

# Werner Haypeter

## Sculpture and the Rules of the Social Game

*Structure*, 2013. 84 aluminum tubes,  
acrylic, fluorescent paint, grip tape, and  
cable ties, dimensions variable.



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Vertical and horizontal lines, grids, squares, and circles—the vocabulary of Werner Haypeter’s work apparently relies on basic forms of geometric abstraction. This has prompted some critics to label his extensive sculptural output as “concrete art” or “constructivism.” In doing so, however, they ignore the fact that although Haypeter adopts a tried and tested repertory of Modernist forms, he uses them for a different purpose, thus interpreting them as a means of overcoming a formalistic concept of art. Haypeter’s work cannot be completely understood if we approach it from the vantage point of formal analysis. Rather, we come closer to his intention if we take a good look at what is arguably the most important constant throughout his work—the attention that he gives to space.

Space, for Haypeter, is no abstract matter: it is not only mathematically or physically defined, but also socially determined. For him, space is an “ensemble of relationships,” to quote Michel Foucault, and these relationships are, first and foremost, social in nature. To Haypeter’s way of thinking,

spaces are essentially characterized by processes of function, by divisions of work, custom, historical circumstance, and neighborhood—in short, by social structures. Consequently, the departure point for all of his artistic decisions in terms of a spatial prototype is his studio. Even as a student at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, he took a lively interest in the social aspects of what a studio is and how it functions. At the end of the 1970s, he was a member of the Düsseldorf Wall-Painting Group, which—through public actions and huge wall paintings—took up political themes, fighting against real estate speculation and for the preservation of affordable living space.

Haypeter’s choice of materials has a lot to do with his “systemic” approach. He takes the risk of setting great store in materials that for most people have little valid aesthetic value (unlike traditional wood, marble, and bronze). Over the course of his career, he has turned repeatedly to plastics such as polyvinylchloride (PVC) (since 1988), epoxy resin (since the early 1990s), and fluorescent paint (since 2003). More recently, he has added acrylic glass, aluminum rods, and oriented strand boards (OSB) to the mix. Haypeter’s preference for such industrially produced, functional

*Untitled, 2000. Poured epoxy resin, 2 views of installation at the Maschinenhalle Zweckel, Gladbeck, Germany.*

materials directly refers to social realities, to production conditions and manufacturing and processing techniques beyond the scope of the artist. Outside of their typical usage, plastics trigger a subliminal insecurity. Doubts concerning ecological or health risks play a role in their perception and treatment. Their aesthetic quality is hard to grasp, and often ambivalent. For instance, epoxy resin is amorphous, though it may be poured into any form; it is transparent and yet murky, an unclear yellowish color. Haypeter’s typical range of colors is characterized by this yellow, which can tend toward green or brown. It is a color chord; it does not overwhelm, but remains non-committal and open in terms of emotion.

A good example of how Haypeter’s sensitivity for specific rooms connects with his particular choice of materials can be found in his installation (2000) for the Maschinenhalle in Gladbeck-Zweckel, Germany, a brick building from 1909 and the former heart of a coal mine. The only thing that he exhibited was a layer of epoxy resin poured several centimeters thick over

the entire floor. The glossy material reflected the room like a gigantic mirror, and the hexagonal floor tiles appeared to recede beneath the yellow layer of resin like a honeycomb buried in honey or archaeological specimens in a display case. The room was open to foot traffic, but visitors were required to wear protective felt overshoes even though hardened epoxy resin is not susceptible to damage. The “castle-tour slippers,” normally worn when walking over the fragile floors of palaces, churches, and castles, gave the feeling of being in a valued historical site. In fact, the exterior of the machine hall echoes palatial architecture, its large, arched windows and other design elements meant to conceal a profane, industrial purpose. By specifying that visitors could only enter the room while wearing slippers, Haypeter made this camouflage bear fruit in the opposite direction. The architecture, with its idiosyncratic beauty and spatial magnanimity (functionless now), has become historically “valuable” as a document of the industrial era, itself already a thing of the past. And incidentally, visitors were exploited, gently, as laborers: by walking in the slippers, they also polished the mirrored floor in which the architecture was reflected as if in a frozen surface of water.

An even more direct inclusion of the viewer was demonstrated by another installation from 2000, in a Mannheim office building. There, Haypeter overlaid a section of the floor with 54 pale-yellow sheets of PVC, each one measuring 52 by 40 cm. Employees were encouraged to move and regroup the pieces so that they would not disturb the flow of work. Hence, the form of the artwork was determined and repeatedly adapted by the viewers, or rather users, in accordance with specific working processes and paths through the room. This created a vivid spatial picture of office activities, a diagram of the “ensemble of relationships” that come about as a result of office work. The employees were able to experience their workplace in a new way, since the environment was visually charged with unusual accents that influenced the working atmosphere, though without being in the least decorative.



Above: *Untitled*, 2000. 54 PVC sheets, .5 x 40 x 52 cm. each; 480 x 832 cm. overall. Below: *Untitled*, 2013. Epoxy resin, OSB, and lead pencil, 36 x 120 x 120 cm.



TOP: SABINE KRESS / BOTTOM: ANDREAS KUSCH, MPK MUSEUM PFALZGALERIE KAISERSLAUTERN



Above: *Lichtfeld (Light Field)*, 2003. Steel, fluorescent tubes, resin, acrylic glass, acrylic paint, and electric cable, dimensions variable. Below: *Asking for an encounter on starboard side*, 2003. Zinc, galvanized steel, acrylic, and fluorescent paint, 5 parts, dimensions variable. Installation at Anneli Juda Fine Art, London.



The social or systemic aspect of Haypeter's oeuvre is not limited to works that may in the broadest sense be classified as "art-in-architecture." It also occurs in his autonomous objects or sculptures, though it is subtler. His largest work to date, *Light Field* (2003), which consists of 18 repeated elements, stands at the crossroads of art

and technical production. Its "modules" — light boxes mounted on tripods of variable height and equipped with up to 14 blue-pigmented acrylic glass plates — were executed in close coordination with a visual communication company, so the compromises between artistic design and technical execution are of particular interest.

This work is initially confusing because it in no way meets the formal expectations of contemporary sculpture; instead, its elements display the precision of construction lamps or measuring instruments, but without serving any discernible function. When we really engage with the work, however, the confusion suddenly passes into an aesthetic experience of mysterious beauty and poetry. *Light Field* maintains a close relation to the room in which it stands, since it may be flexibly adapted to suit the prevailing conditions in each case. The density of its set-up is variable, as are the height of the light boxes and the number of blue plates per unit. Leaving the lamps turned off and merely alluding to the possibility of lighting is also an option. Over the years, *Light Field* has appeared very differently at different exhibition venues. In 2011, it was shown in the garden room of the former imperial abbey in Aachen-Kornelimünster. There, Haypeter decided to make all of the light boxes one height and equip them with either the maximum number of color plates or else leave them empty. Together, the white and blue shining boxes constituted a third level between the floor and the ceiling, with its striking stucco decoration and allegorical Rococo paintings. With a single gesture, simple yet charged with meaning, Haypeter illustrated the energetic connection of *Light Field* to its environment. He had the ceiling lamp removed and wired his lamps directly into the painted allegory of heaven. The clearly visible, vertical cable visually connected Haypeter's work to the 18th-century painting and the stuccoed ceiling beams, as well as to the sponsoring organization, Art from North Rhine Westphalia, which has its offices here.

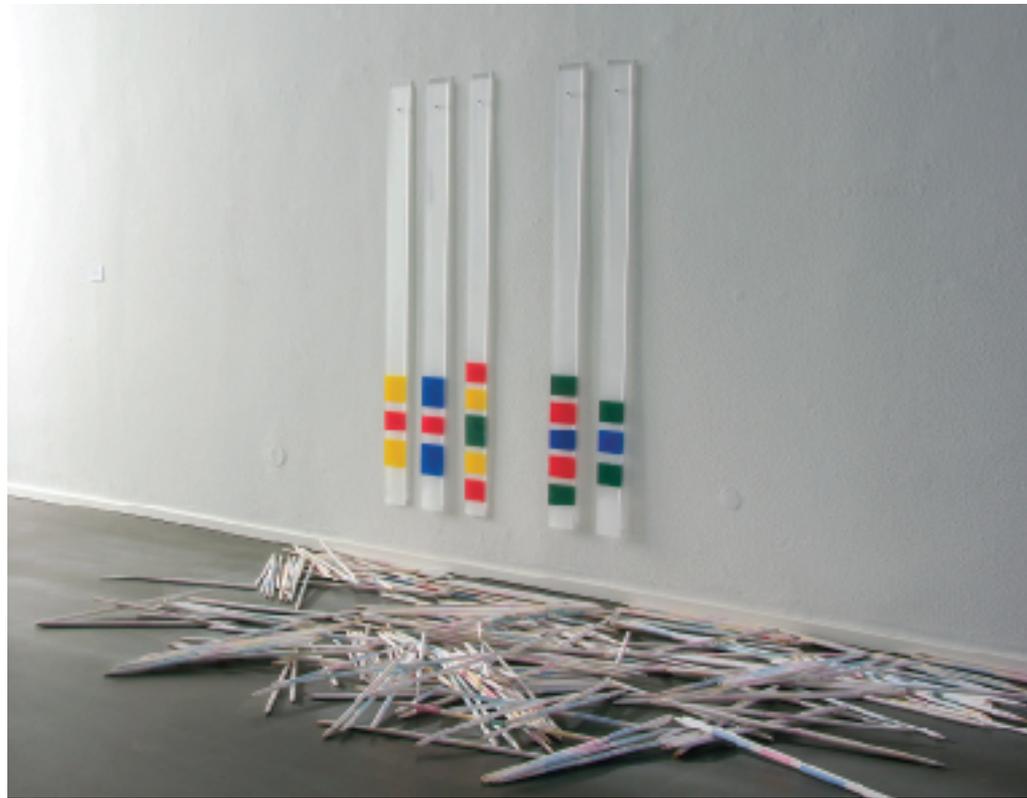
In recent years, Haypeter has developed the modular idea further into a notion of the artwork as a "construction kit" or "game." *Structure* (2013), which was shown at the Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern and the Kunstgalerie Bonn, consists of 84 aluminum tubes, mostly but not completely covered with fluorescent paint. Haypeter is interested in the fact that the slightly irregular, yellowish color gives the tubes an air of bamboo, which is used in Asia for building scaffolding. But the fluorescent

paint also makes the structural skeleton of the sculpture emerge from the dark. Held together with cable binders, some of the tubes form a stable, but irregular sculptural structure of hinted at and loosely played upon cubes. The remaining parts can be arranged in various ways—side by side on a ledge of the wall or laid on the floor, for instance—and it is also possible to use a larger or smaller number of elements. It is clear that this is not a strictly predetermined form; it is about playing openly with spatial possibilities so that the work can visually respond to changes in its spatial conditions. Like the markings on a playing field, a square is delineated with black tape on the floor, its surface area precisely corresponding to the sum of the color surfaces on the aluminum.

The concept of the artwork as a game is revealed even more clearly in *Mikado*, two works from 2013 that explicitly refer to jackstraws, the famous game of patience. Haypeter began with several sets of large garden jackstraws of the kind sold at supermarkets. For the larger of the two works, he used 234 out of 250 wooden sticks, which he had previously treated with white glaze so that the colors signifying point values were just barely discernable. Because of this intervention, the game sticks transform halfway back into their wood origins. The color combinations, however, re-emerge in enlarged form on five narrow strips of colorless acrylic glass hanging on the wall behind the randomly distributed jackstraw sticks. With their bright color fields, they recall giant test strips of the kind used in medical laboratories. The scale relationships of the installation develop entirely from the game. For example, the length of two strips (162.5 cm. each) corresponds to the sum of the diameter of 250 sticks (13 mm. each). The holes bored into the acrylic strips (so that they could be hung) also measure exactly 13 mm. in diameter. Between the third and fourth strips, there is a gaping void. This space is apparently reserved for the most valuable stick, which is normally marked with a blue spiral. Leaving it out refers to the re-evaluation of the game that takes place in this work. Although developed from a well-known game with established rules, *Mikado* translates those rules into a sensual, artistic reality that follows only its own aes-



Above: *Structure*, 2013. 84 aluminum tubes, acrylic, fluorescent paint, grip tape, and cable ties, dimensions variable. Below: *Mikado 234\_250*, 2013. Acrylic paint, wood spillkins, and acrylic glass, dimensions variable.



thetic. Haypeter's art stands in close relation to social conditions and rules of behavior. It attaches to them and makes from them its own formal and functional coherence. But at the same time, normally applicable rules are nullified, and artistic leeway is created. To translate this freedom into the context of real social space may

be beyond the reach of Haypeter himself, but viewers who are able to recognize more in a work of art than a construction of forms, colors, and proportions will find inspiration.

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