



- [Cross-section](#)
- [The Entertainers](#)
- [The Actors](#)
- [The Eloquent](#)
- [The Gourmets](#)
- [The Noisy](#)
- [The Deep Thinkers](#)
- [The Trendy](#)
- [The Arty](#)**
 - [Alexandra Martini](#)
 - [Andreas Gursky](#)
 - [Art House Tacheles](#)
 - [Arwed Messmer](#)
 - [Clemens Weisshaar](#)
 - [Daniel Rosenthal](#)
 - [Friederike Feldmann](#)
 - [Gerhard Mantz](#)**
 - [Günther Schaefer](#)
 - [Jens Casper](#)
 - [Jorinde Voigt](#)
 - [Maix Mayer](#)
 - [Martin Dammann](#)
 - [Mischa Kuball](#)
 - [Nadine Rennert](#)
 - [Neo Rauch](#)
 - [Ostkreuz](#)
 - [XOOOOX](#)

Search

Gerhard Mantz

Gerhard Mantz interviewed by Rory MacLean



'The landscape painter's task is not to create a true representation of air, water, rocks and trees; rather his work should reflect his soul, his feelings,' wrote Caspar David Friedrich, the great 19th century Romantic landscape painter. Two hundred years later, the German artist Gerhard Mantz advances Friedrich's exploration of imaginary and utopian landscapes, but on computers rather than with oil paint.

'I remember at the age of 17 sitting on the floor of the Fondation Maeght in St-Paul-de-Vence, staring at a Kandinsky,' said Mantz, recalling his beginnings as a painter, his eyes sparkling at the memory. 'I was so excited by the painting. I loved it. I didn't understand what was happening to me but I realised that I had to understand this ... mystery.' He laughed. 'It was the moment which changed my life.'

Two weeks earlier, Mantz and a school friend had cycled away from home in Ulm. They had planned to spend their Easter holiday riding to Lake Constance, about 100 kilometres away, but the hills were so steep that the boys dropped their bikes at a friend's house and started to hitchhike. By the end of the first day they were in Switzerland. On the second evening they had reached the Mediterranean.

'I was so happy to be in the south of France that I decided to stay on for an extra week,' recalled Mantz. 'I sent a postcard to my parents asking them to tell the school that I was sick. But my parents worried that something was wrong, and showed the card to my teachers. Everyone knew the truth when I returned home.'

'At first I wasn't sure if I would become an artist. I was fascinated by physics: radio, television, early computer technology. But I realised that I was no Albert Einstein,' he smiled. 'I didn't have the memory. So I thought, my memory is good enough for the arts.'



In 1970 Mantz enrolled in Karlsruhe's Academy of Arts. Over the next 20 years his abstract painting developed through 'Wilde Kunst' to physical, three-dimensional sculpture. He reached outside the frame and then - in works like the thin, red-lipped acrylic *Himalia* - refined his

focus within it, concentrating on singular objects. Next in 1995 he began using computers to help him to discern and define form.

'When I discovered the computer, I was so excited by its potential. The construction of virtual forms was very similar to my three-dimensional studio work. I thought, "This is the best toy - and tool - I've ever had".

Mantz began to work with the Vue d'Esprit - and later Vue - 3D graphics programme, creating objects that did not exist outside the computer's memory, making objects that were neither reconstructions nor representations.

'The work took me back to my roots at the Academy. I found myself

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History, tendencies, names and institutions

Tips

Curators
Painting

imagining space and then constructing it. I put the virtual camera inside objects and then - in time - into a landscape.'

His powerful and eerie digital landscapes seemed to be of the physical world, stirring emotions in the viewer, yet they were constructs which lead the viewer both to the familiar and to the new.

Mantz showed me his *Ahnende Erfahrung* - 'Foreboding Experience' - a haunted vision of tangled and inaccessible undergrowth, part of his *Forest* series.



'My idea was to create a thicket which you could look through but never penetrate. I built it on the flat ground of the computer screen, using scans, adding the bush, the stones, letting the computer duplicate individual elements.

In that way I'm more like a gardener than an artist, throwing seeds into the frame and seeing what comes up.' He stared at the lifelike, abstract image. 'This is Jackson-Pollock-in-the-forest for me.'

His vast cloudscape - printed on three metre lengths of canvas - are especially moving. Wild, transparent, disorientating yet comforting, they transported me into the sky. 'But you can't step on these clouds,' Mantz said, bringing me back down to earth. 'They are an illusion.'



In his series *Air*, as in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of skies, clouds underline an aspect of the sublime, awakening feelings of danger and power, playing with ideas of transparency and ambiguity. But whereas Friedrich's clouds were an

embodiment of freedom and the divine, Mantz's priority is not to convey a metaphysical experience; rather he aspires to reach a level of abstraction reminiscent of Rothko. In addition Mantz - unlike the Romantics - places no individuals within the frame, rendering the idyll inaccessible and unattainable, blocked by thorns or obscured by mist.

His beautiful *Air* paintings have titles like *Distant Incubation* and *The Faithfulness of the Devil*. Other landscapes - which he calls 'archetypal spaces' - include the series *Ocean, Rivers, Wasteland and Mountains*.

In recent years Mantz has also introduced movement into his work, creating animations in his *Infinite Image Productions*.

'The idea for this work came to me during a residency in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern,' he explained. 'I stared at a field of goats and sheep, watching their arbitrary grazing and meetings, and set about designing a programme which would simulate that movement.'

The resulting animations are spontaneous and unique, a random sequential generator ensuring that no image is ever repeated.




Gerhard Mantz is softly-spoken and self-effacing, at home both in his white-walled Schöneberg apartment and his New York studio. He has over 50 solo and 60 group shows to his credit and, when I complimented him on his prolific productivity he

shrugged and said with humility, 'Oh, that's just because of my age.'

'You can call me a digital artist of course,' he concluded. 'But that suggests for me work that is overly technological. I think of myself just as a painter.'

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