

Daimler

Art Collection

Minimalism in Germany. The Sixties II

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In Place of an Introduction

Minimalism in Germany. The Sixties—Aspects of a phenomenon

“Vis-à-vis de rien.” Theodor W. Adorno analyzes the status of the work of art in his aesthetics lectures in 1958/59

In about 1960, the avantgarde artists in Europe, America and Asia formulated a radical reassessment of the traditional concept of the work of art, thus laying the foundations for Conceptual Art and Minimalism in Europe. These developments did not lead to an artistic style, but questioned the basis of artistic production, reception, and presentation in general. The artists simultaneously were working on this ‘dethronement’ of the traditional work of art, to an extent unaware of each other and with very different motives. Put in a different way, the change around 1960 puts an end to the age of the autonomous work of art. This fundamental questioning of the ‘work’ concept makes it necessary to acquire new authenticity and originality, but without being able to make this correspond with traditional artistic production.

Breaking these connections with traditional culture is first of all a global phenomenon. Detaching oneself from the art business, emigrating from the crumbling landscape of institutionalized art can manifest itself quite concretely in the act of leaving the studio and

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looking for other outlets: in the form public actions and performances (Gutai group, Japan, 1955/56) and of *Arbeiten auf dem Felde* (Working in the field, Beuys 1956/57), establishing one's own forum for presentation and discussion (*ZERO* magazine by Mack and Piene, Azimut/Azimuth gallery and magazine respectively by Castellani and Manzoni, 1959), temporarily burying a 7,200-meter-long line or setting up a *Socle du monde* (Plinth for the World, Manzoni, 1960), signing a bridge as original art work (Henderikse), conceiving a Sahara Project with light reliefs and light cubes in the desert (Mack, 1958), celebrating a ZERO Festival at the Rheinwiesen (Mack, Piene, Uecker, 1961), setting up a 1-kilometer-long cord in the Rhön Mountains (Walther, 1964), or in the first sketch for a Land-art project by Walter De Maria that same year.

But this departure from the parameters of the traditional work of art can also be detected around 1960 in the fundamentally new quality accorded to artistic subjectivity: Fontana's slit canvases are radical gestures of subjectivity—no longer of an informal and biographical nature, but of an objectified subjectivity, effectively without emotion. It can also be said that Manzoni, when showing *Artist's Shit*, *Artist's Breath*, and the unrealized *Artist's Blood* project, et cetera, placed alongside his *Achromes*, which still present pictorial arguments, articulates the individual, the 'subject' Manzoni, as a necessary opposite pole.

For some of the artists connected to 'Minimalism in Germany' this quality of artistic subjectivity could be identified in the emotionless choice and configuration of phenomena and things in the world they inhabit, traditionally rejecting 'objective' criteria: artistic access to the things alone qualifies them for discussion in the context of art, and arguments and justifications going beyond this are consistently ignored. The picture becomes an object in modernism at the same time it is being destroyed—a fundamental turning point in the history of twentieth-century art that starts to take shape with Fontana's first *Bucchi* in 1949 (works on paper and canvases with slits).

Here I would like to allude briefly to an intellectual analysis of the 'art change' made at the same time, addressing central questions and problems in art and the intellectual situation at the time: Theodor W. Adorno's lectures on aesthetics dating from 1958/59.

"In the current artistic situation, where literally all the material conditions of art have become problematical, and where art is no longer presented with anything substantial, but where each artist stands 'vis-à-vis de rien', being faced with 'nothingness' to a certain extent, something that in physics would be called basic research is also urgently required in the art field."¹

Adorno is using this diagnosis of the age in order to tune his listeners in, so that even in the second lecture he can locate the essential significance of the reflection process as the basis

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for artistic production and the newly qualified role for the viewer, who by understanding the objective facticity of the work participates in its mode of being, and so becomes part of constitution of the works.² In the third lecture, Adorno questions the concept of the author, develops art's dialectical relationship with reality, and introduces the concept of "dissonance" as a symptom of the times: "When an artist, a composer, for example, uses dissonances today he is not doing it to double the horror of the world through the dissonances, even though there is always something of this horror present in these dissonances and in their exclusivity and their constructive use; he does it first and foremost because each dissonance of this kind is always something happy, simply because it is different from entrenched conventions and then even more because it has not yet been embraced, because it is new and charged with expression."³

In the fifth lecture Adorno discusses whether art is qualified to dispense itself from the reality principle of "mastering reality," while at the same time giving an image to aesthetic distinction precisely by accepting reality, following the principle of collage and montage. Adorno says that there were stages in the history of art "where a certain type of aesthetic sensibility that directs itself against the sphere of cultural chatter and the affirmatively cultural, demands something very precisely from the work of art itself: if it is to remain a work of art at all, in other words if it is to remain true to its definition and opposed to the world, then it should re-adopt precisely that cultivated quality that actually defines its special sphere, and then re-engage with elements of empirical reality after all—as has always been the case in collages and montages [...]."⁴

In the introduction to the sixth lecture Adorno defines the "perspective of radical destruction or damage" as the true "signature of the art of our age," and stresses that art's duty "to help the oppressed find a voice" should not be articulated literally and clearly, but should rather be accepted as concealed within the forms and things of art. The seventh lecture deconstructs the myth of the "creator artist," and observes in this context that "today the problem of construction has become an absolute; nothing is prescribed in terms of form, so consequently form is merely an achievement of the subject with material at its disposal."⁵ Associated with this for Adorno is the significance of chance as a conceptual element in art, as can be observed in productions by artists such as Cage, Pierre Boulez, or Stockhausen: "In the present situation material that has been completely purified—purified from all prescribed categories of meaningfulness—has come up against a kind of crisis of meaning. That is to say it does not yield any meaning itself, and the artist is also not able to breathe any meaning, anything positively meaningful, into it for his part."⁶ The works of art negate any binding order, and the element of chance lends them a new subjective quality. Even so, as Adorno states later, they did not create an impression of something meaningless, but "also [gave] the impression," through the negative principles of selection and chance as constituting elements

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of the production process, “of being an extraordinarily integrated element [...] even one of great compulsion.”⁷

American art in Germany from 1959 to 1970. A success story.

A highly informative essay published by Phyllis Tuchman in New York’s Artforum magazine in November 1970 gives us an insight into how the remarkable reception of American art by German critics, museums and buyers between 1959 (when documenta II was held) and 1970 was viewed by American commentators. As the presence of Abstract Expressionism, Minimal and Conceptual Art in German galleries, institutions and private collections—and how it was communicated to the audience—represents the background for the development of Minimalist tendencies in Germany, the major insights contained in this essay will be briefly summarised here. Partly it was a case of a fruitful exchange between German and American tendencies, and partly it was a case of explicit mutual antipathy.

Tuchman’s essay opens with the words: “The acceptance—and recognition—of contemporary art has acquired a significantly greater profile in Germany. Fifteen years ago, when Documenta I took place in Kassel, the current level of support for contemporary art would have been inconceivable. Today, contemporary art is impossible to ignore. In the past three years, certain galleries have become leaders in the field, prominent collectors have acquired large volumes of contemporary art, and Cologne has become a formidable current arts centre. It is particularly noteworthy that many museums are proud to present young art (and are supported in this in grand style by collectors). Many artists travel to Germany to work and actually produce their best work there, and a large sector of contemporary American painting and sculpture now has a prominent presence in Germany.”⁸

Tuchman begins by establishing that American artists were present in force at documenta II in 1959 (35 in total). These artists were brought to Germany largely by the galleries of Sidney Janis, Castelli and Emmerich. The leading avant-garde galleries of the Rhineland opened at around the same time: Alfred Schmela’s gallery in Düsseldorf opened in 1957 and Rudolf Zwirner’s gallery in Essen opened in 1960. In 1964, as part of documenta III (which was curated by an international jury) the classics of the older generation were juxtaposed with selected contemporary approaches—both German (for instance, the Zero group and Joseph Beuys) and American (Johns, Louis and Rauschenberg). In 1963/64 Heiner Friedrich and

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Franz Dahlem opened their galleries in Munich and Rolf Ricke opened his gallery in Kassel. (Zwirner had been active in Cologne in the intervening period.) They travelled to New York and acquired artworks direct from artists or from galleries (rather than from Ileana Sonnabend in Paris). Friedrich brokered the sale of the American Kraushar Collection, which contained outstanding examples of Pop Art, to the German industrialist Karl Ströher. Expanded to include major artwork groups by Joseph Beuys and others, the Sammlung Ströher collection toured Germany in 1968 before being installed in its new permanent home in the Hessisches Landesmuseum. Tuchman emphasises the collection's quality, but is still more impressed by the professional character of its museum presentation and the accompanying catalogue, which created a new benchmark in the history of art. The next section deals with the Ludwig collection. Tuchman also expresses admiration for the *attitude* of the collectors, who made the artworks available to the wider art-viewing public immediately after acquiring them.

Tuchman regards the decision that documenta IV, in 1968, should focus on current contemporary art as the next significant qualitative change. The influence of the German galerists was considerable: they made artworks available, curated extensive companion exhibitions (Rolf Ricke) or, as with Konrad Fischer and Hans Strelow's response to the first Kölner Kunstmesse (Cologne Art Fair), organized alternative fairs like 'Prospect 68' where prominent (predominantly American) artists of the period were represented. There were detailed discussions on which New York gallery would cooperate with which German gallery, leading to a highly effective division of the market and presentation of the artists. In Tuchman's view, the rigorously developed and strategically oriented programme of Konrad Fischer's gallery commanded a pioneering position in this scene. However, Heiner Friedrich of Munich, one of the foremost publicists of Minimal Art, Conceptual Art and Land Art, also proved to be a remarkably intelligent and farsighted operator who recognized and promoted the latest developments in American art before they had been recognized in the USA.⁹

In the next section, Tuchman emphasises the major role played by young museum curators in Germany, who cooperated closely with the galleries in presenting bold and forward-thinking exhibitions of the young art trends on their premises in Düsseldorf, Mönchengladbach, Krefeld and Aachen. Tuchman critically establishes that new trends and tendencies were discussed in American art magazines in the 1960s, but that they reached a wider audience in Germany. "It is astonishing to see so much American art in Germany, and it is disconcerting to see New York art there before it has been exhibited in New York. Many artworks are so tastefully chosen that the encounter makes a significantly more favourable impression than in New York. There is no need to have access to the house of a private collector in order to see the work of great contemporary artists, and there is no need to visit a gallery or an artist's

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studio to see recent painting and sculpture. American art is currently on display in Germany – whether we are prepared to admit it or not.”¹⁰

Max Bense, Stuttgart 1950/1970 – pioneers of Minimalist language, image and media art

As Werner Lippert phrased it when speaking about Peter Roehr’s artwork with reference to the features it shares with Max Bense’s theory of information, the difficulties in understanding Minimalist and Conceptual German art circa 1965 lie “in the ‘non-ostensive’ nature of the artwork and in the tautological character of the reality ‘reproduced’ in it. This was made abundantly clear in Roehr’s ‘exhibition-exhibition’ in early 1967 – not only were the individual elements of the exhibited pictures identical, but the exhibited pictures themselves were also identical. The point, however, is that where viewers themselves are no longer the (self-immanent) basis of reflection, where they no longer represent the reference point to what is being presented, then the schemata of traditional viewpoints are denied to them. The ‘lack of referentiality’ in the aesthetic object means that it is no longer accessible to an experience-oriented concept of art; what can be seen in it no longer appears sufficient to justify its claim to being art. In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that this kind of artistic thought originated in the same period as an equally object-oriented ‘information-theoretical aesthetic’: this form of aesthetics, also, is a science concerned with aesthetic factors that are unrelated to metaphysical considerations. It is objective and rationally empirical. Like the tendencies in art that are being discussed here, it describes what can be seen in any given object and not what can be seen in the receiving subject.”¹¹

The geographical centre of the 1960s German art developments discussed in this publication lay in the Rhineland, reinforced by the avant-garde scenes in Munich and Berlin. Exhibitions and publications on the Minimalism and reduced art of this period have previously paid rather less attention to the philosopher Max Bense, who was active in Stuttgart and Ulm and whose influence was felt on many levels. “Against the background of post-war Germany, Bense promulgated an aesthetic of ‘technological existence’ that anticipated the media theory developments in literature and the humanities of the 1980s, decades previously. His thoughts on literature and art were part of a comprehensive philosophical worldview devoted to revealing the scientific and ‘technological reality’ of civilisation and opposed to any tendency to mythologize in German post-war culture—opposed to ‘comfortable metaphysics’. Max Bense was ahead of C.P. Snow in calling for an expanded definition of culture that would

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unite artistic and literary culture with scientific and technological culture: he believed that mathematics, physics and the insights of engineering should become part of intellectual events and of current philosophical discourse.”¹²

Max Bense plays a significant role in the context of German Minimalism as a curator, philosopher and theoretician. Bense had been appointed to a professorship in philosophy and scientific theory in Stuttgart in 1950, and also exerted an influence on the young student body at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (1953-58; 1965/66). From 1957 onwards, he organised exhibitions of contemporary art in Stuttgart’s Gänsheide 26 gallery, and from 1959 onwards he organized the same kind of exhibition in the Studiengalerie he himself had founded at the Technische Hochschule. Bense exhibited a number of artists from the reduced art scene in what, in some cases, was their first German solo exhibition: Max Bill, Lygia Clark, Almir Mavignier, François Morellet, Bernhard Sandfort, Harry Kramer, Uli Pohl, Mira Schendel. He discusses Ed Sommer, Hugo Jamin, Kurt Kranz, Gerhard von Graevenitz and Oskar Holweck in monographic texts. The ‘work demonstration’ that took place at the opening of Lygia Clark’s exhibition should be emphasized, as it is little known. The artist demonstrates to the public how the spatial configuration of her flexible, foldable metal sculptures can be changed.

In the winter semester of 1959/60, Max Bense staged the exhibition ‘konkrete texte’ in the Studiengalerie. The accompanying catalogue lists: “max bense (unsigned), introduction; from the programme of the noigandres-gruppe sao paulo (augusto de campos, décio pignatari, haroldo de campos); poems: agosto de campos, um tempo (German and Portuguese); ronaldo azeredo, solitaire; gerhard rühm, words have two forms of manifestation; Helmut Heissenbüttel, Politische Grammatik; eugen gomringer, constellations; Claude Shannon, model of a Stochastic text approximation; Max Bense, montage of the IST; text theory.”

Bense published pioneering texts on themes that included the artwork of Max Bill, Andreas Christen, Lygia Clark, Oskar Holweck, Heinz Mack, Henri Michaux, Georg Karl Pfahler, Nathalie Sarraute and Gertrude Stein, Timm Ulrichs and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. In addition to establishing the Studiengalerie, Bense worked jointly with Elisabeth Walther to establish the magazine ‘augenblick’ (in 1955) and the ‘rot’ series of publications (from 1960 onwards) as additional forums for art.

In the autumn of 1959, as part of the ‘Studium Generale’, project, initiated by himself and by Käte Hamburger, Bense opened the ‘Studiengalerie’ at the Technische Hochschule Stuttgart

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with an exhibition of the French author Francis Ponge's 'Visuellen Texten'. By 1981, Bense had curated a total of 85 Studiengalerie exhibitions. He exhibited artworks by Brazilian avant-garde artists such as Augusto and Haroldo de Campos (1959), Lygia Clark and Bruno Giorgi (1964/66) and Mira Schendel (1967), the British artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, the Swiss artist Andreas Christen (1962), Eugen Gomringer, François Morellet, Uli Pohl (1961), Harry Kramer, Alfredo Volpi (1963), the Stuttgart artist Rolf Garnich, Hansjörg Mayer (1964) et al. Many of these artists had never previously been exhibited in Germany. The first presentations of computer graphics took place in 1965. Bense became the central figure of the 'Stuttgarter Schule', a cultural avant-garde drawn to his aesthetic concept and radicalism. During Bense's tenure, Stuttgart became a centre of 'concrete' and 'visual' poetry.

In the mid-1960s, Max Bense held the exhibition 'Konkrete Poesie International I' in the university's studio gallery. It featured artworks by artists including Reinhard Döhl, Helmut Heissenbüttel, Ernst Jandl, Gerhard Rühm, Dieter Roth and Timm Ulrichs. In the context of the 'Ästhetisches Colloquium', Bense exhibited computer graphics by Georg Nees. He published the manifesto text 'projekte generativer ästhetik' in volume no. 19 of the 'rot' book series. Bense also inspired artists and scientists outside of Germany to consider the uses of the computer as a tool for art and aesthetic research. In 1968, at Bense's instigation, the English curator Jasia Reichardt organized the pioneering exhibition 'Cybernetic Serendipity', which was concerned with computers, art and cybernetics, for the London Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA).

The concept of order is of central importance to Bense—for him, the artistic act of 'ordering selection' opposes itself to a world in the grip of continual dissolution. An artwork is 'manufactured aesthetic information'—for Bense, the term 'information' unites aesthetic, spiritual and technical worlds. At the same time, Bense's concept of 'information' is diametrically opposed to the traditional concept of an artistic 'message'. It replaces this traditional concept with an emphasis on 'material' and 'production'.

Erich Buchholz: the Herkulesufer model, Berlin 1922/1968

It may initially seem strange that the spatial concept developed by Erich Buchholz for his Herkulesufer studio in Berlin in 1922, reconstructed by him in the form of two models in

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1968, is presented in a publication entitled 'Minimalism in Germany. The Sixties'. It was included in the belief that it is no coincidence that Buchholz created his reconstruction when he did—at a time when the specifically Minimalist scene came together in Germany in the mid-1960s, harking back to the spatial concepts of European Modernism and inspired by encounters with the first exhibitions of American Minimal art in Germany, this may have encouraged Buchholz to create his reconstruction. Looking back today, we can say that Buchholz' reduced geometrical spatial installations from 1922/1960s are a German 'answer' to the development of Minimal Art—but also that he, like Lissitzky, was a German pioneer of early Modernism.

As described by Julia Müller in this publication, in 1921/22, Erich Buchholz created a Berlin studio space that was a spatial ensemble incorporating painting and sculpture—the first German example of a pictorial and sculptural layout specifically intended as 'space art'. Speaking in 1969, Buchholz recalled that: "Many of the artists knew this room well: Hülsenbeck, Schwitters, Hausmann, Höch, Segal, Behne, Moholy, Péri, Lissitzky, Kemeny, Kallai ... Behne introduced the architects Oud and Döcker. The walls, sculptures and reliefs gave rise to all kinds of discussions. Eggeling, another member of the circle, introduced the subject of kinetics to the discussion". Buchholz' *Atelier Herkulesufer 15* from 1922 was exhibited as a photographic documentation (after the requested realization was cancelled at short notice) as part of the 'Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung' of 1923—the same show for which El Lissitzky created his legendary 'Prounen Raum'. In 1965, Buchholz was once again working on minimalist space concepts in Berlin; the 1 : 1 reconstruction of the 'Prounen Raum' for the Lissitzky exhibition in Eindhoven 1968 gave him occasion to revive his concept from the year 1922 in model form. The model was first exhibited in an international context at the exhibition 'The Planar Dimension' in the Guggenheim Museum New York 1977.¹³

Representatives of a specific German Minimalism:

Charlotte Posenenske, Hanne Darboven, Peter Roehr, Franz Erhard Walther and others

Before the significant artists of the 1960s are discussed further, two exponents of German 'Minimalism avant la lettre' should be mentioned. At the end of the 1950s, Erwin Heerich, who was living close to Düsseldorf at the time, began to create his 'simple objects'—cardboard sculptures and graphics, prints and drawings based on isometric

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principles, mathematic and geometric logic and architectonic proportions. In July of 1968, the Berlin avant-garde gallerist René Block planned to exhibit Heerich jointly with artists like IMI Giese, IMI Knoebel, Charlotte Posenenske et al. in his exhibition 'Minimal Art'. Heerich, however, refused, as he did not feel that his art belonged in this context.¹⁴

During their studies at the Düsseldorfer Kunstakademie (also in the late 1950s), Bernd and Hilla Becher began their extended series of photographs of architectural structures and industrial buildings in Germany—and, subsequently, of buildings worldwide—threatened with demolition. All taken using the same technique and under the same lighting conditions, the photographs generated their own minimalist aesthetic founded on the fact “that they were created without aesthetic intentions”.¹⁵ They were arranged according to rigid typological rules. The emphasis on anonymity and objectivity and the serial, grid-type presentation anticipates aspects of Minimal and Conceptual Art. The Becher's participation in the exhibition 'Prospect 68', curated by Konrad Fischer, enabled this conceptual affinity to be appreciated by a wider audience.

In the 1960s, Charlotte Posenenske (1930–1985) created pioneering sculptures and reliefs. Some of these artworks could be walked around in. They could be infinitely reproduced and can be positioned anywhere in space. Their coloring was industrial, and they were made from 'cheap' materials such as pressboard, corrugated cardboard or tin. Since 2002, the rediscovery of Posenenske's Minimalist artworks has been significantly furthered by their acquisition by the Daimler Art Collection and their appearance in our exhibitions worldwide. The artist initially created spatula-painted abstract paintings in the late 1950s. Later, she bent aluminum or created installations of ready-made square tubes for public spaces and performative functions. The extremely reduced three-dimensional artworks that she is known for today were all created between 1966 and 1968. Deeply impressed by the protagonists of American Minimal Art, the artist Konrad Lueg opened a gallery in Düsseldorf in 1967, under the name Konrad Fischer. Posenenske exhibited at this gallery, as did Hanne Darboven and American artists such as Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. Charlotte Posenenske completely ceased her activities as a sculptor in 1968—she was said to have made this decision “for political reasons”, but in artistic terms as well it makes perfect sense.

In 1966, Hanne Darboven arrived in New York and developed one of the essential constants within her oeuvre in her encounter with Minimal Art, above all with the work of Sol LeWitt. Her serial sequences of numbers and geometrical figures—along with Posenenske's sculptures, Franz Erhard Walther's action-oriented work forms, and sculptures by Eckhard Schene, Imi Giese, or Ulrich Rückriem—are among the most significant European contributions to a

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Minimalism with a Conceptual quality. In contrast to the many exhibitions and studies of Eva Hesse's work, Hanne Darboven's significance as a bridge between European traditions and American-style Minimalism has largely been neglected in recent publications (e.g., those of James Meyer, Lynn Zelevansky, and Ann Goldstein; Anne Rorimer's 'New Art in the '60s and '70s: Redefining Reality', published in 2001, is one exception). The same applies to Franz Erhard Walther, who lived in New York from 1967 to 1973 and entered into an intense exchange with American exponents of Minimal Art. Walther gained important early impressions from encounters with the work of the European Zero artists, above all Piero Manzoni and Lucio Fontana. It was during this period that Walther discovered the material process as a work form and developed paper works and picture objects that were conceptually and formally close to contemporary works by New York Minimal artists. Deeply impressed and affected by American Minimalism, the artist Konrad Lueg, now under the name of Konrad Fischer, opened his legendary gallery in 1967 in Düsseldorf. As early as 1967, Posenenske, along with Hanne Darboven, exhibited her work alongside that by American protagonists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd.

For the *Konstruktionen* [Construction] series, in New York Hanne Darboven drew on graph paper; individual sheets show punctures at the points at which the construction lines start on the graph paper. These perforations, variations on the dot grid in her Hamburg teacher Almir Mavignier's pictures and reliefs produced in the context of the Zero group, were created by placing cardboard and hand-made paper under the graph paper. Forerunners from Darboven's period as a student in Hamburg are monochrome material pictures that she made on hardboard with items including needles and screws. Darboven first showed the *Konstruktionen* at the 'Normal Art' exhibition organized by Joseph Kosuth at the Museum of Normal Art. In addition to LeWitt, other artists featured included Carl Andre, Donald Judd, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, and Frank Stella. LeWitt introduced her to Kasper König, who represented Konrad Fischer in New York. In 1967, Fischer had opened his Düsseldorf gallery with a Carl Andre exhibition, a show that introduced a cycle on American and German Minimal stances. LeWitt arranged for Darboven's first solo exhibition—together with Charlotte Posenenske—at Fischer's gallery, which was a crucial step in terms of the German response to her work after she returned from New York.¹⁶

Franz Erhard Walther lived in New York from 1967 to 1973. He engaged in an intensive exchange with American exponents of Minimal Art. However, like that of Darboven, his role as a bridge between the European tradition and American-style Minimalism has previously received little attention. Encountering the works of European Zero artists in the late 1950s—especially those of Manzoni and Fontana—was a formative experience for Walther. During this period, Walther discovered the material process as an artwork form, creating

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paper artworks and picture objects that showed a significant formal and conceptual affinity with the contemporary artworks of the New York Minimalist artists.

In the late 1950s, Franz Erhard Walther, who worked between Düsseldorf and Fulda, started experimenting with processual structures and temporary production and treatment forms such as folding, separating, dividing, pasting, packing up, piling, gluing, cutting, and laying out, using materials that were not considered artistic at the time, such as hardboard, primer, paste, untreated cotton, packing paper, or felt. Around 1962/63, Walther developed his series of *Stapel-Auslege-Arbeiten* [Piling-Laying Out Works] with two different states: the pile as storage and at the same time work form, and the various ways in which they can be laid out on the floor, defined individually by the viewer. The act of laying out the work is defined as one of its component, which means that the temporary element, the period of time it serves as sculptural material, becomes part of the work.

In two exhibitions in Fulda in 1963, Walther tested the relationship between material, serial sequences, space, and imaginative 'use'—these can in fact be regarded as prototypical pronouncements of a specifically German Minimalism. In the summer of 1963, he presented a *Braune Matrazenform* [Brown Mattress Form] and two pillow works, each consisting of sixteen parts, out of colorful pages taken from illustrated magazines at the Galerie Junge Kunst. The following December, he exhibited a space-related installation of various sculptural objects: the works were encircled by a hemp string; there was a yellow cardboard box and a vertical, five-part row of pillows on the front wall, a pillow made of muslin on a chair, and on the floor a large air-filled paper pillow.

In the early sixties in Germany, a new kind of Minimalism developed that was initially largely independent from the developments in America at the time. This German Minimalism was in many cases stimulated by, but also in conflict with, Concrete Art and the European Zero avant-garde, which drew attention to itself at the beginning of the sixties with unusually staged exhibitions and spectacular projects for public space. The steles, cubes, and picture objects produced by the Zero artists, which lay in the space or stood in front of the wall, represent a significant new step for German art in terms of quality around 1959/60. The Düsseldorf Kunstakademie played an important role in the transition to a specifically German Minimalism from 1962 until around 1970. Joseph Beuys took over the chair of monumental sculpture here in 1961; his sculptural vocabulary of reduced everyday forms—crates, felt and iron panels, angle iron, display cases, simple shelves, fabric objects, metal cubes—was acquired from 1957 in the context of his work with actions, among other things. In the sixties, it provided many of his students with a basis for examining minimized sculpture. As a student of Karl Otto Götz, the young Franz Erhard Walther developed his first proto-Minimalist

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objects starting in 1962, followed in 1964/65 by Imi Knoebel, Imi Giese, and Blinky Palermo, students with Beuys in Düsseldorf. At the same time, Hanne Darboven in Hamburg, a student of the Zero artist Almir Mavignier, Posenenske in Offenbach, and, outside academic contexts, Peter Roehr in Frankfurt conceived their first attempts at Minimalist works.

At around 1964, Peter Roehr, then twenty years old, was working on his typographic and photographic montages in Frankfurt. The latter type of montage involved a fixed base pattern of quadratic or crosswise rectangular cut-outs from newspaper advertisement photos, mounted using a simple principle of uniform rows with no gaps. Up until 1965, the artist had no contact with the Frankfurt art scene. He decided at the same time to create up to five copies of each montage rather than treat them as one-of-a-kind works of art. Roehr exchanged letters with Jan Dibbets in 1966 on the concept of an “association of mass art producers.” The Frankfurt gallerist Adam Seide in 1966 helped Roehr to stage a radical show entitled ‘Ausstellungs-Ausstellung’ [Exhibition-Exhibition]—ten wholly identical works in black paper on cardboard, 119 by 119 centimeters, the so-called *Schwarze Tafeln* [Black Panels].

As for other active forces at work in this context—Eva Hesse spent 1964 working in Cologne after finishing her studies in the United States, creating her first picture object in the summer she spent there by threading strings through the holes in a piece of wire mesh she had found and covering it with plaster.¹⁷ In 1964/65, Blinky Palermo created his first structural paintings, which grew out of an interest in Constructivism and Suprematism. These were followed in 1967 by a series of uniform-format picture objects created by laying fabric over stretcher frames and Minimalist wall objects. The lean group of sculptures created between 1966 and 1968 by Imi Giese bears the greatest formal resemblance to Posenenske’s work at this time. Giese had also initially allowed himself to be guided by the material purism of the Zero artists in the early sixties, but then developed modular, multipartite sculptures from it using basic geometrical forms. These were set up temporarily, indoors or outdoors, forming variable constellations. In 1966, Erwin Heerich began work on his plans drawn on lined paper and his cardboard sculptures—groups of works whose groundwork had been laid in the fifties and involving an austere concept, precise regularity, and economic serial reproducibility. Eckhard Schene and Peter Benkert created their reduced three-dimensional picture objects and sculptures amid the vigorous figurative painting scene of sixties Berlin. Between 1968 and 1971, Schene created a group of sculptures, mostly varnished black, dealing with illusory spatial penetrations and perspectives. Benkert exhibited his *Minimal Luschen*, which leaned against the wall, with the Berlin Großgörschen group. In the summer of 1968, René Block included art from the German scene—early objects by Michael Buthe and Cubist-

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Constructivist sculptures by Klingbeil—in two Minimal Art exhibitions in his Berlin gallery (featuring Giese, Palermo, Posenenske, et al., and Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, et al., respectively). In 1966, Reiner Ruthenbeck, working in the Düsseldorf context, also began to minimize his formal vocabulary. He created the *Lectern*, *Löffler und Scheme* [Ladders, Spoons, and Umbrellas] groups. It is no coincidence that Franz Erhard Walther organized an exhibition of this early work in Fulda in 1966.

If we regard Walther's Fulda space of 1963 as the beginning of a specifically German Minimalism, then the hardboard space *Raum 19* by Imi Knoebel and Imi Giese marked a preliminary high point: this consisted of “a flexible arsenal of plastic-constructive basic forms such as cubes, rectangular plates, and arch segments stacked on the floor and around the walls, turning the space that surrounds them into a structure for viewers to enter that fluctuates between order and disorder. This multipartite key work was created in *Room 19* of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, which gave both Imi's the chance to stand out from Beuys' other students and to concentrate and objectify their pictorial expression. While Giese's work was more conceptual, Knoebel's was designed more through the working process. In a group exhibition in 1968 ['public eye' in Hamburg, in which Posenenske also took part], the carefully crafted rough elements were set up and assembled outside the academy for the first time to form a kind of repository, defined by the location, of artistic possibilities somewhere between being and becoming.”¹⁸

A significant motivation shared by all the artists mentioned here was to replace the ideologically contaminated materials of the traditional art genres—the pedestal, the bronze cast, the canvas, the frame—with industrially mass-produced products in order to claim de-individualisation and objectification even at the level of materials (and, in many cases, to create a shock effect). Visitors to early Minimalist exhibitions were confronted with brass, Plexiglas, tin and aluminum (Judd), rusting corten steel (Serra), rough wood blocks and iron plates (Andre), pressboard and PVC sheeting (Schene), steel and car body paint (Posenenske), air bubbles, parcel paper and cotton fabric (F.E. Walther), pressboard and fluorescent paint (Giese), press photos and television images (Roehr), incandescent bulbs and tinfoil (Pfisterer) and wood strips and wire (Cremer). The artists mentioned combined this use of unconventional materials with rigorous formalization and reduction and a return to primary structures, to clearly recognizable geometrical phenomenality, to the interplay of positive and negative forms and to logical spatial functions.

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'Serial Formations', Frankfurt 1967—political implications

The exhibition 'Serielle Formationen', curated by Peter Roehr and Paul Maenz for the Studiengalerie at the Universität Frankfurt, can be described as one of the first German 'Minimalist' exhibitions. Other thematically related exhibitions from this period that one could name include: 'Minimal Art USA. Neue Monumente Deutschland' at the René Block gallery in Berlin 1968; 'Sammlung 1968: Karl Ströher' at the Kunstverein und Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin in 1969 and the Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1969; 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information' at the Kunsthalle Bern, the Museum Haus Lange and Museum Haus Esthers in Krefeld, 1969 and the ICA in London; 'Prospect 69' at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf in 1969 and 'Konzeption: Conception'. Dokumentation einer heutigen Kunstrichtung' at the Städtisches Museum Schloss Morsbroich in Leverkusen in 1969.

'Serielle Formationen' was an outstanding exhibition that brought together the contemporary trends of the period. It was the first thematic exhibition of Minimalist tendencies in Germany. In particular, it showed artwork by artists from Germany and elsewhere side by side. A total of 62 artworks by 48 artists were selected because they were pictures and objects with 'serial order' as a visual feature—although the concepts behind them were highly diverse and sometimes downright contradictory. The European Zero movement was represented, alongside manifestations of Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art and Op Art and American Minimal and Conceptual Art. The exhibition was accompanied by an ambitious catalogue containing six original graphical works and extensive artwork documentation and artist statements.

Paul Maenz discusses the exhibition in detail in his contribution to this publication; here, I will merely point out the explicitly political dimension of 'seriality' as an artistic process, as stated in the introductory texts contained in the catalogue. The director of the Studiogalerie, Siegfried Bartels, begins by stressing the featured art's affinity to the contemporary 'Serielle Musik' movement—although, unlike the music, the artworks do not represent a united front. Instead, Bartels' argument as to the context of the exhibition emphasizes the connection with serial production in an industrial society. "Serial manufacture permits an increase in the productivity of the workforce, which can lead to a so-called economic miracle. However, it makes a mockery of the development of the individual. Art endeavors to counteract this effect. The mass-production process itself is our theme here. It is a theme that, in the most

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extreme way possible, calls one of the most important defining characteristics of art—originality—into question. The exhibited artworks are not content with simply denigrating serial items that appear in oppressive quantities. Instead, they make use of them—the only way to produce a successful immanent criticism.”¹⁹ Bartels emphasizes the high informational value of the exhibition for students, and how their active engagement helped to make the project possible. He invokes Frankfurt’s moribund cultural landscape and the “*tabula rasa* of the consciousness of modern art”, and states that: “In expanding their intellectual horizons in ways that existing authority structures perceive as unnecessary, students fulfill a duty to the democratic social order that we are striving for. This means that they must take on an autonomous role within the university and independently influence the social consciousness. This gives their activities in other spheres—particularly the political sphere—greater credibility.”

Paul Maenz begins his brief comments on the exhibition with the words: “Almost everything that is produced in large quantities today is produced through serial production. The fabric of our economy is based on the manufacture and consumption of mass-produced goods.” He juxtaposes “the imaginary value of individual goods” with the ubiquitous phenomenon of mass-production—the dominant force in the contemporary consciousness. Since the late 1950s, the modern art of the Western industrial nations has responded to this phenomenon with “serial formations of the picture elements”. According to Maenz, the coming together of artistic tendencies from Europe and the USA occasioned by the ‘*Serielle Formationen*’ exhibition serves to “make the differences clear by giving people the opportunity to compare. [...] What the exhibited works have in common is their appearance rather than their context.”²⁰

The Konrad Fischer gallery, Düsseldorf, 1967ff

Alongside and at the same time as the Zwirner, Ricke and Friedrich galleries, the gallery founded by Konrad Fischer in 1967 (known in his capacity as an artist as Konrad Lueg) played a prominent role in bringing together German, American and British Minimalist art. German artists whose first solo exhibitions were hosted by Fischer included Hanne Darboven, Charlotte Posenenske, Reiner Ruthenbeck and Blinky Palermo, while English artists included Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Gilbert & George. The New York artists Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Robert Ryman, Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner,

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Douglas Huebler, On Kawara made their European debut in Fischer's venue, in exhibitions arranged by figures such as Kasper König. Darboven was 'discovered' in New York by Sol LeWitt, who recommended her to Fischer. The gallerist succeeded in selling a large number of artworks to German and European collectors, and also in procuring solo exhibitions for his artists at prominent institutions. The exhibitions curated solely by Fischer or jointly by him and Hans Strelow—such as the instalments of 'Prospect' from 1968 onwards in Düsseldorf and, later, 'Konzeption-Conception' etc.—were equally pioneering.²¹

“Not only did Fischer get young contemporary art into art halls that were suddenly geared to the up-and-coming generation—he also got it into Germany's museum exhibitions, which, from 1968 onwards, became 'younger' almost at a stroke. Today we know that Fischer's gallery attained a market percentage of 27.33% in all sales of Minimal and Conceptual Art to international museums and private collections in the period between 1967 and 1980.” Fischer also had a significant influence on the conception and realization of the legendary exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann 'When Attitudes Become Form'. He created contacts with a number of artists, obtained Kaspar König's New York address list, loaned artworks and arranged the second showing of the exhibition at the ICA in London.”²² Fischer's exhibition strategy made Düsseldorf a hub for the newest international art movements and, above all, “the locus of an international scene of a kind that hadn't existed in Germany before. Back then, if you wanted to see contemporary art, you travelled to Amsterdam. At 'Prospect 68', there was only one German gallery represented—M.E. Thelen from Essen. All the others were from other countries.”²³

Minimalism in German artist films and experimental films

This section aims to give at least a brief outline of some aspects of Minimalism in the experimental and art films that were part of Peter Roehr and Paul Maenz' mediation activities. In 1965, Roehr began to take an interest in art film developments connected with Nouvelle Vague and experimental film, explicitly citing Alain Resnais, *Letztes Jahr in Marienbad*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Die verheiratete Frau* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*.²⁴ Roehr put together a programme of films for the Galerie Loehr (17th August 1966) whose purpose was to present his own montages alongside 'short films by painters', who included Andy Warhol, Jesús Rafael Soto, Gianfranco Baruchello and Rudolf Hausmann. A second presentation took place on the 1st of September in Aachen. Roehr brought together Paul Maenz and Willoughby

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Sharp, who later became editor of the magazine 'Avalanche'. Together, they founded the 'Kineticism Press', although only one edition—which dealt with the work of Günther Uecker—was ever to be published.²⁵ Roehr also instigated a dialogue between Hans Geipel and Walter Zehringer, who also presented experimental films, and the German film *auteurs* and artists Rudolf Hausmann, Harry Kramer and Werner Nekes. The Oberhausener Kurzfilmfestival was a major forum for the new ideas of both the Junger Deutscher Film (young German film) and for New American Cinema, as was the 3rd Internationaler Experimentalfilm-Wettbewerb (international experimental film competition) in Knokke in 1963/64, extracts of which were shown in Ulm and Munich: "The structural possibilities of film were increasingly being experimented with, in a manner that was analogous to the development of serial music and Concrete poetry techniques. One side of this was a revival of interest in the montage technique that had last been popular in the 1920s. The other side was the making of films with very few shots, where the structuring took place within the shots, making montage superfluous."²⁶ Films by Roehr and the above-named artists were shown in Knokke, alongside those of the German film *auteurs* Ernst Schmidt, Birgit Hein, Lutz Mommartz and Heiner Costard. The minimalist and conceptual strands of the new cinema began to receive more attention. They were highlighted by the American film theorist Paul Adams Sitney in 1967, with shows in a number of German cities, and in a 'special event screening' at the documenta 4 in Kassel 1968.

New York's first experiments in minimalist film took place in the early 1960s: Robert Morris, Tony Conrad and Jackson Mac Low filmed simple 'happenings' such as fire, smoke, trees etc. From 1963 onwards, Andy Warhol used a motionless camera to film simple temporal sequences that were shown publicly immediately after being filmed. Unlike Warhol, Roehr decided to create his films from *existing* film material, excluding any individual choice or 'signature style'—in the same spirit as his photograph, text and sound montages. In a lateral development, Roehr and Charlotte Posenenske made a film in 1968 by filming the flat polder landscape of the Netherlands from a moving car with an unmoving camera, resulting in a 'terribly boring film', as Posenenske commented (both mocking and adopting a self-conscious pose) in a letter to her Amsterdam-based gallerist, Adrian van Ravenstein.²⁷ Roehr's most ambitious film project—a spatial montage of a sequence from 'Lawrence of Arabia'—was never implemented: "A desert scene from the film is repeated on 32 screens, 8.75 by 4.30 meters in size, arranged 8 deep vertically and 4 deep horizontally. The idea is to give a 'high quality trivial film' aesthetic properties."²⁸ First evolved in 1967, Roehr's plan to offer limited editions of his film montages for sale as "a certain kind of 1960s Kinetic Art", was also ahead of its time.

Finally, I should mention the early films of Hanne Darboven, such as Hanne Darboven, *Sechs Filme nach sechs Büchern* [Six films after six books] über 1968, 1968/1999.²⁹ "Darboven's

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first film has a rhythmical structure, and shows her first major artwork, *Sechs Bücher über 1968* [Six books about 1968], in which the artist presents her date system in a number of different ways. Its basis is the sum total of the figures in each date value. Darboven arrives at this total by adding up the day, month and year values, omitting the figures signifying the millennium and the century. The value of the year to be added is obtained from the last two figures, which are taken as natural numbers and are individually added. In this system, the sum total of 1.1.1968 is obtained like this: $1 + 1 + 6 + 8 = 16$. The sum total of 31.12.1968 is given by the following calculation: $31 + 12 + 6 + 8 = 57$. Darboven's film shows these sum total values in the form of K-drawings (K signifies either 'construct' or 'box'), as number words, as figure blocks and as sequences of rectangles."³⁰

Two film experiments by Samuel Beckett which originated—or rather, were shown—in Germany in the 1960s will be discussed at least briefly. In 1963, Beckett was invited to produce a film in New York. In 1964, he created the script for *Film*, which premiered in Oberhausen and other locations in 1965. Reinhart Müller Freienfels, director of the department for television drama at Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR, today known as SWR) in Stuttgart, was sent the Beckett script *He, Joe* from Paris by Werner Spies in 1966, and invited the author to Stuttgart to produce it. It was to be the beginning of many years of working together. The characteristics seen in all of Beckett's television productions are already present in these overwhelmingly radical early films: the movements and language of the figures are, so to speak, enclosed in the grey rectangle where all action takes place, which echoes the television format. Basic geometrical shapes—square and circular light fields, space angles and space openings, the quadratic or diagonal paths on which the figures move—give the fragmentary action structure and rhythm.

In summary, the most important films of this period from the point of view of this publication are the films of Peter Roehr, Charlotte Posenenske and Hanne Darboven and the four television documentations—the last of which provided an authentic insight into artistic concepts and conversations between artists, gallerists and exhibition visitors on the issues surrounding the production and the distribution of art.

1962/1972 Franz Erhard Walther - Proportionsbestimmungen I & II, published by videogalerie schum, Düsseldorf, video and limited video edition.

Peter Roehr, *Film-Montagen (1965/66)*, Verlag Walther König, Cologne 2009

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Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal dir gehören (All This Darling Will Once Belong To You), Performance organized by Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr, Galerie Dorothea Loehr, September 9, 1967, DVD transfer, 6 mins. 55 secs.

Charlotte Posenenske/Peter Roehr, *Monotonie ist Schön* (Monotony is Nice), 1968, ©Estate Charlotte Posenenske, DVD transfer, DVD transfer, 14 mins. 22 secs.

Konsumkunst - Kunstkonsum, 1968, ed. filmkunstfilm Gerry Schum, 16 mm film and video copy, in: WDR, Cologne, 3rd channel, 17th October, 29:26 min.

Land Art, 1968/69, Fernsehalerie Berlin Gerry Schum, 16 mm film and non-limited video release, in: SFB, Berlin, 1st channel, 15th April 1969, 22.40 - 23.27.

Hanne Darboven, *Sechs Filme nach sechs Büchern über 1968*, 1968/1999, black and white, no sound, Beta SP, PAL, 84 min., 16 mm film transferred to video. Camera: Claus Böhmler.

Ulrich Rückriem, *Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 1970, 11 mm film, black and white, with sound, 0:56 min. A contribution to Fernsehausstellung II *Identification*, included in the video releases.

(Rückriem stands in a quarry, facing the first division executed by him in stone in the year 1968, entitled *Dolomitstein gespalten (Hammer und Eisenkeile)* [dolomite stone divided (hammer and iron wedges)]. It consists of a block of stone constructed from five individual blocks piled one atop the other. He knocks these blocks down one by one.)

Ulrich Rückriem: *Identifications/Teilungen - Kreise - Diagonalen* (Identifications/Divisions - circles - diagonals), Gerry Schum Fernsehausstellung II, 30th November 1970, 22:50, SWF 1. 1 inch videotape, black and white, with sound, 9:45. min. Non-limited release by the Videogalerie Gerry Schum/edition. (In four takes, Rückriem demonstrates various different ways of producing circular shapes - with chalk on a brick wall or on asphalt, in a bodily movement with a hammer in loose earth or by exposing a circular area on a surface covered with hay).

Reiner Ruthenbeck, *Papier* (Paper), 1970, 16 mm film, black and white, with sound, 7 min., release no. 4 by the Videogalerie Gerry Schum/edition. (Only the hands of the artist can be seen above a square black pedestal, crumpling black paper and producing a steadily growing pile.)

Interaction between New York and Germany

The cases of Peter Roehr and Franz Erhard Walther

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1. The influences of European art on the development of German Minimalism

Many of the artists who play a central role in this publication owe their earliest and most crucial impressions to German and European art movements circa 1960.

The first artistic influence that should be mentioned here is the multifaceted spectrum presented by the European Zero movement circa 1957 to 1962, whose innovations included the redefining of the concept of ‘an artwork’ and new strategies of presentation, publication and communication. These developments were preceded or paralleled by the activities of certain individuals connected with art—professors who introduced into academic discourse and teaching the attitudes and qualities of early avant-garde movements, from Bauhaus to Constructivism.

In March of 1957, Franz Erhard Walther began his studies at the Werkkunstschule Offenbach, where he created his first word pictures. These artworks set the tone for what followed: Walther recognized that the construction of a script or font represented an ‘architecture’ whose shapes, sizes, proportions etc. created significant visual content and actively engaged with the imagination of the viewer. In 1959, Walther visited the documenta II event in Kassel, and was profoundly fascinated by the work of Lucio Fontana—whose way of physically attacking the panel picture format and thereby addressing the imagination of the viewer gave Walther more confidence in his own philosophy. In 1960, Walther saw artworks by Yves Klein for the first time (in the dato gallery, Frankfurt). Most significantly, projects by Klein (first seen in the Rhineland in 1957) that aimed to minimize the materiality of artworks—the empty exhibition space entitled ‘Le Vide’, the ‘Leap into the Void’ etc.—introduced into contemporary discourse concepts such as ‘immateriality’, ‘sensibility’ and ‘imagination’, which Walther was able to respond to in his own way. Walther himself confirms that the artworks he created from string in 1962/63 were influenced by Klein’s concept of ‘immateriality’.³¹

In 1962, Walther began his studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Karl Otto Götz. The stimulating atmosphere that collected around Götz was conducive to material process artworks, seen as open projection surfaces. Walther worked with coffee, paste, soils, oil, water and air, bringing them into conjunction with paper which would then undergo a sticking, tearing, crumpling, folding, reduction to little pieces, overlapping and compression process.³² Friendships with other artists—including Jörg Immendorf, Reiner Ruthenbeck and Chris Reinecke—were another significant feature of Walther’s Düsseldorf period. He was also occasionally in contact with Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Anatol Herzfeld and Blinky Palermo.

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In July of 1964, Walther visited the exhibition 'Europäische Avantgarde', which was curated by Rochus Kowallek and held in the Schwanenhalle of Frankfurt's Römer building. There, he saw Pietro Manzoni's 1000 m line enclosed in a cylindrical metal container (*Linea m. 1000, 24. Luglio 1961*) for the first time. To Walther, this represented a radical implementation of two important features of his own artistic thought at the time: the exclusion of optical factors as an essential, constitutive element of an artwork, and—as a consequence—more emphasis on the imaginative capacity of the viewer. To him, the combination of these two elements signified a revolution in the traditional concept of art.

Peter Roehr completed an apprenticeship in illuminated advertising and sign painting between 1959 and 1962 and studied at the Werkkunstschule Wiesbaden in Vincent Weber's painting class between 1962 and 1965. A former Bauhaus student, Weber tried to incorporate Bauhaus principles into the curriculum. Roehr owed many of his formative influences to two legendary early Zero exhibitions: the Antwerp show 'Vision in Motion' and the 'dynamo' exhibition at the Galerie Boukes in Wiesbaden, which brought together a wide spectrum of European artists and the most recent developments in monochrome painting, experimental object art, Kinetic Art and Action Art.

The work of Peter Roehr sank into obscurity after his early death in 1968, but his ideas experienced new recognition in the late 1970s and again in recent years: the 're-reading' of Conceptual and Minimal Art through the lens of contemporary art and art criticism has created a new environment for receiving and understanding his work. The aesthetic of Roehr's early work from circa 1962/63 was initially based on seminal artistic developments circa 1960—'Neue Tendenzen' (Nouvelle Tendances), 'Nouveau Réalisme' and the exponents of the European 'Zero' movement. The severe reduction and serial structure of Roehr's early typographical and object montages anticipate the features characteristic of Minimalist and Conceptual art—of post-1965 American-style 'Non-relational Art'. "What gives Roehr's art its specific character is not solely its abstraction from the object, but—above all—its rejection of the relational aesthetic. Roehr's artwork becomes concrete by reaching the point at which the artistic tautology of the banal item becomes identical with the non-artistic reality that it is taken from. [...] The rejection of relational art was a trend that spread in both Europe and America in the 1960s, in negation of cultural historicity and cultural imperialism. 'This makes it an art that calls any previous definition of art into question' (Peter Roehr)."³³

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2. The influence of American Abstract Expressionism, Minimal Art and Conceptual Art

As Franz Erhard Walther explains in the round table discussion included in this catalogue, the young artist generation of the late 1950s knew nothing of the American art scene: “German artists looked to Paris. At the time, the painters who were heroes to us were people like Alfred Manessier, Jean René Bazaine, Pierre Soulages and Hans Hartung—we hadn’t heard of Yves Klein. I knew a few names of artists from the New York School—as it was called—from art magazines. There were a lot of Americans stationed in my little town [Fulda], and a good friend of mine, an older artist who took classes as an ‘Art Instructor’, would bring some of these art magazines with him. In those magazines, I saw peculiar pictures that looked very fragmented and torn, with no compositional construction. Then I read the dimensions of the pictures (given in inches) underneath, and tried to work it out. I thought—is a picture that large possible? How could you do that? What you have to understand is that in post-war Germany—with its very small apartments—that was unimaginable! The first time I actually saw these very large-format pictures was at the documenta II in 1959. I was fairly knowledgeable about Jackson Pollock, and I wanted to admire his and Wols’ work. I had the chance to do that all right. I have a story to tell about that: there was a giant hall for the Ecole de Paris and its great heroes (Manessier, Bazaine, Soulages, Hartung), and then there was the Pollock-Saal, which you could hardly avoid. And then there were about 30–40 art works by Wols hung in a rotunda, looking fantastic. Then, as I remember, I climbed the stairs and saw two large format pictures hanging there: monochrome, with a stripe running from bottom to top. I thought: how can that be a picture? What you have to understand is that I still thought in terms of composition—in a way that would be unthinkable today. Those were Barnett Newman’s pictures—and they really puzzled me.”³⁴

Newman’s artworks, which Walther saw for the first time at documenta II, 1959, were to make a lasting impression on him: reduced techniques and materials, the active incorporation of the viewer by means of spatially extensive formats and pictures with a ‘manifesto’ character.

Peter Roehr, who never visited the USA himself, initially came into contact with developments in New York through art magazines from 1964 onwards. From 1965 onwards, he was also kept informed by his friend Paul Maenz in New York. Maenz also sent Roehr a copy of a much-discussed essay by Barbara Rose that appeared in *Art in America* in October 1965 entitled ‘ABC Art’.³⁵ Rose describes the then recent developments in art as characterized by “empty, repetitive, non-modulated artworks” created from “conventional, mass-produced objects” and “interchangeable standard units”, and by the devaluing of art based on invention, virtuosity and technique in favour of a conceptual foundation, anti-hierarchical

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structures, simple sequences and “a new absence of content”—all labels that Roehr could apply directly to his own efforts. Through Paul Maenz, Roehr experienced the breakthrough of Minimal Art in 1966. Maenz gave him an enthusiastic description of his visits to the exhibition ‘Primary Structures’ in the Jewish Museum New York and the group exhibition ‘Ten’ at the Dwan Gallery (which included artworks by Carl Andre, Jo Baer, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Ad Reinhardt, Michael Steiner and Robert Smithson). Some of the artists featured in these exhibitions later featured in the Frankfurt exhibition ‘Serielle Formationen’ of 1967, curated by Maenz and Roehr. On a visit to Sol LeWitt’s studio, Maenz acquired the black wood model *First Modular Structure*, LeWitt’s first modular construction.

Sculpture as action

The cases of Franz Erhard Walther and Charlotte Posenenske, 1966/67

‘Plastik als Handlungsform’ (‘sculpture as action’) is the title of a text by Manfred Schneckenburger in the *Kunstforum* magazine, 1975. Substantially, it was a summary of American Minimal Art and Post-Minimal Art developments, but it also featured the works of Franz Erhard Walther—an important reference point for German art.³⁶ The central arguments of this essay will be briefly summarized here, with reference to the cases of Walther and Charlotte Posenenske.

Schneckenburger begins by reiterating that the earliest examples of ‘sculpture as action form’ date from 1965, but that the phenomenon only fully developed in the 1970s. A parallelism with happening and performance can be seen at this early phase, with the sculpture deployed as an ‘instrument’ or ‘catalyst’. In this context, real space and real time are as important as the incorporation of everyday reality. The new space concept of a ‘sculpture as action form’—which marked a major break with what had gone before—was a concept derived by artists from the conditions of space itself, associated with concepts such as “path, axis, location, inside and outside”. Schneckenburger introduces the term “horizontal sculpture” as a qualitatively new concept that replaces the classical *vertical* quality of the figurative, abstract and architectonic sculpture with a *horizontal orientation* that connects with the floor, the space, the locality. It also comprises the scope of actions of human beings, their “fields of operation” and their active access. Taking Robert Morris’ minimalist cubes as an example,

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Schneckenburger goes on to explain that the sculpture is part of a spatiotemporal experiential context and is experienced by the viewer as a sculptural “situation”.

Schneckenburger points to Erich Reusch as an early German exponent of horizontal sculpture. Circa 1961, he laid out beams at the Rheinufer in Düsseldorf as a way of exploring measurements and spans. The only other German artist mentioned in the subsequent part of Schneckenburger’s discourse is Franz Erhard Walther, whose behavioral spaces, created since 1966, “represent a balance between axial accessibility and contained contemplation, openness and closure. Faced with the Americans’ psychically dramatized spatial situations, Walther persisted in examining the fundamentals of body space experience.”³⁷

Schneckenburger describes “an affinity to architectural forms” as another significant characteristic of an action-based sculpture—as the precondition for “autochthonous development of the sculpture as an action form”. Whereas in the architecture of structural construction, functionality and easy habitability swallow up the factors of “poetry” and “psychophysical structures”, the “alternative factors of art” aim to counteract this “loss of sensibility”. Instead, they promote the experiencing of primary structures and modes of behavior. They expand space to include the “inner space” of human beings. “The step from object to space naturally leads to the step from viewer to active agent, from passive seeing to doing and being. Our physical engagement becomes a necessary component of the sculptural structure, which only truly becomes itself through the symbiotic interaction of artwork and recipient. This sculpture wants to be used, to be walked through, to be climbed, to be felt. Unlike previous artworks, it demands more than simply to be experienced in an aesthetic or spiritual process. It demands—literally—to be lived [...] the body is recognized as the organ of spatial experience.”³⁸

The first artwork demonstrations by Franz Erhard Walther in Germany, 1966-69

Franz Erhard Walther’s first presentation of elements of his *1. Werksatz* [1. work-set] took place in the Galerie Aachen in Aachen in 1966, under the title ‘F.E. Walther. Demonstration der Objekte’. He demonstrated the handling and function of about 25 objects to the public. Members of the public could borrow the objects by hours or by the day. Users were requested to pass on notes and observations to Walther.

In January of 1967, Walther tried to repeat his ‘demonstration’ in Aachen as part of his exhibition at the Heiner Friedrich gallery in Munich. The public, however, did not know how to respond to the material. In May of 1967, Walther once again tried to help an audience (in this case, a larger audience in the auditorium of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf) to understand his

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concept of the artwork by enabling them to handle the objects. In early June 1967, Walther moved to New York, where he added a further 20 pieces to the first working phase. In 1968, Walther's book 'OBJEKTE, benutzen' was published by Verlag Gebr. König, Cologne-New York. The book's publication was accompanied by a 24-hour session of putting the working phase's objects to use in Cologne.

In 1969, Walther's artwork could be seen in a number of solo exhibitions within Germany: at the Heiner Friedrich gallery in Munich, at the Zwirner gallery in Cologne; at the Neuendorf gallery in Hamburg, at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld and at studio f in Ulm. Ten pieces from his 'first working phase' were included in the exhibition 'When Attitudes become Form' in Bern. When the exhibition appeared for the third time, in London, the pieces were partially destroyed. In the summer of 1969, the first working phase consisted of 58 pieces, and Walther considered it complete. In December, Walther took part in the SPACES exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art New York. Over the course of two months, the pieces from the first working phase were used with participation from the public.³⁹

Charlotte Posenenske – the action sculpture as an analogy of the democratic process

The place occupied by the slender body of sculptural work by Charlotte Posenenske from between 1966 and 1968 in the context of specifically German Minimalism is that of 'sculpture as action form'. Two work groups are described in this text: the *Vierkantrohre Series DW* [Square Tubes] and the *Drehflügel* [Revolving Vane] *Series E*, conceived in 1967. This series *Vierkantrohre Series DW* [Square Tubes] consists of a kit made up of four stereometric hollow bodies out of corrugated cardboard. They can be connected in different configurations and develop a demonstratively 'anti-aesthetic,' architectural dimension. Posenenske created this series to explicitly involve her viewers, for they decide how many of the elements should be used and how they are combined and placed. In the ideal case—the artist was allowed to realize this only once at a 1967 one-evening exhibition/performance in Frankfurt curated by Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr ('Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören', Galerie Loehr, with Dibbets, Long, Flanagan, Roehr, et al.)—Posenenske regarded the *Vierkantrohre Series DW* as elements of a temporary sculptural and performative action. At the opening of 'Herzchen' night, the artist instructed helpers wearing white Lufthansa overalls to constantly rearrange the elements.

Like Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre in the visual arts or Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer in dance, Posenenske conceived her sculptures based on the industrial principles of geometry, modular reduction, antihierarchical accumulation, standardization, normalization,

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and deindividualization. But in contrast to classic Minimal Art, Posenenske placed the industrial production and inherent reproducibility of her works in the foreground by avoiding, whenever she could, an auratic gallery presentation (be it on the wall or the floor), instead presenting the work in everyday public places and production shops for temporary use of her sculptures. She intended the elements of the sculptures to be produced in unlimited numbers and transported simply, passed on at the manufacturing price to interested ‘activists’ who would participate in overcoming the boundaries between ‘aesthetic’ and ‘economic’ production in an utopian act. The *Vierkantrohre* in particular are open to continuation in terms of number, arrangement, and placement of the elements. In principle, the ways they can be installed both indoors and outdoors are limitless—here Posenenske clearly goes way beyond Minimal Art sculpture in conceptual terms. Changeability and participation, cooperation and public accountability were *the* slogans of the 1968 protest movements in Europe, and Posenenske wanted to give them a formally and aesthetically defined image.

The series of the *Drehflügel* [Revolving Vane] *Series E* was the artist’s last realized work. Its placement at unspectacular points of transition stressed the object’s location at the boundary between Minimal sculpture and architectural room divider. The *Drehflügel* is a cube two by two by two meters made up of twelve one-by-two-meter chipboards. Two boards form the floor and two the ceiling of the cube; while one of the two side sheets is fixed, the other one is movable. The prototype of this revolving vane structure was shown in the 1968 exhibition entitled ‘public eye’ at the Kunsthaus Hamburg alongside works by artists such as Hanne Darboven, Imi (Rainer) Giese, Imi Knoebel, and Konrad Lueg. During the exhibition, some of the visitors scribbled on it—a ‘participatory’ element that the artist was happy to see as part of the work. The concept behind the *Drehflügel* objects is a prototypical and metaphorical realization of a site of a formally and aesthetically defined encounter and collective action: the object has to be produced and assembled in material terms by a ‘collective,’ and the moving vanes present the elements of passage and of human encounter and communication. Here, as in the performative elements of *Vierkantrohre*, we can recognize Posenenske’s origins in the theater, particularly her activity as a stage designer from 1951 to 1955. The sculptural aspects of communication and cooperative usability can be seen in analogy to Posenenske’s radical democratic approach and the discussions of her time about the necessity of social change.

¹ Adorno 1958/59 (Ed. 2009), p. 24.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 32ff.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

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⁶ Ibid., pp. 117ff.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 119, 121, 137.

⁸ Tuchman 1970/71, p. 58.

⁹ Vgl. auch Brinkmann 2006; Richard 2009.

¹⁰ Tuchman 1970/71, p. 68.

¹¹ Werner Lippert in: Exh. cat. Tübingen 1977, p. 13.

¹² Exh. cat. Karlsruhe 2010.

¹³ Exh. cat. New York, 1977, pp. 28/29.

¹⁴ Exh. cat. Berlin 1968, p. 2. The catalogue, however, reproduces an object by Heerich on p. 3.

¹⁵ B and H. Becher, Anonyme Skulpturen, Kunstzeitung no. 2, Düsseldorf 1969, unpag.

¹⁶ Cf. Exh. cat. Hamburg 1999. LeWitt (2004): „I first met Hanne at an opening of a show curated by Joseph Kosuth in November 1967. She had a small group of drawings with her which she showed me. I was struck by the originality and depth of her work. I went to her studio some days later and saw many more drawings.“ “I told everyone I knew about her work. One was Kaspar König. He called Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf. Konrad gave her a show the next month. I am glad to have been able to start her art showing life. Since then I’ve followed all of her work. She has been a close and dear friend.” Sol LeWitt in Exh. cat. Hannover 2004, p. 15. See also LeWitt 1967a.

¹⁷ Cf. Exh. cat. Ulm 1994, p. 103.

¹⁸ Bernhard Bürgi, in: Exh. cat. Maastricht 1989, pp. 9ff.

¹⁹ Maenz/Roehr 1967. p. 3.

²⁰ Maenz/Roehr 1967. p. 5 f.

²¹ To mark its 30th anniversary, Barbara Hess published an article about Konrad Fischer’s gallery, in which she discusses the political and social upheavals circa 1968 and the reception of the Prospect exhibitions and the tenor of contemporary art criticism: Hess 1997, pp. 17-35.

²² Thomas Kellein, Es kam alles durch Konrad, in: Exh. cat. Düsseldorf 2010, pp. 95-177, hier p. 110 f. Richard 2009, p. 15/16.

²³ Friedrich Meschede, Stumme Freiheit oder Versuch eines Porträts nach ephemeren Archivalien / The freedom of silence—or the attempt at making a portrait from archival ephemera, in: Exh. cat. Düsseldorf 2010, p. 49 f.

²⁴ For a detailed account, see: Wendermann 2000, p. 52 f.

²⁵ Cf. Sharp 1968, pp. 317-358. See also Sharp 1967, and Hein 1971.

²⁶ Wenderman 2000, p. 53.

²⁷ Cf. Burkhard Brunn, ‘Monotonie ist schön’, in: Exh. cat. Zürich 2010, p. 13 f.

²⁸ Wenderman 2000, p. 54.

²⁹ Hanne Darboven, *Sechs Filme nach sechs Büchern über 1968*, 1968/1999, black and white, with no sound, Beta SP, PAL, 84 min, transferred from 16 mm film to video, filmed by Claus Böhmeler.

³⁰ Elke Bippus, quoted

from: <http://www.thealit.dsn.de/lab/serialitaet/teil/darboven/darboven.html>. Cf. also Exh. cat, Hamburg 1999.

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³¹ Cf. Exh. cat. Bonn 1980, p. 63, 67 and image 19.

³² Cf. Richardt 1997, p. 87.

³³ Werner Lippert, in: Exh. cat. Tübingen 1977, p. 11.

³⁴ Franz Erhard Walther, see the round table discussion with Franz Erhard Walther and Hans Mayer in this publication.

³⁵ Rose 1965, p. 57–69.

³⁶ Schneckenburger 1979, pp. 20–34.

³⁷ Schneckenburger 1979, p. 26.

³⁸ Schneckenburger 1979, pp. 28, 30.

³⁹ Cf. Exh. cat. Munich 1968.

⁴⁰ Cf. Wiehager 2009a, which also includes the texts by Burkhard Brunn.

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