

Of Smoke and Mirrors: Views and Reflections on Works by Eva Grubinger, 2003-2011

Catalogue *Decoy*, Landesgalerie Linz and Kerstin Engholm Gallery, Vienna, 2012
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From the Middle Ages until the early eighteenth century, almost all commercially available mirrors in Europe were convex. It was relatively simple to make convex mirrors (often called an 'oeil de sorcière' or 'banker's eye'), which at the time were simply rounded polished disks of metal or glass. According to art historian Arnaud Maillet, these were referred to as Nuremberg mirrors, as they have been the city's specialty since the thirteenth centuryⁱThe technology for making glass perfectly flat was not achieved until the late seventeenth century, when table-casting techniques were developed. What we use today as surveillance mirrors were the de facto mode of reflection throughout Europe's medieval and Renaissance periods. The world represented was necessarily distorted; we looked into it not to see our likeness, but to examine a biased simulation, to see reality in our mind's eye from the accepted and unavoidable misrepresentation of artifice. Distortion was a natural and accepted element of representation. The world's falsification by the mirror was seen as the object's essential corruption. As historian Sabine Melchior-Bonnet put it, "the devil is sometimes allegorized in iconography through the image of a monkey playing with a mirror, since each one counterfeits the world, for the devil wants to rival his creator by producing simulacra."ⁱⁱ God creates, and the devil produces simulacra, but it is the distorted surface, the *speculum fallax*, by which the condition of reality's inherent perversion becomes revealed. Look into the back of a spoon, and the world, warped and inverted, becomes a measure of the perversion that we are not.

In Eva Grubinger's exhibition, *Decoy* (2011), three oversized fishing lures sit on the parquet floor of Landesgalerie Linz's main hall. Made of galvanized steel and bronze-tinted aluminum and burnished to a mirror finish, the lures, with their various curves, condense, expand, absorb, and reflect the exhibition space on their surfaces. A lure—often fitted with a hook—is attached to the end of a fishing line to simulate a fish's prey through trickery of movement, color, and vibration. It's an ironic device; it presents the opposite of what it proffers. The lure represents nourishment to fish, which will ultimately become nourishment for others, and it is in this relationship of power, false benefit, control, and artifice that Grubinger engages in her audience. *Decoy* acts like a lure in the sense that it offers the audience artworks that themselves express a critical position towards the reception of art.

In an interview with Cristina Ricupero in 2001, Grubinger, originally from Salzburg, said, 'in Austria, people never tell you straight on what they really think. They always use a certain kind of humor called Schmääh to tell you the truth.'ⁱⁱⁱ This Austrian code, reflected perhaps in the cryptic meaning of the color stripes painted on the fishing lures, is the language with which Grubinger metes out her critique of the Austrian art audience. Austria is a country that used to be an empire. Once covering about a quarter of Europe—from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, snatches of the Netherlands, Spain, a tentacle down the Eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea, the upper regions of Italy, all the way across to Serbia—today, Austria is a landlocked shadow of what it once was. The transition from nineteenth-century royal superpower to one of many new states formed at the end of World War One had a psychological impact on the populace in such a way that the effects have metastasized into damning stereotypes. To many, Austrians are easily startled, sticklers of stifling social formalities, fetishists of title bearing, and possessors of a self-defeating, self-conscious sense of purpose. It is said that some Austrians counter this by taking on a deliberately laid-back attitude that for the most part appears stagey and over measured.

Three months before the Wall fell in 1989, Grubinger moved to Berlin from Salzburg, which in her view was 'small, highly controlled, and conservative.'^{iv} For her, the art audience of her native country was more invested in the charade of the vernissage, the protocols of sophisticated viewing, and the trappings of status than they were in the actual artwork. This opinion—if not a more general contempt for the Austrian art scene—has been widely held by some of the country's most prominent artists. In 1992, Wolfgang Drechsler interviewed forty Austrian artists practicing from the 1950s onward, and the responses to questions about the state of the arts in Austria were predominantly negative. While most of these interviews are with a generation that precedes Grubinger, their reflections nonetheless establish a certain pitch that has reverberated, and continues to be felt. For example, painter Georg Eisler spoke of the exodus of artists during the Nazi regime and how a vertical conversation between generations never materialized after the war. For Oswald Oberhuber, the galleries and museums were simply bad across the board. Viennese Actionists Jürgen Messensee and Hermann Nitsch suffered isolation and persecution in Vienna for being overly experimental. Their friend, Günter Brus, described Austria as a country that is openly hostile to art ('Austria hates and ignores its best artists'). Valie Export admitted that she felt like she had very little impact on the artistic and social life of Austria. Even after a long and x

Vienna for being overly experimental. Their friend, Günter Brus, described Austria as a country that is openly hostile to art ('Austria hates and ignores its best artists'). Valie Export admitted that she felt like she had very little impact on the artistic and social life of Austria. Even after a long and distinguished career, she sees little of the feminism and political activism that she expressed in her practice take hold in Austrian society.^v

Affixed high up on a wall at the far end of the gallery, just under the cornice line is a black, heavy metal ring—the type one finds on the side of piers for docking boats. In an adjoining gallery space is such a pier, as if plucked out of the water and deposited there for viewing. The wooden structure is tall and long: the walkway, supported by eight piles, looms high above our heads like a rain shelter. The piles are painted black with a pitch of over three meters, creating a datum line that suggests the entire gallery below it is under water. Is Grubinger implying that museumgoers, like fish, are guided by swarm mentality and gullibly attracted to luster? As structures, piers are most often constructed by the fishing industry, but in England, piers have also been built purely for leisure. As a piece of architecture, Grubinger's pier, unmoored, seems to serve little function other than as an object of contemplation, casting instead a function for the museum's exhibition space as a place where neither real work nor pleasure takes place.

In Thomas Bernhard's novel *Old Masters: A Comedy* (1985), the reader is audience to an extended diatribe on Austria's cultural philistinism. Like *Decoy*, Bernhard's narrative unfolds from within an Austrian museum. In the Bordone Room of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, the reader encounters Reger, an elderly music critic who has visited this same room in the same museum every other day for the past thirty years to contemplate Tintoretto's *Portrait of a White-Bearded Man* (c. 1545). Reger is introduced mainly through his friend Atzbacher, who retells Reger's attacks on art, its audience, and Austrian society in general. Given his ritual visits to the museum over the years, the reader is to see Reger, however partial, as an experienced observer of the Viennese art public. His assessment is pithy and blunt, and he places the blame of what he perceives as a countrywide ignorance of art on teachers. Himself a musicology instructor, Reger calls teachers 'the henchmen of the state, and seeing that this Austrian state today is a spiritually and morally totally crippled state [...] the teachers, quite naturally, are also spiritually and morally deformed and brutalized and corrupt and chaotic.'^{vi} According to his thinking, teachers prevent their students from any kind of moral, cultural, or artistic development, because 'in Austria one has to be mediocre in order to be listened to and taken

seriously, one has to be a person of incompetence and of provincial mendacity, a person with an absolute small-country mentality.^{vii} As if echoing the narrative premise of Grubinger's *Decoy*, Reger unequivocally states that in Austria, 'people only go to the museum because they have been told that a cultured person must go there, and not out of interest, people are not interested in art.'^{viii} Bernhard's novel, a funhouse mirror, is meant to be satirical (it's subtitled *A Comedy*). Reger's relentless insistence on his opinions rather than a concerted effort in logical reasoning renders him small-minded. Neither Bernhard's book nor Grubinger's exhibition accuse the Austrian, or any visitor for that matter, of cultural inadequacy as such, but they accomplish something far more impinging. In their implication of a possible condition of intellectual impoverishment, both readers and visitors are faced with moments of self-questioning that are truly disquieting. To whom should they defend themselves from these judgments?

At one point, Reger discusses the different positions art and nature occupy in his life, concluding that he has always been happier in art than in nature: 'Nature has [...] been *uncanny* to me, while in art I have always felt secure.'^{ix} Art, the reader gleans, offers the comfort of recognizing in it signs of reason and judgment, the crucibles of our intellect and being. Nature and its workings are commonly taken to be impervious to such human categories, but cultural theorists would argue that the very concept of nature, or the natural, is already a social construct. The word *landscape* indicates a change in space, a shift from object to percept.^x Seeing nature has developed into a set of visual and conceptual conventions: the *view*, which implies an anthropomorphic notion of distance; the *scene*, which suggests a scenario or narrative; and the *perspective*, the world seen through binocular vision. Landscapes relate to an idealized version of a natural, non-urban past, and, as such, physical geography has a parallel existence on the terrain of our subconscious. For landscape architect and writer Susan Herrington, 'landscapes not only represent nature, but in doing so also demonstrate how we relate to it.'^{xi}

Two Friends (2010), a collaborative project by Grubinger and Werner Feiersinger, exemplifies this point by illustrating the dependent roles art and nature have in our pursuit of cultural development. Culture, taken as the sum of human intellectual manifestations, is also an instrument to measure the relative state of governmental maturity. Recently in Europe, public art has had a reemergence as material evidence of social advancement. In many postindustrial economies, the production and exhibition of artwork in the public

realm is generally carried out as a kind of cultural fait accompli. A society that funds or enables artistic production is one that closes the judgment of their morality. The wish fathers the thought: art, made for the benefit of the public, cannot be but good. Along with works by five other pairs of artists, *Two Friends* was produced under the aegis of *Status Quo Vadis 2010*, a project by *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Niederösterreich* (Public Art Lower Austria) and *Sommerspiele Melk*. In the middle of a river, an offshoot of the Danube close to Melk, Grubinger and Feiersinger placed a high-gloss stainless steel I-beam perpendicularly across a pair of conjoined black, army-issued inflatable rafts. From some angles, the beam mirrors the raft and its surroundings in such a way that it looks impossibly transparent.

Much of what the viewer experiences through *Two Friends* defies conventional thinking. With the raft on the milky silt-beige water, and the lush summer growth on either banks of the river, the view recalls those from South America or Southeast Asia rather than Central Europe. The raft stays in place on the river, weighted not by the beam, but fixed in place with concrete anchors below the surface. The I-beam—hollow, non-load bearing, and handmade by the artists from a folded piece of sheet metal—echoes the look but not function of a nearby truss bridge. As an assemblage, *Two Friends* can be understood as a collection of empty yet charged signifiers: empty since the object's decontextualization takes from them their conventional signified, and charged because they're ready vessels for whatever meaning the viewer projects onto it. As the outdoor setting—*nature*—is part of the scenography, the work forces the viewer to register the artifice of culture and how it has produced an ethic for grasping the natural world. How nature is defined is the product of race, gender, and class rather than natural law. Nature, like art, has no intrinsic value. To assign value to something is a 'human activity that is dependent on a human evaluator to make a decision.'^{xii}

As part of *Kunstwegen*, a public art initiative in the Vechte river valley, land that straddles Germany and the Netherlands, Grubinger's *Smoking Shelter* (2011) is located on parkland, and is one of eight artworks contracted to extend an existing sculpture route that includes work by Andreas Slominski, Jenny Holzer, Dan Graham, and Tobias Rehberger. The sculpture walk's aim, stated in several of the project's press releases, is to make this stretch of nature into a cultural space.

The park is picturesque, and sited waterside in a clearing of building-sized oak and

chestnut trees. Grubinger's Smoking Shelter is a pavilion, one that looks like a classic rendition of high modern woodland architecture. A cuboid structure composed of sharp orthogonal planes of black painted steel and supported by slender columns, Philip Johnson's Glass House (1949), and Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House* (1951) come to mind as quick comparisons. The parallels go beyond the visual; like its architectural references, Smoking Shelter proposes an ideological lens for examining the individual, society, and the social mores constructed to mediate them. For Mies, his house's exposed steel members, open façades, and planar forms set amidst grassy surroundings expressed a desire for the individual to find harmony between a technologically driven society and personal fulfillment; while Johnson's house symbolized his desire to live his life in full view of an adoring public, as Michael Sorkin suggests.^{xiii} Grubinger's structure, like *Two Friends*, reassesses the relationship between nature and culture, but where they differ is the emphasis of the dependencies between the two. Scholars have noted the historical moral weight man has imparted to the natural world. For Kant, 'a direct interest, not just taste, in nature is always a mark of a good soul,' and later Johann Georg Sulzer asserted 'inanimate nature offers [landscape artists] an inexhaustible store of materials through which they can exercise a positive effect on men's character.'^{xiv} These sentiments found more recent resonance in the waves of environmentalism starting in the late 1940s as doubt entered our whole cloth faith in industrialization. Beyond simply labeling nature a social construct, Smoking Shelter imposes our assumptions of the natural onto the shifting boundaries of societal conventions.

By delimiting a smoking area in open parkland (where even if smoking were procedurally prohibited, it would almost never be enforced), Grubinger confronts her viewers with the decision of which system to act under—social or natural law. Efficacy of the shelter is circumscribed by the set of laws smokers adhere to. Alone in the park, are we under the jurisdiction of Nature or Niedersachsen? Though situated in Germany, a particularly Austrian concern seems to be at work here. Austrians are inveterate smokers. According to statistics from the Wall Street Journal, about fifty percent of all teenagers and adults in Austria smoke.^{xv} On average, girls start at around twelve, which, according to the World Health Organization, is the youngest age in Europe. Austria amended its smoking regulations in 2009, but with enough loopholes for people to generally continue smoking as they wish. The country's former health minister, Andrea Kdolsky, is often cited as a

champion of free choice and smoker's rights (herself a smoker since she was sixteen). Despite scientific evidence to the contrary, Ms. Kdolsky insisted that, 'no international study tells you that sitting in a restaurant for two hours as a passive smoker brings you harm.'^{xvi} Civil decree, of course, pays little heed to the truths of natural law. An open-air structure, Smoking Shelter has no walls as such, but it has a horizontal band of metal wrapped around its perimeter at eye level, whereby anyone standing inside has no view of the park. Measuring social conventions against the rhythms of nature has a sobering effect. Against the backdrop of tides and seasons and the colors that appear each spring and the white that blankets each winter, our hard fought statutes, their attending regulations, fiats and conventions seem pointlessly procrustean, petty and trivial. Seen through Smoking Shelter, the viewer's relationship to nature is a changing narrative concocted and enabled by society to classify and maintain the status quo.

It's easily argued that societal consent of smoking, being that it is generally accepted as harmful to one's health, impugns our morality. To what degree do laws and customs reflect human needs? To what degree do they obstruct them? Smoking Shelter opens up a space of political reflection, sanctioned every time a cigarette is smoked inside the pavilion. Lit outside, the smoke of the cigarette rising into the trees invokes campfire or barbeque scenes—tropes that return smoke, manmade or otherwise, into a natural realm. Lit inside the pavilion, the cigarette's smoke is distilled as a discrete substance, its white curls objectified against the black surfaces of the space. For artist Christoph Schaefer, who also contributed artwork to the sculpture route, the role of smoke in Grubinger's piece brings to mind Günter Gaus' interview with Hannah Arendt, which was broadcast on West German television in 1964.^{xvii} For the duration of the program, Arendt sat opposite Gaus in a black-box studio, smoking casually, letting her smoke coil and dissipate against the black walls.

More than two decades after she fled to America to escape Nazi persecution, a year after *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published (an assessment of Adolf Eichmann's trial, in which she contentiously detected no trace of anti-Semitism in him despite his role as an SS lieutenant), Arendt found herself back in Germany, coolly answering questions about her thoughts and work since her emigration. One could say that Arendt was herself on trial, the television studio a courtroom in which the particular code of law was never explicitly stated. There she was, a German Jew who fled the Holocaust, once again in Germany to

explain how a Nazi on trial in Jerusalem was not anti-Semitic. Categories of judgment—the objectivity of evidence, the customs of decision-making, the efficacy of rulings—like smoke rings, blur the moment they come into focus. *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (2009), Grubinger’s sculptural installation commissioned by the Kunsthalle Nürnberg in the context of an exhibition on human rights, dilates on this thought.

The work consists of a courtroom setup taken from the International Criminal Court in the Hague. The judges’ bench faces the defendant’s table directly. Geometrically reduced and rendered in matte black, this is a spare courtroom with no witness stand, jury box, public gallery, or prosecutor. Grubinger’s piece shares a title with Christopher Hitchens’s 2001 book, which was a concerted effort to prosecute Kissinger for ‘war crimes, for crimes against humanity, and for offenses against common or customary or international law, including conspiracy to commit murder, kidnap, and torture.’^{xviii} Henry Kissinger, himself a German Jew who fled Nazi Germany in 1939 to America, remains a controversial figure. After army service and a doctorate at Harvard, Kissinger served as both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford’s National Security Advisor. He was instrumental in ending the so-called Yom Kippur War between Israel and allied Egypt and Syria in 1973, the same year he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his part in negotiating a ceasefire during the Vietnam War (though the fighting continued for another two years). Kissinger is nonetheless controversial, as Hitchens pointed out, because he’s linked to, or otherwise enabled, mass civilian killing and assassinations, contentiously supporting junta leader and subsequent dictator Augusto Pinochet’s rise to power. This too happened in 1973. Kissinger is also a vocal dissenter of universal jurisdiction. The same year Hitchens’ book came out, Kissinger penned an essay for *Foreign Affairs* that detailed the dangers of permitting international jurisprudence that would create standard norms in human rights law, and definitions for genocide and war crimes. For him, the creation of the International Criminal Court interferes with the sovereignty of national governments.^{xix} For many, Kissinger’s words spewed forth with irony, cloying a desperate aim at self-protection. Principles of international governance were first declared at the Nuremberg Trials of 1945/6, arraigning the very leaders who pushed his family from Germany. But if the United States had ratified the International Criminal Court agreements of 1998 (along with a community of 120 nations), Kissinger himself might have been tried. In Grubinger’s piece, the gavel sits not on the judge’s bench,

but on the defendant's table. In the context of an exhibition on human rights, this appears as a validation of the theme. In the context of the work's title, it speaks of the relationship between power and law, and how possession of the former allows for skirting of the latter.

Kissinger's nickname is 'the Teflon Man' (because nothing seems to stick to him), and the matte black finish of the installation reflects this moniker, but it also recalls the large black sculptures of an earlier work by Grubinger, *Dark Matter* (2003). Sitting in a white exhibition space is a collection of sculptures, each taller than most people. A housing block, a control tower, a cooling tower, a reactor dome, and an oversized pair of headphones are all executed in a light-absorbing black finish. Mounted on a wall, like a blind window, is a large rectangular sheet of reflective black plexiglas—a black mirror that shimmers like the surface of an iPhone, or a piano.

Recall the so-called Nuremberg mirrors. When tinted black, they were called black mirrors, or Claude glasses—instruments popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth century amongst landscape painters and tourists, particularly in England. Now obscure, Claude glasses gave the scenes reflected on its dark surface a heightened contrast between values and desaturated hues, and the convex shape, though often slight, would give the central subject on the reflection an exaggerated prominence. It made nature look like landscape paintings, giving the whole vista a yellowy tinge as if washed under aged varnish. Like Perseus' shield, a mirror used to avoid looking directly into Medusa's petrifying gaze, to see with a Claude glass one must turn one's back to the desired view. A colored rearview mirror used purposefully to slant reality, perhaps Claude glass could serve here as a unifying image for Grubinger's works—all of which seem to deflect their critique and rather substitute intents, admitting only implicit interpretation. But if art, like *Schmäh*, is an indirect way of getting to truth, it is one that amplifies it through deliberation. Neither to be taken at face value, nor spelled out, 'art should be explained as something to be contemplated,' says Reger.^{xx}

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ⁱ Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 37.

ⁱⁱ As quoted in Maillet, 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ See 'Semiotics of Conspiracy: A Conversation between Cristina Ricupero and Eva Grubinger,' in Eva Grubinger: *Operation R.O.S.A.* (Helsinki: NYKY, 2001).

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v See Wolfgang Drechsler, *Ansichten: 40 Künstler aus Österreich im Gespräch mit Wolfgang Drechsler* (Pölsen: Residenz Verlag, 1992).

^{vi} Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, trans. Ewald Osers (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 38–9.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 13.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 6.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 78.

^x See Susan Herrington, *On Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 2008), 52.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 53.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 58.

^{xiii} See Michael Sorkin, 'Philip Johnson: Master Builder as Self-Made Man,' in *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings* (London: Verso, 1991), 8.

^{xiv} As quoted in Herrington, *On Landscapes*, 65.

^{xv} Christina Passariello, 'Europe's Smoking Culture Lingers, Despite Bans,' *Wall Street Journal Online*, January 2, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123085631602247715.html>.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} From an e-mail correspondence between Eva Grubinger and Christoph Schaefer, December 3, 2011.

^{xviii} Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001), xxiii.

^{xix} Incidentally, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt also challenged universal jurisdiction: in her view, Eichmann, a German criminal caught in Argentina and tried in Israel, ideally should have been tried in an international court, only because she viewed his offences as 'crimes against humanity,' and thus warranted justice, on an international scale, to be realized. For a more nuanced discussion on the articulation of *mens rea* and *actus reus* (intent and action) as a measure of culpability in Arendt's text, see David Luban, 'Hannah Arendt as a Theorist of International Criminal Law' *International Criminal Law Review* 11, no. 3 (July 2011): 621–41. Accessible from <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/619>.

^{xx} Bernhard, *Old Masters*, 24.