# Class Reunion

## Works from the Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann Collection

June 23 to November 11, 2018

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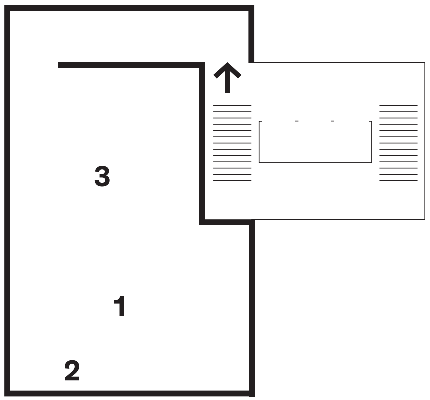
## Entry into the Class Register

Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann do not see their collection as just private property or a prestige object, but rather as an item of cultural value that needs exchange with the public. Their collection has been constantly growing since the late 1970s, and it provides an incomparable view of the development of contemporary art from the 1980s onward. This is a progressive statement on behalf of contemporary art that is anchored in social issues and sees itself as a form of communication. The rationale behind the collection, which is held in Herzogenrath near Aachen and in Berlin, is both creative and productive, and the two collectors' practice can be described as a particularly free-spirited form of cultural production. The act of collecting is realized less in the processes of keeping artworks and completing a collection, and is instead understood mainly as an invitation to participate in the public production of relationships. This very pragmatic and hands-on approach is manifested in sensual and unconventional gestures of presenting, including the principle of "comparative seeing." In this sense, the *Class Reunion* exhibition will unravel an exciting, humorous, and surprising dialogue between the diverse artistic positions in the collection, establishing unexpected points of contact. One focus is on Viennese influences on this international collection and its networks. "Art and the ways in which we approach it," Wilhelm Schürmann says, "are a never-ending process for me, which can and has to be continually changed. In public I am an interpreter, translator, and thus also co-producer. I am also the collector in this team."




## Community

The exhibition title, *Class Reunion*, refers to an installation of the same name by Nairy Baghramian, created for her solo show at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in 2008 **(1)**. There, eighteen shoulder-high objects, with allusions to sculptures of classical modernism or items of furniture, looked like oversized orthopedic aids of the kind not infrequently seen in the spa town of Baden-Baden and which are known as “walkers,” “wheeled walkers,” or “Zimmer frames.” The titles of these works made them into individuals or “walkers” you would like to be accompanied by on your tour of the exhibition. “Walkers” are also good-looking, charming, humorous and well-educated men whose work is to accompany single society ladies to social events. Baghramian’s artworks are like aliens whose prosthetic extensions or antennae are trying to contact the audience. But perhaps it is better to forget thoughts like these. The artist is addressing the beholders themselves, and it is for them to decide whether or not to be part of the class reunion.

In her pictures from her series *Chapter 10: Ark* (2008) **(2)**, R. H. Quaytman explores venues and spaces as meeting places for the like-minded. This artist plans her work series to meet the needs of each specific exhibition context, and presents her work in chapters as in a book. Chapter 10 was dedicated to the Orchard Gallery (2005–2008), a non-commercial art space on New York’s Lower East Side. In fixed formats, the series looks at different details of the gallery space, at the mutual relations between the space, the artworks, and a community of artists connected by private and professional interests.

The amorphous formal idioms of Nairy Baghramian‘s objects seem to be distantly related to Austrian artist Franz West’s “Adaptives” of the early 1970s, objects made of gypsum and metal that were intended to be experienced as extensions to the human body. The sensation of touch is a dimension of experience not usually catered to in art museums (and which here is also unfortunately not possible, for reasons of preservation). West usually gave his Adaptives no titles. In the case of the *Busenschupfer* (Bosom Shaker, 1987) **(3)**, however, an associative and humorous title suggests a possible use, while also indicating a somewhat smutty and masochistic note.

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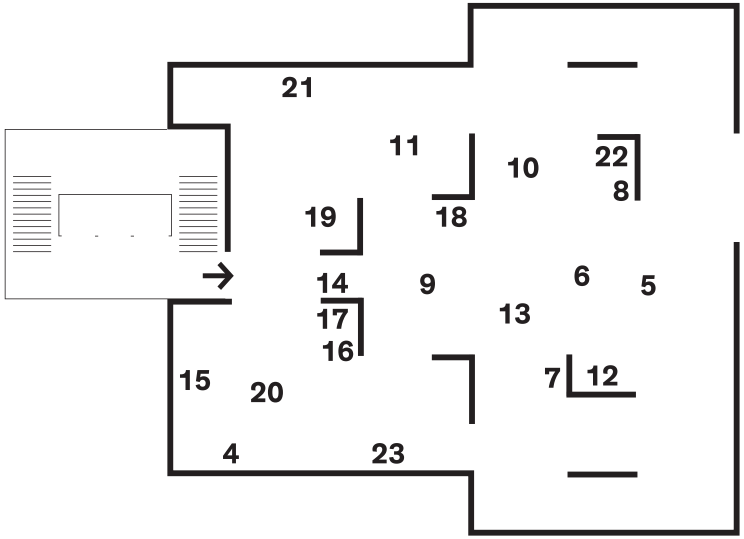


## I and the Others

In this exhibition, Austrian artist Franz West is also represented with a large piece of cardboard painted in silver-bronze and bearing the psychoanalytical sounding title *und hier konstituiert sich das Lust Ich* (and here the pleasure-ego constitutes itself, 1991) **(4)**. Sigmund Freud described the pleasure-ego in his text "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915) as a form of ego that "places the characteristic of pleasure above all others." Is this anarchist enactment also present in the *Bosom Shaker*?

It can be said that one of the pivotal elements in West's work is the relationship between sculpture and the human body. The same can be said of Heimo Zobernig and his *untitled* **(5)** installation of 2009. This work combines two of the artist's main themes: the human figure and the architecture and quality of shelves. Zobernig's sculptures using shop-window dummies posit a standardized depiction of the human being in the context of a neoliberal economy in which the body is the venue where divergent interests are negotiated. Like West's Adaptives, Zobernig's objects—such as the large ball *untitled* (1987) **(6)** refer to the body, using simple geometrical shapes reminiscent of the industrially made objects of minimal art, but here made of painted plastic and thus by no means as heavy as they look. Works by West and Zobernig seem to share a similar dry humor, as well as a use of different media and a preference for everyday "democratic" materials. The two artists have organized joint exhibitions and collaborated on sculptures.

The work *Untitled* (2010) **(7)** by Walter Swennen demands a clear stance from its beholder. Swennen's paintings are like translations, in which language plays a key role. *Untitled* asks the decisive and socially dangerous question as to we and they, we and the others—but what side are you on, and which sides are meant anyway? In *Ceux qui sont ici, sont d'ici* (2013) **(8)**, by contrast, the Flemish text "Zij die hier zyn zyn van hier" (those who are here are from here) is written almost absent-mindedly, and has a soothing effect, as if no one needs to explain themselves. Belgian artist Walter Swennen was born in 1946 and began to work as a painter in the 1960s, wanting to finance his life as a freelance philosopher not associated with a university by selling his paintings. After some time, Swennen came to realize "that pictures and words are essentially the same—they both belong to the realm of literature." According to the artist, the real opposition is "not between pictures and words but between pictures and words on the one hand and painting on the other."

## Problems with Plinths

Before Heimo Zobernig began in the 1990s to place his objects in terms of their various functions within the gallery space—as an art object, a shelf, a plinth, or a piece of exhibition architecture, in 1969 Viennese artist Oswald Oberhuber made a wooden plinth and inscribed it with a promise: "Stand on this plinth and you'll experience the Führer feeling!" **(9)** This appeal is rhetorically ambiguous, as without steps this meter-and-a-half high plinth is probably not easy to get up on. In case anyone should try (attention: not permitted in the museum, of course) the result would probably be slapstick contortions. An amusing prospect. And there is the very painterly character of the text, white on black, with the occasional drip still visible. Oberhuber, who made many letter and number paintings, is always interested both in the aesthetics of writing and its content and meaning: "I have always experienced numbers and letters as shapes, which they are; I wanted to give them a life of their own and use them as a means of expression," he said. Looking at the script-as-image seems to be just as important as deciphering it. Reading and "reading" can and should lead to different results.

One can also speculate on how disconcerting the term "Führer feeling" might have been to an exhibition audience in the late 1960s. The culture of political memory in postwar Austria was strongly shaped by a narrative of victimhood, with the country viewing itself (not only for reasons connected with international law) as having been occupied by Nazi Germany—as if the crowds cheering the "Führer" on Heldenplatz during the celebrations of Austria's "annexation "—or rather union with Germany—in 1938 had just been some kind of bad dream. Right up to the present, as the political scientist Cornelius Lehnguth recently remarked, there are various competing political interpretations of history in Austria. Besides its historical and aesthetic dimensions, current political developments worldwide mean that in 2018 Oberhuber's plinth has a pressing topicality even beyond the Austrian context.

Given historical and contemporary migration, the old-fashioned and anachronistic suitcases in Zoe Leonard's installation *Untitled* (since 2001) **(10)** have a highly charged context of associations. Placed directly on the floor of the museum, these objects look like lines of suitcases waiting in vain for their owners at airports. They are abandoned signs of journeys, migration, and private fates, like that the parents of the artist actually experienced. Her mother fled Poland and emigrated with her husband to the USA, where Zoe Leonard was born in a small town in the state of New York. The orderly row of suitcases on the floor, their abstraction and repetition, however, make it possible to ignore their personal and social context. In accordance with the principles of minimal art, these cases interact with the gallery space, where they form an irritant or barrier that we have to walk around and that can obstruct our access to other artworks on display.

Cooperation, reference, and the paths traveled by ideas all play a part in Martin Kippenberger's sculpture *Laufstall für Prospekte (Peter-Skulptur)* (1987) **(11)**. This work was originally part of an exhibition of sculptures entitled *Peter*, which was first shown in the documenta year of 1987 at Galerie Max Hetzler in Cologne before touring, in various versions, to Vienna, Graz, and New York. It occupies a special place within Kippenberger's exhibition history. Borrowing from the historical presentation form of "salon hanging," (known as the Petersburg hanging in German), Kippenberger developed the "Russian deployment" arranging the exhibition as a "cluttered allover" (Manfred Hermes). The show of forty-five sculptures revolved around the theme of "furnishing problems." In this way, Kippenberger took an artistic angle on contemporary interiors and on an unfettered postmodernism that had entered its Baroque phase by the second half of the 1980s. *Peter* also engaged with the sculptural practice of friends and fellow artists like Georg Herold.

Herold's work is characterized by three material motifs—the wooden board, the brick, and caviar. His unerring sense of sculpture may have been obscured by the bawdy humor in his work, although the artist himself stresses: "I'm not interested in visual jokes [...]. I wanted to use boards and bricks in a very pure way to achieve things that others achieve very differently." In 1988 Georg Herold made the work *Untitled*, in which three vertical slits are clumsily patched up with stuck-on bricks and plasters, with the wooden framework partly still visible behind the canvas. This recalls the work of the Italian artist Lucio Fontana, and his attacks on traditional painting in the later 1940s, but Herold's late 1980s work again asks as to the status of painting, after the medium had witnessed a decade of revival. The work *Reparation* **(12)** was also made in 1988, and it also seems to refer to Fontana, but here the artist has sewn the four slits in the canvas back together again.

## Selfie Me and You

During a stay in Rome in the spring of 2015, the New York artist Rachel Harrison was confronted outside the Pantheon with street traders offering wares she had never seen before: selfie sticks. At the time, this telescopic device allowing people to take pictures of themselves and friends without the help of a stranger was still relatively new, and yet it was soon to become the manifest expression of rampant selfie mania, not only among tourists but also in the art world, which produced its own Instagram celebrities. Harrison, who was born in 1966 in New York City, is known for the apparent effortlessness with which she uses "tactical acts of re-appropriation" (John Kelsey) to transfer profane items from the commercial and everyday world (newspaper racks, fashion magazines, shop window dummies, video screens, shelving units) into her work, harnessing them to her own artistic purposes. She thus did the same with the selfie stick, using it several times, including in the exhibition *American Gothic* **(13)**, in which a white plaster bust of an "Indian" with a feather headdress seems to be taking a picture of himself using a selfie stick. The title refers to the famous painting of the same name by Grant Wood from 1930, an iconic image of American painting in the depression years. In this image, a "typical" farming couple is looking straight at the painter or beholder as if looking at a camera. The painting draws on various notions of the conservative and staid rural American population of the time, and perhaps Harrison is also alluding to stereotypes with her gypsum Native American Indian with a feather headdress. In the exhibition, Harrison's work has a prominent and very visible place in the middle of the room, but the self-immersion in the act of gazing into your own camera that Harrison presents here means that viewers are somehow excluded. This self-assured guest has come instead of all interaction, we might say, and has instead withdrawn into pure self-observation. This makes this work also an homage to the video and performance artist Nam June Paik and his "closed-circuit" installation *TV Buddha*, an antique Buddha statue in front of a television set, which is screening a view of this Buddha from the front, recorded by a video camera behind the television. Today the meditative calm still present in this installation has given way to self-marketing in the hectic business of social networks.

## Self-Examination

These artworks frequently ask what it is that defines artistic work and makes it possible. Painter Miriam Visaczki, for example, writes the time on a piece of felt like a personal notepaper *12:40 to 14:40* (2017) **(14)**. This work, which is not typical of Visaczki's oeuvre, names the period of time that the artist is able to free up for her work, in contrast to all her other duties, such as those of a mother. This is a pointed statement, saying that creative work is determined by banal everyday life and gender roles.

Christopher Williams uses a depiction of a camera to show the medium of image creation itself. *Untitled, Focal length: 210mm, Aperture: f/11* (2015) **(15)** shows a section cut through a camera and the aesthetics of the technological apparatus, thematized here as the machine that creates pictures and meaning. Its view of reality is not neutral, but dependent on the technical potential of the equipment. A monochrome yellow canvas by Stephen Prina is perhaps in quiet dialogue with the work of his fellow student and friend Williams, who laid out his own theory of color using photographs with Agfa, Kodak, and Fuji films. *Push comes to Love – YELLOW* (1991) **(16)** is part of a series of works by Prina in different colors from the commercial Pantone color spectrum, which annually presents its new international color canon for fashion and visual communication.

Monika Baer also questions the basic prerequisites of the medium of painting (which is so often associated with a cult of genius), when she adds elements of technical color printing and serial reproduction to her paintings. *CMYK* (2016) **(17)** is painting with the colors of the printer cyan, magenta, yellow and black-key, with transparent layers of color creating new colors due to overlapping. A painted cigarette in the painting and a gin bottle take us from the abstract color fields to the real world. The ironic parallel drawn here between painterly and alcoholic excess is played out to the full. The gin bottle stands for the amount of black (K) to be used in the print, with the amount yet to be determined.

In a unique collaboration with John Baldessari, one of the founders of conceptual art in the 1960s, Meg Cranston created her series of *Real Painting (For Aunt Cora)* (2013) **(18)**. On monochrome color fields, proposals made by the Pantone company for the fashion year 2013 selected by Cranston, texts are mechanically printed. They cite a 1961 text by Baldessari, written to his Aunt Cora. There Baldessari describes the kind of painting his aunt expects of him, including "a eucalyptus tree with leaves that look real," but finishes his list with "I can't." This work combines a more than fifty-year-old text with the commercial color trends of its day, and thereby melds two very different fundamental issues. Which colors (commercially defined) determine our everyday environments, and how can a motif, reduced to a linguistic intention, develop the power of association? The interplay of these two levels of information leads to new meanings.

## Archive Aesthetics

In the case of the installation *The Three Boxes* (1984) **(19)** by Paul McCarthy art appears deeply withdrawn, like a snail inside its shell. A stack of three dirty fruit crates contains video films by McCarthy from the years 1970 to 1975—with this he declared his early performance works to be completed, and transferred them to a sculpture. In the exhibition, these works are thus present but cannot be seen. In an accompanying text, McCarthy noted that he imagined *The Three Boxes* as "skulls—containers for an internal substance." Art takes place here as a mind game. "I never collected for the living room, but for my head," says Wilhem Schürmann, "which is why I also bought very large installations, to push my own limits. The idea was for things not to get too cozy. So it didn't really matter if the art was in my house or in storage. Art takes effect in your head, so I don't need to have it around me the whole time."

A number of works seem to be frozen in a packaged or pupation stage. Before abandoning the art business entirely in 1989, Laurie Parsons always worked with found materials, aiming to bring objects that she herself had not made into the art world. The photos in the carton *Box of Photos* (1991) **(20)** were given to her over many years. They are mostly private snapshots, in which the artist is seen as a guest at different events and which are generally focused on middle-class homeliness, family, and motherhood. Originally, exhibition visitors were permitted to rummage through the box, and Parsons thereby gave them insight into a very private world. Today, these photos are enclosed in a kind of time capsule. They are part of the past, as is also Parsons herself, who today works as a social worker. She ended her artistic career as a matter of principle and has completely distanced herself from the art business.komplett distanziert.

## Image and Word against Painting

Many of the artists featured in the exhibition play in different ways with the semantic potential of writing and language. A good example is the work of the Viennese artist Heinrich Dunst. In 2014, he used the capital letters D and A to produce a voluminous two-part language object, casually leant against the wall, made of pink insulation material with a phenomenal range of meanings: it appears as a word, a prefix, a sound, a statement, and a sign, all at the same time **(21)**. This sculpture with its approach to language taken from concrete poetry is sometimes expanded by the artist himself, when he appears in the gallery—speaking, reciting, making sounds, and gesticulating.

Silvia Bächli, who lives in Basel and Paris, works on a graphic form that is capable of spreading into three-dimensional space with the ease of music. The artist is interested equally in the narrative and musical qualities of drawing as a medium. “My drawings are closer to music than to stories,” she has said. “Was ist dies?” (what’s this?) is written on a gouache from 2010 **(22)**. The inquisitive viewer-ego finds itself literally mirrored. “Good drawings,” Bächli says, “are larger than the format limited by the edges of the paper. Works on paper are like sculptures, extending to different degrees into the space where we move.”

The British painter Michael Simpson is known as a “long-distance runner” in the field of painting. One of the recurring motifs in his large paintings devoid of people is benches; between 1989 and 2009, Simpson worked exclusively on a series of *Bench Paintings*. Since 2009, he has focused on the squint **(23)**. In Simpson’s work, this refers to “leper squints,” small openings in the outer walls of medieval churches through which lepers and other social outcasts could take part in religious services from outside. Simpson defines the core of painting as a series of “solutions to problems,” saying that “a painting must always move beyond its subject.”

As the *Class Reunion* exhibition shows, language, words, and letters are used in art as an incredibly versatile, and almost magical material, bringing added levels of dissent, humor, poetry, or unruliness to art. The collectors’ slightly idiosyncratic focus beyond the evergreens of international art can be seen very clearly in the works in this exhibition. As Wilhelm Schürmann says: “They are all works that are typical of our collection: raw, succinct, fundamental, fleet-footed, and modest. These works show their own production, explore their own states of being, and illustrate the construction of our perception.”

**Imprint**

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**Exhibition**

**Class Reunion**
**Works from the Gaby and**
**Wilhelm Schürmann Collection**

**June 23—November 11, 2018**

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