

SPIKE
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ISSUE OUT NOW!!!



SALAD DAYS!!!!

OR HOW IT
FEELS LIKE TO
BE YOUNG AND
RESTLESS!!!!
ENJOY FAILURE!!
!!DRINKEND!! TOO
ALIVE!!!!!!



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Chris Reinecke, *Klima-Tisch*, 1967

In the very male avant-garde of 1960s West Germany, what was a young woman artist thinking, filling a basement with household junk? Tasking her audience with simulating various weathers, Chris Reinecke's beguiling installation recast the gallery as more than a place for contemplation of, but for interaction with art.

By Hans-Jürgen Hafner

It is a rainy Friday in October 1967 when all the action, or rather an absolutely novel kind of action, begins. For what thirty-one-year-old artist Chris Reinecke is about to offer in "Cooperative," her irritatingly but aptly titled debut exhibition at art intermedia, a commercial gallery in Cologne run by the political journalist, art critic, and devoted anti-capitalist Helmut Rywelski, is heretofore unheard of. And to an audience obliged to cooperate with the artist to make her artworks "happen," the invitation, from a rare woman on the scene, just two years out from her art academy graduation, might have been far beyond the pale. Not settling to join in her male contemporaries' raunchily avant-gardist battle cry for *Aktion* (action) – a new and as yet unnamed tendency that, borrowing from activism and performance, had been disseminating since the arrival of Fluxus in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1962 – Reinecke even managed to unfold a further, unforeseeable dimension: use value derived from *Interaktion* (interaction).

Promising thrill, scandal, and destruction, action is the artistic and political weapon of choice in highly politicized times. Student protests were on the rise from Japan to Germany, where Benno Ohnesorg had recently been murdered by a policeman while picketing against a visit to Berlin by the Iranian Shah. Reinecke herself was soon to immerse herself into leftist politics, both as a co-initiator of Düsseldorf's gentrification-fighting *Mietersolidarität* (Tenant Solidarity), and sometimes as an active member of the Communist Party of Germany/Marxists–Leninists. An optimist for radical emancipation who would all but see to delivering actions herself, what she requested from her artistic audience is participation – an active involvement with her art.

At Rywelski's gallery, what exactly visitors were to involve themselves with was a display of modestly sized works: destroyable pictures, more or less functional objects, and seemingly casual set-ups of common household objects. There was a mattress that, made from vacuum-packed flour, would



adopt silhouettes when laid down upon; carefully painted city- and landscapes that, made from plastic foil and filled with cotton wool, were ready to be torn apart; as well as a rough outline drawing of Cologne's famous cathedral, which was to be covered with chewed gum. Already, the exhibition invitation card had come with a short how-to text topped off, show-and-tell style, with gum chewed by the artist.

Yet, visitors who found their way to the underground *Aktionsraum* (action room) seemed, according to Reinecke's own scrupulous documentation of the event, to have largely ignored their task. This is especially true in the case of her *Klima-Tisch* (Climate Table), the exhibition's experimental centerpiece, which, admittedly, did feature a rather beguiling mix of stuff: there was a toaster, a ventilator, a lamp stand, and some hand-colored lightbulbs; perfume, body oil, a spray can filled with water and some flour, too; a pair of sunglasses, a cheap plastic shower cap, and, fixed under the table, a woolen scarf; last, carefully painted and ready to flip through, a set of landscape miniatures. Following the instructions, handwritten on a sheet pinned to the wall, the visitor was meant to simulate various weathers, with the toaster providing heat, the ventilator blowing winds, the different light tones supporting changing ambiances, and so forth; there was even a fold-up camping chair, so that the different climates might be experienced at one's own leisure.

Back then, even progressive art still came mostly in the form of painting and sculpture; one need think only of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke's seminal exhibition "Leben mit Pop. Eine Demonstration des kapitalistischen Realismus" (Living with Pop: A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism) at a Düsseldorf furniture store in 1963, or the decidedly "political" objects and assemblages by Reinecke's fellow, H.P. Alvermann. As a viewer, it was novel just to find oneself in the position to be asked to touch an artwork at all. In that light, Reinecke's invitation to participate in the *Klima-Tisch*, a quirky ensemble of cheap household objects hardly credible as serious art, was likely to have been felt as an act of transgression, and one that her audience apparently responded to in kind. Instead of going through her seasons, what her would-be cooperators did, per Reinecke's report, is "pour flour in the running ventilator, smear the little paintings with oil, perfume, flour, and sawdust." In other words, they yielded regressively to the pressure to play, "like kids 'showing-off.'"

The readiest contemporary comparison is with the installations of Joseph Beuys, which were made not of industrial consumer flotsam, but, notoriously and overwhelmingly, of symbolically heavy materials like fat, felt, lead, technical gear, and occasional animal corpses. A magician-like figure who performed idiosyncratic rituals in these setups, the artist was the object of adoration from his students, including Reinecke's then-partner, the artist Jörg

Rarely has an artist shown such a willingness to revise the conceptual disposition of their work.

Immendorff: she sometimes joined him at the *Ringgespräche*, the endless discussions in Beuys's class at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where the master unfolded his concept of *Soziale Plastik* (Social Sculpture). Charged with the esoteric thinking of Austrian anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, Beuys imagined his practice as not only aesthetically, but socially transformative, a conceit captured in his mantra: "Every human being is a natural artist."

This may shed some light on "Cooperative," and especially on *Klima-Tisch*, with its mutable array of extra-banal things, but also on Reinecke's deep commitment to involving the audience actively and, what's more, at eye level. Her installation can best be understood as turning the Beuysian ideal upside down: unraveling the sensible – the installation's visual, haptic, and olfactory sensations being clearly fabricated – Reinecke put the onus on the material conditions of the aesthetic and social.

Thus, it should be seen as not only youthful naiveté, but also an eagerness to learn from her experience that the artist refused to accept *Klima-Tisch* as a failure. As she states in her report, the idea only needs to be re-calibrated; most of all, "to avoid that too many people interact with the objects" (mitigating any mess as well as the risk of show-offs) and "to intensify the ludic drive." Unfortunately, this wouldn't be possible without further instructions and clearer rules – which serves only to point up the authoritarian direction that even the most well-intentioned emancipatory art often takes, then as now. Rarely, however, has an artist shown such a willingness to revise the conceptual disposition of their work, and thus to critically address her own precocious role within its arrangement. In that sense, *Klima-Tisch* not only marks the beginning of a radically participatory form of art, but already demarcates its limits. What else would you expect from a true avant-gardist than to grow up quickly? —

CHRIS REINECKE (1936, Potsdam, Germany) lives and works in Düsseldorf. Her next solo show, at Beck & Eggeling International Fine Art, Düsseldorf, opens on 6 February 2026; her work is also on view in the group exhibition "Land and Soil: How We Live Together," at K21, Düsseldorf till 19 April 2026.

HANS-JÜRGEN HAFNER is a Berlin-based author, critic, and curator.