

Tobias Rehberger

“I do if I don’t”

March 26–August 28, 2022

With “*I do if I don’t*,” the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart is presenting the largest and most comprehensive exhibition devoted to the work of Tobias Rehberger in the Stuttgart region to date. It brings together key work groups and thematic areas from his oeuvre—from a portrait series started in 1995 to site-specific installations developed expressly for the exhibition.

Tobias Rehberger (b. 1966 in Esslingen) is a professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, where he himself studied under Thomas Bayrle and Martin Kippenberger from 1987 to 1992. The artist draws on various concepts and ideas from the fields of architecture, design, and music for his works. He brings together different media and genres, with sculpture always forming the basis of his artistic practice. In his expansive works and site-specific objects, he often explores notions of functionality and usability.

Several of Rehberger’s works seem easily accessible and immediately comprehensible due to their colorful, pop, and eye-catching surfaces and their haptic materiality. Only on closer inspection does their entire profundity and complexity become apparent. His works revolve around phenomena of everyday life and cultural differences, address the global economic system, or tell stories about specific places, linked with aspects of time, space, and speed. The artist also uses his works to question the familiar and the found; he devotes himself to the supposedly unfinished, the imperfect, the handmade. He adapts and recontextualizes artworks and design classics as well as trivial everyday objects in a minimally alienated form; his subtle interventions relate to size, proportion, material, and the surface of things. Some of his ideas lead to “detours” or “disfunctions” in his sculptures. A supposed flaw, for instance, has been added to the works in his series of “handicapped sculptures.” In this way, Rehberger also raises questions about art’s usefulness and purposefulness. Moreover, the artist investigates the conditions of form and content, production and authorship, transformation and rededication.

The exhibition presents central work groups by the artist, including many that he has repeatedly rethought and developed further, recapitulated, and modified over the last three decades. Rehberger arranges these ongoing work complexes alongside, between, and within

new works or adapts them to a particular exhibition venue, changing it as a result. The transitions between the exhibited works is often seamless, everything flows together.

A special feature of the show becomes apparent even before visitors enter the museum: with a large light installation Rehberger has expanded the exhibition onto the building's exterior. Over three stories of the Königstrasse façade, he combines writing and forms using two light works—*Free coffee free parking freedom*, created in 2018 for the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai, and a selected portion of *Paysage vu à travers un point d'observation*, which he made for the 15th edition of the Paris city-walk art festival Nuit Blanche in 2016. Individual lighting elements can be controlled from a console set up in the museum's forecourt. The work responds to the song that visitors upload from their own smartphone to the terminal via Bluetooth and then play. The façade installation pulses to the rhythm of the museum. Particularly at dusk and at night, the work becomes an extraordinary sound-light backdrop, reminiscent of a gigantic billboard, operated by visitors and passersby in public space. This participatory approach is also encountered in the exhibition itself; visitors are intermittently given the opportunity to actively participate and interact with Rehberger's works.

The glazed base area of the building is covered with the group of works called *Ads*. For this, the artist has expanded his poster series, designing unofficial promotional posters for various brands and stores that reflect his own view of and relationship to them. The installation marks the first time since the museum's opening that this area is being used artistically as exhibition space.

In the first exhibition room, visitors are greeted by more than forty vase portraits. Since 1995 Rehberger has portrayed artists and collectors by depicting them as vases. In these early works, he asked sitters to submit their favorite flowers and plants for this purpose—without informing them beforehand what color or shape “their” vase had. As a result, there are small and large, angular and bulbous, simple and extravagant shapes that are alternately colorful, monochrome, or transparent. The portraits subvert the typical notion of representation and present a view of the sitters that evolves between one's self-perception and that of others: the self-portrait in the shape of flowers meets up with the perspective of the artist, such that the arrangement becomes a kind of double portrait. Several self-portraits have also been created in this group of works.

Occupying the next, central two-story room of the cube is a light installation consisting of some 200 lamps hanging from the ceiling. Rehberger commissioned a traditional glass-blowing workshop in the Harz Mountains to design and produce the lamps. The tear-drop-shaped glass lamps in different colors are complemented by light objects made of colored Velcro strips. Via light switches visitors can control individual lamp groups and make them light up.

In the adjacent room, a large variety of the artist's door and window sculptures is on display. The titles in this series refer to the names of stores, bars, and restaurants visible from his

various Frankfurt studios over the years. The shapes of the sculptures derive from the dimensions of the studios' doors and windows. For the first time, the works in the series are not being presented as free-standing or wall-hanging objects but as a walk-in installation. The final exhibition room on the second level is devoted to the so-called "termite mounds." For these, the artist colored the natural structures made of cellulose and earth, lending them an artificial character.

On the third exhibition level, visitors encounter Rehberger's shadow sculptors in the first room. Lit by a spotlight, the seemingly abstract objects project letters onto the wall. The sculptures' shadows become series of letters, joining to form works like "Tom" and "Cruise," "sex" or "butter." For the first time in the Stuttgart exhibition, visitors can also participate in the interplay of abstract forms and language by helping to design the projection surface—that is, the wall behind the sculptures—and thus add a further interpretation.

The second large room on this level is dedicated to the neon sculptures. While at first glance they recall billboards along a lively, big-city shopping street, Rehberger transformed their supposed promises into ironically exaggerated messages: "Dieses Ei ist industriell hergestellt" (This egg was industrially produced), "ALLES gratis" (EVERYTHING for free), or "**Nothing** happens for a reason." The messages aren't exclusively static but shift between different statements as they light up. The latter slogan, for instance, alternates with "**Everything** happens for a reason." The galleries that run between these two rooms are lined with dynamic shimmering patterns: the dazzle wallpapers often used by the artist create camouflage and dazzle effects and thus dissolve the boundaries of the room. This in turn has an impact on the beholder's own position. One step, and he or she perceives the space in a completely different way; the spatial structures of the museum start to sway. In this, the installations are reminiscent of the perceptual experiments of Op Art.

With his room-encompassing works, Tobias Rehberger creates social and interactive sites for coming together, inviting visitors to linger and to connect with each other through and via art. The artist has designed the entire upper floor of the museum as a space for meeting and experiencing. The main work is the *Tea House*, a staged room-within-a-room with a pavilion inspired by the Japanese tea ceremony. In recent months, Rehberger and his Frankfurt studio added to it by creating various sculptures using a 3D printing process. Some of them can be not only viewed at a distance in the conventional manner but also used as seating, tables, and hand-knotted carpets. These textile works, distinguished by interwoven color and relief surfaces, are figurative and explore forms of medial mediation. Here, visitors are free to sit and lie down, to rest, think, and meet and talk with friends and acquaintances. Or they can also opt to consume meals and drinks: a 3D ceramic edition designed for the exhibition, consisting of a cup, bowl, and plate, can be purchased with food or drink during scheduled hours.