

Hans Schabus: Das letzte Land (The Last Land), 2005

The artist's studio is full of tools, woodworking machines that have obviously been used frequently dominate the room, paper, plaster and wood models capture the looks. There is no assistant to be seen—it is a one-man workshop, definitely. Hans Schabus is a sculptor in the classical sense. Again and again, he finds himself confronted with a great challenge he has to cope with, with an artistic project that has to be worked on, carried out—with physical force, to the limits of what can be done, of what would just be asking too much. With this approach, Schabus comes up to what people traditionally expect from an artist: dealing with one's material all on one's own, sculpturing, creating something. Schabus's material, his mass, however, are places, spaces. It is these spaces he analyzes and reformulates: physically and psychologically redimensioned, they transfer the resultant formative power to the individuals entering them. By overcoming bodily, spatial, and temporal boundaries, Schabus's works offer very personal moments of experience which spring from the artist's equally personal exploration of space—an approach which is by no means natural today. At a time when art presents itself as a social act or deals with socio-political issues, Hans Schabus's practice adheres to one principle above all: his art is something he does for himself. The relationship between artist and artwork is an intimate traditional one. Fending for himself, he tackles space. His approach is entirely individual, almost heroic—whether he digs the „Schacht von Babel“ (The shaft of Babel, 2003), a 5-meter deep pit, in his studio, which he fills with the material he excavates day by day throughout several months in a kind of reallocation process; whether he undertakes nearly romantic adventurous sailing trips in his boat “forlorn,” a one-man vessel of the “Optimist” category he constructed himself and with which he not only cruises Vienna's sewer system but also neared the southern tip of Manhattan—or whether he realizes his project for this year's Venice Biennial.

Schabus relies on an extremely analytical method to deal with such a task, feeling his way towards the issue, investigating and localizing the space in question. Before exerting all his energies, before realizing his concept,



Der Schacht von Babel (The shaft of Babel), 2002, photo: Hans Schabus



East River, New York, March 26th, 2002, 2002

and mounting his work, he thoroughly explores all connotations surrounding the place, encompassing it, meticulously examines all spatial, temporal, and functional determinants. For him, the exhibition space is not just some volume, some neutral presentation area but always a very particular place, a structure of references influencing everything. A site full of coordinates and relations, a network of historical and functional aspects, both a burden and a challenge for the artist. Fathoming the past, analyzing the specific characteristics of the place, digging in the galleries of local history unearths a lot of things: major historical cornerstones as well as minor anecdotes, unknown connections, past moments disrupting the identity of the space. For the final viewer, the invited or uninvited visitor of a work by Hans Schabus, many of these things may be irrelevant, some of them even incomprehensible. For the artist, however, this analytic process is vitally important. For the result of this investigation is the system of coordinates, the matrix of ideas that he superimposes on the space and which transforms it by making it deviate from its apparently clearly defined original proportions. This historical and contextual localization links it with its environment, turning the two into a whole. The process-oriented strategy is also of special significance in regard to the dimension of time defining the space. Pacing it both mentally and contentually results in a continuous change. As architects such as Peter Eisenman superimpose various coordinate systems not based on the Cartesian order but on a topological grid structure, for example, on a design and morph it into new three-dimensional proportions on the basis of this system, Schabus relies on the data of his field research for the transformation of the space towards a new truth.



Astronaut (komme gleich) (Astronaut [be right back]), 2003, Secession, Vienna, photos: Matthias Herrmann

The Venice Biennial and the Austrian pavilion by Josef Hoffmann with its long history and particular architecture certainly represent a singular challenge. Working within such a system of coordinates is not only a very public affair but also an undertaking which is far from autonomous. The volume of Hoffmann's pavilion breathes history, has been the stage for many things, suggests great expectations, but also has a very specific appearance and a spatial will of its own. Schabus has already worked with such buildings. For his major exhibition "Astronaut (komme gleich)" (Astronaut [be right back]) in the Vienna Secession in 2003, he countered the key work of Viennese art nouveau and landmark exhibition space with a new form of navigation through the building. Visitors were refused admittance to the building through the central temple-like entrance and had to be smuggled into the Secession via the technical service rooms in the basement. Schabus had set up the volume of his studio as a central object right in the middle of the main exhibition hall—as a resistant, closed body, a cell which took possession of the entire space from below, from inside. Dealing with Hoffmann's pavilion in Venice, Schabus resorts to even more drastic means. He decided to deprive the pavilion of its face, to burden it, to make it disappear, to turn its outside inside, to impose an entirely new identity on the edifice.

Venice—a monument built on water. The cultural identity of the city is well-nigh stifling for everything that tries to move in it, is to be erected in it. Something different but equally boundless had to be found as a counterpoint. The sculptor's bold dream has focused on moving a mountain—

something heavy, huge, and lasting by definition—on building a mountain where the foundations for an entire city were once laid. Mountains rise between Vienna and Venice, and, by installing a mountain or rather the three-dimensional image of one, Hans Schabus takes up the typical and turns it into the typological. He shifts the myth of the mountain enveloping Austria and occupying its very center—an image to which Austria owes a lot and of which it has asked a lot.

Schabus's mountain presents itself on the defensive and takes a negative stance. An object without an apparent opening—something not to be entered, not to be climbed—has replaced the public pavilion with its interior offering a home for the best art of the nation. The artist has erected a vigorous, gigantic barrier. This barrier suggests everything a pavilion for an international exhibition of art may stand for: greatness, power, consciousness, identity. But the gesture also includes an exclusion, shuts something off, outlines a refusal. Schabus has already tested such strategies: the entrance of the Vienna Secession was blocked up, and people could only get into the Kunsthau Bregenz to see his exhibition by using the rear entrance. Situated at the very back of the Biennale premises, the Austrian pavilion marks a close, an end, draws a demarcation line: the art area in front of it, the city behind it. Schabus's transformation of the pavilion emphasizes this border function. Like any art place burdened with history, the Austrian pavilion also unfolds a colossal claim: everything positioned within its sacred halls is art, state art even. The mountain articulates an equally colossal claim, it aims at a balance and also takes a negative stance—which is the artist's very personal stance directed against being subjected to the pavilion and its patronage over his works. The pavilion does not impose itself on the artwork, it is the artwork that imposes itself on the pavilion.

With its two-dimensional composition resembling surface formations of computer models, the work presents itself as a rather technologically defined, menacing, constructed image of a mountain. From outside, it does not reveal the extraordinary density of the construction, the accumulation of material necessary for its mounting. The first thing you see is an unapproachable mountain which is not there to be climbed. The form is no backdrop, no imitation of nature but a constructed symbol, a huge reference illustration for artistic production in an occupied space. A mountain is not just an abrupt elevation of the earth's surface but also a symbol of permanence and stability. This is why, generally, Muhammad must go to the mountain and not the mountain to Muhammad. Moving a mountain seems to be the most radical maneuver within Schabus's oeuvre so far. He cannot go bigger as a sculptor. And he cannot take possession of a space in a more impetuous and reckless manner. The work already suggests itself as an unmistakable milestone for his artistic career.

But digging, driving tunnels, sinking shafts, and building are no mere metaphors for Schabus's work as an artist. Space defines itself most impressively when it is surrounded by mass—when its structure is the only thing that can be perceived optically and acoustically. The subterranean elements—the holes, tunnels, and shafts—comply with these requirements and have been used repeatedly by the artist as cornerstones. Both the physical and



Das Rendezvousproblem (The rendezvous problem), 2004:
Song of Most, Song of All;
There is no-one what will take care of you;
There is no-one what will take care of you;
Kunsthau Bregenz, photos: Markus Tretter

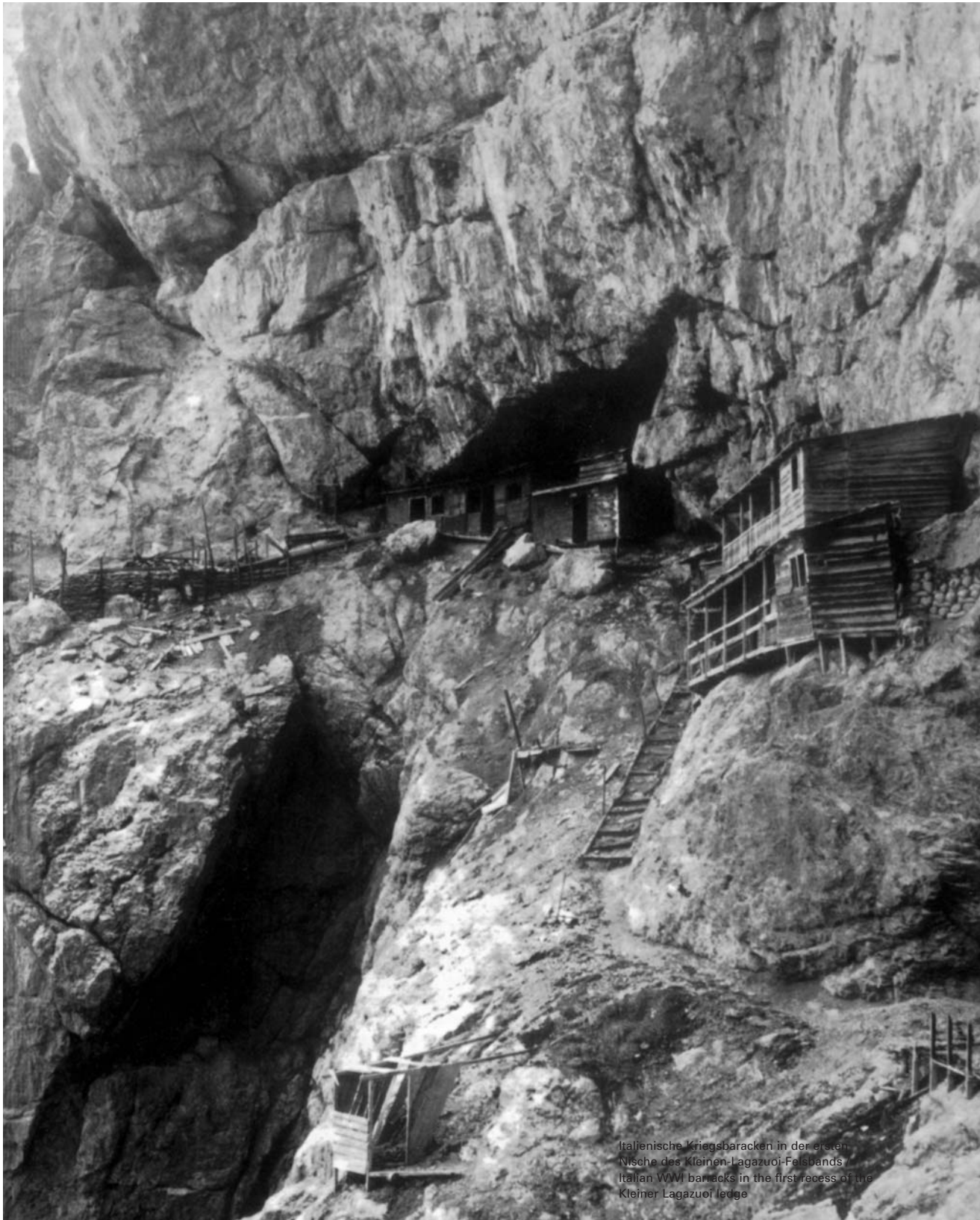
the psychological dimension of a space can be grasped best when its boundaries are massive and impermeable. A clearly defined space must be traversed, crossed, experienced in its time dimension. Visitors only gradually perceive the artwork they enter: the approach depends on how fast they move within the spatial structure the artist has prepared or rather suggests. The public had to climb the various levels of Schabus's presentation "Das Rendezvousproblem" (The rendezvous problem) in the Kunsthaus Bregenz one after another. You can enter the mountain in Venice and walk inside it; you will find yourself in subterranean galleries—an absurd situation for a city built on water. You will find yourself down there, in another world—the contrast to Venice as a city of art with its glorious backdrop cannot be more striking. This building, this object has to be explored from the inside. It calls for an active approach: as the artist has appropriated the place in his analytic preparatory work, the visitor has to take possession of it physically. The inside of Schabus's work immediately reveals the complex character of the mountainscape; the density of the wooden construction, its system of stems and ribs—as it is also used in boatbuilding and, thus, suggests the interior of the mountain as a capsized boat—is simply breathtaking. Right through the middle of this subterranean construction system inside the mountain, visitors will walk up the planks to the skylights and the summit. The gigantic object turns into a protective Alpine fortress granting a final tour d'horizon. Watching the masses of cultural tourists amidst the various countries' pavilions from above strikingly discloses the problematic character of the Biennale event as an art world exposition: the individual within the labyrinth of a fair dedicated to national self-promotion, of artistic manifestations wooing for attention—with oneself, at the moment, in the biggest of all.



Das letzte Land (The Last Land), 2005, photo:
Hans Schabus



Das letzte Land (The Last Land), 2005,
Austrian Pavilion, Venice, photos:
Bruno Klomfar



Italianische Kriegsbaracken in der ersten Nische des Kleinen-Lagazuoi-Felsbands
Italian WWI barracks in the first recess of the Kleiner Lagazuoi ledge



Pavillon des Österreichisch-Ungarischen Lloyd, Eröffnungsparade 1873, György Klösz, Albumin auf Karton / Pavilion of the Austro-Hungarian Lloyd, opening parade, 1873, György Klösz, albumen paper on cardboard