PICTURE BOOK ART
The Book as Artistic Medium

Press Release
Vienna, 11.10.2022

Press Conference
Tuesday, 11.10.2022, 10 am
Please register via presse@MAK.at

In the exhibition *PICTURE BOOK ART: The Book as Artistic Medium*, the MAK presents the creative, aesthetic, and textual variety to be found in a medium that is familiar to us all: picture books. Neither "kids's stuff" nor the sole reserve of illustrators, they deal with a wide range of themes for both children and grown-ups—impressively articulating a broad palette of artistic styles and social topics via the medium of the book. The exhibition in the MAK Direktion displays a selection of outstanding picture books from the 1960s to the present, to include works by Sonia Delaunay, Warja Lavater, Bruno Munari, Olaf Nicolai, Dieter Roth, and Lawrence Weiner.

The MAK has already presented a number of exhibitions on the book as art; with *PICTURE BOOK ART: The Book as Artistic Medium* the picture book as genre is presented in its entirety. Many artists see in the picture book an important platform for their art, and in doing so principally address an adult audience. Their picture books reflect their understanding of the world, directing our attention to crises, dangers, and catastrophes—as well as to hope, beauty, and the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

In selecting the exhibits, in line with the exhibition's title the aesthetic aspiration manifested in these worlds of images was the decisive factor. Beside loans from the Neue Sammlung of Friedrich C. Heller, who has also assumed the role of guest curator, objects from the MAK's substantial collection of books by artists are on display.

In a total of eight chapters—"Books Are Spaces," "Almost Nothing," "Fairytales: Other Worlds," "Poetry of Symbols," "Writing and Sound as

M   **A**   **K**

Image," "Traces of Art History," "Town and Landscape," and "World in Crisis"—the exhibition reveals the artistic and thematic range of the picture book as medium.

An important theme of the exhibition is art-historical quotations. Impressionism, Surrealism, Suprematism, Futurism, Dada, New Objectivity, Abstract Expressionism, Color Field Painting, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Photorealism have all as a matter of course found their way into the world of picture books. Older readers will relish recognizing familiar motifs, opening up new realms of meaning and interpretation, whereas for younger readers novel ways of experiencing the full range of visual languages are unlocked.

But enormous aesthetic power can also be released by precisely reducing artistic expression, as shown for instance in *El libro negro de los colores* (Rosana Faría and Menena Cottin, 2011). The book contains only black pages. Thus, supported by a lyrical text, it intensely stimulates all our other senses to imagine the experience of color. The book impressively demonstrates how color can be communicated to blind people—using haptic images, each of which is accompanied by a short text in Braille.

A remarkable example of the use of materiality in picture books as a medium is Bruno Munari's 1980 work *I Prelibri*: a casket designed for the tiny hands of children contains books made of wood, cloth, felt, plastic, and other materials.

Time and again, picture book artists play skillfully with symbols—as does for instance Warja Lavater in *Ergo* (1987). Using abstract surfaces and graphic symbols whose specific shape and color give them a strong emotional charge, the book engages visually with René Descartes' famous dictum "cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am). The importance of working with letters is especially evidenced by so-called alphabet books, that not only serve as introductions to writing but also through their variety stimulate and train visual cognition.

Since the 1960s, picture book art has branched out from portraying an idealized world of princesses and tame animals located in beautiful landscapes to tackle difficult and contentious topics such as historical catastrophes and environmental disasters, or sociopolitical problems such as war and migration. Some exhibits thus also portray visions of horror (Serena Viola and Francesco Guccini, *Auschwitz*, 2019), invite one to feel pity and compassion (Jens Thiele*, Wenn auf den grünen Hügeln*, 2010), sweep one off one's feet through their representational impact (Ed Young and Kimiko Kajikawa, *Tsunami!*, 2009), or offer a distanced perspective of events (Issa Watanabe, *Migrantes*, 2019).

With *PICTURE BOOK ART: The Book as Artistic Medium*, the MAK engages with a very contemporary phenomenon. For despite the fact that digital media play an increasingly important role in all age groups, the book market is experiencing a worldwide boom—and picture books in particular are in

demand. The way we experience everyday life seems to be progressively determined by our reception of images—and analog picture books offer artists and designers, as well as readers, an aesthetically unparalleled forum.

Press photos and texts on the exhibition's individual chapters are available for download at MAK.at/en/press.

Press Conference
Tuesday, 11.10.2022, 10 am

Opening
Tuesday, 11.10.2022, 7 pm
Admission free from 6 pm

Exhibition Venue
MAK Direktion
MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

Exhibition Dates
12.10.2022–5.3.2023

Opening Hours
Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Guest Curator
Friedrich C. Heller, with the participation of Ursula Brandstätter

MAK Curator
Kathrin Pokorny-Nagel, Head, MAK Library and Works on Paper
Collection/Archive

Graphic Design
Theresa Hattinger

Supporting Program
Continually updated at MAK.at

MAK Admission
€ 15, reduced € 12, every Tuesday 6–9 pm: admission € 7
Admission free for children and teens under 19

MAK Press and PR
Judith Anna Schwarz-Jungmann (Head)
T +43 1 71136-213, judith.schwarz-jungmann@MAK.at

Sandra Hell-Ghignone
T +43 1 71136-212, sandra.hell-ghignone@MAK.at

Ulrike Sedlmayr
T +43 1 71136-210, ulrike.sedlmayr@MAK.at