

## Variations of my Subject Constanze Fritsch

In 1977, Robert Rehfeldt pirated some of his earlier works to reconceptualise his etchings with abstract blue elements made of multiples triangles. These works come together in the exhibition *Variations of my Subject (Variation über mein Thema)*. Collage, as the Max Ernst specialist Werner Spies named the fundamental principle of his oeuvre, extends in Rehfeldt's etching not only to the merging of paintings and abstract elements, but also to the assembly of the paintings themselves, which runs as a red thread through Rehfeldt's works as in the those of Max Ernst – who he credits as inventor of the collage.

Loyal to the highly referenced by Surrealist first stanza of the sixth canto of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, “Beau comme une rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie”, Ernst also defined his collage technique as “the systematic exploitation of the coincidental or artistically provoked meeting of two or more realities on a plane that is apparently unsuitable for this purpose – and the spark of poetry that jumps over when these realities come together.”<sup>1</sup> This quotation from his book *Au delà de la peinture* was well known in the GDR as classical modernism and the exhibitions of Roland März in the National Gallery become more popular.

“Part of the peculiarities of Ernstian colleges are that the cut-outs ‘borrowed’ are completely detached from their original contexts, deleting their reference and only making the inherently contradictory images apparent.”<sup>2</sup> To quote Werner Spies again, “Le [...] collage [...] confère un sens nouveau aux éléments de réalité cités dans l'œuvre.”<sup>3</sup> This new purpose – as Spies proposes – is however not bound, remaining open and multiple, fixed only by the respective viewer who thus enters a dialogue with the collage.

Rehfeldt's earlier works set in the collages are themselves assemblages and montages of everyday objects mounted on the images, and not only vary the idea of collage, but above all create a *mise-en-abîme* collage effect. The everyday objects, already alienated in their combination and overpainting in the works, are defamiliarised furthermore through the clichéing of the assemblages and montages in the etching, bringing the alienation effect of showing that is shown – which Brecht developed in his Epic Theater in 1926 – to an extreme. The everyday objects, already alienated in their

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<sup>1</sup> Zitiert nach *Von der Collage zur Assemblage. Aspekte der Materialkunst in der DDR*, Ausst.-kat., Nationalgalerie, Ost-Berlin, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Katharina : *Max Ernst. Illustrierte Bücher und druckgraphische Werke. Die Sammlung Hans Bollinger-eine Neuerwerbung*. Wienand, Köln, 1989, S.18. “Beautiful as the fortuitous encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table.”

<sup>3</sup> Spies, Werner : *Max Ernst. Les collages inventaire et contradictions*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1984, S.14. “The [...] collage [...] gives a new meaning to the elements of reality cited in the work.”

combination and overpainting in the works, are defamiliarised a further time through the cliché of the assemblages and montages in the etching, bringing the alienation effect of showing that is shown - which Brecht developed in his Epic Theater in 1926 - to an extreme. Because of this desire to experiment and this boundless will to create, Lothar Lang called Robert Rehfeldt one of the "most versatile experimenters"<sup>4</sup> of the antipodes of the Berlin School in *Überblickswerk Malerei und Graphik in der DDR*, which was published in 1983. However, the drive to create must also be understood here as a desire to develop one's own creativity in the sense of Joseph Beuys' "Every man is an artist," which "Rehfeldt was one of the few"<sup>5</sup> in the GDR who followed this ideology. Like Max Ernst, Rehfeldt's collaged etchings enter into a dialogue with the viewer, but also with his own works and, beyond that, with the works of other artists whose techniques he applies and develops further.

The paintings from Robert Rehfeldt's last years, which are mainly presented in this exhibition, capture this innovative spirit and offer an entrance point into his practice as a whole. In these paintings, disparate elements come together in a new context, in a sense collaging his own oeuvre. The wildness of his abstractions and the paste-like paint application form relief-like structures and a special feel that invites you to see and feel these works.

In *Untitled*, 1993, a bird-like head is loosely placed among smudged shades of grey and blue as disjointed red words like "Yes", "Love", and "Whay" – perhaps a variation of the words "Way" or "What" – and number crisscross on the lower half of the painting. The vulvas found in both *Eruption Painting*, 1993, *The Blue or Red Point*, 1993, and *Untitled*, 1993, could read as alga under a microscope or as the red gaping of wound or perhaps neither of these, thereby inviting endless interpretation and speculation from the viewer. Erotic and sexual moments also reverberate in these images. *Yes*, 1992, depicts the bursting eruptions of two phallus-like formations that emit yellow and red rays. But they could also be cacti or volcanos or representations of Rehfeldt's own creativity. This leaves a light veil of irony and uncertainty hanging over everything.

The broad-eyed figure *The New Person*, 1992, shows a head and torso which has been distorted by the strokes and dots which almost dissolve facial features entirely. This estrangement, reminiscent of the Brechtian literary approach characterised by the feeling of being a foreigner in one's own country, was a common feeling for many people in East Germany after the fall of the Wall – and for Rehfeldt in particular. Many of his companions recalled Rehfeldt's perplexity after the fall of the Wall, with Eugen Blume even stating that after 1990 "for [Rehfeldt] a new beginning was no longer possible."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lang, Lothar: *Malerei und Graphik in der DDR*, Reclam, Leipzig, 1983, S.180.

<sup>5</sup> Blume, Eugen: *Der Kunstarbeiter Robert Rehfeldt*, In: *Robert Rehfeldt. Malerei. Visuelle Poesie. Mail-Art. Grafik. Objekte. Video*, Ausst.-kat., Ephraim-Palais, Berlin, 1991, S.12.

<sup>6</sup> Blume, Eugen: *Robert Rehfeldt – ein Fließender, ein wahrer Fluxusmensch*, In: Wohlrab, Lutz (Hrsg.): *Robert Rehfeldt. Kunst im Kontakt*, Verlag Lutz Wohlrab, Berlin, 2009, S.11.

*Variations of my Subject* serves as a kind of mirror of these recollections, summarising the burning glass that is Rehfeldt's body of work from as early as 1977. The assemblages depicted in this exhibition, which, like Robert Rauschenberg's hybrid approach of Combine Paintings which bringing a wide range of objects taken from everyday life similar to the Merz movement by Kurt Schwitter – to which Max Ernst also refers in his collages – are "no longer organized as a picture, but exist [...] as an unsublimated accumulation, a sampling of found elements of modern life."<sup>7</sup> The embedded objects thereby suggest a strong sense of haptics, inviting you to feel them as he literally referred to them a "graphics to touch."<sup>8</sup>

The everyday objects used, such as cigar cases, are torn out of their context of meaning and function in relationship with what they are combed with or overpainted on in a way that feels almost militant – objects forced into an end-of-time, dystopian context. At the same time, the materials are cartooned by the fact that they are, after all, only banal everyday objects, which is reminiscent of the Polaroid series of 1989, in which Rehfeldt staged himself with various uniforms as a military or spy à la James Bond. In this series a game develops that alternates between fascination for the militaristic and its refraction by the irony felt in Rehfeldt's face. He takes on different roles: the general, the secret service agent under cover, the ordinary soldier. But, "just as her could pose in uniforms, he could also embody different types of artists."<sup>9</sup> Between these different artistic styles, however, there is always an animated communication which can also be found in the works of the Mail Art movement. *Variation on my Subject*, in fact, can also be seen as the foundation of Rehfeldt's Mail Art portfolio still in the possession of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt. These works not only enter into a conversation; they are also transferred into each other. Rehfeldt transfers his assemblages into clichés by copying his earlier works and prints them, whereby the work with objects itself is also transferred into print. Rehfeldt transfers his assemblages into clichés or pirated versions of his works by printing them, whereby the work with objects itself is also transferred into print by using the intaglio technique with found objects he would print in his basement workshop.

This communication, however, not only takes place between Rehfeldt's various artistic styles, but addresses both the viewer and other artists. In the spirit of Mail Art – which Lothar Lang describes as "people-uniting"<sup>10</sup> or "Cont-Art" – Rehfeldt described this interpersonal communication as "more important than art". Ray Johnson also founded Mail Art in 1962 as the New York Correspondence School of Art. But Mail Art not only involved its members in international conversations about postcards, it also multiplied contacts and ideas. Ray Johnson also founded Mail Art in 1962 as the New York

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<sup>7</sup> Dickerman, Leah: *Introduction*, In: *DADA. Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris, Ausst.-kat.*, National Gallery of Art Washington, 2005, S.8.

<sup>8</sup> Rehfeldt, Robert: *Randlage 34/35*, undatiert.

<sup>9</sup> Blume, Eugen: *Robert Rehfeldt – ein Fließender, ein wahrer Fluxusmensch*, In: Wohlrab, Lutz (Hrsg.): *Robert Rehfeldt. Kunst im Kontakt*, Verlag Lutz Wohlrab, Berlin, 2009, S.10.

<sup>10</sup> Lang, Lothar: *Malerei und Graphik in der DDR*, Reclam, Leipzig, 1983, S.315.

Correspondence School of Art, but Mail Art not only involved its members in international conversations about postcards, it also multiplied contacts and ideas.

Robert Rehfeldt, often understood as the main protagonist of Mail Art in the GDR, was himself a multiplier of his ideas but above all known for his unbridled creativity. "Art in Transmission" was one of the calls sent out via mail art. As already mentioned, he followed Beuy's motto "Everyone is an artist", whose work he became acquainted through the traveling he was allowed to do as his Mother lived in the West of divided Germany. This is also how he met Wolf Vostell. According to Jürgen Schweinebraden's memoir, Vostell and Rehfeldt met around 1976. Vostell's work *Zwei Fräulein mit leuchtendem Brot* by Beuys was later gifted to Rehfeldt and was pinned to Rehfeldt's studio door on Mendelstrasse for years. However, Rehfeldt's understanding of and connection to Beuys encompassed neither his political dimension nor his social impetus to change society via the development of individual creativity and the stimulation of self-emancipation, to self-confident and self-determined subjects. Rather, Rehfeldt seems to have read Beuys through and with Marcel Duchamp: Developing One's Creativity in Ironic Play. For Rehfeldt, Duchamp was also one of the founders of Mail Art, as he noted in the catalog Postcards and Artists' Cards of the Arkade Gallery in 1978: "It was M. Duchamp who in 1916 thought of sending his ideas by postcard."<sup>11</sup>

As Klaus Groh summarized, "Points of contact with DADA, with Fluxus, with Nouveau réalisme, and with visual and concrete poetry are detectable, but not the cause to which Mail Art could be traced."<sup>12</sup> This can also be applied for Rehfeldt, whose work is primarily associated with the principle of collage, as he productively pursued all these sources of inspiration. A reference DADA in the GDR can certainly also be explained by this renewed virulence for, and the necessity of, the ironisation of an overpowering state, which ruled authoritatively above all through a dogmatic and ideologically overloaded language. Rehfeldt himself experienced the cruelty and senselessness of war as a child, which the Dadaists repeatedly addressed.

DADA, one of the biggest reference points for Fluxus artists, were with whom many mail art artists in the GDR corresponded; Beuys would also the Easter Fluxus Zone Rehfeldt's home<sup>13</sup> after Robert Motherwells published *Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* in 1951 and Marcel Duchamp's 1966 installation *Étant donné* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art inspired many artists to engage with art of chance. In 1971 Ray Johnson renamed his New York Correspondance School of Art to The Marcel Duchamp Club. However, artists in the GDR who practiced mail art came into contact with DADA only through Fluxus artists like Robert Filliou. Significant were also the

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<sup>11</sup> Zitiert nach Wohlrab, Lutz; Winnes, Friedrich (Hrsg.): *Mail Art Szene DDR. 1975-1990*, Haude & Spener, Berlin, 1994, S.17

<sup>12</sup> Zitiert, Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Siehe Blume, Eugen: *Robert Rehfeldt – ein Fließender, ein wahrer Fluxusmensch*, In: Wohlrab, Lutz (Hrsg.): *Robert Rehfeldt. Kunst im Kontakt*, Verlag Lutz Wohlrab, Berlin, 2009, S.10.

booklets circulating such as *Théâtre du silence* and *Apollinaire*, a tribute to his 100th birthday, in which texts by Apollinaire, Cendrars and others, which are now in the Mail Art archive in Schwerin. There were also several exhibitions in the GDR in the early 1970s that dealt with collage and assemblage, such as Roland März's exhibition *Die Collage in der Kunst der DDR (Collage in the Art of the GDR)* in 1975 at the National Gallery, or *Collages, Montages, and Frottages by Artists of the GDR* in 1978 at the Galerie am Sachsenplatz in Leipzig. After returning East Berlin the 1950, the works of John Heartfield were quite controversial there, but by the 1960s his influence on the development of art grew. By 1981, Roland März had dedicated an extensive archive to him. All of these cultural influences found their way into Rehfeldt's work and can still be traced in the layers of his paintings.

With the many facets of Robert Rehfeldt's work, both expressed in by the diverse range of media and genres, collage remains the red thread of his work. Like Max Ernst, who saw in the convergence of different realities a spark of poetry jumping into a world emerging from it, Rehfeldt also created a reality of his own, which recomposed the everyday life of the GDR with a lot of poetry but above all also playful irony.