



NORWICH GALLERY

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Proposition for Reclaiming a Space 1997

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KONRAD FISCHER interviewed by GEORG JAPPE

Studio International vol 181 February 1971 pp 68 to 71

Exhibitions at Konrad Fischer Gallery Düsseldorf

First one-man shows

Darboven (D) December 67

Sandback (USA) May 68

Long (GB) September 68

Fulton (GB) June 69

McLean (GB) September 69

Gilbert and George (GB) May 70

Ruthenbeck (D) March 68

First European one-man shows

Andre (USA) November 67

Artschweger (USA) June 68

LeWitt (USA) January 68

Nauman (USA) July 68

Ryman (USA) December 68

Smithson (USA) January 69

Weiner (USA) April 69

Huebler (USA) January 70

Wilson (USA) October 70

Dibbets (Hol) August 68

First German one-man shows

Rinke (D) March 69

Buren (F) October 69

Merz (I) March 70

Law (GB) August 70

One-man shows in museums, arranged by Konrad Fischer

Andre Darboven (Museum Mönchengladbach); Long, Sandback, LeWitt, Dibbets (Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld); Palermo (Museum Wuppertal Studio).

Collective exhibitions arranged by Konrad Fischer

'Prospect 68' and 'Prospect 69', Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf; 'Konzeption-Conception', Städtisches Museum Leverkusen, October 69.

Other exhibitions

Becher, Palermo, Polke, Richter, Rückriem (G); Bochner, Flavin, Marden (USA); Sladden (GB); Panamarenko (B)

The young art dealer Konrad Fischer, born in 1939, started his first gallery in Düsseldorf only three years ago, and he is regarded as one of the most influential 'art agents' in any context involving new tendencies on the international art scene. The interview brings out, on the one hand, his novel method of working - investing ideas instead of capital - and on the other his marked personal style, which involves a concern with artists instead of their works (which may in any case already have been sold). Apart from giving an impression of Konrad Fischer's personality and ideas, what he says also raises questions of art politics. For example this is the first time, to my knowledge, in today's much expanded art world, that the demand for a precise division of labour between artist, dealer, public exhibition and museum has been not only raised but spelled out in detail.

Konrad Fischer has asked not to be represented by a photograph of himself, or by photographs from his exhibitions ('they're just random installation photos, things of the past'), but by a montage of his invitation cards. The use of picture postcards as private view invitations, which also serve as a record of the gallery's work and the artists who exhibit there, is regarded by Konrad Fischer as one of his inventions.

JAPPE *Didn't you start off as an artist?*

FISCHER Yes, I studied and painted at the Düsseldorf Academy, when was that, 1958-62. In 1963 I had my first show, at Schmela's, the *Sportsman* pictures. The best known thing, as you say, was the *Phosphorescent Shadow Play*, because the museums passed it around a bit. But I wouldn't waste much time on that, it's unimportant.

JAPPE *Why?*

FISCHER Because the art I produced is unimportant. 'What you are, Konny lad, is a good dealer', Schmela used to say. He forced the issue by asking me to start a second Schmela gallery for young people. I wasn't too keen, but everything happened very quickly. I was thinking it all out already; and it didn't work out quite as Schmela had imagined it. You see, I decided - I didn't need any money. What I had was less than 5000 marks - I went on teaching for a year after that - and an idea. Minimal art wasn't known in Europe, and I saw an opening. I thought it was important, and I knew it only from photographs. So I thought I'd try to get through to the artists - I was one myself after all - and I said to myself, 'If someone sends them a plane ticket, they'll come.' So I sent one to Andre.

JAPPE *Did you know him?*

FISCHER No, but his response was 'At last, someone wants to do a room with me.'

JAPPE *Giving artists a ticket and getting them to come, instead of spending a lot of money on transporting objects - was that your idea?*

FISCHER I never heard of anyone having the idea earlier. At least, those who have been given the credit were later than I was. My gallery opened in November

1967. After the Andre exhibition I didn't need to say anything; Andre said it for me. He said, 'Go right ahead it's great'. I have never corresponded much, and I have never worked with galleries much. Sol LeWitt came here quite independently of Dwan. The American galleries didn't make difficulties; the initial difficulties came from German dealers trying to make trouble with their colleagues in New York. I went to America for the first time in April 1968, and called people up - not Warhol or Lichtenstein, that's not interesting, but Judd. In his studio I discovered Sandback. I split the cost of my air fare with the Munich dealer Friedrich; since then like-minded galleries have often shared my expenses.

JAPPE *When you discover completely new people, how do you go about it?*

FISCHER I rely on a feeling. I have a strong conviction that I know what is good, otherwise I couldn't work. What I do is emotional and personal. When I have no information of my own to go on, I rely on the judgement of my friends, especially the artists. For example: I once had to put off a show with Sol LeWitt, and he recommended the drawings of a German girl who lived in New York, called Hanne Darboven. I did hastily find a replacement of my own, but it turned out to be unnecessary. There is no doubt that good artists respect other good artists, and yet there are so many utterly different personalities, in Minimal and Conceptual Art for example, that it doesn't lead to the formation of a clique. I owe a lot to these personal contacts; and chance has played a big part as well. When I was still an artist I shared an exhibition with Richard Long and Jan Dibbets at the Galerie Loehr in Frankfurt. I have never felt so spontaneously enthusiastic about anyone as I did about Richard Long. He had been at art school with George, of Gilbert and George. And Gilbert came from South Tyrol, and an exhibition held by my colleague Friedrich in Munich made him decide to go to art school in London. That shows that dealers with their exhibitions can do more than just show what is new; they are part of the process of producing it. On the other hand, when something gets recommended to me, and I have a feeling that I don't understand it - as with Kosuth's texts - then I leave it alone. And when he puffs himself up in *Studio International*, that's the sort of thing I can't take. The most important test is the exhibition itself. Of course you have a big advantage over the collector or the critic, when you stay with the stuff for a whole month. Sometimes I come home after setting up an exhibition and say 'Great, the best I've ever had!' And then a month later I see there's nothing to it at all. It's better to move gradually from scepticism to enthusiasm than the other way round. Of course there are some enthusiasms that last, but quite aside from enthusiasm, the momentary spark, I have set out to promote a single tendency, and not to keep a general store. If you specialize you can be clearer about the way to go.

JAPPE *Can you outline what this single tendency is?*

FISCHER To start with it was a new tendency that no one knew about in Europe, Minimal Art, and then it was the consequences that came from that: an abstract, reduced, serial art. Conceptual Art above all.

JAPPE *Although you represent a kind of art that the public finds uncongenial, you have become one of the best-known dealers in Germany because you have had an effect on the artistic climate as a whole. What were the considerations that guided you?*

FISCHER There is no gallery in Düsseldorf that is less well-known than mine. Twelve hundred people get my mail shots every month, but over three years there have been, at most, a thousand visitors to my gallery. I am unequivocally an 'in' gallery. And I am dead against 'education'- that's a job for a public institution.

JAPPE *And your job?*

FISCHER To get artists over here, and to bring them into contact with those who live here. When I was an artist everything was so far away; Warhol, Lichtenstein and all those were unattainable great men. But when you know them, you can have a beer with them and get rid of your inferiority complex. I insist that the artist has to be there when I show his work. A lot has been done in the last few years. Palermo and Richter, for example, two of the German artists who have exhibited with me, have now been to New York, and they felt at home there because they had already met artists like Andre and LeWitt over here. In the same way, the Americans go back and tell everyone that there are artists over here too. It's not the artists who are chauvinists, but the institutions.

JAPPE *But for the 'Prospect' show you brought whole galleries over as well?*

FISCHER For the first one, yes. At the second one it was mainly artists. At the Cologne Kunstmarkt only German dealers were allowed to take part. It would have been really informative if they had shown what was not known in this country, instead of pandering to chauvinism. The Kunstmarkt is a place to find out about prices, not about art. Strelow was well known in Düsseldorf as a journalist, and persuaded the city that 'Prospect' was the best and most economical way of providing an informative international survey of the latest tendencies in art. This is quite right; the trouble with a gallery is that the exhibitions come one after the other, there are no visible tie-ups, no direct juxtaposition, and yet different tendencies do have a lot in common. I can't sell anything that I am not convinced about. A museum, on the other hand, can provide the whole spectrum of information without having to engage its own responsibility with respect to all the artists individually.

JAPPE *Your German colleagues have criticized you on the grounds that 'Prospect' lured the collectors away from the German art market.*

FISCHER Practically nothing was sold at 'Prospect', there wasn't any poaching of clients, and anyway the big collectors are known internationally.

JAPPE *Yes, but in that case why did the American galleries come? They had to bear nearly all the costs themselves.*

FISCHER I am absolutely certain that it's important to the Americans galleries to have a progressive image in Europe. In America this image hardly exists at all; in Europe there are much better galleries, as far as courage and progressiveness are concerned. In America the galleries are basically general stores. Anything new is just a drop in the ocean. Friedrich, Sperone, Ricke, Art & Project, Wide White Space and I are way ahead of any American gallery from the point of view of consistent progressiveness. Just look at Dwan or Castelli; they have six or eight shows a year, and the regulars just come back again and again. I just couldn't afford the variations in quality; in Europe blunders can be overlooked, but they're not forgotten. There is no doubt that there is a lot more progressiveness in Europe, and progressive art gets a response much more readily here than in America. In New York - apart from Seth Siegelau, who's a private entrepreneur - there is no gallery accessible to the public that has shown Conceptual Art. I don't see any point in the progressive American artists moving to Europe; but I do believe that I think this is the place where they have an interest in finding out what they can do away from their own context.

JAPPE *Do you believe that progressive European art is growing in importance?*

FISCHER Definitely. In the last few years more and more good people from Europe have turned up and been recognized by the American artists, and that's something that didn't happen before. I'd like to make it quite clear that by this I don't mean Beuys. He is the best-known European artist, but in America they think he's a young man. He is possibly the most important artist of the post-war period, but he isn't young and over there they identify him with the rise of Process Art in 1968. If Beuys doesn't want to do an exhibition in America, Castelli would only have to put one together out of Beuys objects from the Kunstmarkt; but they're too expensive for him. Over there people think Beuys is just some new European artist, whereas he's really a classic.

JAPPE *So when you talk young artists who do you mean?*

FISCHER Of the young artists from Europe who have gained recognition in America, the first ones I think of are Richard Long, Hanne Darboven, Daniel Buren, Jan Dibbets, and Gilbert and George. They were on show at major international events like the 'Attitudes' show in Berne and the Tokyo Biennale, and next year they will be represented in a central position in New York - but I don't want to talk about that yet. Richard Long now has a contract with Dwan. He had his first one-man show at my Gallery in September 1968.

JAPPE *How is it possible to establish an artist and to keep him going with limited financial resources?*

FISCHER The artists get their plane tickets, they stay with me - that's why I have such a large flat. The material costs are low. When I find an artist I can't start thinking about who is going to buy. To start with I did try a few times to have a specific buyer in mind, as dealers usually do. But I was never right. I made a fool of myself. Really. No gift for it. I'm not going to call up some collector and talk him into something. Things don't sell all that fast anyway. Although if I hadn't sold anything at the Andre show, I shouldn't have got much further. The first collectors were a Dutch couple, the Vissers. I haven't got many clients - a doctor, a bank director, a foundry engineer - and a few in Italy, Benelux and England. But more than 50% of what I sell goes to other galleries. Perhaps I'm not an ordinary art dealer. I'm not interested in this whole gallery business. I want to convey information, to show artist's work; I couldn't care less where I do it. I have never put a notice in a paper. I'd rather do museum exhibitions which are linked with my name. There's hardly a single big exhibition that's not put on with my help. Think of 'Attitudes' or the Conceptual Art show at Leverkusen, or the Haus Lange shows, to mention only those near here. The capital as far as the artists and I are concerned, is the publicity. What's important for me is not how to sell things but how to get information across to those who are interested, so that in due course the artists I represent get somewhere, and people say, 'Fischer got the right man'. I think the usual dealer's attitude, neglecting everything that has nothing to do with sales, is absolutely wrong. I see myself as an art agent; this is a long-term job, you have to build up gradually, it's no use expecting to get what you want in three years.

JAPPE *What are your plans for the future?*

FISCHER On that I want to say something basic. I don't believe it's possible, at the present moment, to interest a larger public than exists already. I think experiments like Street Art are a mistake. The idea is to present art to the public as entertainment, but there is no such thing as entertaining art - apart from a few of the by-products. The idea of bringing the museums up to date is based on a misconception. It's certainly possible to do up-to-date exhibitions; but sugaring the pill - music, advertising, and so on - is just a way of increasing the number-of visitors. Museums are an archive of visual art. And when a museum puts on an exhibition of contemporary art it ought to do so in a museum-like way, that is, logically and coherently. Extending a tradition into the future: that's the way a museum ought to inform the public it ought to raise the value of tradition, through bringing in new tendencies, and not depreciate it as usually happens nowadays. A Minimal exhibition, for example, would make sense in the context of a Mondrian and Bauhaus collection. A continuum of art must exist in the museum,

to provide a firm basis for people to get a bearing in the future. It's true that a public gallery that specializes in temporary exhibitions can appeal more directly to the public, but not to the extent that it becomes an amusement hall, a place of entertainment. The private galleries are nothing whatever to do with the general public. The gallery owner's job is not to communicate things to a wide public but to 'keep the family informed'

JAPPE *The 'family' being those who spread the word in the art world?*

FISCHER Yes. I do an exhibition, it's seen by two people, they tell four others, they tell eight more - in six months there's a chain reaction. There is no art that is easily consumable. Warhol or Van Gogh make just as many demands on one as Conceptual Art; it's just that with paintings people think they've taken it all in in one look. I believe that art is understood only by professionals.

JAPPE *Aren't you inviting Left-wing accusations of elitism?*

FISCHER There is no such thing as an elite mentality except where the elite has control. This is just faulty reasoning on the part of the Left. Artists don't make art for an elite; they don't make it for anyone.

JAPPE *You mean they are governed by what Gottfried Benn called 'the compulsion to express'?*

FISCHER Better to call it a need, there's no compulsion. Art has no function; it's just art.

JAPPE *Art for Art's Sake, in other words.*

FISCHER Yes, that hasn't changed. The extension of consciousness can come about through any new object: the moon on television, for example. Any art that sets out to expand people's minds is nothing more nor less than education. Artists can't change society through their art, but through the influence they gain by means of their art. In spite of Guernica, Picasso was not a political artist. But if he were to say anything about politics now, it would get printed and people would read it. And the people who are interested in art are those that spontaneously get something out of it; they can be of any educational level, and they certainly don't belong to a class circumscribed by the IQ standards of the Establishment. Take artists like Barnett Newman or dealers like Schmela - they come from perfectly ordinary backgrounds.

JAPPE *And you don't want to give away anything definite about your future plans?*

FISCHER Yes, one thing. I am not going to need a gallery. I want to work as an art agent. What I want, and what my artists want, is to show my programme for a solid half-year somewhere where it hasn't been possible to see it before. I am thinking of London. My Düsseldorf and New York artists are known in the places where they live; but my London artists are better known in Düsseldorf and New York than they are in London.