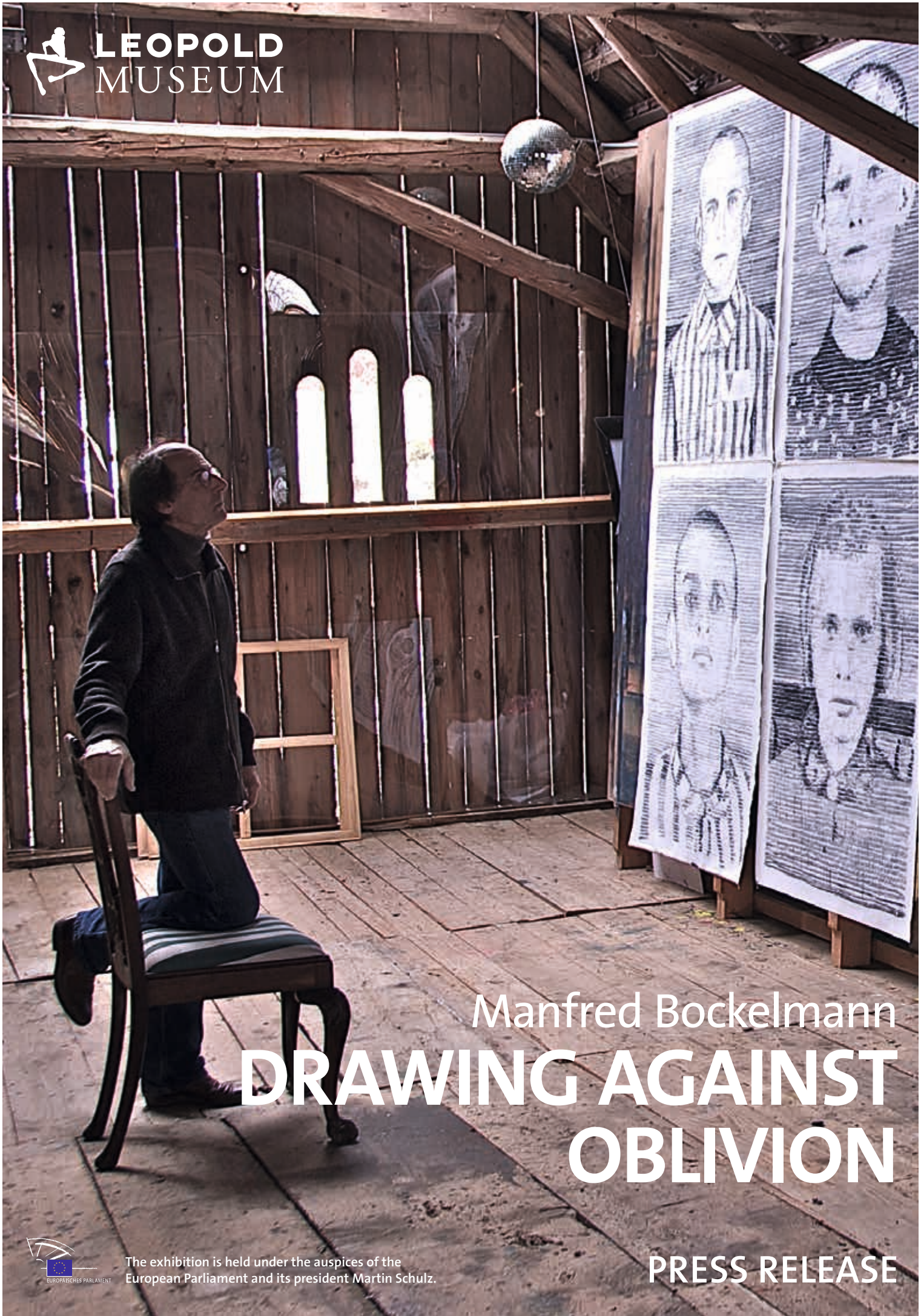




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Manfred Bockelmann

# DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION



The exhibition is held under the auspices of the  
European Parliament and its president Martin Schulz.

PRESS RELEASE

# Manfred Bockelmann

## DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION

17.05.2013–02.09.2013



Manfred Bockelmann (born 1943)  
Herbert B. • 2 years old, 2010–2013  
Photograph of the work in progress  
Manfred Bockelmann © VBK, Vienna 2013

The exhibition »DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION« shows more than 60 large-scale portraits of children and adolescents who became victims of Nazi terror. For these works, the artist Manfred Bockelmann (born 1943) deliberately chose simple materials, opting for charcoal drawings on jute canvases. With this series, which Bockelmann has worked on over the past few years, the artist wants to create »signs against oblivion«. His aim, as he puts it, is to »give a face to at least some of the names and numbers, to lift out a few people from the anonymity of the statistics«.

Heiner Hammerschlag writes that »through the means of his art, Bockelmann releases the victims from the obscurity of denial and highlights the atrocities of legalized crime in a subtle way«.

Manfred Bockelmann: »I don't show martyrs, heaps of dead bodies or ill-treated faces deprived of their individuality and marked by hunger, disease and exhaustion. Rather, I show individuals who have yet to face their ordeal«.



MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
IN HIS STUDIO, 2010  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013

The portrayed children and adolescents were between two and eighteen years old and fell victim to Nazi terror at the Viennese children's clinic Spiegelgrund, at the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hartheim and Theresienstadt, among other places. These young people were murdered between 1941 and 1945 for being of Jewish, Slavic or »Gypsy« origin, for having parents who opposed the regime or for suffering from mental or physical illnesses. According to the racial fanaticism of the »Third Reich«, they were considered »pests of the people« who needed to be wiped out to ensure the »purity of the German blood«.

The portraits are based on police shots taken by the authorities of the time – the Gestapo, the SS and the medical profession – after the children's deportation to hospitals and camps. They were already wearing the infamous broad-striped convict's suits and had their heads shaven. Others, mainly Roma and Sinti, were asked to report to the authorities for a photo call. Eager to make a good impression, they were wearing their best clothes. While they didn't yet know what awaited them, their faces are all clearly marked by fear and uncertainty.

The portraits show beautiful, young fellow human beings. The faces of these »impure« people, as they were then called, reveal pure humanity. The artist's aim to draw »against oblivion« stands testament not only to these special young people who have a name and a biography, but also to the values of an empathic human sympathy. He aims to make beholders aware of their own humanity, not only with respect to the past, but also to the present. The expressions of the young people depicted in the portraits strike a chord with the beholders. They evoke a sense of kinship, even of identity, which forms the essential basis of human ethics. While the photographs taken by the Nazi authorities were meant to show »the others«, Bockelmann's charcoal drawings point to the »sameness« in the depicted and the beholder, forming a community of man that has to be cherished and looked after. Seeing oneself in others and others in oneself shows that the other is in fact the »non-other«. Therefore, the exhibition's message is that we should take part, sympathize, identify and not look away. Certainly, the portraits are heart-



MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
ELISABETH EMMELER AND HER CHILDREN, 2010–2013  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013

MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
KATHARINA »GATTI« KOWACZ • 8 YEARS OLD, 2010–2013  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013

breaking to behold, they leave one speechless and make one inclined to look away. And yet, when looking at them, these young people, whose lives were taken, seem to come back to life in some other way. The archaic, crumbly charcoal traced by the artist's hand stands in stark contrast to the coldness and precision

of the photographer's lens, opposing this murderous and relentless arrangement. The seriousness and urgency of this topic can only be expressed by appreciating its natural, fragile and vulnerable aspects, by accepting and accommodating them rather than hiding them and by affirming them in a positive way.

»To leave oneself unfinished« was the humanistic credo that the Austrian author Heimito von Doderer ultimately arrived at after he himself had been infected by the National Socialist ideology of the pure and the strong for some time. The young people in the portraits had no choice but to »leave themselves unfinished«. Yet, owing to the artistic transformation of Manfred Bockelmann's charcoal drawings, these portraits convey a deep sense of being whole and complete.

**Curator: Diethard Leopold**

**»Taking part, sympathizing, not looking away«**

The exhibition's curator Diethard Leopold sees the project »DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION« as »a way of coming to terms with the past« and as »an eminently relevant means against forgetting our humanity«. The depictions of people who had to »leave themselves unfinished« encourage us, the beholders, to »take part, to sympathize, to identify and not to look away«. To Diethard Leopold, this is precisely the message of this exhibition.

**»I show individuals who have yet to face their ordeal«**

Manfred Bockelmann on his depictions: »I don't show martyrs, heaps of dead bodies or ill-treated faces deprived of their individuality and marked by hunger, disease and exhaustion. Rather, I show individuals who have yet to face their ordeal«.

**»For me, this work will never be done«**

In an interview with the exhibition's curator, Diethard Leopold, Manfred Bockelmann explains that »for me, this work will never be done«. What inspired his renderings? Bockelmann: »The year 1943. It was during the war, when the Nazi killing machine was in full force and when so many children were being killed while I lay safely in my crib«.

**»Released from the obscurity of denial«**

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Heiner Hammerschlag writes that »through the means of his art, Bockelmann releases the victims from the obscurity of denial and highlights the atrocities of legalized crime in a subtle way«.

**»This exhibition is very serious. Deadly serious.«**

The portrayed children and adolescents were between two and eighteen years old and fell victim to Nazi terror at the Viennese children's clinic Spiegelgrund, at the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hartheim and Theresienstadt, among other places. André Heller's assessment of the project is that »this exhibition is very serious. Deadly serious«. According to Heller, Bockelmann carries out »unsparing grief work for himself as well as for us, the beholders«, which »without warning, brought tears to my eyes and cast a spell over me as if I were hypnotized«.

**»Faces marked by fear«**

The exhibition's curator Diethard Leopold explains the systematical Nazi terror: »The portraits are based on police shots taken by the authorities of the time – the Gestapo, the SS and the medical profession – after the children's deportation to hospitals and camps. They were already wearing the infamous broad-striped convict's suits and had their heads shaven. Others, mainly Roma and Sinti, were asked to report to the authorities for a photo call. Eager to make a good impression, they were wearing their best clothes. While they didn't yet know what awaited them, their faces are all clearly marked by fear and uncertainty«.

### **»What would have become of you had you been allowed to live?«**

Diethard Leopold on the inconceivably brutal fate of the depicted: »These young people were murdered between 1941 and 1945 for being of Jewish, Slavic or »Gypsy« origin, for having parents who opposed the regime or for suffering from mental or physical illnesses. According to the racial fanaticism of the »Third Reich«, they were considered »pests of the people« who needed to be wiped out to ensure the »purity of the German blood«.

### **»Instead of answers ... only questions«**

Marion Hussong, Manfred Bockelmann's niece and a professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, feels that when looking at the portraits, we enter into a dialogue with the depicted: »When we look at the portraits, these young people meet our glances. They offer us no explanations, for they don't owe us anything. Instead of answers, we see only questions: Who were you and what would have become of you had you been allowed to live?«

### **»Testing our own ability to feel sympathy, solidarity and responsibility«**

According to Diethard Leopold »being confronted with these portraits tests our own ability to feel sympathy, solidarity and responsibility, for especially the paintings of the so-called »impure« reveal pure humanity«. Leopold: »The artist's aim to draw »against oblivion« stands testament not only to these special young people who have a name and a biography, but also to the values of an empathic human sympathy. He aims to make beholders aware of their own humanity, not only with respect to the past, but also to the present«.

### **The »other« is in fact the »non-other«**

Diethard Leopold feels that »the expressions of the young people depicted in the portraits strike a chord with the beholders. They evoke a sense of kinship, even of identity, which forms the essential basis of human ethics«. Leopold: »The photographs taken by the Nazi authorities were meant to show the »others«, to depict those who were »different«. Bockelmann's charcoal drawings, by contrast, point to the »sameness« in the depicted and the beholder, forming a community of man that has to be cherished and looked after«. »Seeing oneself in others and others in oneself shows that the »other« is in fact the »non-other« adds Leopold.

### **The »dark portraits«**

When approaching the topic of his series, Bockelmann received help from a very close friend of his, Heiner Hammerschlag. In the autumn of 2010 Bockelmann visited him and his wife in Maria Saal, explained his idea and asked for help with source materials: »That is why he sought me out that day, to ask me to provide him with some material on the subject (...) my library yielded a book by Alwin Meyer called »Die Kinder von Auschwitz« (The Children of Auschwitz). It contains about thirty photographs (...) of boys and girls who were murdered in Auschwitz. Throughout the following days and weeks, Manfred Bockelmann transformed all these photographs into »dark portraits«. He decided to withhold the pictures from the art market«.

### **»Giving the nameless dead a face«**

The journalist Peter Michael Lingens writes that »ever since I have known Manfred Bockelmann I have always associated him with »good fortune« and »beauty«. Years after we met, I learned that Bockelmann's father had been a Nazi (...) While other »sons« repress the »past« of their »fathers«, he wanted to know the details. I was nevertheless surprised by his manic concern with the portraits of these murdered children. They were created for one reason only – to give nameless dead people a face. I can only guess why this is so important to Manfred Bockelmann. Simon Wiesenthal once explained his work to me as follows: »I have to justify that I was fortunate enough to survive«. I can imagine that this might in some way apply to Manfred Bockelmann as well – that a person who has been blessed with so much beauty in his life at some point feels the need to give something to those to whom life has been gruelingly unfair.«

### **»Archaic charcoal to oppose the coldness of the police photographer's lens«**

Diethard Leopold sees the fact that the pictures affect beholders so deeply as an important part of the process of approaching the topic. »Certainly, the portraits are heart-breaking to behold, they leave one speechless and make one inclined to look away. And yet, when looking at them, these young people, whose lives were taken, seem to come back to life through our remembrance«. With his project »DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION« Manfred Bockelmann transforms inhuman distance into closeness. »The archaic, crumbly charcoal traced by the artist's hand stands in stark contrast to the coldness and precision of the photographer's lens, opposing this murderous and relentless arrangement. The seriousness of the topic can only be expressed by appreciating its natural, fragile and vulnerable aspects, by accepting and accommodating them rather than hiding them and by affirming them in a positive way«.

### **»The unfinished« as an expression of a »deep sense of being whole and complete«**

Leopold refers to the Austrian author Heimito von Doderer (1896-1966), who, while he himself had been infected by the ideology of the Nazis for some years, eventually arrived at the following humanistic credo – »to leave oneself unfinished«. »The young people in the portraits had no choice but to »leave themselves unfinished«. Yet, owing to the artistic transformation of Manfred Bockelmann's charcoal drawings, these portraits convey a deep sense of being whole and complete«.

### **»DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION«**

The exhibition's title »DRAWING AGAINST OBLIVION« refers to the series of portraits based on »police« shots showing Jewish, Roma and Sinti children as well as victims of euthanasia. The exhibition also includes portraits on unprimed canvas that are based on photographs from family albums taken along by the victims together with other possessions on their uncertain journey into the concentration camps, in the vain hope that they might survive.

**ABOUT THE INSTALLATIONS:****THE MATERIALS**

All the drawings in this exhibition were created using charcoal. In the entrance hall to the exhibition Manfred Bockelmann has installed up to 6 meter tall birch trunks with charred tops, representing oversized drawing materials. They also give an indication of the site of the horror: Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**HORIZONS**

Another room houses the series »HORIZONS – Limit of Perception« which covers the walls with hundreds of newspaper sheets. The artist has created the room as a space for meditation and free associations on the themes of information – transience – remembrance – denial – oblivion. In this work, Bockelmann uses lines as a formal principle. The horizon is a recurring theme in Manfred Bockelmann's oeuvre. Rather than rendering the central line of a landscape, the artist employed the idea of the horizon in this instance to depict the limit of our perception. He used newspapers and water-soluble printing ink as his materials. Bockelmann first started to paint over newspapers with black, regular and horizontal brushstrokes thirteen years ago. The writing that is left visible consists mostly of headlines. »Painting over the papers creates the impression of a window blind that has been pulled down« explains Bockelmann, adding that »we don't even know which pieces of information we have stored in our memories and which ones we have chosen to repress. This is the danger: History repeats itself, because people forget«.

**VIDEO PROJECTS:****HEAVEN**

Manfred Bockelmann talks about his conversation with an Auschwitz survivor, who told him: »They could take everything away from us, except for one thing – being able to look up at the sky«. Inspired by this remark, the artist created a film that renders the unspeakable visible.

**»NIGHT JOURNEYS«**

In many cases the victims were taken from their homes in the middle of the night. A film recalls these dreaded deportations.

**INFORMATION**

A separate room provides further information on the subject and a space for reflection. A timeline highlights the most important historical events that occurred between 1918 and 1945. Books that inspired Manfred Bockelmann during his work are laid out for visitors to browse through.



The exhibition is held under the auspices of the European Parliament and its president Martin Schulz.



## CATALOGUE ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION



**Diethard Leopold (Hg.)**

*Manfred Bockelmann. Drawing against Oblivion*

With contributions by Diethard Leopold, André Heller, Marion Hussong, Peter Gstettner, Peter Michael Lingens, Heiner Hammerschlag, Stephan Pumberger

**Brandstätter Verlag**

192 p., 24 x 28 cm, 100 illustrations

Price: € 19,90

ISBN 978-3-85033-763-2

## BIOGRAPHY

Manfred Bockelmann was born in 1943 in Klagenfurt and grew up on his parents' manor in Carinthia, the youngest of three sons. In 1966 he graduated from the Higher Technical Institute in Graz, where he had studied fresco painting, graphic arts and photography. He moved to Munich, where he began a successful career as a freelance photographer. In 1971 he met Friedensreich Hundertwasser in Zurich. After a trip on Hundertwasser's cutter, their creative dialogue was published in the art book Hundertwasser: Rainy Day (1972) – a synthesis of photography and painting. Since this picture book was a great success, Bockelmann created another art book on the painter Rudolf Hausner – Adam (1973), a photographic psychoanalysis.

For his work as a photo journalist Bockelmann traveled the world. His motifs were highly diverse and included threatened native tribes from the Amazon headwaters as well as cityscapes from New York and Hong Kong. Landscapes became a preferred theme. In 1973 Bockelmann went on a three-month-long photographic safari through East Africa which was to have a decisive impact on his work. Landscapes also became the central theme of his painterly oeuvre. With his landscapes he did not want to depict people's homelands, but rather wanted to create an open space for projections – havens of tranquility. When Manfred Bockelmann gave up his work as a photo journalist, his camera became the »sketchbook« for his paintings. In the winter months of 1977/78 he traveled to Australia. On the beaches of Sydney he drew rake traces into the sand, which he then documented on camera. This parallelism of lines has since become a hallmark of his work. Following a trip to Japan in 1990, Bockelmann painted a series inspired by rice straw mats entitled »Tatami«. This series is also characterized by parallel lines. In 2001 he started to paint over newspapers with parallel brushstrokes. He called this project »Horizons – Limit of Perception«. Ten years later this subject, which he has likened to geological stratification, has resurfaced in his portraits or »drawings against oblivion«. »I am digging up my past, the time of my early childhood«.

Manfred Bockelmann has presented his works in more than a hundred solo exhibitions in galleries and art fairs around the globe. His pictures feature in many private and public collections. He has realized large-scale projects on »art in the public space«. After an extended period of non-representational painting in oil on canvas, he has since turned his attention to charcoal on canvas and his oeuvre has become representational. Since 1990 Bockelmann has lived and worked in Carinthia, Munich and Vienna.



MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
RAKE TRACES IN THE SAND, SYDNEY, 1978  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013



MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
HORIZONS, 2005  
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WORK IN PROGRESS  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013



MANFRED BOCKELMANN (BORN 1943)  
UNBEKANNTER NAME/NAME UNKNOWN, 2010  
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WORK IN PROGRESS  
MANFRED BOCKELMANN © VBK, VIENNA 2013

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