Against the Light
Günter Brus and Franz Graf
This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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The BRUSEUM has been turned into the scene of a dialogue between the two artists Günter Brus and Franz Graf in the exhibition Against the Light. The dialectic structure, which avoids any strict chronological or thematic order, develops on the pattern of a discussion between the two. Different themes are alluded to and extensively discussed, only to be dropped and then taken up again and developed further in some other direction. The combination of what to all appearances is such a heterogeneous body of work brings many surprising correspondences and allows intimate spaces for thought to emerge. The BRUSEUM extends an invitation to witness this richly facetted dialogue, which turns on such fundamental issues as coming into existence and ceasing to be, desire and rejection, humanity and violence. The unexpected juxtapositions lead to the discovery of mutual influences, they permit a new view of the work of both artists to develop and let this to appear against the light provided each to the other by the dialogue partner.
Against the Light

Franz Graf (born 1954, lives in Vienna) was already intensively involved with the work of Günter Brus (born 1938, lives in Graz) in the 1980s. In *BRUS* (2013), which is presented in the exhibition on a small blue industrial vehicle, he has expanded a drawing dating from this earlier period on canvas. The motif of the drawing had its origins in the *Strangulation* action by Brus which he had also used as a poster for his last action *Endurance Test* (1970). It also served him as the introduction to “Pfaueninsel” (peacock island), a chapter from his book of texts and illustrations, *Irrwisch*, which was decisive for his development as an artist at the end of his period as an actionist.

In both *Endurance Test* and *Irrwisch* Brus deals with the vulnerability of the individual and the pain, impotence and anger caused by suffering repression. Franz Graf has blurred the form of Brus with double contours and ornamentation and motifs from nature. Among other additions he has sketched in a thrush, playing on a Brus publication with this title (German *Drossel*) dating from the time of his Berlin exile in the 1970s—in 1968 he fled from Austria, where he had been sentenced to several years of imprisonment following an actionist presentation. In the *Drossel*, the official organ of the ironically titled *Austrian Government in Exile* (Österreichische Exilregierung) was known from 1968 to 1975 under the title *Die Schastrommel* (the fart drum). Brus regularly published work here including his own writings and the image-text compositions he termed “Bild-Dichtungen” (picture poems).

Franz Graf himself compared the route to his *Body Machine* (2013), developed from a discarded fitness device, which loses none of its sheer massive solidity despite a pleasingly kitschy colouring, to the “way to the scaffold”. Our own steps on this way are accompanied inconspicuously by four single sheet works by Brus, prompting in us thoughts on the entanglement of beauty and death (*Erste absichtliche Skizze*, 1981), the exposure of intimacies (*Veröffentlichung*, 1985), victory and defeat (*Sie standen, flogen and sanken*, 1981) and harassment (*Alle Engel malen himmel*—
blau, und aus der Seide himmelt sich das Blut, 2004). These prepare an intellectual basis for the confrontation with Graf’s work. While the Body Machine (the material existence of humans has always been an important element in Graf’s art) intervenes centrally in the room space, the Brus graphic works hanging on the wall are suggestively restrained in terms of both form and content. Rückgrat mit Begleitmusik (backbone with accompanying music, 2001) shows a human body part comprised of a skull and spine, which Graf frequently uses as an ornamental element in his drawings. The questioning of human corporeality in material existence is then continued thematically in the work of the two artists.

A second Body Machine (2013) lies turned over on its side in the next room, like an industrial accident or an act of vandalism. We are not shown the human body directly, but the Body Machine is plainly linked to it in its associations and through this the spectacle we are offered becomes a scene of aggression and violence. This context is again revealed with reinforced radicalism through the moment of sexuality in Graf’s works FICKEN (fucking) and IDIOTEN (idiots), both 2013. The artist scrutinises language as a cultural construct here, but points equally to its power and mutability, by alienating the letters of the alphabet and allowing the word “IDIOTEN” to slip into “TO(E)TEN” (the dead ones/kill) with the hidden letters “T” and “E”. The metal construction which surrounds these works is reminiscent of thronging metal bars, but possibly also of a slatted frame—it functions simultaneously as a picture carrier, a frame and as a component of the work in terms of content. The confrontation with sex and violence is continued on the wall in graphic works by Günter Brus, Das Menschenmögliche (the most humanly possible, 1971) and Surrealist paart Realistin (Surrealist couples with Realist, 1971), in which the human body is driven to terrifyingly absurd limits, or is even transformed into a lethal weapon.

The photographs of the Brus action Silber of 1965 are still virtually unknown, since only a small selection from these has so far been released. We see how Brus
himself winds bindings around his wife Anna who is “laid out” on a table like a mummy, how he attaches her to rods, paints her, covers her in silver foil and then frees her once again from this state of bondage. Franz Graf refers to the motifs of this action and responds by presenting a woman between iron rods, which are jammed into a metal pipe. Analogies and correspondences arise between the reclining body of Anna and the portrait of a woman with inscrutably indifferent eyes, whose glance thus remains hidden from us. Graf appears to extend the imagery of the Silber action in the room while simultaneously modifying his own work, which frequently involves tied-up and bound women, in this reading of the Brus photographs.

The Günter Brus image-text composition *Vier Grauzonen* (four grey zones) dating from the 1980s and Franz Graf’s *UNTER MYNEM ROCK* (2013) do not at first glance appear to share any thematic common ground, both works seem to be “talking at cross-purposes”. At first it is merely the colouration (grey/black/white) and the formal distribution achieved by the hanging, or the embedding of the work in the metal construction that brings both works into a linked context. When we immerse ourselves in Graf’s playful approach to language, however, and interpret the title of his work “my new rock” somewhat apart from the norm, then a level of association opens up through which new life is breathed into an interpretive examination of the Brus image-text composition.

*ICH LIBE DICH* (I lov you, 2013) by Franz Graf at first appears to confront us with a sober declaration of love (plain white letters on a black background). When we look again more closely we perceive the “uncleanness” in and behind these words: In addition to the intentional misspelling of the German word “Liebe” (love), we notice the to some extent imprecisely finished edges and the colour splashes, which rob a phrase that has become virtually an empty cliché of its surface perfection. The fact that the issues of love and human relationships deserve a multi-layered consideration also adds power to the Brus single sheet work *Schönheit ist nur noch Umgang mit der*
Erfahrung (beauty is simply dealing with experience, 1986) and the enigmatic video of the pregnant Anna Brus knitting a pullover (Pullover, 1967). These very different works open up a space for thought spanning the subjects of love, relationships, parenthood, but also divorce, parting and finitude.

Günter Brus subjected the tradition in painting of the two dimensional picture to radical question in his actionism and he declared himself and his body to be the material of his art. His thinking here is given expression in his incidentally produced action sketches, which the artist made on the one hand as detailed scores or rough concepts, and also as reflections on the actions. In the sketches the human body can also be subjected to unrealistic expansions, mutilations or bending. The body which is declared to be a work of art is excessively deformed, injured. In PARA (2005) Franz Graf also does violence to the artistic medium. A knife penetrates at once both picture and the surrounding space and once again exemplifies in a palpable manner, the radicalism behind the self-inflicted injury of Brus in his last actionist work.

Günter Brus issued a radical rejection to the pictorial concept of art in the early 1960s with his Informel works. He made gestures of psychic impulses and these in turn became strokes, blotches and colour splashes on the canvas. The artist wanted to “live to the full” on the picture surface. A further Graf Body Machine (2013) joins the early Brus confrontation and permits the pictures to enter a new field of tension between emotion replete gesture and a controlled, sporting motion sequence. The gesture in Selbst­verstümmelung (self-mutilation, 1965) by Brus, in which he has extended the effective area of the picture to the surrounding space and to his own body, now becomes an intensive existential “workout”; the Informel bears witness to the escape route from the anaesthetic gloss-over effected by society.
Curator
Roman Grabner

Text
Antonia Veitschegger

Translation
Y’plus, Graz

Graphic concept and design
Lichtwitz Leinfellner
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Layout
Karin Buol-Wischenau

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