



Imi Knoebel, *250.000 Zeichnungen (250,000 Drawings)*, 1968–75.
Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

On Closed Boxes

Gordon Hall

From across the room, they look like six black rectangular monoliths, lined up evenly along the wall. As I move closer, three silver metal inlays along the forms' vertical corners reveal themselves to be hinges, and the faces become a pair of closed panel doors, two pairs of silver keyholes found at my knee and head height; these boxes are in fact cabinets. The exhibition text tells me that the title of this work by Imi Knoebel, *250.000 Zeichnungen*, or *250,000 Drawings*, describes the contents of the cabinets: 912 boxes holding 250,000 graphite drawings of juxtapositions of two straight lines on letter-sized paper, produced by Knoebel between 1968 and 1975, for which these painted wood cabinets were specifically designed and made. I further learn that during the first and only other time this work was exhibited at Dia, in 1987, visitors to the museum could ask to have the cabinet doors unlocked by the gallery attendant and be shown the drawings, although, according to that exhibition's curator Katharina Schmidt, no one ever asked.¹ This time, there does not seem to be an invitation to ask to be shown the contents of Knoebel's cabinets.

This essay was originally presented as a lecture in the symposium Rethinking German Minimalism at Dia: Chelsea, New York, NY on November 10, 2021, organized by Ian Wallace, 2020–21 Andrew M. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at Dia Art Foundation. Video available at <https://diaart.org/media/watch-listen/rethinking-german-minimalism-symposium/media-type/video>.



Imi Knoebel, *250.000 Zeichnungen (250,000 Drawings)* (detail,) 1968–75. Photo: Gordon Hall

This furniture-sculpture poses several practical yet unanswered questions. Are there boxes of paper inside the cabinets? Are these papers actually each a unique drawing? Are the cabinets really locked? Do the doors even actually open?

Ian asked me if I would like him to find out the answers, and I refused, realizing that I did not want to know anything beyond what is already publicly accessible information. Not out of laziness, or shyness, or time constraints, but because, the more I thought about what this sculpture offers, the less I wanted to know the truth of what is inside Knoebel's storage cabinets.²

I love it when objects ask me to believe them. I'm reminded of reliquaries – the ornate boxes that hold the invisible (or unverifiable) pieces of bone, fabric, or hair of saints, precious because of what they claim to contain, but also precious because the box itself requests our belief. To trust in its credibility is not only to state this belief but to put it into practice. Belief, in this formulation, is no longer only an intellectual process, but an aspect of perception itself – I see the box differently when I believe it contains an invaluable relic.³

In some sense, all objects ask for a version of this belief, particularly three-dimensional ones, as I conjure the sides of the thing I cannot see as I move around it, faithfully piecing all the time-elapsing views together into one object, one thing whose back I can only believe in. (Thank you Husserl.)⁴ I *believe* that this chair has legs under it, holding it up. So, just as we spatially and temporally intend the unified object by piecing it together through time, we also intend it through the knowledge of it as a category of thing: I see a chair as separate from a table as separate from the floor because I know, I have been taught, what those things are. In this way, I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that the objective world is only there because I believe in it.

I can't readily verify whether Imi Knoebel's six cabinets contain 250,000 drawings (which, if you're wondering, averages out to approximately 98 drawings a day for seven years.) And though I am

curious, I also don't want to know the truth. Because I believe they are in there, and when I look at the cabinets I see them as full. This exercise of vision as a form of belief is far more valuable to me than empirical fact in this case, because (I presume) it flexes a capacity



Reliquary in the Shape of a Sarcophagus, Byzantine, 400–600 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art

that is so vital to trans and gender-nonconforming life: not just believing what people say about what is inside them, but allowing, even encouraging, that knowledge to shape our vision, our read of a body. A full cabinet looks different than an empty one, depending on what one believes, even while, on another register, it looks exactly the same.

It's a troubling idea, seen through the haze of our present moment's zest for misinformation, and the political and social harm caused by collective dedication to untruths. But, I must defend our capacity for our perception to be shaped by our belief, because, for me and so many people like me, we know what we are looking at, even when others refuse to believe it's real. When reading bodies, perception is belief.⁵

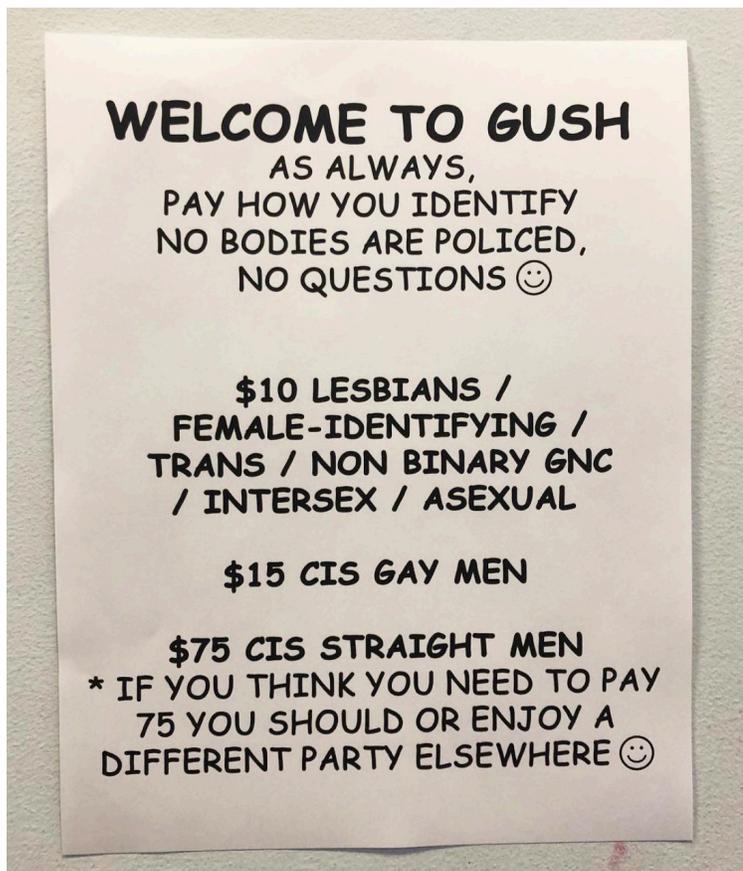
This kind of shared perceptual belief shapes communities, which create boundaries that then must be guarded and maintained. On a large scale, these kinds of boundaries work against accessibility and inclusivity, creating public institutions that are not meaningfully available to broad publics. When it comes to powerful and historically elitist institutions, openness is long overdue. BUT, and this is a BUT I care about deeply – there are some spaces that need boundaries. Boundaries that exclude, but also protect. These kinds of spaces—community spaces, marginalized spaces—need to remain mostly closed. Because communities are destroyed by the presence of too many people who can't see because they don't believe.

This is what subculture means, and why “safe” spaces feel, if not safe, at least tolerable, livable. Shared mutually reinforcing vision puts belief into practice, allowing one to extend oneself into space, as Sara Ahmed has described it.⁶ I think many people have that feeling most of the time; the frictionlessness of one's body falling into line. For others, the rare contexts in which this feeling is possible must be fiercely defended, even at the risk of being unwelcoming. The box has got to stay closed.

Imi Knoebel is, himself, a sort of a closed box—refusing to say much of anything about his work, just a small handful of interviews over his more than 60-year career.⁷ It's fitting, this reticence, because it mirrors the kind of refusal performed by *250,000 Drawings* – not only are they monochrome black boxes



Gordon Hall , *Closed Box (Beige and Yellow)*,
2020. Cast concrete, 15 x 19.75 x 16.5 in.
Photo: Hesse Flatow



Door policy from *GUSH* party, Brooklyn, NY. March 2019. Photo: @gushofficial

but they are also, presumably, locked shut. They read as a row of “NO”s. Full of answers, maybe, but not ones that will be readily given. I’ve thought for years about the capacities of formally reduced sculpture to offer a resource for those of us looking to refuse. Refuse what? Legibility, respectability, clichéd symbolism, representation, gate-keeping, surveillance, self-explanation, medicalization, gender-affirming surgery letters, gay marriage—needing to make ourselves make sense according to presently existing logics, even when those logics do not fully enable our lives.⁸ Formally reduced abstraction has often felt like a way through – to answer the questions not asked, to refuse the demand for legibility, while still claiming a voice: asking to be looked at and then turning away. Seeking out your gaze, and then asking something different of that gaze in return.

I visit Imi Knoebel’s work at *Dia Raum 19* multiple times a year. And it continues to give more to me as an artist than probably any other artwork I’ve seen. Its smooth and uniform

Masonite surfaces, its unsymbolic shapes, the way it so generously turns inward—gives itself to me as a language. *Raum 19* is also defined by its capacity for change, its rearrangeability. The 77 objects in this collection have no fixed positions, and no arrangement of this piece is ever definitive or final, producing a sense of always extending possibility, what Giorgio Agamben might describe as *potentiality*.⁹

250,000 Drawings shares this, insofar as alongside its other characteristics (serial, uniform, closed, black, locked) is this one: *openable*. Just as the closed box can function as a request for belief, a resource for subcultural community, or a model for political refusal, it also always offers the possibility of change: a closed box might open. The embodied potentiality of these Imi



Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 (Room 19)*, 1968. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

Knoebel sculptures feels like a gift: Things are the way they are now but there is always reason to believe that they could be different. A future that feels foreclosed leaves me in need of another world but unable to believe in one. This row of closed and locked cabinets offers itself to me as a horizon, tinged with the sense that there are other possibilities, even if I don't know what they are. This pointing is invaluable. I don't mind if the door is locked, as long as I can find it.

Notes:

1. "Knoebel, May 28, 2021, Dia Beacon" Dia website, accessed November 2, 2021, <https://diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/imi-knoebel-exhibition-266>.
2. Ian refers to Ian Wallace, 2020–21 Andrew M. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at Dia Art Foundation, who organized "Rethinking German Minimalism".
3. My gratitude to Elizabeth Lastra, my Medievalist colleague at Vassar who provided valuable insights into the relationships between reliquiaries and belief.
4. Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas*. (New York: Routledge, 2012), originally published 1931.
5. For example, see Hall, Gordon "Extremely Precise Objects of Ambiguous Use" in *OVER-BELIEFS: Gordon Hall Collected Writing 2011- 2018* (Portland: Portland Institute for Contemporary Art / Container Corps, 2019), 15-18.
6. Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" *GLQ*, Issue 12 Volume 4 (2006): 543-574.
7. Kamps, Toby. "Letter from Dusseldorf: A Conversation with Imi Knoebel" *The Brooklyn Rail* (2020) Accessed online November 2, 2021, <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/04/art/Letter-from-Dusseldorf-A-Conversation-with-and-about-Imi-Knoebel>.
8. For example, see Hall, Gordon *OVER-BELIEFS: Gordon Hall Collected Writing 2011- 2018* (Portland: Portland Institute for Contemporary Art / Container Corps, 2019).
9. Agamben, Giorgio. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).