



# Ulrike Müller

MEYER\*KAINER EDITION

# Ulrike Müller

## For Now

11.2.–8.4. 2023

MEYER\*KAINER, Vienna

For Now

lately you say I've had an awkward  
pull  
toward the past tense  
my remarks renovate  
details in oil

pantoufles all over again  
in the slippery something that  
should be your mind  
does it matter about heels<sup>1</sup>

Ulrike Müller's diverse artistic practice – which, in addition to the enamel and rug works, monotypes, collages and wall painting shown here, also includes drawing, performance as well as publication and curation projects – slips, like the shoe or mind in Rosemarie Waldrop's poem, through time and its forms, shuffles in slippers, stumbles on heels through modernity, pulling backwards, drawing forwards. Müller's pull towards the past tense is manifest in her citations and re-writings of the history of abstract painting – Constructivism, Geometric Abstraction, Neo-Geo, Feminist Formalism – which she breaks down, reassembling their elements into new compositions, but never into a totality, suspending closure and completion. That way, her images do not present modernism as a self-contained project, but rather as a constant search for other forms of expression and formal renewals: *the old expressions are with us always and there are always others*. A simultaneity of the novel and the bygone, of past and present tense, of post and now – a temporality also inherent in the exhibition's title that is borrowed from the New York poet Eileen Myles: *For now. The end, for now. That's it, over, goodbye, for the moment. A postponed end. A joke without the finality of a punch line.*

The joke is told across different groups of works: individual pictorial elements move from one series to the next, snippets of color and form repeat and subtly switch their mediums and grounds; something appears in an enamel painting, then on canvas, paper or rug, carries forward. The cat, in the letter or e-mail box a moment ago, that is, on the invitation card, shoo shoo, hop hop, now she's purring on the wall. Picked up as a stray, put into the picture, then straight to the gallery, ein Katzensprung. Figurative elements absorb abstraction and appear more as signs than as clear references. They are hints, set pieces, scraps of figuration that, like syllables, do not yet form an intelligible figure, a whole word, but rather a sound, a hunch, a misunderstanding. A stutter, a childlike babble, an aphasic phonetic disorder.

*The dissolution of the linguistic sound system in aphasics provides an exact mirror-image for the phonological development in child language*, writes Jakobson, writes for and not of, as if aphasia made the child's acquisition of speech possible in the first place and with it every production of sound in developmental stages, as if it held the mirror or provided rules, folie oder folly.<sup>2</sup>

The disintegration of language as fundamental to the first attempts at language acquisition. Speech loss, noise, and missing words as reflections of first babble words. Müller slides and stumbles, like the linguistic outliers child and aphasic, in snippet language through modernist abstraction. With stencils, templates and color schemes from archives and everyday visual culture, she dissects, cuts, mixes, melts, fixes and dyes the mother tongue painting; combines the rigor of abstract-constructive principles and geometric forms with the suppleness of domestic colors and fleeting figuration.

and in one bubble swims Jakobson, saying: children with their wild sounds, with their first blustering bubble, are able to produce any imaginable sound of any language, the bubble rises, which they'll soon forget, the bubble floats pregnant with meaning above the afternoon, once they acquire their mother tongue, the bubble pops<sup>3</sup>

Sophia Rohwetter

For Now

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Ulrike Müllers vielfältige Praxis – die neben den hier gezeigten Emaille- und Teppicharbeiten, Monotypien, Collagen und einem Wandbild auch Zeichnung, Performance sowie Publikations- und Kurationsprojekte umfasst – schlittert, wie der Schuh oder der *mind* in Rosemarie Waldrops Gedicht durch die Zeit und ihre Formen, schlurft auf Pantoffeln, stöckelt auf Hackenschuhen durch die Moderne, pullt nach hinten, zieht nach vorne. Müllers Tendenz zur past tense zeigt sich in der Zitation und Umschreibung der Geschichte malerischer Abstraktion – Konstruktivismus, Geometrische Abstraktion, Neo-Geo, feministischer Formalismus – die sie in einzelne Elemente zerlegt und neu, aber nie zu einer Totalität zusammensetzt, suspending die Vollendung. Ihre Bilder präsentieren die künstlerische Moderne nicht als ab- und in sich geschlossenes Projekt, sondern als eine ständige Suche nach anderen Ausdruckformen und formalen Erneuerungen: *the old expressions are with us always and there are always others*. Eine Gleichzeitigkeit von Neuartigem und Vergangenem, von past tense und Gegenwart, von post und jetzt, die auch dem von der New Yorker Dichterin Eileen Myles geborgten Ausstellungstitel innewohnt: *For now. Das Ende, fürs Erste. Das wars, vorbei, goodbye, für den Augenblick. Ein aufgeschenbes Ende. Ein Witz ohne die Finalität der Pointe.*

Der Witz erzählt sich über die Werkgruppen hinweg, einzelne Bildelemente wandern von einer Serie zur nächsten, Farb- und Formelemente wiederholen sich und wechseln scheinbar fließend ihre Medien und Gründe; etwas taucht im Emaillebild, dann auf Leinwand, Papier oder Teppich wieder auf, setzt sich fort. Die Katze, eben noch im Briefkasten oder Emailpostfach, also auf der Einladungskarte, husch husch, hopp hopp, jetzt schnurrt sie an der Wand. Zugelaufen, ins Bild gesetzt, dann in die Galerie, ein Katzensprung. Die gegenständlichen Elemente nehmen die Abstraktion in sich auf und hängen mehr zeichenhaft da denn als klare Verweise. Es sind Andeutungen, Versatzstücke, Figurationsfetzen, die ähnlich wie Silben, noch keine eindeutige Figur, kein ganzes Wort bilden, mehr ein Laut, eine Ahnung, ein Missverständen. Ein Stottern, ein kindliches Gebrabbel, eine aphasische Lautbaustörung.

der abbau des sprachlichen lautbestandes bei den aphasischen liefert das genaue spiegelbild für den lautlichen aufbau der kindersprache, schreibt Jakobson, schreibt interessanterweise nicht: aphasischer abbau liefert spiegelbild des kindlichen aufbaus, schreibt für, als ob die aphasische störung das kindliche und damit jedes sich in entwicklung befindliche lautbauen erst möglich machte, spiegel halte oder spelregel lieferte, folie oder folly.<sup>2</sup>

Der Abbau der Sprache als Grundlage des Spracherwerbs. Sprachverlust, Störgeräusche und Wortfindungsschwierigkeiten als Spiegelbild des ersten Wortversuchs. Müller schlittert, stammt und zieht, wie die sprachlichen Grenzgänger\*innen Kind und Aphasiker in Schnipselsprache durch die moderne Abstraktion. Mit Schablonen, Vorzeichnungen und Farbschemen aus Archiven und visueller Alltagskultur zerlegt, zerschneidet, mischt, schmilzt, fixiert und färbt sie die Muttersprache Malerei; verbindet die Strenge abstrakt-konstruktiver Prinzipien und geometrischer Formen mit der sanften Schmiedbarkeit häuslicher Farben und flüchtiger Figuration.

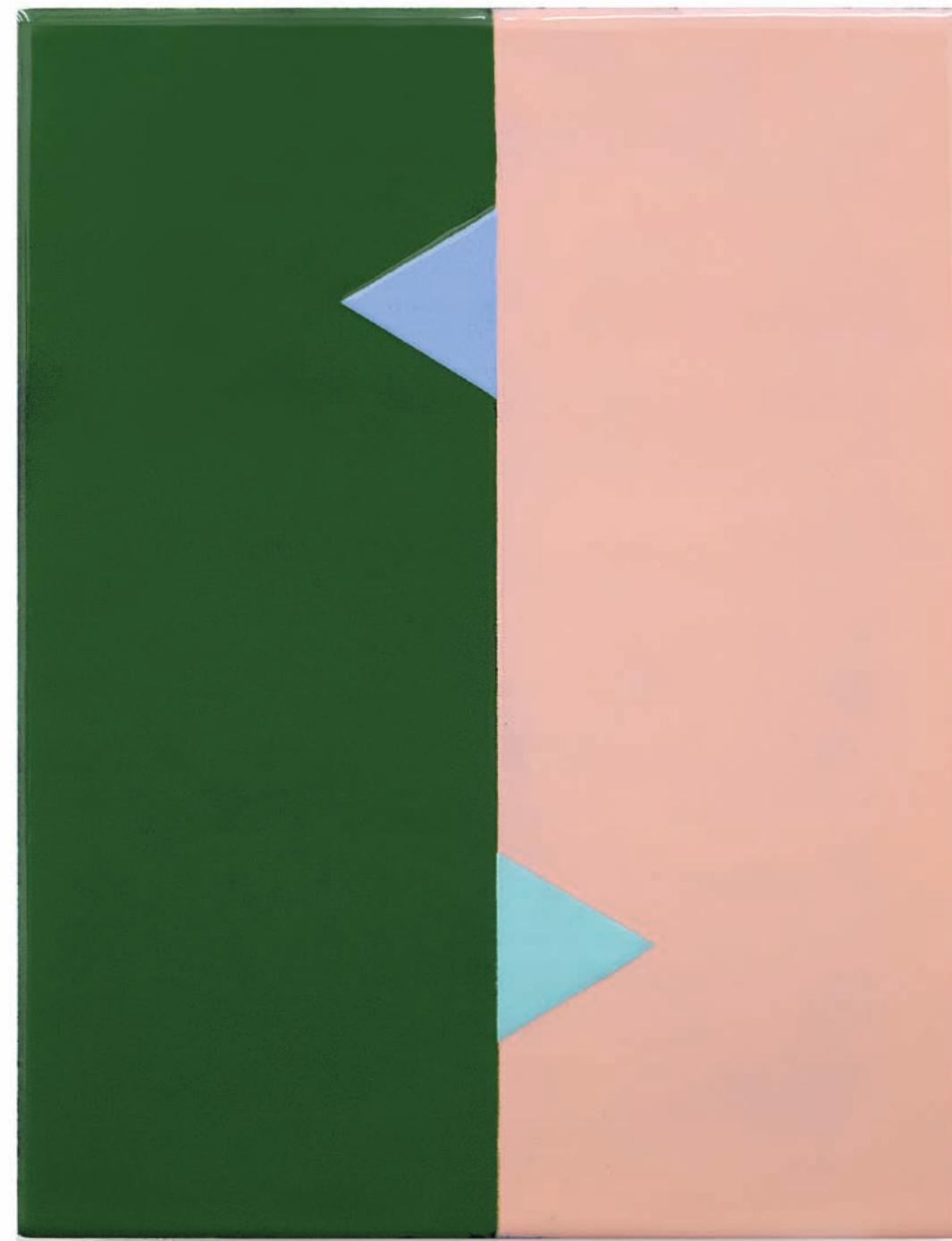
steht in einer blase Jakobson, sagt: die Kinder mit ihren wilden lauten, mit dem ersten blusteren lallen, sind sie in der Lage, alle denklischen Laute aller Sprachen zu erzeugen, Blase steigt auf, welche sie dann vergessen, Blase schwebt bedeutungsschwanger überm mittag, wenn sie ihre Muttersprache lernen, platzt<sup>3</sup>

Sophia Rohwetter

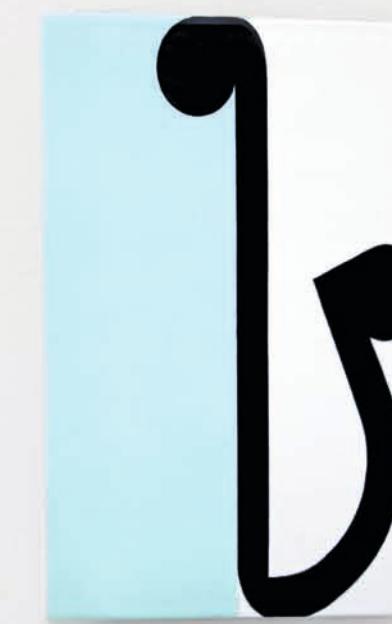
<sup>1</sup>Rosemarie Waldrop, "Kind Regards," in *Gap Gardening: Selected Poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Uljana Wolf, "Babeltrack (Notes on a Lengevitch)" (translated by Sophie Seita), in *Subsist: Selected Poems*. Brooklyn: Belladonna, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 40.



Hinges, 2023  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 x 30.5 cm





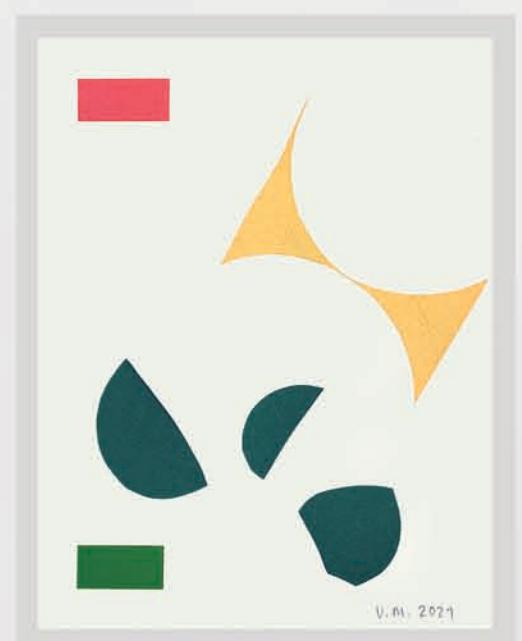
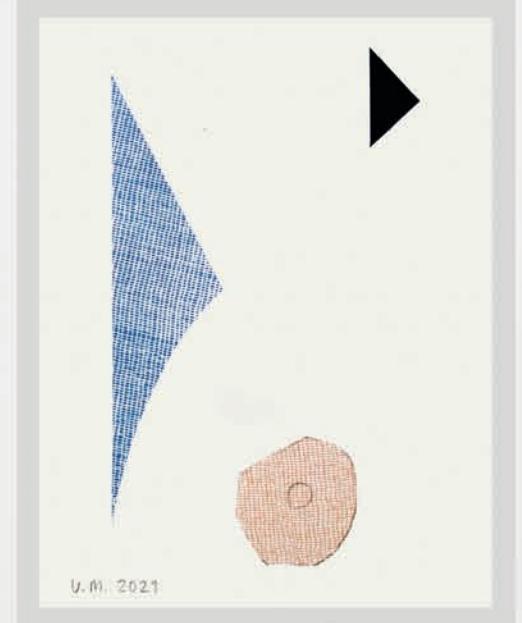
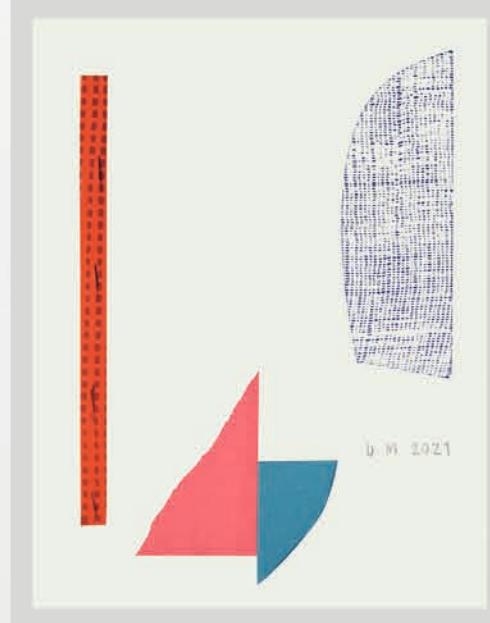
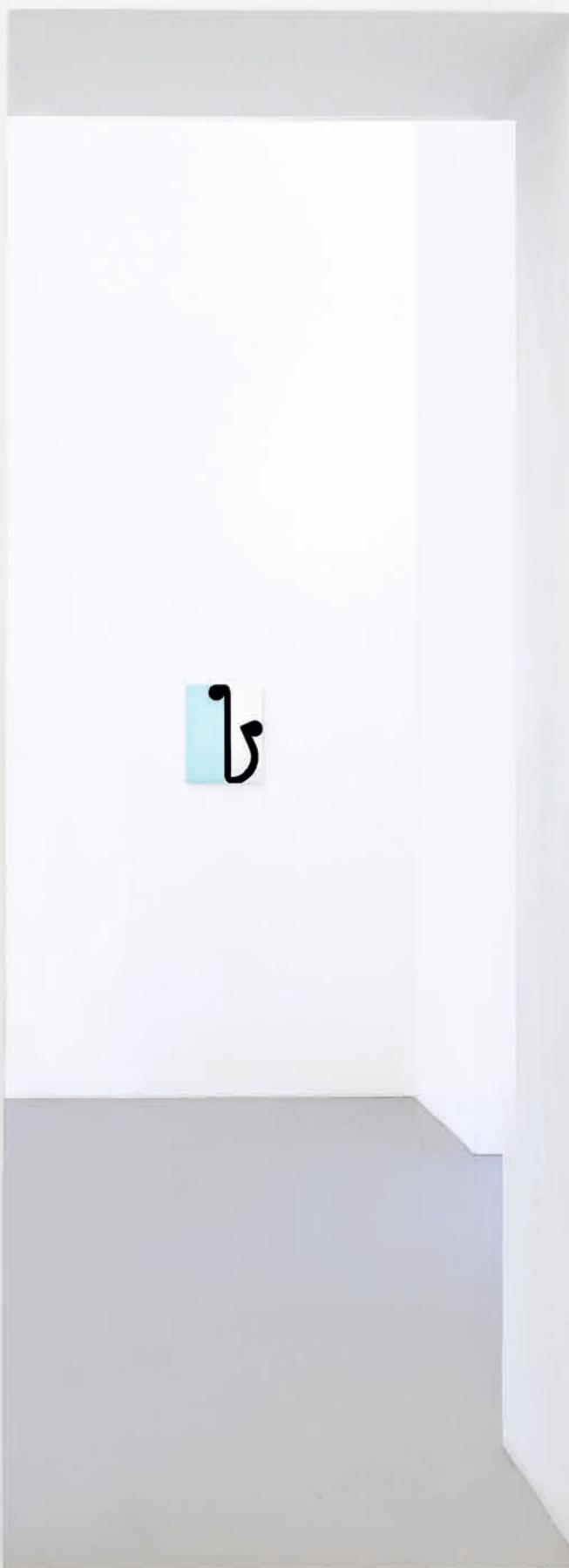
*Hinges*, 2022  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

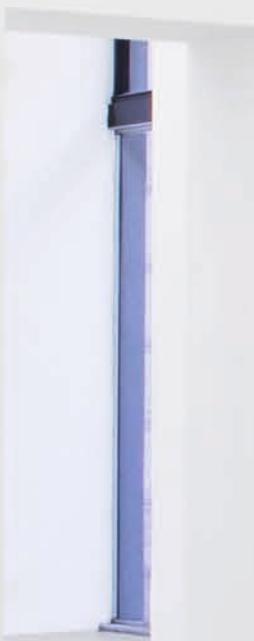


*Hinges*, 2022  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 x 30.5 cm











For Now, 2022  
Monotype with chine-collé on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 × 57 cm  
Unique



Musterhaft, 2022  
Monotype with chine-collé and pochoir on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 × 57 cm  
Unique



*Bric-a-Brac*, 2022  
Monotype with chine-collé and pochoir on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 × 57 cm  
Unique

18



*Followers*, 2022  
Monotype with chine-collé and pochoir on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 × 57 cm  
Unique

19





*Home Office, 2022*  
Monotype with chine-collé and pochoir on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 x 57 cm  
Unique



*To Teach, 2022*  
Monotype with chine-collé and pochoir on paper, executed with 10 Grand Press in Brooklyn, NY  
74 x 57 cm  
Unique

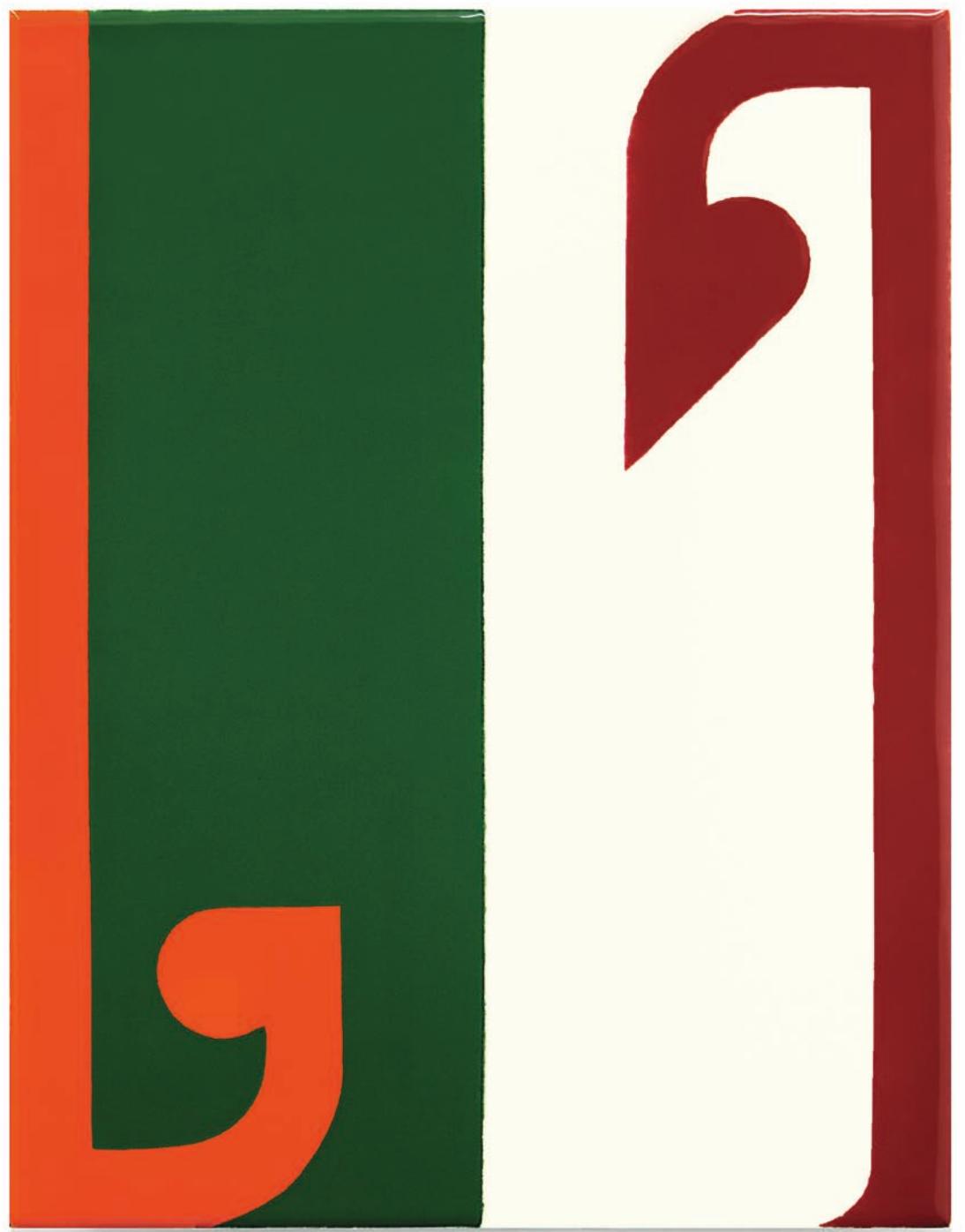




Rug (*una sola*), 2022  
Sheep wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz,  
Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico  
255 × 192.5 cm  
Unique



Rug (*por ahora*), 2022  
Sheep wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz,  
Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico  
256 × 414 cm  
Unique



*Hinges*, 2023  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

28



*Hinges*, 2022  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

29





*Hinges*, 2022  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

32



*Hinges*, 2022  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

33



In the Studio: Ulrike Müller  
(Excerpt)

STEEL STILLMAN Many of your art projects in the early 2000s were performance- or language-based. For instance, in the audio piece *One of Us (Freakish Moments)* [2005], using the second person, you address listeners one at a time through headphones, telling them about their day, which has been filled with endless humiliation...

ULRIKE MÜLLER From sweating to slipping on a banana peel to shitting one's pants on a subway train and worse. *One of Us* was made for a group show at the Mütter Museum, in Philadelphia. I wanted to disturb the comfort of the viewer's assumed normalcy vis-à-vis the "freakish" medical specimens on display. The text was a montage of incidents I'd experienced or heard about.

STILLMAN Then, in 2005, in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib, you wrote, performed, and video-recorded *LOVE/TORTURE*. In it, you stand on a stage with your back to the audience, lit by a single bright light that casts your shadow on the back wall. You then engage in an implied dialogue—your interlocutor is neither seen nor heard—in which you are both torturer and sadomasochistic dominant. The text is superimposed on the images.

MÜLLER Suspending the question of the implied other's consent, the text offers short bursts of direct address that hover ambiguously between torture and sexual role playing. I timed myself so that each passage of text was followed by an equivalent period of silence. That silence, during which the audience had to sit with what they'd just heard, constituted the piece.

STILLMAN The shadow seems to imply the absent other.

MÜLLER Or a doubly absent other, because with my back turned, I too am both there and not there. At that time, I was thinking a lot about how to use the first person without necessarily speaking about myself.

STILLMAN Soon after that you started working on what became the "Curiosity Drawings." Is it true that they began as research for a video?

MÜLLER Those works emerged out of experiments that mirrored, on a visual level, what I'd been doing with text. For instance, when editing the *LOVE/TORTURE* video, I used a split screen to document the use of silence in the performance. Around that same time, I began taking sheets of letter-size paper and dividing them vertically with a pencil line. I then traced simple shapes, circles, and curves from objects that I had on my desk, like a water glass or rolls of tape. I was interested in handmade symmetries, and the line doubled as an axis and a spine. From there, the drawings developed organically, almost making themselves, each one giving me more than one possibility for how to continue.

STILLMAN In the end, there came to be fifty-one "Curiosity Drawings," all but two titled with a line from the early feminist Mina Loy's poem *Lunar Baedeker* [1923].

MÜLLER Titling the "Curiosity" images was important to me; without them, the drawings wouldn't have been finished. In her travel guide to the moon, Loy evokes particular other-

worldly qualities of light, temperature, and scenery. And on a sonic level, she uses alliteration and internal rhyming, and pays special attention to the sounds of vowels. I found my visual strategies reflected in her language.

STILLMAN In hindsight the "Curiosity Drawings" were the pivot point between your text-based work and the primarily visual work of the years since. How did the enamel paintings get started?

MÜLLER It took me several years to get there. For a while, I continued working on paper, but I found the results too quiet and the material too vulnerable. I wanted the works to be more explicit, and sturdier. I tried painting on canvas and metal before making the connection with enamel through signage. Not many signs are enameled any more, but on a residency at Artpace San Antonio, I was introduced to Sherry Fotopoulos, a jewelry maker, who taught me the technique. In pursuing the sign-like quality of enamel, I hadn't realized that I'd have to go through the jewelry world.

STILLMAN There are constraints when working in enamel: there's a limited palette of frit—the powdered glass that is fused onto metal when fired—and the colors can't be mixed; and the motifs can't be drawn by hand but must be translated from working drawings into stencils.

MÜLLER Plus, I'd never worked with metal before, and it didn't feel natural to use a kiln and handle red-hot stuff. But I liked the limitations of the process. Picking colors from a preformulated palette introduces a culturally shared element—a language with built-in ideas and assumptions, like the six or eight colors that kids are given in a box of crayons. They're supposed to be enough to depict the world.

STILLMAN The enamel paintings in the first groups, "Fever 103" and "Franza," relate back to the "Curiosity Drawings."

From then on, the motifs and colors become more complex.

MÜLLER In retrospect, there is something methodical to how I introduced colors one by one as I went along. After the first enamels, which were all only black-and-white, I then added red, whose quasi-Constructivist quality led me to other strong industrial colors. Eventually, to counter that boldness, I brought in baby blue and pink to lend a pastel sensibility. Over time, the enamels have evolved from conveying graphic concerns with negative space toward more painterly preoccupations.

STILLMAN You generally present the enamels in groups, identifiable by their shared palettes and related motifs, in horizontal rows. Why?

MÜLLER Partly because that's how I make them, relationally as groups. But there's also a seasonal component. It's simply too hot to use the kiln in the summer, so when I make a set of enamels they also represent a slice of time. Each batch is like setting up an experiment and pushing it along. I'm trying to make active objects that have a built-in instability and offer more than one reading.

STEEL STILLMAN is a New York-based artist and writer.  
Excerpt of the article "Ulrike Müller on Humiliation,  
Repetition, and Painting with Enamel" in *Art in America*,  
November 2019 issue, pp. 82–91.





Ulrike Müller  
*The Conference of the Animals*,  
Queens Museum, New York  
Sept 16, 2000–Jan 16, 2022



Prize of the Böttcherstrasse to Ulrike Müller  
Kunsthalle Bremen  
Aug 29–Nov 1, 2020



La Biennale di Venezia, 58th International Art Exhibition  
*May You Live in Interesting Times*, curated by Ralph Rugoff  
May 11–Nov 24, 2019





La Biennale di Venezia, 58th International Art Exhibition  
*May You Live in Interesting Times*, curated by Ralph Rugoff  
May 11–Nov 24, 2019



Ulrike Müller  
Container Contained  
MEYER\*KAINER, Vienna  
Mar 15–Apr 13, 2019



*Container*, 2018  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

48



*Container*, 2018  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

49



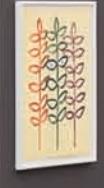
*Container*, 2018  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

50



*Container*, 2018  
Vitreous enamel on steel  
39.4 × 30.5 cm

51



Ulrike Müller  
*Container*  
Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf  
Nov 15, 2018–Feb 24, 2019



57th Carnegie International  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh  
Oct 13, 2018–Mar 25, 2019

Imprint

Exhibition  
Ulrike Müller  
*For Now*

MEYER\*KAINER, Vienna  
11.2.-8.4. 2023

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pp. 46-47: Marcel Koehler  
pp. 48-51: Jackie Furtado  
pp. 52-53: Katja Illner  
pp. 54-55: Bryan Conley  
p. 57: Sean Fader

Whitney Biennial 2017  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
Mar 17-Jun 11, 2017





Rug (*gato de cochinilla*), 2015  
Wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz,  
Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico  
218.4 × 163.5 cm  
Edition 3



Rug (*con triángulos*), 2015  
Wool, handwoven in the workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz,  
Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico  
218.4 × 163.5 cm  
Edition 3

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