Artforum
Dezember 2010, S. 271

MUNICH

Martin Wöhrl

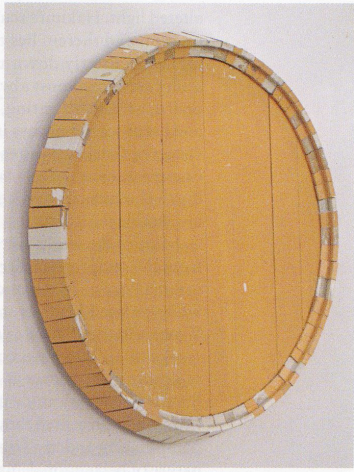
TANJA POL GALERIE

"*Was auf der Alm eine Alm ist, ist in der Stadt ein Stüberl*" (What on alpine meadows is an alpine hut is a cozy little pub in town): In the catalogue for Martin Wöhrl's new show, this is how writer Andreas Neumeister describes the institution of the beer or wine hall typical of many German cities, along with its transformation from alpine authenticity to a globally recognizable cliché signifying beery (or winey) coziness. Tied up with the iconography of the *Stüberl* is the wooden barrel, a kitschy symbol of tradition and conviviality found everywhere in the German urban landscape, in the form of bar signs, barrel tables, and items of decor.

Wöhrl took on the barrel in his recent solo show "*Cantina Sociale*," presenting—not without a wink or two—new works that are all in some way indebted to the traditional form of the wooden beer or wine barrel. It would be shortsighted, however, to see the exhibition merely as a facile commentary on the visual manifestation of a tacky petit bourgeois aesthetic. Rather, Wöhrl's works are characterized by a subtle give-and-take between thematic dimension and autonomous, abstract form.

These works—some wall mounted, some freestanding—echo the barrel's disk-shaped ends, or else adapt its characteristic round-bellied form. Wöhrl focuses on particular formal properties of the barrel, which often get overlooked because the form is semantically so overloaded. The dissection of the forms of various sections of a barrel—such as the complex dovetailing of the front and sides, oval and round cross sections, and the tightly spanned central bulge—underscores analogies to historical framed shapes, such as the tondo and the medallion, as well as to the shafts of ancient columns that, like the barrel, are characterized by a degree of swelling or entasis. In part, Wöhrl's adaptations pay indirect tribute to the skills of the barrel maker. But throughout, he uses materials that wouldn't seem very well suited for manufacturing barrels: old doors, some with real wooden veneer, some with plastic veneer, some painted (white and pinkish orange), some with visible patina, many seemingly dating from the 1960s.

In his sculptures, Wöhrl uses formal analysis and the change of material to take the usual associations of the barrel to the point of absurdity. And so the culturally overdetermined form is momentarily rescued from its context, becoming briefly available to be experienced as apparently pure form that can be connected either to a classical, work-immanent notion of sculpture or to a modernist notion of functionality. Nevertheless, in the very next moment, the barrel inevitably relapses into low-brow trashiness. In this respect, "*Cantina Sociale*" was a sly and subtle commentary on exhibition practices and the autonomy of the modern artwork. This ambiguity could also be seen in the concentrated way the show was hung with an almost exaggerated insistence on formal cohesion that further emphasized the art character of Wöhrl's "barrels."



Martin Wöhrl, *Fasskopf (Delicious Pizza)*, 2010, wood, 35⅝ x 35⅝ x 3⅜".

By raising fundamental questions about how form and meaning interlink, and how the balance between them is constantly shifting, Wöhrl goes beyond a critical examination of popular stereotypes or a merely campy attitude. The formal reduction he pursues with such consistency offers a sculptural analysis of the social construction of meaning, thus displaying the double character of every form—abstract ones included.

—*Daniela Stöppel*

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.