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Gardens in the Exosphere Poems and Picture-Poems by Günter Brus

Accompanying booklet

The exosphere is the outermost layer of the Earth's atmosphere, and is a floating transition into interplanetary space where gravity gradually loses its effect. Günter Brus locates his stories there, where they are penetrated by life, his pictures and his poetry. With Günter Brus the picture and text are in constant dialogue, they complement each other reciprocally. Therefore handwriting is for Günter Brus also an "unpaid art of painting", whose line creates words and pictures of the same intensity.

On the basis of picture poetry and manuscripts from the literary legacy, which contains over 700 notebooks and around 20,000 written pages, the exhibition *The Gardens in the Exosphere* shows that Günter Brus was very active as a writer over the last 30 years, and at the same time illustrates how he bursts through genre boundaries.

Notebooks

A blue ribbon represents the common thread throughout the exhibition: the notebooks from Günter Brus are a smorgasbord of poems, short stories, aphorisms, drawings, thought fragments and notes. They contain drafts of his books as well as of some picture poetry. The lined and chequered exercise books in A5 format, which Brus has been using since the early 1970s, were dated and titled by the artist, and on some notebook labels you can also find indications of the location. With the purchase of the literary legacy in 2009, a bundle of around 700 notebooks came into the collection of the BRUSEUM, through which the creation of his literary works as well as his biographical and artistic development is made clear.

The Hölderlin Cycle

In the 1970s Günter Brus recognized that through the combination of writing and drawing a "system" and at the same time a future artistic path was open to him. The works *Irrwisch* and *Europe's Balcony* represent early preliminary stages of this symbiosis. In 1975 the artist began to work intensively with the genre of picture poetry and created the cycle *Friedrich Hölderlin. The Tragic Process in History and Poetry*. This poet of German Classicism is an ever recurring reference point in Brus' oeuvre. In his cycle the artist gravitates to the expressive and lyrical voice of Hölderlin, and sets aside colourful forms and associative scenarios from his dense picturesque language.

The Gardens in the Exosphere

A hike on the Krähberg with Mr. Theinerfall and Miss. Silberstern, a visit to the theatre in Schnakenstein am Walde, or the cryptocratic Republic of Amorettanien – in his story Günter Brus takes us into a world which often appears fantastic, but also sometimes ironic-realistic. Flora and fauna waver with human shadow figures in the illusionistic pictorial space, while the text changes during the narrative and becomes a reflection of art and poetry. Günter Brus often emphasises the intertwining of writing and drawing, and the interaction between poetry and the art of drawing, which can lead to surprising turns such as in *The Gardens in the Exosphere*.

The Literary Legacy

For the first time the BRUSEUM presents the literary legacy of Günter Brus, which was purchased for the collection in 2009. Alongside his picture poetry Brus also worked purely on literature during the last 40 years. Together with numerous periodical contributions and columns, since 1984 novels and collected writings have also been published. One can find the departure point of his diverse work in the notebooks and manuscripts, in which drafts and notes document the genesis of the literary oeuvre. These writings range from fairy-tale-like texts with poetic pictures, to biographically oriented texts. Once pervaded by sorrow and subliminal, dark pain, then again with amusing plays on words and puns about everyday injustices, Brus breaks the boundaries between literature and visual art.

The Ruin

A vanished hermit who brings his grandfather clock to the nearby castle ruin and positions it there upside down is the impetus for surreal and sensual events at this place. In this short story in the style of Edgar Allan Poe, Günter Brus tells of a bloody vortex of time which stands first upside down - and then still. One encounters sinister, mystical and sometimes even nightmarish pictures. The crumbling walls of the ruin as well as interwoven human bodies drooping from exhaustion, alternate with images of mischievously smiling kites and handless clock faces filled with entrails. "I will add up all of the rooms and remove the time from the result.", notes the hermit at the end. In 1985 "The Ruin" also appeared in book form. Already one year earlier notes for this picture poetry could be found in one of the notebooks, at that time still with a different ending.

Night Thunderstorm and Collected Writings

Like notebooks, they are difficult to classify as an entity: the thought fragments, aphorisms, ironic plays on words, rhymes and thoughts which make up the contents of *Night Thunderstorm* by Günter Brus. Also here it is the form which creates the common thread throughout the book. Each three lines of handwriting are separated by geometric figures such as circles, squares and triangles. Between these text-filled pages, full-page chalk drawings can be found. From them the viewer recognizes shadowy human forms, heads without a face, snake-like or dragon-like

creatures which float in a surreal world without earth, and instead share their existence with bars, circles and darkness.

From A to Z Günter Brus also rolls out his world of thoughts on everyday and artistic events, no matter whether in the form of a poem or a pun. The principle of “continuous updating” plays an important role in this context, through which the thought stream finds immediate expression, and direct speech, dialogues, quotations and biographical reflections alternate with each other. His collected writings from 1984 to 1988 were published in 1993 by the publishing house “Das Hohe Gebrechen” under the title of *Morning of Brain, Noon of Mouth, Evening of Speech*. At this time Brus began to also express himself literarily in the form of novels; the publication of *The Secret Messenger* brought him first recognition as an author.

After Us, the Painting Deluge!

Under the collective term “Theoretic Poetry”, Günter Brus presents his personal comments on art, literature and their producers. He comments on a hundred lexically organized keywords in the form of aphorisms, short prose pieces, sketches, essays and notes. Parallel to his own picture-poetic work, these statements emerged over the course of several years. Brus apparently does not mince his words, as the alienated well-known saying “After us, the deluge!” in the title already indicates.

Powdered Milk

“No motto. No foreword, no introduction, no actual design. Only status dairy.” is written at the beginning of the picture poetry *Powdered Milk*. These conditions qualify comments on the system of “COMPANY MENTAL SELF NATION”. It is an art of monologue in which a lyrical “I-Thought” spins above inertia, its lackeys and time. On the cover page a figure appears to stroll along a scale which reaches to infinity, a reference that it appears once again over the ENDLESSNESS floating in the picture poetry as a horizontal figure eight. Whether it is a metaphorical view of things or a surrealistic narration of reality, the last sentence appears to be a principle of the artist: “*Speak not if you want to be silent, but destroy your agenda whenever you want.*”

Dream Role and 35 Sentences

The picture poetries *Dream Role* and *35 Sentences* show Brus’ development in this original genre since the fairy-tale narratives of the 1970s. When Brus writes in the *Dream Role* about the attempt of a pitiful person who solitarily disputes a stage appearance, the artistic dual talent of the picture poet becomes apparent. The drawings underline the feelings of the protagonist, and depict his loneliness and the excessive demands of the overwhelming stage setting. The background of the written pages is also designed by Brus in such a way that it looks like old, pale paper, and matches the look of the drawings. The text and picture emancipate themselves completely from each other until the bizarre end, as Brus describes the dream sequences of the performer and the single spectator.

In the work *35 Sentences* the artist again pursues questions related to clever absurdities, and ponders art of every type. What do the North Pole and Austria have in common? What does it mean to erect a monument? What is art – and what is an anti-art animal? The puns and aphorisms are either supplemented with drawings which generate animal-machine hybrids, or with trains of thoughts which are figuratively drawn to the point of absurdity.

The Good Old Time

The first part of the autobiographical notes by Günter Brus casts a blunt glance on the childhood, adolescence years and school years of the artist. Puberty and art tuition are equally a theme, as well as the relationship to his father and grandfather from Ennstal, with whom he spent much time. The book is however also a look at the uptightness of society at that time, which Brus fled already at a tender age through the creation of a fantasy world.

Good Old Vienna and Good Old West Berlin

The strong emotions which Günter Brus associates with the Vienna of the 1960s are the core contents of the second part of his literary autobiography. The years of Viennese Actionism meant a life without money and without recognition for the artist – a condition with which his small family also had to suffer. The narratives gain surrealistic elements in that Brus lightly modifies the names of the people mentioned in the book. In this way can be found for example Gerhard Rühmann instead of Gerhard Rühm, Hermann Schlacht instead of Hermann Nitsch, or Otto Sperrmüll instead of Otto Mühl.

In order to avoid a prison sentence due to the violation of sovereign symbols, Günter Brus fled Austria with his family in 1969 to the Western part of the then still divided Berlin, where he stayed for 11 years. He became a member of the Berlin Circle, and autobiographically and legend-formingly described the early 1970s in Berlin in *Good Old West Berlin*. Together with Oswald Wiener, Gerhard Rühm and Hermann Nitsch, he founded the “Austrian Exile Government”, as well as different periodicals and a gallery. “The Berlin air is great, but it also scatters the memories”, wrote Brus.

7 Horror Stories and After the Last Loosening

When Günter Brus writes horror stories one could then label them as modernized folk tales, especially when they revolve around such classic themes as death, sickness, war or insanity. With dark humour he depicts in circular forms embedded bizarre anecdotes on meat eating horses, an untamed fire in an Irish bookstore, or the Crimean war. The white chalk invades the scenarios like fog patches, and creates a strong contrast to the black shadings on grey paper. In 2003 Günter Brus had already experienced much: the era of Viennese Actionism, the years in Berlin exile, the return to Austria, the transformation from disreputable artist to National prize winner. Many of these impressions and reflections flow into the heterogeneous picture poetry *After the Last Loosening*: thoughts about death, emptiness, poems on returning and expressive ink drawings which subtly retreat behind the text.