



WERNERTHÖNIFOURBARFO

WERNER THÖNI **4 | 4**

WTA editions

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Barcelona, 2019

Texto: Peter Freund

Imágenes: Erich Meier

Maquetación: WTA editions

Imprenta: Onlineprinters GmbH

Werner Thöni's 4|4

The driving aesthetic of Werner Thöni's new work, 4|4 ("4 bar 4"), inverts the celebrated dictum of fellow Swiss artist Paul Klee, "Art does not *reproduce* the visible; it *makes* visible." Klee's modernism champions the revelatory power of visual art. Thöni by contrast cuts an expressive path that unifies visible reproduction with its apparent opposite, material concealment.

Four 130-centimeter by 130-centimeter Prussian blue paintings stand directly opposite four prepared, cube-shaped benches upholstered with canvas, also painted Prussian blue. The four painting/bench pairings are marked with a small set of numbers and affixed with sales-like tags which link the wall canvases to their corresponding seats and each pair to the others through a logic of series. The serial logic is sewn through this body of work as a concatenation of integers scattered in a specific pattern across these painted surfaces: 13-16, 26-29, 43-46, and 68-71. Identically positioned in each painting/bench coupling, the four number clusters enter into a larger implied sequence – running from 0 to 71 (perhaps beyond) – in which the spaces between the four pieces convey ellipses of missing numbers.

The composition of each painting presents a fundamentally identical geometry that suggests the convention of a three-view plan for building and assembly instructions. Do the paintings hint at plans for the assembly of the benches? Within the repeating geometry, the detailed markings vary, like the numbers and tags, from piece to piece. At first, the sketched views register as figures against a deep blue background; however, closer inspection reveals that these figures are in fact the background over which the blue has been superimposed as mask.

Werner Thöni does not object to explanations of his densely conceived canvases but is quietly indifferent to volunteering any. Is it to give the viewer a greater role in the work? After all, by coupling the paintings with seats, he materially integrates into the work an invitation to the viewer to sit and have a look. Introversion may be the birthright of every artist, but Thöni's is engaged with a broader problematic animating his project.

4|4 was inspired by a tragic event from 2015 that received widespread international attention. The work pays tribute to 71 migrants and refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan who died while locked inside a truck traveling on an Austrian motorway towards Germany. This *final cause* of Thöni's project remains decidedly absent from the visible surface of the work. Beyond the number sequence, which correlates with the tragic death count, Thöni has otherwise created the work out of an intricate network of contingent, even incidental associations he developed while contemplating the tragedy over time.

The project springs from an impulse that is neither directly empathic nor edifying. Instead it opens up a context for the artist to generate free associations that redirect and refract the public light shone on the tragedy. The associative elements – including the grid and cube (building blocks of design); title labels cited from a 2017 MoCA exhibition, “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.” (statements of desire); IKEA patterns (the hope of a prefabricated life); and Prussian blue (a pigment produced by oxidation, exposure to oxygen) – are transmuted by the artistic process. Some are entirely covered over with the Prussian blue, leaving only hints of an underlying grid, the ragged suggestion of a cube, markings, scribbles, and indeterminate sketches of happenstance objects. And yet all these contingent details are framed within the precise, repeating visual structure and beautiful imposing blue.

Contemporary art has long endeavored to burst the unbudgeable nexus between revelation and visibility – between truth and the evidential. The seriality, markings, and geometries position 4|4 within a particular lineage: Sol Lewitt's incomplete cubes, the subtractive aesthetics of Gordon Matta Clark and Doris Salcedo, the impenetrable surfacing and memorialist markings of Antoni Tàpies. The work's installation aspect brings the viewer into the realm of Duchamp's “reciprocal ready-made,” where by “using a Rembrandt as an ironing board,” an artwork is returned problematically to the status of everyday object. The viewer of 4|4 must confront the awkward prospect of physically trespassing on the art when deciding whether to take a seat. What might this mean that I sit down on the very object depicted in the abstract plan on the wall in front of me?

The root of Werner Thöni's current work presents an ethical withdrawal. From the quotidian to the political, the contemporary fetish of *transparency* expresses the hopeless utopianism of an administrative discourse. When communication is assessed according to its clarity – based in evidence and explanation as an ingratiating form of intellectual friendliness – any excesses of ornament, allusion, or indirection appear as hostile obfuscation. The proliferation of documentary exposés that showcase the world's tremendous suffering through lavish photographic and testimonial evidence begins to overlap with the endless advertised promises of commodities and markets to remedy the woes of the day. The unmistakable clarity of message risks obscuring the stakes of enjoyment for those who survive even from a well-informed distance.

As equitable as its claims may be, the current ethic of transparency belies the bad faith of every self-righteous complaint against obscurantism. Painting has always been about covering up, hiding, or obscuring the last daub of paint, a flawed rendering, the void of the canvas. Werner Thöni's paintings take obscurantism into their artistic embrace and propose a form of tribute that withdraws from a tragic event into the precise space of its absence. The artist makes no claim to have a relation to the reported victims but rather stipulates personal associations out of the very lack of relationship. Instead of particularizing the universally-demonstrable tragedy, the essential gesture of 4|4 is to universalize the always yet-to-be-distinguished particularity of such loss. In other words, to face a public tragedy truly one must confront one's own radical distance from the event. The artist's quiet indifference to volunteering explanations in this case represents neither a coyness nor a refusal but rather an aesthetic that seeks the basis for authentic expression.

Peter Freund, PhD

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Barcelona, 2019

4 | 4

Four paintings, four benches

Pintura
I want a poodle
130x130x3 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Puff
I want to be seen together
37x37x41 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Pintura
I want to be easy
130x130x3 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Puff
I want us to sneak out
37x37x41 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo

Pintura
I want pain
130x130x3 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Puff
I want a six footer
37x37x41 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Pintura
I want a baritone
130x130x3 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



Puff
I want Arnold
37x37x41 cm
Azul de Prussia Ftalo



4 | 4

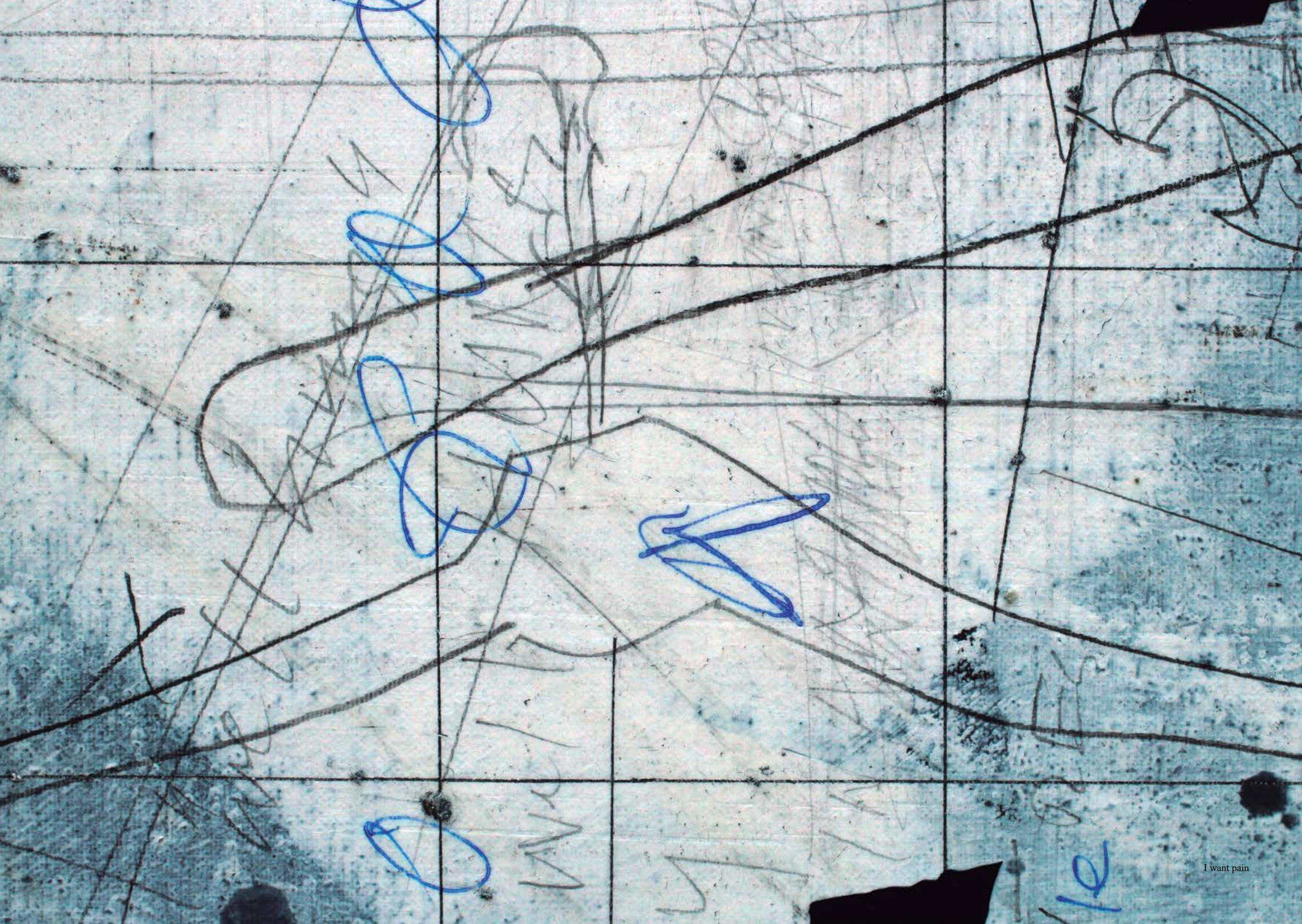
Magnified views



13

15







I want to be seen together



I want a six footer

I want us to sneak out



I want Arnold

Special Thanks

Núria Eres Charles

Peter Freund

Bruno Ryff

Nicolas Freytag

Adela Moreno Montaña

Néstor Espinach

Agnès Thöni

The artist can be reached at art@wernerthoeni.com.
For more information about his work,
visit www.wernerthoeni.com.



Puff

**I want
Arnold**

37x37x41 cm
Azul de Prussia
Ftalo

