

Experiential Space

^E *Where does your interest in creating site-specific works come from?*

Object-based sculpture always ends up creating a distance between it and the audience, even if the work is free-standing and you can walk around it. Works of art and viewers each occupy their own spaces, and these spaces are incompatible. Observing this aspect, which I found unsatisfactory, got me to move away from creating objects to working spatially and creating site-specific works.

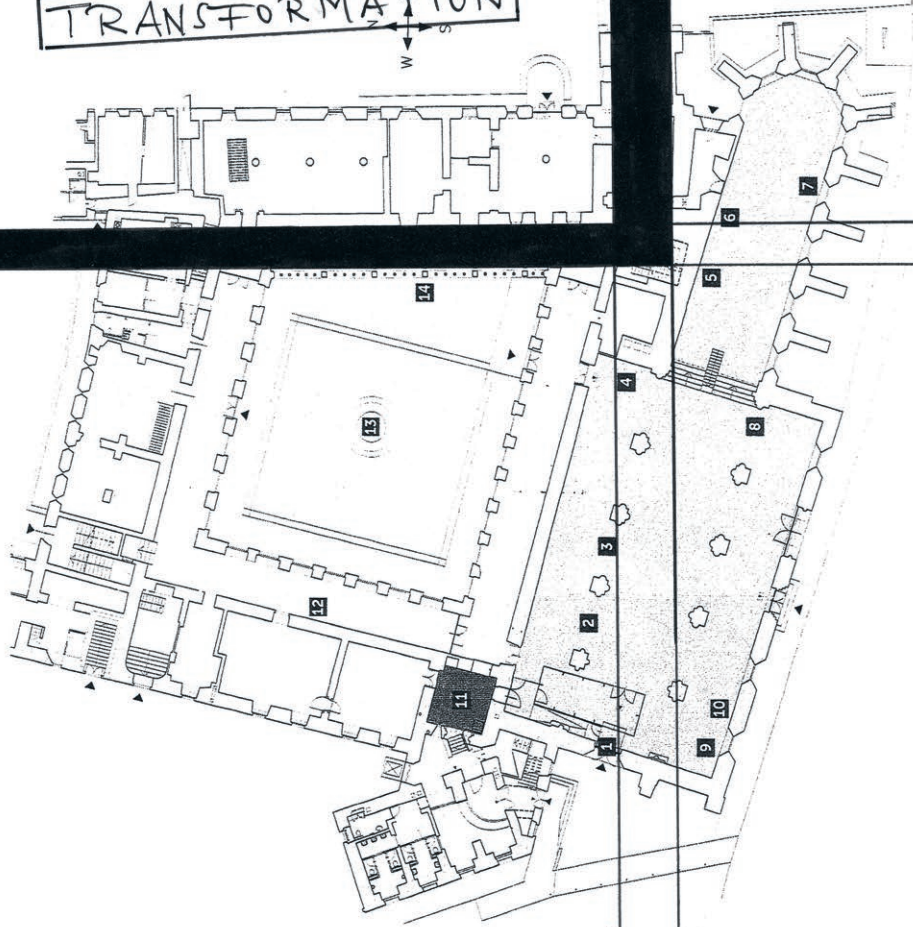
What does space mean to you, how do you conceive of space?

Important for me is the notion of “experiential space.” This requires the physical presence of the viewer since this can’t be created through distanced observation. Interacting with the “given” physical space around us and taking in perceptually what we experience creates a possibility for unique aesthetic experiences that can be best described as “reflecting over one’s physical experience of space.”¹

What is your basic approach when starting a new project?

Each project presents entirely new challenges and always begins with visiting the site. I try to get a feel for the atmosphere, analyze the dimensions and proportions of the space, measure and document it photographically. In the studio I work on creating elevation and plan views and theoretical research. Entirely pragmatic aspects also play an important role. The walls of the Dominikanerkirche, a Dominican church in Krems, for example, are under monument protection

TRANSFORMATION



Übersichtplan Dominikanerkirche

1. neugotisches Maßwerkfenster (1891)
2. Christus mit wappentragenden Engeln (um 1490)
3. Dominikanerszenen (um 1500)
4. Gozzofresko (gestiftet 1280)
5. Verkündigung (Ende 14. Jh.)
6. gemaltes Doppelgrab (um 1330)
7. Sessionsnische (Anf. 14. Jh.)
8. Hl. Christophorus (Ende 14. Jh.)
9. Hl. Dominikus (um 1260)
10. Deckenmalerei Johann Georg Schmidt (beendet 1736)
11. alte Klosterpforte (um 1250)
12. Fragmente von Heiligenfiguren (um 1370/80)
13. Innenhof: Fensterumrahmungen Leopold Michael Perger (um 1740)
14. Fragmente gotischer Kreuzgang (ursprünglich Ende 13. Jh, rekonstruiert 1970/71)

and cannot be touched, nails or holes are not permitted. In terms of my planning this means something different than “You’re not allowed to hang a picture there.” How do I respond to this? I make use of the supposed limitations, they become “material.”

You were an artist-in-residence in Krems. What was your experience of the city and in particular the Kunstmeile, which stretches from the Dominikanerkirche in the old town of Krems past the Kunsthalle to the Minoritenplatz square in Stein?

The neighborhood around the AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Niederösterreich studios, the museums, the Kunsthalle, the university campus, and the Stein prison is a world all its own, although the prison exudes an oppressive atmosphere at times. But I enjoyed this environment, I was able to work there in a very focused way. My evening walks through Stein, up into the vineyards and the hills behind Krems were always great. My project actually draws a line conceptually from the Dominikanerkirche past the Mariensäule, a Marian column on the Körnermarkt, to the Kunsthalle, although the aspect of linking Krems and Stein was only of peripheral interest to me.

The Dominikanerkirche is a secularized space and has been a kind of multi-purpose hall for a long time. It has served as a garage for the fire department, a theater, cinema, and museum and is now used as an exhibition and event location. What was your impression when first entering it?

First there was the refreshing coolness, in the extreme summer heat of 2018, then I heard a recording of Gregorian chants emanating from the cloister, part of museumkrems, into the church. I found this distracting. Inside the Dominikanerkirche itself was the Kunsthalle Krems’s summer exhibition, and seeing past Eva Schlegel’s expansive installation required a certain amount of abstracting in order to grasp the space of the church as such and be cognizant of its impact. Experiencing the contrast between the hushed, richly colored, massive basilica and the brightly illuminated choir was of course impressive.

How did you experience this space, its qualities, its weaknesses?

I felt a kind of placelessness and ambivalence. On the one hand you have the fragments of the frescoes, which date back to the early fourteenth century and are still evidence of a “lived” place. On the other,

ansblenden

Teilräume

autonome Ebene

Selbst [das]



the room lacks furnishings, there are also no sculptures or altars present. Such elements, in connection with the architecture, usually give you an idea of the functions a church interior serves. They structure the space and create a hierarchical order that allocates a place to those entering it. Its qualities and weaknesses are less a result of the architecture and its material appearance than the missing, original functions of the church.

What special challenges does a—now secularized—sacral environment present?

Our collective memory is seemingly conditioned in such a way that we only require an architectural shell and a few murals to perceive a place as sacral. Can a secularized environment like that of the former Dominikanerkirche still be called sacred? The Dominikanerkirche in Krems lost its original function in 1786 as a result of secularization. I want my work to illuminate this fact and its divergent history of subsequent use as explicitly as possible. Accordingly, the focus of my project revealed itself to me fairly quickly: “The church that is no longer a church,” and, conversely, “The Kunsthalle that is no longer a Kunsthalle.”

We were introduced to your initial ideas when you took part in the AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Niederösterreich program at the invitation of the ORTE Architecture Network. Could you recap your initial thoughts and steps in appropriating space?

The concept of spatial appropriation is very apt here, and with all my projects this process begins with the first site visit. The “mental constructing” starts immediately. In the Kunsthalle Krems skylight hall, this process was quite straightforward since these kinds of white cube spaces in art institutions always look more or less the same.

I tried to get a feel for what the Dominikanerkirche is like when empty, but this was never possible because something was constantly being set up or taken down for events. That was a problem at first because I was trying to get a sense for how much or how little intervention was needed in order for a work to adequately address the space, to “get things under control.” This got me to ask what it means to feel impelled to start from a completely empty church space. Or to put it another way, why is our culture so preoccupied with filling empty spaces that no longer have a function or no longer produce things with its own, new content?

My answer to this corresponds to how I think about site-specific work: I don't start at a self-referential zero point, in a vacuum, so to speak, but work with and on the contexts and parameters presented to me.

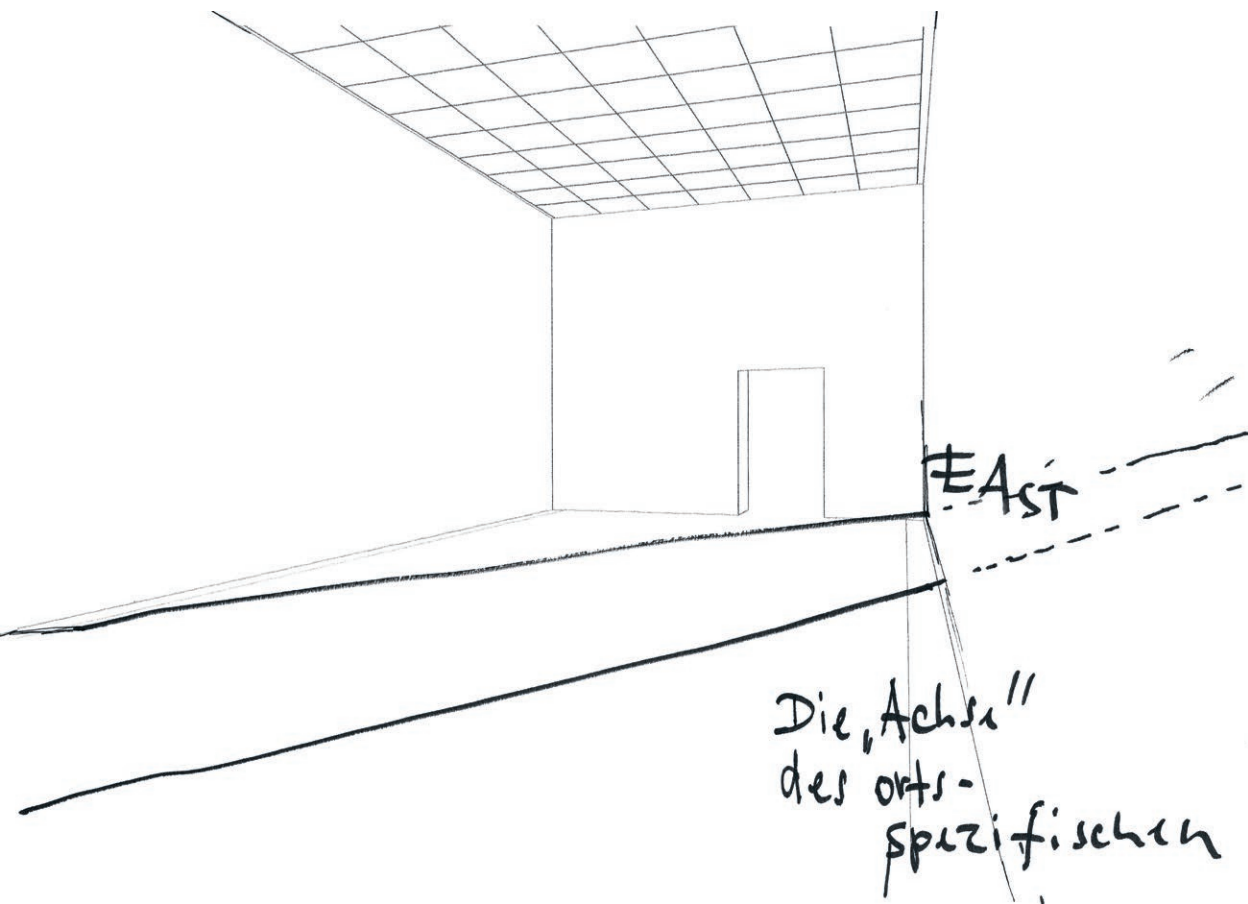
Your exhibition takes place in three very different spatial settings, inside the Dominikanerkirche Krems, at the Mariensäule on the Körnermarkt, and in the Kunsthalle Krems skylight hall. How did you approach this project in three different locations conceptually?

A design process doesn't always develop in a linear way for me, it's also based on trial and error. It's so involved I can only outline it in a reduced form.

I began with thinking about the Dominikanerkirche because creating an art installation there "in opposition" to the existing architecture of the church interior seemed to me to be the simpler task. But I ended up underestimating this because my proven approaches from other projects, such as inscribing a perfect geometric form into the floor plan of the church didn't work here. The church's history is far too complex for a meaningful work to be developed in this way.

Researching the history of the Dominikanerkirche's construction then led to the information that I needed to be able to define the conceptual approach of my work differently here. During the building of the monastery complex, the Dominicans integrated or "docked" existing buildings onto it. As a result of this, it wasn't possible to orient the church precisely to the east and the cloister has a strange trapezoidal shape. By extending the axes of the cloister and of the monastery's oldest structure into the church, i.e. the very architectures that "stood in the way" of the monastery complex achieving a perfect form, gave me the formal bases for my work: the "diagonal traversing" of the basilica and the "realigning" of the central axis of the choir to the east.

In approaching the skylight hall, I first developed a large number of floor plan variations in an effort to find a conceptual link to the Dominikanerkirche. I found this first on a formal level by transferring the eastern "realignment" of the choir onto the Kunsthalle. This created a white spatial axis in the skylight hall, at the center of which I placed a baroque sculpture of the Archangel Michael. A text work in the background of the space, conceived overall as a "black box," completes the setting.



What interventions do you use to link these three spatial settings together?

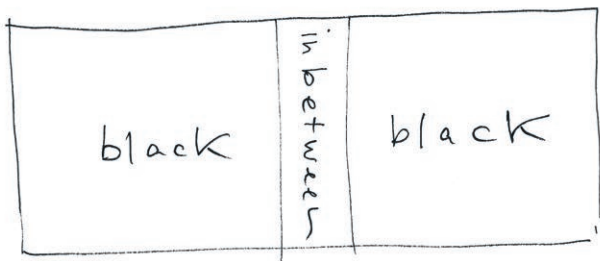
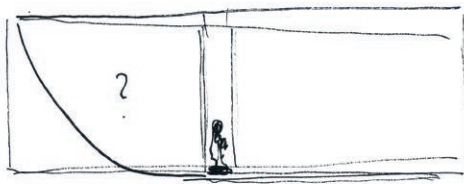
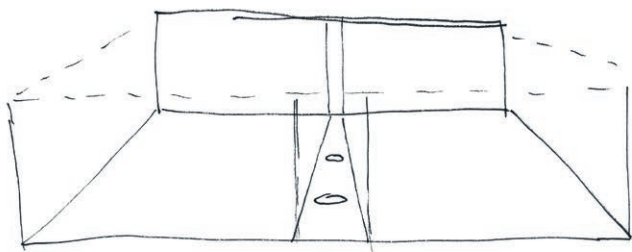
I create this connection on two levels. Firstly architecturally and spatially, which as mentioned was developed out of the floor plan of the monastery complex, whose axes and lines are made visible inside the church. The theme here is the negation of the rigorous axial structure and the staged “realignment” of architecture.

And secondly on an iconographic-conceptual level. This is linked closely to the Mariensäule on the Körnermarkt and its sculptural ensemble by Andreas Krimmer.² One of these originals, a sculpture of the Archangel Michael,³ located today inside museumkremes, I placed inside the Kunsthalle skylight hall. It is flanked by an oversized plot-print of a text work on a free-standing exhibition wall. It features an alphabetized list of all nouns from the essay “Das Dominikanerkloster. Kirche—Kloster—Kreuzgang” (The Dominican Monastery. Church—Convent—Cloister) by art historian Harry Kühnel. The text was a contribution to the extensive exhibition catalog *1000 Jahre Kunst in Krems*⁴ (1000 Years of Art in Krems), published in 1971.

My work method can therefore be described as a shifting of formal and programmatic ideas and concepts from the reference system of contemporary art to that of the church context and vice versa.

How did you come up with the idea of transferring the Archangel Michael to Kunsthalle Krems?

You had brought to my attention historical photos from around 1970, when the church was still used as an exhibition space by the municipal museum at the time. These showed a series of sculptures individually installed inside the pointed arch arcades, including Krimmer’s *Erzengel Michael mit gestürztem Satan* (Archangel Michael Defeating Satan). In the choir, paintings, crosses, and altar fragments were exhibited with chairs positioned in front of them. In the photos, historical documents of an exhibition practice, the works of art appear oddly unrelated and lost in the space, although the church seems to be an adequate space for the works on display that had become placeless as a consequence of secularization. In terms of that presentation, I asked myself how we approach “cultural assets” that are relegated to museums and how we might deal with them differently. Is their factual existence limited to that of cataloged objects, or do they have a contemporary potential, far removed from didactic exigencies and themed exhibitions?



What does it mean to you to present the baroque sculpture at the Kunsthalle? How do you see it situated there?

I'm presenting the fact that it is out of place, because it cannot be located in the Kunsthalle. The origins of bourgeois art institutions and art associations are rooted in society's detachment from a religious order. How they view themselves is closely tied to the ideals of the Enlightenment, to human reason and not to faith. Or can you recognize a kind of faith in art in them?

"Relocating" the original sculpture to the Kunsthalle is only one aspect of this, the other is the "concealing" of its replica on the base of the Mariensäule. Because a causal link exists between the original and the replica, I hide its "double" on the Mariensäule inside a black box. This deconstruction creates a temporary gap in the baroque cityscape that has mutated into a tourist and selfie backdrop. Which also brings up the question of the importance and status of the locations included in *(B)EAST!*

In seeking to situate a baroque sculpture within a contemporary exhibition context, I'm referencing the theories of Robert Morris and Donald Judd. In their critique of twentieth-century European art, they analyzed an incompatibility between the "spaces" of the viewer and the artwork. The Baroque era, on the other hand, symbolized an epoch of art history for them in which this separation of the two spaces did not yet exist.⁵

What is your intention with the text work in the skylight hall?

The text work—the list of words—represents a condensed history of the Dominican monastery. It should not be viewed in isolation because there is a close conceptual link between it and the baroque sculpture; both originate from a church- and art-historical context. However, their "occupation" of the Kunsthalle doesn't form the basis of a curatorial concept, rather they serve as material for an artistic intervention. This distinction is important because it is not about what is shown, but how it is shown.

Two divergent strategies are employed here. On the one hand, I place low-hanging lengths of carpet in front of the black fabric covering the walls of the space in order to create a darkened, stage-like, overall setting. Visitors cannot elude this atmosphere intensification. On the other hand, the "image" of what is created in the space is completely open-ended. This aspect is taken over by the text work and the Archangel Michael. It is my sense and hope that visitors will intuitively

grasp that both elements are misplaced, which is intended to open up a broader way of interpreting them.

What function do you assign to language in the overall context of your work in Krems?

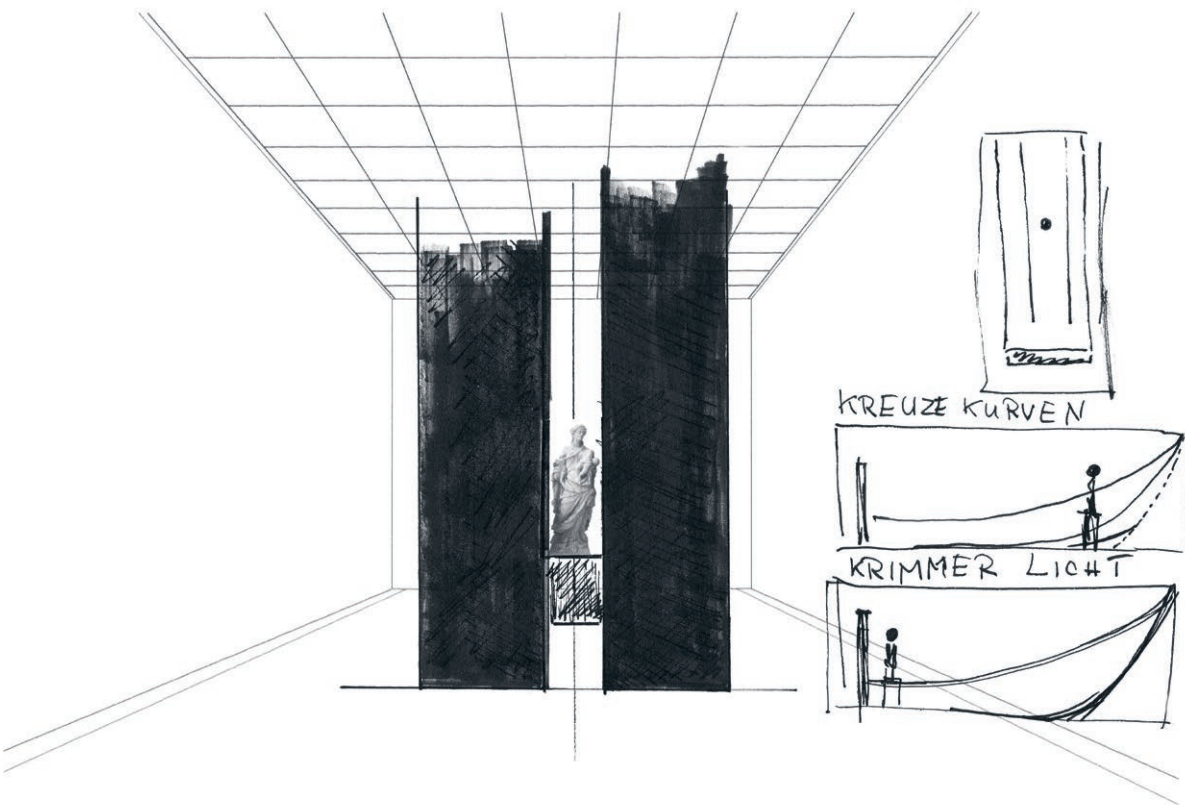
By listing the source text, viewers are made aware of the original work that the word list comes from, and the title of the publication—*1000 Jahre Kunst in Krems*—also points to their interrelationship. Nevertheless, the sequence of words, deprived of their context via a process of reduction and reordering, is completely abstract.

Through this abstraction, the “functionality” of language, in this case every individual word, is made clear. We read the word list and “visualize” it in our imagination or try “spatializing” it. This happens in reverse when looking at, when “reading” the sculpture. We create an image for ourselves, and in our mind or in conversations we search for words that correspond to the image. It is completely open where viewers enter or exit while reading, or which terms their thinking gets “caught” on. My aim is to produce an overlap between the impressions created in the overall space and thus establish a new reference system of viewers, sculpture, language, and space.

You mostly work with very reduced, minimalistic interventions and installations. What interests you about this approach relative to the given space?

I would describe the skylight hall installation as nominally reduced, almost baroque even by my standards. Here I'm deconstructing the myth of the white cube, whose white “appearance” can be understood as being derived from the conception of the sacral. The centrally positioned figure of the archangel and the curves within the space, reminiscent of inverted pier arches or celestial spheres, inform the meaning of the work, creating a kind of “super-space” that counteracts the homogeneous and neutral impetus of the room—the intention, after all, is to negate the interaction between artwork and architecture. The skylight hall as exaggerated *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In the Dominikanerkirche I take the opposite route, here things are “grounded.” The basilica no longer contains a self-referential work of art; with its pillars it occupies a carpeted area with open-top, box-constructions clad in carpet. Church and “work of art” are interpenetrated in such a way that separating the two spaces as such no longer makes sense.



You prefer using black and white in your interventions. What inspired you to work with these colors? What essential meaning does color have in your installations?

I'm not interested in color per se, I use it functionally and contextually. For example, changing lighting conditions cause variances in the bright blue of *A Crystal Lives On* for the stairwell of Kunstverein Hannover, forming a connection to Bruno Taut and his exploration of light.

The use of black and white maximizes how the volume and proportion of a space can be represented. Their combination produces contrasts and reduces things to the essentials, to light and shadow. In concrete terms, I use black to create "cuts" in spaces, create sight lines, or to allow parts of spaces to recede into the background.

How do you choose your materials for a project? You mainly work with fabric and carpet. Why do you like working with such soft materials in spaces?

I don't associate carpet as a material with any particular theme, like the aspect of home furnishings. In most of my projects, carpet is simply a floor covering whose purpose is to highlight the functional aspect of being able to enter my installations.

However, since the Dominikanerkirche and the skylight hall can only be entered with the provided slippers or in socks, a form of ritualization takes place. Here the sense of touch, feeling your feet on the soft carpet, is part of the work. The hanging strips of carpet provide a haptic aspect because you can touch them with your hands when moving through the space. I am working with curtains as a space-dividing and space-delimiting element for the first time in this form. A "fixed" structure of wooden panels or drywall elements seemed inappropriate to me and would also not have been technically feasible. On the other hand, the molleton, a fabric used for stage curtains, has a light and ephemeral quality; it alludes to the origin of the word wall in German: *Wand* (wall) is akin to *Leinwand* (canvas) and *Gewand* (vestment).

How did you come up with the exhibition title (B)EAST!? What meaning does it have for the project?

"EAST" is a critical term for working site-specifically. Early Christian churches face east, although aligning structures with the cardinal



Carpet - Curves

tube -
space

directions has much older origins worldwide. “BEAST,” in focusing on the beast, negates the emphasis of the sculpture’s title, *Erzengel Michael mit gestürztem Satan* (Archangel Michael Defeating Satan). The beast has a human face—who or what is it actually? For me, combining the words into (B)EAST! is an expression of an ambivalence that, as a linguistic and visual extension of the work, is intended to influence how the spatial structure is perceived.

What is your intention in concealing a space with fabric? Do you see this as a way of reinterpreting or expanding the space?

“Reinterpreting” and “expanding the space” only partially describe my working method. The buildings I work with remain what they are. What I do is reveal their structures and attempt to deal with the pre-existing architecture as if it wasn’t a static form.

Some of the curtains hang freely in the space, so I wouldn’t speak of concealment. The frescoes on the walls and the church’s pillars are therefore only partially or temporarily hidden—depending on the viewers’ position. I see this as a continuation of what has always happened in the church. During the Baroque era, the old capitals of the columns were removed and replaced by “contemporary” ones. Further “modernizations” removed the half-columns from the pillars of the nave to make space for frescoes. In the nineteenth century, wall pillars and frescoes were removed in the choir in order to install a theatrical rigging system for the theater. During subsequent uses, parts of the space were repartitioned again and again. The Dominikanerkirche’s “old contents” were repeatedly and continue to be overwritten. Today there’s the wine fair, the children’s theater, the reading, the Christmas market, and contemporary art.

My work reflects these processes by temporarily withdrawing from view art-historically relevant details and in recreating old partial sections of the space by curtaining off the choir and the aisles.

Do you think of yourself as an architect?

No, although I work in and with space and, as with architecture, it is my material. Incidentally, I would not have answered this question so succinctly in the past. Of course, this has to do with finding your identity as an artist and transcending borders. Functionality is still seen as an essential distinguishing feature between art and architecture—esthetic edification versus function. Undermining this is an important aspect of my work.

What did you find particularly exciting about creating a work for Krems, what were the challenges?

I started preparing for the project in September 2018. Planning such a complex work follows a kind of suspenseful arc, which was then suddenly interrupted by the corona crisis and postponed as a result. That was a strange experience, I think for everyone involved.

The biggest challenge was creating a relationship between the spaces. The skylight room was more difficult for me—so much has already been said about and done with the white cube. Since I create my work on the computer, in sketches and models, I'm always curious about the end result. Only once its realized do I understand the work with all its consequences and connotations for the space.

How are visitors integrated into the approach and realization of the project?

The visitors are the main characters in my “spatial plays.” This results from the fact that the architectural spaces I work with physically “encompass” them. I use dimensions and proportions in my works, so that they can be projected onto the people experiencing the space and that the process of creating the work can be apprehended both physically and spatially. In being traceable artistic decisions, logic in space versus expressivity, I see a connection between my work and Minimal and Conceptual art.

How important to you is the visitor's movement in the space?

It is fundamental to my work. The movement of visitors both physically and mentally is what actually constitutes the sculpture. My goal is that this movement activates the passive architectural space and thus changes its qualities.

What is your approach in providing information to the visitors? Are there explanatory texts?

This conversation provides insight into my thinking. In general, I would say that using language to explain art has its limits. For example, there's no definitive way to respond to the question of situating the sculpture of Archangel Michael in the Kunsthalle. I would also avoid providing an answer here. Instead, these and other questions should be left to visitors.

light

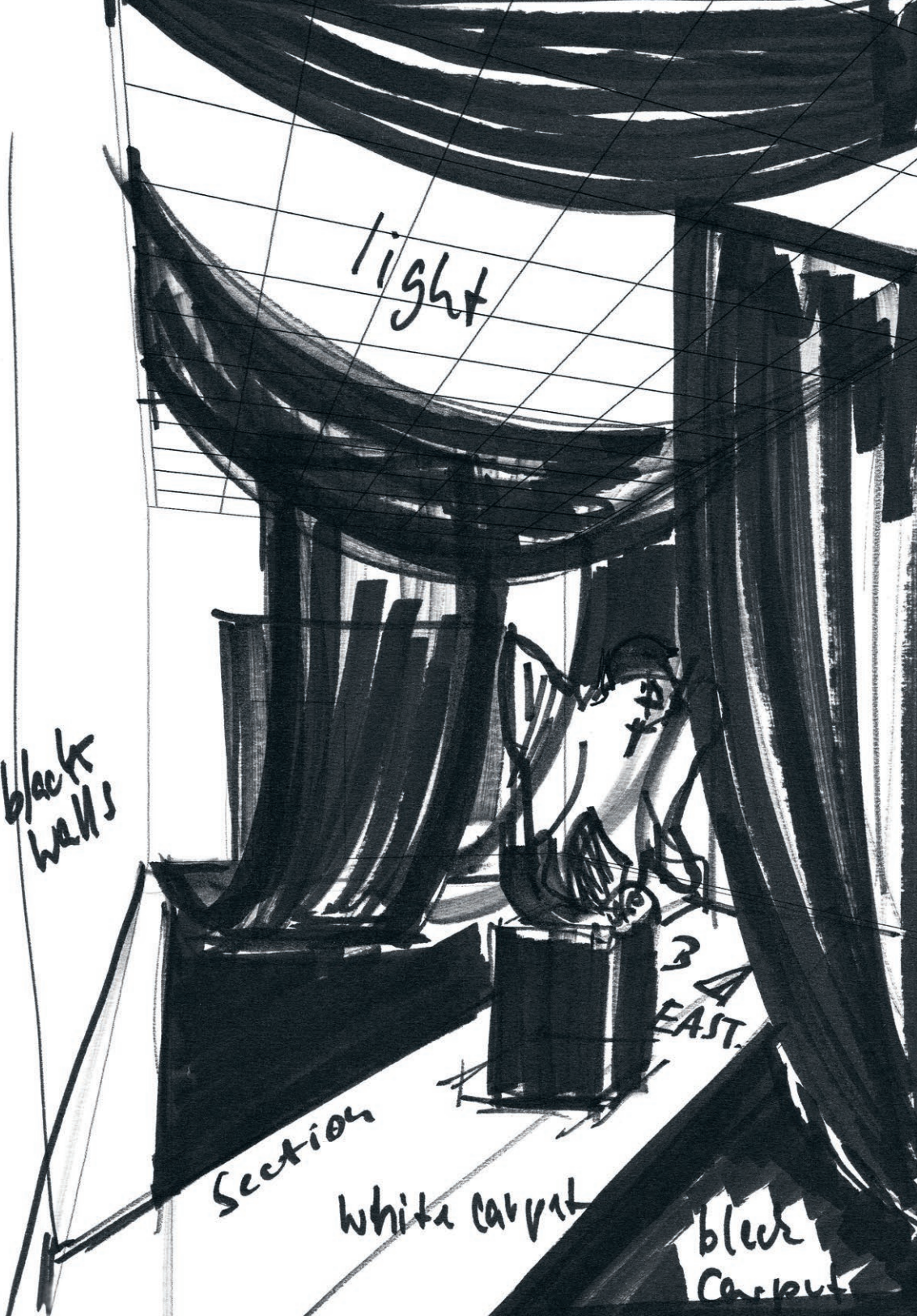
black
walls

3
4
EAST.

Section

white carpet

black
carpet



The nature of your art is very project- and time-oriented. Once an exhibition is over, only the photographic documentation of your work remains. How do you deal with this?

This temporary aspect of course creates a few problems. There is a lot of effort that goes into my installations, and at times it seems disproportionate to me to take them down it after a few weeks or months. This also influences the choice of materials. They have to be light and easy to use, and both carpets and curtains should be recycled. The photographic documentation is also very involved and has a kind of work character. I photograph most of my projects myself, and I also plan the sequence of images for the documentation. The essence of my work is that only images and the memories of viewers remain; this is something I accept.

Which spaces would you still like to realize a project in and why?

When I started out working artistically, spaces couldn't be "empty" enough. Particularly exciting were settings configured around modernist ideals. This has changed. Currently I think there is a lot of potential in architectures with complex histories.

This interview with Christian Helwing was conducted by Helene Fehrer, Andreas Hoffer, Magdalena Robson and Florian Steininger.

- 1 Friederike Wappler, "Ein Denken des Körpers, das sich selbst reflektiert, gerät ins Rotieren," in *Bruce Nauman. Versuchsanordnungen. Werke 1965–1994*, exh. cat. (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1998), 83–94, here: 91.
- 2 The original sculptures by Andreas Krimmer, which are in the archives of museumkrems, have been replaced by freely modeled replicas.
- 3 *Erzengel Michael mit gestürztem Satan*, after 1688, sandstone, height 182 cm. Andreas Krimmer (1665–1735) was a master of Krems baroque sculpture.
- 4 Harry Kühnel, "Das Dominikanerkloster. Kirche – Kloster – Kreuzgang," in *1000 Jahre Kunst in Krems*, exh. cat. (Krems: Dominikanerkloster Krems, 1971), 133–156.
- 5 See Arie Hartog, "Erzählende Räume. Christian Helwing: Marcks und das Museum," in *Christian Helwing. Marcks und das Museum*, exh. cat. (Bremen: Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, 2015), 38–46, here 39.