



## **David Eisl**

Mountains of Madness

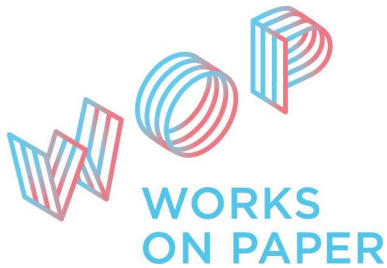
Opening  
23/3/2018

Date  
24/3/2017 - 31/5/2018

### **David Eisl | Playing chess with perception**

In his miniature short story *On Exactitude in Science* (1961), Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges tells the tale of a nameless empire of the past in which cartography was perfected in a quest for ideal representation. The geographers of this land – who refused any form of graphic simplification or selection of information – managed to produce a map with a scale of 1:1 and in flawless accordance with the landscape. Alfred Korzybski would counter Borges' fable with his well-known aphorism “the map is not the territory”. With this declaration, he figuratively expressed that a person always inhabits two worlds – the refuge of language and symbols and the real world of experience. The former – in which we can locate the map – is always an abstraction of the latter and is never identical to it. According to Korzybski, people are able to delve completely into the world of abstractions and, in extreme cases, to forget the underlying “landscape”, the reality of experience. Korzybski's thought appears to be related to a postulate by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who – not unintentionally quoting Borges' miniature – asserted that with regard to the increasing digitalisation of our daily life, we are progressively surrounded by the illusory world of media images, behind which reality disappears.

The works of David Eisl (\*1985) focus on comparable questions of man's relation to his surroundings, of the representation of reality and the construction of perception. It is immediately apparent that his reflections are performed via an examination of the game of chess. In his series *the map is not the territory* (2016/2017) Eisl first made the checkerboard pattern the focal point as a symbolical structure, as a “map” in the sense of Korzybski's quoted aphorism. This aspect is further emphasised in the presented series *Mountains of Madness* (2016-2018), through the combination of the checkerboard pattern with postcard



city views and landscapes. As a result, the pattern of the board explicitly obtains the character of a cartographic structure. Its combination with cityscapes of New York and Chicago is a logical choice since the layout of these metropolises is based on a grid. But the artist does not replicate the cities' layouts in his overlaying of them with checkerboard squares of wood veneer. On the contrary, he appears to employ them to dissolve the elementary points of spatial orientation (top-bottom, front-back, inside-outside) so that his subversion of the central perspective creates an irritating tilt effect. This is reinforced by Eisl in some of his works by the presentation of the postcards turned upside down. Particularly by undermining the grid patterns within the city layouts, he opens up the metaphorical layer of meaning of every cartographic structure. These he regards – as is clearly indicated by his reference to Korzybski – as an abstract, socially charged entity, like the checkerboard pattern. The pattern as “map” - which connects the concept of the Cartesian grid with cartography – here turns into the ironising emblem of the wish for order and the ability to plan and calculate and thereby the ambition to measure the world. That measuring does not purely facilitate insight, but involves control, occupation and colonisation and therefore is also an expression of a thirst for power and human hubris is indicated by the series title *Mountains of Madness*.

*Mountains of Madness* do not only take the shape of high-rise buildings of American metropolises, but also of mountain ranges of Salzburg, that are also – if sometimes more freely – overlaid with the checkerboard pattern. It is striking that Eisl, in the titles of his works, switches the names of the depicted high-rises with those of the pictured mountains. With this transposition of names and the resulting irritation, the artist explicitly underscores the separation of “map” and “territory”, of culture and nature, of sign and signified. This dislocation, for the artist, is not only significant with regard to the approach to reality, but, as he emphasises, also regarding questions of representation and perception. Not least did it lead him to the choice of the postcard as a visual medium, which, according to the artist, even though taken from the concrete location, depicts not so much the experienced reality of the place but has always been an idealised reproduction and therefore refers back to the construction of perception. Is there, within this topos of the construction of perception via the image, a connection between the anachronistic medium of the postcard and the manipulable digital image? Does the Cartesian grid hinted at by the checkerboard squares not play with the homogeneous division of the image area into individual points, which one could, considering digital image production, also read as pixels? Or is the chessboard structure covering the scene not partly reminiscent of those “empty”

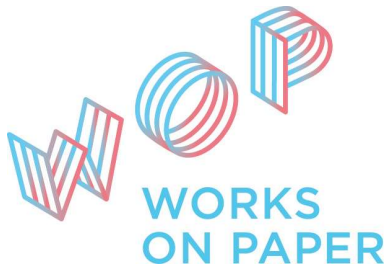
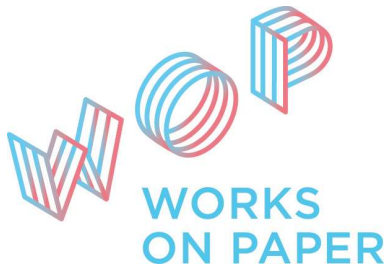


image areas that the photo editing software Photoshop displays in a grey-and-white grid?

Led to these ways of reading by the use of the checkerboard pattern as an irritant, one may think back to the initially mentioned philosopher Baudrillard, who, regarding the present-day media society, asserted the following: “The territory no longer precedes the map [...]. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory [...], it is the map that engenders the territory.” Thinking back to Korzybski, this means that the abstract symbol and sign systems developed by humankind now generate the reality, like Photoshop can be used to manipulate the image of a mountain so that it has little in common with visible reality. That which is perceived as natural is also progressively culturally constructed. The fact that fictional realities can not only be transported via the medium of the image, but can also be topographically anchored is made clear by the title of the large-scale piece *Cayman Islands* (2018) that marks the centre of the exhibition. Related to the edited postcard showing mountain ranges on the visual level, with its title it points to the eponymous Caribbean archipelago, which, counter to its image as a beautiful holiday destination, also functions as a tax paradise for countless places of business that only exist as fictional letterbox companies.

Eisl's works therefore, via the use of the motif of the chessboard pattern, open up wide associational realms that range from questions of the measurability of the world to digital manipulation of the image space and the accompanying construction of perception. The game of chess, though, for him is not only motif, but significantly method as well. This is particularly evident in the Indian ink drawings in the *Playgrounds* series. In their production Eisl enters a fictional game with himself and lets the drawings come into being according to a self-imposed set of rules. These are followed by the artist in a dialectic of order and chance, so that the drawings at times follow the existing structures of the paper, at times drifting across it in a freer, almost blotty manner. Via the use of isometric paper – paper used by architects for the three-dimensional presentation of designs – optical illusions create anew a form of topographic space. From these results, in *Playgrounds*, a tension between map and territory on the visual level as well as a play with perception on the conceptual level like we already know from the series *Mountains of Madness*.

Eisl's expansion of the idea of art to encompass the game, as it is particularly evident in his *Playgrounds* series, is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's assertion that every artist is a chess player. It also, however, brings back the *scores* of the Fluxus movement, an art current in which play was equally significant in the



establishment of new forms of art. Eisl, however, emphasises that he draws his inspirations not so much from art history as from the fantastical literature of an Edgar Allan Poe, the aforementioned Jorge Luis Borges or Julio Florencio Cortázar. The latter saw the ludic character of his literature, in which the real and the fantastical overlap, grounded in the challenge to “not accept things as valid, as inevitable”. The overlapping of fact and fiction also appears in Eisl's works, and therefore one may suppose that the artist has a similar wish to break conventions of perception to illustrate that all views on things are constructions and therefore relative. Accordingly, what is most interesting to Eisl about the game as motif and method is, quoting the artist, “playing with perception itself”.

Stephanie Damianitsch  
(Übersetzung: Monika Dittrich)