

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

WALTER PICHLER

A PORTRAIT

Text: Felicitas Berlin

We're flying to 40° degree Vienna. Our destination is Seilerstätte in the First District, where the studio of Walter Pichler – who passed away in 2012 – is located. We are meeting Anna Tripamer, Pichler's daughter, there. Once we reach the fifth floor – the Viennese studio is right under the roof – she greets us with her deep voice and, apologising the heat, invites us in. She is wearing a long black skirt and a thin checked shirt tucked in, her dark hair tied back in a bun.

The first thing I notice is the smell of warm wood, which dominates the rooms here. To the right lies a large study containing a long wooden table, a bench with a plentiful array of tools neatly lined up, large shelves filled with drawings set in wooden frames, and, here and there, Pichler's models and sculptures, both small and large. Separated by a long glass window, the room next to it, on the left, houses a large wooden drawing desk and two armchairs: one made of straw with a black-and-white patterned sheepskin, and a futuristic-looking one, the *Galaxy 1*, designed by Pichler in 1966. After Anna has made us some coffee, set up two fans and returned to the large table in the studio with several bottles of water and a bucket of ice, we sit down. Her on one side, us on the other. This is how we would meet up again a month later – this time in St. Martin.

As the conversation progresses, we come to understand what mattered most to Walter Pichler: sculpture as the focal point of all his work, and, beyond that, man and its place in the world. A certain attitude, expressed through consistency, continuity and precision.



Anna Tripamer, 2026

Anna begins to talk.

At the Innsbruck Gewerbeschule, her father initially started an apprenticeship for Calligraphy and Decorative Painting in the early 1950s. One of his teachers, however, quickly realised that the young Pichler belonged elsewhere. Since no one in his family had completed a higher education before, it took considerable persuasion. And so the teacher convinced the local priest to explain to Pichler's parents the urgency of their son's further education. Thanks

to their Catholic faith – in this instance – they now supported his decision to leave. And so, in 1953, he arrived in Vienna to join the masterclass in Graphic Design at the University of Applied Arts. In the early 1960s, Pichler moved into the studio on Seilerstätte, where he initially focused on utopian architecture. This interest, which he shared with his friend and architect Hans Hollein, was to lead to a joint exhibition on precisely that theme in 1963.

Although the traces of the war started to fade, many cities – including Vienna – were still shrouded in a grey gloom. Pichler, one of eight children from a modest South Tyrolean family, for whom Vienna already felt like a cosmopolitan breath, traveled to New York at that time, where he stayed with his friend, the architect Raimund Abraham. And there it was: the colourful, glittering, crackling, buzzing future. The Americans were flying to the moon; televisions flickered and radios crackled everywhere; politics and advertising were now taking place in people's living rooms; consumer society was taking shape; and in art, this was expressed through Pop Art. This futuristic world also included all manner of innovative materials. furniture, clothing – everything was suddenly made of plastics, such as PVC, which made its debut in Pichler's early work.



Workspace with a large wooden table, Seilerstätte, Vienna

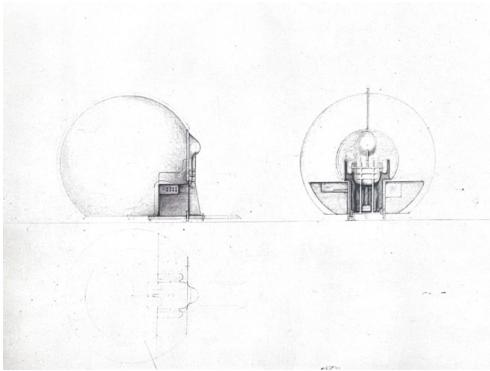


Bench with tools, Atelier Seilerstätte, Vienna



Galaxy 1, designed in 1966

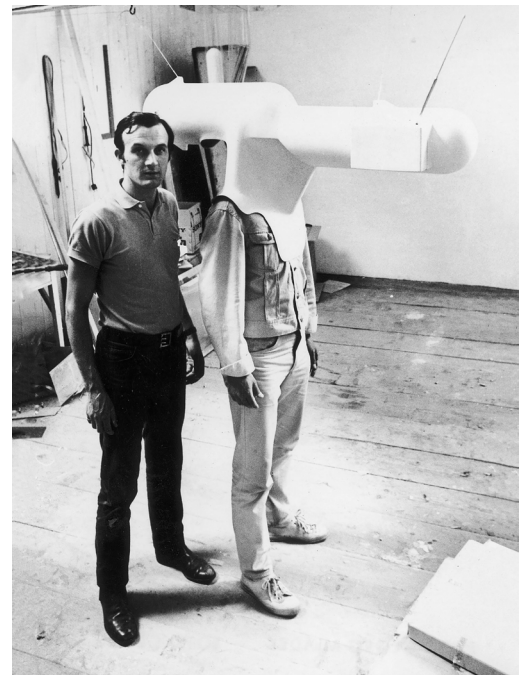
For the first time presented to an international audience in 1967, Pichler took part in a group exhibition alongside Hans Hollein and Raimund Abraham at MoMa, New York.



Drawing for *Intensiv-Box*, 1967

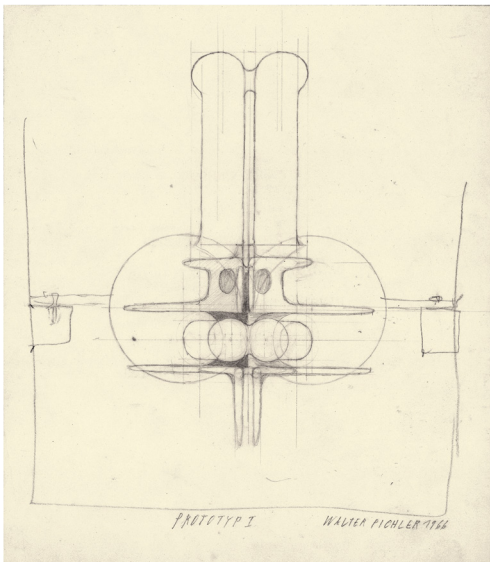
After being deported from the USA without a visa, back in his Viennese studio his 'mad technical pursuits' ("seine wahnsinnigen Technik-Beschäftigungen"), as Anna describes, gave rise to his series of the *Prototypes* in which he explored the extension of the human body into space. The body moving along this horizontal line, positioning itself on its upper or lower surface. The body expanding into its surroundings. At the same time, Pichler therein

explored the paradoxical coexistence of isolation and interconnect-edness: the attempt to shield oneself from the environment whilst, at the same time, connecting ever more closely with it through technical apparatus. Take, for example, the *TV-Helm* (1967), a futuristic-looking, tubular object around one metre in length that one pulls over one's head. Completely shielded from the outside world, the wearer is exposed solely to the technical media inside.



Walter Pichler and *TV-Helm*, 1967

That idea was taken to its logical conclusion in the *Intensiv-Box* (1967). An inflatable PVC bubble with tubes and cables, inside which stands nothing but an armchair. Anyone who takes a seat is left entirely to their own devices, whilst at the same time being fully connected to technical media. Anna comments: "I mean, we're sort of there, aren't we?" She's right. We're totally there. Today, everyone sits in their own bubble – only this is no longer an artistic exploration but reality.



Drawing for *Prototyp I*, 1967

In her accounts of the *Prototypes*, Anna already hints at something to which we shall return later in relation to her father's character and his inseparable working methods. Key words: continuity and consistency. If one considers Pichler's very first *Prototype*, *Prototyp I* (1966), one sees two spheres fused together and thus already the basic form of what recurs decades later in the *Doppelkopf* (1987). It is one example of how Pichler continuously deepened, over the course of decades, the formal and conceptual considerations he had initially developed, concerning the relationship between body, space and sculpture.



Doppelkopf, 1987

We soon come to discuss how Pichler positioned himself in relation to the art of his Viennese contemporaries. The avant-garde Viennese art scene of the postwar period – from the Wiener Gruppe to Wiener Aktionismus – was his personal milieu, and some of its representatives were his close friends. However, he identified less with what increasingly defined their artistic practice. Both the strong politicization of that era and the associated turn toward the performative were foreign to him as an artist. He wanted nothing to do with it, for for him it was solely about sculpture. Sculpture as the end result of a continuous and consistent endeavour, which, in his view, should under no circumstances require an audience. The precise, finished object in itself – that was the aim and effect of his art.

Chronologically getting closer to the move to St. Martin, Anna mentions her father's profound exhaustion following his major solo exhibition in 1971 at what was then the Museum of the 20th Century, now known as Belvedere 21. The museum director, Alfred Schmeller, had sent him to the Süd-Burgenland area to recuperate. Following the director's advice, he spent the summer there. Without a driving licence, he cycled around the area a great deal, and whilst doing so came across an abandoned farmhouse, with trees growing through the roof of its barn. Only the kitchen was still let to a cobbler, a profession that Pichler's father had also practised. Whilst walking round the house, he spotted a note pinned up with a thumbtack: 'Closed today, as I can't be bothered to work.' Anna laughs. "As soon as he saw that, he knew straight away: this is a good house." He found the owners, an elderly couple from the village, promised to return in two weeks with half the purchase price, and kept his word. To do so, he even sold a sculpture. "Which he actually never did," says Anna. Years later, he bought it back.



Haus für den Rumpf and die Schädeldecken and Haus für die Türme, St. Martin

Pichler's move to St. Martin in 1972 marked the beginning of a new phase in his work. Instead of the PVC he had previously used, he now turned to materials available in the local area – clay and wood – as well as various metals and glass. Furthermore, he now had much more space to work. This applied to the studio itself, but also to something else: the surroundings enabled him to build houses for his sculptures. These structures are many things they are not – they are not residential buildings, not bathhouses, not workhouses, and so forth. In terms of their function, they perhaps come closest to a temple. Yet they are certainly not that either. They simply represent a place, a space, which serves specifically and solely to house this one thing: the sculpture.

In his architectural designs, he pays close attention to the 'correctness' of the space, which arises from the specific characteristics of the respective work and the ideal incidence of light for it at different times of the day and year. Ultimately, he regarded them as the completion of the sculpture itself.

As a sculptor, Pichler was deeply committed to craftsmanship. This implied the necessity for him to build each stage of his work consistently upon the previous one, proceeding step by step. One could not, one must not begin on the surface, but must always start with the substructure with utmost precision. He was firmly convinced that this is something one can sense, that it gives the object in question a different aura. Looking at his sculptures and also his drawings, one can agree with this. One sees and feels this approach. Which brings us to another important point: realising that, in Pichler's work, time becomes a material in its own right. For it takes time to work with such precision. He would spend years planning a single sculpture. Countless drawings, becoming ever more precise, eventually resulting in true-to-scale sketches that allow an idea to mature until it can be put into practice. Until he begins to work on a sculpture. And then there's no turning back. After so much time and planning, says Anna, "you have to be sure. It has to be just right." Man always plays a role in his drawings too. He often depicts him in a specific orientation in relation to the sculpture or the architecture. Here, too, this particular precision is evident – the sculpture and the architecture are exactly the way they are, in relation to how a viewer is positioned in space.

We now turn to that 'certain something' in Pichler's work, which I inevitably sense upon my arrival in St. Martin. Anna explains that this 'something' has often been labelled as 'spiritual'. However, she says, that would be too simplistic and, moreover, completely wrong. It is not spiritual; it is not a matter of faith, but yes, there is 'something' there. Anna herself has been trying for years to find the right word. In our



Armchair in the Studio, St. Martin



Haus für den Rumpf und die Schädeldecken, St. Martin

conversation, she describes it as a certain 'Glimpser' that keeps reappearing. Perhaps, she continues, the word 'shrine' best describes it.

The way the sculptures exist there, the way their surroundings – their houses – are designed for them, and also the way Pichler's studio is laid out all seem non-negotiable. It is precisely this sense of the 'non-negotiability' of the circumstances created by him that pervades this 'certain something' atmosphere of this place. Every space, every corner, every orientation and every object seems as though it could only be exactly as it is and exactly where it is. No other angle would be conceivable, no other material, no other height. Everything seems to follow an internal logic that leaves no room for alternatives. One has to be present to understand – more feel – that peculiar atmosphere. And yet one feels it immediately.

In the studio, located on the opposite side of the kitchen in the U-shaped courtyard, we find an armchair and a bed that seem to grow out of the wall. When you sit down in the armchair, you sit very upright, automatically placing your arms on the armrests – which are at just the right height – and looking toward the work table. It is the perfect spot to take a break while still keeping an eye on the work and observing it. Also in the sculpture houses, there are often places to linger that are always positioned to give a good view of what is happening inside. Once again we find ourselves in a situation where there is no better alternative than to linger in this exact spot. It almost feels like Walter Pichler has left behind certain non-verbal behavioral instructions to anyone who visits this place. It is important to note that this perception does not imply a lack of freedom. It is all simply exactly as it should be.

When you step into the *Haus für den Rumpf und die Schädeldecken*, the *Rumpf* (1982) is positioned exactly in the center of the only door through which you can enter. You have no choice but to walk directly toward it. The base of the *Rumpf* is anchored into the whitewashed walls of the house with hinges. The floor is made of clay which has many cracks from this summer's heat, and when turning your head to the right, there stands a sort of table-like structure made of treated and partly untreated wood with six legs that seem to grow out of the clay, and on its precisely laid surface, three of his *Schädeldecken* (1979–1981) are arranged symmetrically. Another central element in Pichler's work – symmetry.

In the *Haus der Tröge*, Pichler essentially constructed the outer form of a figure eight: walls that curve around the two water troughs found in the surrounding area as utilitarian objects, enclosing them at a slight distance. He had also planned an additional system of channels that would have carried the water collected from the



Schädeldecken, 1979–1981



Rumpf, 1982



Haus der Tröge, St. Martin



Haus der Tröge, St. Martin

roof from one trough to the other and then into a basin. Pichler, however, never completed this construction. Anna explains that after her father's death, the idea of realizing it was considered, using his precisely scaled and meticulously detailed plans. In the end, however, she deliberately decided otherwise, as it did not feel right to carry out the construction without giving her father the possibility of having the final say.

Particularly enchanting – the word may sound kitsch, yet the place itself is anything but, and still it is the right word – are the Türme in their house. Tall brick walls, topped with a simple pitched roof, are housing five sculptures consisting of wooden columns, on the upper ends of which elegantly shaped metal objects are placed. At first, I think they are angels. Then Anna tells me, “das sind die Frauen.” (“These are the women”) Women sculptures. Beautiful, enchanting women. We enter the house through a door at the side. Then Anna opens the other two: one opposite the door through which we entered, and another facing the sculptures. Opening the doors makes a distinctive sound, and suddenly we are standing in a completely open space, flooded with evening light, with the women towering high above us. Enchanting.

At some point I ask Anna about Pichler's character, about him as a person. How would she describe her father to someone who had never met him? Could this description be separated from his life as a sculptor, from his art? She replies, “No, definitely not”. Anna recounts how loving he was as a father to her and, more generally, to people whom he respected and had therefore taken into his heart. Anna goes on to note, however, that “he was incredibly annoyed by stupid people”. She further explains that this stemmed from his aversion towards those who flaunted their shallow wisdoms, rather than – in recognition of their lack of expertise – either kept quiet, openly admitted it, or asked questions. Her father could not stand this “constant muddling through”.

His aversion to shallow-wisdom-flaunters makes sense. It goes back to his defining character traits, continuity and consistency; and beyond that, his attitude. The attitude of going into every detail, the attitude of precision. That was immensely important to him, Anna emphasises forcefully: “It has to be right right down to the very seam of a thing!”

There are many artists' children who grapple with the legacy of their parents. But having this place, St. Martin – which is much more than just a collection of individual works – is something quite different. So I ask her about her personal approach to this particular legacy. Anna explains that, as an only child, she realised relatively early on that sooner or later she would bear a special responsibility for preserving this ‘universe’. Before her father passed away, she often asked him for advice, hoping for something like a set of guidelines. But he would simply reply, “Sweetheart, you'll figure it out.” That is how he had always handled it – with complete trust in his daughter's ability to make decisions. With a smile, but also a serious and determined expression on her face, Anna adds: “I've worked with his body of work so much – and indeed lived with it – that I know there's simply no one else who knows it better than I do. That's a fabulous feeling!” There could have been other options, such as turning St. Martin into a sort of museum and handing over the

remaining works – those not tied to the site – to a gallery for management. Yet Anna decided to make use of that distinct expertise and familiarity that is solely hers. And so today, her main mission is to preserve her father's legacy.

A legend surrounds Pichler, that of a hermit who withdrew to Süd-Burgenland and devoted himself fanatically to his work. Anna corrects this image. Whilst St. Martin was indeed a place of concentration, it was at the same time a meeting place for numerous artists who had their homes there too and who – just as they had previously in their Viennese establishments – needed a place for exchange. It was out of this need that the ‘Club an der Grenze’ (Club at the boarder) was born. The name simply refers to the old farmhouse right on



Haus der Türme, St. Martin

the Czech border, whose interior – like everything touched by Pichler – was tailored to the location with ‘incredible precision’. Kurt Kocherscheidt designed the bar, Martin Kippenberger the later famous St. Martin bar chairs, and the catering was also organised collectively. Alongside the site-specific furnishings, a joint portfolio was produced featuring works by Pichler, Kocherscheidt, Kippenberger, Christian Ludwig Attersee, Bruce Meek and Erwin Bohatsch, amongst others; the proceeds from its sale went towards supporting a dental clinic founded by a friend in Burkina Faso.

Anna talks about long, noisy nights at the club, which often didn’t end until dawn, and about how, as a child, she would fall asleep under benches and chairs whilst her parents carried. It was only years later that she realised one of her childhood memories of walks at sunrise was actually the walk home after such nights. I ask her further what it was like to grow up in a place like that. She explains that at home it was like this: “My father worked and talked about his work, and my mother, who was a photographer and documented his work as it unfolded, was always waiting for the right light. Did I sometimes wonder if I was growing up with some lunatics? Yes!”

During my visit to St. Martin, I notice something else alongside the necessity and precision of this place: there is life here. We’ve been there less than half an hour when the neighbour peeks through the window of the drawing room. We drink our first Schnapps – Williams Birne – Anna and the neighbour to calm their nerves after last night’s storm, and us just for the sake of it. After Anna has shown us round and we have gone from sculpture-house to sculpture-house with our eyes growing wider by the minute, we are back in the kitchen at the large table when there is another knock on the door. This time it is Peter Pilz and another friend. Peter, who has a house some kilometres further on in Slovenia, is Pichler’s former assistant. She introduces him as the ‘real specialist’. She introduces him as the “real specialist.” Not one to advertise himself, we only learn in passing that he played a key role in Pichler’s contribution to the 1982 Biennale, for which the entire Austrian Pavilion was redesigned by him and Peter to accommodate his works. Obviously.

The rest of the evening was spent not talking about work. Instead, the conversation turned to good excuses for cancelling boring dinner parties, the necessity of little white lies to counter the starkness and tedium of the truth, pre-ordered coffins, the annoying Lou Reed, and then we danced with spoons as castanets.

The following morning, our visit in St. Martin draws to a close, and I am glad to feel a growing sense that, thanks to Anna’s stories, I am now able to write a portrait of her father.

Our last words before departure close the circle. Bringing together drawing, design, sculpture, and architecture in his work, one might be tempted to describe Pichler as a universal genius, or, as we constantly hear it in today’s trendy art terminology, as a transmedial or interdisciplinary artist. From Anna, I learn that he firmly rejected such labels. She tells me: “My father always said, my profession is sculptor. He clearly linked these words. Not draughtsman, nor architect – certainly not architect. It was always important to him that the sculpture remained at the centre.” And here, too, the overall picture of Pichler remains coherent: he understood himself as one thing, not many.

A consistent position.



Die Türme, 1990, St. Martin