

## DOMINIKUS MÜLLER

## “THE ENORMOUS ROOM”

For Helmut Federle art is a matter of the utmost existential tension and a spiritual affair: an expression of the individual, a sign of inner unrest, a search for orientation. Federle’s abstract, geometric paintings are intensive and expressive, while also possessing the calm composure of a Zen garden. At Swiss Re Next, he has transformed the auditorium into a walk-in painting.

One of Helmut Federle’s favourite words is “climatic”. In an interview he stated: “Colour transports climate.” His painting of the auditorium at Swiss Re Next is meant to look “climatic rather than geometric”. A “climate” (cold or warm, harsh or mild) is a statement, even when it is a matter of something as intangible and personal as moods and feelings. And for Federle, concrete positioning and individuality are important. For him, this is a question of identity and deviation.

Federle’s work in the windowless auditorium at Swiss Re Next is called *The Enormous Room*. The title could hardly be more fitting. With its almost 6-metre-high ceiling, measuring 11 by 21 metres, the auditorium is certainly enormous. With a team of assistants, and with the help of the restorer Roland von Gunten, Federle painted it completely in shades of green and yellow that are familiar from his paintings. The yellow seems to give the whole room a warm, gentle glow. The men used rollers, broad brushes and even repurposed mops to paint the

wooden walls. The artist stood in the middle and directed the execution of his meticulously planned painting.

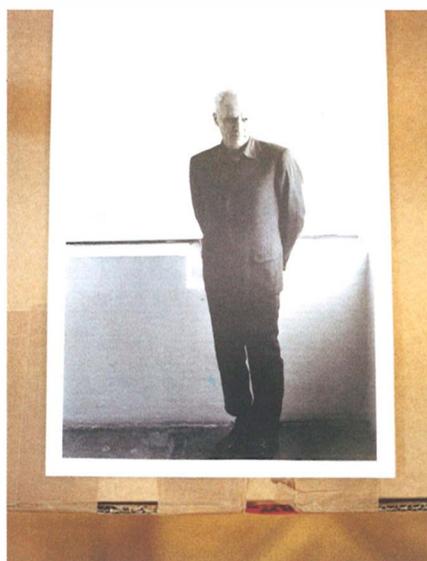
*The Enormous Room* clearly reflects Federle’s signature style; it is an expression of his presence. The paint was applied in accordance with a specific dramaturgy: more or less intense, lighter or darker. Some areas of the wooden walls have been left untouched, others are densely covered. Different superimposed layers begin to shimmer,

creating depth and rhythm.

On one side there is a remotely rectangular patch while on the other there are vigorously applied painterly brushstrokes that recall the precision and meditative concentration of calligraphy. And, finally, in the top back corner, there is a comment on the painterly principle, and maybe on the fact that Federle was less personally involved than usual in the actual realization of this painting: a large,

dynamic horizontal brushstroke, but applied as a screen print. It is an enlarged copy of an element taken from a model of the room painted by Federle himself.

Federle has a keen interest in architecture and he has often worked with architects in the past. With Diener & Diener, the architects behind Swiss Re Next, he realized a firewall at the Swiss Embassy in Berlin. At the Novartis Campus Forum 3 in Basel, Federle was extensively involved in the design of the building and especially the facade. But he has never created anything like *The Enormous Room*: a walk-in painting, a spatialized abstract picture that surrounds the viewer.



This really does generate a specific mood, a special climate. Federle's climate.

Born in 1944 in Solothurn, Switzerland, Federle is one of the great loners in the last 40 years of painting. Someone who cannot be assigned or even pinned down to a specific current. His work oscillates between opposite poles, between rigidly executed geometrical forms, rigor and control on the one hand, and, on the other, free painterly gestures, the tangible emotions and the depth of individual expression.

The two sides are held together above all by the artist himself. "I have a frequency within me," says Federle, referring to the origins of his project for Swiss Re Next, "and the painting emanates from that frequency."

For Federle, who represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale in 1997, painting (and art more generally) is an existential matter, something philosophical.

He is known for often working with the letters of his own name, especially the H and the F. In this way, he puts his life and his person into his pictures, literally. His works are marked by great seriousness and huge concentration. As well as being expressive and precise, the pictures are also perfectly balanced, creating a sense of calm and composure.

Federle's own life has been shaped by countless journeys and constant encounters with other cultures. It is the life of a seeker, never settled, always on the move. "Unrest," he says, "is part of the magic." In his early 20s, in 1967, he went to Tunis where he had his first exhibition and, among other things,

performed as a singer in a nightclub. He later lived in the United States for some time. For some years now, he has felt attracted to East Asian cultures, especially that of Japan. Islam, the United States and Far Eastern philosophy: "These are the three major cultural influences in my life," says the artist. "But they are far from homogenous. I can bring them together, but I can't reconcile them." If one views Federle's works as direct expressions of such a divided existence, this explains

the tensions in his pictures – and their tangible sense of a search for a centre and a balance.

As a painter and as a human being, Federle believes in the individual and in personal expression.

In this context, he is interested not least in a certain kind of intensity, an "upswing from ordinary being", as he calls it. And such an upswing and intensity are often found only in remoteness

and in retreating from existing conventions. Correspondingly, he says, he is drawn to people who act "as their own content", people who put their own existential weight into their work and who are capable of creating this work from within themselves. One figure who plays an important role for Federle in this respect is the American poet E. E. Cummings, from whose autobiographical novel *The Enormous Room* (1922) his work for Swiss Re Next takes its title. In this book, Cummings, who was born into a wealthy family on the East Coast, gives a striking account of his internment in France during World War I.



“I read Cummings’ poems as a young student in Basel,” says Federle, “and they made a deep impression on me.” In any case, he adds, many of his works can be understood as homages. Besides Cummings, other projects have been devoted to the Bauhaus artist and colour theorist Johannes Itten, to the painter Josef Albers or the Swiss martial arts fighter Andy Hug. In the auditorium at Swiss Re Next, a sign refers explicitly to Cummings. The great ones are those “who have devoted their lives to something” says Federle. What he means by this is the radical firmness of the dedicated. But also something else: the almost existential devotion to a cause.

The Swiss artist HELMUT FEDERLE, born 1944, lives and works in Vienna and Camaiore, Italy. For the building extension of the Swiss Embassy in Berlin, completed in 2000, he created a geometric wall relief. Major solo shows include: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon (2017), Kunstmuseum Luzern (2012), Kunsthaus Bregenz (1999) and Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1992).