

# Universalmuseum Joanneum Press

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## Günter Brus Inside-Insight

### Accompanying booklet

#### Permanent Exhibition

From the drawings of the academy years to the Viennese Actionism until the picture poetry – Günter Brus has made use of many different forms of expression during his artistic activity. The exhibition follows the development of the artist and demonstrates which continuities shape his art despite the different approaches.

#### Drawings from the Academy Years

Since he graduated as the best of the Arts and Crafts School in Graz, Günter Brus could begin a degree at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna without an entrance examination. Following the advice of his parents he enrolled in the graphics class, soon however he changed to the painting class of Prof. Eduard Bäumer. Because he was in disagreement with his teachers over the question of the form of his student projects, he studied at the Academy only for a short time and quit without any degree. The works created during his time at the Academy rank among the little known works of Günter Brus, however they are important in order to comprehend the genesis of the artist.

#### Informel

After his withdrawal from the Academy, Brus became interested in abstract Expressionism which understands paintings as a process, event and action. He then went on to *Informel painting*, which rejects any conceived representation, and began to paint on a purely gestural level. He longed to go beyond the confines of the canvas into the room, penetrating reality. Moving impulsively at the canvas, he regarded *action painting* as an essentially physical and very direct painting process. Paper has neither top nor bottom, nor a centre; he turned it whilst he painted, documenting the traces of his body movements. Günter Brus smeared black colour beyond the edges of the paper, or he slashed his pencil so fiercely over the paper that the hatchings looked as if they had been hewn with an axe, tearing the paper in some places. Painting and drawing thus became an event, the process being more important than the resulting work.

## **Ana**

In 1964 Günter Brus detached himself completely from the canvas and put his own body into the centre of his art, allowing it to become medium and object of his actions. The white room became the grounding into which objects and naked actors blended, fully covered in white. Brus painted, spilled and smeared black colour all over the body of his wife, Anna, and across the room, culminating in an achromatic, existential painting orgy, which appeared to be an agonising attempt at obliteration. The monochrome, living painting was named "*Informel der allerletzten Stunde / Informel of the final hour*".

## **Vienna Walk**

In 1965 Brus realized the *Vienna Walk*. Here the artist formulated most clearly the symbolism of the dividing and at the same time harmful line. He became a living picture which walked through the centre of Vienna. By painting himself completely white from head to toe and drawing a vertical black line which divided the face and body symbolically into two halves, he dissolved the borders between art and the general public. The walk was interrupted by a police officer and Brus received a fine. The press dismissed the action simply as an advertising gag for his first solo exhibition at the "Young Gallery" opening the next day.

## **Self-painting / Self-mutilation**

In his self-paintings, Brus dipped himself and the real world around him into a total overcoat of white. He created a white grounding and a three-dimensional surface, not only achieving the symbolic obliteration of everything existing, but a new beginning, too. With powerful brush strokes he painted black lines on his body which seemed to cut him apart and injure him. He emphasized the vulnerability of his own soft body by additionally arranging hard objects such as an axe, scissors, fork or razor blade upon and around himself – like a still-life. Although the vehemence of the gestural painting act appears somewhat subdued in Ludwig Hoffenreich's aesthetic photographs, it is evident that the road to self-mutilation had already been opened.

## **Body analyses**

With his body analyses from 1967 to 1970, Günter Brus progressed a further step away from the self paintings. With his radical focus on the body and its functions, he encountered the particularly sensitive area of social taboos – after all, processes of excretion, body fluids and excrements represent existential and elementary experiences. For his *Zerreißprobe*, Brus meant to dive underneath the surface and test crucial limits.

## Drawings

After his *Zerreißprobe*, the cuts on his own body became marks on a sheet of paper once more. This sudden break with actionist art was met with a lack of understanding within the art scene. Brus, however, felt that he was responsible for his family, thus, after “fulfilling an act of shamanist self-discovery” (Brus), he no longer wished to express himself through actionism. In the 1980s, his radical break with actionism and transition to a picture poet was described in the press as the “Taming of a wild one”. Brus explained this with the change in social and political conditions. As opposed to the attested break in his work, some say that there is a connection between his actionist and literary, illustrative work, even regarding his so-called transition as a continuum in which everything is linked together.

## Picture poetry

From 1974/1975 on, Brus began to concentrate more on his *bebilderte Manuskripte / illustrated manuscripts*, which he described as *Bild-Dichtungen / Picture poetry* some years later. For him, this combination of texts and illustrations would become a new independent form of art, in which the intellectually effortless process of drawing constantly penetrated the intellectual act of writing, thus generating a process of mutual inspiration. He regarded drawing and writing as equal skills, being just as powerful in the act of creation as his actions had been. His cycles were often produced in a permanent 24-hour tour de force. Brus also began to create individual leaves which varied stylistically, at the same time moving away from the subject of injury. Already during his period of training in Graz, Brus began to additionally dedicate himself intensively to music. This also played a central role later in the oeuvre of the artist, be it in concerts with other artists or in picture poetry such as *Dark Chamber Music*.

## Kaspar Hauser

Around the mysterious foundling Kaspar Hauser many legends have formed, including around his death in 1833. It is still unexplained today whether Hauser died from the effects of a stabbing wound which was perpetuated by himself or a third party. However, since the enigmatic man of unknown origin already carried many scars on his body, for example from a “pistol accident” and earlier stabbing wounds, it is assumed today that he injured himself. In his Kaspar Hauser cycle Günter Brus again made injury of your own body into a symbolic act. The technique of erasure, the carving of drawings in the metal primer, and the injury of the material mirrors the suffering of Hauser on a further level. However, parallels between the artist and motive are created not only in the self-injuring ambitions; the element of isolation is also taken up by Brus again and again. In this way the last picture of the cycle shows the protagonist Kaspar Hauser left alone lying in a corner, a motive which also already appears in his action *Self-Painting*, and in some drawings from the 1970s.