

The World of Interiors
Boyer, Marie-France: Bibliotheque Rationale
March 2022



The library building has been designed in a pared-back rationalist style. A simple granite slab serves as a stepping stone from the natural world of the garden to that of the mind beyond, and the structure is 'framed' by a narrow band of gravel that runs round the perimeter

Below left: the yellow rear elevation is based on a sketch by Günther Förg, entitled *Wall Partition*, owned by Max Hetzler. Below right: Förg's work, here seen reproduced in books, has been compared to that of Cy Twombly, Ellsworth Kelly and other postwar US abstract artists



BIBLIOTHEQUE RATIONALE

As part of a contemporary-art complex he's created in a tiny village in western Germany, Max Hetzler commissioned the construction of a library to be filled with books gathered by his longstanding client, the artist Günther Förg. And what was the thinking behind it? Having mounted 20 exhibitions together, the gallery owner wanted to create a shrine to his friend's generosity. 'I wanted simply to give him something back,' he tells Marie-France Boyer. Photography: Nicolas Schimp



Above: this exhibition space features a group of photos by Wilhelm Schürmann that capture the artists gravitating round Max Hetzler in 1980s New York, including Jeff Koons, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger and Förg himself. The table and chairs are by Carlo Mallino

Opposite, top: Förg's 3,000 volumes sit on Dieter Rams's modular '606' shelving system for Vitsoe. The leather armchairs are by Jean-Michel Frank, the glass table is by Mies van der Rohe and the concrete one is by Konstantin Grcic. This page: a curtained-off galley kitchen





IN WEIDINGEN, a village in western Germany, the gallery owner Max Hetzler has constructed a new building to accommodate the library of Günther Förg, the artist and friend whose work he exhibited for more than 30 years. A guest house, gallery and 15 or so sculptures scattered about give concrete form to the foundation he set up in 2012 with his wife, Samia Saouma (*Wo!* Oct 2014), and son Max Edouard.

Hetzler was in his early twenties when, in 1974, he opened his first gallery in Stuttgart. A decade later, in 1983, it relocated to Cologne, which at that time had become the centre for contemporary art alongside New York.

Ten years after that he upped sticks again, this time to Berlin; branches in London and Paris have followed in the time since. All the while, Samia Saouma, who is French/Lebanese and was raised in Rome, was busy running a gallery in Paris under her own name. There, starting in the 1970s, she exhibited the photographs of O. Winston Link and Robert Mapplethorpe, later moving on to the work of Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger. It was their shared interest in these two German artists that brought her and Hetzler together in the 1980s. Today she runs Galerie Max Hetzler in Paris and he the one in Berlin, while Max Edouard looks after the London operation.

In 2012 they established the Foundation for the Promotion of Contemporary Art in Weidingen, a small Catholic village with a population of just 180 in Rhineland-Palatinate, a stone's throw from the German border with Luxembourg. Here Max had bought an old country house surrounded by lime and apple trees some 40 years earlier.

The foundation's buildings are scattered around the house. Every year an exhibition is held in the *Kunsthalle*, and simultaneously the village hosts a summer festival, to which the Hetzlers invite locals, friends, the artists and gallery staff.

A second structure offers lodging for an artist-in-residence, and the third is the Günther Förg Library. Scattered around this trio of buildings, and indeed the village, are sculptures by the likes of Rebecca Warren, Darren Almond and Toby Ziegler.

When Max Hetzler first began exhibiting Günther Förg in 1979, the two men were already slightly acquainted, the latter being a frequent visitor to the gallery despite himself living and studying in Munich. Two years later, he and fellow artists Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger found fame – and forged an inseparable bond – when the gallerist showed their work together. So closely associated were they, they would become known as the Hetzler Boys. 'Through the gallery,' Förg explained, 'there was an exchange, respect and friendship among individualists.' He himself worked in painting and sculpture, as well as graphic art and photography. His work is held by Tate Britain and Modern in London, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, MoMA in New York and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel.

In the words of the artist and critic Gilles Altieri: 'Günther Förg is not an abstract painter. He is a romantic expressionist, the language of forms laconically borrowed, the colours singing ponderously like a church bell.' The writer Emmanuel Grandjean, meanwhile, points to how 'he manages to combine the two strands of abstraction that have always stared each other down: minimalism and expressionism'.

Top left: *Softwares*, a fabric piece by Croatian artist Hana Miletić, hangs at the window beyond *Tunika*, a monolithic sculpture by Günther Förg. Top right: seen beyond a 1989 photograph of the artist by Wilhelm Schürmann, an almost vertical staircase leads to the bedroom



It was following Förg's death in 2013 that Hetzler turned to Axt Architekten, a practice that is itself based in Weidingen, with the brief to design a building that would house his friend's collection of 3,000 books. What he envisaged was something that observed a certain modesty and respected the vernacular architecture of the region.

The library stands in the middle of a sculpture garden in the centre of the village, and is surrounded by large 19th-century rural houses painted in pale colours and the Catholic church, which has been a destination for pilgrims since the 13th century. There are plenty of cows here, but no café, no shops, nor that many humans. And so the sudden arrival of a contemporary art scene has been somewhat surreal to say the least.

This library is a single-storey white block with one wall featuring a large rectangle painted golden yellow – an artwork of sorts by Günther Förg (it is based on one of his sketches on paper that Hetzler owns). The ceiling height inside is five metres, and the space is divided into two sections: the book repository and the exhibition area, which has a full-width glass wall that overlooks and has access to the street; another window has views of the church at the back of the building. Once a year this room hosts a show of works by or related to Förg. Last summer, it was the turn of the photographer Wilhelm Schürmann, a close friend who captured the Hetzler Boys' life in the 1980s.

The library area itself has floor-to-ceiling metal shelves on three walls, with a lovely long cherrywood ladder for access hanging by a doorway so as not to obscure the volumes' spines. One half of the fourth wall is glazed, while the other half pro-

vides spillover display space. Four large leather armchairs set around a low table make this a welcoming and convivial place in which to sit and browse the books.

To the right of the main entrance – and hidden most of the time by means of a white cotton curtain – is a tiny 'guest cabin' above a kitchenette, shower and loo. It is accessed by a near-vertical ladder and has the luxury of a skylight so the bed's occupant can stand without bumping their head. This discrete tiny living space provides accommodation for one person who has come to consult or study in the library.

'I like the idea of offering other people use of these books, giving access to informed readers who wish to learn more about the affinities Förg had with certain artists,' Hetzler explains with enthusiasm. He himself has two libraries – one in Berlin devoted to art and architecture and one in Weidingen to *Belletristik*, or fiction and *belles lettres* – while Förg had three spread across Switzerland and Germany. 'The one we have here is fundamentally an artist's library and it reflects his interest in such things as architecture and African arts.'

Close to the old family home where he often goes to recuperate, next to a church whose bells ring out three times a day, Hetzler is thus paying homage to a long-standing friendship. He talks about the library as if it were a kind of shrine. 'I held over 20 exhibitions with Günther. Over the years he has been so generous that I wanted simply to give him something back' ■

The library is open for study by appointment. For more information about it and the Foundation for the Promotion of Contemporary Art, visit kunst-in-weidingen.de

Top left: tucked by a door leading from the library area, a cherry-wood library ladder enables intrepid readers to reach volumes close to the 5m-high ceiling. Top right: for researchers in temporary residence, the bedroom under the roof has a skylight that offers standing headroom