

# **Good Old West Berlin**

## Günter Brus and the Berlin of the 1970s

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Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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**Good Old West Berlin**

Günter Brus and the Berlin of the 1970s

**BRUSEUM / Neue Galerie Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

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In 1969, Brus fled from Vienna to West Berlin in order to avoid being sent to prison as the result of an art action. The city was to become his home for nearly a decade. He later described his exile in an autobiographical short story collection called *Das gute alte West-Berlin* (2010). This exhibition explores Brus's artistic environment in Berlin, from which he drew new, creative ideas. We meet some of the artists with whom Brus was linked both by friendship and joint projects during this period.

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## Art and Revolution

On 07.06.1968, an audience of about 400 people at the University of Vienna watched the artistic/political action *Kunst und Revolution* (Art and Revolution) by the Viennese Actionists. This later became known as the 'Uni-Aktion', the university action. It was also, derogatively, referred to as the 'Uni-Ferkelei', the university obscenity. The participants' performances broke a number of social taboos. Günter Brus had already declared his body an artistic medium in earlier actions. In *Kunst und Revolution* he mutilated himself with cuts, smeared himself with his own excrement and masturbated while singing the Austrian national anthem. Within the repressive Austrian cultural scene this event mutated into a scandal, while the tabloid press whipped up a hate campaign against Brus. In addition, he was actually prosecuted and sentenced to six months in prison for 'vilification of Austrian symbols and violating public morality and chasteness'. As a result of the conviction, and encouraged by a postcard from Gerhard Rühm, Brus and his family fled Austria.

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## Escape to West-Berlin

Günter Brus was hit hard by his escape to West Berlin in 1969 with his wife Anna and two-year-old daughter Diana. The family were not in the financial position to emigrate, while the extreme reactions to his Actionism threw him into a state of serious doubt about his art. Berlin, however, ultimately turned out to be a 'welcome place, where one ought to have gone anyway'. The international art scene there enjoyed greater freedom than in Austria, and impressed him. 'Right away Berlin felt like a kind of home, or at least a plaster cast after a badly broken neck and leg (...) this city is the only one for which my heart carries feelings of homesickness', Brus wrote in *Das gute alte West-Berlin*. Günter Brus lived here illegally for seven years, and without a valid passport. During his time in Berlin, Brus turned to drawing as his only artistic medium. In 1976 Anna Brus was at last able to gain an audience with the Austrian President Rudolf Kirchschläger and argued successfully for his prison sentence to be commuted to a fine. In 1979 the family returned to Austria for good.

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## The 'Austrian Government in Exile' and 'The Shit-Drum'

Each participant was a member of the government allocated a particular area of authority: Günter Brus himself, for instance, was 'Emperor for Internal and External Affairs', Oswald Wiener was 'Emperor for Military Emperors', Gerhard Rühm was in charge of Transport and National Education. The 'central organ' of the government in exile was the publication *Die Schastrommel*, which translates as *The Shit-Drum*, with Brus as its editor and designer. 17 issues appeared up until 1977, towards the end (from 1975 on) under the name of *Die Drossel*, meaning both 'songthrush' and 'choke / throttle'. Brus developed his own type of magazine design and explored new ways of combining text and image. The articles in the *Schastrommel* were contributed by various writers, including Georg Baselitz, VALIE EXPORT, Antonius Höckelmann, Maria Lassnig, Kurt Kren, Arnulf Rainer, Dieter Roth, Dominik Steiger and Peter Weibel. From 1975 on, Brus also focused on another magazine project, co-founding *Gedanken* (thoughts)

with Oswald Wiener in Berlin. *Gedanken* featured spontaneous and unfinished ideas, which they screenprinted in Brus's apartment and sent out to subscribers.

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## Artists' workshops

In Berlin, Brus established close friendships with Oswald Wiener and Gerhard Rühm (in whose attic apartment they gathered for work meetings). Although not based in Berlin, Dieter Roth, Hermann Nitsch and Arnulf Rainer often visited. The close collaboration between Günter Brus, Dieter Roth, Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener led to the idea of 'workshops' in which the artist friends worked collectively on poetry, visual art and music. The workshops were intended to be held among the close circle of friends at more or less regular intervals, each lasting several days or nights. The aim was to discuss, eat, drink and work creatively together. From 30.10. to 7.11.1972 the artists staged their '1<sup>st</sup> Berlin Poets' Workshop' in Gerhard Rühm's studio, and also, later, in the back room of Oswald Wiener's bar, 'Exil'. Alongside with Roth,

Wiener, Rühm and Brus, Friedrich Achleitner also took part. The partly chaotic results were published in the 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Schastrommel*. The next, the 'Glossolale Dichterworkshop' (Glossolial Poets' Workshop), was held on 06.02.1973. The objective here was to communicate in a fantasy language (although it actually ended in laughter and fooling around). At the '3<sup>rd</sup> Berlin Poets' Workshop' only Roth, Rühm and Wiener were present. Arising from a spontaneous desire to make music, the workshop became the first 'Music Workshop', representing the start of the later 'Selten gehörte Musik' (Seldom-heard Music) concerts. In December 1975, the '1<sup>st</sup> Berlin Drawing Workshop' finally took place over three nights in Wiener's apartment. Christian Ludwig Attersee, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Dieter Roth, Gerhard Rühm, Dominik Steiger and Oswald Wiener worked together on about 100 joint works. Dieter Roth, still well-known for his artworks made from spices and other foods, 'enhanced' some of the drawings with mayonnaise, complaining the next morning when these had ended up in the bin.

The artists' workshops called into question genres of art and mixed them together. Authorship was rejected as a meaningful element in art, by for example working together on the same sheet of paper and allowing the creations to merge.

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### Edition Hundertmark

Armin Hundertmark—previously a cemetery gardener, who lived on an allotment and at that time still did not have a telephone—has been publishing artist editions with original works collected in small boxes since 1970. Hundertmark's first box included Joseph Beuys, Günter Brus (with signed photos of his last action, *Zerreiβprobe*, or Stress Test), Robert Filliou, Ken Friedman, Ludwig Gosewitz, Milan Knížák, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Gerhard Rühm, Tomas Schmit and Ben Vautier. After gallery-owner Michael Werner refused 50 drawings by Günter Brus in 1972 with the comment that Brus was obviously 'in crisis', Hundertmark proposed an edition entitled *Der Balkon Europas* (The Balcony of Europe). Brus agreed and added

texts to the rejected drawings, with free associations to the images. This was an early example of his finding a way to combine text and image, which would later develop into the genre of 'Bild-Dichtungen', or picture-poetry. Subsequently Brus was included in several editions. At that time, no orders were received by the publisher for Armin Hundertmark's first boxes; today, however, they have a prominent place in art history.

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### The „Exil“

Oswald Wiener lived in Berlin from 1970 on and ran a bar called the 'Exil' (Exile) in Berlin-Kreuzberg with his wife Ingrid. Alongside the 'Zwiebelfisch' (Onion Fish), the 'Exil' became the regular meeting-spot for Günter Brus and his friends. Brus designed the cover of the menu and a ceiling painting, while Dieter Roth designed the wallpaper for the bar's back room. During the 1970s the 'Exil' became the favourite haunt of the international art scene in Berlin: the food and drink was good and an atmosphere of creative exchange allowed new ideas to be

pursued. Many drawings were produced in a state of intoxication, more or less. Günter Brus wrote that the 'Exil' was his 'Nachtstudio', his night studio: 'At the regulars' table particularly it often became rowdy and some adepts of Viennese Actionism tried out a kind of scandal-worthiness.' The same regulars' table was attended by artists such as Christian Ludwig Attersee, Dieter Roth, Gerhard Rühm, Dominik Steiger, Joseph Beuys, Markus Lüpertz, Tomas Schmit, Ludwig Gosewitz, KP Brehmer, Karl-Horst Hödicke and many others. A few of them were immortalised in a specially produced 'regulars' table book', which was, however, mainly used by Brus, Rühm and Wiener. The book bore the unusual imprint 'Schmale Renaissance 18 / Die sensible Phase', meaning 'Narrow Renaissance 18 / The sensitive phase' (actually names of typefaces). Eventually Günter Brus and Oswald Wiener commissioned it as a 'hiking book'—Wiener even designed a carrying device for the bulky book.

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## Art by Post

Günter Brus describes himself as a notorious letter-writer. And indeed countless letters were sent over the years, many including drawings. Although he did not live in Berlin but in Vienna, Christian Ludwig Attersee was among one of the most important artists with whom Brus maintained contact by post during his exile in Berlin. Between 1975 and 1978 the two of them worked together by exchanging letters. A total of 97 sheets of paper were sent back and forth between Berlin and Vienna. Each of the two artists reacted with a drawing to the other's drawings. The works produced have two titles: one chosen by Attersee, one by Brus. At the beginning of their collaboration the sheets were clearly divided into two halves, but over the course of time they became increasingly interwoven and the drawings merged into one another. A further collaboration by post developed between Günter Brus and Dominik Steiger. During a joint trip to Treviso, the two sent re-worked postcards to their friends and subsequently decided from then on to send

each other a sheet of paper to be completed by the other every Wednesday. This collaboration forms the basis of the book *Jeden jeden Mittwoch* (Every Every Wednesday). Apart from letters, Brus and his artist friends sent each other postcards—in particular Dieter Roth designed several greetings cards or re-worked traditional cards from wherever he was staying.