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# **OVAL OFFICE**

Wolfgang Wirth

Heba Y. Amin | Tony Cokes | Diane Esnault & Raul Walch | Suzanne Lacy | Howardena Pindell

Concept by Wolfgang Wirth

Curated by Petra Poelzl

29.05. - 31.07.2021



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### THE OVAL OFFICE

Wolfgang Wirth's exhibition concept OVAL OFFICE starts out from the office of the same name in Washington, D.C., which the artist sees as embodying places where the dynamics of political representation become manifest. Together with works by Heba Y. Amin, Tony Cokes, Diane Esnault & Raul Walch, Suzanne Lacy and Howardena Pindell, Wirth's large-format paintings create a permeable space that questions and challenges seemingly universal mechanisms of power.

The official representative office of the President of the United States is located in the West Wing of the White House. Since the 1930s, the interior has been renewed after each change in president: furniture, floor coverings, artworks and busts are then replaced. While Trump grew a forest of flags behind his desk and chose a painting of the controversial President Andrew Jackson (seventh president of the United States, 1829 - 1837), Joe Biden has installed busts of Rosa Parks (civil rights activist, 1913 - 2005) and Martin Luther King (civil rights activist, 1929 -1968). The staging of the space thus suggests the political stance of the respective president and becomes a backdrop for those working there: John F. Kennedy together with his children at play (1962), the telephone conversation between US President Nixon and the astronauts of Apollo 11 (1969), or Kanye West's visit to Donald Trump (2018). Images emerge, are transported by the media, and inscribe themselves into the collective memory. I regard the Oval Office as a kind of stage-like space that is only unusual in its shape. Moreover, far-reaching political decisions are made there, which are based on a different ideological stance depending on the individual president. The space is like a territory in which a multitude of different inscriptions overlay one another and realities intersect.<sup>1</sup>

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On the one hand, Wirth's examination of the representative office space's geometric form is reflected in the newly produced series OO-1 to 7; on the other hand, it becomes visible in the true-to-scale replica of the Oval Office's floor (75.8 m2), which – similar to a stage construction – inscribes itself into large areas of the gallery (95 m<sup>2</sup>).

In his large-format paintings conceived for the exhibition, the artist abstracts and multiplies the elliptical form – and brings together two different characters of work: sometimes, the form is filled with subtle colour gradients demanding our intense perception and enclosed by regularly worked, radial, two-colour linear segments; elsewhere there is a St Andrew's cross pattern inside the ellipse, which is surrounded by delicate pastel surfaces.

Due to their colour scheme – blue, red, black, white – the stricter sections resemble the deconstruction of national symbols; meanwhile, the pastel-coloured surfaces develop a pull, almost as if another possible world was opening up behind or within them.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Wirth in conversation with Petra Poelzl, 27.05.2021, Neue Galerie Innsbruck.

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I find that painting is capable of creating spaces of possibility. The colour gradients that I use in these paintings do not end, at least in my imagination, at the respective edge of the picture; they can be imagined as continuing into infinite, vaulting chromatic spaces.<sup>2</sup>

When our gaze wanders further into the room, it quickly becomes apparent that the atmosphere emanating from the paintings extends into the exhibition space. Freedom and trepidation can be felt simultaneously. The oval-shaped wooden floor almost seems like a cinematic stage that has to be entered. While the paintings demanded notional immersion, the geometric form inscribed into the floor creates another threshold that actually needs to be crossed physically; while at the other end of the ellipse, two more paintings – flickering, shimmering and vibrating – are already unfolding their maelstrom-effect.

Allowing ourselves to be guided by this pull, another space is entered – one that is fully occupied by the elliptical floor construction. In this space, a void has been created deliberately – i.e. the floor area of the representational space without furniture and décor – and set to zero point "in order to imagine and evoke alternatives to the political attitudes and content represented there up until now".<sup>3</sup> A permeable space is created, in which fragments of realities, imaginations and possibilities by the artists Heba Y. Amin, Tony Cokes, Suzanne Lacy and Howardena Pindell are combined and interwoven to oscillate with Wirth's paintings,

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

### Visitor text

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the conceptual exhibition architecture, chosen books and the flag designed especially for the exhibition by Diane Esnault and Raul Walch.

Together, these artistic works create a third space in the sense of Homi K. Bhaba, one of the most important postcolonial literary and cultural theorists of our time.<sup>4</sup> A third space can emerge wherever people with different knowledge or from different cultures meet and discuss meaning and content. The core characteristic of a third space is that new content and cultural differences are being created constantly. These renegotiated meanings in the third space are not set in stone either: they are dynamic, performative, changeable and temporal. However, the contents negotiated in a third space are not necessarily better, more correct or freer of contradictions than others. They simply represent alternative constructions and ways of thinking – and do not appear fixed and rigid but instead flexible and permeable.

Text: Petra Poelzl

<sup>4</sup> Homi K. Bhaba: Die Verortung der Kultur, Tübingen (2000).

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# TONY COKES Evil.16 (Torture.Musik) (2009-2011)

Video (color, sound), 16:27 min

Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles und Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

*"Evil.16: Torture.Musik* animates excerpts from an article by Moustafa Bayoumi that was originally published in The Nation magazine on December 26, 2005. While surveying the topic I found this article to be a key and cogent text in a body of reportage and scholarship devoted to the military use of music and sound as a weapon, a form of psychological manipulation, or torture. The soundtrack features a playlist of songs or artists documented as being used in U.S. spy-ops and torture programs." Tony Cokes

Twisted Sister / Wanna Rock (1984) AC/DC Hells Bells (1980) Alice Cooper No More Mister Nice Guy (1973) The Bee Gees Stayin' Alive (1977) Christina Aguilera Dirty (2002) Don McLean American Pie (1971) Linda Ronstadt You're No Good (1974) Martha & the Vandellas Nowhere to Run (1967) Barney the Dinosaur / Love You (1992) Metallica Enter Sandman (1991) Britney Spears Baby One More Time (1998) Bruce Springsteen Born in the USA (1984) 8

David Grey Babylon (1998) Guns N' Roses Welcome to the Jungle (1987) Nancy Sinatra These Boots are Made for Walking (1966) Nine Inch Nails March of the Pigs (1994) Queen We Will Rock You (1977) Black Sabbath Paranoid (1970) Drowning Pool Bodies (2001) Sesame Street theme Mount Kimbie, Maybes (James Blake Remix) (2010)

Direction: Tony Cokes Concept, Design + Edit: Tony Cokes Research: Erin Sullivan Text: Moustafa Bayoumi Disco Inferno, *The Nation* (26.12.2005)

# HEBA Y. AMIN The Master's Tools I (restaging of Herman Soergel's portrait) (2018)

Archival B/W print, 86 x 110cm Courtesy of the artist.

OPERATION SUNKEN SEA is an attempt to flip a historical narrative and to place myself at its center as a radical act. I recently discovered Atlantropa, which was a proposal for a giant engineering project to drain the Mediterranean Sea, devised by a German architect named Herman Sörgel in the 1920s. He believed that uniting Europe and Africa as one continent could create the resources needed to rival the economic power of Asia and the Americas. It was a techno-utopian idea, typical of the early twentieth century, when people really believed that technology could solve the world's problems—or Europe's, at least.<sup>5</sup>

Invested in the power of technology to generate a new future for humankind, OPERATION SUNKEN SEA initiates a large-scale infrastructural intervention unparalleled in scale: a new era of human progress will be initiated through the draining and rerouting of the Mediterranean Sea to converge Africa and Europe into one supercontinent. The operation promises to bring an end to terrorism and the migration crisis, provide employment and energy alternatives and confront the rise of fascism. The project instills a fervent movement towards technocracy which takes a proactive stance towards the reparation of Africa and the Middle East by relocating the Mediterranean Sea within the African continent.

Referencing and expanding upon early twentieth century techno-utopian visions, OPERATION SUNKEN SEA is an ongoing research project and intervention by Heba Y. Amin that investigates significant transformations in territorial constructs and their impact on new geopolitical alliances and global politics. By shifting the paradigm in a time of neo-fascist necropolitics, the project responds to the contemporary moment of political uncertainty in Europe, the unrest and collapse of nation-states in the Middle East and the neo-liberal failure of globalization in Africa. The operation – mimicking languages (political, architectural and cultural) of fascist regimes – instigates a new vision for Africa and the Middle East by pinpointing what could be attained by and for those most affected by the wars waged for oil, resources and power in the last century.

<sup>5</sup> Heba Y. Amin in Artforum: Heba Y. Amin discusses her work in the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, June 05, 2018.

## SUZANNE LACY Making the Crystal Quilt (1998)

Video (color. sound) 48:00 min Edited by Michelle Baughan

<sup>10</sup> Courtesy the artist

The Crystal Quilt (1985-1987) is one of several works by Suzanne Lacy that explore the experience of aging, and in this case how aging women are represented in media and public opinion. The project was developed over a two-year period during which Lacy created a series of events and classes, including a lecture series, film screenings, and a mass media campaign in collaboration with almost two dozen artists and scores of volunteers. A key part of the project was an Older Women's Leadership Series designed by Sharon Anderson, a series that brought 35 women leaders from across the state together in seminars at the Humphrey Institute.

This extensive research process culminated in a large-scale performance installation on Mother's Day in the middle of a Philip Johnsondesigned shopping complex with a crystalline roof. The performance featured 430 Minnesota women over the age of 60 seated at tables on an 82-square-foot rug designed to resemble a quilt. Over loudspeakers a pre-recorded sound work mixed personal observations and reminiscences by 72 women with social analysis about the un-utilized potential of the elderly. A loon cry or thunderclap rang through the space at ten-minute intervals, signaling the women participants to change the position of their hands on the table, thus changing the design of the quilt. At the end of the performance, an audience of almost 3000 people flooded the stage bearing hand-painted scarves. As they greeted the triumphant performers, they transformed the austere order of the quilt design into a crazy quilt of color.

While The Crystal Quilt performance took place in 1987, the project spanned 1985-1987. And the documentary was completed in 1998.

**Participating artists:** include Nancy Dennis, Sharon Anderson, Phyllis Jane Rose, Phyllis Salzberg and Judy Kepes.

Quilt design: Miriam Shapiro

Scarves: Julie A.

Soundtrack: Susan Stone

**Choreography:** Sage Cowles, and PBS live broadcast produced by Emily Goldberg.

**Sponsored by:** the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), the Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs Reflective Leadership Program, KTCA Public Television and the Minnesota Board of Aging, with cooperation from the Walker Art Center and At the Foot of the Mountain Theater.

## HOWARDENA PINDELL Free, White and 21 (1980)

Video (color, sound), 12:15 min Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery, New York Video

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Pindell grew up when the South was still lawfully segregated and racism was rampant nationwide. She was 21 when the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964. In *Free, White and 21*, she illustrates the stark divide between black and white Americans by appearing as both herself and as a white woman. The video opens with a glancing shot of the artist in whiteface and wearing a blond wig, in the guise of a white woman from the 1950s or 60s. This character is the free, white, 21-year-old to which its title refers, who appears throughout the video, discounting Pindell's searing experiences with statements like, "you really must be paranoid," and "you won't exist until we validate you."

When she comes onscreen as herself, Pindell first recounts the abusive racism that her mother endured, and then talks viewers through the milestones of her own life—including elementary and high school, college, and young adulthood—via the discrimination that made her advancement such a struggle. At one point, she peels a translucent film off of her face, as if to reference the facial masks and other cosmetic products marketed to women to beautify and transform their looks. But this film has not changed the artist's looks, and especially not the color of her skin. Instead, it serves to re-emphasize the fact that they were transformed by a white-dominated American society—into a liability.

### DIANE ESNAULT & RAUL WALCH Squatting the Ruins of our Utopia (2021)

Acrylics on flag fabric, 116 x 520 cm Courtesy of the artists

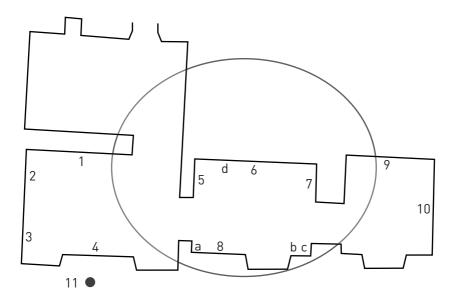
The Neue Galerie Innsbruck is located in the Imperial Palace (Hofburg) in Innsbruck, a former residence of the House of Habsburg. With "Squatting the Ruins of our Utopia", in a first-time collaboration of the two artists Esnault & Walch, they have produced a flag that dispenses with any representative symbols. Positioned in front of the Hofburg, it projects into the streets of Innsbruck. There are fantastic patterns on the front, and the word IMAGINE is written on the reverse.

> Imagine there's no countries It isn't hard to do Nothing to kill or die for And no religion, too Imagine all the people Living life in peace... You...

> You may say I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one I hope someday you'll join us And the world will be as one

> Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can No need for greed or hunger A brotherhood of man Imagine all the people Sharing all the world... You...

### John Lennon, Imagine (1971)



#### **R00M** 1

- 1 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-4 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm
- 2 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-3 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm
- 3 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-2 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm
- 4 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-1 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm

#### **R00M 2**

- 5 **TONY COKES** | *Evil. 16 (Torture.Musik)* (2009-2011) HD-Video, colour, sound, 16:27 min., Edition 1/5, 2AP, (TCo.012.1) Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
- 6 HEBA Y. AMIN | The Master's Tools I (restaging of Herman Soergel's portrait) (2018) Archival B/W print, 86 x 110cm Courtesy the artist
- 7 SUZANNE LACY | Making the Crystal Quilt (1998) Video (color, sound) 48 min, Edited by Michelle Baughan Courtesy the artist
- 8 **HOWARDENA PINDELL** | *Free, White and 21* (1980) Video (color, sound), 12:15 min. Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery, New York
- a A-D\*
- b E-H\*
- c H-M\*
- d M-W\*

#### **ROOM 3**

- 9 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-6 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm
- 10 **WOLFGANG WIRTH** | 00-5 (2021) Oil on canvas, 190 x153 cm

#### Flagpole in front of Neuen Galerie Innsbruck

11 **DIANE ESNAULT & RAUL WALCH** | Squatting the Ruins of our Utopia (2021) Acrylics on flag fabric, 116 x 520 cm Courtesy the artists

\* Books in alphabetical order by first name.

**WOLFGANG WIRTH** has been a member of the Tyrolean Artists Association since 2004 and lives and works in Vienna. In his artistic practice, he explores the limits of current painting and negotiates socio-political issues in the medium of painting itself - as a material system of discourse and reflection.

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Representation of power and the decoding of its underlying patterns are just as much a topic of his work as the examination of territories and political spaces, their borders and the variants of their crossing, displacement and dissolution.

In his large-format oil paintings, subtle colour gradients and sharpedged, coloured (fragments of) patterns together with conscious blanks that show the priming of the canvases create spaces of possibility for the mind and trapdoors for the eyes.

His work was most recently shown in the Stadtgalerie Museumspavillon, Salzburg (2021), the Museu Nacional de História Natural e da Ciência, Lisbon (2019/20) and in the Rabalderhaus, Schwaz (2017). Further exhibitions and participations at Galeria Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon (2014, 2018, 2021); Galería Magda Bellotti, Madrid (2012, 2016); Charim Gallery, Vienna (2006, 2009, 2013); Gallery Lokal\_30, Warsaw (2006, 2009); at Traklhaus, Gallery 5020 and the Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; Tresor/Kunstforum Bank Austria, Vienna. **HEBA Y. AMIN** is a multi-media artist and Professor of Art at the Stuttgart State Academy for Art and Design. She is the co-founder of the Black Athena Collective, curator of visual art for the MIZNA journal, and currently sits on the editorial board of the Journal of Digital War.

**TONY COKES** lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, where he serves as Professor in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Recent solo exhibitions include CIRCA, London (2021); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona (2020); ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts, Brussels (2020).

**DIANE ESNAULT** is a textile designer and artist living in Berlin. She works on versatile textile-based projects for costume design, scenography, vexillography and large scale fabric installations. Over years, Diane Esnault developed long term collaborations with different cross-disciplinary artists, such as Claudia Hill and Raul Walch.

**RAUL WALCH** is a visual artist living and working in Berlin. He studied sculpture at the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee and completed his studies in Olafur Eliasson's class at University of the Arts Berlin. Subsequently, he was a fellow at the Institut für Raumexperimente. Walch is a board member of the initiative Die Vielen e.V. and the Berlin artists' association bbk berlin. Currently he is teaching at the international MFA-Program "Public Art and New Artistic Strategies" at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. **SUZANNE LACY** is renowned as a pioneer in socially engaged and public performance art. Her installations, videos, and performances deal with sexual violence, rural and urban poverty, incarceration, labor and aging. Lacy's large-scale projects span the globe, including England, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, Ireland and the U.S. She is a professor at

the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California and a resident artist at 18th Street Arts Center.

**HOWARDENA PINDELL** studied painting at Boston University and Yale University. The artist's fascination with gridded, serialized imagery, along with surface texture appears throughout her oeuvre. Even in her later, more politically charged work, Pindell reverts to these thematic focuses in order to address social issues of homelessness, AIDS, war, genocide, sexism, xenophobia, and apartheid. Adrienne Maree Brown: *Emergent Strategy. Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Chico/Edinburgh 2017.

Adrienne Maree Brown: *Pleasure Activism. The Politica of Feeling Good*, Chico/ Edinburgh 2019.

Adrienne Maree Brown: We Will Not Cancel Us. And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice, Chico/Edinburgh 2020.

Angela Y. Davis: Freiheit ist ein ständiger Kampf, Münster 2020.

Armen Avanessian: Realismus Jetzt. Spekulative Philosophie und Metaphysik für das 21. Jahrhundert, Berlin 2013.

Catherine Morris/Rujeko Hockley: *We wanted a revolution. Black radical Women 1965–85*, Brooklyn 2017.

Chantal Mouffe: Über das Politische. Wider die kosmopolitische Illusion, Frankfurt am Main 2007.

Christine Bruckbauer/Patricia K. Triki: *The Turn. Art Practices in Post-Spring Societies*, Wien 2016.

David Steinbacher: Plenarsäle. Plenary halls, Wörgl 2012.

Denkfabrik: Verbündet Euch! Für eine bunte solidarische und freie Gesellschaft, Hamburg 2021.

Emilia Roig: Why We Matter. Das Ende der Unterdrückung, Berlin 2021.

**Florian Malzacher:** *Truth is concrete. A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, **o.O. 2014.** 

Florian Malzacher: Gesellschaftsspiele. Politisches Theater heute, Berlin 2020.

Frantz Fanon: Die Verdammten dieser Erde. Vorwort von Jean-Paul Sartre, Frankfurt am Main 2018.

Giorgio Agamben: An welchen Punkt stehen wir? Die Epidemie als Politik, Wien 2021.

Guido Barbujani: Die Erfindung der Rassen. Wissenschaft gegen Rassismus, Berlin 2021.

20 Hamed Abdel-Samad: Schlacht der Identitäten. 20 Thesen zum Rassismus – und wie wir ihm die Macht nehmen, München 2021.

Hannah Arendt: Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft, o.O. 2019.

Hannah Arendt: Macht und Gewalt, München 2019.

Hannah Arendt: Über das Böse. Eine Vorlesung zu Fragen der Ethik, München 2021.

Hannah Arendt: Wahrheit und Lüge in der Politik, München 2019.

Hannah Arendt: Was heißt persönliche Verantwortung in einer Diktatur?, München 2020.

Homi K. Bhaba: Die Verortung der Kultur, Tübingen 2020.

Jacques Rancière: Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien, Berlin 2008.

Jana J. Haeckel/Christiane Krejs/Petra Poelzl: Performing the Border. Perspektiven des Widerstands, Wien 2017.

Jared Diamond: Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, London 2011.

Jarett Kobek: Ich hasse dieses Internet, Frankfurt am Main 2016.

Johannes Bellermann: *Gramscis politisches Denken. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 2021.

Jonas Lüscher/Michael Zichy: Der populistische Planet. Berichte aus einer Welt in Aufruhr, München 2021.

Lydia Haider: Und wie wir hassen! 15 Hetzreden, Wien 2020.

Marcus Quent: Absolute Gegenwart, Berlin 2016.

Melodie Michelberger: Body Politics, Hamburg 2021.

Michael Foucault: Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses, Frankfurt am Main 1993.

Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri: Assembly. Die neue demokratische Ordnung, Frankfurt am Main 2018.

Michael Lüders: Wer den Wind sät. Was westliche Politik im Orient anrichtet, München 2016.

Nikolaus Kuhnert/Anh-Linh Ngo/Günther Uhlig/ Arch+. Zeitschrift für Architektur und Urbanismus: *Rechte Räume. Bericht einer Europareise*, Berlin 2019 [52. Jahrgang].

Noam Chomsky/Emran Feroz: Kampf oder Untergang! Warum wir gegen die Herren der Menschheit aufstehen müssen, Frankfurt/Main 2018.

Octavia E. Butler: Parable of the Sower, o.O. 2019.

Peter Volgger: Von den Wunderkammern zum Cyberspace. Fantasie und Wahnsinn in Architektur, Medien und Politik, Berlin 2021.

Raul Walch: Atlas of Disquiet, o.O. 2019.

Raul Walch: *It* 's a great pressure to be here, Bielefeld/Berlin 2019.

Rustom Bharucha: Terror and Performance, Abingdon/New York 2014.

Sophie Passmann: Alte weisse Männer. Ein Schlichtungsversuch, Köln 2019.

Srećko Horvat/Slavoj Žižek: *Was will Europa? Rettet uns vor den Rettern*, Hamburg 2013.

Stefan Weidner: Ground Zero. 9/11 und die Geburt der Gegenwart, München 2021.

Stephan Bierling: America first. Donald Trump im weissen Haus. Eine Bilanz, München 2020.

Susanne Scharnowski: Heimat. Geschichte eines Missverständnisses, Darmstadt 2019.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: The beautiful Struggle. Der Sound der Strasse, München 2021.

Tarkib Bagdad Festival für Zeitgenössische Kunst: Programmheft Tarkib Bagdad Festival für Zeitgenössische Kunst 2018, o.O. 2018.

Unsichtbares Komitee: Der kommende Aufstand, Hamburg 2010.

Walter Benjamin: Das Passagen-Werk, Vol. 1 & 2, Frankfurt am Main 1982.

Credits

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CONCEPT | Wolfgang Wirth CURATOR | Petra Poelzl HEAD OF PRODUCTION | Cornelia Reinisch-Hofmann TECHNICS | Severin Sonnewend EXHIBITION DESIGN | Paul Irmann & Luis Navarro SUPERVISION & ASSISTANCE | Nadine Blaas & Mirjam Miller



GREENE NAFTALI ZILBERMAN

Garth Greenan Gallery



#### Kunstpavillon: Wednesday – Friday 12.00 – 18.00 & Saturday 11.00 – 15.00 Neue Galerie: Wednesday – Friday 12.00 – 17.00 & Saturday 11.00 – 15.00 Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen: on request.

