

Total View

Gerhard Rühm

Retrospective

1952-2015

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Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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Exhibitions at the BRUSEUM concentrate on various aspects of Günter Brus's art, broadening their context or portraying productive interactions with other artists. The current exhibition, 'Total View', presents Gerhard Rühm's first retrospective from 1952 until today: Gerhard Rühm is an author, musician and visual artist who has constantly sought to explore and question the boundaries between different media. In his art, texts become music, music becomes texts and drawings become typography. Gerhard Rühm is a co-founder of the 'Vienna Group', which created new impulses in Austrian art and literature after 1945, and in this way also influenced Günter Brus's work.

Drawings

For Gerhard Rühm, art production is a highly physical activity per se: 'The producer is the body, no matter whether he is speaking, singing, dancing, shaping something with his hands or using a tool.' Clearly a drawing also cannot be created without using one's body. Rühm emphasises this basic condition when, for instance, he restricts the radius of movement of his right hand by maintaining that his forearm has to rest on the paper during drawing. His own physical constitution is expressed when the last drawn lines before falling asleep, memories of touches or the trace of a fall are reproduced. Yet it is not only his own body that is investigated through drawing: Gerhard Rühm practises, as he puts it, a 'direct form of life drawing'. The naked model is not viewed and sketched from a distance, but rather the outline of the body is transferred directly and in extreme physical proximity: the model lies on the piece of paper on the floor and serves as a stencil whose contours are traced by Rühm with a pencil. Thus the drawing not only conveys the shape of the body

but also a suggestion of how it feels: 'The stroke of the pencil in this way shows, for example, whether it rubbed against the obstacle of the bones, whether it came up against muscles or softer fleshy parts ...' The position of the models can shift gradually—and then the outline is traced each time on the same piece of paper, so that the various outline drawings overlap, creating traces of movement of a highly decorative nature. However theoretical the questions behind Gerhard Rühm's drawings might be, their realisation is often humorous—such as when he attempts to throw a pencil at a rectangle drawn on a piece of paper or tries to draw with both hands simultaneously. Not every line has to be controlled: chance also plays a part in the drawing.

I and You

Gerhard Rühm has always closely examined certain concepts such as 'I', 'you' and 'now'. We all understand these terms in everyday use—yet what do they actually describe? What do we mean, when we say 'I'? Depending on

who is speaking, something—or someone—else is meant. In any case 'I' does not signify something static, or unchangeable: the I of today might not be the I of ten years' time, it could even change at any moment. It is not only 'I' but also the relationship between I and you that interests Gerhard Rühm: human life is always also shaped by encounters with an opposite. Hence the process of attempting to approach others is the focus of some of Rühm's works. Is it possible to achieve a seamless transition from I to you? Or do we define our 'I' specifically by being different to other people?

Vienna Group

The Second World War had a huge effect on Austria's cultural life: modern movements such as Expressionism and Surrealism were banned under the National Socialist regime, while art was taken over for propaganda purposes. Groups of artists formed after the war ultimately sought new forms of expression, yet also wished to tie in with modern movements that had been vilified

by National Socialism. The 'avant-garde' had one thing in common: academia and the establishment were radically rejected in the name of artistic progress, while traditional perceptions of art were questioned. It was also in line with this that the 'Vienna Group' was founded in the early 1950s by Friedrich Achleitner, H. C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Oswald Wiener and Gerhard Rühm. The five authors had little time for classical readings and shocked the public with their *literary cabarets*, which among other things included the destruction of a piano: as a symbol of bourgeois culture the piano was smashed to pieces, preparing the path towards a new departure. In this way the Vienna Group were trendsetters for a number of artistic actions over the years that followed, including the artistic environment surrounding the young Günter Brus.

Visual Poetry

Gerhard Rühm's approach to literature is largely shaped by the realisation that the effect of a text depends on the ambiguity of its words and that this in turn depends on the way it is rendered: when we read a text it makes a big difference whether that text has been printed, typed on a typewriter or written by hand, whether the writing is plain or scrawled, big or small. It is not only the meaning of a linguistic expression—what it is referring to—that is important, but also its 'material side', such as the letters printed on a piece of paper. Gerhard Rühm experiments with this linguistic material: he breaks the text up into its components and makes these into pictures. So, for example, he expands a word's range of meanings by arranging its letters in images. Or he works with individual letters that he sets out on paper in such a way that they no longer make words and only their appearance and phonetic value are the focus. In Rühm's visual poetry there is no clear separation between literature and visual art, between text and image—they permeate each other.

Photomontages

Gerhard Rühm's photomontages arrange images in relation to one another. These works can be compared to the constellations of words and letters in his visual poetry, even if the material here is different. The images used show concrete objects or snapshots of a wide range of situations. According to Rühm they have nothing to do with conventional photo collages 'in which—in order to convey illusionistic image context—parts of photos are cut out and stuck onto other photos as seamlessly as possible.' Instead, Rühm plays with the seams, the breaks that emerge between the images. Despite these seams, we attempt to read a unifying narrative from the individual situations and things. We ask ourselves: What happened? How could this somehow all be connected? Rühm's photomontages reveal our desire to find a meaning in apparent incoherence. Gerhard Rühm also used the montage technique to create images of a very special kind: what are known as his 'reading pictures' are not for looking at but rather—as their name implies—for reading: Rühm

arranges chopped-up photos in a fixed pattern, making them readable in a linear fashion. We can only make out the overall picture after we have read it line for line.

Silhouette

Gerhard Rühm has been working with the technique of silhouette since the end of the 1980s. From the very outset he was fascinated by the characteristic, high contrast between black and white. The effect of this contrast produces the clear outline of a form, yet also the contour of the corresponding negative form at the same time. It is this ambiguity that interests Rühm: we can decide for ourselves whether we look at the form or the negative form—both usually reveal figures or faces. Viewing an image is a changeable process, our view can change according to the figure and the background. Yet even this categorisation is not always available to us: figures can merge with one another, nestle into one another and share their contours.

Ink

In the early 1960s Gerhard Rühm began to rework texts taken from books, brochures and newspapers with ink. These reworkings consist in the obliteration, the 'inking out' of sentences and parts of sentences, so that only certain terms remain visible. In this way he destroys the meaningful conjunction of words, while also constructing new connections. Rühm's ink paintings demonstrate a completely different approach to the medium: the ink is applied to wet paper and runs, like marbling, so forming faces and strange shapes. Often the images are accompanied by words that open up new potential interpretations of what we can see.

Visual Music

Gerhard Rühm has always had a strong connection with music: his father was in the Vienna Philharmonic, and he himself studied the piano and composition at the Academy of Music in Vienna. He is however not only interested in playing music in the practical sense—its notation also attracts

him: he describes it as a 'transfer station from the composer to the interpreter and from there to the listener' and thus as an important means of communication. Music is something we hear and yet also, thanks to its notation, something readable. Like language in general it is accessible on the one hand as an acoustic phenomenon and on the other as a visual phenomenon. Gerhard Rühm experiments with the visual aspects of music: even when we look at and read sheet music the reference to sound is still the focus. So what happens if one views notation as a purely visual attraction? Or if the staves hold words instead of notes? Rühm even invites to see the staves themselves as a drawing, treating them as a geometric pattern or showing us how a hammer strikes a note an interval lower. Ultimately Rühm stretches the boundaries of art genres, composing music with images or interpreting the sounds made by drawing as music.

Gerhard Rühm

Born **12.02.1930** in Vienna. Studied (piano and composition) at the State Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna as well as private instruction with composer Josef Matthias Hauer. **Around 1954** Founded the 'Vienna Group' with H. C. Artmann, Friedrich Achleitner, Konrad Bayer and Oswald Wiener (existed until 1964). **From 1958** Numerous solo exhibitions, including the Amsterdamer Stedelijk Museum and at documenta 1977 and 1987 in Kassel. **1964** Moved to Berlin. **1972-1995** Taught (free graphics) at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. **1975** Moved to Cologne. **1977** Karl Szuka Prize; Austrian Honorary Award for Literature. **1991** Grand Austrian State Prize. **2007** Golden Medal of Honour of Vienna. **2012** The Austrian National Library purchases the premortem bequest of Gerhard Rühm. **2013** Austrian Honorary Prize for Science and Art. Gerhard Rühm lives in Cologne and Vienna.