

Serielle Formationen. Frankfurt 1967

First thematic exhibition on Minimalist trends in Germany at the time

Curator 2017: Renate Wiehager. Curators 1967: Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr.

Daimler Contemporary Berlin

June 3rd – November 5th, 2017

The exhibition ‘Serielle Formationen’ [*Serial Formations*], jointly curated by Peter Roehr and Paul Maenz for the studio gallery of the University in Frankfurt in 1967, can be seen as the first thematic exhibition on Minimalist trends in Germany. In the context of its exhibition series ‘Minimalism in Germany’, which started in 2005, the Daimler Art Collection is making a first attempt to re-stage the historical presentation. ‘Serielle Formationen’ was an outstanding exhibition that brought together the contemporary trends of the period. 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 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. “The ambition of ‘Serielle Formationen’ was to inform and to identify the differences between seemingly similar art phenomena.” (Maenz)

The show at Daimler Contemporary Berlin features artworks from the Daimler Art Collection as well as loans from German and International collections.

Participating artists

Carl **Andre** (USA), **Arman** (USA), Thomas **Bayrle** (D), Ronald **Bladen** (CAN), Hans **Breder** (D), Enrico **Castellani** (I), **Christo** (BG), Jan **Dibbets** (NL), May **Fasnacht** (CH), Eberhard **Fiebig** (D), Dan **Flavin** (USA), Raimund **Girke** (PL), Hermann **Goepfert** (D), Kuno **Gonschior** (D), Hans **Haacke** (D), Jan **Henderikse** (NL), Ewerdt **Hilgemann** (D), Bernhard **Höke** (D), Donald **Judd** (USA), Jiří **Kolář** (CZ), Yayoi **Kusama** (JP), Walter **Leblanc** (BEL), Thomas **Lenk** (D), Sol **LeWitt** (USA), Konrad **Lueg** (D), Adolf **Luther** (D), Piero **Manzoni** (I), Agnes **Martin** (CAN), Almir **da Silva Mavignier** (BR), Henk **Peeters** (NL), Larry **Poons** (JP), Charlotte **Posenenske** (D), Markus **Raetz** (CH), Bridget **Riley** (GB), Peter **Roehr** (PL), Dieter **Roth** (D), Felix **Schlenker** (D), Wolfgang **Schmidt** (D), Jan **Schoonhoven** (NL), Klaus **Staudt** (D), Mike **Steiner** (USA), Frank **Stella** (USA), Paul **Talman** (CH), Günther **Uecker** (D), Victor **Vasarely** (HU), Herman **de Vries** (NL), Andy **Warhol** (USA), **Gruppe X**

Further works related to serial formations from the Daimler Art Collection by Karl-Heinz **Adler** Karl-Heinz **Adler** (D), Hal **Busse** (D), Hermann **Glöckner** (D), Hanne **Darboven** (D), Karl **Gerstner** (CH), Rolf **Glasmeyer** (D), Gerhard **von Graevenitz** (D), Marie-Luise **Heller** (D), Hans Peter **Hoch** (D), Heinz **Mack** (D), Christian **Megert** (CH), Christian **Roeckenschuss** (D), Ulrich **Rückriem** (D), Eckhard **Schene** (D), Michael **Steiner** (D) (Loan), Franz Erhard **Walther** (D)

Many post-war artists living in Germany felt that they were inheriting a ravaged artistic landscape. Circa 1960, the center of current art developments shifted to New York. In the mid-1960s, Hanne Darboven, Günther Uecker, Charlotte Posenenske, Blinky Palermo, Heinz

Mack, Ulrich Rückriem and Franz Erhard Walther travelled to New York to exhibit their artwork there and to get into contact with other artists—from this point onwards, Minimalism in Germany was based on an interplay between European and American movements and debates of the period.

Grids, structures, combinations and serial formations are significant concepts in German Minimalism. As Peter Roehr put it, the grid's formal severity, clarity and simplicity doesn't create "a composition"—it creates a structure that he describes as "a regular fabric with identical objects". Artists saw grid-shaped structures and serial sequences as aesthetic models for anti-hierarchical and antiauthoritarian systems—as the antithesis of composed, hierarchically organized works.

Examining the critical factors that unite Minimalist tendencies in art and design in the 1960s we can find the following: system, series, variability, new materials, elementarization of form, functionality and democratization. The concept of 'the system' in regard to design comprises the systematic analysis of the specific context (historic precursors / function / production / marketing) and also issues relating to technical implementation and practical use. 'Serial formations' was a key phrase in art during this period, that emanated from the new technological conditions and the ideological implications of capitalist serial production. It related to the demand of buyers and consumers for items to be made more easily and cheaply available by producing them in large quantities, and for items to be 'variable' in the sense of being stackable, detachable etc. This was necessarily coupled with the utilization of new materials such as metal, cork, cardboard, plastic, foam etc. The geometricalization and elementarization of items in terms of their shapes signified the union of an anti-expressive, neutral attitude with a technological exactitude. 'Democratic' design models went hand in hand with this, democratization was a key sociopolitical drive of the period. This was given its tangible form in the fine arts by the emergence of 'multiples' and 'editions', of new and often impermanent materials and of participative action concepts.

Beside 'Serielle Formationen' Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr curated a performative group show titled 'Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören' [*All This Darling Will Once Belong To You*] (Galerie Dorothea Loehr, Frankfurt, September 9, 1967) and lasting only one evening. Invited to create 'artworks of a transient character', eight young artists, still unknown at the time, created an evening's worth of processually conceived artworks. The artists who took part were Jan Dibbets, Barry Flanagan, Bernhard Höke, John Johnson, Richard Long, Konrad Lueg, Charlotte Posenenske and Peter Roehr. (Gilbert & George, who were equally unknown at the time, were invited but were unable to take part.) Taken together these events formed the pioneering exhibitions of the period. 'Serielle Formationen', which included artworks by American artists such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Agnes Martin whose work had never been exhibited before in Germany, was intended to demonstrate that perceptions of these serial artworks should be based on the concept behind each of them and not on their appearance. 'Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören' can be seen as the forerunner of the legendary exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form' (Curator Harald Szeemann, Bern 1969).

Other thematically related exhibitions from this period that one could name include: 'Minimal Art USA. Neue Monumente Deutschland', René Block Gallery, Berlin 1968; 'Sammlung 1968: Karl Ströher', Berlin 1969; 'Primary Structure, Minimal Art, Antiform', Ricke Gallery, Kassel 1968; 'Prospect 68', Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf 1968; 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information', Kunsthalle Bern, Museum Haus Lange and Museum Haus Esthers, Krefeld, ICA London 1969; 'Konzeption: Conception'. Dokumentation einer heutigen Kunstrichtung', Städtisches Museum Schloss Morsbroich, Leverkusen 1969.

Concerning 'Serielle Formationen' the explicitly political dimension of 'seriality' as an artistic process can merely be pointed out, as stated in the introductory texts contained in the catalogue. The director of the studio galerie, 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 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."¹ 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."²

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'.³ Therein, Rose describes the recent developments in art as characterised 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 favor of a conceptual foundation, anti-hierarchical 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 these artists later featured in the exhibition 'Serielle Formationen' in Frankfurt. On a visit to Sol LeWitt's studio, Maenz acquired the black wood model *First Modular Structure*, LeWitt's first modular construction.

The total of 62 picture and object artworks by 48 artists were chosen for 'Serielle Formationen' because they featured 'serial arrangement' as a visual characteristic. Beyond this, however, the concepts behind them might be entirely different. "The ambition was to inform and to identify the differences between seemingly similar art phenomena." (Maenz) The European Zero movement was represented by the artists Piero Manzoni, Günther Uecker, Hermann Goepfert, Adolf Luther, Henk Peeters, Jan Schoonhoven, Herman de Vries, Jan Henderikse and Hans Haacke. Branches of Nouveau Réalisme, Pop and Op Art were represented by Arman, Christo, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Konrad Lueg, Bridget Riley, Almir da Silva Mavignier and Victor Vasarely. American Minimal and Conceptual Art was represented for the first time by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. The Frankfurt art scene was represented by Peter Roehr, Charlotte Posenenske and Thomas Bayrle.⁴

'Serielle Formationen' and 'Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören'
Paul Maenz (2010)

There are a number of reasons why, almost half a century on, I still remember the two exhibitions 'Serielle Formationen' [*Serial Formations*] and 'Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören' [*All this Darling will once Belong to You*] so well. Chief among these is probably the fact that they had such an influence on my relationship with art and with artists in my subsequent career. They are also associated with a period of intense collaboration with the artist Peter Roehr, my close friend, who died at an early age. Quite apart from this, these two exhibitions in Frankfurt in the 1960s are today considered 'historic', and have been frequently mentioned in the intervening years. 1967: Peter Roehr was 22 and I was 27, and we had an elan to match. The circumstances under which the two exhibitions came about could safely be said to be pretty modest. The atmosphere was not professional in the modern sense, and Germany did not have the kind of art scene that exists today. In our case, there was barely any budget at all, certainly no fee for a curator. We did, however, see an

opportunity to turn our impatient demands as to what contemporary art should be into something definite and visible.

The concept for 'Serielle Formationen', in which we exhibited 62 artworks of various sizes by 48 European and American artists (depending on what was available), came from Peter Roehr; to whom the idea came naturally due to his own radical serial working method. The important thing was to make it clear that it was not the appearance of the serial artworks but the underlying concept that must be the basis for how they are understood. This was coupled with the ambition to present, for the first time, American artists working in the brand-new discipline of Minimal Art, unknown in Germany at the time, such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. Since the 1950s, serial image patterns and structures had spread and blanketed Europe and the USA. They could be seen everywhere: in the Nouvelle Tendances, in Nouveau Réalisme, in Op Art and Pop Art and in the most recent phenomenon of them all: Minimal Art in the USA. The exhibition 'Serielle Formationen' was an attempt to bring together the kinds of picture arrangements that one came across everywhere at the time: rows, accumulations, combinations, variations, permutations etc. The exhibition was to be international and was to feature the best artists of the age.

Our deliberations, of course, also took into account the need to see this art phenomenon in the mirror of everyday reality, to understand it in relation to socioeconomic structures. To reflect this, our catalogue text began with the statement: "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." We argued that "the existence and quality of products necessary for life depends on their being produced in large batches, in series. The fact that artists with diametrically opposed ways of thinking suddenly, and often independently, began making use of serial formations can surely not be explained solely in aesthetic terms."

To come to the exhibition itself: it took place from the 22nd of May to the 30th of June 1967 in the studio gallery of the University in Frankfurt (then director: Siegfried Bartels). The tone and atmosphere of these years in Frankfurt is eloquently revealed by the foreword to the catalogue: "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." Without going into this any further, it would have been virtually impossible to hold such an exhibition at this venue at the University of Frankfurt one year later, since the political climate, the anti-bourgeoisie polemicism and the impatience with which the allegedly "politically ignorant" open space of art was met had become too intractable.

The slim but informative catalogue of 'Serielle Formationen' lists the 62 works on display individually, accompanied by comments from the artists. What their comments reveal is, above all, the vast artistic spectrum and the wide range of perspectives that the exhibition opened up to viewers. Carl Andre, for instance, describes the function of sculpture as "enclosing and holding space", and "using the material to make an incision into space". The

young Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's comments are very different; one of her net pictures, from 1960, was included in the exhibition, and her comments highlight her compulsions, her hallucinations and obsessions as the driving force behind her art. The purpose behind Belgian artist Walter Leblanc's "rhythmic surfaces" was "to evoke the impression of a purely visual perception of an aesthetic object rather than of an artwork". The opposing view was expressed in Donald Judd's statement (which has since become famous) that "non-art or anti-art" are not valid terms, because "if someone says his work is art, it's art". English artist Bridget Riley accompanied her contribution with a commentary that talked in terms of an "optically tingling static electricity", a "sparkling texture". Jan Schoonhoven's comments were more dry and Calvinistic: "the serially deployed elements improve the possibilities for objective production. The rows create a necessary restriction, resulting in the elimination of the unimportant and an intensification of the image, making it more absolute." The commentaries by the other artists were similarly disparate.

This May 1967 exhibition shows what a broad spectrum—in terms of color, of thought and of aesthetics—the 48 artists featured in the exhibition, who seemed so similar upon superficial examination, but whose perspectives were, in fact, an eternity apart: from Christo to Sol LeWitt and Arman, from Enrico Castellani to Dan Flavin, from Raimund Girke to Hans Haacke and from Piero Manzoni, Agnes Martin, Dieter Roth, Victor Vasarely to Andy Warhol.⁵

Dr. Renate Wiehager

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¹ Maenz, Paul and Roehr, Peter, *Serielle Formationen*, artist book accompanying the exhibition at the *studio galerie*, Frankfurt, 1967, p. 3.

² See note 1, p. 5 f.

³ Rose, Barbara, "ABC Art.", *Art in America* 53/5 (1965), pp. 57–69.

⁴ See for detailed analysis: Wendermann, Gerda, "'Inhalt und Form sind deckungsgleich': Peter Roehr in der Sammlung Paul Maenz.", in: *Sammlung Paul Maenz*, vol. 2: *Peter Roehr 1944–1968*, ed. by Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar. Ostfildern, 2000, p. 60f.

⁵ Essay Paul Maenz first published in: *Minimalism Germany 1960s*, ed. by Renate Wiehager, Daimler Contemporary Berlin, Stuttgart, 2010, p. 105.