

# **Projects 39 : Georg Herold, Markus Oehlen : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 5-March 23, 1993**

Author

Herold, Georg, 1947-

Date

1993

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/386](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/386)

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georg herold  
markus oehlen

projects

The Museum of Modern Art  
New York

February 5 – March 23, 1993

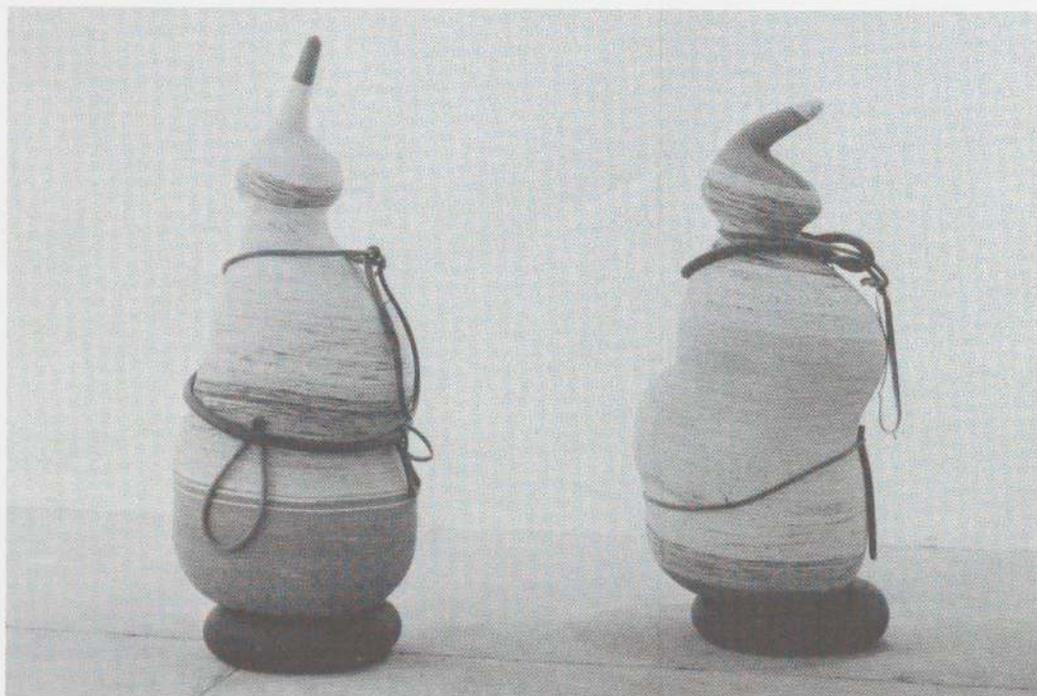
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Certain objects are never at home in the world. Ill-suited to any imaginable circumstance, they occupy space and command attention, but serve no other function than to make everything around them seem equally strange and out of place. That includes people, since objects of this kind give no reliable clues about how one is to relate to them or what is to be done with them. In fact, there is nothing to be done with them. They are just there.

The three sculptures that are the centerpiece of this exhibition belong to this class of oddments. Two untitled pieces of 1990 are the creation of Markus Oehlen, and one from 1992, titled *Pfannkuchentheorie*, is the work of Georg Herold. The surrounding paintings and reliefs represent other dimensions of the artists' activities, but they do not make these sculptures seem any more natural in context. Rather, these additional works only confirm one's initial suspicion that Oehlen and Herold are most at ease making things that are never at ease, and that will never put the viewer at ease either. "Offness" is the dominant characteristic of all their work, and it is contagious though generally benign in its effects on ordinary objects and ways of looking.

Similar in their ungainliness and their peculiar self-containment, Oehlen's and Herold's freestanding works are dissimilar in most other respects. Each of Oehlen's two pieces, made of varicolored filaments wrapped tightly around a carved styrofoam core, is garlanded with flaccid bicycle innertubes and perched on a pumped-up automobile tire. These towering presences suggest all manner of likeness, though no one thing establishes their true source or model. The more they beg comparison with other things, indeed, the more unaccountable they reveal themselves to be. Rung round with rubber and bound with cord, their bodies thus seem to swell and constrict like inflatable dressmakers' dummies cinched into full-

Markus Oehlen. Untitled. 1990. Polystyrene, string, and tubes. Two parts, each 7'2½" x 39¾". Photo courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne

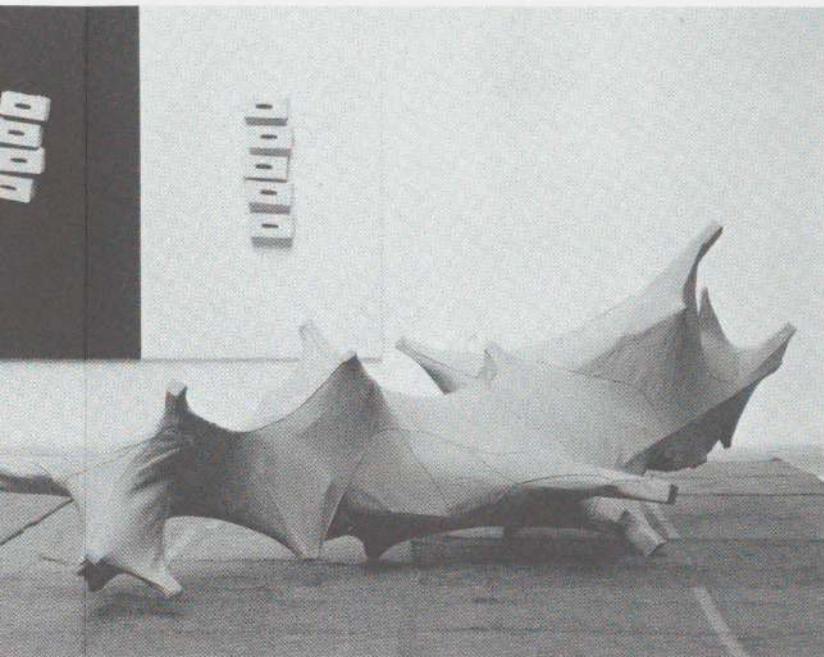


body corsets. On second glance they may look like pin-headed Michelin men, seated on whoopie cushions and bedecked with tube-balloons of the sort twisted by side-show performers into dachshunds and poodles. Or they may strike one as a couple of those blow-up punching-bags that, gluttonous for punishment, bob back after each blow. Viewed on more purely sculptural grounds, the main coiled shape shifts around its displaced central axis, whose top resembles a bent finger and whose broad bottom is lost sight of in its unstable meeting with the tire base.

Horizontal, slack-skinned, and all elbows and knees, Herold's sheathed construction *Pfannkuchentheorie* is almost the antithesis of Oehlen's pneumatic tops. Whereas the former are eccentrically poised, Herold's object seems to be struggling to find its form and footing—and clearly never will. Pieced together from raw linen and scrap lumber, it looks like nothing so much as a cocooned painting. The brick-laden canvases on the nearby wall—*Empty Symbol* (1990) and *Void* (1992)—make it obvious, however, that these larvae will never emerge as pictorial butterflies, but will always bear a symbolically ambiguous but physically unambiguous weight. Delineated by the stitched seams of the patched fabric, the surface contortions of *Pfannkuchentheorie* appear to model topological principles like those illustrated by the bizarre geometric solids Man Ray photographed in the 1930s as examples of proto-surrealist form. Translated by the artist as *Cluster Theory*, the title invokes just such a mathematical model. Read literally, however, the title brings such high-flown abstractions back down to earth. By nature a pancake is ordinary, floppy, and inert; metaphorically, it is something that just can't get off the ground.

As is evident in the examples so far discussed, Oehlen and Herold do not share a style but they do share a preference for forms that defy conventional aesthetic classification. And despite a nearly ten-year difference in age—Herold was born in 1947, Oehlen in 1956—they have some personal and professional history in common. Both artists first exhibited in 1977 and both made their first significant public mark in a 1980 show provocatively called "Finger for Germany." Organized by Jörg Immendorff, a painter, performance artist, and veteran agitator in the spirit of his teacher Joseph Beuys, this exhibition also included works by Hubert Kiecol, Werner Buttner, Christa Naher, and Markus Oehlen's brother Albert. The tone they collectively set was typified by a





Georg Herold. *Pfannkuchentheorie*. 1992. Roof laths and canvas, approx. 12'1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 68 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". Photo courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne

regression to adolescence most exhaustively expressed by bad boy for all occasions Martin Kippenberger (who was close to the group), and by a cultivated disrespect for good aesthetic manners inspired by their diabolically comic mentor, Sigmar Polke.

Oehlen's paintings respond to many of the same irreverent impulses as Polke's but are more consistent in their look and finally more ambiguous in their relation to "sincere" expressionism. Trained as a designer during the early 1970s, Oehlen layers his images in a fashion that is at once sharply graphic and broad and painterly. His use of photocopy-based collages and his habit of doubling or tripling contour lines give the artist's vigorously gestural approach a mechanical reverberation. Pictures gleaned from television screens and stylized figuration culled from the modernist lexicon provide the basic iconography that he stencils or draws onto patterned, stained, or color-swabbed canvas fields. Where Polke and others have used bargain-rate printed textiles for backgrounds, Oehlen has added the technique of batik dying, with all its acquired connotations of kitsch-craft.

Stirring this mix of appropriated devices with a purposefully rough hand Oehlen creates paintings and drawings that are cryptic most of all as a result of their lack of overt sarcasm toward the sources they "misuse." In his other activities Oehlen has displayed the sarcasm that is the trademark of his milieu. Well known as the drummer in the mid-Eighties Punk band *Mittagspause*, he cut an album called "Revenge of Memory" with fellow artist-musicians A. R. Penck, Kippenberger, and Immen-dorff, and a solo called "Beer Is Enough." With some of the same members of his circle, he was also co-founder of the "Church of Indifference." Markus Oehlen's painterly appropriations are not the expression of a Pop sensibility, however, nor does he caption his pictures with the wise-ass titles in vogue with his friends. Instead, he lets the paintings speak for themselves and uses his borrowed imagery and mannerisms as the visual raw material for an aggressive but earnest metaphoric painting. Limned with a broad, moody touch, the awkwardly animated figures in

Oehlen's earlier paintings may thus remind one of David Smith grotesques of the 1930s and ranked totems of the '40s and '50s as much as they do of the humanoid glyphs of his near contemporaries Penck or Markus Lupertz. His newest paintings are just as mysterious but more expansive and sharper in contrast.

The sculptures presented here, however, are without clear precedent outside of Oehlen's own work. The first such three-dimensional works date from 1985, when Oehlen exhibited a trio of fat comma-shaped objects that had been wrapped with cord and saddled. Abstract in their basic design but ridiculously functional by virtue of their riding gear, they were like rocking horses for grown-ups. Wobbling on their rubber-tire bases, the next batch of sculptures in this mode included two from 1990 with ducks' heads, and several of the same date with what appear to be outstretched arms. The two works in this exhibition (also from 1990) have no such animal or human attributes, yet we inevitably impose upon them standards of physical comparison that derive from the long tradition we inherit. Running from ancient Greek *kouroi* through to Rodin and Giacometti, that tradition teaches us to judge the proportions of a vertical sculpture as if they were ideal or expressive distortions of those of average bodies. That canon does not apply to Oehlen's dirigible objects, nevertheless our awareness of it plays straight man to the humor that gives them their peculiar identity. Too wide to embrace, too tall to meet eye to eye, limbless and buoyed up rather than laterally balanced or firmly planted on the ground, they tower over us, obtusely anthropomorphic, all girth and no guts, all wit and no brains.

More conceptual in orientation than Oehlen, Georg Herold specializes in throwaway jokes and terse visual riddles. Informing all of his diverse production is his upbringing and early artistic education in East Germany. Herold

Markus Oehlen. Untitled. 1992. Acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 8'2 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 5'10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". Photo courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne

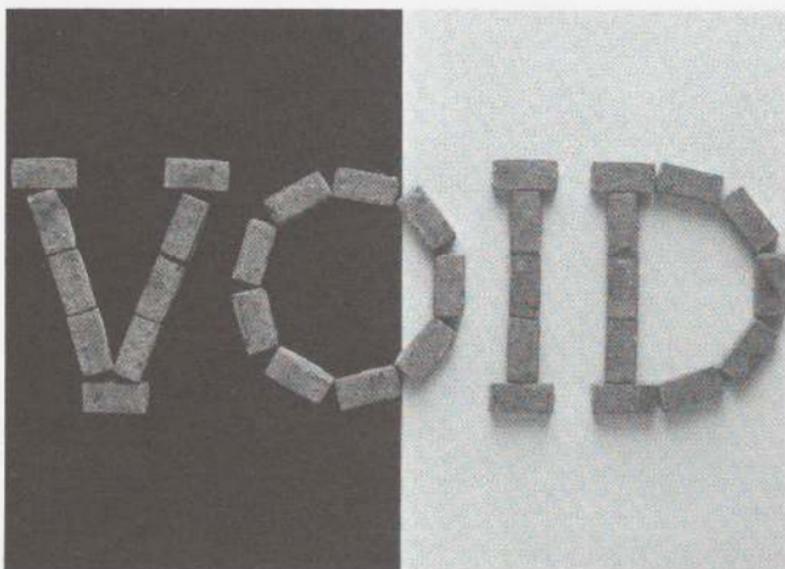


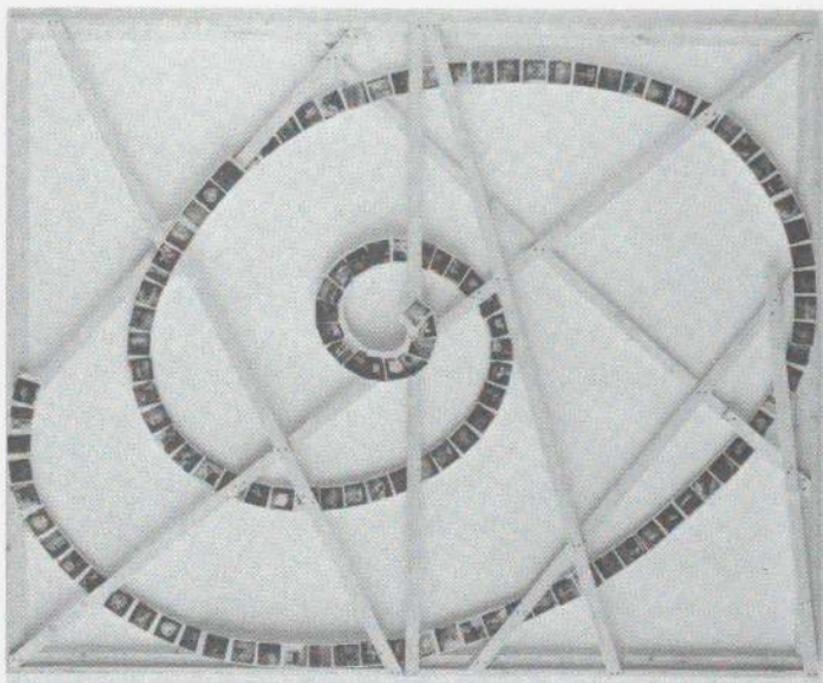
did not arrive in the West until 1973 after a relatively short jail term for a failed escape attempt. Already twenty-five at the time, he had been trained as a Socialist Realist—like Gerhard Richter, who with Polke has assumed the influential position previously occupied by their mentor Beuys—and he was not wholly liberated from that conservative formation until he studied with Polke between 1977 and 1981.

Compared to Polke's, Herold's humor is dry, but his irreverence is equal in spirit and often focuses upon the same topics. Herold's preferred targets are art and politics. A clunky "cubist" object made of two-by-fours and stuck together with duct tape entitled *Dense Light* satirizes the machine-age precision and purity of Bauhaus abstraction, while a related lumber construction crudely mimics the contour of Albrecht Dürer's iconic watercolor rabbit. On the contemporary side, Herold's brick-heavy paintings take to an extreme the "real-life" relief elements typical of "combine" paintings by artists from Rauschenberg to Kiefer. Whereas Kiefer's sometimes literally leaden appendages never respond to gravity in the illusionistic space of his doomsday vistas, Herold's bricks pull the canvas out and down into the viewer's physical actuality. Even Polke is not safe from Herold, whose caviar-stained pictures lampoon the cosmically diffuse paintings his elder has recently made with mineral dust and natural pigments.

A hard-currency Soviet export of long standing, which Herold has aptly renamed "Russian cocaine," caviar represents the political dimension as well as the art-parody side of his work. In one work in the series, for example, all the tiny fish eggs have been enumerated, as if the manic Polke or contemplative painter of numbers Roman Opalka had become a time-serving census-taker in a Kafkaesque bureaucracy. The title of this bean-counter's dream is *Disasters of Democracy*. Herold is also drawn to maps and diagrams, since they offer him the opportunity to rearrange or obscure the "facts" they communicate. And, like Beuys before him, he invents didactic schemas of his own, though unlike Beuys, who offered his pseudoscientific models as a cure for society's ills, Herold leaves no doubt that his systems are inherently dysfunctional.

Georg Herold. *Void*. 1992. Canvas, velvet, bricks, and epoxy. Two parts, each 6'2¾" x 51⅞". Photo courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne





Georg Herold. *Outputsky Spiral*. 1992. Roof laths and polaroids, 7'6½" x 8'4¼". Photo courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne

In formal terms his lath and stretcher-bar assemblages are take-offs on painting or constructivist sculpture, but closer attention to their specific texts shows them to be commentaries on the jerry-rigged social systems of Eastern Europe.

The exception of caviar aside, Herold prefers commonplace materials—bricks, of course, but also buttons, stockings, underwear, socks, wire, and laths. Chosen for their neutrality and for their lack of preordained artistic function, these materials also have the virtue of being new. "I have no use for objects pregnant with history," Herold said in a 1986 interview, thereby setting himself apart from Beuys and his contemporaries and followers whose work depends on the romantic "aura" of found objects. On the other hand, Herold's attraction to plain materials is equally far removed from that of Pop-influenced artists who redeployed or remade commercial products. In this regard and in his emphasis on perfunctory facture he is in sympathy with another émigré assemblagist, Ilya Kabakov. And, like Kabakov's, Herold's deliberately defective metaphors for large social debacles and petty human flaws are poignant as well as damning. The reality of Eastern Europe that such artists have brought with them is that of a failed experiment in social engineering whose emblems are neither the patinated refuse of *Arte povera* nor tongue-in-cheek intimations of Western consumer culture. Herold's art is made of new junk rather than old junk, and instead of using it to critique capitalist excess, he evokes the insufficiencies of the underdeveloped utopia whence he came.

With more than enough experience of State-manipulated aesthetics to make him suspicious of advocacy art, Herold aims to unprop official truth rather than to engage in agit-prop for whatever good cause. "I think it has something to do with my past and with the fact that I'm from East Germany. It's about interpretation, giving things a name, or not giving them a name, or giving them the wrong name. Games, if you like, that either capture the essence or simply circle round it." Rather than being apolitical, however, Herold's art remains decidedly political in its concerns, as the absurdly emblematic or flaglike brick paintings in this show attest. Herold's

indirect approach in this regard shares something with that of another recent **projects** artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and in general such an oblique but edgy style of social commentary is increasingly typical of a moment when old ideological constructs have caved in, leaving a rubble full of fragments that are alternately ridiculous and dangerous—and sometimes both.

"Nonsense is better than irony," Herold has said, and that observation marks the distance between him and those post-modernists of the Eighties for whom blatant irony was the dominant strategy. In a context where previously agreed-upon certainties and dichotomies have ceased to apply or persuade, contrary souls must realize that predictably teasing conventional wisdom is of little avail. To succeed artistically or on any other level one has to fight fire with fire. "What we get dished up to us every day is nonsense anyway, so it's nice to oppose it with something that will meet with complete incomprehension. Once you learn to live with absurdity, it's the things you used to think were normal that come to seem absurd." It is just such a reversal of perspective that Herold and Oehlen effect, so that after spending time in the company of their work, one comes away with the disconcerting but still not altogether unpleasant feeling that the ordinary world is less well constructed than we are encouraged to believe, and less tightly wound.

Robert Storr

All quotes are from "Being an Artist Is Not a Goal: Georg Herold Interviewed by Barbara Catoir," *Artscribe International* (April–May 1986).

## biographies

Georg Herold:

Born in Jena, East Germany, 1947.

Studies in Halle, 1969–73.

Is caught trying to escape from the East and jailed but is then released and allowed to emigrate to the West, 1973.

Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, 1974–76, and the Academy of Fine Arts, Hamburg, 1977–78.

First one-person exhibition in Hamburg, 1977.

Regular exhibitions at the Galerie Max Hetzler in Cologne starting in 1984.

Lives and works in Cologne.

Markus Oehlen:

Born in Krefeld, West Germany, 1956.

Trains to be a draftsman, 1971–73, then studies design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dusseldorf, 1976–81.

First one-person exhibition at Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf.

Plays drums in Punk band, Mittagspause, 1979–83.

From 1984 onward concentrates on painting and sculpture.

Regular exhibitions at the Galerie Max Hetzler starting in 1982.

Lives and works in Hamburg and Krefeld.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation, The Bohen Foundation, and The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

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