

# THEATRUM MUNDI

curated by: *Elisabeth Saubach* and *Iris Kasper*

The project *theatrum mundi* by Niki Passath examines, in two different installations at three different places – Schaufenstergalerie SCHARF, esc medien kunst labor and galerie GALERIE – the development of models of the world and how these might turn out in the future.

Co-production by contemporary collective graz (*Elisabeth Saubach* and *Iris Kasper*), esc medien kunst labor and galerie GALERIE as part of the architecture summer 2018

The project *theatrum mundi*s realized at Schaufenstergalerie SCHARF (Opening: Fr, 22.06.2018, 7 p.m. / Duration: 23.06. – 25.09.2018) and in coproduction at esc mkl (Opening: Fr, 27.07.2018, 7 p.m. / Duration: 28.07 – 29.08.2018) and at galerie GALERIE (Opening: Fr, 27.07.2018, 7 p.m. / Duration: 28.07 – 09.08.2018). The project is part of Architektursommer 2018 (<https://www.architektursommer.at/events/theatrum-mundi/>).

In various different fields of science, models of the world have been and still are being developed: from astronomy and physics via informatics to philosophy, psychology and mythology. In the exhibitions quantum physical and mechanical considerations play a decisive role, since their results make a mockery of the determinist world and enable a pluralistically oriented view of the notion of world. *“Through quantum physics and quantum mechanics, many thought games become possible, religious belief and natural sciences thus do not necessarily contradict one another any longer.”* [Niki Passath]

With the discovery of the Big Bang, the creation and the development of the cosmos became understandable. The astronomer Carl Sagan noted then in 1988: “A universe with nothing

for a creator to do.” In the context of his M-theory, which based on string theory, the British physicist Stephen Hawking argues that there are several universes with their own laws of nature. A universe could create itself and would not depend on the intervention of a supernatural being. Hawking dedicated his whole life to the search for an all-explaining world formula, which found its expression in the M-theory: “The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundaries. The universe would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE.”<sup>1</sup> (Stephen Hawking) This assumption would exclude the existence of a creator of the universe. Meanwhile Hawking has not only extended his earlier ideas and taken up some new cosmological questions, but he has also partly revised his earlier hypotheses. Thus he recently said that the Big Bang might possibly not have been the beginning of time and space, but a transition, the laws of nature would then determine its further development.

On the question of God there are various different statements by Hawking, such as: “The laws may have been decreed by God, but God does not intervene to break the laws. God would be left at best with the freedom to select the initial state. But even here laws could prevail. Then God would have no freedom at all.”<sup>2</sup> Other scientists from theoretical physics, such as Max Planck for example, believed in the “prevalence of a godly reason” with regard to the development of the cosmos. According to the physicist Anton Zeilinger, in natural science God is perceivable as follows: “There are two questions: one concerns the role of a God of the clockwork who has created the clockwork and who activated it. Which initial conditions initiated this clockwork since this conditions the future. Which laws determine the clockwork? Answers within the field of natural sciences are not possible here. The second question is, if – besides this question of the initial conditions – from the point of view of the natural sciences there is the possibility to intervene. [...] Apart from that there are certainly things concerning the natural sciences that cannot causally be explained. This is the quantum mechanical individual process, the so-called quantum jump which cannot be explained causally.”<sup>3</sup>

In principle, quantum physics and quantum mechanics change our view of the reality and contradict in this respect really our reason, for example if it is a question whether a thing can be at two locations at the same time, Zeilinger notes in this context: “There is the famous entanglement when two parts cling together in such a way that the measurement at one part changes the state at the other part. This phenomenon means that we either have to say good-bye to our notions of space and time – or to our notions of reality. Or to both. [...] We need a new view of the world, in which we change our ideas of reality and of space and time.”<sup>4</sup> Between the fields of science and spirituality, points of contact can thus be traced and connecting lines between various argumentations and hypotheses can be drawn, just as between the fields of art and spirituality. In the context of the relationship of different models of the world to each other, there is a point of contact between art and spirituality – while spiritual models of the world take the relationship of observable and non-observable world into account and form – depending on the cultural context and doctrine – different versions of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, art can underline the model character of their designs.<sup>5</sup>

Within a society, different models of the notion of the world collide – this concerns different approaches of how to think “world“, which exist side by side partly in harmonic, partly in a polarizing relationship to one another. Meanings and valences are not at all fixed, but are per se subject to identity as well as to a permanent change. In this context one should consider the “Copernican paradigm”<sup>6</sup> in which the model of the world and the image of the world prevail so to say but cannot be projected onto one another. In the context of the exhibition one would speak of an organic world model, which manifests itself in the installation in a rhizomatic construction and which refers to the holism of the observation of the world: “They constitute a world of continuous and undirected transformations in which all parts are an integral part of the whole [...]. Organic models of the world are thus anti-dualistic, they overcome the main contradiction of the occidental thinking, i.e. the contradiction between matter and spirit, body and soul”.<sup>7</sup> Art in this

sense is defined as a laboratory, in which a meaningful contribution to a current spiritual model of the world can be developed.

Niki Passath symbolizes, through his objects set in space in motion, the transformation of world models and realizes site-specific installations at esc mkl, galerie GALERIE and Schaufenstergalerie SCHARF. To speak with Tony Maslić: “His work accumulates in a synthesis of speculations and observations, and develops an insight almost like a premonition of a possible future, but without losing its allusive and elegant poetic characteristics. [...] Occasionally dystopian but always thought provoking”.<sup>8</sup> The theatrical aspect is a concise element of the installations *theatrum mundi* – from the architectural opening of the space from esc mkl, through the public space, to the exhibition rooms of galerie GALERIE. The architecture of the space becomes a conceptual starting point for the installations. The curatorial concept of Schaufenstergalerie SCHARF is based on the interference between the public space and the white cube. The glass surfaces, which make esc mkl and galerie GALERIE almost permeable from all sides for the views of passers-by, open up the exhibition space into public space and make the passive participation of the pedestrians to an completing aspect of the installation. Thus, during the summer months, the exhibition space at esc mkl is transferred from the inside to the outside and the street or public space becomes the exhibition space. Both exhibition spaces together become, via the light, a kind of stage for the objects.

Gearwheels move objects via self-running motors in an incessant up and down – at the same time two further wooden constructions rotate on two levels around their own axes and around the individual objects. In itself, the circular movement refers to a organic construction of world models – whereby the object on a visual level appears anthropocentric instead of heliocentric: Doesn't it, in the middle made of gears, remind us of a dancer? In the dance of the models, the question of the actors inside remains open. Thus, these objects could also be understood as an implicit criticism of the anthropocentric world model in which man was elevated to the

measure of all things. “So there is no such thing as an absolute position. I would like to break the rigidity of these worlds of thought. [...] The world view doesn’t always have to be so strictly defined, especially the transitions are the interesting thing.” ( Niki Passath) Irregular jerking marks inconsistencies in the construction system, which do not stop the continuous process. The moment of happenstance in which a work is created – a drop of color, a twitch, the touch of the canvas through parts of the machine – and the machine leaves its own imprint and breaks out of the system of construction – the system of algorithm – by happenstance. Only these unpredictable “outbursts” generate and stimulate the emotional and thus poetic potential of the installations.

The questioning of the anthropocentric world model continues in the questioning of autonomy and authorship, per se within art and the emergence of art – but also in the context of a neoliberal-capitalistic world model, through the self-running and robotic elements of the installations. The provocative aspect is another conceptual constant of Niki Passath’s installations – in the theatre of constructed world models the object, read as the centre of everything, dances on the stage of unlimited possibilities – or are they nevertheless limited – if constructed by the artist?

Also the model of time – a robotic, symbiotic chalk drawing that will run as work in progress over the duration of the exhibition – also refers to the model constructed by humans (whereby the completeness of the model is hidden only in the anomaly, the imperfection – or also in the quantum leap).

The paintings that connect the objects and floor markings of the esk mkl with the rooms of the galerie GALERIE within the expansive installation, form a kind of backdrop – a kind of, partly digitalized and robotic diorama – a landscape in whose foreground the objects dance in their formations. They are built up in layers of color surfaces, hand-drawn lines, digital prints of a mountain landscape as well as the objects of the installations and robotic, symbiotic elements that are always created at the same time. These works

subversively question the role of the artist in a high-tech and digitized world, but they also question ritualizations as a global phenomenon in the context of everyday experience. Are we losing the ritual, in the digital whirlpool of our time which is becoming faster and faster, also through technology, in its social relevance? The repetitive patterns of the individual installation elements – the structure in several layers and the repetitive movement of the totem objects – reflect per se on the ritualization, which is once again underlined by the staging of the objects via light and floor markings within the installation at esc mkl. The markings on the floor plates of the exhibition space also connect the different layers of the installation.

The organic aspects of the installations can be linked to the approach of quantum physics. The decisive moment of the installations lies in the “both as well” and is unfolded through the jerky movement – the imperfection and through the generative and performative aesthetics. The expansion of the project to several exhibition venues also illustrates this conceptual approach: while at this moment two objects move fixedly at Schaufenstergalerie SCHARF, four objects dance through the space at esc mkl, correlating with the paintings at galerie GALERIE. Suggesting a wave and at the same time in observation fixed particles, the installations explicitly refer to approaches of quantum physics: they refer to the ability to be both – wave and particle. And to the possibility to exist at two places at the same time.

**text by: Elisabeth Saubach and Iris Kasper**

1Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time, From the Big Bang to the Black Holes, Bantam Books Toronto, New York: 1988, p.136.

2Stephen Hawking, quoted after “Stephen Hawking prepares for weightless flight”, source: <https://www.focus.de> <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11722-stephen-hawking-prepares-fo...>

3Anton Zeilinger quoted after: Anton Zeilinger and Michael Landau in conversation with Kurier-author Gabriele Kuhn, Naturwissenschaft und Glaube – ein Widerspruch? Ein Priester und ein Quantenphysiker reden über Gott und die Welt [Natural Sciences and Religious Belief – a contradiction? A priest and a quantum physicist talk about God and the world], Kurier, 24.12.2013, source: <https://kurier.at/stars/naturwissenschaft-und-glaube-ein-widerspruch/41.944.439>. Here translated by Dörte Eliass.

4Anton Zeilinger in conversation with Gerlinde Wallner, summer talk, Catholic Archdiocese Vienna, source: <https://www.erzdioezesewien.at/site/home/nachrichten/article/51744.html>. Here translated by Dörte Eliass.

5Cf. source: <https://www.uni-salzburg.at/>

introductory words on a lecture by Rüdiger Lohlker, “Einheit, Immanenz, Transzendenz und Barmherzigkeit im islamischen Denken” “[Unity, immanence, transcendence and charity in Islamic thought as part of the lecture series “Transzendenzvorstellungen in Kunst, Literatur, Religion” [Notions of transcendence in art, literature, religion], lecture on 12.06.2017, contribution published on 03.04.2017. Here translated by Dörte Eliass.

6Aura Heydenreich, Vom astronomischen Weltmodell zum literarischen Weltbild: Johannes Keplers „Somnium“ zwischen faktualer Kosmographie und fiktionaler Selenographie – mit einem Kommentar zu Durs Grünbein „Cyrano oder Die Rückkehr vom Mond“ [From the astronomical world model to the literary view of the world), in: Der Himmel als transkultureller, ethischer Raum [The sky as transcultural ethical space], Harald Lesch a.o. (eds.), Göttingen 2016, pp.333 – 371, here: p.366. Here translated by Dörte Eliass.

7 Isabel Wünsche, Naturerfahrung als künstlerische Methode: Organische Visionen in der Kunst der klassischen Moderne [The

experience of nature as artistic method: Organic visions in the art of Classical Modernism], in: Industrialisierung Technologisierung von Kunst und Wissenschaft, Elke Bippus a.o. (eds.), Bielefeld 2005, pp.86-112, here: pp.86-87.

(8) Tony Maslic, Preface, o.s., in: Niki Passath – Thinking Like A Machine – An Artists Journey Into Robotics, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin / Boston, 2017

(9) Zitate des Künstlers: Niki Passath im Interview mit Anna Maria Burgstaller, 2016, Quelle: <http://www.artandsignature.com/blog/2015/11/25/niki-passath-%E2%80%A2-interview/>