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BRUSEUM A museum for Günter Brus

work list

Günter Brus is a painter, drawer, actionist, poet and author. The BRUSEUM presents his total artistic oeuvre with a comprehensive selection of works from its own inventory, tracing his development and illustrating his impulsive, elaborate creative act, which constantly tests the limits of human tolerability. When the Joanneum quarter is opened, the long called-for museum dedicated to Styrian artist Günter Brus becomes reality.

Room 1

Informel

In 1960 Günter Brus left Academy of Applied Arts prematurely. Instead, he felt attracted to *abstract expressionism*, which understands painting as a process, happening 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*". Kurt Kren made a substandard film of The *Ana* action, which took place in Otto Muehl's flat.

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.

Einatmen-Ausatmen / Inhaling-Exhaling

In 1967, Brus' daughter was born who, alongside his wife, would remain his sole model. In that year his interest for the subject of birth was reflected in his three actions *Pullover*, *Osmose*, and *Einatmen-Ausatmen / Pullover, Osmosis, Inhaling-Exhaling*. In *Osmose*, a balloon slowly deflates between the artist's legs, who is painted in white. During *Pullover*, the act of *Inhaling* and *Exhaling* was visible on the upper part of the artist's body, whilst his wife was knitting. The birth theme had already been subject of the *Transfusion* action two years earlier, which Brus had staged together with his wife without an audience. In the process, he transgressed the strict black-and-white canon, for the first time using vivid colours in his action.

Room 2

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. By replacing the pencil with a razor blade and the stroke with a real cut, he thus penetrated the depths of the body and almost transgressed the bounds of the bearable. In his 1968 project *Der helle Wahnsinn – die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns (plain madness – the architecture of plain madness)* which took place in the Aachen/Aix-la-Chapelle Reiffmuseum, he also shifted existential processes of life, such as breathing, nourishment, excretion and pain, to the centre of attention. For the first time, a self-inflicted injury was demonstrated in an action in Germany. Brus cut his chest with a razor blade, defecated, urinated and drank his urine in front of the audience. The alienating effect of the white painting was missing. Brus wore ordinary clothes in order to be very close to his audience.

Kunst und Revolution / Art and Revolution

On 7 June 1968, Brus staged the action *Kunst und Revolution (Art and Revolution)* before an audience of some 300 at the University of Vienna together with Otto Muehl, Peter Weibel and Oswald Wiener. The action, which was labelled as “Uni-Ferkelei” (filth at the university) by the popular press, caused a major scandal. Their nakedness, defecating, vomiting, masturbating, whipping, self-mutilation and the smearing of excrements on their naked bodies whilst they sang the national anthem of Austria standing on the national flag caused such a shock in the public, that in 1970, Günter Brus was sentenced to six months imprisonment for the “vilification of Austrian national symbols”. Shocked by the reactions and the sentence, Brus fled with his family to Berlin. As opposed to similar actions, the spectacle was seen as a “political manifestation” which had a deep impact on the self-conception of the so-called middle classes.

Action sketches

In his early years of actionism, Brus refused to present his works to the public via traditional media. At the same time, drawings were emerging alongside the actions. These action sketches were, on the one hand, intended as preparatory conceptual scores, on the other hand, as illustrated reflections on his performances. Independent of that process, a group of drawings came into being from 1966 on, in which his vulnerability is driven to extremes with the pencil. Stretched-out, injured and mutilated bodies and torture instruments stand isolated and fragmented in indefinite pictorial spaces. Drawn with simple ballpoint pens in cheap notebooks, they illustrate the impossible disintegration of the physical.

Transition to a picture poet

After his *Zerreiprobe*, 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.

Irrwisch

Brus’ always recorded all of his actions in drawings and paintings. Upon the request of a publishing company, he began to document his action art chronologically. However, he did not wish to act as an administrator of his own past. After interrupting the enterprise, in 1970, he began to create his text and picture book *Irrwisch / Will-o’-the-wisp*, which, in 1971, was published in a circulation of 500 copies. In *Irrwisch*, he deals with the imagery of his last actions in great detail and sums up his Vienna years. The body analyses described in the work are so extreme that their realisation does not seem possible. Black and white drawings revolve grimly around menacing fantasies of violence in which injuries, perversion, bigotry and political authority are major subjects. The work became a cult book within the community around the “Austrian Government in Exile” in Berlin. *Irrwisch* is also an early precursor of his picture poetry in which he reveals his free approach to language and images. Brus appears to have shed his past – he uses colour, writes his texts by hand and discovers new subjects which unfold within a mythical style of language.

Balkon Europas / Balcony of Europe

In 1972, the publisher Hundertmark suggested the making of an edition called *Balkon Europas / Balcony of Europe*. Brus affixed “new” drawings, which had been rejected by gallery-owners, onto sheets of paper without illustrative comments. 30 five-leaved books in boxes were released, each containing one of his unique picture poems. The individual leaves, which are clipped together, differ in this book form from his later works, especially due to the fact that their order is neither interchangeable, nor can they be hung onto the wall. Brus realised that his future lay in this “system” of combining writing and drawing.

Rooms 3 and 4

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. He started up a dialogue with artists and poets from past centuries and quoted their works or integrated them in different forms into his own work. Gradually, his picture poetry began to take on distinct fairytale-like traits which became evident in his conscious use of childlike language and figures from the world of fairytales. In the later, brilliantly-coloured leaves, influences of Odilon Redon, James Ensor, William Blake, Alfred Kubin and Fritz von Herzmanovsky can be detected. They depict weightless figures and wizards wearing masks and colourful costumes, whose gaiety and erotically charged atmosphere is counteracted by sorrow and subliminal melancholic pain.

Venus im Pelz / Venus in Furs

The author Leopold Sacher-Masoch (1836 – 1895) wrote his world-famous novel *Venus im Pelz*, which spawned the word “masochism”, in Graz. Masochism was defined for the first time in 1880 by the psychiatrist and forensic physician Richard von Krafft-Ebing. For his new illustrated edition of *Venus im Pelz / Venus in Furs*, Günter Brus, who had returned to Graz in 1979, created a cycle of 36 leaves with a coloured frontispiece showing his masochist construction of the femme fatale in an impressive black-and-white mische technique.

Room 5

Patent Urinoir, Patent Merde

During the months in which Günter Brus appealed against his sentence, he worked on the pamphlets *Patent Urinoir*, 1968, and *Patent Merde*, 1969. They are a kind of documentary account of the events following the university action scandal as well as the beginning of a new artistic strategy. Brus addressed the public with the help of a publication which, as a collage made up of facts and fiction, allowed him to come to terms with the repression and events around the university action. The patents show anonymous threatening letters, reprinted legal reports and psychiatric examinations illustrated by Günther Brus. *Unter dem Ladentisch/ Underneath the shop counter* (1969), which was published in Berlin, can be regarded as a further manifesto with the intention of supporting him during his financial crisis.

The Schastrommel

The Schastrommel was the organ of the “Austrian Government in Exile“ which Günter Brus founded together with Oswald Wiener and Gerhard Rühm in Berlin to voice the artists' protest and ironical response to the situation in Vienna in 1968. During the following years, 17 editions were issued, which Brus compiled from a mixture of typescripts, text reproductions, drawings and photos. From 1975 on, when *Die Schastrommel* was renamed *Die Drossel*, Brus was solely responsible for its production. In his first own edition, the black-and-white picture, *Die Zernunft*, was intended to “deconstruct” rational thought. In 1975, *Das Namenlos* The *Nameless* appeared in the Drossel as a purely literary statement from Günter Brus .

Literarischer Vorlass / Literary premature legacy

The literary pre-mortem bequest consists of 700 notebooks, work manuscripts and designs of over 20,000 written pages produced since the early 1970s. Thousands of blue school jotters are filled with his *Fortschreibung / Extrapolation*, notes, aphorisms, poems, atmospheric images, dialogues, novels and stories. His texts are spontaneously cross-border, verses and prose intermingle with diary notes, dialogues and aphorisms alongside everyday memos, telephone numbers and shopping lists. This replenishing and intermingling effect of different kinds of texts without a title, structure or hierarchical order, actually without beginning and end, become a literary principle.

The *literarischer Vorlass* is a collection and bequest of both the literary and artistic developments of the artist. His sketches, drawings and notes serve as a source to trace the development of each picture poem.

The following literary works by the poet Günter Brus have been published:

Der Geheimnisträger, 1984, *Amor und Amok*, 1987, *Morgen des Gehirns. Mittag des Mundes. Abend der Sprache*, 1984 – 1988, *Die gute alte Zeit*, 2002, *Nach uns die Malflut*, 2003, *Das gute alte Wien*, 2007, *Das gute alte Westberlin*, 2010, *Irrwisch*, 1971, which has become part of 20th century Austrian and world literature.

Room 6

Wiener Aktionismus / Viennese Actionism

Viennese Actionism was a very specific version of actionist art which emerged in Austria parallel to the international Happening or Fluxus movements. Established in 1964 by Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, the movement received its name, *Wiener Aktionismus*, from a close friend of the group, Peter Weibel, a few years later. During the international transition phase sparked by the generation of 1968, the actionists broke taboos, attacked the established concept of art and adamantly demanded the destruction of all predetermined ideologies and values. Their objective was to liberate society from psychical and physical restraints and to establish personal freedom. The essence of real life replaced prevailing illusions in a world of pretence, the action thrust aside the image, the body became material. This excessive predominance of the physical in its immediate form links up to the equally vehement form of Austrian Expressionism in Vienna around 1900, which artists such as Schiele, Kokoschka and Gerstl captured in their work. This Austrian form of radicalisation culminated in the *Kunst und Revolution / Art and Revolution* action at the University of Vienna; at the same time, it heralded the collapse of the Vienna Actionist group.

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