

# ARTFORUM

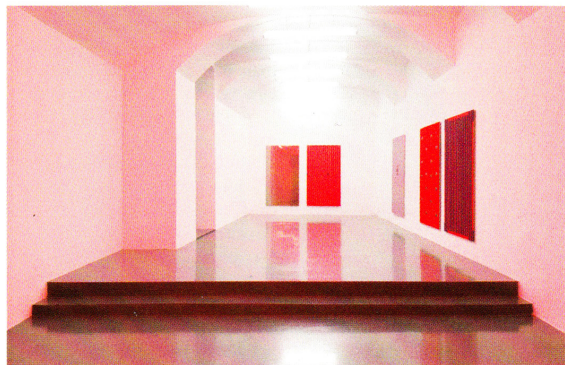
VIENNA

## Nick Oberthaler

GALERIE EMANUEL LAYR

"We turn around in the night, consumed by fire." The Latin palindrome "*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*" had as powerful an impact on the sensibility of Guy Debord and the Situationists as it did on the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten. The sentence delights the Austrian artist Nick Oberthaler, too. If you ask him about it, he'll enthusiastically start elaborating on German Romanticism, Heidegger, eternity, seduction, and the dangers that arise when a person wants to touch the sun. "The highest form of artistic expression is writing," he declares. Maybe that's why he's pulled no punches in titling his recent show "Distinct Features of Fast Oscillations in Phasic and Tonic Rapid Eye Movement." It sounds like a scientific article by neurologists studying visual phases. What Oberthaler is referring to, perhaps, is that illuminating moment of awakening that casts familiar situations in a surprising new light.

The works themselves were based on a succinct rhetorical aesthetic of geometries and abstractions, which Oberthaler—the most fascinating Austrian painter/conceptualist since Walter Obholzer—cycles through with a certain hard-boiled irreverence. Of the seven vertical-format



View of "Nick Oberthaler," 2015–16. Photo: Georg Petermichl.

works on display (each about seventy by forty inches), the artist placed two beside the entrance and the rest in the far corner diagonally across the room. Intervening in the gallery's lighting system by swapping out half the white fluorescent tubes for red ones, Oberthaler took institutional setting and relocated it to a red-light district. The works themselves emerged from the dramatic darkness of the stage as if from Mars. The floor gleamed like wet asphalt. Reflected in its surface, the mirror images of these intense, clear pictures blurred together. A polished sheet of stainless steel on the rear wall reflected the architecture of the space and the sweeping curve of the lamps on the ceiling.

Oberthaler's technique and choice of materials are canny, at times inscrutable. Sometimes he paints on drywall, sometimes on aluminum, which is coated with primer and gesso. Then come twenty, often as many as thirty, layers of acrylic, brushed on so meticulously that barely a trace is left to betray this analog mode of production. Within the fundamental flatness, a grid lies submerged that lends structure and support to the simple motifs: bow ties and stripes. Oberthaler's references to the Dutch cult painter René Daniëls and to constructivists of all countries are not merely limited to an eclectic exploitation of art history, but also extend to the complex of the world captured in print media. Onto the dirty pink surface of a standard Sheetrock panel, he transfers photocopies of Calvin Klein ads, citing Roy Lichtenstein's grids of Benday dots and Robert Rauschenberg's solvent-based rubbing technique.

Oberthaler's approach to an aura-laden past is anything but impassive. The relationship is characterized by an obstinate rebelliousness. The artist, who reveres Bram van Velde, likes to recall what Van Velde once told Samuel Beckett: that since the essence of the object is to evade representation, all a painter is left to do is to represent the conditions of this evasion. After Van Velde, after neo-geo, painting can still come from a sense of doubt about the medium, even of its probable failure. Fleeting and difficult to grasp, Oberthaler's work flickers in the no-man's-land between language, art, and life.

—Brigitte Huck

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.