

PERES PROJECTS

# SPIKE

## COSMOS OF ONE

by Colin Lang

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**A legend of the Viennese avante-garde flies solo in a recent exhibition of paintings and drawings at Peres Projects, Berlin.**

There is something messy covering Hermann Nitsch's (\*1938) new works at Peres Projects in Berlin: paint. This layer of material has emerged like the prodigal son to reclaim the wild terrain of the flat painted surface, pushing the envelope of the Austrian artist's lifelong quest for intensity of experience, material, or both. The octogenarian has never veered from this path, from his earliest days in Viennese Actionist circles to his current, more solitary endeavours, there art has been an incitement to extremities, including bloody rituals involving hundreds of performers. On top of the familiar formats of Nitsch's historic Actionist tableaux – blood and the residue of performances, poured across a support – are the deep grooves of the artist's fingers and hands. I say tableaux because the word is reminiscent of the critiques lodged against Gustave Courbet in the Salons of nineteenth-century Paris: one reviewer remarked that the realist could only be regarded as a great artist of the inferior art of the *morceau*, the piece or part, and not the *tableau*, the whole picture in all its depth and scenography. Nitsch, in works like *Schüttbild* (2021), manages to take the more well-known poured picture, which usually resembles (without actually involving, at least by the gallery's admission) a dried blood splattering, and cover it with marks that look like *morceaux*. Not that the other images were not in a way parts of something else – ritual, action, event – but here, they attest to more than the absence of a former happening.

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This blanket of gesture is of a different kind altogether: a realist move to ground the painted support in the singular touch and presence of the artist – so forcefully, acutely – that the result becomes a thick, materialist veil shrouding the documentary-like relics that have been the customary signature of Nitsch’s Actionist images. Smaller paper works are treated with a similar hint of conspicuousness, like the Unikatgrafik (unique graphic editions, 2021), a baffling if paradoxical concept that speaks to the artist’s desire to continue, that the works are never properly finished, until they are. In another of the Schüttbilder, Nitsch is careful to couch the generative procedures of picture-making within his established vocabulary, 90. Malaktion (90th paint action, 2021). In this acrylic painting, the traces of what looks like dripping blood, visible at the foot of the work, are smeared with a palette that belongs more to the tube of paint than to any human soma. Bright pinks collide with violet and light yellows, swirling in an entirely new configuration. Nitsch splits his time between Austrian and Italy, the land of colorito, a fact that might go some way in accounting for the deep, baroque movement of 86th Action Painting (2021), something like a morsel of Titian or Giorgione, who, we later learned through radiography of their paintings, were similarly fond of grown-up finger painting, though they did their best to hide it.



Works like the lemony Untitled (2020) appear like fragments, close-ups, of a much larger work: the pulsating window dressing to something like a tableau vivant, which were always, in the past, the orchestrated events of Nitsch’s Actionism. Which begs the question: Why this now? Why invest in the gestural in paint, as a foundational act and not one merely bent on preservation or perpetuity? Like any good painting show, there are drawings (Zeichnungen, all 2020), which, well, look a lot like small paintings, all made with bright oil stick on paper. Are they proof of Nitsch’s new universum, the cosmos of one? I did not, as the Sun Ra song claims, dare to knock on the door of this cosmos, because, they doors sufficed as they were, as deep as the cracks of paint and the absent hands that exhorted them to keep moving.

Painting is not necessarily picture-making, at least not for Nitsch, and neither is it a mere document of some kind of performance. It was altogether weird not to hear the drone of an organ, but the ephemera of Nitsch’s actions are still there, as legible to a detective as the footprints of an assassin. The sacrifice was not animal or human, though; it was more base than blood, and speaks to the potential resonance of this covering, and

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painting, and gesture. Without a concert or performance to motivate these new works, Nitsch set his sights on the deception of transparency, a false deity if ever there were one. Presence and touch are specious, too, perhaps, but it is the intensity and effort with which they are proclaimed that counted in this show for Nitsch. This much, one can do alone.



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