



Gerhard von Graevenitz 1934-1983
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INTERVIEW WITH PROF. DR. ANTJE VON GRAEVENITZ GERHARD VON GRAEVENITZ ESTATE

Gerhard von Graevenitz, who was born in Germany in 1934 and lived and worked in Amsterdam from 1970 onwards, was a leading proponent of Op Art. His practice encompassed relief art, kinetic art and early computer graphics. Early in his career, he was a devoted member of the Group ZERO, but he eventually developed an interest in other movements and co-founded Nouvelle Tendances. He died in Switzerland in a plane crash on August 20, 1983.

Antje von Graevenitz is a Professor of Art History. Born in 1940 in Hamburg, she was married to Gerhard von Graevenitz from 1969-1983. She was on the board of the Stichting de Appel in Amsterdam, the Academy of Art in Arnhem, Stichting Stamina in Amsterdam, and the Art Collection of Groningen, and was also President of the Netherlandish branch of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). Additionally, she advised the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg, the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz and the Central Archive of the International Art Trade based in Cologne.

Loretta Württemberg You have been overseeing your husband's estate for more than 30 years. He died in 1983.

Antje von Graevenitz Yes. We had been married since 1967. But by 1983, we were already living apart. That final year, he had been living next door. He was killed along with his girlfriend and their child

Assuming the responsibility of managing an estate is always stressful, but doing so under such circumstances must have been especially

My focus shifted almost immediately. You quickly come to realize how much you still love the person. I didn't resent them, but I did resent their shared fate—and especially that their baby had to die with them. They were all traveling together in the plane that crashed. That's why I wanted to ensure that the three would remain together, that they would be buried together. I'm happy I was able to make it happen that way in the end.



Antje von Graevenitz
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2017, photo: Emile van de Griendt

And then there was the art your husband left behind. Did you begin your estate work right away?

Yes. The burial took place a week after the crash. Almost immediately afterwards, the Dusseldorf gallerist Hubertus Schöller, who had been planning an exhibition with Gerhard, approached me to ask that it move forward. A friend helped me organize

everything, as I was not yet in the mindset to do it alone. We hung the exhibition together.

What was it like to have the exhibition so soon after his death?

The gallery owner was certainly surprised that I was so involved. Perhaps he thought that I would take care of the logistics and that would be that. But I always saw my role as director of the estate as much more than that. I needed to keep a close eye on the presentation of the work. My husband always wanted his art to be hung in a specific way, and it was particularly important that the kinetic objects be at the height of the solar plexus, which is to say quite low. Concurrent to that exhibition, there was a display of his graphic works and a kinetic object in a small darkened space in the Municipal Museum of Mönchengladbach. Both exhibitions were very consoling. They allowed his works to live on and when the kinetic pieces moved, he was still present somehow.

Did you feel at peace afterwards ?

Not really. The studio still had to be sorted out, and somehow everything still had to go on. My whole place was suddenly filled with boxes. On top of it all, the art market seemed like uncharted terrain. Gerhard was exceedingly talented in negotiating with dealers, and of course I wanted to be able to do the same on his behalf. But some dealers didn't want to have anything to do with an artist's widow. I thought that was truly a shame, because I had considered some of them to be my friends.

Did that affect the market value of his work?

In the beginning there was a lot of interest, especially from museums. At the time of his death, Gerhard's work was no longer en

vogue. It was wonderful that people suddenly felt—either out of nostalgia or kind-heartedness— “Oh, he’s gone, we absolutely need one of his works!” I’ve come to realize that it’s the same for other artists who have passed away. But after about two years, the nostalgia dissipates. That also goes for museums interested in holding retrospectives. For instance, the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller in Otterlo, the Netherlands, wanted to put on a major retrospective right away in June 1984. To this day, the catalogue that I created for it remains crucial to the understanding of his work.

At the time of your husband's death you were a lecturer in Art History at the University of Amsterdam. Did you return to your university duties right away?

Yes. I had to, but I also wanted to continue working at the university. I was also able to ask a couple of students to help me organize the archive. We had folders spread out on two large tables—a ping pong table and a big round one. We sifted through the documents, and kept the ones that were important for the forthcoming exhibition catalogue; my contribution was to be a short biography of 12-15 pages. There ended up being enough material for 99 pages, which were accepted without a word. That was wonderful.

What was your next step?

Right after the exhibition in Otterlo, I began to consider whether it wouldn't also be good to hold an exhibition in Munich—Gerhard was German after all. During his time in Munich, he had often consulted for the Lenbach-Haus and organized lectures there. Because of that, Gerhard's friend the art critic Jürgen Morschel thought that that museum would be the right venue. In

addition, it also owned a work by Gerhard. So I called the Director, Armin Zweite, and asked if he wouldn't be interested. But he put me in my place instead: “You're the beneficiary and the widow, and it's not your place to go around pushing [Gerhard's work]! We museum professionals would come to you if that's what we wanted.” I could understand his perspective, but it still stung. These days we're back on good terms with one another.



Gerhard von Graevenitz
© Gerhard von Graevenitz Estate, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
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Your anecdote sheds light on the power struggle that so often breaks out after the death of an artist.

Exactly. It wasn't good advice. But afterwards, I still withdrew like a snail into its shell. In the eighties, there weren't many exhibitions for which Gerhard's work was relevant—just a couple that were held abroad on German art or on the art of the sixties. Now and then Galerie Hubertus Schöller and Winfried Reckermann would hold solo exhibitions. Interest dwindled for a time. In 2005, Galerie von Bartha in Basel was the first to begin promoting his work in earnest again. Just before that, for the first time in a long time, there had been exhibitions devoted to the themes of movement, light and Op Art in Graz, Basel, Karlsruhe and Frankfurt, which had featured my husband's kinetic art.

Does that also mean that there weren't any significant sales of his work until 2005?

Only every now and then. I also made investments. Here's an unusual story: right after Gerhard died, Winfried Reckermann called and said that he would like to hold an exhibition again soon and that Benjamin Katz had taken photos of Gerhard at the last exhibition. I went to Cologne right away. Seeing those photographs was really moving. Katz did a wonderful job. It was just so Gerhard, the way he would do something so simple—like plugging in a cord—but with such intense focus—that concentration and devotion to something as banal as electricity! I thought it was so important that I decided to finance the publication on the spot.



Lichtobjekt, 1969
© Gerhard von Graevenitz Estate, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
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Was it an option for you at the time to hold on to all of the work, or, alternately, to bequeath everything to a museum? Or was the best approach always to sell pieces one by one?

I wanted to sell continuously, as Gerhard himself had done. However, I didn't like selling to private individuals, and especially not from my home; that was a rare occurrence. I learned from Gerhard that it isn't important for there to be a concentration of the artist's work in a museum to preserve his or her legacy. He

always used to tell me about Bart van der Leck—a leading proponent of de Stijl—whose work was only to be found at the Kröller-Müller Museum, where it is mostly in storage. And that's why almost no one knows him today.

Was selling Gerhard's work also a way to disseminate it to wider audiences?

It was one way to help secure his reputation. But as I said, I didn't like selling to just any private individual—only to real art collectors. In any case, collectors who aren't serious don't tend to have much interest in kinetic objects. They're fragile and weren't made to distract people at the dentist or in a bookstore. Schöller and I were extremely vigilant and I always made sure that prospective buyers couldn't purchase Gerhard's work for less from me than at a gallery. Gerhard learned that lesson early on when he was a gallerist at 'nota' in Munich and when he exhibited at Hans Mayer's Op-Art gallery in Esslingen, before it moved to Düsseldorf. While Gerhard's exhibition was taking place in Esslingen, two Americans suddenly showed up at his studio in Munich and bought one or two pieces for less than they would have cost at the gallery. Hans Mayer was furious. To his credit, Gerhard had had no idea that these people had been to the gallery beforehand. But that was a hard lesson for him, and I have also ascribed to it. If a collector comes to the studio to buy art, I always get a gallery involved. Galleries are creative and they also work hard to preserve the artist's legacy. You have to keep that in mind.

Today the The Mayor Gallery in London also represents your husband's work. Have you also benefitted from the renewed interest in the Zero Group?

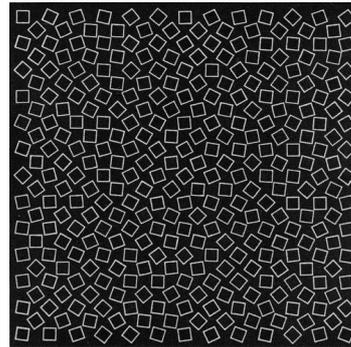
The Galerie von Bartha in Basel made the contact with The Mayor Gallery. As I learned

later, Miklos von Bartha had discovered a work by Gerhard at an exhibition dedicated to the theme of "Moving Parts" at the Tinguely Museum in 2005. It was hanging in the stairwell next to the restrooms, which was just appalling to me. But then the curator called with the news that von Bartha thought it was the most beautiful piece in the whole exhibition, and that he wanted to work on behalf of Gerhard's oeuvre. Since I wasn't familiar with his gallery, my son and I went to go see it. Its programming appealed to me immensely, but what struck me even more was Miklos von Bartha's enthusiasm. It is absolutely infectious, which is half the battle. Von Bartha has done a lot for Gerhard's work, and he's sold a lot of it, too, including to James Mayor in London. In turn, Mayor sold some of Gerhard's pieces to the Sperone-Westwater Gallery in New York, which then dedicated an exhibition to Gerhard and François Morellet. Now hardly any of the works on view were from the estate, but those exhibitions still made a difference. There was a wonderful online response from art critics: "It was (at that time) the best exhibition in New York." Of course that made me happy. Whenever possible, I visit galleries that want to show Gerhard's work and ask other gallerists about them. Now there are galleries in Stuttgart, The Haag and Berlin that show him. As an estate director, you really have to keep an eye on how the work is being treated!

Is it important to establish an authoritative presence, to show that someone is watching?

I do think so. At this point, I identify with this role so much, that it's as much a part of me as one of my arms or legs. And I also have my son and daughter accompany me and always keep them up to date on my commitments. That way if anything happens to me, they would be able to take over right

away.



regularity irregularity, 1960
© Gerhard von Graevenitz Estate, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn,
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Earlier you mentioned that early piece of advice that widows should stay in the background, but it sounds like you didn't follow it!

No, for the most part I did. I always wait for people to come to me. And I learned from mistakes like this one: Before we met, Gerhard was friends with Hanna Weitemeier. Beginning in 1972, she did a lot to promote the art of the Zero Group, including for the Lenz-Schönberg collection and she also did some outstanding writing. One day she said she thought that there wasn't enough happening with Gerhard's work, that it couldn't keep going on that way, and that I should see if any of the auction houses would be willing to put anything up on the block. After some persuasion, I did just that. But they declined because Gerhard's work didn't have any history at auction. That changed in 2010 after an auction at Sotheby's in London, although now interest on all sides is waning a bit. At some point, the market for Zero Group became oversaturated and too many works were put up for auction. The prices for Gerhard's work also increased, but for other artists they shot up exponentially.

Why wasn't that the case for your husband?

He had an ambivalent relationship with the Zero Group. Early on, he felt at home with the group and exhibited with them. However, when he came into contact with the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel and the international artist's group Nouvelle Tendance in Paris in 1961, he began to see himself as more of a researcher and philosopher, which led him to distance himself from the Zero Group's mysticism. Romantic musings such as: "The sun is coming near, the sun is Zero," were an anathema to him. You can see it in his work. He studied theories of perception and philosophy and also publically opposed Zero, which you can read about in the catalogue "Kunst-Licht-Kunst" published by the Stedelijk van Abbe Museum in 1966. For that reason, the ZERO Foundation does not recognize him as a full member, although it does include him in survey exhibitions and publications in his capacity as an artist who had belonged to the group early on.



Kinetisches Objekt mit 3 Ovalen (Schwarz auf Weiss), 1969
© Gerhard von Graevenitz Estate, VG-Bild, Bonn 2017

Is the cost for your ongoing estate work very high?

I have to spend money regularly on restoration; unfortunately, nothing would happen otherwise. That goes for both works that remain with the family and those in public collections. When a piece begins to deteriorate or there is some problem with it, museums will often simply put it in storage,

or others have favorites that they prioritize in sending to the restorer. So little by little, I've begun approaching museums about the matter. My children and I have decided to put some of the money from sales towards restoration. If a museum is willing to have a work restored, we usually pay at least half. It's in the true spirit of Gerhard and his work.

Was establishing a non-profit an option for you?

Yes, and it was also recommended that I do so. The art historians Georg Jappe and Jürgen Morschel thought that a foundation would be a good idea. So I asked the gallerists, including Reckermann, who advised strongly against it. Galleries didn't usually like working with foundations, because they tended to find them unwilling to negotiate. That's why I never did it. It proved to be the right choice in the end.

Do you have specific goals for the estate in the coming years? Are there any themes or topics you would like to address?

Yes, there are. My husband left behind a lot of notebooks. I found quite a lot of them at one point and now I'm transcribing them one by one. [Son Moritz von Graevenitz comes in and is introduced.] Please sit down! Moritz, what goals do you have for your father's work, and what do you think I still have to accomplish in my role as estate director?

Moritz von Graevenitz Overall I'd like to see his oeuvre maintained and for it to be seen in the right context. That is, not in someone's home. The best would be for the interested public to be able to see it in a meaningful public space.

AvG Gerhard would have said the same thing.

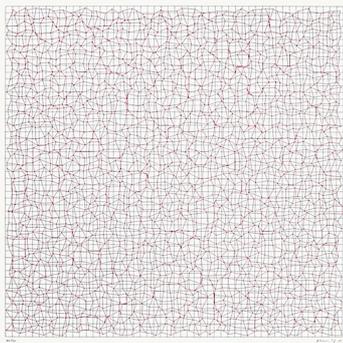
MvG We also hope that his work remains intriguing and inspiring to future generations.

AvG At some point you will take over the estate.

MvG Yes.

Then I'd like to ask a question that I always pose at the end of an interview. If a living artist came to you and asked your advice about planning his or her estate, what would you tell them? What would you have liked your father to have told you? Would it have been helpful if he had left behind instructions or ideas for the estate, or did he do so?

MvG Possibly allotting means to restore works and in general making sure that there is enough to just take a breath. That would help mitigate the obligation to popularize and commercialize everything right away. Sometimes it takes longer for interest in an artist to fully develop, which was the case with my father.



Siebdruck rot-blauer Raster, einer von zweien, 1978
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AvG My advice would be to stay in close contact with the key players, to ensure that the beneficiaries are personally involved and perhaps that they even write to gallerists and curators now and then: "Congratulations! That was a wonderful exhibition." Show an interest, even if the exhibition didn't have to

do with Gerhard. Not: "Do you want to show my husband's work? Here I am!" That just doesn't work. Maybe clarify to whom one should sell the work and where it should be sold, or consider whether or not certain works belong together.

Thank you very much.

Antje von Graevenitz was interviewed by Loretta Würtenberger in Amsterdam 2016.