, horse, kangaroo, lion etc. The animals function as identification figures that serve to draw the viewer into the loosely connected narrative thread. Hess's Brescia graphical installation for example featured many motifs from mainstream, everyday culture: a wheelchair tumbling down stairs, figures climbing a mountainside or ski-jumping off a slide or a diver swimming into a ventilation slit in pursuit of a dolphin. These figures are based on sport pictograms – one only has to think of the vast visual influence exerted by Otl Aicher's pictograms for the 1972 Munich Olympics to recognize that this is a global language. In Brescia, as in many early wall paintings by Nic Hess, there were many everyday objects such as lifting platforms, screw clamps, slides, street lights, giant paper clips etc. – as well as graphical icons – that are understood by people of different cultural heritages.