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"New Art from Vienna"

Uncommon Denominator: *New Art from Vienna*, MASS MoCA-Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts. Summer/Fall 2002

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Adriana Czernin, *Entanglement*, 2002. Video projection, played on two monitors.
Photo : Arthur Evans, courtesy of MASS MoCA.

ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

North Adams, Mass.

HEAPING HYPERBOLES AND OTHER WAGGISH DELECTATIONS

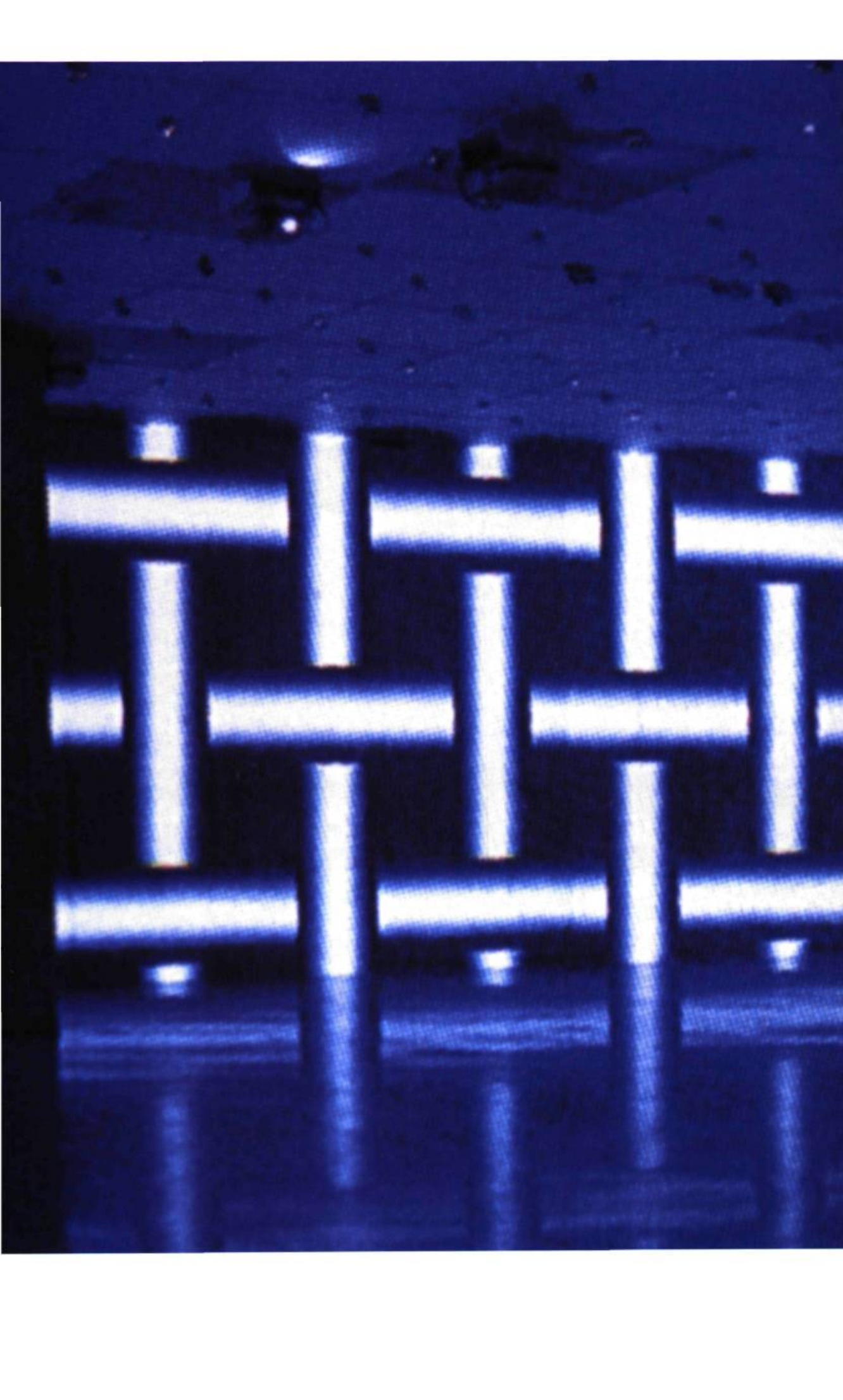
Uncommon Denominator : New Art from Vienna, MASS MoCA—Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts. Summer/Fall 2002

“To cultivate laughter is to cultivate knowledge.”
Mikhail Bakhtin

his fall, I was reminded of Bakhtin’s ideas on laughter when a ticket agent at the Clark Art Centre in Williamstown, Massachusetts, suggested that I start the county wide ‘Vienna Project’, featuring visual and performance art by artists active in Vienna, at the MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). “You will have more fun going there,” he said. “It’s in an old factory, and you will love it and laugh.” And he was right. The exhibition *Uncommon Denominator : New Art from Vienna* was funny, but seriously funny in a way as to involve a critical engagement through laughter. Its venue compounded this leitmotif. MASS MoCA is a giant artwork in itself : a factory turned museum with enormous spatial facilities and an interior design concept that works with the raw traces of the old building, such as faded paint on brick walls and columns which accentuate the art installed inside. The fun of visiting MASS MoCA began in the lobby with Franz West’s two four-post canopy beds, *Two*

Amphibian Beds (Zwei Amphibien Himmelbetten) (2001), which were occupied. A sign invited visitors to lie down and rest, which several did, jumping on them and clearly enjoying the artwork. West’s work continued into the next gallery with sofas that could only be approached by passing in between two monitors showing Adriana Czernin’s video, *Entanglement (Verwicklung)* (2000/02), in which the artist is seen unfolding a tightly bound flowered headscarf in a prolonged process. Her exaggerated action turns into an event and unravels social and cultural histories while being funny at the same time, especially since both monitors show the same unfolding simultaneously.

West’s sofas, like his beds, are covered with textiles, which he purchases locally in order to reflect the patterns and colours of fabrics worn and used by inhabitants of communities in which he exhibits. In North America, West is well known since his 1994 solo exhibition at the MOCA in Los Angeles where he filled the museum’s exterior plaza with numerous canopies – to critical acclaim. His concerns are communal spaces that, he laments, no longer allow pedestrians to





Peter Kogler, *Untitled Installation*, 2002. DVD sound track projection. Photo : Arthur Evans, courtesy of MASS MoCA.

linger and sit publicly, as was the case in earlier periods : for example, during the Baroque, when cities offered their citizens momentary rest and comfort.

Of the fifteen participating artists, the work of three more will be engaged with here, art installations that brought people together through laughter. Indeed in Bakhtin's understanding, laughter liberates. "When you laugh, you cease to be afraid and you can then investigate, and there is no surer path to self-confident humanism and control over one's resources, both inner and other than this."¹ For Bakhtin, laughter is an individuating force that helps to define our place among other subjects. It is always experienced as movement from a certain inhibition to a certain freedom. Moreover, it is contingent and contagious, not learned or teased out of the mind : "Words can easily be misspoken but the body cannot make a misstep, for in laughing, the body is always already out of step – that of 'laughing outsidersness.'" Laughter is an explosive burst, a dynamic force, which in this exhibition was most loudly expressed in Erwin Wurm's *Fat Car II* (2002). People could be heard laughing out loud upon seeing a Ford Escort sitting squat centre, covered in a thick layer of pink "fiberglass-skin" with its headlights and Viennese license plate framed by an apparent living dermis. Oozing, as it were, with flesh, hanging in heavy folds, the details conjuring up images of fleshy Baroque figures. Sure enough, looming behind the car, an inkjet print on a plastic canvas showed the *Curator/Emperor* (2002), a five-metre tall figure, the actual curator of the exhibition, blown up in a pink shirt that echoed the car's colour. The exaggeration continued in photographs, *Me and Me Fat*, hanging on the opposite wall, of the same person, Wurm himself, thin and fat.

While the authority of curator and artist are ridiculed alongside Wurm's statement concerning obesity and consumption, a Baroque resurgence is articulated as well in the excess of representation. Writing on the Baroque fold, philosopher Gilles Deleuze observes that the Baroque refers less to an essence or a historical period, and more to an *operative* function, where the fold is most instrumental, and, as I wish to argue for these works, is comparable to laughter since both the fold and laughter are agents of engagement. Baroque folds are not produced by invention but through appropriation, realized here in the pink car and inflated curator, thick foam mattresses on beds, and a resistant headscarf – hyperboles that grip the beholder. Twisting and turning its folds, the new Baroque work activates and pushes them into infinity, one upon the other to enfold us bodily, yes laughingly. Laughter is a bodily function, as Bakhtin argues, a primordial element that detaches us temporarily from the world and thus restores our inner strength so that we may

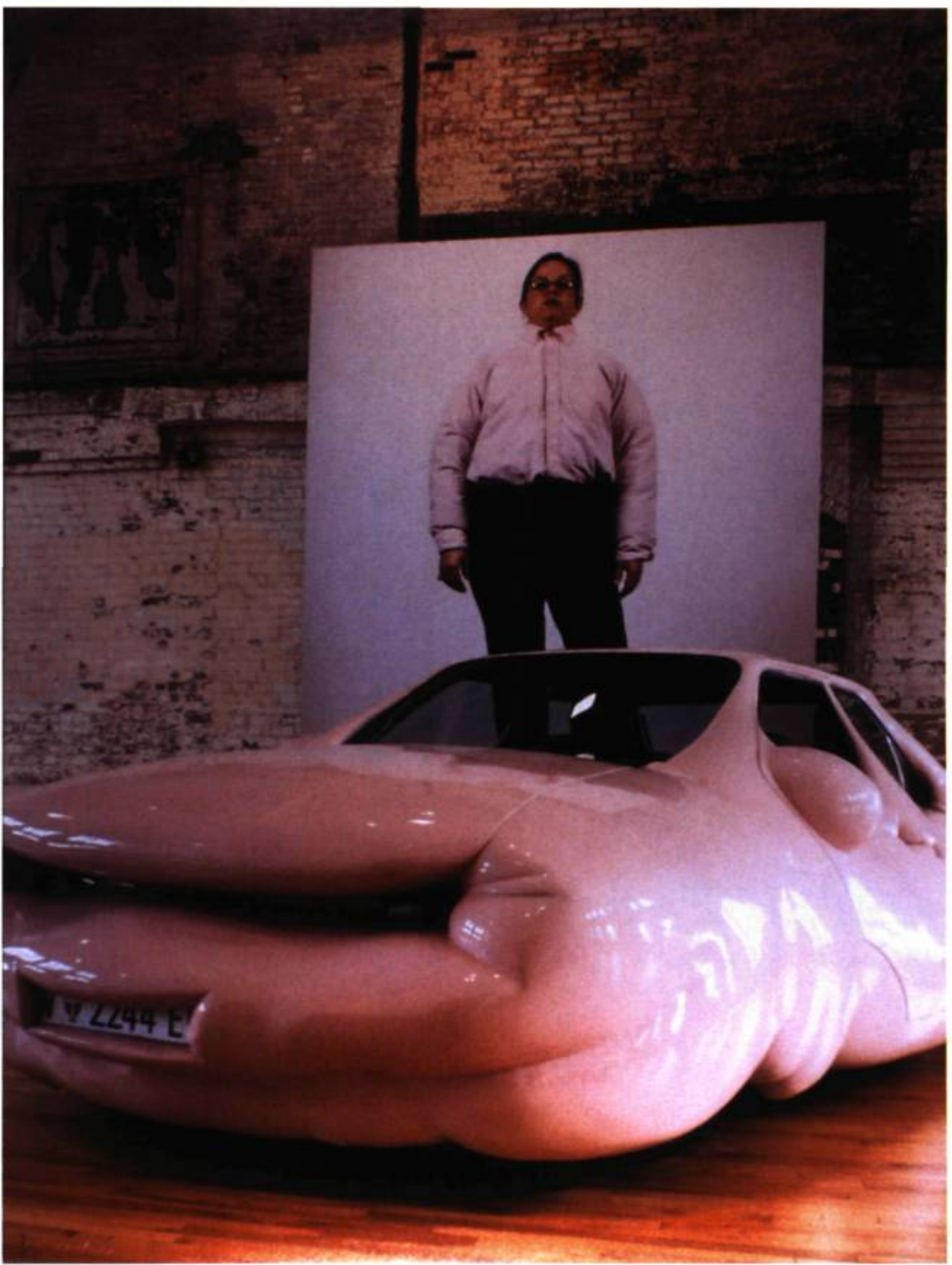
"true up" our vision more clearly and responsibly. Bakhtin sees "classical vision as autonomous, authoritative or monologic, pointing instead to truth found in everyday realities," something which Wurm could be seen to attempt in his use of what for many is a fetishistic object – the automobile – as a conduit to enfold an audience globally into issues concerning health and the environment. In *Fat Car*, the excessive folds make us laugh and see an innate form of knowledge.

Ridiculous also is Lois Weinberger's *Portable Garden* (2002), which consists of large plastic woven shopping bags filled with soil and tall weeds, collected locally and placed in the museum under neon light. For visitors walking around looking for an anchor to engage aesthetically or verbally with the work, this exaggerated 'sculptural grouping' did indeed seem nonsensical. "This is just a bunch of weeds," I heard someone say. Still the search for clues continued until a photograph on the wall caught my eye. Showing train tracks covered with weeds, the remnants of a more local railroad network that connected people, especially the elderly and disenfranchised, in small towns before the advent of inter-city transportation and automobility, the photograph situated the work in terms of travel, location and displacement. However, the weeds themselves must be seen in conjunction with their containers, distinct bags commonly used by immigrants and homeless people as a means to transport everything from personal luggage to 'hot' goods peddled to tourists in front of museums. In this sense, the bags in the exhibition, with their undesired content of lush weeds, or 'ruderals' as they are known scientifically, speak much less to a concern for the displaced as to xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants or the disenfranchised as 'unwanted guests'. Although these individuals may be considered by some to 'thrive' in their conditions of survival, they are nevertheless condemned to living utopia out of the portability of either their cultural containment or exile as a marginal fold of society.

In contrast to Weinberger's decidedly low-tech *Garden*, the technicality of Peter Kogler's *Untitled Installation* (2002) was thrilling. To a soundtrack by Franz Pomassl, this DVD projection held visitors transfixed by the virtual iron chains projected on the walls of a windowless room especially built for the installation. This project is a realization of Deleuze's monad, which for him is a part of the Baroque fold. A monad is comparable to a dark box-like space where an illumination takes place visually and intellectually through beams of light that enter through an aperture, like the small hole of a camera, only to reflect what we already know from external observation and through memory but now experience and see anew – more pointedly. Thus com-



Peter Kogler, *Untitled Installation*, 2002. DVD sound track projection, Photo: Arthur Evans, courtesy of MASS MoCA.



Erwin Wurm, *Fat Car II*, 2002. Ford Escort covered in fibreglass, Vienna license plate. Photo : Arthur Evans, courtesy of MASS MoCA.

parable to shots of light that illuminate the shadowy side of the Baroque fold, monads are lights which are seen through motion by a continuous folding and unfolding as is the case in this large 'box.' For the links of the chain moving horizontally, then vertically, bulging and grinding against each other as if they were upholding enormous weights, then spinning around rapidly only to snap back to their original static position. One is both transfixed and transferred in time, perhaps to the drudgery in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, or even to childhood memories of riding the accelerated pirate ship rides in Disneyland. Kogler's installation was a visual and musical feat, unreal yet so perceptively graspable. Indeed one's perception was intensified to the point of being mesmerized. Smiling, I looked to the other museum visitors who were just as transfixed as I was,

then laughingly we spoke to one another on the awe of the experience.

What I saw visualized in *Uncommon Denominator* is Deleuze's take on the Baroque fold converging with Bakhtin's argument that "laughter is contagious and the first step toward dialogism, the fully serious function of laughter." In other words, I experienced the art in this exhibition to be held together by an uncommon denominator of the Baroque fold and Bakhtinian laughter.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDL

Thanks go to Alice Ming Wai Jim for her sound critical response.

NOTE

¹ Quotes are taken from Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1997).