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Die Kunst des Herrn Nestler The Art of Mr. Nestler

Accompanying booklet

This retrospective exhibition offers an insight into Norbert Nestler's major groups of works: his object art, graphics and designs for public space. The distinctive quality of his work lies in his intense interest in materials and how they are handled, his experimentation and crossing of boundaries. The works he produced in this way had an impact that extended into public space and a social interaction.

Norbert Nestler was a graphic and object artist, performer and art teacher. He was born in Vienna in 1942 and grew up there in the post-war period. From 1960 until 1965 he attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna where he studied under Josef Dobrowsky, Herbert Boeckl and Max Weiler, graduating with a degree in painting. During this time he was already sharing a studio with Friederike Johanna Bauer, who later became his wife as Friederike Jeanne Nestler-Rebeau. Together they moved first to Leoben and then in 1966 to Graz, where both found work as art teachers. Even later on, they never chose to favour freelance activities over their work as teachers. In 1967 Nestler was awarded the Joanneum art prize for his picture *Wohin geht ihr, fliegende Brüste*, his first breakthrough as an artist. Another effective step in his development was his participation at the trigon exhibitions *Architektur und Freiheit* in 1969 and *intermedia urbana* in 1971. The progressive design of these exhibitions was due to Wilfried Skreiner, director of the Neue Galerie Graz at that time. On the invitation of Günter Waldorf, from 1970 on Nestler became a member of the Forum Stadtpark, where he ran the visual arts section together with Hartmut Urban and Peter Gerwin Hoffmann from 1973 to 1976. As artists, all three were also avid communicators of art. At the Forum Stadtpark, they above all promoted an examination of print and original graphic work. The 1975 graphic reproduction week *Grafik live* demonstrated not only the scope of lithography but also, for instance, that of screen-printing. In 1982 Norbert Nestler—in the meantime especially successful abroad—once again took on the role of visual arts adviser. At that time Nestler saw the Forum Stadtpark as an important venue for contemporary art, always 'one step ahead'.

With the visual arts office, it was possible jointly to fund and stage regular exhibitions within the framework of the *steirischer herbst* festival. These exhibitions focused on the theme of art and the public sphere in terms of political and social aspects, and extended far into the public space of Graz. The 'rusty nail', Serge Spitzer's *Brunnenwerk* (1985) in the Graz Stadtpark, dates from this period, when Nestler, together with Hartmut Urban, Peter Gerwin Hoffmann and his wife Friederike Jeanne Nestler-Rebeau continuously played a part in deciding the programme and curating shows at Forum Stadtpark.

The exhibition *Die Kunst des Herrn Nestler* (The Art of Mr Nestler) is designed as a retrospective of the artist's own work. Its concept was developed together with Norbert Nestler before his death in January 2014. The title refers to Herbert Baumgartner's film, in which a spotless Norbert Nestler emerges—like a phoenix rising from the ashes—from a bog. Although the film was shot in 1974, it was not completed until 1983 within the context of the *Der Kunstraum. Dialog und Ritual* exhibition. At the same show, Nestler cast himself as a *Lebendbüste* (living bust) among major contemporary *Kunst-Kultur-Köpfe*, art-culture-heads, including figures such as Peter Weibel, Wilfried Skreiner and Walter Koschatzky. During the 1960s and 1970s, corporeality, the staging of one's own body and its portrayal also represented an important theme for Norbert Nestler, albeit not to the same extreme extent as was seen in Austrian Actionism.

His work *Stiegenschlauchgrafik* (Stair Tube Graphics), originally designed for the staircase at the Galerie beim Minoritensaal (today known as the Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten) and now installed at the entrance of the Neue Galerie Graz, refers to his works of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as *art play*, in which Nestler focused chiefly on the motif of the tube and pipes, long before Peter Kogler discovered this subject for himself. These works are the spatial extension of mostly serial works, their graduation and structuring. The motif of the tube is continued and developed in several sculptural works, which expand into space like architectural forms. These works are meticulously executed and demonstrate Nestler's broader passion for the materials he employed, in particular for materials that were new to the art world at that time such as Plexiglas or aluminium. His sculptural works have a technoid character that is expressed without the personal signature of the artist. They are reminiscent of Utopian architectural models and social concepts of space, such as those spread during the 60s and 70s by Austrian architects like Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler, *Haus-Rucker-Co* or *Coop Himmelb(l)au*, sharing a common transdisciplinary merging of architecture, sculpture and installation. Within this context, a constant concern is also the treatment of social spaces and spaces of consciousness.

Nestler's work *Pharisäer* (Pharisees) displays a technical, cool vocabulary of forms. Its figures appear almost as robots or extra-terrestrials. The corporeal and the architectonic meld into a surreal group of traitors, first exhibited by Nestler in 1972 within the framework of the *steirischer herbst* festival in the Ecksaal at the Joanneum, here in Neutorgasse. The characteristic, layered language of forms that extends to occupy space can also be seen in Nestler's *Brunnen* from 1972/78 at the Sigmund Freud Clinic in Graz, or in the model of *Raumgreifende Form* from 1974, designed for the outside space of the Bruck an der Mur district authority.

His graphics are also significant, experimenting between contact print, photographic and other print techniques and with a variety of base materials. During his lifetime he enjoyed continual success at international graphic festivals and won a number of related competitions. Despite this, he never tied himself exclusively to the medium, preferring to work between and across disciplines and media, searching out processual and communicative elements. His consistent aim was to address and to involve the observer directly in his works.

The exhibition catalogue (Verlag De Gruyter) including installation views and texts by Elisabeth Fiedler, Günter Holler-Schuster, Edelbert Köb and Katrin Bucher Trantow will be presented in January 2015.