

KING KONG

"I can do
a circle, I
can do a
Gerwald Rockenschaub
square, or
similar basic
geometric
shapes!"

Interview by Tim Lienhard

TL Mr. Rockenschaub do you want to be called by your first name?

GR We can do that with pleasure!

TL You exude a certain seriousness that tempts people to address you formally.

GR I recently felt so old in Vienna, it was horrible. When I looked into the audience during my music performance, my concert...there were many young people...a cool audience, but some of them couldn't relate to my music at all. Less the younger ones, but the somewhat older "art audience" was irritated, because they could not properly classify and decode my music. I make electronic music, but not dance music.

TL So you're still DJing?

GM No, not for a long time. I make music, but more as a hobby. See my CD "Private Pleasures" from 2004. In the 90s I was on the road as a DJ. Land up, land down, also internationally, then I had a club in Vienna from 1995 to 1999, "the audioroom".

TL Why did you feel old?

GR Because those in the audience were so young, oh fuck, I'm getting old.

TL You turned 70 last year, did you celebrate?

GR Yes, but on a very small scale. I invited friends over for dinner.

TL I thought you, who still occasionally DJ and who had your own club, would rent a club to celebrate a milestone birthday.

GR When I still lived in Vienna, I partied big, but with my move from Vienna to Berlin around the turn of the millennium, I let it go. I didn't want to do the same thing as in Vienna again.

Vienna is a bit narrower. You go out on the street and almost every time you run into a gallery owner, which increasingly annoyed me, and then you just meet too many people who know you, which is also annoying. I like to be anonymous, that's why I moved to Berlin.

TL Berlin is also the club capital of the world. It would be obvious, given your biography, to feel at home here and to go to the clubs. Do you go to Berghain?

GR Not for some time now. I don't want to do it anymore. I've done so many events myself, I've been to so many events as a DJ, or as a visitor, at some point the number is counted out, for me personally.

TL When was it told?

GR When I moved to Berlin, I still went out, but at some point it was over. I don't feel like going anywhere, it's a pain in the ass in this big city. Then I also lost contact with the scene. For example, Berghain, at some point it became so touristy that it was simply impossible for me to go there. Or then you just don't know the people anymore or you don't have a connection to the operators anymore and you have to get in line. Of course, I never had to wait in line when I was a party organizer.

TL Have you also distanced yourself from the art scene in the meantime, or have you remained true to it?

GR Also a little bit. I still go to certain events that interest me, but I hardly ever go to openings

anymore. Openings are more social events, so I don't see anything of the exhibition, of the art. Of course I make exceptions at openings of friends. Of course, I also go to openings of the gallery Mehdi Chouakri, which represents me.

TL You have already distanced yourself from something a few times in your life. You originally studied history, philosophy and psychology. But then you switched to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Are you unsteady?

GR What does "studied" mean... I was enrolled and attended some of these lectures, seminars, etc. I was interested in philosophy. I was interested in that, and I'm still interested in philosophy. I took the entrance exam for the University of Applied Arts, not necessarily to become an artist. Because at that time I couldn't imagine what that meant at all. I was in my eighth semester at the university and I had to ask myself, what am I doing here? An academic career or what? Either graduation, or something completely different. So I first applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, but wasn't accepted because I was wrong there, that was simply the wrong school for me. That's why I took the entrance exam at the University of Applied Arts. That was the better school at the time anyway. There were people like Bazon Brock, Peter Weibel, Joseph Beuys as a guest professor, and Karl Lagerfeld, just a lot of good professors.

TL You didn't want to paint, or do liberal arts, but applied arts, design, furniture?

GR That was not so clear to me at the beginning. My interests and ambitions developed little by little, including what I can do artistically. At that time I also played in the post-punk band „Molto Brutto“. My announcement was, you try more or less what you can. If you can't do anything, you do it anyway.

The galleries in Vienna then opened up to young artists at the beginning of the 80s. So it was relatively easy for me to quickly find a gallery - the Galerie Nächst Sankt Stephan. Then very soon the Cologne gallery Paul Maenz also became interested in my work. Then followed international exhibitions, group exhibitions and also solo exhibitions, so it has then somehow developed.

TL The crowning glory was the invitation to documenta in 2007. Did you fit in there, or did you think it was something completely different that the others were doing?

GR What does fit in mean. I was just invited, whether I fit in there is not my problem for the time being.

TL You accept every invitation?

GR No, I don't accept every invitation! But at some point the Documenta director Roger Buerger contacted me and then I met him and he told me what he wanted and that sounded interesting to me. So why should I turn it down?

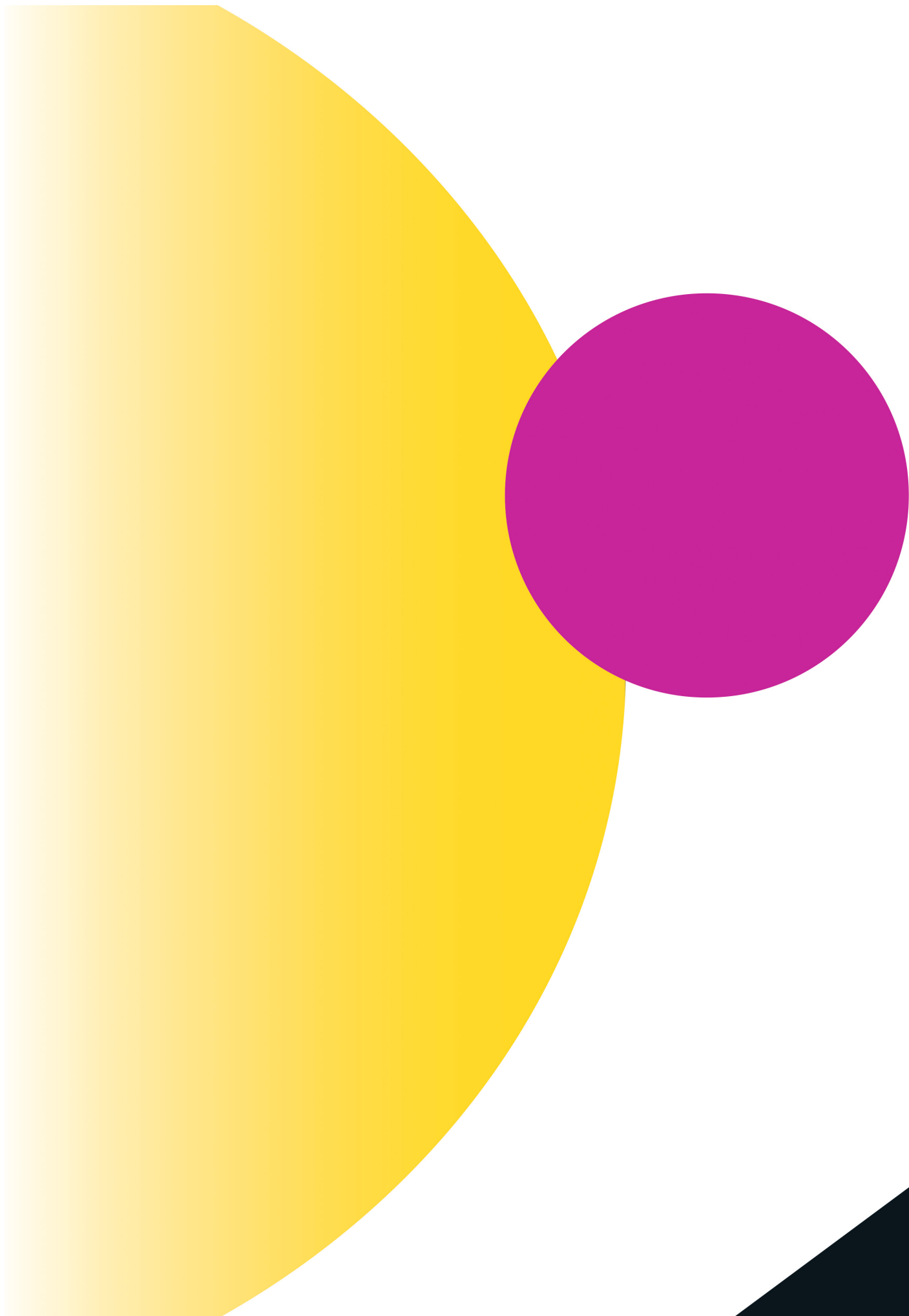
TL An invitation to Documenta is in itself an honor that no artist would want to miss, right?

GR Unless it's completely stupid, but a Documenta director usually has an interesting concept.

TL Was that an accolade for you in 2007 then?

GR I think in other categories. So for me as an





accolade, I couldn't say that now, I just don't think that way. I'm invited, so I try to give the best from my perspective. Every event that I agree to, I try to give the best I can.

TL But there are different categories of invitations. There is a blatant hierarchy in the art scene. Isn't there a difference between inviting a small art association in the provinces and inviting the world art exhibition Documenta?

GR No, not necessarily. Documenta is of course a different category because it's a big event, yes well, but if the director, or the director of a small art association is an interesting person who has an interesting concept and an interesting space, then I would definitely do that.

TL So for you the place is not so important, but the space?

GR The exhibition space is crucial, the possibilities in such a space and then, as I said, the concept of the operator.

TL Can this also be a private person who invites you to design private spaces in their home?

GR Of course, this can happen.

TL Happens, right?

GR Already happened, yes.

TL Where then is the boundary from art to architecture to decoration?

GR For me, not everything always has to be unique. I have nothing at all against decoration. I have nothing against design. It's just a design and decoration job. That can be interesting. Simply this contradictoriness, that's what I find challenging. I also always ask when I'm invited by an institution, what do you want? Which doesn't mean that I then get involved exactly.

TL If someone says to you "I have a pink sofa here, a matching wall must be created by Gerwald Rockenschaub". Does he also have a chance?

GR Yes, he did.

TL Do you see yourself as a service provider?

GR Yes, also as a service provider. But I don't see that in a negative way, that's not pejorative for me at all. It's a job, a task that has to be done as well as possible. Of course, it may be that I can't think of anything. Art in construction, or so-called art in construction, I usually can't think of anything to say.

TL So the fact that you can't think of anything can also happen?

GR It's not just me. From time to time, people can't think of anything to say about anything; it's probably the same for a writer, for example, it's probably the same for everyone.

TL You obviously don't think much of the term artistic genius. Do you reject this habitus of an artistic genius?

GR I just don't think the term artistic genius makes any sense at all. What is that supposed to mean?

TL Don't you know colleagues who feel this way?

GR That's their problem then, if they feel like a genius or want to work for art history. What a nonsense from my perspective. I don't decide whether what I do is interesting or relevant for art history.

TL What will remain of your work?

GR I don't know, I don't really care. I can't influence

that, I don't know.

TL Do you look back, do you look back at what you've done over the decades?

GR Of course, that can't be avoided at all. I'm always confronted with it in one way or another. But I'm more interested in what I'm doing at the moment. The next projects naturally interest me more than the past projects. But that has nothing at all to do with devaluing what I did in the past. That's over, that's what I've done.

TL Is there anything you would redo? Do differently?

GR Yes, probably, if I were to do it differently now, I would pretty much do it differently. Of course I would do it differently, because I'm at a different stage of my artistic development now than I was, let's say, ten years ago. Because my spectrum has expanded and I now have other possibilities, can develop other ideas.

TL Are there moments that you look back on fondly, where you yourself say that it was a great time?

GR I look back with great pleasure. The 90s and the 80s were great, because I got into the art business, which I didn't expect at all. That was a super interesting, exciting time. The 90s were super exciting because I did a lot with music back then. DJ-ing, clubs.

The stock market crash in 1987 was extremely "unexciting".

TL In what way?

GR By many coincidences, simply by being in the right place at the right time, I slipped into the art business. That then took on a dynamic of its own. I was young and thought that this would go on forever.

TL And that was thwarted by the 1987 stock market crash?

GR Of course, that was slowed down, the art market almost came to a standstill for a few years. So I said, "Okay, shit, what now?"

TL Before that, there was the so-called Neo-Geo movement. Did this art movement as a play with geometric forms suit you?

GR I was part of this trend. But that's not what you invent yourself. Someone says Neo-Geo and then it's called that. One is then part of this movement or this trend, which one does not invent oneself and never invents alone, but many, many artists who do similar things or have a similar idea of art, who nevertheless express themselves in very different ways, are then brought together by someone under one term or trend.

Summarized.

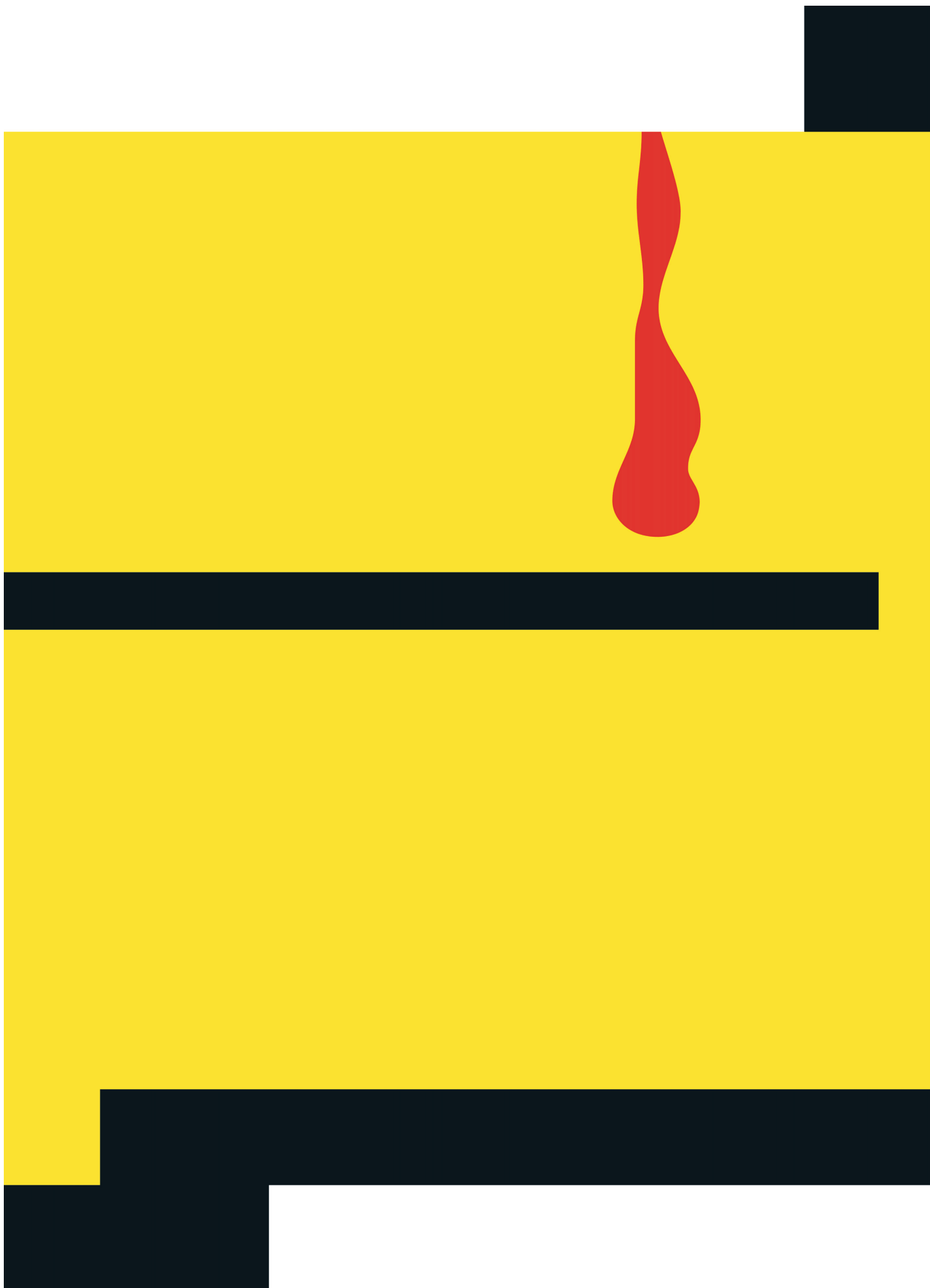
TL Nobody talks about Neo-Geo anymore. Neo-Geo used to be, but you have remained faithful to this style. Do you have a love for geometry?

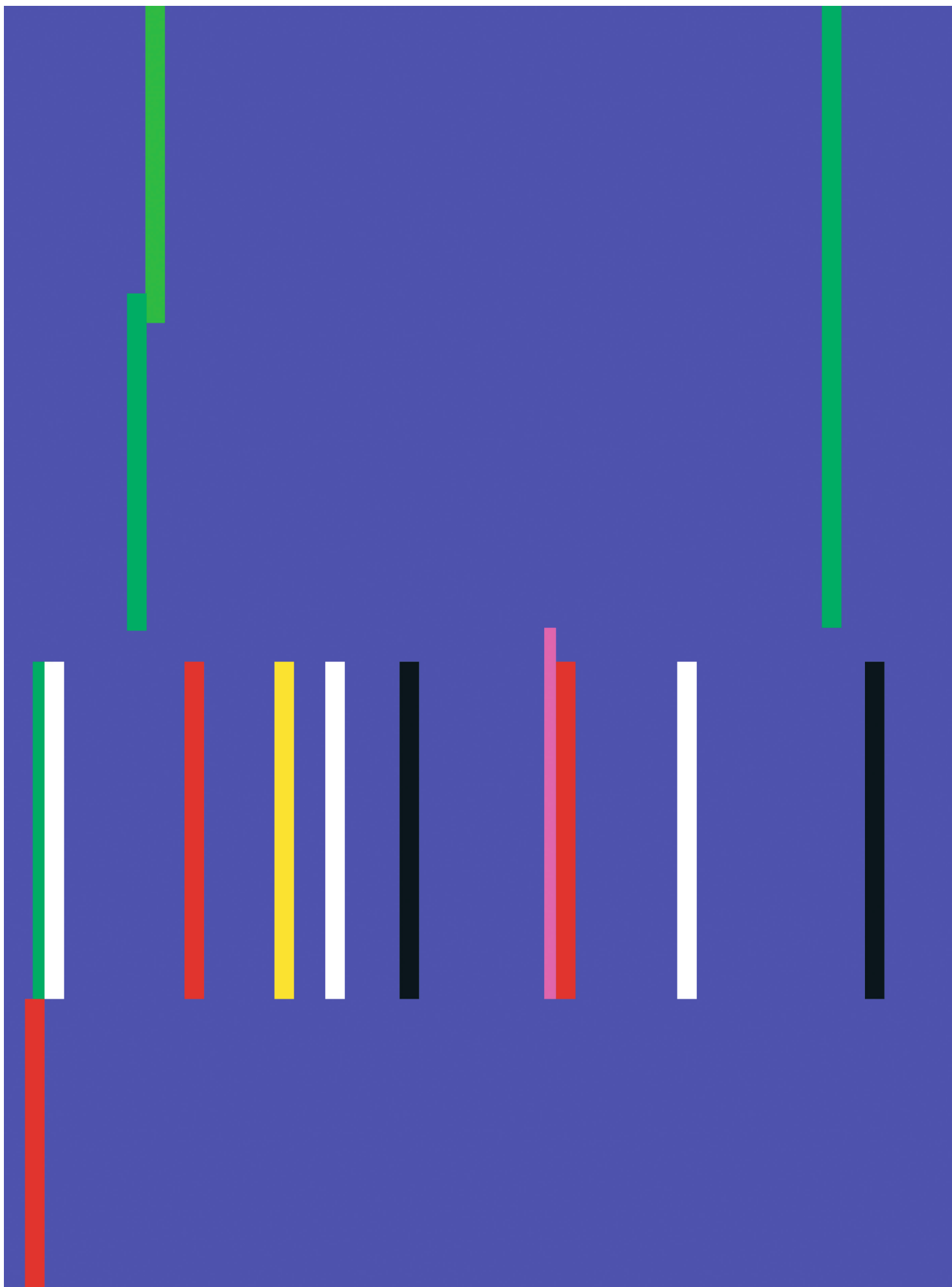
GR I do what I can. I came to the art school and also in retrospect, what can I do better than others.

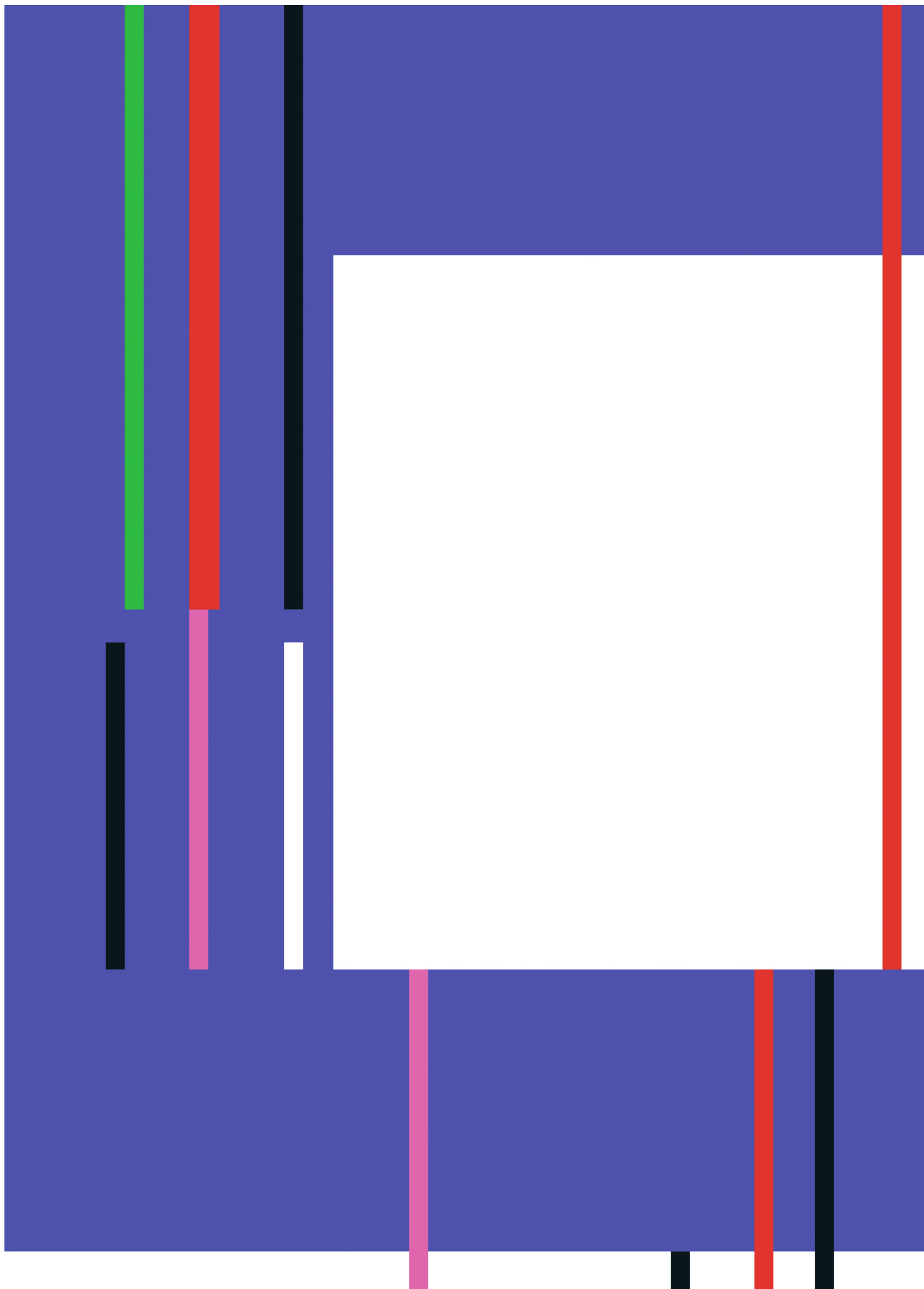
TL What is it?

GR Well, I can do a circle, I can do a square or similar basic geometric shapes, I can do those! That also corresponds to my personality.

TL What would that be like?







GR I feel emotionally connected to geometric shapes. TL Because it is clear, or why ?

GR A decisive question for me as an artist is: What do I want to represent, what do I want to show? What is my formal language? Friends at the time in the eighties painted gesturally, expressively. I tried that, too, but it didn't interest me, such nonsense...

TL Did you want it to be more strictly ordered. Geometric form instead of gesture?

GR That has nothing to do with orderly, but that is not my formal language, this gestural, emotional. The question is also in which tradition one stands!

TL In which tradition do you stand?

GR The so-called Gestische were much more accepted in Vienna because they were supposedly part of a Viennese tradition. If I felt at all at home in a tradition, then in the "Wiener Werkstätte".

TL Which stands for the functional.

GR Exactly the functional, but also the rational level interests me more.

TL Does that also mean that you are interested in the use?

GR The utility level and the rational, that just suits me better as a person.

TL So it's not the emotional, but the rational that's important to you?

GR I find both interesting and important, but I'm more on the rational side than the emotional side.

TL Why?

GR I'm just like that, there's no why for me! TL

Do you like being like this?

GR I don't mind, it's just the way it is. It's not that I'm not emotional at all, I can't say that at all, it's just that when I think up something, conceive an exhibition - by the way, I always think in exhibitions, in contexts, and less in individual works - then I ask myself what I want to represent! What is the theme? What do I want to show the audience in a particular space? My installations always have to do with space. To put it casually, I ask myself, how do I decorate the hut? What's in there, where do I put what, and how does an audience move through such a space? I always think of the audience as well. What possibilities do I offer the audience now?

TL Is it easier to decorate a white cube of yours than a rococo castle?

GR My job is to come up with something. From my perspective, there are no difficult rooms, but the worst that can happen, I can't think of anything...

TL Do you like White Cube?

GR I have to come up with something reasonable for every spatial situation that I would like to show. TL Do you have easier access to a White Cube than to a room in the Palace of Versailles?

GR That would be great, Versailles would be a real challenge! I'm into that kind of shit, Baroque, I like that. But what do you do with it, there's so much there, it's so exuberant, with gold and everything, how do I accentuate that? How do I deal with it? What does that have to do with me and how can I rework that into some kind of functioning idea, into a meaning? Super exciting job!

TL If you say you like that shit, baroque and rococo, then I'm surprised that you yourself live in such reduced rooms. Why don't you have stucco on the ceiling, or exuberant decorations?

GR Baroque would be something I would definitely not want to inhabit, but if I lived in Baroque, I would completely ignore it in no time. As a living situation, I would have to ignore it, visually push it aside, in order to be able to work at all. But I'm permanently gawking at the computer monitor when I work anyway and don't see the surroundings.

TL How would you describe the art you make?

GR It's hard for me to describe, I don't describe what I do, I do it. I get invited to certain situations, institutions, galleries and then I come up with something, develop an idea that I think works and could be exciting for an audience.

TL For me, this is a visual language that you are using, that you are developing in an almost pictogram-like language. Pictograms that can be read and grasped quickly. Do you also see it that way?

GR There are certain works that are probably quicker to grasp than others. My animations, for example, are already programmed or primarily intended in such a way that you can see very quickly what's going on, what's happening. They're very short loops, three to 14 seconds long. But of course I build in a few so-called visual traps.

Because it must not become banal for me! It's my job to bring some sophistication into it, so that it doesn't become too superficial, because that would get on my nerves.

TL Musicality also plays a role for you. What about dramaturgy, which a single image doesn't require, but a room does?

GR That then has to do with the respective installation and staging. If I have six or seven rooms in a museum at my disposal, then I can of course create an exciting dramaturgy and rhythm of the installation, an almost cinematic dramaturgy. What do I show at the beginning, what do I show in the middle and on the way out?

How does the dramaturgical circle close then? How do I design the dramaturgy of the space?

TL What do you actually create? Paintings or sculptures, objects or installations?

GR My installations usually consist of different elements, sculptures, objects, images.

TL The decision which color you use, is it intuitive or do you follow a color theory?

GR No color theory at all! By functionality. How does it "pop" best, how does it work best? How do different colored elements go together or not?

TL Are these purely intuitive decisions?

GR To put it casually, that's over the top.

TL Is there a noticeable thing about you favoring the same color over and over again?

GR Well, very often I use a pretty bright green or magenta. I'm quite fond of that. I often work with signal colors.

TL So you intuitively coordinate that?

GR Yes, I coordinate them with each other. But making everything brightly colored doesn't make sense to me either. It's about variety.

TL Is it also a question of not being dissonant, but of fitting together? Do you prefer harmony or dissonance?

GR It depends on the overall context. In a certain exhibition concept, I may well say okay, something dissonant has to go in there.

TL Signal colors are crucial because they attract attention?

GR Yes I work with it as an eye catcher.

TL Is that okay if I can make a reference from some of your objects to some of Donald Judd's?

GR Donald Judd is too dogmatic for me.

TL Are you more playful and free?

GR Undogmatic in any case and more playful.

TL So it doesn't bother you if someone sees an object of yours on the wall and says, that looks like Donald Judd?

GR If he looks closely, an object of mine does not look like Donald Judd. If he misinterprets that, that is his problem and not mine. But okay by me, I do not prescribe how someone should see something.

TL What is your relationship with children's toys?

GR Children's toys? I am no longer a child, but I have now and then an absolutely childlike mind. The other day I saw a photo of a completely wacky children's toy, I liked it very much.

TL I don't see chaos with you. Do you create order with what you create?

GR Chaos is not my topic. There is already enough chaos anyway.

TL With you, I see more of an offer and perhaps an effort at readability.

GR Well, you could say that. My offer is that it is potentially readable, yes it is.

TL Deciphered?

GR Decodable.

TL You had said that this is your personality, which prescribes this form, which you produce. I would, as little as I know you, but assess as very structured, striving for order, almost as compulsive describe.

GR Compulsive by no means. My work is about art, and for me it's also about bringing tension into it, so from my point of view it shouldn't be too ordered.

TL Playful usability also comes to mind for your works. Can you do something with it?

GR Yes, of course. What I do has to do with design, of course, but it's not design.

TL As far as I can tell from your work, I hardly see any blurred colors, but rather clearly separated color fields or areas.

GR Yes.

TL Why is that?

GR Because this blurring doesn't interest me, quite simply. It's not my thing.

TL Have you become rich with your art?

GR What is rich?

TL When you have more money than you need and can spend.

GR With me it works differently, I have earned enough money so far to be able to afford my productions well then again and again? That's all

I need.

TL I see structured, clearly separated elements in your compositions. That also has to do with order. Are you looking for stability?

GR Not at all. Order or structure have certain functions here. In my room installations, I also specify the possible direction of travel for the audience through sculptural elements.

TL Does this make you a kind of choreographer of the exhibition visitors?

GR A door also gives a direction. Through my installations in the room, or in a door, this is disturbed a bit, but with it I also connect rooms in a different way than a very normal simple door. In art you can do that, a little disturbance, a visual disturbance, dramaturgical disturbance.

TL Do you see yourself as a concept artist?

GR Yes and no. As a conceptual artist in the classical sense certainly not, but yes I develop concepts. I am definitely not a painter.

TL Would you have liked to become an architect?

GR No.

TL Why not. After all, you work with rooms.

GR I decorate rooms. I react to rooms.

TL You are a decorator!

GR Exactly I am a decorator!

TL Is what you do supposed to be popular or elitist?

GR In art, you can allow something to be ambiguous. It is a game.

TL Are you a gamer?

GR Yes I play with shapes, colors and their function, I play with ideas, with content, but I don't play in the casino.

TL And something like board games, board games?

GR I hate that, I hate that, I think that's terrible. Card games are out of the question for me.

I don't like it at all, card games get on my nerves, and they get on my nerves big time.

TL Then thank you for the interview. It was not a game, but a pleasure.

All images: © Gerwald Rockenschaub

Courtesy: the artist and Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin; Galerie Krobath, Vienna; Vera Munro, Hamburg; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York / Vienna; Thaddeus Ropac, London / Paris / Salzburg / Seoul