

**Alexander Brener and  
Barbara Schurz**  
Conspiracy of the  
Cephalopods

21.09.2019–19.01.2020

BRUSEUM/Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum  
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The BRUSEUM presents Alexander Brener (born 1957 in Almaty, Kazakhstan) and Barbara Schurz (born 1973 in Klagenfurt)—a team of artists with a close affinity to the gallery ‘host’ Günter Brus in terms of both the methods and themes they choose. Over the years the partners have had a polarising effect wherever they turned up: they flashed their bare behinds at openings, spat at speakers and threw peanuts at them. Their seemingly naive actions went profoundly against the grain of the cultural scene. As a result they were frequently met with contempt and even exclusion, and were labelled ‘art terrorists’. Their drawings also take us straight out of our comfort zone: the sometimes aggressive and explicit sexual images are disturbing, despite (or perhaps precisely because of) their playful, comic-like style.

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## Conspiracy of the Cephalopods

Brener and Schurz are masters at finding sore points—and then poking them ruthlessly. The elements of their work that often come across as unpolished and imbued with a childish naïveté are precisely where their critical explosive force lies. The strongest effect, after all, is to be felt wherever we are not expecting to encounter defiance and resistance. It is not without reason that the exhibition is called the *Conspiracy of the Cephalopods*: we don't see the cephalopods we know from children's drawings as being capable of scheming and conspiracy, let alone any serious political agenda. How short-sighted of us!

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## Shape Shifter

Produced by Brener and Schurz especially for this exhibition, the series *Shape-Shifter* mixes human, vegetable and animal into a bizarre fusion. Skin mutates into scales, fur and abstract patterns, while feet, hooves, antennae, flowers and claws sprout from bodies. Stalks, wings and

spines accompany vulvas, penises and breasts. These strange transformations are reflected in basic life processes: excretions alongside incorporations and sexual acts, growth alongside dismemberment and disintegration. The peculiar beings observe their continuous metamorphosis sometimes foolishly, sometimes in terror. A recurring motif is the shoe that simply does not want to fit (in with the other). It is not the ability to fit in, but rather the ostensibly clumsy non-conformist who is the driving force for further development here.

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## Pinocchio and Don Quixote

Originally figures from literary fiction, Pinocchio and Don Quixote appear time and again in Brener and Schurz's drawings. Pinocchio is a character from a children's book: a wooden puppet brought magically to life, a cheeky yet lovable rascal whose nose grows whenever he tells a lie. In Brener and Schurz's work he also gets up to terrible mischief and shows no respect for supposed authorities. In drawings they produced during a stay in Rome in 2009, Pinocchio

can be found in every picture, although not always at first glance: at times his pranks are almost swallowed up by the colourful action around him. Don Quixote, on the other hand, is famous as the parody of a knight: he tries to attack windmills, mistakenly believing them to be giants. In Brener and Schurz's illustrations his illusory courage also becomes a comical attitude in an absurd struggle.

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## Amazonki

The Amazons are a band of fearless warriors in Greek mythology. In Brener and Schurz's Amazons series they are shown naked, spreading their legs and brandishing various weapons. An absurd variety of objects is placed between their legs, sometimes clearly between their labia: from swords, skulls and porcupines through to a needle and thread, a metronome and a cactus. Without batting an eyelid they allow their vulvas to touch things in a way that could only fill 'mere mortals' with disgust, pain and horror. The focus is shifted away from sensitivity and vulnerability, towards

strength and fighting. The vulva becomes a weapon among weapons. The Amazons' naked bodies are the site of aggressiveness, energy and resistance.

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## Battles

The exhibition at the BRUSEUM inspired several ink drawings that are a teeming mass of detail: alongside heaps of faeces, stacks of skulls, warships and people we can make out swarms of insects, caterpillar-like winged creatures and various hybrids of human and animal. The result is an extraordinary interweaving of beings—above, beside, inside: at times violent, often copulating, occasionally even peaceful.

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## Dada Afterlife

Particularly in their refusal to make a clear statement and in their absurd and confused combination of different elements, Brener and Schurz can be associated with the Dada art movement. In the series *Dada Afterlife* key figures from art history appear, such as Hugo Ball and Emmy

Hennings, who in 1916 founded the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, still regarded as the birthplace of Dada. Man Ray, whose actual gravestone inscription is quoted by Brener and Schurz in the picture ('Unconcerned, but not indifferent'), is shown in the body of a woman shaving his intimate parts: he is only shaving one side, in a reference to Man Ray's self-portrait with half beard. Among many others, tribute is also paid to Marcel Duchamp, who went down in art history for his Ready-mades (everyday objects that he presented as works of art).

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### **Fuck off and die alone**

For many years now Brener and Schurz have been producing drawn books. The exhibition features the 158 original ink drawings made for the publication *Fuck off and die alone*. In the foreword they claim to have found the drawings and texts on a park bench, and that they have no idea who the author was. In actual fact the text of the book, which does not contain a uniform narrative, mainly consists of quotes from other writers and variations on

them. We find texts by writers such as Samuel Beckett, Ralph Ellison and Wallace Stevens, covering various themes: forms of love and sexual desire, physical and psychological constraints and the difficult balancing act between self-realisation and living in a community. In the four sections of the publication, ornately framed pages of text alternate with mostly absurd images. The pictures are not direct illustrations of the text but are often associatively linked.

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### **Icons**

Many of Brener and Schurz's works refer to the Russian tradition of icons. Particularly in Orthodox Christianity, icons are venerated as cult images. They depict Jesus Christ, Christian saints or religious scenes. In the private sphere we find 'icon corners' (similar to the Catholic 'home shrine'): believers place or hang icons for prayer in the corner of the room. There are strict rules governing the motifs and compositions of icons. Brener and Schurz's drawings borrow repeatedly from these conventions. The

size of important figures and elements is exaggerated compared to others; a large figure is then 'draped' with many smaller ones. The way the pictures are divided up into different fields is also reminiscent of icons: a larger middle image that traditionally shows a saint, surrounded by smaller scenes from their life. Other key elements of icons are the combination of text and image as well as a two-dimensional style of painting—both of these are to be found in Brener und Schurz's drawings too. They even feature well-known saints and motifs—albeit in new versions—such as the erotic temptation of Saint Anthony or Georgina the Dragon-Slayer (instead of George). In addition, the drawings present a number of 'new creations' such as Margot of Madagascar or Santa Samanta.

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### **Lubok**

Brener and Schurz's works often reference the Russian lubok (plural: lubki). Lubki are folk pictures that enjoyed popularity in Russia from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were simple graphic prints

that were then vividly hand-coloured by anonymous artists. They were generally created as individual graphics but also in series and in small-format books. Lubki depicted fairy-tale images and fantasies, and later also scenes from social life. They often contained explanatory texts or narratives. These decorative folk pictures served as entertainment, but also sought to inform the wider public and sometimes to critique the political situation. Like the lubok, Brener and Schurz's drawings have a garish and whimsical quality to them. Behind the pirates, mermaids, goddesses and frog princesses, however, there lurks biting societal and social criticism.

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### **Eva Penetrator**

The figure of *Eva Penetrator* embodies a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the Fall of Man in the Bible: In the Garden of Eden the snake entices Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Eve (together with Adam, who also eats some of the fruit) is then driven from Paradise. In the form of *Eva Penetrator* the

figures of Eve and the snake are merged. Due to the combining of the female sex and the snake, this Eve is herself capable of penetration. Does this make Adam's role in Paradise superfluous? In the depictions of *Eva Penetrator*, the snake appears variously as a phallus, a kind of sex toy and an excretion.