

Günter Brus. Picture-Poems

From 18.06.2021

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The BRUSEUM presents a retrospective of Günter Brus's picture-poems based on 50 works. Over 900 individual sheets reveal how this genre evolved, allowing an overview of its remarkable diversity. Spanning from 1972 through to the present day, this interplay emerges as a unique cosmos of constantly new compositions combining pictures and words. In addition to some major works from public collections, many pieces from private collections are also on show.

Picture-Poems

'Most "new pictures" have already been seen.' (Brus)

Comprising 162 sheets, *Brus' and Blake's Job* from 2007 is the most extensive picture-poem Günter Brus has ever produced. Like Günter Brus, the poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827) worked skilfully with image and text, without subordinating one to the other. Blake sets his often visionary pictorial worlds in counterpoint to the texts rather than seeking to illustrate them. Brus became aware of Blake as early as the 1970s, and he became for him both a source of inspiration and a legitimization of his chosen path. In the cycle *Erzeugung der Erzengel aus Schmutz* (creation of the archangels from dirt, 1977), we can discern not only William Blake sitting on Brus' shoulders, but also his contemporary John Keats, together with the earlier German physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, revealed by Brus as an inspiring 'ancestral portrait gallery'. Blake's cycle on the Book of Job from around 1820 is echoed in *Brus' and Blake's Job*, pointing to the source that

prompted this intense study, which lies primarily in the combination of literary and pictorial work. In 2007, it was a publication about Blake's sketches that again prompted Brus to review and rework Blake's work in such fullness. He comments, condenses, criticises and works with collage, playing with familiar divine and diabolical motifs.

Das Namenlos (the nameless) is an very extensive picture-poem first produced in 1975 as a text, then expanded to include a pictorial level. Nevertheless, it is not a continuously narrated story, but rather there are, for example, dialogues between Bonaventura and the judge Schweinfetz, ultimately coming to an absurd end. Like the satirical novel *Nachtwachen* (*The Nightwatches*) from 1805, the picture-poem is coloured by a dark romanticism. The novel appeared with the addition of 'by Bonaventura' as a loose sequence of text forms that accompany a night watchman on his rounds, leaving a very fragmentary impression.

Günter Brus has produced a total of over 800 picture-poems on tens of thousands of sheets, which have so far been discussed mainly in the context of visual art and not so much in the context of literature. He began working with this new genre in Berlin, where he had fled following his conviction for the action 'Art and Revolution' at the university of Vienna. In 1971 *IRRWISCH* appeared there, his most radical work combining text and image, leading to the edition *Der Balkon Europas* (the balcony of Europe). Seven of the total 30 issues are to be found on display here. Individual sheets were assembled in boxes, each copy being a picture-poem in its own right. What remains unique is that Brus here stapled the sheets together to form a book. At that time Brus recognised 'a system' in the combination of writing and drawing and the potential for a future artistic path. *Die Zernunft*, which Günter Brus dedicated to his friend Gerhard Rühm, and *Der Volls Schmerz* (full pain) signal the breakthrough of the picture-poem in 1974. The Berlin period was marked by his collaboration with Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener, in whose bar EXIL the

friends met regularly, but also by his daughter Diana, who is represented in *Der Volls Schmerz* with two drawings of her own.

1980 saw the first big touring exhibition entitled 'Bild-Dichtungen', which for the first time showed single sheets and series of text-image works on a large scale. Its first stop was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, moving on to the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, from there to the Kunstmuseum Luzern and finally appearing at the City of Graz Kulturhaus. Here the show caused a stir as part of the 1981 steirischer herbst festival. At the other locations, however, it was a success and brought Günter Brus renown as a visual poet, also allowing the first printing of *Zum Geleit* (as accompaniment), as a separate publication.

Günter Brus' excessive working methods, which made him famous due to the Actions during the 1960s, can also be found in his picture-poems. Sometimes he completes the whole text in one sitting, as in *Weisser Wind* (white wind), or draws an entire cycle in one stretch. He experiments with

different formats and drawing techniques, uses various kinds of paper ranging from simple wrapping paper to structured handmade paper, works with coloured pencils, ink or biro. 'Weisser Wind' was the name of an inn where Günter Brus spent an evening in Zurich, naming the text he wrote there after it. He was the last to leave the inn, which is why his manuscript concludes with the words 'Let there be darkness'. The title links the transience of the wind with the achromatic, nihilistic white that Brus had already accorded a special meaning in his Actions. The pictures are detached from the text—they were subsequently created completely independently of it. Cohesion is provided by the uniformly greyish tone of the paper, while the picture compositions across two or three sheets appear special. In contrast, *Der Stadtpark* (city park) from 1983 takes the form of a traditional book design, the picture framing the page at the top and the text below set out like a poem. Sometimes image and text are intertwined, in *Zuviel der Worte sind getan* (too many words are done) he reduces the text and in *Stummzeichen* (silent sign) he

omits it altogether. The creative process is different each time, and so too is the result of this remarkably productive process.

The erotic side of his oeuvre is evident in the large-format oil pastel drawings illustrating *Friedrich von Schlegel. Zehn Sonette* from 1988. Brus, like Franz Blei who first published the sonnets in 1912, deliberately attributes the ten erotic poems to Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829). However, actually it was an unknown author who described in the sonnets copulations of a very diverse nature, male lust, penetration and fantasy in both homo- and heteroerotic physical encounters. Günter Brus transforms them into fragmentarily distorted body syntheses. Using fleshy colours he draws the lines purposefully and firmly, poetically and at times almost aggressively. In this pornographic series, body parts are exposed, vulnerable and threatening as they surround the explicit text.

Schlafmittag (sleep midday) focuses on how strenuous it can be when time does not seem to want to pass. Image, word-pic-

ture, text and metaphors converge around the inertia of being. Moments of 'not finding rest' and 'not being able to sleep' are visualised in a poignantly allegorical way.

A few years ago Günter Brus claimed that he was 'all drawn out'. Due to the pandemic and the closure of his favourite pub, however, he returned to his studio and started work again. He produced watercolours, painted, drew and wrote in ink. Now that he is over 80 the artist's lettering has changed, but the intensity of his work has not. His most recent picture-poem, *Indizien* (evidence), comprises ten sheets. The works of the last 20 years are a remarkable demonstration of how Brus uses a wide range of ways to express himself, and that his dogged persistence in creating picture-poems is not yet 'all drawn out'. This is what *Der natürliche Irrwitz* (natural madness) is about, as well as the final *Qual*, or torment, that everyday life can sometimes become.

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