

# Herbert Distel – A Homage with Works from the Collection

August 28 to October 7, 2012

Bern artist Herbert Distel (b. 1942) is one of the most many sided artists of Swiss contemporary art. As a painter, filmmaker, sculptor, video and sound, installation and conceptual artist, he is a key protagonist in “exploring and addressing the subject of art media” (Peter Schneemann). On the occasion of his 70th birthday, the Kunstmuseum Bern has organized a small homage to the artist. After all, the museum owns a collection of his work that represents many of the diverse phases of the artist’s career.

## Room 1

The self-portrait *Werde, der du bist* (Become who you are, 1992) serves as a kind of introduction to the exhibition. The artwork comprises a staged studio photo shooting. In the background we can see photographs from Distel’s series *Spoon River Anthology* (1987-1989) showing two stone portraits of historic figures (see room 3). The artist poses in front of them, and a further picture of him has been pasted into the upper part of the composition as collage over the background. The wider context of various portraits dating from different epochs points out that human existence is a fiction, a topic which periodically absorbed Herbert Distel. In addition, the self-portrait reveals the artist’s versatility and his fondness of experimentation in art. These qualities led him to renewedly employ new materials and media to articulate his ideas.

Herbert Distel’s early work is marked by concentration on sculpture. His work in this medium initially took on the form of reliefs such as *Wellrelief* (Corrugated relief, 1964), using neon tubes and corrugated iron that was painted over white. Due to a love of mathematics and geometry Herbert Distel then began to make sculptures such as *3 Tropfen, von rot bis blau* (3 Drops, From red to blue, 1967), and *Ei* (Egg, 1968). In essence the artist plays with stereometric forms like the sphere, the cone, and the egg. A drop is made up of a hemisphere and a cone, and thereby comprises a combination of two basic forms.

At first Herbert Distel made white sculptures, but from 1965 onwards he also began to apply color in the medium. With malleable and easy to manipulate polyester, a plastic that had just been introduced to the market at the time, he found a neutral material with which he could achieve the perfection he desired, the prerequisite for creating flawless form and color. Without a pedestal and set directly on the ground, the colored sculptures of elementary forms have a suggestive force of expression and influence our perception of space.

## Room 2

Herbert Distel’s experiments with sculptures made of plastic culminated in *Projekt Canarias* (1970). For this work he organized the Atlantic crossing of a three-meter long sculpture of polyester made to look like an egg. He launched the artwork on June 10, 1970, at the most western point of the

Canary Islands, hoping that the ocean currents and Atlantic winds would carry it some coastline in the Caribbean or to the shores of Central America. On February 24, 1971, the egg was finally discovered on the north coast of Trinidad, where very strong winds had crushed it on rocks.

The event involved the participation of highly diversified specialists and individuals who had nothing to do with art. Additionally, Herbert Distel worked together with a PR agency, which was responsible for marketing the project and making it known to the public. The whole process, right up to realizing the event, is reflected in various works: The *Landkarte* (Map, 1970) lists—as calculated by the German Meteorological Service for Shipping in Hamburg—the probable route, the drift of the currents and expected duration of the journey, as well as the corresponding destinations for the different times at which the egg could be set afloat. In 1970 WDR produced a film of the journey taken by the egg from Switzerland to being set adrift. An overview of the extensive correspondence resulting from the planning stage as well as the great response to and popularity of the event can be found in a file containing documents, letters, photographs, and newspaper reports from 1969 to 1974.

Cooperation with the various scientists in conjunction with *Projekt Canarias* may not have necessarily been a novel thing, but the role played by a PR agency in the organization of the event definitely was. Therefore Herbert Distel is one of the first artists to have integrated the organization and management of an art event as essentially part of the work itself, and a pioneer in guiding the reception of art independent of a museum.

## Room 3

At the beginning of the 1980s, Herbert Distel began to work with the medium of photography. In the photo series presented in this section of the exhibition, the artist engages with the human face and its representation just as he did in the *Self-portrait* (room 1) or in the video *Die Reise* (The journey, room 4). In divergent ways, both series in room 3 address the issue of identity and what its constituent elements may be. The series *Fratelli Ballinari* (1993) engages with portrait photographs of two brothers residing in Bern, Pietro and Silvio Ballinari, whereas *Spoon River Anthology* (1986-1989) is based on photographs of stone busts from grave monuments in the Staglieno Cemetery of Genoa. Herbert Distel named the latter series after the 1915 published volume of poems *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Master (1869-1950). In 244 poems, the American poet invented the lives and thoughts of 200 people in a fictive town he called Spoon River. The phrasing of the poems resembles obituaries, which, however, are in this case written by the dead themselves. Inspired by the volume of poetry, Herbert Distel gave his portrait photographs the names of individual figures from the anthology. The artist included *Gustav Richter* (1987), who remembers his past as a gardener; *Dorcas Gustine* (1988), whose honest character is described, although it did not make his

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townsmen particularly fond of him; *The Circuit Judge* (1988), who regrets the fact that he was more swayed in his judgment by lawyers' rhetoric skills than administering to justice; and *Dora Williams* (1989), whose life seems to have been an eventful one. After being deserted by her first husband, Dora Williams was left a wealthy woman when her second husband died. She henceforth traveled all over the world. In various later marriages she led a sophisticated life, until she was poisoned—or so she believed—by her last husband, Count Navigato, native of Genoa. Herbert Distel underscores her decadence, greed, and deceit by means of a half mask, which emphasizes her "bombastic and extravagant" personality (Urs Stahel). Simultaneously the mask and the lighting enhance the vitality of the sculpture and make the photograph into a model for the scope of photography as well as for the relativity of our perception.

#### Room 4

Since 1974, Herbert Distel has explored the moving image. Besides 16 mm films such as *Das Telefon* (The telephone, 1977), *Jimmy* (1982), *Marrons Glacés* (Glazed chestnuts, 1981), which will be shown during the exhibition at the Kino Kunstmuseum (see the agenda), he began also to increasingly explore the medium of video.

The film on DVD shown here, *Layla in Camp, Majnun lying without* (1975), was produced by Herbert Distel together with René Bauermeister and the Parisian pantomime group called Layla. It is an adaptation of a Persian miniature that illustrates Nizami Ganjavi's (1141-1209) story of *Layla and Majnun*—a still popular romantic epic poem among Persians, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Indians, and Pakistanis—singing of Majnun's love for Layla, and has been passed down in several differing versions. In one well-known adaptation, Majnun falls mortally in love with Layla the very first time he sets eyes on her. He then, however, becomes insane with love and flees to the desert after Layla's father hinders the couple's marriage.

The video *Die Reise* (The journey, 1987) is a 14 minute long production with four actors (Raphael Jundt, Kurt Salchli, Paul Talman, Felix Klee) that was inspired by the concluding part of an audiophonic work with the same title from 1985. The video deals with the subject of the human face, which likewise plays a prominent part in his photographic artworks (room 3). One after the other, the camera hones in on one of four commuters traveling in the compartment of a train—comprising men of all age groups. After a while the different portraits merge. The face as an external, individual identification sign, where identity becomes concretely evident, mingles with other faces that duplicate and overlap.

Herbert Distel was awarded numerous prizes for the video *die angst die macht die bilder des zauberlehrlings* (The fear the power the imagery of the sorcerer's apprentice, 1987-1993), which he produced together with Peter Guyer. The work constitutes a confrontation between two artworks with different media backgrounds. On the one hand, the video references Johann Wolfgang Goethe's ballad of the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and, on the other, is based on a TV music program broadcasted in the 1960s of an orchestra rehearsing the symphonic poem the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* composed by Paul Dukas. The imagery comprised recycled TV images. Herbert Distel extracts them from their original context and imbues them with new meaning in creating a new sequence. The black-and-white pictures can be basically ascribed to the ballad. The montage mode echoes the chaotic situation in which the sorcerer's apprentice can not dispel the spirits he has awakened. The action culminates in a nuclear explosion, after which the images finally become colored.

The video DENK MAL (Think/monument, 2007-2012), completed just before the exhibition opened, again engages with the subject of the egg. Now, however, the motif makes apparent how a shift in Herbert Distel's art from a sculptural to a media-oriented focus took place. This transformation in his art began in the 1970s, with the material object increasingly no longer playing a role or only a very subordinate one. The video films a 22 ton egg sculpture by panning around it. The egg measures 3 x 2 x 2 m and is the same size as that featured in the *Canaris* egg. In 1970, it was carved out of granite from the Gotthard nappe and set up on a site next to the route connecting Basle and Chiasso, just before the south portal of

the Belchen Tunnel, until it was transferred to Il Giardino di Daniel Spoerri in Seggiano (Italy) on loan.

*Curator: Claudine Metzger*

#### Herbert Distel: Biography

1942	Born in Bern, lives in Katzelsdorf near Vienna Attends the School of Arts and Crafts, Biel, enrolls in graphic art classes, studies under Fridolin Müller
1963-1964	Stay in Paris Studies lithography at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts Member of independent group of artists Bern 66
1969	Sculpture prize of the X Bienal de São Paulo
1970	<i>Projekt Canaris</i> (Canaris project)
1972	Documenta 5
1970-1977	Realization of the Schubladenmuseums (Museum of drawers) ( <a href="http://www.schubladenmuseum.com">www.schubladenmuseum.com</a> ) Turns to using new media: experimental theater productions, Press Art, staged photography, sound and film art
1985-1987	Studied dramaturgy and artistic direction with the Polish directors Krzysztof Kieslowski and Edward Zebrowski in Berlin
1993	Video <i>die angst die macht die bilder des zauberlehrlings</i> (the fear the power the imagery of the sorcerer's apprentice)
1997	Running Parallel to Documenta X, he launches an event that advertises the bottle rack prior to Duchamp in the international art press
2012	<i>cuckoo's egg—cadeau empoisonné</i> , Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, Cully ( <a href="http://www.sokultur.ch/html/kulturschaffende/detail.html?q=Herbert+Distel&amp;qs=all&amp;p=0">www.sokultur.ch/html/kulturschaffende/detail.html?q=Herbert+Distel&amp;qs=all&amp;p=0</a> )

#### Agenda

**Kunst über Mittag:** Mittwoch, 29. August 2012, 12h30 – 13h

**Blicke auf die Gegenwartskunst:** Dienstag, 11. September 2012, 18h30

#### Kino Kunstmuseum

Das Kino Kunstmuseum zeigt am Samstag, 1. September 2012, 16h30 und am Sonntag, 2. September 2012, 11 h folgende 16mm-Filme von Herbert Distel:

- *Das Telefon*, 1977 (18 Minuten)
- *Marrons Glacés*, 1981 (8 Minuten)
- *Jimmy*, 1982 (25 Minuten)
- *Canaris*, 1970 (28 Minuten)

Mehr Informationen siehe [www.kinokunstmuseum.ch](http://www.kinokunstmuseum.ch)