

**NITSCH**  
SPACES OF COLOR

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## Exhibition Facts

Press conference	16 May 2019   10.00 am
Opening	16 May 2019   18.30 am
Duration	17 May – 11 August 2019
Venue	Basteihalle
Curator	Elsy Lahner, ALBERTINA
Works	ca. 100
Catalogue	Available for EUR 34.90 (English) & EUR 32.90 (German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>
Audio guide	German, English, Italian & Russian
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1   1010 Vienna T +43 (01) 534 83 0 <a href="mailto:info@albertina.at">info@albertina.at</a> <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>
Opening Hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm Wednesdays & Fridays 10 am – 9pm
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# NITSCH

## Spaces of Color

17 May–11 August 2019

For Hermann Nitsch, painting is one among several disciplines of his *Orgies Mysteries Theater*. It is deeply rooted in actionism, performance, and multimediality. It is the origin of the Actions and, at the same time, their result. With the exhibition *NITSCH. Spaces of Color*, his paintings are to be viewed exclusively and separately for the first time, not as part of a larger whole, but as paintings in their own right. This style of painting goes far beyond the dimensions of panel painting, conquers the entire wall, and intervenes in the space as an all-encompassing installation.

It is a change of perspective, another possible view of Nitsch's work, with which we give it additional significance and anchor it anew within art history. As visitors to the exhibition, we now experience the same works in an entirely different way and, in this concentration, in all their diversity. The exhibition sheds light on an artist who has consistently developed his painting from the 1960s to the present day and further expanded his own specific approach for each Painting Action, each group of works. The results are now accessible and perceptible at the ALBERTINA Museum as color spaces and poured installations.

Hermann Nitsch sees his work as a Gesamtkunstwerk, as a comprehensive spectacle of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*. From his *Aktionen* (Actions), their photographic and filmic documentation, and the relics of his Actions via painting and his graphic work to the music he composes, his texts, scores, and stage sets, the individual disciplines are brought together to form a cohesive whole. Nitsch's main objective is to stage real-life events with his work, thereby addressing all the senses and intensifying perception and experience. The goal is, through this delirious state of being, to consolidate humankind's existence in the world. With his theater, he strives to ecstatically and excessively overcome the boundaries of art, to make art and life become one.

Nitsch's painting stood at the beginning of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, enabling Nitsch to realize his idea, and with it the basic elements of his theater, initially on the two-dimensional picture plane, before his Actions and Painting Actions expanded to three-dimensional space in front of an audience. Nitsch's painting focused on the physical handling of color, the expressive gesture, the actionist application of paint, and the bodily acting out.

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Nitsch always wanted, and still wants, his painting to achieve and express the same thing as his concurrent (body) Actions, which are conceptually based on the painting process. In his Painting Actions, Nitsch also allows an audience to participate in this process. “i wanted to show how the pouring, spraying, smearing, and splattering of red paint fluid can rouse sensually intensive excitement in the viewer, how it solicits sensually intense perception.” The experience of color with all the senses, the “sensuousness of the substance,” as Nitsch calls it, passes from the artist and his co-actors to the audience. But even afterward, the process of creation remains visible and tangible, physically traceable, in the pictures. “

Nitsch’s works are characterized by the necessity of bodily experience. His works, especially his paintings, cannot necessarily be grasped according to purely aesthetic criteria. They require that the viewer get involved in the process of creation, either in the Action itself or by contemplating it afterward, and to participate in or comprehend it in its intensity. The concept of the exhibition is to sensitize visitors to the differences in the various approaches and painting processes and to make these spatially perceptible in the exhibition itself.

## Wall Texts

### Early Works, 1961–1962

“With my first paintings, one cannot yet speak of action painting. More than anything else, I hoped the thickly applied paint would arouse a sensory experience in the viewer. I wanted to paint pictures in a completely different style. I then started spattering with paint. When I was finished I was enthusiastic about my work. I knew immediately that, from that point on, I would paint differently. This was the first picture that was exclusively red. This is how I found my way to action painting.” From this point on, Nitsch created only red monochromes, drawing a clear analogy to blood. A colleague photographed and filmed these first painting actions, in which Nitsch poured the paint onto huge jute canvases with a small cup and then reworked the flow of paint with the brush and more paint. Even in these first painting actions Nitsch worked swiftly, intuitively, and ecstatically, using his whole body. Later on, Nitsch’s painting actions also took place in front of an audience.

### Blood Organ Painting, 1962

In 1962, together with his artist colleagues Otto Muehl and Adolf Frohner, Nitsch wrote the “Blood Organ Manifesto,” which today can be regarded as the first theoretical concept of Viennese Actionism. This resulted in the “Blood Organ Action,” for which the artists had themselves walled inside Muehl’s basement studio for three days and then presented their newly created output. Frohner and Muehl worked on “Junk Sculptures” and together hung a slaughtered sheep upside down. In the course of this joint performance, Nitsch’s 7th Painting Action took place, during which he executed his first poured painting for which blood was used as a painting medium, the so-called *Blood Organ Painting*.

### Resurrection Cycle II, 2002

“After painting the first ‘Resurrection Cycle’ in Prinzenhof in the summer of 2000 and succeeding in incorporating flower-fresh colors into the substance and flesh of the paint, it was clear to me that this year I would radically address the color yellow. What emerged was ‘Resurrection Cycle II’. The color of the summer-ripe grain intensifies to the dazzling light of the sun, into which one is not able to gaze. Now it is only about light, about white, steaming light, not comprehensible to the eye.”

In 2002, during his 45th Painting Action, Hermann Nitsch worked solely on paintings in which yellow dominates. One can see dark traces of paint trickling along the lower margins. Nitsch had first poured russet paint onto the canvas and then reworked it with variations of yellow. It seems as if yellow has triumphed over the dark colors, with light coming to life again as it breaks forth from the dark.

## **Black Cycle I, 1991**

From 1990 to 1992, Hermann Nitsch mainly used black paint in his painting actions, initially applied thinly, then more viscously. As early as 1992, this black phase gradually retracted, and red began to feature in his works once again. In “Black Cycle I,” the artist partly poured the paint and partly spread it across the painting support in all directions using his hands. The traces of his fingers can still be seen on the applied paint. A large part of the white primed jute canvas remains visible. In some cases Nitsch has added his painter’s smock, which shows traces of how he has wiped his hands on it. That Nitsch refers to the individual pictures of this cycle as “Stations of the Cross” underlines the color’s death symbolism. On the other hand, the Stations of the Cross also mark the path toward Resurrection. For Nitsch, whose art alludes to the world’s eternal cycle of death and rebirth, black thus not only signifies death, but also the coming into being of new life.

## **Poured Floor Paintings, 1995**

In 1995, Nitsch’s 37th Painting Action took place at the Kunsthaus in Mürzzuschlag. Nitsch realized his works primarily on the floor, using blood as a painting medium in addition to oil paint. In a first step, the blood was extensively poured over the white primed jute canvas laid out on the floor. In a second step, the artist applied red paint by pouring it and then treating the soft, viscous substance with his hands.

Toward the end of the painting action, the entire floor of the room was stained with blood and paint. The walls were densely populated with the newly created poured floor paintings. It was hardly possible to identify individual works – they no longer existed as such. Nitsch’s poured floor paintings have no fixed orientation; they are directionless. Accordingly, they can be presented in various ways, rotated and turned in different directions. Exceptions are those works in which traces of the flowing paint or an attached painter’s smock indicate a top and a bottom. Nitsch’s signature on the reverse side of a painting provides information as to the perspective from which the artist himself prefers to view a particular work.

## **Colored Poured Paintings, 1989**

Until well into the late 1980s, Hermann Nitsch worked exclusively with red paint. For him, red is the most intense color of all, standing for blood and flesh, for love and life. In the year 1989, however, his works became multicolored: “The shock induced by the color red must be heightened further.” Above all, the liturgical colors green, blue, and violet, as well as black and white, were used and applied according to their effect and symbolic meaning. Shortly afterwards the application of paint was also modified. Whereas the artist still used rather thin paint here for these colored poured paintings of 1989, he later switched to an increasingly viscous paint substance, creating pastose, almost relief-like works.

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Nitsch pointed out that the use of diluted paint would reflect his fascination with blood, whereas the impasto would allude to his interest in flesh. The painter's smock is part of most works in this group. As early as the 1960s, Nitsch had conserved the blood-drenched textiles he had worn during his performances as relics. From 1986 on, he did the same with the painter's smocks donned during his painting actions. Showing traces of colors and movements, the garments document the physical aspect of the genesis of his works. In addition, the artist continues to be present in his works through the painter's smock.

## Relics from the 6-Day Play, 1998

The works on view here are relics from the legendary *6-Day Play* of the *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, which took place at Prinzendorf Castle and its surroundings from August 3 to 9, 1998. The works were created during the actions: an animal was disemboweled, with fabric stretched out in the background, which was inevitably splattered and stained. Only after each action, in a later process, were these coincidental relics treated, conserved and hence turned into artwork. The *6-Day Play* marked the culmination of an idea Hermann Nitsch had already conceived in 1957: to create a Gesamtkunstwerk encompassing painting, music, and theater and incorporating viewers and participants alike, celebrating all existential states of life—in both its most beautiful form and its deepest abysses.

The score of the 6-Day Play alone comprised 1,500 pages. 100 performers and 180 musicians rehearsed the process over a period of 21 days. The material required included one ton of tomatoes, one ton of grapes, 20,000 flowers, as well as 1,000 liters of blood. Animals were delivered in slaughtered state. Others, whose meat was intended to be eaten by the 500 participants, were slaughtered by trained butchers under veterinary supervision. On the second day alone, 10,000 meters of canvas were used for the painting actions.

## Colored Trickle Paintings, 2005–2011

For this series of works, Hermann Nitsch was inspired by railroad tank cars at a switchyard in Budapest from which the oil was running in thin, iridescent lines. His "Colored Trickle Paintings" were created selectively between 2005 and 2011 during various painting actions. The artist let the thin paint run down in narrow trails from the upper margin of the pictures and down beyond their lower edges. When pouring the paint, he determined its thickness and speed, but did not intervene with its course. This is why alongside the tracks of trickled paint one can still see the white of the jute or cotton fabric of the canvas. In some works, the paint was first splashed onto the canvas and only then spread across the painting support by means of pouring.



## Resurrection Cycle I, 2000

In Hermann Nitsch's 43rd Painting Action, which took place at Prinzendorf Castle in the summer of 2000, the artist produced a number of particularly colorful and chromatically intense poured and smeared paintings. The application of paint is pastose. The individual colors are placed next to and on top of each other as overlapping fields. Countless traces of tiny finger movements with which the paint has been spread across the canvas are clearly visible.

With this cycle, Nitsch sought to celebrate life as such: "Without losing the substantial weight of the paint as matter, I wanted to reintroduce the light of color, the sound of color, and far-reaching harmony in my work. I have never dealt so intensively with color as in this cycle. Everything suddenly became brighter, more cheerful, committed to light, to the light of flowers and the sun. Abundantly colored flowers of the months July and August, especially fresh roses and gladiolas, were carried into the studio; I let myself be inspired by the splendor of color, it was my model. It was clear to me that I was working on a Resurrection cycle."

## Performance Paintings from the 6-Day Play, 1998

On the second day of the *6-Day Play*, on August 4, 1998, Nitsch realized his 41st Painting Action in the granary of Prinzendorf Castle. Similar to his painting action at the Kunsthaus of Müzzzuschlag three years earlier, the artist worked with blood and paint on white primed jute canvas. But the artist now used acrylic paint because a physical reaction to turpentine forced him to do without oil paint. With painting actions that are embedded in his body actions, Nitsch strives to illustrate how an action grows out of painting: "Action painting results in a process, takes place dramatically in time. The result is ecstatic gestural action. The process is almost more essential than the result. The action leaves the pictorial surface, moves into the space. Blood is used instead of paint. Intestines, inner organs, animal carcasses, naked human bodies are included. Food, taste, sensations of smell and touch enrich the synesthetic palette." The poured paintings realized in the context of an action are called "Performance Paintings."

## Resurrection Triptych, 2003

Hermann Nitsch's *Resurrection Triptych* can also be considered a part of his *Resurrection Cycle II*. Using powerful yellow, Nitsch has overpainted the dark ground of the triptych's three panels. The stained painter's smock placed at the center symbolizes the crucified body that is seized by the light of the Resurrection.

The work clearly makes reference to the triptychs of the Christian tradition. Nitsch harks back to medieval altarpieces with their gold grounds and central scene of the Crucifixion.

Nevertheless, Nitsch, who once referred to himself as “church painter without a church,” does not exclusively rely on Christian imagery. He is interested in many religions. Moreover, he does not wish to attach too much importance to symbols. Rather, he seeks to achieve an immediate sensuous effect with his work.

## **Ox Paintings and Brown Series, 1994/1995**

With his “ox painting,” Nitsch revisits in his painting the slaughters that take place during his actions. He was inspired by Rembrandt van Rijn’s *Slaughtered Ox* from 1655. In 1893, Lovis Corinth took up the theme in his painting *In the Slaughter House*, depicting the freshly killed and still steaming animal surrounded by the butcher and his assistants. Chaïm Soutine produced an entire series of works devoted to the depiction of this motif. Nitsch realized his own interpretation of an “ox painting” in several versions. The example on view here has been painted with thick layers of brown and red tones. Compared to his art historical models, it is much more abstract and merely alludes to the carcass of an ox.

In 1994 and 1995, Hermann Nitsch realized a number of works in various shades of brown. Their brown color alone prompts one to associate these works with feces or a child’s smearing of excrement. According to psychoanalytical theories, toddlers regard their own excrement as something they have creatively produced. The tactile examination of their excrement becomes a pleasurable activity. Through socially conditioned toilet training, however, children soon turn to other suitable materials, such as spit, sand, mud, or the pap on their plates and discover that they can leave behind lasting traces through smearing. Thus smearing would be an early form of graphic statement developing parallel to a child’s first scribbling. Sensory perception and the motor skills of the hand come together: the qualities of the mushy material can only be felt through movement. Curiosity, sensory perception, motor skills, action, pleasure, contemplation, concentration, and affects enter into an intensive reciprocal relationship that is fundamental to the qualities of the human exploration of the world. It is precisely this multiple experience—the tactile examination of the material, its exploration, and the feeling of pleasure—that Hermann Nitsch is concerned with in his painting and in his work as a whole. When we look at his pictures, this experience, which is also perceived during the creative process, becomes visible and tangible at the same time.

## **Square Smeared Paintings, 2012–2018**

Nitsch has only been working with the 200 × 200 centimeter square format for seven years. With a an equilateral surface, the center of the picture gains intensity. The juxtaposition of square works dating from different years illustrates the multiple ways in which Nitsch has addressed this formal condition. The earliest square paintings date from 2012; the most recent ones, featuring red trails, were created this year within a period of four weeks during the artist's 80th Painting Action.

In the late 1950s, at the beginning of his career as an artist, Hermann Nitsch resorted to various formats. Working as a graphic designer for the Museum of Technology in Vienna, he used discarded hardboards that were made available to him free of charge. A short while later, Nitsch had a spacious studio of his own on Brünner Strasse. It allowed him to realize paintings measuring nine meters in length, taking up the entire studio. In these years he soon discovered his preferred format of 200 × 300 centimeters. When such a painting is viewed from close up, its dimensions suggest to the field of vision an impression of being right in the middle of a space of color. The slight deviations in format from painting to painting can be explained by the differing widths of jute canvas that Nitsch had specially imported from India. It is only in special painting actions that Nitsch deviates from his standard formats—such as during his 56th Painting Action, also referred to as “Cathedral of Colors,” where the variously sized works bathed the room in light and color similar to a stained-glass church window.

## **Cathedral of Colors, 2009**

In May 2009, Hermann Nitsch conducted his 56th Painting Action, the largest thus far, at the Nitsch Museum in Mistelbach. Characteristic of the works from the cycle “Cathedral of Colors” are the use of a variety of colors, the dynamism of the creative process, as well as the unusual and varied formats of the paintings: the roughly 700-square-meter exhibition space was lined with fabric and plastic sheets, and the floor was laid out with jute-covered stretcher frames. Nitsch stood on the fabric and poured the paints: various shades of red, green, yellow, orange, blue, or brown. The paint was then spread across the fabric with a large broom. Nitsch's collaborators marched barefoot, as if in a procession, one after the other, across the soaked jute fabric, spreading the paint with their feet over yet uncovered white areas. Due to the weight of the bodies on the stretcher frames, the paint was pressed through at these points onto the front side of the fabric. Nitsch choreographed further actions and gave stage directions.

For other paintings, highly viscous paint was tipped onto horizontal jute canvases, this time propped across trestle tables. Nitsch spread and rubbed in the paint masses with his hands or a spatula or kneaded them into the painting ground like dough. The traces of his fingers are still recognizable on the respective works. As soon as a painting was completed it was hung on one of the walls of the hall while still wet. The exhibition was created parallel to the painting process, growing with each additional painting. Thus the neutral white exhibition hall was gradually transformed into a “cathedral of colors.”

## Painting Action of 1983

For about twenty years, Hermann Nitsch had devoted himself to his total work of art or Gesamtkunstwerk, the Theater of Orgies and Mysteries, an interplay of concert, theater, and performance. No major painting actions took place during this time. This changed in 1983. Due to an upcoming comprehensive exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, all works had been collected from Prinzendorf Castle, leaving it empty. Nitsch took advantage of the newly gained space and took to painting lavishly on huge formats throughout the day, working with diluted red acrylic paint. Numerous traces of hand- and footprints are characteristic of this group of works. “I was overcome by a strong desire to paint the walls and floors again. I experienced much joy in the hot August of that year, as I poured, splattered, and splashed the surfaces with blood-red paint. Trained by the actions, I achieved a sense of lightheartedness, freshness, and spontaneity that was not present in the earlier paintings.”

## Fountain Paintings, 1989–2018

Individual “Fountain Paintings” are created during Nitsch’s various painting actions, as the artist pours a gush of paint into the middle of a large canvas of horizontal format. The paint splashes in a fashion reminiscent of a fountain, spreading to the margins of the painting ground thanks to the force of pouring. The artist finally covers the center of the picture with the smock he has worn during the painting process. Hermann Nitsch also resorts to another method when producing his “Fountain Paintings,” placing a small canvas of vertical format at the center of the large canvas. He continues by treating the two overlapping canvases simultaneously. When the vertical format is removed, it leaves behind a white area in front of which the artist then mounts his painter’s smock. The smaller poured painting, now freed from its function as a stencil, becomes a work of art in its own right. Only a glance behind the painter’s smock would reveal which type of “Fountain Painting” it is.

**Filmclips** Edited by *CastYourArt.com*, ca. 9 min.

5th Painting Action, Atelier Nitsch, Vienna, 1962

80th Action, 3-Day Play, Prinzendorf, 1984

19th Painting Action, Prinzendorf, 1986

20th Painting Action, Secession, Vienna, 1987

84th Action, Feast of Pentecost, Prinzendorf, 1987

26th Painting Action, Sydney Biennale, 1988

28th Painting Action, Prinzendorf, 1989

40th Painting Action, 20er Haus, Vienna, 1997

100th Action, 6-Day Play, Prinzendorf, 1998

122nd Action, Burgtheater, Vienna, 2005

56th Painting Action, Nitsch Museum, Mistelbach, 2009

## Biography

Nitsch is born in Vienna on August 29, 1938 and grows up with his mother. In 1953 he takes up his studies at the Higher Secondary School for Graphic Arts in Vienna and delves into literature, poetry, music and philosophy. He begins to write and plans a “primeval drama” that should encompass all major aspects of existence. The idea ripens to transform the sensuous imagery of his texts into real pictures within the great drama of the *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*.

Inspired by Art Informel, he devotes himself to painting starting in 1959, initially developing his theater idea on the two-dimensional pictorial surface. At the Museum of Technology, where he is employed as a graphic designer, he is allowed to use a room as his studio and realizes his first poured paintings in painting actions, concentrating primarily on paint as a substance.

In 1962, Nitsch starts with his first (body) actions (*Aktionen*). His handling of blood and slaughtered animals causes emotions to run high in Austria. Nitsch does not attempt to provoke but rather seeks to create an intense sensuous and physical experience. In 1966 he achieves his international breakthrough at the “Destruction in Art Symposium” in London together with other Viennese Actionists.

In 1971 Nitsch purchases Prinzendorf Castle in Lower Austria, which becomes the venue of his total work of art, the *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, his studio, and his home.

Over the decades, Nitsch has numerous exhibitions all over the world, including participations at documenta (1972 and 1982) and the Biennale of Sydney (1988). Nitsch represents Austria at the Universal Exposition of Seville (1992) and in 1989 starts teaching at the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

In Austria he occupies the main room of the Vienna Secession with his paintings in 1987 and in 1997 realizes a comprehensive painting action at the Museum of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (20er Haus). In 1995 he creates the stage design for and simultaneously directs *Hérodiade* at the Vienna State Opera. In 1998, the *6-Day Play*, his hitherto most extensive realization of the *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, takes place. In 2005 he stages an action at the Burgtheater.

In 2007, the Nitsch Museum in Mistelbach, Lower Austria, opens its doors, followed by the Museo Hermann Nitsch in Naples in 2008. In 2018 the artist celebrates his eightieth birthday.

With his multifaceted oeuvre, Hermann Nitsch is one of Austria’s internationally most recognized artists.