



Left Günther Uecker, *Oval*, 1958
signed and dated '58';
signed, titled and dated
'1958' (reverse)
nails on burlap laid on board
mounted on panel
87 by 88.7 by 10.5cm
(34¼ by 35 by 4in)
Estimate: £450,000 - 650,000
(\$585,000 - 845,000)

Right Lothar Wolleh's
1972 portrait of Uecker
on his bed of nails

Changing tack

After a traumatic war, Günther Uecker was determined to remake modern art from scratch. To effect this transformation, as **Francesca Gavin** explains, he reached for a bag of nails

If Günther Uecker owns one material in contemporary art, it is the nail: nails are vital in much of the 86-year-old artist's work. Years after he started working with this simple, everyday object, he remembered his own first experience with nails. At the end of World War II, in order to protect his home from the approaching Russian army, the teenage Uecker decided to nail down every door and window of his house, leaving only a small hidden window free for him to sneak out and get food. When the Russians arrived, they couldn't get in. "I remember how proud I was," the artist recalled.

It was not just the artist's wartime experiences that led to his use of nails. There's a line from the Russian poet Mayakovsky: "Art is not a mirror held up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it." For Uecker, this was realism. "The emotions are in the hand. The hand is the tool and the workplace is art," he once noted.

For the viewer, part of the appeal of the nail is its openness to interpretation. Nails bring to mind the crucifixion, violence, industrialisation,

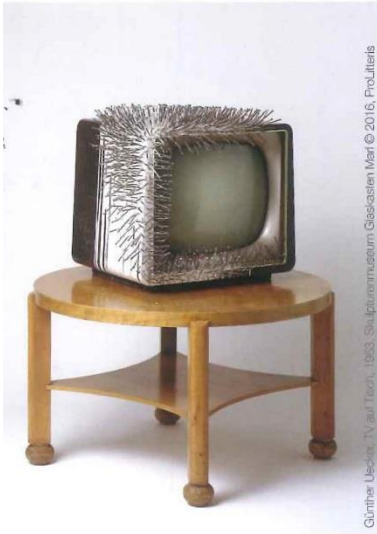
work and protection. Yet looking at Uecker's art, his work just feels like an incredibly aesthetic, conceptual take on the abstract.

Uecker's 'nail fields', as he calls them, vary immensely. He has created swarms of nails, painted or raw, white or black. He has clustered nails like mussels clinging to the top of a canvas. He has nailed objects including TV sets, stools, stumps of trees, sewing machines and record

"Nails bring to mind the crucifixion, violence, industrialisation, work and protection"

players. The results can be linear or misshapen, ordered or chaotic, unruly or geometric – as exemplified by *Oval* (1958), offered in Bonhams' Post-War and Contemporary Art Sale at New Bond Street in February. There is often something organic about his work: the nails might cluster together to resemble a school of fish or – as in *Vogel* (1962), which is also offered in the





Günther Uecker, TV auf Tisch, 1963, Sauplasmuseum, Glasgasten Meer © 2016, ProJitteris

Bonhams sale – perhaps a flock of birds.

Although the nail fields often hang on the wall, they really talk about some of the concerns of sculpture – light, shape, darkness, form. The way shadows emerge from the nails is as important as the way they are positioned and composed. Emerging with, and influenced by, Op Art, Uecker's nail fields were kinetic even though they did not move.

Yet it would be wrong to pigeon-hole Uecker. He takes the smallest elements of human existence and transforms them into pieces brimming with empathy and beauty, whether in paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, installations, stage sets and costumes, poetry, films, photography or performance pieces.

One of his most notable installations, *Sand Mill* (1970), consists of a motorised sculpture that drags small stones on cords through sand. The grooves it would create are simultaneously wiped away by a second set of stones. (A version of this

was shown as part of *Unlimited* at Art Basel in 2015.) "Art is like the traces of wounds ploughed into the field," Uecker once stated. The piece has a hypnotic nature – something that emerges in many of Uecker's abstract pieces.

The iconic images of Uecker are of an artist wearing white workman's overalls, blurring the border between painter and decorator. In recent portraits, he appears to be constantly smiling, filled with a kind of creative joie de vivre. He was invited in 1974 to teach at the art academy in Düsseldorf, as professor of 'free art', a post which he held until recently. However, he still works everyday in his studio. Despite his joyfulness, there is also dedication. There is a darkness to what he creates, often appearing in response to deeply political experiences.

In 1973, Uecker made work in response to the American bombing of Laos. In 1986, the year of his son's birth, he created figurative ash paintings after the Chernobyl disaster. These primal figures feel like haunting echoes of loss.

But then there is a sense of the adventurer about Uecker – an openness to using the visual as a means of communicating beyond language and borders. To understand Uecker's work, it pays to look at his life, which provides a fascinating backdrop to his art and may be key to comprehending his political outlook. Born in 1930, he spent his childhood tending animals on

"Uecker was forced to bury rotting corpses from a sunk prison ship. He was only 15 years old"



2016 The Artist / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Germany

Top left Hammering it home: Günther Uecker, *TV auf Tisch*, 1963

Left Günther Uecker, *Baume aus einem Stamm (Trees from One Trunk)*, 2009-2015
Courtesy Dominique Lévy

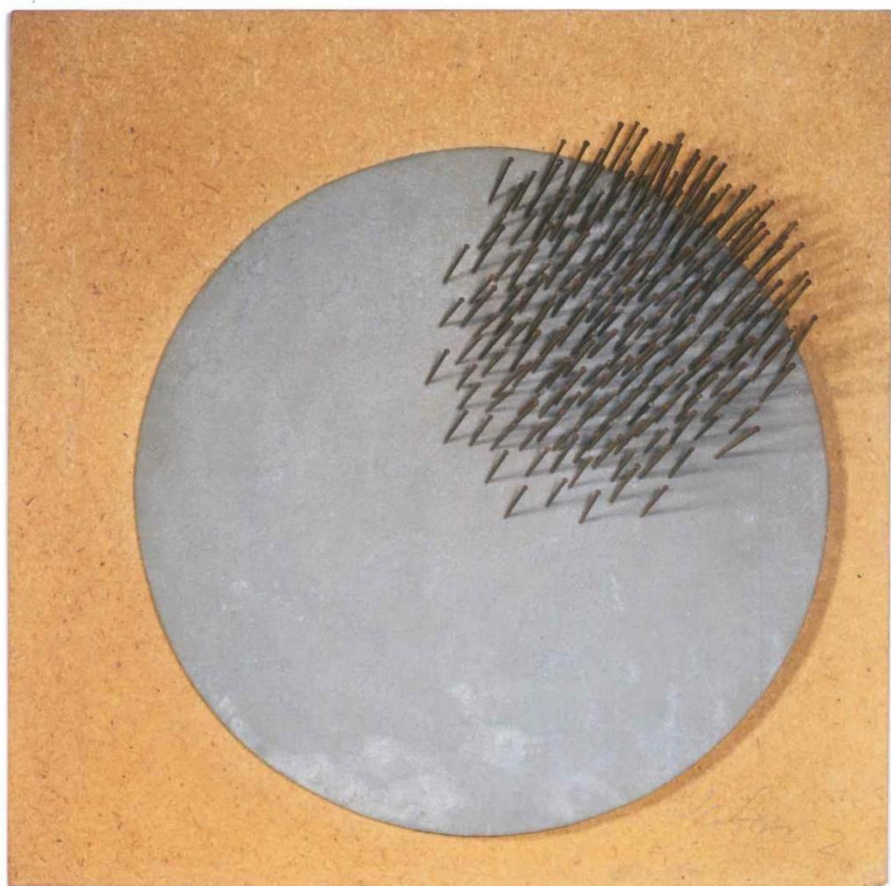


© Herbert Kollar / Courtesy Dominique Lévy

farmland his father rented near the Baltic Sea at Wustrow. But in the run-up to World War II, the area became a test ground for Germany's fighter jets and rockets. As Uecker said, "I had an almost erotic relationship with aeroplanes. The cables and bakelite materials inside smelled as seductive to me as a perfume shop." But the artist's wartime experiences were not without trauma. After the British sunk the prison ship *Cap Arcona* in 1945, 75 corpses washed up in Wustrow. Uecker and two friends were forced to bury the rotting bodies. He was only 15. It was an experience he could not speak about for decades.

After the war, the farmland was appropriated. Uecker seized the opportunity to head for Düsseldorf, where he persuaded painter Otto Pankok to take him as a student. "Surviving is a form of wise presence on this planet," Uecker noted. It was in Düsseldorf that he met Otto Piene and Heinz Mack – the pair with whom he formed the Zero group, named after the idea that this was the zero hour from which they would start art afresh. Their aim was to acknowledge and transcend the past. Uecker wrote, "I do not belong to the generation of the guilty but to the generation of the heirs to guilt." The movement appealed to international artists such as Lucio Fontana and Yayoi Kusama, both of whom were drawn to the idea of an absolute beginning with the freedom to use materials to explore light, movement, space and structure.

Zero placed Uecker at the heart of the 1960s European art scene. He was particularly close to Arman and to Yves Klein, whom his sister married. Uecker was included in the highly influential Op and kinetic art show, *The Responsive Eye*, at MoMA in New York in 1965. In 1968, he



occupied the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden with Gerhard Richter for a week's demonstration-cum-performance. He also represented Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1970 and was a participant in Documenta on three occasions.

Throughout his career, Uecker has been very successful in Germany, but in recent years his place in the international art market has been cemented. The short-lived Zero group has recently been given major shows at the Guggenheim in New York and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. Uecker's early nail pieces are reaching seven figure sums. But then this should be no surprise: his visual language is immediate and constantly being reinvented. The main draw of his work is its sense of emotional universality. As Uecker once said, "It is the human character in my work [that] touches man."

Francesca Gavin is visual arts editor of *Dazed & Confused*, art editor of *Twin* and contributing editor at *Sleek* and *AnOther*.

Sale: Post-War and Contemporary Art
London
Thursday 9 February at 4pm
Enquiries: Ralph Taylor +44 (0) 20 7447 7403
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bonhams.com/contemporary



Top left Uecker working on *Verletzte Felder (Wounded Fields)* in his studio, 2016

Top right Günther Uecker, *Vogel*, 1962
Signed and dated '62'; signed, titled and dated '62' (reverse)
nails on canvas laid on board mounted on panel
74.9 by 74.8 by 10.5cm
(29½ by 29½ by 4¼in)
Estimate: £400,000 - 600,000
(\$520,000 - 780,000)

Above *Year Zero*: Uecker (second from left) in gallerist Alfred Schmela's home, 1965