

esprit

organized by K.R.M. Mooney

August 30 - November 09, 2024

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spirit is a bone

When describing this exhibition, artist and curator of the exhibition K.R.M. Mooney proposes that Konrad Fischer Galerie and its history provides a foundation and frame in which to situate works of artists across generations. This statement is a provocation to me as a writer and leads me to a type of self-criticism of my own work as a curator. This kind of cross-generational curating speaks to a form of revaluation that we might say is particularly present within the generation—and I'd argue, particular milieu—of international artists and cultural workers that both Mooney and I are a part of. We tend to look back at artistic practices from around the time that this gallery was founded, and which it was and continues to be invested in promoting. While canonised now, these practices that favoured conceptual frameworks, minimal and minimalistic aesthetics, almost immaterial gestures, and sometimes doggedly persistent rules of production by artists, were not favoured by the market at this gallery's inception. Yet today, the investment in such history, sometimes merely by sheer proximity to it, has undoubtedly become part of how meaning and resulting commercial value is attributed to works of art and to the intellectual property that structures its discourses.

For many artists, the appreciation of these practices today is not merely reappraisal, but rather a search for forebearers of artistic practice that may seem anachronistic to what nowadays is the spectacle of the business and the culture industry, with its fairs and attendant fashionable curatorial discourses. Regardless of the subsumption of these practices by the culture industry and its market, they do lead us to ask whether the gesture of critique remains immanent to a work of art or whether it is diminished in the course of history. What may seem cynical, but is entirely true, is that the legacy of the avant-garde is an incredible sales pitch that gallerists, curators, and artists themselves align with in different ways, as a form of self-historicization and by extension, a way of attributing symbolic or commercial value to their work

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Leading up to this exhibition, Mooney spoke to me about what he called a “mode of invitation” in thinking about this show. In writing this text, I returned to asking what to make of this phrase as a writer who accepted such an invitation. On one hand, it speaks to the curatorial relations established by the artist and those that he invited to take part in exhibition; and on the other, of the gallery that invited him to make an exhibition under the pretence of a group exhibition. While this is not a strict curatorial framework, it speaks to many of the social realities of how exhibitions are made and the sensitivity of artists to take such things into consideration as a part of their conceptual and aesthetic decisions. From this point of view, we can take into consideration the relation between the artist curating the show, the other artists he has communicated with in producing it, the existing works part of Konrad Fischer Galerie's inventory, and the material history of the gallery itself; all of which form points in which Mooney has responded in constructing the exhibition.

From this very context there's an historical precedent that sets this in place. We can understand that modes of invitation formed the background of the establishment of this gallery. As many visitors will know, from the late 1960s and into 1970s, artist-turned-gallerist Konrad Fischer (mother's maiden name Lueg) was one of the first German gallerists to take advantage of new airline connections between the United States and new modes of artistic production that allowed the artist to make their work in-situ instead of investing money on the often costly shipping of works of art.¹ While other galleries did the same, it seems particularly pertinent that Fischer was an artist himself and was involved in the curation of important exhibitions introducing conceptual art to West Germany and the Rhineland.²

An artist whose work dug into the currents of late-Modernist avant-garde criticality and as a dealer, connected with an international network of artist peers. What Fischer's invitations resulted in was shifting the site of production away from the artist's studio as the point of origin for works of art, and instead, instigated modes of making art that engaged with site and context, making the artist themselves an actor in direct relation with how their art was both produced and consumed by an audience in a specific context.³ While this is largely taken for granted today in a globalised art trade that takes the mobility of the artist as a given, the site of Konrad Fischer Galerie was undoubtedly a part of the story that saw artists shifting their attention to the context, or more precisely the infrastructure that constituted modes of exhibition-making as part of the subject and material of art making in and of itself.⁴

The major development to take place since then, akin to the introduction of relatively cheap air travel, was the introduction of the internet and its integration into the culture industry. In effect, completely changing how the information and images produced by art and its industry were distributed and consumed. There is no doubt that in tandem, this also changed how art was produced. In terms of the changes in the distribution of information that occurred in this time, just two examples: first in 1999, e-flux introduced its global mailing list, centralising the communications of galleries and museums internationally; and less than ten years later in 2008, Contemporary Art Daily launched its blog, aggregating exhibition views which were already spread across alternative platforms into one place. Alongside this, art and antiquities have become more commonly bought and sold as a speculative investment, with specialised Freeports built to avoid the taxation obligations on behalf of their collectors. The commercialisation of art that a group of artists that included Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter playfully critiqued with their elaboration of Capitalist Realism in the 1960s, has given way to a financialization of art, as a global information driven commodities market.

While this exhibition doesn't claim to comment explicitly on these larger social facts, for me it does come to mind when we are led to reconsider the history of the gallery, and undoubtedly its founder, within the current context of the art business. If we are asked to think of the gallery as a

¹ In 1967 and the years that followed, affordable air travel was still quite rare. That year, Lufthansa launched the first direct route between Düsseldorf and New York, which came at a high price. If you were able to extend your visit in Germany for four weeks or more, you could however enjoy lower prices. This allowed the artists of the time to work on site at their own pace and provided them the chance to connect with institutions in the surrounding area—including Leverkusen, Krefeld, Cologne, Mönchengladbach, as well as Amsterdam and Eindhoven—where much of Fischer's American artists' work was showcased early on.

² For example, *Conception / Konzeption* (Curated with Rolf Wedewer, Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, October – November 1969) and the series of exhibitions titled *prospekt* (1968 to 1976) at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. Throughout this period, Fischer maintained communication with many key museum curators, enhancing collaboration and exchange. As noted by the gallery: "The initial exhibitions frequently featured works that were considered quite challenging to sell at the time, such as those by Long, Buren, Nauman, Ian Wilson, Stanley Brouwn, Gilbert & George, and even the Bechers, among others. In the first two years, Dorothee and Konrad did not make any sales."

³ See Michael Sanchez, "A Logistical Inversion; From Konrad Lueg to Konrad Fischer", Grey Room, No. 63 (Spring 2016), pp. 6-41

⁴ For further elaboration of discussing the notion of infrastructure within the context of contemporary art and what has been identified as infrastructural critique in favour of institutional critique, see Marina Vishmidt, "Only as Self-Relating Negativity": Infrastructure and Critique'. *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts*, 15 March 2022, p. 13-24.

frame, then it should then come as no surprise that the exhibition touches on themes such as the device of the frame in works of art, the para-artistic network of invitation cards and ephemera, and the social contract between artist and gallery. There are works that look to the formal constraints of delineation, of what in German theory has elaborated in the concept of *gestell*, or of what we can deduce to be the material choices that aesthetic subjectivity recognises as the boundaries of a work. One particular gesture asks for the participation of Galerie Konrad Fischer as a legal business entity, in effect, making the conditions of production and display visible as relations that are defined by the social contract between artist and business. Elsewhere we see the accumulation of invitation cards and ephemera as part of, on one hand, the waste of public relations, and yet on the other, the construction of a mythology of para-artistic networks rooted in the ephemeral and easily distributed. Each example speaks to a certain staging of aesthetic subjectivity that looks, self-reflexively, to the relations between the production of the work of art and its display. As viewers, it points to the fact that our own appreciation, consumption or viewership is already intrinsic to the work, as a structural condition of all art and its resulting value.⁵ When foregrounding where value maybe transmitted or transmuted, the fetish value of the artwork or its frame, whether physical or in narrative, is never far from our senses. This is not something intrinsic to the work, like how reason isn't intrinsic to the skull or value to a bar of gold, but something social and constructed by our own participation.

– Nicholas Tammens

⁵ This point proceeds from a reading of the theory of theatricality presented by Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (London and New York: Sternberg Press, 2012), 22.