

SPIKE
ART
MAGAZINE
84

SUMMER
25

SPiKE

DE/AT EUR 20
CHF 28
GBP 18



VULGARITY



o.T. (Untitled), 1985, acrylic on nettle, 180 x 150 cm

Courtesy: Galerie Andrea Caratsch, Zurich/St. Moritz

“Mülheimer Freiheit – Neue wilde Bilder,” Galerie Paul Maenz, Cologne, 1985

In the 1980s, as Cologne's star was rising as *the* market for German art, Walter Dahn and Jiří Georg Dokoupil teamed up to desecrate its most sacred cow: painting. Equal parts punk, porn, and farce, their collaborative canvases bled, oozed, shat, and spat on the very conceit of artistic genius.

By Hans-Jürgen Hafner

Over the past decade, abundant grotesquerie and queer aesthetics have contributed to profound dislocations of the sexually or morally acceptable in today's aesthetics, reshaping broader cultural expectations. This is not without consequence, as nobody seems to care about blatant vulgarity, both inside and outside the arts – though let's avoid slipping into politics here.

With vulgarity's margins expanding since the experiments with bad taste in art, music, and fashion in the 1980s, the prototypically vulgar has become hard to pin down. Even more so because the key conflict that fueled the advance of art forms during that period, from painting and “Pictures” (named after Douglas Crimp's seminal 1977 exhibition at New York's Artists Space) to performance – that is, the antagonism between high (institutional) and low (popular) art – has largely disappeared; more precisely, it has been dislocated into a culture-industrialized smokescreen that obscures ever more virulent class differences. A defeat from both ends: It's equally ridiculous to adhere to the

notion of an autonomous high art as to fall for the phantasma that the recent emancipatory elitism – like equating Balenciaga with Antifa – would be open, available, and better for everyone, as if it were a law of nature.

Yet, Walter Dahn and Jiří Georg Dokoupil's joint exhibition “Mülheimer Freiheit – Neue wilde Bilder” (Mülheimer Freiheit – New Wild Paintings), presented in the summer of 1985 at Paul Maenz's Cologne gallery, could offer a good starting point for the yet-unwritten history of vulgarity, with all its inherent ambivalences. Especially when we study the show's standout piece: In line with the era's cynicism and its dabbling with the politically incorrect, it could easily be titled *Cunt Painting, or An Allegory of Painting*. Instead, it bears the rather underwhelming *o. T.* (Untitled, 1985), a typical title for high-art painting in those days – or, in other words, modernist abstraction.

o. T. is a man-sized composition, cartoonishly painted like most of the works rather conventionally presented in Maenz's grandiose, loft-style space. The painting seems to

Views of “Mülheimer Freiheit – Neue wilde Bilder,” (Mülheimer Freiheit – New Wild Paintings), Galerie Paul Maenz, Cologne, 1985



**The option to willfully
paint as “bad as possible”
– think punk’s fuck
three chords when one is
already too much attitude,
applied to painting –
opened the floodgates for
long-dispensed
figurative styles.**

incorporate and reflect on its clean surroundings, its well-lit, surreal scenery adopting the form of an open stage, and to take refuge in a picture-in-picture iconography, with a loosely sketched, perspectival painter’s canvas horizontally laid out. But the play in question has already started; it stars wildly stylized, pornographic characters you’re more likely to find in restroom graffiti than in an art gallery, replete with all kinds of body fluids. Preceding Paul McCarthy by a full decade, this is full-on gonzo heavily dosed with acrylic. Center stage is occupied by a phallic painter’s brush, its bristles soaked in brown pigment and mysteriously conducted, not by some artist’s hand, but by a wide open, dripping vagina, with the brush directed from the (imaginary) inside out. *Die Malerei*, the German word for painting, being a feminine noun, perhaps it’s no surprise that, later in his career, Dokoupil would paint with mother’s milk and, more recently, pigmented soap bubbles.

On top of that, the grossly obscene composition features a pair of penises – not two artistically amiable, miniaturized phalli, morally accepted since antiquity, but travesties of penises. Like leaking faucets or cyclopean voyeurs, they leer down from atop the inset canvas. With bushy balls and exposed glans, they compound the puerile hyperbole of the composition: placeholders for the two artists responsible. As if fully absorbed in the spectacle of painting pussy lips, either urine or semen oozes out of them, polluted with blood. At some point, the sticky, brownish mix smears with the painter’s brush – its own immaculate conception.

The work is both typical for and exceptional among Dahn and Dokoupil’s *Gemeinschaftsbilder* (collaborative paintings), pictures painted jointly to systematically obscure the artists’ individual styles. The method was perfectly in line with the ideas of the duo, both born in 1954 (Dahn passed away last year), who would dismiss the notion of the thoroughbred painter genius so notoriously identified with the Neue Wilde movement in the early 80s.

Striving to outdo the elder generation’s dealings with academic tradition and its *épater les bourgeois* coqueries – think of Georg Baselitz’s *Die große Nacht im Eimer* (The Big Night Down the Drain, 1962–63), showing a grotesque,

child-like figure with an enormous head, masturbating – painting “new” and “wild” was the Federal Republic of Germany’s hottest contribution to the larger international trend commonly filed under Neo-expressionism (itself a multifaceted field, including the Italian Transavanguardia painters Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Enzo Cucchi, as well as proponents of America’s New Image painting like David Salle, Julian Schnabel, and Susan Rothenberg – a rare woman artist among the bunch). Much loved by collectors and curators, they were despised by the critics of their time, and remain largely ignored by museums and academia today. The critic Benjamin Buchloh, himself a Cologne expatriate in New York, would only find “figures of authority and ciphers of regression” in the Neue Wilde paintings. Even if, in fact, these last never drew from the early Expressionism of the 1910s, but from the newly emerging genre of Bad Painting and, of course, punk – with neighboring Düsseldorf an important hot spot.

Taking its name from the eponymous exhibition “‘Bad’ Painting,” curated by Marcia Tucker for New York’s New Museum in 1978, the option to willfully paint as “bad as possible” – think punk’s *fuck three chords when one is already too much attitude*, applied to painting as a vehicle of its own de-construction – opened the floodgates for long-dispensed figurative styles. These styles became newly

© Paul Maenz

o.T. (Untitled), 1985, acrylic on nettle, 201 x 201 cm



available to painters seeking to distance themselves either from the New York art establishment, with its indestructible fondness for modernist abstraction, or the once politically relevant but since canonized Conceptual art.

In Germany especially, Bad Painting resonated strongly with artists who – like Werner Büttner and brothers Albert und Markus Oehlen, as well as Dahn and Dokoupil – drew from Conceptual art and punk subculture. Many of the artists were involved with bands – “Part-Time Punks,” to quote a 1980 single by the Television Personalities – but always maintained a foot in the art world. Having studied with Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf, Dahn and the Czechoslovakian

émigré Dokoupil – himself recently arrived in Cologne after a one-year stint at New York’s Cooper Union, where he sharpened his conceptual skills under institutional critic Hans Haacke – met in 1979. They kicked off their collaborative painting project almost immediately, before forming the Mülheimer Freiheit, together with four fellow artists: Hans Peter Adamski, the autodidactic Peter Bömmels, Gerard Kever, and the Austrian Gerhard Naschberger. The group would soon go on to achieve international fame, and immediately became proverbial for the Neue Wilde movement.

Maenz, who had run his gallery since 1971 as a programmatic hub almost exclusively dedicated to

© Sprüth Magers, Berlin. Courtesy: fluid archives; ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe

o.T. (Untitled), 1985, dispersion on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



then-still-ascendant Conceptual art, was indispensable in the group's rapid rise, as he helped to jumpstart the project with the December 1980 exhibition "Mülheimer Freiheit & interessante Bilder aus Deutschland" (Mülheimer Freiheit & Interesting Paintings from Germany). From then on, Cologne would attract the international art crowd, among them artists, creatives, and hipsters.

The conceptual tradition of Maenz's gallery sheds further light on the then-widespread availability of painting – a notoriously controversial medium that had become *optional* in art-making and was no longer synonymous with art itself. Conceptual art had indeed successfully done away with the

old modernist ideal of medium specificity, which would safeguard the privileged position of painting as the art market's most valued commodity. In contrast, the painting revival at the beginning of the 80s would fill the vacuum left by an art scene that, favoring theory-heavy critical interventions, had mainly addressed the happy few within institutions and academia. While Conceptual art formally failed to abandon the artwork altogether, it did recognize the structural fabric of the art world, and identified its distributional modes – museums and the gallery system – as its most relevant subject matter. As a collateral effect, it had fostered an expanding art market and widened an international distributional

© Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin

Dahn and Dokoupil offensively ridiculed the habits, skills, and trademarks of fellow artists in the form of painting.

network, its new audiences evermore attuned to the ever-changing moods of pop culture. These audiences were eager for art to deliver taste-challenging art objects rather than the infamous aesthetics of administration – largely, tastefully styled brochures, invitation cards, and wall texts.

It's not incidental that all the paintings in "Neue wilde Bilder" are based on a shameless appropriation of US-American Philip Guston's *Painting Table* (1975) – a disillusioned look at the painter's tools, brush, paint, and palette. Dahn and Dokoupil's compositions move beyond simple appropriations, as the paintings reactivate and isolate the myth of the tortured artist, with Guston a prototype for lustful deconstruction. The latter's late, cartoonishly figurative work from the 70s – not only his controversial renderings of Klansmen, but also his scrupulous inquiry into the banality of painting – was mounted to advocate the Neo-expressionist trend in "A New Spirit in Painting," which opened at the Royal Academy, London in 1981, a year after Guston died. A landmark exhibition for any painting revivalist, the show kickstarted the international boom for figurative work.

Yet, this is not without irony. For both Dahn and Dokoupil, as much as for Guston, a wry reflection of the banal materiality of painting cleared the stage for their own allegorical renderings, which substituted artistic creation with sexual deviance: The artists, having become salivating voyeurs, are already reflecting on the years of hype and their own position within it. In another version, the artists switch roles and become salivating vaginas, while a solitary penis brushes debris onto the canvas. Especially rude is a square-format with a monumental painter's brush dancing over the canvas, its handle desperately clasped by the two miniaturized artists, as the one on top shits fountains of blood down on the other.

Early protagonists of the emerging Cologne art scene – one famous for its competitive atmosphere, strong male bonds, prevalent misogyny, and homophobia, especially among the so-called Hetzler Boys, a clique of artists named after their gallerist, Max Hetzler: Büttner, Georg Herold, and the Oehlen brothers, with Martin Kippenberger its creative and destructive nucleus – Dahn and Dokoupil set the pace for a rapid downward spiral. While both followed their individual careers, the collaborative paintings came in quick

o.T. (Untitled), 1985, acrylic on nettle, 151 x 151 cm



succession, with the pair working through various genres, styles, and themes with scathing humor and the will to paint explicit *Gegenbilder* (anti-paintings). These were often made on the basis of appropriating from then-famous colleagues: The *Duschbilder* (Shower Paintings) presented at Maenz's gallery in 1983, for instance, were piss-takes at the expense of their Neo-expressionist colleague, the Berliner Rainer Fetting. Openly gay, Fetting indeed favored simple subjects like naked men taking a shower, and would apply a sort of expressionist makeover to give them a contemporary twist.

Even worse than spitting on the contemporary nostalgia for painting with the allegorical and pornographic travesties of the "Neue wilde Bilder," Dahn and Dokoupil offensively ridiculed the habits, skills, and trademarks of fellow artists – again, a specialty in a milieu where social ritual often involved not only bad-mouthing rival artists, critics, collectors, and bystanders, but also playing embarrassing blame games. Yet, by 1985, the Neue Wilde hype had all but run out of steam. Even Dahn and Dokoupil would soon end a cooperation so productively based on mutual disinhibition, with Dahn eventually giving up on painting altogether. To no real surprise, "Mülheimer Freiheit – Neue wilde Bilder" largely vanished from art history's records. —

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