

Action Art in Germany and Neighbouring

Countries

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First of all I will give you an idea of the context and the conditions in which Action Art started to evolve in the Germanic countries, in Germany, Austria, Holland and Switzerland. The end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties were marked by the disaster of the Second World War. Germany and Austria were licking their wounds after losing the war. Holland had just lost its colonies in Indonesia. Everything was to be rebuilt and this required an incredible amount of physical and mental discipline. It was not a time for new experiences. This attitude resulted in an extremely conservative spirit, even in the spiritual world. Many things were forgotten: Futurism, Surrealism, Dada. While John CAGE was crossing the conventional borders between disciplines, creating a kind of living Gesamtkunstwerk, with a group of musicians, painters and choreographers at the Black Mountain College, Yves KLEIN exposed *Le Vide* (The Void) in France and claimed "to be able to fly". Artists in Germany - who for the most part had resisted the laws of Nazi aesthetics - were rediscovering abstraction and the free gesture in informal painting. It was only at the beginning of the sixties that things began to move on. Initially, there was a general feeling of malaise. Young people, and also artists, no longer wanted to accept the constraints of a society with only one idea in its head: its consolidation according to the economic laws of the market (taken to the extreme). At the same time, they rejected the concept of education extolled by preceding generations, particularly in Austria where the reactionary Church exerted a strong influence. The exception to this was Holland, where the education system was much more modern.

A group of artists and writers called The Situationists were some of the first to express this malaise during the fifties. A central point of their programme was "to put an end to forms of art that had been historically outdated for some time, by means of their simultaneous realization and abolition, substituting them with the revolution of every-day life and the permanent creation of situations." Although these theories remained largely unknown in Germany - possibly because Germans were uncomfortable with the Marxist nature of Situationist theory - the fundamental principals and the attitude expressed in these theories formed the basis of new movements that went on to develop in the country. It was in this context, around the mid sixties, that the first signs of Action Art began to emerge in German-speaking countries. The first happenings in Germany took place around 1960. The Korean/American artist Nam June PAIK was the first to introduce this art from the United-States. His first performances in front of German audiences were in Cologne, in Mary BAUERMEISTER'S studio - the wife of Karlheinz STOCKHAUSEN - and in Jean-Pierre WILHELM'S Gallery in Dosseldorf. The public were shocked: 'After having taken a mouthful of a stimulating drink, a small Asiatic guy threw white beans into the audience and emptied a bag of flour over his head. Mute and motionless, like a sculpted idol, his black suit decorated with white, the little man stood there, unrolled a little paper. covered his face with it. squeaked and weeped. Then, like a furious, screaming epileptic. he threw himself into a bath-tub filled with water.' This was how a well-known art critic at the time described one of PAIK's happenings. Wolf VOSTELL was the first German artist to introduce the happening to his native country. in the meantime, the art form had changed: it was no longer a secret ritual for a small, intimate

group. Happenings had taken to the streets, looking for monumental frameworks and the participation of the crowd. VOSTELLS most famous happening, made in 1964. was called In Ulm, um Ulm, um U/m herum (" In Ulm, around Ulm. allaround Ulm" - the name of a city). The public were transported in buses to "spectacular" sites, such as an airport, to attend dramatic events. and were then left to their

One only has to open any book about Action Art to see that this art really exploded in Europe around 1965: the Viennese Actionists were making work in Austria and the first Fluxus concert was being held in Wiesbaden. Subsequently, a number of Fluxus artists who had been involved in this concert - including George BRECHT, Robert FILLIOU, Emmett WILLIAMS, Al HANSEN, Takako SAITO and Ben PATTERSON - returned to Germany to live, where a number of them continue the Fluxus tradition to this day. Joseph BEUYS, who was in the Rhine area, had good contacts with Fluxus and some common interests with them. He did not, however, subscribe to any particular group or movement. He developed an extremely individualistic practice that went on to influence the work of generations of Performance Artists. No one succeeded in equalling, or copying, him, and this was not only due to his socio-political theories - which even at the high point of his actions did not have the amplitude they would later gain - or his choice of his materials - the wax, the felt, the grease and copper that made him so famous. It was, rather, due to his interior strength, which was more than a simple question of presence; it was a kind of radiance that it was impossible to imitate and, at the same time, his ability to create a very dense and authentic atmosphere around him with simple objects. It was these types of qualities that, for many years, served as a kind of goal that subsequent performance artists would try to attain. The following quote, taken from a text written at the time and describing the action Eurasia from 1966, concretely expresses these ideas: "The opening motif was the division of the cross. BEUYS was crawling on his knees, pushing two small crosses in front of him on the floor. He stopped at a blackboard. He hung a watch with an alarm clock from each cross. He drew a cross on the blackboard, and then wiped half of the cross out, writing the word 'Eurasia' underneath it. Then, he moved a dead hare, whose legs and ears were extended with long black sticks, along a line drawn on the floor. When he carried the hare on his shoulders, the sticks touched the floor. He moved away from the wall, returning to the blackboard, where he put down the hare. Three things happened while he was moving: He put white powder between the legs of the hare. Placed a thermometer into its mouth and ritualistic and ecstatic nature of the processes that produced the pictures, and through the integration in their paintings of materials such as blood, cotton-wool, sanitary towels, cigarette-ends, nails and stockings. From this time onwards, the way was free for an explosion of activities that combined an intense pictorial experimentation and opposition to bourgeois morality, which continued to be very restrictive. The artists covered naked female bodies with blood, excrement, and the corpses of bleeding animals, and in the middle of this battlefield stood Hermann NITSCH, dressed in a bloodstained chasuble. This will to oppose culminated in 1968, when a group of artists, amongst them Otto MUHL, Peter WEIBEL, Gunter BRUS and the writer Oswald WIENER, organized a happening inside the Vienna University. This act was not only an artistic action, but also an open revolt. It resulted in a number of protagonists spending the night in prison. The events of 1968 evoked, for many artists, the vision of a sociocritical art, although not in the sense of direct political agitation. The imagination with which the students had overthrown order outside as well as inside the universities inspired those artists who were

already looking for a very direct form of art that would really touch a public. The German artist Jochen GERZ, who was at that time already living in Paris, where he was involved in the students' movement, improvised little scenes in the streets in order to provoke people. For example, he offered a blind person, whom he didn't know, to help him cross the street. After crossing the street he asked the man to take him back again. The blind man agreed and they crossed the street again... and again and again. In another action, he laid down on the ground in a field,

in order to eat heart with love. At that time the word "performance" was not yet in use, and this type of action was not intended to be realized in an art-context in front of an art audience. The public consisted of passers-by. At the time, the condition of women was one of the main themes being addressed. In Vienna,

she was encountering a particularly narrow and rigid social framework in which her feminist actions had a great deal of impact. She walked in the street, dressed in a fur coat, pulling her companion Peter WEIBEL behind her, walking on all fours, like a dog on a leash. In another action, she walked in the street, holding a box covered with a black curtain in front of her chest. She invited people to put their hands in the box, where they found her naked breasts. This piece is called Cinema to Grasp and to Touch. Alongside these socio-political manifestations there existed a very different movement - BodyArt, which sought to explore the plasticity of the human being. These were not public actions; the artists worked mostly in the studio with a photographic or video camera as their only witness. The most important Body Art artists in Germany were Klaus RINKE, Rebecca HOFER and Franz Erhard WALTHER. Although this work cannot entirely be considered as Performance Art, it had a big influence on future Performance Art because it demonstrated the many possibilities of the language of the human body. In the early seventies, it was above all in the United States that Performance Art as a type of art form was emerging. Names like Vito ACCONCI, Chris BURDEN, Charlemagne PALESTINE, Terry FOX were gradually fixing themselves in memory. One might say that the spectacular birth of Performance Art in Europe took place in 1975. This was the year in which the Appel, a space for performance, opened in Amsterdam. Wies SMALS - the founder, rented a former warehouse in the historical center of Amsterdam. In no time this house became a cult-place for Performance Art in Europe. It turned out that besides the invasion of artists from the United States, there existed quite a number of performance artists in Europe, who just hadn't found the right place to show their work. A publication from Appel that appeared two years after the opening includes the names of the most

famous artists in the world. The list of artists who lived in Holland was not very long, but includes some very prestigious names: Ben d'ARMAGNAC, Marina AB RAMOVIC and U LAY, Gerrit DECKE, Nan HOOVER, and ReindeerWerk were amongst them. Activities were suddenly, and brutally, interrupted by the death of Wies SMALS and his team in a plane accident. Ben d'ARMAGNAC, who had already passed away in 1978, also has a place in

memory as one of the great names. His performances were extremely simple and at the same time extremely impressive. He created very uneasy situations that he forced himself to endure. He could be seen suffering, the sweat pouring from his forehead, until neither he nor the audience could stand it anymore.

The joint performances of ABRAMOVIC and ULAY were also tests of endurance, but they were more calculated and control-led. Instead of showing suffering they demonstrated the domination of that feeling. The essential content of their performances was the tension between the two of them. In order to make this tension palpable, they opted for very simple, exemplary confrontations. For example they ran back and forth in a space, coming into contact with each other from time to time, though barely perceptibly, increasing the force of this contact, and at times slapping each other on the face alternately, and this also with increasing violence. There was no dramatic end, it merely finished suddenly. After this wave of work, that lasted a few years, there was quite a radical turnaround in Holland in the early eighties. Some performance artists were of the opinion that "performance" was finished, that it was "exhausted" and so they would no longer do it. Some were honest in admitting that it didn't bring in enough money and that they preferred to make objects and go back to selling them in the art market. This was the case with the duo Reindeer Werk; two artists called Tom PUCKEY and Dirk LARSEN. They had started with extremely physical performances, rolling on the floor in convulsive movements, uttering cries and sounds like epileptics. This strange behaviour, that seemed a priori to be so repugnant, ultimately left the spectator with the feeling that they had seen an act of very particular and authentic communication between the artists. Communication was moreover Reindeer Werk's principal theme. At around the beginning of the eighties they started to work with groups of participants, living in very particular situations and installations in which the material around them, as well as the food, was very significant - a little like in Joseph BEUYS' work. Harrie de KROON and Kees MOL were amongst the artists that did not give up Performance Art. The former increasingly used body language

and voice in his work, whilst the latter intensified the world of chaotic and baroque images in his work with growing aggressivity. During the second half of the seventies, Performance Art became so popular in Germany that at the art fair in Cologne, in 1977 - where I had been asked to present a program of performances - so many people went to see the performances instead of buying art that the gallery-owners decided to ban performance from the fair. Besides quite a number of American artists, the cream of German performance artists was involved in this programme: Jochen GERZ, Ulrike ROSENBACH, and JÖrgen KLAUKE. Jochen GERZ was no longer making the

type of spontaneous acts he had made in 1968, he was now presenting very precise images and ritual gestures, examining the relationship between mediated images and words. Ulrike ROSENBACH, who was at that time deeply involved in feminist art, superimposed historical images with her personal history as a woman. Later, she became gradually more involved with spiritual experiments, at the same time as developing a highly sophisticated and original video technique. The great strength of this artist is on one hand the inventiveness of her images, and on the other hand her ability to use her gestures and her face to reflect the most vivid emotions. JÖrgen KLAUKE is by contrast a cynic whose main object is to pillory customs, conventions and traditions, which he does more often than not with the help of drawings and photos. However, from time to time he likes to use performance methods. Moreover, we can see how his performances appear to be conceived for the camera. Timm ULRICH is a very important German artist who is nevertheless very hard to classify. His greatest performance involves the creation of a situation around his own character and way of life. He began this work in 1966, when he exposed himself

in a glass case in a gallery. For many years he made very varied performances where the central theme was the questioning of art and its methods. In tandem with this he cultivated the ambition that he had invented everything himself by writing letters, declarations and involving himself in lawsuits. He also appeared to be a very anxious individual, making existential experiments in his performances, as in the performance where he rolled around on the floor between a positive and a negative electric pole, running the risk of being electrocuted. In another performance he destroyed his own image by shooting a camera that was filming him. This was reminiscent of an historical event that took place in Chile in 1973, when a photograph closed about one year ago due to a lack of funding. The director, Paul PANHUYSEN, makes large-scale installations in which he changes space into a sound box with the help of long strings that he extends across the room. He makes the strings vibrate using small motors and his hand, producing an incredible spatial sound. Sound Art goes back, in fact, to the Fluxus era. Takako SAITO, who has lived in Dosseldorf since the sixties, worked with the creation of sound by means of paper objects. Joe JONES, who also lived in Dosseldorf for many years and died a few years ago in Wiesbaden, became the guru of Sound Art following the opening in 1969 of his Music Store in New York. On the fifteenth birthday of the Apollohuis, he presented a performance entitled Put the Baby to Sleep, which was received enthusiastically by the public. He walked around the auditorium with an old-fashioned baby-carriage filled with a collection of simple string instruments, activated by small motors. He had placed a solar cell on the carriage, which regulated the intensity of the sound. Each time he approached a projector, the instruments started to play loudly and, as he moved away, they became more and more quiet. Another artist, Rolf JULIUS, is of the opinion that every object, every building, and every landscape has its own sound; but he himself creates these sounds. He produces these sounds in his studio, with simple electronic equipment. He then applies these sounds to objects with the help of a little personal stereo. It can be a stone hidden under a tree, a sachet filled with red pigment attached to a window, a puddle of water in a park. Sometimes he takes his studio with him to do live performances in nature, installing himself under a tree and making music for it. The sound performances of the Dutch artist Toine HORVERS are conceived to be carried out by other people, either by collaborators that have already been prepared or by the public. The performances involve very precise scores that the participants have to follow by singing, murmuring, beating drum, etc., reacting to external elements such as the daylight and traffic-sounds and so on. At first sight Switzerland does not seem to be a country rich in performance art. However, activities have been going on there for some time, and this does not only consist of the experiments by Roman SIGNER - without a doubt the most well-known Swiss performer abroad, as well as being the most rapid, creating performances that last a few minutes or seconds only. In addition to this there is the work of Christine BRODBECK, Anna WINTELER and Monika KLINGLER, who are the only artists in Europe whose work I would, without hesitation, describe as dance performance. It is interesting that the infrastructure of performance

functions very well in Switzerland. This tradition has its origins in the large-scale Performance Art event organized in Bern in 1985 by Gerhard Johann LISCHKA. When one thinks of the limited number of artists and the size of the country (or rather the lack of size), it is surprising to observe the number and quality of the meetings, festivals, colloquia and group-projects that take place there, as well as the quality of the teaching of Performance Art in art schools. It is moreover the artists themselves that are responsible for this. It's too easy to put this down to

Switzerland being a rich country. It is rich, but it is also quite conservative and so the enthusiasm of the artists is essential to making something happen. It is thanks to performance artists like Norbert KLASSEN in Bern, Vanci STIRNEMANN in Zurich, and Ruedi SCHILL in Luzern that this cultural landscape continues to flourish. The situation in East Germany before the fall of Communism was much more sombre, not to say sinister. A completely different situation existed in East Germany before the end of communism. Artists there had no freedom, no materials and no information. More than in any country in the East, artists were cut off from the rest of the world by a Communist regime that was particularly severe. This was perhaps because of the position of the country, which was between the East and West, a situation incarnated by the Berlin Wall. It is still more surprising that a group of young people who were still studying at the time at the Art Academy of Dresden found a way, in the mid-eighties, to gain access to information about the work of BEUYS, Arnulf RAINEER, and the Viennese Actionists. They found a way, well sheltered by the fourwalls of the art school, to organize Performance Art shows, which, had they been presented in public, would have been the end of their careers: "The representation of suffering did not correspond to Communist ideology." Only a few months before the fall of the Wall we in the West became aware of the existence of this somewhat mad group of artists calling themselves "Autoperforation Artists" (Volker LEWANDOWSKY, Micha BRENDEL, Else

GABRIEL, Rainer (GRASS)). It is a pity, but understandable, that these artists, after having lost the necessity of a violent opposition against the conditions of dictatorial aesthetics, quickly adapted themselves to the laws of Western, capitalist market strategies. Another artist, coming from the same school in Dresden, has resisted the bait of the art market. Matthias JACKISCH, known in Quebec, very quickly developed his own style of performance work - "performance process". In many ways, performance is always a process, but for JACKISCH this concept has a deeper meaning. His performances can last several days, or even weeks. He installs himself in a space that he gradually appropriates, by testing the walls and ground and bringing in objects from outside, while exploring the acoustics. Then, in a partially controlled manner, he allows unexpected things to develop in a way that is dictated by the simple presence of elements. The great master of this art of giving objects and events their own sovereignty, of observing them and allowing them to find their own way without predetermining the course, is Boris NIESLONY and I would like to conclude by paying tribute to him. Boris NIESLONY is not only a great performer - the head and heart of Black Market - but he is also an important organizer and theoretician. I believe that without his perseverance, without his continual reflection, without the demands he makes on himself and others, then Performance Art would not have the stature in Europe that it now has.

Notes 1 The members of the International Black Market group are= Jorgen FRITZ (Germany), Norbert KLASSEN (Switzerland), Boris NIESLONY (Germany), Alastair MacLENNAN (Northern Ireland), Nigel ROLFE (Ireland), Jacques Van POPPEL (Holland), Rai VAARA (Finland) Zbigniew WARPECHOWSKI (Poland) 2 Christoph TANNERT, Via Lewandowsky catalogue, Berlin, N.G.B.K. 1989. In situ work