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Jutta Koether

1982, 1983, 1984

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“Beyond those initial contortions, his limbs managed to come up with a counter-rhythm, [he] heard sounds through them that he didn't recognise, but which gave him the strength to tear his head out of the hole.”

Launched in September 1980 in the provinces of Cologne and named after the British punk band *X-Ray Spex*, the magazine *SPEX* was intended both as an act of self-affirmation and the embodiment of this very counter-rhythm opposing provincial life in West Germany. A handful of young publicists proved that it is entirely possible to write about pop music (and, at the same time, everything else) in whichever way you choose, contrary to the prevailing rules of journalistic etiquette.

Jutta Koether sets the beginning of her career as an artist in 1982 and published her first contribution for *SPEX* in the January issue of the same year: *Die Seele, der Tod und das Loch – Eine Kurzgeschichte* (*The Soul, The Death, and The Hole—A Short Story*) from which the above and the following quotations have been taken. Koether continued writing texts on music, artist portraits, single and album reviews under her own name and aliases (Lucie Beyer and, from 1985, onwards Mrs. Benway). Together with her painting and drawings these were “specs” of various kinds to tear your head out of the hole and look at the world, understand it, and tell a story. All the formats come together under the immense pressures of the present and history, a wild engagement with the now and the past through the reception of cultural artefacts. At a young age, archaeology was Koether's first pair of specs through which she observed the world. Subtitled “Musik zur Zeit” (*Music in/for its Time*), this pressure also shaped the collective *SPEX* project. The magazine radically departed from the established practices of cultural journalism of the moment, dominated as it was by issues from the previous decade and dogmatic left-wing alternative and peace movement agendas, toward contemporary music and the concept of an aesthetic left.

“They came across many things down the centuries and in their time.”

In this act of generating the past and the present, tradition is by no means a burdensome thing for Koether – it is more a method of producing text, be it painted or written. In a demonic process all predetermined meanings and allusions are distilled from the elements that—for example—make up painting per se, so that they can be redeployed: “plunge [...] briskly and brashly into the immured, concrete sepulchre of rock 'n' roll with a lot of guitar noise and using it to pick out the best bare bones”, as she aptly put it when writing about Sonic Youth's *Kill Yr Idols* (1983). 1980s guitar music was one of the core concerns of early *SPEX*, but precisely as a synthesis of other art forms: here rock 'n' roll is not just a counterpart, not just a foil for painting, but the one is not intelligible without the other. The more recent past of rock 'n' roll in the form of punk and folk is of particular interest to Koether. In the mid-1970s, punk set out to show that with just a few chords and a few stylistic devices, anyone and everyone can make powerful and meaningful statements through music. This was preceded in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the music of reclusive singer-songwriters, with its exposed, simple techniques, which often came across as misunderstood surrealism, bordering on folklore, kitsch, and poetry.

“Groping around himself, he realised that the bones had come alive, had bodies that emanated all manner of things, much like his own.”

The theoretical, practical, and poetic disinterment and reassembly of the bare bones of punk and folk, which were generally also present in the painting of the time as expressive smearings and elemental techniques, preoccupied

Koether up until 1985. In her case it was more a matter of “Wild Nights”—referencing Emily Dickinson—than wild painting, her creative output is concomitant with, yet fundamentally dissimilar to the fast and fluent images of the so-called “Neue Wilde” (New Fauves) in her orbit. Drawing on folk-punk influences, Koether made small-format oil paintings in the privacy of her room, in contrast to the flow and circulation in the large studio workshops of most of her contemporaries. Her paintings are each dominated by a central motif, which were customarily consigned to the canvas in a series of impasto brushstrokes or, more rarely, extremely cropped by the small format. Specs and receptors, eyes, vessels, and holes are recurrent motifs. They are paired with mythical pyramids, spheres, and dots, which nestle as abstract, fundamental units in the vessels and are veritably wedged into the paint, protruding like blisters or simply balancing on the bones.

“The lifelike souls with their ingeniously-fashioned ears could not stop the course of fate either, because it was motorised.”

As a compliment to rock 'n' roll, the viscera of painting, such as Frank Auerbach's crusty application of paint or Marjorie Cameron and Francis Picabia's visual operations, are laid bare utilising dirty cutlery and very much ‘under the influence’. Koether's demonic research views the world through ever-new specs, but it always ends right back at a starting point. It was not until 1985, in Koether's first exhibition, that her paintings were taken out of her private realm and exposed to the dynamic of the immediate, public arena. Her paintings from the previous years were those of a receiver that transmits into time. Under the heading *Music in/for its Time*, Koether did not orient herself on the time of the Kronos, the time that passes, but on that of the Kairos, the moment of opportunity that we seize, but which also breaks upon us in a demanding way. What counted and still counts for her is the discourse of painting, the discontinuities and connections, the drifting around at the beginnings and ends of popular and non-popular cultures in an era she subjectively experiences in active, communal correspondence and engagement. Koether produces her paintings in this time and sends them out into it. In her own way, she teaches us not to lose any.

-Tonio Kröner

Galerie Buchholz is pleased to announce an exhibition of Jutta Koether's paintings and works on paper from the early 1980s. This is our tenth solo exhibition with Koether since 1996, and the first in our New York gallery.

Jutta Koether (1958, Cologne) lives and works in New York, Berlin and Cologne. Koether's work was the subject of a comprehensive survey exhibition at the Museum Brandhorst in Munich and the Mudam in Luxembourg in 2018 and 2019. Exhibitions of her work have been held at Artium Museoa in Vitoria-Gasteiz (2022), Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (2019), Dundee Contemporary Arts (2013), Moderna Museet in Stockholm (2011), Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (2009), Kunsthalle Bern (2007), and Kölnischer Kunstverein (2006). Koether programmatically connects her painting to performance, music, and textual production; present and past collaborators include Reena Spaulings, Tom Verlaine, Steven Parrino, John Miller, Tony Conrad, Kim Gordon, and others. Since 2010, Koether has been Professor of Painting and Drawing at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts, and has previously taught at Columbia University, Cooper Union School of Art and School of Visual Art in New York, Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, Yale University in New Haven, Universität der Künste in Berlin and Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi in Copenhagen, among others.

Blank Forms Editions will publish the first English translation of Koether's collected writings from the early 1980s through the 1990s.