

Josef Bauer

Galerie Karin Guenther, Hamburg



KARIN GUENTHER

Galerie Admiralitätstraße 71 20459 Hamburg Fon +49 40 37503450 info@galerie-karin-guenther.de www.galerie-karin-guenther.de



Josef Bauer
Taktile Poesie - Nackenstütze, 1965 - 68



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Josef Bauer
Der Besuch, 1965-68



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Josef Bauer
Zwischen Tür und Angel, 1968



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Josef Bauer
Taktile Poesie - Halskrause, 1965 - 68
Polyurethane, fiberglass, polyester, 95 x 53 x 19 cm



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Josef Bauer
Taktile Poesie, Handalphabet, 1969
Photography, 64,5 × 41,2 × 2,5 cm



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Josef Bauer
Galerie MAERZ, 1970
Exhibition view, Josef Bauer Archive



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Josef Bauer
Taktile Poesie - die Sprache des Zeigens
Installation view, Galerie Karin Guenther, 2018



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Josef Bauer
Körpergalerie, 1974
Photography, 75 x 48 cm (framed)
Edition: 2/5 + 2 AP



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Josef Bauer
Die Sprache des Zeigens, 1969
Photography, 61,5 x 41,5 cm (framed)
Edition: 5 + 2 AP



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Photography, 61,5 x 41,5 cm (framed)
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Josef Bauer
Verfügbare Pinselstriche, 1987 - 2015
Collage, 40 x 32 cm



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Josef Bauer
Verfügbare Pinselstriche, 1987 - 2015
Collage, 36,5 x 28 cm



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Verfügbare Pinselstriche, 1987 - 2015
Collage, 36,5 x 28 cm



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Josef Bauer
6 buchSTABEN, 1968-92
Aluminum, wood, 6 parts, various dimensions



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Josef Bauer
6 buchSTABEN, 1968
Photography: Fritz Lichtenauer



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Josef Bauer
Raumstudien, 1968 - 2005



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Josef Bauer
Demonstration
Installation view, Belvedere, Vienna, 2019



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HAMBURG

Josef Bauer

GALERIE KARIN GUENTHER

A woman awkwardly and rigidly clutches a giant letter *K* to her chest as though it were her greatest treasure and she fears it might abandon her. The object is not much smaller than she is, and there is something touching about how its cumbersome bulk yields to her forceful embrace. The black-and-white photograph is part of a series titled "Taktile Poesie" (Tactile Poetry), 1965–, by Austrian conceptual artist Josef Bauer, whose work since 1964 was presented in this survey exhibition, titled "Taktile Poesie—die Sprache des Zeigens" (Tactile Poetry: The Language of Showing). Bauer's "tactile poetry" is best understood as a variation on the explorations of language as a material for art that emerged in the 1950s as concrete poetry—for example in the work of the poets of the Wiener Gruppe (Vienna Group), among them H. C. Artmann and Gerhard Rühm.

Unlike them, however, Bauer is not content to work on paper, choosing instead to focus on the haptic dimension of language and using the human body to probe it. Some of his letter objects are made to be hugged, but others extend to become long poles that can be carried around as if in a procession. The photographs of such performances are never pure documentation. On the contrary, Bauer staged the events, usually spontaneous affairs involving neighbors or relatives, held in nature and without spectators, as a pretext to take pictures. At the gallery, one of these letters on a stick, a *U* on a long aluminum pole, *buchSTABE (U)* (Letter [*U*]), 1983, leaned in a corner like an oversize pitchfork. The piece also illustrates Bauer's *showing* of language: In his hands, it is an act that can take on a demonstrative, emotive, or rebellious cast. The last was here exemplified by *Die Sprache des Zeigens* (The Language of Pointing), 1969, a photograph of an outstretched hand holding an *L* aloft like a torch, in a gesture that might read as a

signal of revolutionary pathos. But the artist seems to prioritize other aspects over the semantic tenor of his letters or their aesthetic qualities as objects. He endows the building blocks of written communication with materiality and a tangible bodily existence, translating language into an affective physical idiom.

A group of wall objects created in 1970 supplanted the hand holding the letters in the photographs with its imprint in white modeling clay wrapped around an *X*, a *T*, or a cross made of wood painted black. These pieces spotlight the immediate effect of a human action as basic as a squeeze of a hand. In the 1960s, Bauer had also started inviting the public to handle some of his works: amorphous polyester and polyurethane constructions such as *Körpernahe Form (weißes Objekt)* (Close-Up Shape [White Object]), 1965, which was on view here. With their organic forms as well as the use of physical interaction to establish an immediate relationship to the body, these objects recognizably anticipate Franz West's more widely known *Passstücke* (Adaptives), the first of which dates from 1974.

Works from Bauer's series "Verfügbare Pinselstriche" (Available Brushstrokes), 1987–2015, pinpointed the interplay between the sculptural qualities of painting and the human figure. To make these pieces, Bauer daubed paint on a glass pane in thick brushstrokes, then peeled off the drying pigment and transferred it onto newspaper cutouts showing female models. The paint typically covers the women's faces and much of their bodies; in some cases, the models are effectively clothed in paint, with only their faces and limbs sticking out.

Bauer made pioneering contributions to vital developments in Austrian art—especially concerning sculpture's relationship with the human body—that later propelled the more prominent careers of artists including West and Erwin Wurm, as well as tendencies in international body art. Oddly, his work seldom got the recognition it deserved, though that has begun to change. Later this year, a long-overdue major retrospective of his work will finally take place at the Belvedere 21 in Vienna.

—Nina Möntmann

Translated from German by Gerald Jackson.



Josef Bauer, *Körpergalerie* (Body Gallery), 1974, photographic print, 29 1/2 x 21 1/2" (framed). From the series "Körpergalerie" (Body Gallery), 1974.

JOSEF BAUER

Escaped from the context of his time into the context

I

There could be many reasons why Josef Bauer is only now getting the attention he deserves: he's modest, totally devoted to his work, reclusive, and resides in the countryside, away from the urban art scene. . It is amazing how much Bauer anticipated decisive movements in Austrian – as well as international – cultural development, tendencies with which other Austrians would later achieve international success.

His artistic environment consisted of the poets of the Wiener Gruppe (Vienna Group), German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann, and the artists and literary figures surrounding the writer Heimrad Bäcker. This scene was organized as one that transcended the boundaries of art disciplines, a discourse fostered by the small number of artists' groups and accessibility of facilities. Galleries, exhibition rooms, theaters, bars, clubs, and meeting places all offered forums for shared reflection, artistic production, and the presentation of artworks. One has to imagine the post-war years and the new awakening right after. The avant-garde had been truncated or had emigrated, so the new beginning was a rather traditional one. There were also serious shortcomings in the infrastructure needed by the artists, such as a lack of galleries, of an art trade, of literature, etc. The first attempt at a reconnection to contemporary art was the establishment of the ART CLUB in 1947, called into being by the painter Gustav Beck; its founding president was Albert Paris Gütersloh. At first, it was a purely artistic group, which included Alfred Kubin and the then-avant-garde and internationally-active Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Vacant rooms and low rents offered these Viennese avant-garde artists empty spaces to live and work. The artists made their base in the association's bar, "Strohkoffer" (straw suitcase), in the first district, which quickly became the center of the Viennese scene. The painters represented in the Art Club were primarily divided in two groups: abstract artists led by Beck and Carl Unger, and surrealists led by Edgar Jené, who later founded the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism. Soon after its establishment, the group was also joined by Gerhard Rühm and H.C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, and Oswald Wiener, who was at the time mostly known as jazz musician. The scene in the "Strohkoffer" maintained an intensive dialogue with the Parisian art scene, which also resulted in Jean Cocteau's visit in 1952.

The Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, founded in 1954, followed the Art Club in both chronology and membership. The gallery was initiated by Monsignore Otto Mauer, an influential presence; the venue was primarily associated with such painters as Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Markus Prachensky, Kiki Kogelnik, Maria Lassnig, and Oswald Oberhuber. Its figures also included literati from the Wiener Gruppe, such as Friedrich Achleitner, Konrad Bayer, and Gerhard Rühm. Several avant-garde groups were also present at the exhibition openings, for example the painters, the Wiener Gruppe, the Actionists, the sculptors, and the functionalist architects. Augmenting this landscape was the so-called "Griechenbeisl." The gallery in the Griechenbeisl was founded in 1960 by painter Christa Hauer – who had taken over the traditional inn from her father – and Johann Fruhmann, who was close to the Informel art movement. This site provided a location for a scene that occupied a distinct position from Nächst St. Stephan, and filled the gap in the Viennese exhibition landscape once the Art Club dissolved in 1959. The gallery, run by artists, for artists, anticipated the model of the producers' gallery, and during its eleven-year existence opened itself to conceptual tendencies. While Nächst St. Stephan initially focused on painting, the Griechenbeisl placed an emphasis on sculpture. The gallery continued until 1971 and regularly presented works by Josef Bauer. The Wiener Gruppe, which considered itself affiliated with neo-avant-gardism, built on the pre-war avant-garde and continued until Konrad Bayer's death in 1964, was at home in both locations, even though these groups certainly competed with each other. Beginning in 1954, the artists also met in the "Glory" café, which represented the starting point of the group's fruitful period. Points of contact were found in literary expressionism, in surrealism, and in Dadaism. However, Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Fritz Mauthner's language criticism, as well as Max Stirner's philosophy, provided theoretical impulses, too. In their "poetical parlour games," the artists examined the material of "language"; in readings and happenings, which were described as "literary cabarets," the members presented text montages, concrete and visual poetry, chansons, and sketches. In addition, the dialect, which was to play a major role, particularly with Artmann, was rediscovered for modern poetry.

It was Artmann who, in 1953, defined the "poetical act" as a spontaneous action that is not bound to a medium of recording. Bauer's early works with "performative" graphemes can be assigned to this definition. From the beginning, Bauer distinguished himself from the concrete and visual poets of that time, since he was interested in transformed, far more experimental sculptural and painterly procedures, which he linked with his own physicality and the integration of text blocks. But a radical attitude towards art, and thus also an isolation from prevailing tendencies, also developed in the entire group. The group opposed the conservative literary and artistic tendencies of the post-war era, an approach that caused them to initially fail to gain widespread recognition. In Austria after the Second World War, a conservative climate and a return to traditional ways of thinking and values prevailed. So this period was marked by the attempt to revive the Austrian identity and to promote regional poets such as Karl Heinrich Waggerl and Peter Rosegger. The attitude slowly dissipated after 1958, however, when the country decided to participate in the Brussels world exposition, and thus in architectural Modernism, in order to connect with international Modernism. Karl Schwanzer, a young and completely unknown architect at the time, was commissioned to design the modernistic steel pavilion for the EXPO, which in 1962 became the "20er Haus," the first Museum of Contemporary Art in Austria. The museum was directed by the young Werner Hofmann, who was influenced by the French avant-garde.

II

Starting in the 1950s, Josef Bauer increasingly explored "Concrete Poetry," particularly in the context of the Wiener Gruppe, by sculpturally limiting texts to their basic vowels, thus endowing the visual meaning with a larger significance. "Concrete Poetry" is a term for poems that represent a statement figuratively, as if through drawing and painting with words and letters. This development, too, has to be seen in light of the post-war period. The Wiener Gruppe wanted to turn away from traditional forms, to break with a more recent history in which the elites had failed. These artists were looking for an alienated view of the old, familiar language, for changed habits of seeing and listening, new readings in order to gain new insights into the connection between language and society. Language served as a platform for reflection in order to formulate all the contexts in which it is entangled. Language criticism is social criticism and social criticism comes into being through language criticism.

Language no longer serves to describe an issue, a thought, or a mood, but rather becomes the purpose and object of the poem, or represents itself. An important figure in this movement was the writer Heimirad Bäcker, who exerted a major influence on Josef Bauer. Through the experimental nature of his "new texts," and their approach to basic strategies of concept art and the offensive appropriation of fragments of reality, the field structured by Bäcker acquired a decisive function for the fundamental anchoring of an avant-garde attitude in the Austrian art of the 1970s. Through the involvement of people such as Josef Bauer, Bäcker gradually gained acceptance for the experimental treatment of literature in visual art and thus also in a larger public. Bauer shared Bäcker's approach and consistently translated the basic questions of Concrete Poetry into sculpture. Against this backdrop, he worked on visual texts that defined themselves through their haptic qualities. Here, a conceptual, semantic notion of creation whose decisive component resided in the presentation of the relationships and the linkage of purely tactile qualities rapidly developed.

While the treatment of these sculptural letter objects was initially bound up with his own person, Bauer was inviting his audience to handle the amorphous shapes as early as the mid-1960s. He calls this "Tactile Poetry" and so traces the relationship between body and sculpture. This was long before Franz West, who was 13 years younger, became known for his "Passstücke" (Adaptives). The chain of interaction of the human body with the sculptural object not only led to West's oeuvre, but its problematics were also close to the later experiments of "Body Art." In 1967, Bauer developed the "head rests", abstract sculptural forms of polyurethane foam. These were at first performatively staged by himself and his artist colleagues. The interaction between the human body and the artistic object could be manipulated by the viewer, while the object had an autonomous status. At the time, all the members of the Wiener Gruppe were striving to re-evaluate the visual possibilities of text, while Bauer was the only one in this entire context who linked the interest in the aesthetics of the visual text with the monumentality and materiality of the sculptural material. Unlike his colleagues, however, in this examination Bauer draws on tangible nature, in which body and language encounter each other directly, in order to analyze their linguistic potential. Tactile poetry is here translated as "poetry-to-touch" or "touched poetry."



It was with his installations, which he himself called "Taktil" (Tactile), that he most fundamentally extended the notions of visual poetry at the time. Here, his interest in Concrete Poetry, painting, and performance is most clearly combined. These installations were composed of small paper works with partly rhythmic letter ensembles, plaster casts, sculptural painting fragments that reduced the diverse materialities to absurdity, letters, and sculptural objects such as a pitchfork stuck into bilious green polyethylene. The formation of a performative space was uncommon for the time and in the recent new setup of the installation has an increasingly temporary effect. The hand-crafted nature of the letters – today we would call it an examination of the crafts – is now clearly focused in the installations, for example in the plaster casts in the hand alphabet of 1968 or in the handwritten paper works that he is still producing today. The letters or graphemes mounted on long poles served as portable experimental arrangements of sound poems that were to be mutually reformulated. The relationships between the signs could be constantly renegotiated. The installation describes a perpendicular corner situation. One element of interest – and most probably also the starting point – is a large letter "A" in one corner of the installation. "A" is the beginning of the alphabet and thus constitutes the beginning of each articulation. It is the starting point of all poetry. The universal beginning goes together with one's own handwriting and one's own body. In one photograph, he recalls Hercules as he stems a stone, which, as a plaster cast, however, is an illusion, and within the installation acts as an illusion in front of the viewer. Beside it is a real stone, with real weight. The tactile sense of materialities is addressed here, as with Eva Hesse or Louise Bourgeois. Bauer links the individuality of his expression with the semantics of the word used, combining various artistic languages, as well as materialities, with each other which carry the message far beyond the textual. A level of reflection is opened up, an open space that actually only has been known and familiar to us from the art of the past 20 years.

Bauer also continues Bäcker's conceptual approach. Thus, in 1963, he took a stone from nature, photographed it, produced a plaster cast of it, drew its outlines, and described this very process. He thus analyzed the different perception of things through images and languages, similar to later experiments by Joseph Kosuth. From early on, concept art was inherent in the context of these Viennese artists and derived directly from a literary thinking that paved the way for a more analytical approach. His conceptual approach to painting, which already highlights the gesture, is interesting. In the beginning, he used everyday found objects, which he doused with paint as a purely painterly gesture. Here, too, a transformation of the medium takes place, this time from the object towards painting. Later, his work became more textual or more conceptual, since he transferred the painterly gesture into photography. We see the artist's hand as he holds a red brushstroke in the air. Stroke and ground are separated. The painterly gesture is isolated and thus acquires a new significance. Or he writes the names of the colors on a text image. Text becomes image and image becomes text.

Bauer's oeuvre was also the precursor for the "One-Minute-Sculptures" by Erwin Wurm. In the 1970s, Bauer photographed women getting dressed underneath sleeves of fabric; for the fleeting moment of the picture, they are frozen, becoming transient sculptures. In an anthropological and social-science sense, the performance is among those body techniques that presuppose the body as the "first and most natural technical object and at the same time technical means of the human" (Duerr). For Bauer, the body very early on occupies a position that is as significant as other forms and techniques of artistic expression and takes a very explicit form.

In view of all these considerations, it quickly becomes clear how virtuosically Bauer has combined not only the artistic forms of performance, painting, and Concrete Poetry, but also sculpture, and in the process found a formal vocabulary that has an extremely contemporary effect, particularly today. Probably, he was ahead of his time, because the subsequent generation developed something similar out his work and achieved success with it. But, to me, it seems to be all the more important today to closely examine Bauer's work and to integrate it into the canon of important Austrian art. Whatever he thought early on continues to inscribe itself into today's contemporary art and is more topical than ever.

Bettina Steinbrügge
("Josef Bauer. Works 1965-Today. Grazer Kunstverein 2014)