B.R.D.: ABSTRACT TENDENCIES IN NEW GERMAN ART

It can be claimed that German art (i.e., art in the Bundesrepublik Deutschland, or West Germany) of the last ten years comprises the most durable and exciting national contribution to the current art "boom." Cultural traditions, economic strength, patterns of regional dispersion and identification, an increasingly complex but not unstable social fabric, and a healthy commitment to support for artistic activity on all levels (the federal, the state, the municipal, the private, and to some extent the corporate) have insured a multi-tiered system for generating artistic discourse and support for that discourse. Neither government subsidy nor private patronage is the sole arbiter of taste, neither the educational system nor the museum system the sole means of exposure or employment for artists.

Something else affects contemporary artists in West Germany, however, something less concrete yet more profoundly pressing than the above-mentioned factors shaping the nature of their country. Germany's recent history continues to weigh heavily, not just on the conscience of this generation born too late to be blamed for it, but on their whole philosophical grasp of the world. It is not just the recent past that spurs today's German artists but the still unresolved dissonance between recent German — and European — history and the human values inculcated for centuries into Germans and Europeans.

It is fitting, then, that German artists have reascended to international respect and influence precisely by coming forth with their anger and their need to reassert the powerful dialectic between passion and intellect that had been their heritage. This has been the accomplishment of German neo-Expressionists like Anselm Kiefer and Jörg Immendorff. It has also been the accomplishment of contemporary German art's paterfamilias, the late Joseph Beuys, who assumed an overtly transgressive role in German society with a part shamanistic, part political stance, and a body of work that confessed to evil, exorcised shame, and recalled both mysticism and rationality.

With the newest crop of German artists, it would seem, mystery subsumes into logic even as personal expression becomes more indirect. The readily grasped force of raw painting has been replaced by a cooler, more restrained visual language and a wittier, more urbane grasp of materials and techniques. The forms have become clearer, but the references and the reasons for fabricating have become less apparent, more a matter of aesthetic investigation and social metaphor than of individual emotion or cultural revelation. The mode of expression has become more oblique, literally abstracted.

As it has elsewhere, the reversion to abstraction in Germany has taken on various forms — geometric in particular, but other modes as well — and has manifested itself in two and even more in three dimensions. Even more than elsewhere, new abstraction in West Germany centers around the conceptual tension produced by artistic "play," that is, the individual artist's self-consciously aesthetical amplification and metamorphosis of his or her chosen subject matter. The relationship of what an artist wants to say, what he or she wants to talk about, how he or she might anticipate being understood, and how he or she actually is understood — the whole hermeneutic network of relative positions among inventor, observer, and invented/observed — seems much more pronounced in the thinking of new German abstractionists. They are, after all, still acutely aware of their unresolved inheritance and their own ambivalence towards it. It's just that they have finally gained some distance from that inheritance and their feelings about it, and can regard it with a certain dispassion, if not a lack of response. Even as they deal with that inheritance, they watch themselves deal with it.

All this means, among other significant developments, that the new German abstraction — or abstractions — is deliberately, even conscientiously, content-loaded. Purely formal concerns present themselves immediately to the beholder but are designed to communicate and facilitate the consideration of deeper personal, philosophical, social, or even political issues. There is, of course, no common formal language in art on which the artists can depend to convey what they mean. But their structures, their materials, their incorporation of extra-pictorial devices (most notably language itself), and even their self-conscious application of style — which some, at least, deliberately change from body of work to body of work, even from piece to piece — are oriented towards the inference, if not the direct conveyance, of message. In this respect, current German abstractionists do not replicate the purely non-objective, self-referential, haptic and experiential approaches of American Minimalists or other "pure" abstract artists (especially the German hard-edge and minimal painters and sculptors of the 1960s). Their model is closer to the Abstract Expressionists, who insisted that their abstraction was invested with content, indeed served deliberately as a vehicle for "subjects of the artist." But those highly metaphysical subjects were in fact best conveyed by such abstraction; the concerns of these German artists tend to be more concrete.

The closest models of thought for new West German abstractionists is the painting of Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, in which a multitude of stylistic approaches and references bespeaks a thoroughgoing ambivalence about the society they inhabit, the ability to feel or to communicate in that society, and the role of art in such a complex and compromised social fabric. These younger abstract artists accept Polke's and especially Richter's effective conflation of referential and non-objective imagery, regarding the former as an element in the latter. This is how an artist like Günther Förg can present large photographs and photographic installations as abstractions, despite the fact that the images are freighted with social and/or personal meaning, and how an artist such as Gerhard Merz, by contrast, can encode similar meaning into an elaborately crafted and seductively beautiful "abstract" object. This is how sculptors like Stephan Huber and Dieter Teusch can formulate non-objective structures iconically framing highly provocative signs, or sculptors such as Michael Dörner and Thomas Grünfeld can create "false furniture" which upends notions of functionality and elegance. This is how a painter like Imi Knoebel — who, somewhat further along in his career than the others, is actually a bridge between them and Richter and Polke — can work in several supposedly contradictory styles at once, confounding expectations. This is how artists as diverse as Heiner Blum and Thomas Locher, Günther Rost and Monika Brandmaier can engage the rudiments of written language as the one "recognizable" factor to recur in their work (especially given the fact that language is itself a highly developed, yet entirely natural, form of abstraction). This is how painters like Martin Kippenberger, Markus Oehlen, and Markus' brother Albert can coyly evolve imagery into unreadability, or Ulrike Nattermüller and Horst Münch can conversely spice their non-objective canvases with hints of symbolic figuration. This is how painters as unalike as Helmut Dörner and Udo Koch can display a similar appreciation of the tactile grittiness and simultaneous fragility and durability of raw materials. And this is how artists as dissimilar as Georg Herold and Eberhard Bosslet, Isa Genzken and Bogomir Ecker, Alf Schuler and Wolfgang Robbe, Gerhard Mantz and Rainer Bergmann, Klaus Kumrow and Theo Lambertin, Harald Richter and Sabine Funke, Stephan Kern and the mononymous Meuser can in their various ways — their rendering, their coloring, their hewing, their arranging, their finding, their assembling, their building — express a kind of faith in the human urge to fabricate, even though they recognize how that urge can be misdirected into ultimately destructive ends. As was demonstrated in the last Documenta, where a number of the artists here also showed, such objects and structures — redolent of machines and buildings, heavy industry and handicraft — evoke both the constructive and destructive, exploitative and cooperative aspects of contemporary society.

If such social and philosophical issues, however abstracted and generalized, preoccupy these artists, why do they root themselves in abstract form? Why do they in effect express their ideas, ideas about "real" life more than about the "pure" life of the mind, in these "purified" formal modes? In part, because they are, as mentioned before, not just thinking about these issues, but are watching themselves think about them. They strive at once to express their concerns with real-life matters and their own introspection. They do not want simply to make supercilious commentary or clever objects; they want to explore both the sensibilities that have produced the things they criticize — the acceptance of fascism, for example, or the surrender to consumeristic values, or the way the human urge to invent and build serves such negative manifestations — and their own individual relationships to those sensibilities. Unlike the attitudes conveyed by the New York-based appropriation and neo-Geo art with which we are most familiar in America, attitudes which are too often marked by a simplistic accusatory tone and a cynical acquiescence to the societal degenerations being faulted (or, if you would, "deconstructed"), new German abstraction mixes ambivalence with commitment, enervation with energy, despair with hope. German artists feel themselves at once part of their society and alienated from it, critical of their fellow countrymen and fellow human beings and responsible to them, suspicious of the power of art to expand consciousness and effect change, and devoted to that power. In a sense, more than any other national group of artists, the current crop of abstractionists working in West Germany reflect the state not just of the art, but of the world, at the end of the twentieth century.

Peter Frank
Los Angeles
August 1988

KARL BORNSTEIN GALLERY

August 26, 1988 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

B.R.D.:
ABSTRACT TENDENCIES IN NEW GERMAN ART
September 29 - November 10, 1988

OPENING RECEPTION: Thursday, September 29, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

The Karl Bornstein Gallery is pleased to announce the inaugural exhibition at its new Santa Monica space, "B.R.D.: ABSTRACT TENDENCIES IN NEW GERMAN ART", organized by noted critic/curator Peter Frank with Karl Bornstein. Featuring the work of 33 West German artists, this exhibit explores one of the most exciting national contributions to the current art scene. Many of these artists have participated in major international surveys such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale. But for most, this is their first American exposure. Participating artists are:

RAINER BERGMANN
HEINER BLUM
EBERHARD BOSSLET
MONIKA BRANDMAIER
HELMUT DÖRNER
MICHAEL DÖRNER
BOGOMIR ECKER
GÜNTHER FÖRG
SABINE FUNKE
ISA GENZKEN
THOMAS GRÜNFELD
GEORG HEROLD
ULRICH HORNDASH
STEPHAN HUBER
STEPHAN KERN
MARTIN KIPPENBERGER
IMI KNOEBEL
UDO KOCH
KLAUS KUMROW
THEO LAMBERTIN
THOMAS LOCHER
GERHARD MANTZ
GERHARD MERZ
MEUSER
HORST MÜNCH
ULRIKE NATTERMÜLLER
ALBERT OEHLEN
MARKUS OEHLEN
HARALD RICHTER
WOLFGANG ROBBE
GÜNTHER ROST
ALF SCHULER
DIETER TEUSCH

In his essay for the exhibit, Peter Frank writes: "It is fitting that German artists have reascended to international respect and influence by coming forth with...their need to reassert the powerful dialectic between passion and intellect that had been their heritage. With the newest crop of German artists, the readily grasped force of raw painting seen in the work of the neo-Expressionists has been replaced by a cooler, more restrained visual language and a wittier, more urbane grasp of materials and techniques. The forms have become clearer, but the references and the reasons for fabricating have become less apparent, more a matter of aesthetic investigation and social metaphor than of individual emotion or cultural revelation. The mode of expression has become more oblique, literally abstracted.

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