

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

INTERPLAY NO. 2: RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT & ISA GENZKEN

*I stand in shoes
made of lead
I carry a shirt
of chains
I grow wings
of cement
I sing a sad song
that should save me*

A jam session between Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and Isa Genzken in DAS MINSK's cabinet, the second INTERPLAY brings together the works of two uncompromising artists. Although it's rather quiet in the cabinet, it almost seems to me as if free jazz is sounding between the painting *In sich gefangen* (Trapped Within Oneself) from 1973 by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and the concrete sculpture *Weltempfänger* (World Receiver), ca. 1990, by Isa Genzken—a musical style that embodies freedom and resistance and seeks to challenge instead of complaisance.

The *Weltempfänger* by Genzken exhibited here was created in 1990. The year in which Wolf-Rehfeldt ceased her artistic production. How should such a sealed *Weltempfänger* receive or even transmit anything at all? That this cement radio lacking buttons or a speaker could fulfill its function seems unlikely—perhaps just as unlikely as Wolf-Rehfeldt building an international Mail Art network might seem in a regime like the GDR.

In Genzken's *Weltempfänger*, some see a commentary on the "tristesse" (sorrow) of German postwar architecture. Wolf-Rehfeldt's pertinent question to this might be, "Are we really building right?" Genzken, in turn, might add: "Everybody needs at least one window," which is how she also titled her first institutional exhibition in Brussels in 1993. A window always symbolizes insight and outlook, a hinge between the self and the world outside. In the collage *Fensterblick, collagiert* (Window View, Collaged) from 1980 Wolf-Rehfeldt augments the abstract form from her painting *In sich gefangen* with numerous windows.

Others see in Genzken's *Weltempfängern* an expression of unsuccessful or failed communication. But isn't it rather a communication that works in spite of everything? The antenna is there, after all. It is the crucial element—music and news can only be received from around the world through it. The antenna is the window.

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After Genzken first exhibited a Panasonic brand world receiver as a readymade in 1982—a device she used in her studio to receive music from around the world, often in languages that she didn't understand—she then produced the minimalist cement sculptures beginning in 1983–84, which are instantly recognizable as radios despite their strong abstraction. This is how the so-called *Weltempfänger* series came into being, consisting of individual works or work groups of radios. To produce them, the artist filled different-sized rectangular wooden cases with cement and sunk metal antennas in the still-moist material. There are numerous *Weltempfänger* in various sizes, forms, and surface structures in Isa Genzken's oeuvre, all of which are equipped with an antenna.

At the same time, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt was sending and receiving post from around the world, no matter which language. She maintained an international exchange of letters from the GDR with artists from the United States, Latin America, Poland, and the Netherlands, irrespective of any boundaries. She had taught herself the English language for this. Typewriter, radio, and post were major achievements in worldwide communication, which, now often translated into the digital, still exist today. The citizens of the GDR, however, were largely deprived of the unrestricted reception of news and music from all over the world through censorship, control, and manipulation.

The handling of information remains one of the greatest challenges to the preservation of democracy and freedom. Information and media can maintain a democratic system and strengthen it, as well as weaken or even threaten it. *Freedom Won – Freedom Lost* is the title of one of Wolf-Rehfeldt's typewritings from the year 1975: doesn't every bit of freedom gained also contain its loss somewhere else?

In the painting in INTERPLAY No. 2, Wolf-Rehfeldt gives expression to a feeling of being trapped within oneself that is also evident in her many "cagy beings," such as the tile work *Cagy Being 3* (1989/2022) at MINSK. This is an experience that is also, but not only, due to the political system in the former GDR. In a meeting at her home, the artist talked about how the flow of information in the GDR radically decreased, while at the same time the surplus of information in the West really overwhelmed her. Both conditions posed a danger to her, Wolf-Rehfeldt said. In the juxtaposition of the drawings *Gefühl in Grenzen* (Feeling Within Limits), *Grenzübertretung von Gefühlen* (Boundary Violation of Feelings, n.d.), and *Gefühl meiner selbst* (Feeling of Myself, n.d.), Wolf-Rehfeldt gives expression to her striving toward freedom. The first drawing consists of two parts. The "feeling" is depicted here as a round abstract form, similar to the painting *In sich gefangen*. In the upper part, the form dutifully remains in the rectangular boundaries of the drawn frame. Beneath, it rebelliously defies the frame surrounding it. In *Gefühl meiner Selbst* the form surpasses the typed word "restriction" (Einschränkung), which forms the frame.

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Gefühl meiner Selbst could be simultaneously interpreted as both a self-portrait of the artist and a portrait of her art. The aim of her art seems to be the liberation from limitations and constraints. From the constraint of submitting to the function of signs, the constraint of respecting the frame of the paper, from the constraint of thinking within the frame.

The round forms of the painting *In sich gefangen* seem mobile and flexible, while the concrete of Genzken's sculpture has a finality that is only relativized by the function of the antenna. Is the *Weltempfänger* ultimately more "trapped within oneself" than the forms in Wolf-Rehfeldt's paintings? The sound from Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt's typing on the analogue typewriter, character for character, line for line, the sound of Genzken's *Weltempfänger*, sometimes staticky sometimes clear; both artists transmit and receive.

I listen to the imagined free jazz in the cabinet. "Free" like Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt's Mail Art, which evaded postal controls and went out into the world; "free" like Isa Genzken's *Weltempfänger*, which as resonating bodies seem to receive sound from all over the world. Even if "free" here does not necessarily mean free: anyone who believes that free jazz originated in a open, utopian space is mistaken. It's much more about regaining and claiming a nonexistent freedom in a society that oppresses and discriminates. Art offers such emancipatory free spaces. To find and maintain them is difficult. Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and Isa Genzken are artists who consistently defy the constraints of the art world and artistically talk back. That's the sound this INTERPLAY is made of—not loud, but certainly powerful.

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