

David Weiss
I Wish That I Sailed the Darkened Seas
24.06.–31.07.2021

Oskar Weiss and Oliver Falk are very pleased to present *I Wish That I Sailed the Darkened Seas*, an exhibition of David Weiss's early work. The show juxtaposes three groups of his early oeuvre: his so-called Netzbilder, Cityscapes and Neocolor grattages. All the works on display date from the period 1973–1978. The exhibition title *I Wish That I Sailed the Darkened Seas* is a slight variation on a line from Lou Reed's 1964 song *Heroin*, which came out on the Velvet Underground's debut album in 1967.

In the 1970s, David Weiss had completed his foundation course in Zurich in Hansjörg Mattmüller's class and went on to take Alfred Gruber's sculpture class at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel. Now, just a few days after what would have been his 75th birthday, the late great Swiss artist (1946–2012) is back in Basel with this selection of his early works. Weiss was once asked what he'd want displayed in an exhibition of his oeuvre. Ideally, just the black webs, he said. They clearly meant a great deal to him.

Netzbilder

The impulse to survey the earth and draw maps goes all the way back to the age of ancient Egypt. Surveying involves the formation of "Netze" that connect up the various control points. This technique can be used to show how things are interconnected, interrelated. Before executing his small series of large-format Netzbilder around 1976, Weiss noted in block letters on a sheet of paper coated in opaque black ink: "I Wish I Was Born a Thousand Years Ago". This line in Lou Reed's *Heroin* is immediately followed by an expression of an unfulfilled longing to "sail the darkened seas". Weiss undertakes this subtly allusive voyage across time in his Netzbilder: lo-fi pictures containing lines and minimal visual information. They are sections of something greater, views from a point in outer space, floating "above things". What the lines and various adjacent fields represent remains an open question. In their graphic sobriety, they invite us to approach earthly realities from a distance in a cosmic context, remaining detached from technomania and other cults, from ideological arguments for revolution and macrobiotics, as well as from pipedream promises of living life on the moon.

1970s Zurich

In 2020 Bice Curiger and Stefan Zweifel's looked back at the "handful of joyfully rebellious events" between 1975 and 1980, at what seemed impossible before and after that:

It was a matter of breaking free from the shackles of a postwar society that was stuck in a state of self-hypnosis and felt oh-so-modern. It revealed a realm in which one's own creative potency was palpable, and a language between art and non-art – with wild power surging from the bottom up – that was outspoken and rousing in its imperious vitality.¹

Neocolors

What exactly are David Weiss's Neocolors? Iwan Schumacher describes this technique in the final chapter of his "Early Biographical Notes", the first posthumous catalogue about David Weiss's early works:

After having used color in various Netzbilder, David now (1977) began producing small Neocolor drawings, availing himself of a technique we still remember from our school-days: fields or stripes are drawn on a sheet of paper using wax crayons of various colors and then painted over in black. The black coating is then scraped off with a fine nib to reveal the drawing underneath: strokes and lines in random, intense colors suddenly shine forth. He produced some more Neocolor drawings [...] in 1978. The motifs range from abstract to representations of women and science fiction.²



Weiss, who was living on Zähringerstrasse in Zurich's Niederdorf neighborhood at the time, would buy his pressed wax pastel crayons, along with other drawing materials, at the nearby Papeterie Racher. This type of crayon by the Caran d'Ache company was called Neocolors. The assortment has since expanded, but the name remains unchanged to this day.

The '70s

In 1973, the Arab oil-exporting nations cut production and imposed an oil embargo on the countries that had supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War, which led to the infamous oil crisis. That fall, a Swiss federal task force banned driving throughout the country on three car-free Sundays. Meanwhile, the ETH Zurich continued expanding its campus on Hönggerberg and set up professorships in architecture to explore architectural heritage and methods of analyzing built and unbuilt environments, the city and cities in general.³ These developments coincided with the emergence of the first wave of the environmental movement and the first cooperative housing. Kurt Furgler took office as Swiss president on January 1, 1977, and Jimmy Carter was sworn in as the 39th president of the United States on January 20. All that year, left-wing terrorist attacks by the RAF (Red Army Faction) peaked during the "German Autumn", making West Germany an epicenter of international terrorism. Documenta 6 and the first Münster Sculpture Projects were held that year too. And in July 1977, New York blacked out when the power went out for a night, and David Weiss began making his Neocolor drawings.

Working with the dark

Weiss's Neocolor nightscapes tie into his large cityscapes of the same period insofar as both groups are worked out of a black ground, out of darkness and the night. They reflect the nascent "counter-public" subculture in the art scene at the time, including the pent-up energy, longings and daydreams of what was long stifled by the rules and regulations at brightly-lit public places and eventually found an outlet in the Zurich opera house riots that broke out in the early 1980s.

David Weiss and Peter Fischli met in the mid-1970s and embarked on what was to prove a lifelong collaboration "in darkened seas" and the visible world. Several decades later, in 2011, Weiss rediscovered his early works of the 1960s and '70s: he made plans to exhibit them in a museum and publish his sketchbooks, and he gave Iwan Schumacher instructions on how to hang the Wandlungen, his drawings on loose-leaf A4 paper – in ballpoint pen on gray recycled graph paper or in watercolor on white paper. While making these preparations, he came across the two sketchbooks of black ink drawings whose title has been borrowed for the present exhibition.

– Stefanie Manthey, translated by Eric Rosencrantz

¹ Bice Curiger, "In Zeiten des Aktivismus. 'Stadtkunst' – extrem lokal und ziemlich international," in *Ausbruch & Rausch. Frauen Kunst Punk 1975-1980*, ed. by Bice Curiger and Stefan Zweifel, Zurich: Edition Patrick Frey, 2020, pp. 32- 82, 32.

² David Weiss. *Arbeiten/Works 1968-1979*, ed. by Stephan Kunz, Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur exhibition catalogue, February 15–May 18, 2014, Chur: Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur, 2014, pp. 122-143, p. 141.

³ See the articles by Michael Hanak and Benedikt Loderer in: *Architekturführer Zürich. Gebäude – Freiraum – Infrastruktur*, ed. by Werner Huber, Zurich: Edition Hochparterre, 2020, pp. 40-45 ("1950-1974: Organisiert und funktionstüchtig") and 46-51 ("1975-1995: Zwischen Ölkrise und Industriebranche").