

Conceptual Art in East Germany – Robert Rehfeldt and his network of artists

With my lecture I would like to introduce you to the artistic work of Robert Rehfeldt. Rehfeldt was born in Stargard/Pomerania in 1931, but lived and worked in East Berlin from 1945 until his death in 1993. After finishing his apprenticeship as a stone cutter, he studied painting and graphics at the Academy of the Arts in West Berlin. By producing abstract and experimental pieces of art that ranged from Super 8mm Film, Performance, Sculpture and Painting to a variety of printing techniques, he began to work in defiance of the official cultural and educational policy of the GDR. The largest part of this extensive oeuvre is quite unknown and has not been presented in public until this day, although Rehfeldt's artistic approach was very unusual in East Germany. He dealt with stylistic strategies of Dadaism, conceptual practices and elements of Pop-Art to break with the rules of Social Realism, but most people were interested in Rehfeldt's Mail-Art projects only.

As a start, I would like to point out two aspects, that played the most important role in Rehfeldt's life and work: community and communication. Rehfeldt had the vision to found a „community of creative artists and cultural workers“, in which everybody could exchange ideas without competing for fame in the commercial art market. Rehfeldt's worst image of being an artist was to hide behind his easel and losing touch with the outside world. This idea, which was strongly inspired by Joseph Beuys, meant something very special to him: in East Germany, prohibitions of exhibitions and publications involved an isolation of alternative artists, which, at first glance, could not be easily overcome. It took years until the unofficial art scene was able to establish itself. This required to find solutions for using the few possibilities and compromises the state offered them. At so-called „Wohnzimmer-Galerien“ („living-room-galleries“), exhibitions took place in private houses. Most of these meetings had been organized by artists, who, if registered at the „Verbund Bildender Künstler der DDR“ („Association of Visual Artists in the GDR“), were allocated a studio which offered enough space for lectures, parties and concerts. Visual artists, who were less exposed to the collective rituals and control of the cultural policy, had key benefits compared to actors, dancers and musicians who worked in hierarchically managed institutions. The interdisciplinary events enabled both the exchange and the presentation of other art forms, which otherwise had no chance of being put on display. Furthermore, the often excessive meetings (alcohol, that cost little in East Germany, played an important role) offered an uncomplicated way of making new contacts.

Robert Rehfeldt and his wife Ruth, who, by writing concrete poems, worked as an artist too, had a large studio near Alexanderplatz. While the bright upper level could be used perfectly for painting and drawing, the basement, the so-called „Kriechgalerie“ („creep-gallery“) offered enough space for printing presses, exhibitions, concerts and parties, which took place regularly. The premises were very well insulated, so that people could make noise without having to consider neighbours or the police throughout the whole night: fine artists, authors and film-makers, among them for instance the actor Manfred Krug and the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, went there regularly. Guests from all over the world were accommodated in the basement of this studio.

After Erich Honecker had replaced Walter Ulbricht as head of state in 1971, a cultural liberalization was initialized, which allowed for the opening of various nonofficial private galleries. This offered many new possibilities: Now, exhibitions did not have to take place spontaneously in private rooms or outdoors any longer—for example, there had been temporary shows and performances at cemeteries or wasteyards. Along with the well-known studio-gallery „Eigen und Art“ in Leipzig or „Gallery Oben“ in Karl-Marx-Stadt, the „Cooperative Society for Fine Arts“, later renamed to „Gallery Arkade“, was founded with the help of Robert Rehfeldt in Berlin. His first major exhibition though, which was to take place at the Cooperative Society in 1966, was prohibited by the secret police (Stasi). He wanted to show several prints and graphics as well as a didactic presentation that explained to the visitors the way he worked: etched printing plates and other utilities was supposed to illuminate the entire developing process of his works of art. The Ministry for State Security did not approve of idea and declared Rehfeldt's work to be non-artistic and counter-revolutionary: it made him close the exhibition „for technical reasons“ a few hours before the opening.

In East Germany it was nearly impossible for an artist to earn enough money only by selling his work. Being a member of the „Association of Visual Artists in the GDR“ was not only necessary for getting studio space, but also for receiving a tax number. Also, the artists' salaries depended on public works that were commissioned by the state. Artists such as Rehfeldt were blackmailed by the Stasi frequently: Work assignments were cancelled, because he tried to send self-made postcards with the inscription „Sei Kunst im Getriebe“, which freely translates into „be resistant by making art“.

In 1966, Rehfeldt made a conscious decision to live in East Germany, especially because the rents were low and he felt financially secure. His work resembled that of a handyman: He drew vignettes and caricatures, designed billboards, made sculptures and ornamented buildings like shopping malls, factories or a race-course for horse racing. He mastered many different techniques and materials such

as stained glass, ceramics, enamel and house front painting. It was generally very common in the GDR that artists accepted jobs organized by the Stasi, but it still is interesting to examine what kind of work they did. For example, Rehfeldt would probably not have liked to paint the officer's club at the Stasi regiment but enjoyed to position political collages at the Underground station „Rosa-Luxemburg Platz“. He always worked in teams and used this as a chance to make new contacts and build up a network. Since the 1970s, many artists had been organising common trips to Poland, to attend the Jazz festival in Warsaw, to visit the graphic biennial in Krakow or to visit several University libraries which offered a wide selection of Western European literature. Rehfeldt also took part in so-called „Plein-Airs“, which were very popular in East Germany. Plein-Airs, mostly planned by artists, were excursions to nature with the objective of working together in a creative way, and of course of celebrating and having a good time. In the outdoors, isolated from everything, Rehfeldt attended Performances and experienced the possibilities of substandard film for the first time. All art forms with a conceptual background, whether Performance, Installation, Body-Art, or Film and other media, stood no chance in the GDR. Generally, both the necessary structural conditions and a personal interest in this kind of art were lacking. Especially actionalist concepts and intermedial collaborative projects were not accepted, because the Stasi was afraid of solidary agreements among the artists. Every art work that could not be hung on a wall as a properly painted and framed image was officially forbidden because it was deemed to be „sketchy“. Hence, it is not surprising that many artists relocated to Western Germany. Others, such as Rehfeldt, were obliged to play a double role and to find a special way of coexistence with the Stasi. These artists had to develop a resistance against governmental repression and control mechanisms to realize their own ideas.

Rehfeldt did not announce his performances, but instead held them spontaneously. He always came up with new ideas at exhibition openings: He liked playing the guitar, invited other musicians for a session, filled hosepipes with whisky and recited poems by Kurt Schwitters and Ernst Jandl. He had a good grasp of different dialects, especially of the Austrian, because he had lived in Bad Ischl/Austria for several years during National Socialism. In 1945, as a 14-year old boy, he was forced to join the mountain infantry. Of course, Rehfeldt was more than glad when the Americans entered the country and the war was over. Since that time, he has been a big admirer of the USA and started collecting steel helmets. Rehfeldt enjoyed it very much to act and masquerade, but he did not always need an audience. Some of the performances he made on his own at home; they can be viewed in the form of polaroid photographs only. In 1982 Rehfeldt was permitted to visit his mother in Hamburg for the first time. Also, he wanted to seize the opportunity to attend the Documenta 7 in Kassel. Unfortunately, at

that time, he physically resembled a member of the RAF (Red Army Faction). When Rehfeldt arrived at the station, the whole area was blocked and crowded with policemen who arrested him immediately. Back at home, he documented and re-enacted this adventure in a very funny way: He took photographs of himself wearing more than 50 different costumes that ranged from the American GI to the National Folk Army Officer.

But there were East German artists who really concentrated on Performances in public space: César Olhagaray for example, who was granted asylum by the GDR in 1974 after he had been detained as a political prisoner for several months in Chile. Among others, he showed a Performance at an exhibition opening organised by Rehfeldt in Berlin, mixing up elements of Body-Art, pantomime and free dance. Olhagaray who was a well-trained ballet dancer, architect and graphic artist, had the aim of developing new ways of communication and body language and describes himself as an art agitator.

The examination of the human body also played an important role for the „Auto-perforation-Artists“, a group of stage designers, founded by Else Gabriel, Micha Brendel, Rainer Görß and Via Lewandowsky in the mid-1980s. In 1988, they staged a performance with the title „Allez! Arrest.“, during which the artists were living in the gallery Eigen und Art for 11 days, exhibiting themselves, in a self-proclaimed „state of emergency“. The reference to Joseph Beuys is quite obvious: During an exhibition at Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin in 1982, he constructed a temporary studio in the atrium, where everybody could watch him working. His appearances at Documenta were always associated with his constant physical presence. The exhibition space was likewise his working room.. The Auto-perforation-artists converted the gallery to a space for living, sleeping and working, for exhibitions or concerts and also for visitors and guests. Every day between 6 and 8 p.m. there were „consultation-hours“ during which the public could trade in information, objects and food for art works. These actions can be described as „Social Sculpture“, but priority was given to a provocative exhibitionism and sado-masochistic rituals that remind of Hermann Nitsch's „Orgy-Mystery-Theatre“ and the Viennese Actionism.

The Auto-Perforation-Artists had several reasons for acting as they did: Provocation, fooling the regime, breaking taboos, exceeding limits. While dunking their heads in buckets full of cow's blood and blow-drying dead wet chicken, they explored the strategy of shock as well as the fascination of disgust. They definitely had an affinity for using curious materials such as animals' throats or lungs, hens' claws and dead muskrats. The Auto-perforation-artists had the goal of their own expatriation. Therefore, they did not compromise or mitigate their provoking ideas. Ironically, they could make

trouble without being expelled from the country or getting serious problems with the Stasi. This shows how inscrutable and unpredictable the governmental and the cultural system in East Germany were: In order to keep the artists' group under control, the Stasi offered them spaces for public performances, for instance at the Academy of the Arts in Berlin.

The performance artist Erhard Monden made similar experiences. In 1985, he took the courage to open a „School for Advanced Fine Arts“ which he led until the German Reunification and even beyond – fighting against the opposition and interventions of the Stasi that classified him as „politically-indifferent“ and „hostile-negative“ person in their secret files. In 1981, Rehfeldt, a close friend to Erhard Monden, made a Super-8 documentary on Monden's artistic method of production. He filmed Monden who was following/realising his concept of making self-portraits by means of stencils and airbrush during a time period of 60 hours. At the moment, the film is located somewhere in the Berlin archive, looked after by Ruth Rehfeldt. Regrettably though, it has been unavailable for viewing to date, apart from occasional screenings at select exhibitions.

In East Germany, a Super-8-camera was neither something luxurious nor a scarce good, films were easy to find in every drugstore, whereas video cameras were nearly unachievable. An artistic production of electronic media hardly existed in the GDR. Film in particular was seen as a potentially subversive medium, with which critical positions towards the state could have widespread effects. Under special circumstances, the experimental, autonomous, artistic work with Super-8 was possible, without financial or governmental support, and without permission of showing the results to the public. Artists who ignored the rules had to face reprimands like penalties and confiscations. Many of them developed their films on their own, which caused a loss of quality but prevented the Stasi's access to the material. The substandard films lacked a sound track. During a film screening, the sound was play-backed from an audio-tape, and the speed of the cassette player had to be adjusted to the speed of the projector. Sometimes, a band played live music which underlines the performative and experimental character of the screenings which were unique, inimitable events that were kept secret to avoid trouble with the Stasi. The loss of documentary references – only few photographs exist – demonstrates that the artists at that time were not really interested in permanent storage or musealisation of their work.

Besides film, Rehfeldt explored different sound techniques. For instance, he assembled sound collages from radio shows during the 1960s and recorded audio-tapes entitled „vocal/melodic audio-tape-letters from East to West“, which he moderated, giving away private details, playing the guitar and

interviewing his family. The results he sent to friends and relatives in West Germany.

In the GDR photocopiers, too, were kept under rigorous control by the Stasi because they could easily be used for producing political leaflets. Particularly popular but forbidden books and postcard editions had to be photographed page by page for duplication. Under the conditions of the state's guardianship, public relations work was also not possible for self-determined actions. It was prohibited to place an advert in the papers, or to print and hang up posters anywhere in public. Therefore, many artists and organisers went back to forms of invitation that might appear antiquated and bizarre from today's view. They used nearly all available techniques, from dry point processes to potato printing, which also played an important role for the Mail-Art movement later on. Both spot remover which facilitated rubdowns of printer's copies and the children's stamp box „Splendid 527“ were popular and helpful means that Rehfeldt used frequently besides his self-made rubber-stamps. Rehfeldt, as many artists from dictatorial states, used Mail-Art to prevent isolation and make international contacts: For instance, he had a lively artistic and personal exchange with Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys, György Galántai, Anna Banana, Endre Tót, Paulo Bruscky, Egardo Antonio Vigo or Clemente Padín. Rehfeldt did not only study English, Polish, French and Spanish vocabulary to overcome language barriers, he also liked to mix up different words to form new items. Amongst others, he connected the words CONTACT and ART to CONTART. This word-creation became a label of his work; he stamped and printed it on his letters, postcards, posters and New Year's greeting prints. The graphic art works and drawings Rehfeldt posted regularly to his friends mostly dealt with the problems of life in a surveillance state and claimed creative liberty. Also, he attached address lists to his letters because networking was a matter of particular concern for him. Rehfeldt who was an avowed socialist and never distributed political leaflets or agitated people for fighting against the political regime secretly, never had serious problems with the Stasi. This does not mean that the Ministry for State Security thought Mail-Art was harmless: Jürgen Gottschalk, a Mail-Artist from Dresden, was under surveillance and finally imprisoned for more than 2 years. Most of Rehfeldt's letters were intercepted, opened, photographed, documented and saved in the folders of the so-called “post-control-files”. In the GDR, more than 90.000 private letters were read secretly every day. After German Re-Union, many Mail-Artists took the opportunity to inspect their Stasi files. They noticed that many addresses on foreign letters had been ripped off the envelopes and were preserved while the rest of it was destroyed. Thus, the Stasi's postal system can be accused of demolishing art works deliberately. In other cases, they not only faked envelopes by means of purpose-made postal and rubber stamps, but wrote letters to play people off against each other. For instance, Leo Duch received a letter from Robert Rehfeldt with

an attached flag of the GDR, which caused him lots of trouble with the Brazilian military police. When Duch asked Rehfeldt not to put any propaganda material in his letters anymore, it emerged that he never put the flag inside the envelope.

Even though many artists from East Germany worked in a conceptual way in the Mail-Art system, there were many interesting works beyond it. Rehfeldt tried to outsmart the responsible Censorship of Publications Board by producing different rubber stamps with English, official-sounding company names that made, when placed on envelopes, an intimidating impression on the postal system's staff members. In 1981, Birger Jesch questioned the postal censorship during a nightly performance, in which he wrapped himself with red ribbon whose one end was tied to a public letterbox. Two years later he used the letterbox again, when he threw letters into it anonymously, wearing a self-made mask. Joseph W. Huber, who met Rehfeldt for the first time at "Palette North" where Rehfeldt worked as a teacher for drawing, painting and printing, designed a postcard edition named "Schilderungen". Huber photographed signs in public space, whose surroundings show the complete opposite of the prohibitions or orders they carry. Huber chose a perfectly fitting title: the German expression "Schilderungen" is a synonym for the English word "stories" or "reports", but also contains "Schild", which means "sign" in English. Furthermore, he organized several environmental actions. Among other things, he made frottages of gully caps in Berlin districts that had no adequate water supply.

It is very important to make some of these art works accessible to the public, because most of them have never been presented at exhibitions or elsewhere. At the moment, they are located in the artists' or their relatives' private hands and could fall into oblivion soon.