

OTTO MUEHL: Art at the Abyss

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OTTO MUEHL. ART AND CONTRADICTION

To exhibit the art of Otto Muehl means to offer an Austrian perspective on international art history. As a co-founder of Vienna Actionism, Muehl taps into central trends of his time—from Abstract Expressionism and Informal Painting through material art to the expansion of the concept of art into action and performance. He radicalizes these impulses and develops from them an art that is as distinctive as it is unsettling.

Muehl is also one of the most controversial figures in Austrian postwar history. His work has influenced artists far beyond Austria's borders and anticipated key developments in performance and body art. However, as the founder and leader of the Friedrichshof Commune, he also traumatized people and abused his power. In 1991, Muehl was rightfully charged and sentenced to seven years in prison for sexual abuse of minors and other offenses.

An exhibition of his work must neither allow the significance of his art to be overshadowed by his crimes nor relativize the crimes by the significance of his art. For this reason, the selection of works was made with particular care. The exhibition presents Muehl's works as works of art—not as illustrations of his biography, not as documents of the commune, and not as evidence of his crimes. Works that depict victims of his sexual abuse and could today lead to further trauma for the victims were deliberately not included.

Unlike earlier retrospectives, this exhibition focuses on a few key groups of works. The history of the commune is not ignored but is distinguished from the art-historical analysis. The focus is first and foremost on Muehl's art of the 1960s. His path leads from Actionist painting through material paintings and the destruction of the traditional panel painting to sculptures made of rubble and debris. Muehl turns the acts of tearing, spilling, deforming, and destroying into artistic processes. They echo a generational experience: the material and moral devastation of Europe caused by war and National Socialism.

His works also revolve around a deeply pessimistic view of humanity. Beneath the thin veneer of civilization lie suppressed instincts, aggressions, sexual desires, cruelty, and destructive rage. In Muehl's work, human beings appear defiled, sullied, stripped of their dignity and their social mask. His art thus becomes an expression of a pessimistic anthropology of the 20th century. This pessimistic stance towards human co-habitation creates a stark contradiction to Muehl's later aspirations associated with the commune in the 1970s: of all people, the artist whose work reveals so little trust in humanity believes in the possibility of bringing forth new human beings through a radically transformed way of communal life. However, this communal utopia of liberation increasingly gives way to a hierarchical system with Muehl himself at its center. The utopia turns into domination and abuse of power.

Perhaps this is one of the key insights of this exhibition: Muehl's early art is more complex, more contradictory, and ultimately more perceptive than his later social utopia. While the latter fails in its claim to be able to change people, his art reveals the contradictions inherent in human nature.

THE FREEDOM OF RESEARCH AND THE PROTECTION OF THOSE AFFECTED

This exhibition comes with a special responsibility for the museum. In dealing with Otto Muehl, two equally valid concerns come into conflict: the protection of those affected as well as their personal rights and the freedom of art, scholarship, and historical research. One must not be pitted against the other.

For this reason, the exhibition does not feature any works in which victims are recognizable. At the same time, works of art, historical documents, and archival materials that have been published for decades must, as a matter of principle, remain open to scholarly research and museum-based examination. In doing so, it is also important to defend the autonomy of art: A work of art is not limited to the biography or the moral judgment of its creator but possesses its own aesthetic and historical reality. If such material is also denied access and presentation, even though it neither depicts those affected nor violates their personal rights – the freedom of research comes under pressure.

A democratic society must guarantee both: the protection of the individual and the opportunity to examine and bring to light even the disturbing, contradictory, and morally fraught chapters of its history. Remembrance requires consideration – but it also requires learning from the past.

OTTO MUEHL: A LIFE AT THE ABYSS

Otto Muehl was born in 1925 in Grodnau, Burgenland, and grew up in the neighboring town of Gols. Between 1943 and 1945, he served as a Wehrmacht soldier in World War II.

He was taken prisoner during the final year of the war and remained an opponent of National Socialism for the rest of his life. In 1952, Muehl passed the teaching certification exam in German and history and studied art education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In the 1950s and 1960s, he worked as an art teacher and art therapist.

In 1960, as part of his first solo exhibition at the *Galerie Junge Generation* in Vienna, Muehl presented geometric-Cubist paintings. That same year, he rented the Perinetkeller in the 20th district as a studio, which, two years later, became the birthplace of Vienna Actionism, as it was the venue for the first actions. Beginning in 1961, Muehl turned his attention to the materiality of painting and expanded his practice to spatial objects.

Together with Hermann Nitsch and Adolf Frohner, he laid the foundation for Vienna Actionism in 1962 with the action *Blutorgel (Blood Organ)*. Numerous material actions followed, in which Muehl poured, stained, and soiled the culturally and materially sterile body. His actions often aimed to transgress moral and aesthetic boundaries and to push the limits of what is tolerable, which is why legal complaints and prison sentences regularly accompanied his work. After the action *Kunst und Revolution (Art and Revolution)*, carried out with Günter Brus, Oswald Wiener, and Peter Weibel in at the University of Vienna in 1968, Muehl moved his actions abroad—primarily to Germany – due to repeated criminal prosecution.

In 1970, he founded the Praterstraße commune in Vienna as a utopian alternative to the nuclear family society, and two years later he gave up art to devote himself entirely to his work in the commune. In 1972, the group moved to Friedrichshof in Burgenland and introduced communal property, the greatest possible economic independence, and free sexuality. Otto Muehl served as the commune's leader. The group quickly expanded to hundreds of members and soon had numerous branches in European cities.

In 1976, Muehl resumed his artistic production. He painted landscapes, still lifes, as well as portraits and developed the concept of “art as a way of life.” After several scandals, criminal offenses, and internal disputes, the commune disbanded in 1990. In 1991, the Eisenstadt Regional Court sentenced Muehl to seven years in prison for aggravated sexual abuse of minors, rape, suppression of evidence, and other criminal offenses. After serving his sentence, Muehl moved with his wife and children to Moncarapacho, Portugal, where he died in 2013.

TOPOGRAPHIES OF DESOLATION

The origin of painting lies in the contamination and defilement of a beautiful, pure surface.
Otto Muehl, 1962

In early 1960, Muehl struggled with letting go of figuration in painting. That same year, he met Günter Brus and was deeply impressed by his “total creative excess.” Shortly before that, Brus and Alfons Schilling met the American artist Joan Merritt in Mallorca, who introduced them to the gestural painting of Abstract Expressionism. The *documenta* catalog also conveyed to them this new conception of painting, which pointed far beyond Austrian postwar art. Muehl took these impulses, appropriated and advanced them. After brief Cubist experiments, he finally broke completely with figuration in 1961 and initially painted in the style of Tachism. Tachism is an informal art of spontaneity and chance, of abstract blots of paint, and of impasto. During this phase, Muehl’s focus on the materiality of painting grows. Color no longer serves as a means of representation for him but becomes physical matter. The artist no longer paints with color; he works within it, digging through it.

Grooves, crusts, and distortions transform the picture plane into a physical scene. Muehl’s expressive gesture eventually escalates into a physical assault against the picture plane. This is followed by radical experiments with materials, in which the artist presses scraps, cement, rags, paper, strings, or natural fibers into the paint, sets the canvas on fire, rolls around on it with his entire body, “hits into the painting,” and paints “as wildly as possible

Every smooth surface provokes me to defile it with intense life. I crawl around on it on all fours and fling the dirt in all directions. I work until the surface is exhausted.
Otto Muehl, 1962

Muehl describes the resulting paintings as actionist painting and “sinkhole aesthetics.” The self-declared goal, he says, is to “depict what is crushed, shot to pieces, exploded, devastated, destroyed, and ‘out of joint.’” The violence directed at the image has a historical dimension: for Muehl, it is a way of coming to terms with World War II, in which he served as a soldier. In this context, his art is a “warning against the abyss that threatens us all”: an art on the brink of the abyss. According to Muehl, the paintings evoke “quagmires, swamps, demolition sites, earthquakes, catastrophic floods, mutilated war-torn landscapes, and decaying carcasses.”

The new painting is not judged by beauty and harmony, but by its uniqueness and vitality: the most important thing is the speed with which it is painted; this speed tears open the unconscious creative realms within the human.
Otto Muehl, 1962

The Austrian postwar generation encounters a society that represses Nazism, war, and mass murder, concealing them behind a restored order. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno held the view that an aesthetic of beauty was no longer possible after World War II. Muehl acts in accordance with this view. In the wake of the civilizational ruptures caused by two world wars, an aesthetic of harmony and beautiful appearances seems questionable to the post-war artist. Muehl instead creates works that challenge both a conservative understanding of aesthetics and of painting by elevating the shattered ground of postwar landscapes to the status of a subject and contrasting what was once beautiful with the new, ugly reality of war.

DESTRUCTION AS CREATION

I bought a blowtorch and want to use it to burn holes in the canvas and solder wires together. With fire, I can create much more chaotic holes than with a knife. I need a pile of junk for this work.

Otto Muehl, 1961

In June 1961, Otto Muehl first mentions concrete steps away from impasto painting and toward three-dimensional material objects. He buys a blowtorch and pierces holes in the canvas with fire. For the informal painter, the focus lies in an “energetic” and “bold” design, on artistic expression beyond composition and pictorial order. Muehls paintings are now torn, soiled, and clogged with material.

The burn holes are reminiscent of the charred fabric and plastic canvases by the Italian artist Alberto Burri, which were created during the same period. Muehl mentions Burri in his letters from that time, as well as the Spanish artist Manolo Millares, who tears his canvases apart and ties their threads together with paint to form sculptural ridges. With their destructive gestures against the canvas, Burri, Muehl, and Millares are the pioneers of an international assault on panel painting. They elevated the act of destruction to their guiding creative principle.

The Futurist art movement, founded before World War I, also sought to demolish everything old and classical. Although they employ a similarly destructive approach, postwar artists differ significantly from their Futurist predecessors. Instead of emulating the new orders of technology and seeking to rebuild the world according to a war- and machine-based aesthetic, the new destructive art rather reflects the chaos resulting from the machine induced destruction of society after World War II. In this way, postwar artists respond to a shattered reality that seems both familiar and alien.

What Muehl would go on to do a short time later in his material actions involving people—pouring, smearing, covering, and soaking had already developed in his panel paintings. The destruction of these works does not signify the end of art: it becomes a process from which a new art emerges.

OTTO MUEHL AND VIENNA ACTIONISM

Vienna Actionism refers to an artistic movement that was founded in Vienna and active throughout the 1960s. Its most important representatives are Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. The term “Vienna Actionism” was first coined by Peter Weibel in 1970 in the publication *Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus und Film*. The four artists did not always form a fixed group, but rather a loose association united by a shared interest in transcending traditional art forms and developing new modes of expression.

Starting from painting, they gradually moved away from panel paintings and shifted their artistic practice into real space. The human body became a central component of their actions. These actions challenged established notions of art and addressed themes that were taboo or repressed in postwar Austrian society, such as sensuality, sexuality, shame, and guilt.

Within Vienna Actionism, Otto Muehl developed a unique artistic stance. His early material actions transformed dirt, soil, food, and waste into artistic materials. With actions such as *Versumpfung einer Venus (Swampification of a Venus)* (1963), *O Tannenbaum* (1964), *Bodybuilding* (1965), and *Nahrungsmitteltest (Food Test)* (1966), he engaged with social norms, consumer behavior, and bourgeois notions of order and purity. At the same time, he drew upon art-historical pictorial traditions such as the still life and transformed them into performative stagings featuring real bodies and ephemeral materials.

Beginning in 1968, Muehl's actions took on an increasingly socially critical and political impetus, culminating in the event *Art and Revolution* (1968) in Lecture Hall 1 at the University of Vienna. As a result, Brus and Muehl were sentenced to two months in prison for denigrating Austrian state symbols, the national flag, and the national anthem. Toward the end of his Actionist phase in the early 1970s, Muehl primarily carried out taboo-breaking body-analytical actions (such as *Oh Sensibility*, 1970), which focused primarily on the breaking of sexual taboos.

FROM THE DESTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN

Otto Muehl's actions emerge from painting. Initially, he attacks the closed surface of the canvas: paint is poured and mixed with fabrics and objects. Soon, the canvas is no longer sufficient. Painting enters space, and the human body itself becomes the picture surface.

This fundamentally alters the meaning of pouring and splattering. Pigments, eggs, flour, food, detergent, water, and mud no longer form a composition on a canvas. They strike a human being, blur their contours, strip them of their individuality and social appearance. Soiling becomes a pictorial method of transgression: what previously possessed a form now becomes mushy, amorphous, and loses its contours. Quite literally, the human being sinks into the material. The human has – both literally and metaphorically – lost its face.

With this approach, Muehl continues modernism's long-standing rebellion against beauty, purity, and the smooth surface. Classical art had idealized the human body and depicted it as a self-contained form. Muehl does the opposite. His bodies are nude, but they are no traditional nudes. It is not only the rejection of anatomy or the abandonment of conventional materials such as wood, stone, and bronze, but also the aesthetics of destruction that define Muehl's actions. The models' bodies are disfigured and reshaped. Instead of the beauty of Venus, he reveals her decay; instead of the physical strength of the bodybuilder, he presents a grotesque caricature of the human body; and instead of military discipline through military training, Muehl unveils the absurdity of the conditioning of human beings.

The use of cream, flour, or eggs has a slapstick quality to it, like the obliteration of a face in the legendary pie fights of the silent film era. With Muehl, however, the laughter dies on one's lips. For this recurring obliteration transforms the body into anonymous, dirty and ugly material. Muehl evokes more than just the broken human being, more than the human material that perished in the trenches. In the 20th century, with its abundance of perpetrators and victims, humanity lost the very identity that humanism had attributed to it for centuries.

Thus, Muehl's journey from panel painting to performance extends further than the change in medium would suggest. It is not merely a change in materials that takes place here. With the departure from the canvas, the conception of humanity also changes. The body becomes the stage for an art that, in the wake of the catastrophes of the 20th century, no longer believes in the integrity of the human being.

THE HUMAN AFTER THE CATASTROPHE

Otto Muehl's actions of the 1960s revolve around a simple yet radical image: the human being who loses its form. Faces are covered with flour, paint, eggs, detergents, food and liquids; bodies are smeared, breaded, submerged, wrapped and stripped of their contours. The individual loses its profile. The human no longer appears as the likeness of an ideal, nor as a heroic, autonomous figure, nor as a self-contained personality. Muehl presents the human as material, much like war reduces human bodies to a material, and degrades each one into faceless mass, into a being without identity. This is the common thread linking such diverse works such as *The Swampification of a Venus*, *Mom and Dad*, *Bodybuilding*, *Military Training*, and *Leda and the Swan*. Their themes vary—sexuality, family, the military, the cult of the body, sexual violence—but the perspective on humanity remains the same.

This perspective originates in the 20th century, with its succession of world wars, industrial mass murder, extermination camps, and anonymous battles of attrition: In light of these experiences, the human can no longer be portrayed as the crown of creation or as a sovereign rational being; instead, filth, violence, humiliation, and destruction become the image of a humanity whose civilized facade can crack at any moment.

Irony, the grotesque, and parody—which repeatedly permeate Muehl's actions—do not weaken his message. They intensify it. In Muehl's work, the ridiculous and the cruel lie very close together.

In his performances, Muehl gradually escalates this conception of humanity into an excess of sexuality, violence, and obscenity. Bodies devour, injure, and humiliate one another; perpetrators and victims are caught in a cycle of unbridled instincts. This cruelty is part of a deeply pessimistic view of humanity. Exaggeration and escalation are part of the Actionist principles of composition that sketch a distorted image of humanity, whose repressed urges Otto Muehl seeks to lay bare relentlessly in his performances.

Muehl's concept of violence remains essentially limited to physical violence, a view that is also shaped by his experience as a soldier in World War II: injury, mutilation, and death constitute its outer limits. The founder of the commune developed no sensitivity to, nor any sense of guilt about, his own later abuse of power.

CARICATURES OF POWER

We have given a great deal of thought to the artist's place in society. What is important, in any case, is the ongoing revolt against society: art as a political cause.

Otto Muehl, 1966

In 1967, Otto Muehl calls for a “total revolution.” Up until that point, he always conducted his actions as a form of social and cultural agitation, but from then on, he turned increasingly toward current politics and daily news. Together with the writer Oswald Wiener, Muehl co-authored the parodic revolutionary treatise ZOCK in 1967. In an exaggerated manner, the two artists called for an all-encompassing transformation of the world:

“The destruction of all celestial bodies: sun, moon, and stars,” the “annihilation of the society of pygmies,” and “complete chaos.” The text’s agitational rhetoric celebrates the filthy and the animalistic, while rejecting the clean and the bourgeois. ZOCK continues the principle of destruction found in early Actionist painting and is in harmony with the mud and sinkpit aesthetics of Muehl’s material actions, which he coined “Total Actions” in 1966.

Everything is gone! We must crawl on all fours again. We must become pigs. Human race has turned out to be a failure.

Otto Muehl, 1966-1971

The ZOCK manifesto was followed by ZOCK-parties, political collages, the “Vietnam Party” action, and a series of portraits of figures from politics and pop culture. Muehl first painted the portraits and then reproduced them using the technique of screen printing. Thereby he turned the painted portraits of famous faces back into mass products. Both his intensely colorful style and the techniques of screen printing and mass production are borrowed from an art movement that Muehl often criticized at the time: Pop Art.

I accuse Pop Art of this lie. If Roy Lichtenstein no longer paints or invents anything but simply copies everything; that is very good, for he proves that there are no more images; but I hold it against him that he sells his realization that there is nothing left but images.

Otto Muehl, 1966

In garish colors, Muehl reproduces the heads of about 20 famous people in a striking, caricatured manner. Unlike Andy Warhol—whom Muehl reveres as an exceptional artist—he does not create color variations in the individual prints. Instead, Muehl produces a multitude of identical reproductions, thereby parodying the serial nature of the media and advertising world. Muehl lists some of the portrayed people in the ZOCK Manifesto and describes them as “disgusting types” or anti-icons, since they have achieved fame in a society that should be abolished.

With indescribable lust, ZOCK will pounce on all statesmen and lackeys, on the composers of national anthems, devout pastors, recipients of state awards, title holders, sports stars and on everyone who has made something of themselves in this shitty society. ZOCK will take special note of particularly repulsive characters: Nixon, Mao Zedong, Prince Charles, Queen Elizabeth, the Shah of Persia, Udo Jürgens, Mick Jagger, Karajan, Axel Springer, Otto Muehl, Pope Paul.

Otto Muehl, 1971

ZOCK, which encompassed such diverse media as performance art, painting, printmaking, poetry, and music and was carried out between 1966 and 1971, was Muehl’s last major art project before he retired from art and devoted his time entirely to the formation of a “therapeutic commune.” The ZOCK manifestos already hint at some of the commune’s central principles. Yet while ZOCK still emphatically advocates the destruction of all social orders, the commune in the 1980s, ten years after its founding, would, by contrast, be governed by strict social hierarchy.

THE COMMUNE. THE FIRST DECADE

In **1970**, Otto Muehl moved into a 120 m² apartment on Praterstraße in Vienna, which soon turned into a haven for young bohemians and free spirits of all kinds. Shortly thereafter, a core group of about ten people living permanently with Muehl formed: the foundation for the first “Muehl Commune.” It was a revolutionary group whose goal was to establish a counter-society.

Muehl laid the theoretical foundations for this as early as 1970 in the ZOCK Manifesto: the abolition of the nuclear family and private property, the introduction of free sexuality, and the transcendence of art through “actionist life practice” within the group. The commune understood itself as a therapeutic project: society could only be changed if the individual accomplished change. In **1972**, Muehl ceased artistic production entirely and began conducting therapeutic individual sessions and group analyses. His analytical approach drew on the “character analysis” of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud’s “dream analysis,” his own actionist artistic practice, and, later, Arthur Janov’s “primal scream theory.” The synthesis of these theories will have a lasting impact on communal life within the commune.

In the fall, the group purchased the former model farm of Archduke Friedrich in the Parndorfer Heide in Burgenland: The Friedrichshof, to which they soon moved. In **1973**, in keeping with its therapeutic mission, the commune renamed itself the Actionist-Analytical Commune (AA). The collective strove for the greatest possible self-sufficiency. They grew vegetables and raised livestock.

To dissolve the individual identity within the collective and to distinguish themselves from the left-wing subculture of the 1960s, all commune members shaved their heads. The commune established two guiding principles of its existence and its self-therapeutic sessions: To overcome the “shell” caused by sexual inhibition and to undo the psychic damage caused by “the nuclear family society.” In addition to actionist analyses, another therapeutic device, the so-called self-expression evenings were brought to existence. A self-expression session ideally ends in symbolic patricide and matricide or in a psychological return to one’s own birth experience. The development of consciousness is to be brought about through ecstasy and “energetic release” in front of the assembled group. Homosexuality, however, was understood as “infantile damage”, which must be treated therapeutically—a conviction shared by homosexual commune members themselves.

Around **1974**, the commune founded its first collective businesses—transportation and moving services, jeans import, carpentry, and heating installation—to generate funds for collective property and the expansion of the Friedrichshof. The group now comprised about 50 people and operated a regular guesthouse on weekends, offering self-expression courses and actionist analyses for a fee. In **1975**, the commune stepped up its public relations efforts to recruit new members; for example, through the magazine AA-News or by setting up information booths at art exhibitions, such as the documenta. The first AA city groups formed in Switzerland and Germany, soon followed by France, the Netherlands, England, and Norway. Starting in **1976**, the now internationally represented utopian community project called itself the AAO: Actionist-Analytical Organization, based on the principles of free sexuality, collective production, and communal property. The commune established an efficient division of labor, which in the 1980s became the foundation of an increasingly undemocratic hierarchy.

That year, the women founded the Women’s Initiative along with its accompanying magazine to challenge male dominance in the commune. In **1977**, the commune’s growth required the expansion of self-governance. Each person took on a task within the enormous collective enterprise, for example in the publishing, workshop, utilities, finance, or education groups. Muehl retained responsibility for therapeutic, educational, economic, and artistic leadership. Meanwhile, television reports about the commune attracted public attention. The commune was confronted with several accusations, mainly because of its resemblance to a cult. However, the commune was also celebrated as a social utopian experiment: Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky even received a delegation from the commune.

WIENER AKTIONISMUS MUSEUM

At the same time, revenue from the communal enterprises started to decline and the collective economy began to falter. The commune decides to shut down the collective businesses, and to re-integrate commune members into the labor market of the “nuclear family society.” In 1978, communal property was temporarily abandoned and private property re-introduced. Commune members were sent to vocational training courses and to universities. In 1979, however, the economy picked up and the communal model of property was re-introduced.

THE COMMUNE. THE SECOND DECADE

By early **1980**, the commune had over 700 members. At the same time, its hierarchical structure began to take on aristocratic traits. The commune was organized in so-called work and consciousness groups. Those in the 1st consciousness-group would have more decision-making power because they were certified as having a “higher emotional level of consciousness.” This classification was determined, among other things, during the self-expression evenings and mainly through informal processes. The cult of personality surrounding Muehl grew in those years; more closeness to him meant more power within the processes of decision-making. Muehl was celebrated as a genius by many commune members; his speeches were printed and used as teaching materials. In the early years of the 80s, the commune began to take on the shape and the characteristics of a cult, even though Muehl’s power was granted to him solely by the commune members themselves.

The commune increasingly integrated art into its everyday life: film productions, theater performances, lectures, music evenings, life drawing classes, and painting evenings. Later, an art office was established and a collection was created. The growing number of children was addressed by the establishment of a self-managed children’s house, run by teenagers, as well as by the opening and official recognition of an elementary and middle school.

Free sexuality remained a fundamental principle of the commune. Monogamous relationships were forbidden but were carried on in secret. Strict hygiene rules ensured protection against sexually transmitted diseases, especially since the outbreak of the AIDS crisis. In **1982**, the hierarchy within the commune increasingly became an instrument of social control and discipline, leading to competition for higher ranks. In addition to the group palavers already taking place, “failure palavers” and “children’s palavers” were now introduced, which sometimes resulted in condescending insults and traumatizing humiliations of both adults and children in front of the assembled group.

In **1983**, due to health concerns and ongoing cult accusations, the commune ceases its public relations and cultural activities, stops admitting new members, and isolates itself from the outside world. At the same time, more and more commune members are working in the private sector outside the commune. The commune, once freely organized, is now increasingly evolving into a capitalist-style enterprise. An enormous economic boom ensues. At the same time, tensions grow between the artistic leadership and the economic interests of those profitable commune members who are financing the Friedrichshof with millions.

In **1985**, the commune purchased an old finca, El Cabrito, on the Canary Island of La Gomera. Following the Chernobyl disaster on April 26, 1986, mothers and children were the first to leave; many other members followed. Some members, however, criticized the purchase as a luxury project. That same year, the first allegations of sexual offenses against minors were leveled against Muehl. Former commune members attempted to file a complaint against the head of the commune. The district attorney’s office launched an investigation. Many commune members shared Muehl’s conviction that minors—the protected age is below 14—also have a right to free sexuality. Amid investigations, Muehl ordered the burning of potentially incriminating material such as diaries. His directive was only partially carried out, as many commune members hid their diaries and later handed them over to the police. In those years of the mid-1980s, the fear of state persecution spread throughout the commune.

In **1989**, a house search took place at Friedrichshof, but no incriminating evidence found. By this time, Muehl and his inner circle have already been consuming not only marijuana but also, increasingly, cocaine for several years, which only further fueled Muehl’s delusions and fantasies of omnipotence. In 1990, the communal property was transferred to official structures; the fathers of the children were identified through DNA tests; and the commune was dissolved. In 1991, Otto Muehl was sentenced by the Eisenstadt Regional Court to seven years in prison for aggravated sexual abuse of minors, rape, abuse of authority, endangering the moral well-being of persons under 16 years of age, violations of the Narcotics Act, perjury, and the suppression of evidence. Muehl’s partner, Claudia Muehl, was sentenced to one year in prison for sexual abuse. Community member Bernd Stein was sentenced to 18 months in prison for suppression of evidence and perjury.

OTTO MUEHL AND VAN GOGH. SELF-PORTRAIT AS AN ARTISTE MAUDIT

In the 1980s, Vincent van Gogh became a central figure with whom Otto Muehl identified. For Muehl, this was less about the exemplary nature of van Gogh's painting and more about the myth of the artist: Van Gogh embodies the outsider and visionary whom his era failed to recognize and whose social failure subsequently became a sign of his artistic greatness. Muehl stages himself in this tradition of the *artiste maudit*, the "cursed artist." In the painting called *Initiation*, Muehl exaggerates his identification with the great Dutch artist to a grotesque point.

In the painting, van Gogh appears twice, cutting off a piece of Muehl's ear. Van Gogh's famous self-mutilation of December 1888 is transferred to Muehl, passed on to his artistic heir like a baton. What went down in art history as an act of self-harm in van Gogh's case is carried out by Vincent van Gogh a hundred years later on Otto Muehl. The scene is a grotesque rite of passage: van Gogh marks Muehl through the injury and admits him, as it were, into the imaginary community of misunderstood artists. The wound becomes a stigma and, at the same time, a badge of the chosen artist.

In the second painting, Muehl recounts the incident of self-mutilation—which has been elevated to the status of a myth—from a reversed perspective. Van Gogh inflicts the wound upon himself—historically accurate; beside him appears, presumably, the prostitute with whom van Gogh spent the night immediately before his psychotic episode and mocks the misunderstood genius against a hellish background. It is the gestural language we recognize from medieval panel paintings depicting the Mocking of Christ. Tragedy and comedy, pathos and ridicule lie side by side. Muehl therefore does not reverently appropriate the van Gogh myth. He exaggerates it to the point of caricature. Both paintings are as much about Otto Muehl as they are about Vincent van Gogh. Muehl inscribes himself into the long genealogy of the misunderstood artist while simultaneously subverting this claim through caricature and grotesque. Van Gogh's severed ear becomes a symbol of an artistic existence in which social exclusion, injury, and a claim to greatness are inextricably linked. Through this rite of passage, van Gogh himself acknowledges the Austrian artist as his equal.

OTTO MUEHL AND THE NEW HUNGER FOR IMAGES

Around 1980, the latest paintings by the Neue Wilde offered Muehl an opportunity to return to figuration without slipping into academicism. He does not depict the objects in detail. The brushstroke replaces perspective and modeling. The bodies lack any three-dimensional internal structure. Arms and legs consist of a single broad stroke; the face is rendered with just a few patches of color. It is not the subject that defines the art, but rather the painterly gesture and color. At the same time, color emancipates itself from the natural color of the object. Red, blue, green, and yellow stand side by side, unbroken, with great coloristic intensity and in stark contrast to one another.

At the same time, the banality of early genre painting is once again becoming worthy of depiction in contemporary art. No “grand” narrative unfolds in these paintings: a woman sits on the toilet reading a newspaper; a mother goes for a walk with two children; a bird-eater is secretly observed by a man; a woman stands in the shower. These are not heroic motifs, nor are they psychologically charged subjects. They are fragments of everyday life.

Muehl discovered, primarily through the Berlin painter Rainer Fetting, the possibility of returning to representational painting without sacrificing the achievements of his own gestural actionist painting. On the contrary: the broad brush, the rapid execution, the physical movement, the aggressive directness of the color—Muehl has been familiar with all of this in his own art since the early 1960s.

In the early 1980s, Rainer Fetting dominated the European painting scene, capitalizing on the renewed appetite for images that had been reignited by US-American Conceptual and Minimal Art. Muehl is thus not responding to a marginal Berlin phenomenon, but to an artist who had just become one of the most internationally prominent representatives of the new figurative painting. It is no coincidence that Muehl titled some of his most striking watercolors “after Rainer Fetting.” He discovered in Fetting’s “vigorous painting” a figuration that came astonishingly close to his own roots in gestural actionist painting. For him, the Berlin Neo-Expressionist was the ideal link between his own painting and his earlier actions. What Muehl had removed from the picture in the 1960s—physicality, aggression, action—he found again in Fetting’s paintings.

THE SCREAM OF THE EARTHQUAKE AND THE LONGING FOR SILENCE

In 1986, Muehl painted two groups of works that stand in contrast to one another like antipodes. On the one hand, chaos: the earth trembles, people fall, tables and glasses tip over. On the other hand, the order of the Parndorfer Heide: a few fields of color, a horizontal line. The earth stands still. Everything is at rest. In 1985, during a visit to the Friedrichshof, the Neapolitan gallery owner Lucio Amelio provided the impetus for the *Terrae motus* series. Following the devastating 1980 earthquake in southern Italy—thousands of people lost their lives, entire villages were razed to the ground—he commissioned artists such as Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Gerhard Richter to create works in response to the catastrophe.

Otto Muehl turns the earthquake into an existential metaphor: The ground is pulled out from beneath people's feet; up and down switch places, and bodies lose their balance. It is the moment when all order collapses. People lose their sense of security and stability. In doing so, Muehl captures the ambivalent attitude toward life in the 1980s—an attitude that was not defined solely by the new wealth of the yuppies, the consumer frenzy, and the stock market boom. The escalation of the Cold War, marked by the fiercely contested NATO Double-Track Decision, AIDS, the Challenger explosion, and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 shook people's faith in security and progress. Tensions also arose at Friedrichshof for the first time during these years: the increasing concentration of power in Muehl's hands, as well as internal conflicts within the commune between those who earned millions from insurance deals and those who distributed the wealth, heralded the crisis that would soon lead to the commune's dissolution. *Terrae motus* becomes a symbol: What seems solid and secure is faltering and unreliable. What a metaphor for the 1980s! For the commune, for Muehl's way of life, for his victims, for human existence itself.

The tranquil landscapes of the Parndorfer Heide provide a stark contrast. Here, Muehl pushes art to a point where it almost ceases to be landscape painting. Sky, earth, and the distance become zones of color; the horizon becomes a single line. No perspective opens up the space: these are images of a longing for security and order. They do not evoke landscape painting, but are rather reminiscent of Ellsworth Kelly, Imi Knoebel, and the grandeur of Barnett Newman. Yet Muehl does not cross the boundary into abstraction. A single horizontal stripe transforms the monochromatic surfaces into fields and sky. The color temperature imbues this landscape with the heat of summer. The artist who, just 15 years earlier, had energetically defiled, demolished, and deformed the material and the human body in his performances, has now arrived at a style of painting characterized by the utmost purity and reduction, tranquility, and stability. All frenzy comes to a standstill.

Two models of the world converge in these two series: collapse and stability. Catastrophe and order. In one, humanity loses all footing. In the other, a single horizontal line restores the world. Otto Muehl will not follow this artistic path of safety and stability in his day-to-day life. He is not an anchor, but the earthquake that destabilized the world of many.