

## **“You cannot bore someone into loving art”**

### The iridescent art of Tom Schmelzer

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In the turmoil of 21st century art, the question arises as to what art can still achieve. At the same time, the overwhelming presence of visual media makes it increasingly difficult for artists to gain the undivided attention of the public. Can contemporary art help us to re-read the inflationary flood of images and question the retreat into the private sphere? Does discursive art still have a role to play - as a medium that moves us emotionally, encourages reflection and demands critical dialog?

Of course, challenging works also exist in the environment of a homely, neo-Biedermeier everyday life. But they need a convincing and clear appearance to break through lethargy and passivity. It is precisely these qualities that can be found in Tom Schmelzer's works in an astonishing and often wonderfully confrontational way. If you wander through the sculptural and installation oeuvre of the Munich-born conceptual artist, which now spans over 30 years, you don't know where to look first due to the impressive presence and unusual aesthetics of the works.

Schmelzer's object "salvator mundi" (p. 5) from 2021 consists of a Bowie knife with a wide blade that adheres magnetically to a pinewood panel. The angle of the knife tempts you to reach for it and pull it out of the stone like a sword. If it weren't for the problem of the handle, a cactus. The spines make it impossible to pick up the knife. Like a mixture of an artifact from a natural history cabinet and a weapon, the look is the first thing that captivates you. An obvious conflict is visualized. But the amazement does not end here, it begins. The title of the work, "salvator mundi", the "savior of the world", stands for Christ, the redeemer of mankind, in terms of cultural history. The assumption that solutions have to be fought for, accepting sacrifices on many sides, is a questionable social construct and definitely not a Christian one. This object skillfully demonstrates this. The subtitle "peacemaker" refers to the solution inherent in the work: if you reach for the weapon, you hurt yourself. Schmelzer's works are to be understood conceptually and discursively. Stirring and eye-opening. They live from their manifold moments of irritation.

This form of confrontation with one's own perception of the world runs like a common thread through Tom Schmelzer's work. Schmelzer addresses ethical, political and economic problems and skillfully weaves them into his sculptures and installations. This is also the case in the work "the void" (p. 6) from 2019. The debate about global environmental destruction often focuses on the far-reaching damage that can be expected as a result of climate change. Far less discussed, but just as dangerous, is the associated, accelerating decline of wildlife. The overexploitation of soils and oceans, deforestation and air and water pollution are destroying habitats. In 2019, a report sponsored by the United Nations was published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Among other things, it states that of an estimated 8 million animal and plant species, around 1 million are threatened with extinction - more than ever before in human history. Schmelzer's black display case acts as a monument to

this shocking development. At a height of 70 cm, four gold-plated animal snouts protrude from the sides slightly below the transition from the matt metal base to the glass cover. The space inside the display case remains empty. The expected exhibit is missing. Instead, a closer look reveals a dead fly lying on its back on the top of the glass cover. The work is a monument to our ignorance. Whether dog, pig or cow, the animals in our environment have almost all been domesticated and yet are treated strangely unequally. We form an emotional bond with pets, whereas farm animals are largely exploited. Humans consider themselves superior, the more intelligent species. Animals are degraded to appendages. To speechless and defenseless ornaments. The animal snouts appear as if their bodies had been cast into the monument, the display case like a tombstone. Even though Schmelzer's works are consciously committed to a timeless aesthetic and executed with excellent craftsmanship, they are not primarily intended to be beautiful, but rather painful. They depict the existential problems of our time in a pointed and sharp manner and encourage a dialog on current issues.

The broad spectrum of techniques used by the artist ranges from digital technologies to traditional craftsmanship. This results in complex and often interdisciplinary works that are reminiscent of classical art history and open up unimagined potential. The series "theatrum sapientiae" (p. 7), Theater of Wisdom from 2019, immediately evokes associations with Baroque still lifes. This became particularly popular in the Netherlands in the 17th century. Tom Schmelzer creates modern, three-dimensional interpretations of the traditional visual language - which brings together flowers, food, animals and symbolic objects. The art of the Baroque period lay in the fact that, on the one hand, the still lifes appeared so real that you were not sure whether you were looking at an image or reality. On the other hand, the still lifes were intended to make the idea of vanitas tangible through the deliberate arrangement of objects. A reminder that life is finite (*vita brevis est*) and that human beings are just as transient as even the most beautiful flowers and the freshest fruit. It seems paradoxical that the paintings themselves freeze the moment and time. The same and yet different thing happens in Schmelzer's works of "theatrum sapientiae". For example, two historical pewter plates stand on a minimalist black table. On them are a toad, a half-peeled lemon, its peel twisting in a spiral, and two shrimps arranged in a circle. The replicas are a perfect illusion. All organic material has been transferred to bronze in a complex process and patinated true to the original. The still lifes no longer know transience. Frozen in time, these vanitas symbols do not age or decay. Even in a hundred years or more, they will look identical. Schmelzer skillfully brings the aspect of transience into the present: our society is eager to stop ageing. Be it through beauty surgeries or the endless range of anti-ageing and lifestyle products that are imposed on us through advertising and social media. The postulate is that you have to appear young, no matter how old you are. Our lives consist of a continuous succession of self-optimization practices. The escape not only from everyday life but also from our own mortality is disguised under this cloak. And so the cycle of works "theatrum sapientiae" is an allegory of our optimization mania. We think we can stop the progress of time. What a mistake, what a waste of lifetime.

The title of this series also refers to a basic theme that runs like an arc through the sculptor's entire oeuvre. The "theatrum sapientiae", the theater of wisdom, is a synonym for the Wunderkammer. Also known to some as a cabinet of curiosities, the Wunderkammer is considered the forerunner of modern museums. Created during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, they were mostly private collections of extraordinary objects that reflected the curiosity,

knowledge and wealth of their owners. The focus here was on their enlightening character. Such collections could contain anything from natural specimens, scientific instruments, works of art, antiques and curiosities to ethnographic objects. The Wunderkammer was deeply rooted in the spirit of research and discovery of the Age of Enlightenment and Humanism. For the collectors and their guests, the Wunderkammer stood for a sense of wonder and amazement and reverence for creation. Tom Schmelzer's works also possess these qualities. They evoke wonder and curiosity and are often reminiscent of classical artifacts in their variety of materials. A walk through his work thus feels like a stroll through a modern cabinet of curiosities. Everywhere you go, you come across objects that are as exciting as they are unusual, attracting you with their visual fascination and precision, only to then put a finger in the wound of our social fabric.

Flip-flops would probably not have made it into the Wunderkammer in the 17th century. However, the use of two slices of bread as outsoles is a wonderful example of the irritating power of Schmelzer's work. The at first glance humorous but impractical shoes (made of PCV) address a serious topic. The work "good shoes take you good places" (p. 8) from 2023 comments on the export of cheap plastic items from Asia to Europe and the USA - at ridiculously low prices. As with a plethora of other products, labor and materials are not paid fairly by the global West. What is being negotiated here is symbolically the inadequate equivalent value of the goods - corresponding to the price of two slices of bread. Our ambivalent actions become visible: the perpetuated global North-South divide is structurally exploitative and at the same time the basis of our Western wealth. At this point, it also becomes clear how the artist is able to take us along and surprise us with the principle of the original combination of essentially alien objects - here shoes and slices of bread. Unexpectedly, system-immanent misconduct appears in the supposedly small. As pars pro toto.

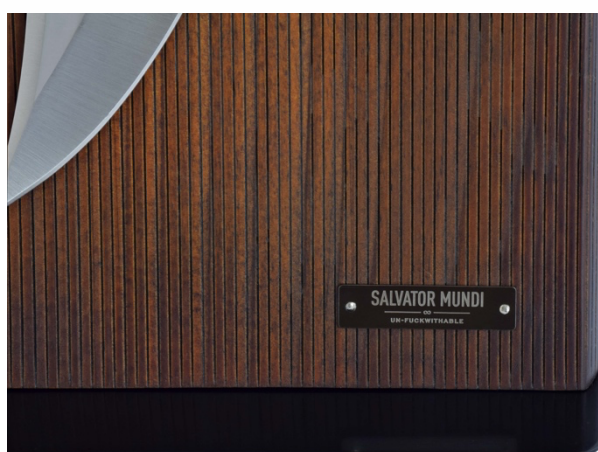
Contemporary politics is also echoed in Schmelzer's work. In "pinUScchio" (p. 9), a drawing from 2020, two heads can be seen facing each other. On the left is the profile of Donald Trump, whose nose grows so long that it is knotted far in front to form an infinity symbol. The nose ends just a few millimeters in front of the world community, in the form of Joe Biden's profile on the right of the drawing. According to the Washington Post, Trump demonstrably made 30,573 false or misleading statements during his presidency. Like the lying Pinocchio, his nose is growing longer and longer. The strategy of misinformation and fake news on topics such as immigration, foreign policy and coronavirus was intended to unsettle and incite the public. This FUD principle of targeted disinformation - Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt - is an established tactic to manipulate the perception of a society. False, negative or dubious information is spread in order to gain personal advantage. But why is Donald Trump still relevant today? Trump's understanding of office, his demeanor and his tone are here to stay. They are in the world. Just like the division of the population and the brutalization of political mores. "There's a Donald Trump in every small town in America," says US artist Mike Bouchet. Joe Biden won the election, but the Trump principle is not over. It is the success of the shameless. In Germany, too, an unprecedented level of state skepticism is spreading across the globe from the USA. For many, facts are no longer a question of science, but a question of faith. Humanity has never known as much as it does today. And yet many discussions remain at a reactionary, pre-Enlightenment level.

The impressive range of works by Tom Schmelzer, who studied art, philosophy and medicine, is both their strength and their unique quality. With his iridescent, multi-faceted works, the

conceptual artist manages to take up fundamental themes of the human condition as well as current problems and bring them into the discourse in a trenchant manner; to charge them intellectually and yet leave them legible. The beautiful appearance. The great greed. The sweet self-deception. Schmelzer's works stand in a clear, art-historical tradition. They make use of different materials, craft techniques and innovative technologies. For good reason, as Tom Schmelzer puts it in the fifth of his 10 working rules: "Choose the media that fits the purpose best - every single time." Each work must be able to stand on its own and be convincing. With their concise, sometimes provocative visualization, the works not only amaze the viewer, they also challenge them to look beyond the first impression and reflect more closely. "You cannot bore someone into loving art."

"The ancient Greeks said that amazement is the beginning of all knowledge, and that if we stop being amazed, we are in danger of losing our knowledge." Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 1986

July 2023



**salvator mundi (standing)**  
peacemaker  
stainless steel, synthetic, pine wood, magnet  
approx. 36 x 8 x 7 cm (knife)  
approx. 21 x 21 x 13 cm (knife block)  
2021  
edition of 9 + 3 a/p



**theatrum sapientiae III**  
illusionary installation  
bronze (unique copy; dead-mold casting), tin, steel, silver  
arrangement with stand approx. 55 x 35 x 35 cm  
2019

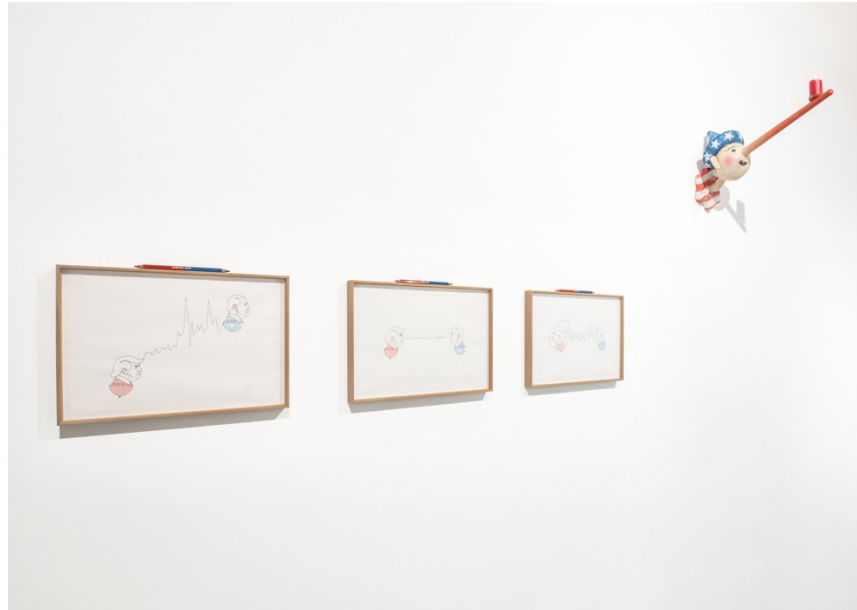
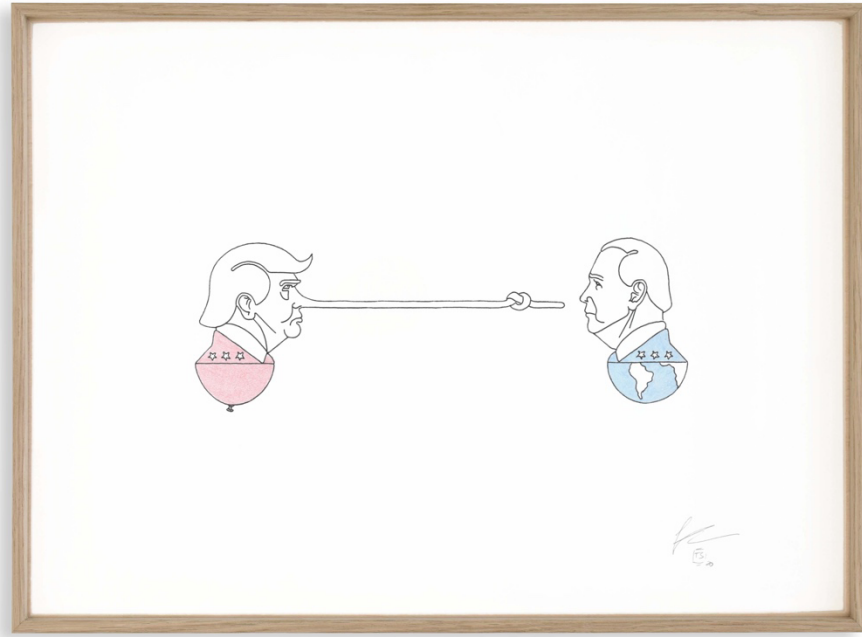


**the void**  
sculpture  
polyester, gold leaf, steel, acrylic glass top  
approx. 140 x 33 x 33 cm  
2019



**good shoes take you good places**  
PVC, brass  
approx. 23 x 10 x 5 cm (each)  
2023  
edition of 9 + 3 a/p





**pinUSchio**  
archival ink, crayon, pencil, paper, embossment,  
aluminum frame, oak veneer, museum glass  
approx. 412 x 300 mm  
2020



**he who sows the wind shall reap the storm**

pinUSchio

linden (carved, turned, set on chalk ground, waxed), candle

approx: 66 x 28 x 20 cm

2021