CAAC Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo

- **Exhibition: "**KP Brehmer. A test extending beyond the action"
- **Artist:** KP: Brehmer.
- **Inauguration**: 31 March, 20:00 h.
- **Date: 31 March – 12 June 2011.**
- **Curator:** Doreen Mende

A Test Extending Beyond the Action.
Exhibiting the Projects by KP Brehmer
Doreen Mende

In 2009, the British music critic Mark Fisher published the book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* One of Fisher's main thoughts is that the recent economic crisis in the West did not result in a collapse of Capitalism. "Capitalist realism hasn't weakened since the bank crises; if anything, it has intensified."[1] Reading Fisher's book while working on a show with projects by the German artist KP Brehmer (1938–1997), made me think that we can utilize Brehmer's practice for a series of tests in order to get our heads and lives around a Capitalist Realism that has become a living condition. The exhibition of projects by KP Brehmer leads us today into a space of reflection: how do the visual systems of Western societies affect the human being? What means do we have for making audible our disagreement without withdrawing our words and images? Is an alternative contract with a Capitalist Realism possible?

We are living in a time of an excess in exhibiting Magazines, newspapers, stores, television and especially today, the Internet, constitute and reproduce visual grammars, directing our understanding of the world. Museum exhibitions are just a further component of the circuit. This excess in exhibiting is a living condition monitored by Capitalism. If we approach Brehmer's displays, films, publications, compositions and installations as "notation systems" of social processes, then a similarity to a musical

score emerges. Only in the moment of the performance do the questions posed by these works become apparent, under the actual conditions of making them public. Exhibiting here might be understood as both a means and a concern of a practice – for KP Brehmer, and for us, today, perhaps more crucially than ever.

Interstice

The exhibition at CAAC opens with *Wie mich die Schlange sieht. Wie ich die Schlange sehe.* (How the Snake Sees Me. How I See the Snake, 1985), which is juxtaposed here with the seminal postage stamp project of *Trivialgrafik* (1968). These works share a political impulse that takes place without writing the word 'politics' in front of a marching crowd or shouting it in an agitating voice. Brehmer used the pattern of the postage stamp into wall paper, editioned prints, inflatable plastic pillows and so called *Auswahlbeutel* (a bag of assorted stamps). Brehmer's use of the stamp shifts its original function in the economy of propaganda, towards a 'sociology of art': the art collector shall be confronted with the trivial and ideological purpose of everyday image production. The confrontation of the stamps with portraits of Hitler, Walter Ulbricht and Lenin, with *Wie mich die Schlange sieht. Wie ich die Schlange sehe*, that eventually exposes the artist's own head, emphasize Brehmer's recognition of his own implication in the visual codifications of societal orders, from dictatorships to other forms of governance.

The title of the two-part work *Wie mich die Schlange sieht. Wie ich die Schlange sehe* marks the respective perspectives of looking. It could be a Shot-Reverse-Shot. These well-known filmmaking techniques produce a sequence of takes that stage a dialogue or a relationship between two characters. The painted head appears in the manner of a so-called thermo-painting, that utilizes the visual grammar of thermography which Brehmer had already used in the mid-1970s as a technique to deliver visual "templates" for his paintings. According to the principles of thermography, the colour red signifies warm temperature; blue stands for cold. The snake is photographed.[2] But is it the snake that the 'I' sees? We see an image of a snake which makes us believe that we know what a snake is. Yet we cannot be sure 'what' or 'who' the snake actually is. *Wie mich die Schlange sieht. Wie ich die Schlange sehe* opens up a huge discrepancy of a visual grammar between the image of each character. But both are each *an image* in which truth has two faces: fiction and documentary.[3] We have no proof of evidence that the image presents the head of Brehmer, as the title suggests; nor can we axiomatically define what the head of a snake signifies.

The question of truth is situated *between* an image and its appearance in a magazine, a display, a stamp, a film and in an exhibition space. It is from this interstice, that we need to ask ourselves *what is it that makes today's images so different, so appealing*?4

This approach treads the ground of self-reflexivity, which Mark Fisher considers in 2009 as a crucial means to re-think the relation of the individual to Capitalism. Self-reflexivity demands an investigation of both visual and display strategies of everyday imagery and its effect on the individual, and our own implication in its operation. For Brehmer, there is neither an outside nor an inside of a system. We cannot step out of a system as we might wake up from a dream.

Make Images Politically
Brehmer's projects resonate with the famous sentence by Jean-Luc Godard and the Dziga-Vertov-Group, who claimed that the aim is not to make a 'political film,' but to 'make films politically.' In this respect, *Ideale Landschaft* (1968) is a compelling project: the colour spectrum 'green to blue' is spread out in different shades, similar to printed sheets in halftone blocks, and in different print formats. This spectrum is presented in different formats such as displays, largescale Klischee-prints on plastic canvas, publications, drawings and a film (exhibited at CAAC the first time) discloses the singular conditions of a medium and performs a self-reflexivity on the conditions of image production. Inflected with a strong pedagogical impulse, the projects challenge him and us to reflect on the conditions of seeing through their exposure in public. The many forms of *Ideale Landschaft* demonstrates how the visualization of the world, even in such a seemingly innocent image of an 'ideal landscape,' is implicated in politics. Like Godard, whose many films vivisect the complicated relationship between the violence of and the passion for the image, Brehmer's projects reveal an absolute political concern for the conditions of image production as well as for the conditions of image distribution (exhibition) in everyday life. The *image* of a landscape in *Ideale Landschaft* appears as a construction.

Much subtler than the loud agitprop posters of Klaus Staeck or the shamanic universe of Joseph Beuys, Brehmer's approach is closer to the understanding, that "Art is not a reflection of reality. It's the reality of reflection."5 *Ideale Landschaft* articulates a sharp awareness of how the image takes place, in the literal sense of the expression 'taking a place,' within society and – perhaps more importantly – *in relation* to each individual

member of society: in front of a display, a TV screen, a publication, in a landscape garden or even in front of a meditation object.

Decoding

As a major figure of the German Pop Art initiative called Capitalist Realism, which culminated in the famous catalogue raisonné, *Grafik des Kapitalistischen Realismus*, by René Block in 1971, Brehmer worked for decades on the inversion of the capitalist economy of knowledge production by decoding its forms of visual nomination. His reflection on the means of formalization in a context of public display enabled the political to take place without shouting the word 'political.' His expropriation of Western concepts of typography, cartography, thermography and colour theory reveals the ways in which visual appearances are implicated in economics. Borrowing the term 'exappropriation' from Derrida, Brehmer's projects alter existing visual grammar structures in order to restart the contract with a Capitalist Realism in a different way.6

Developed in relation to industrial printing techniques 1960s, Brehmer produced many works as Klischee-Drucke.7 We find this printing method in various displays, original prints and stamps throughout large-sized works of *Ideale Landschaft.* His interest in printing processes as an artistic practice old a singular relevance in the lifelong friendship with René Block. They met first at the Werkkunstschule (School of Arts and Crafts) in Krefeld in 1959. Both Block and Brehmer loved music "more than literature and maybe even more than fine arts."8 It became a friendship between an artist and a curator, constantly punctuated by exhibition and publication collaborations. Brehmer then participated in the inaugural exhibition *Neodada, Pop, Decollage Kapitalistischer Realismus* of Gallery René Block in 1964, that included Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, Wolf Vostell, Sigmar Polke, before the exhibition and publication *Trivialgrafik* was produced by the Block gallery in 1967-68. Yet Brehmer was always very interested in the British branch of Pop Art, which blossomed already by the mid-1950s in formations such as The Independent Group and its interest in the "As-found" which has been a major conceptual material to work with. He appreciated Richard Hamilton's work, with whom he intermittently corresponded. Hamilton dedicated him a collage of newspaper clippings about the Rolling Stones dating from 1965–67 and another collage called *The Critic Laughs* (1968).9

Dynamizing

Along with Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Gustav Metzger, Klaus Staeck10 and others, KP Brehmer was also invited to conceptualize the German Month at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in Fall 1974 resulting in the influential exhibition/publication *Art⇄Society.*11 Understood in the context of its time, the London project started with a colloquium in Berlin in April 1974, that extensively explored the complex relations between the artist, the curator, the institution and society. The colloquium comprised a self-critical investigation, and also included an analysis of previous exhibition projects, before the actual exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art opened in Fall 1974.

We would fail to understand KP Brehmer's subtle political thinking, if we reduced his attitude to a loud agitating voice, which the initials KP at first might suggest. In solidarity with the DKP (German Communist Party), which was prohibited in West-Germany in the early 1960s, Brehmer, then based in West-Berlin, changed his surname Klaus-Peter into the distinctive part of the Leftist party's acronym. However, membership in a political party was not his political means, his strategies were instead located in art making, exhibiting, and teaching.12 Similar to the group of artists who constituted the initiative of Capitalist Realism, the projects until the mid 1970s could be considered as a network of exhibitions as it formed a network of artists around issues of Art and Politics13 dynamizing the role of art in relation to society and life. In this context, Brehmer's understanding of "a test extending beyond the action"14 is attached to a very clear mission of the project *Farbtest "Nationalfarben"* (Colour Test "National Colours") from 1969/1972. It relates (in the publication to the London show in 1974 and in the exhibition at CAAC in Seville in 2011) to the work *Realkapital – Produktion* (Real Capital – Production, 1974). Here, the relations between labour and capital are the point of departure: Brehmer jolts "the aggressive gestures which the representation of the profit rate develops"15 with the generosity of gestural brush strokes.

Conditions of Seeing

From here a large range of diagrammatic projects emerge. As Brehmer demonstrates, we are confronted by everyday imagery that contains an ideology of image making as a major strategy of political tenure as well as of colonialism. For example, *Farbengeographien* (Colour Geographies) strongly reveal the manifestation of racial ideologies and party platforms based on statistical data and shaped by visual mapping.16 *Vier-Farben-Problem* (Four Colour Theorem, 1980) relates to a mathematical game claiming that the world can be entirely visually represented with

only four colours. Following this, the conditions of seeing embedded in Western rationality becomes a territorial totalitarianism. In *Goya*, Brehmer seems to exceed a territorial belief in relation to the image, when he locates the mortal remains of Spain's immortal painter in France. But Goya's skull as a symbol of human singularity is treasured in the painting of Goya's head in the Museum of Saragossa. We cannot quite say where to draw the distinction between the division of rules of evidence, totalitarian imagery and the power of imagination. The instances of judgment are turned on us and on our accountability as individuals in relation to the classifying forces of colonial societies.

But Brehmer, again, includes himself as well as us into the process of investigation. It is not a perspective from outside, but a reflection of the extent to which a systemic schematization of our vision affects us. *Vergleiche das Kartenbild der Iberischen Halbinsel mit dem Griechenlands! Betrachte die Grenzen gegen Portugal* (Compare the Map of the Iberian Peninsula with the One of Greece. Look at the Border to Portugal) is a concrete test, while in *Schriftproben zur Bestimmung der Sehschärfe* (Writing Sample to Identify the Acuity, 1976) Brehmer articulates a more abstract and speculative proposal to detect a relation between typography and degrees of human existence from "tired" to "dead."

We must keep in mind that following Brehmer's expropriation of the visual systems of representation, a test can never be finished. Or to turn it upsidedown: a test is only valid in the very moment of its performance, but will never be able to stand for something or speak for someone. Related to Brehmer's suspicion towards data collection, the major project *Seele und Gefühl eines Arbeiters* (Soul and Feelings of a Worker, 1978-80) concerns a sociological study from the early twentieth century, a time in which not only labour, but also health and leisure became industrialized with its bio-political effects resonating even today. It seems that its different "versions," such as a 42-part drawing, large-scale panels, sketches, display instructions, a self-test in form of a diarybook, each allows a spatial generosity to unfold an immediate and singular temporality undergoing a test. It neither claims to be a rule of evidence nor provides a general truth. But if anything, it stands for itself.

Score
The project *Seele und Gefühl* also exists in the form of a musical score for solo flute, cello and piano. On a conceptual level, it is similar to the practice of Hanne Darboven,

as Brehmer's score shows a strict structure of the musical scale, according to the scale of a statistical investigation of emotional states of a worker over 48 weeks. Two large pauses, marked in two blocks of several rows without notes, indicate the worker's holiday and illness. They interrupt the tonality, and it appears to become a performance in which the audience, the conditions of the performance and chance are un-controllable elements, as in a composition by John Cage. In a musical performance even more stringently than in a visual work of art, time is folded: there is the moment of writing down the note which already implicates an imagination about the quality of the sound of a tone in the future performance. Yet the actual performance, in the form of a concert, cannot be calculated in total. It introduces a temporality which does not follow a linear temporal movement from past to present, but the performance of a musical score exposes a past beyond a present: the notation might be like an itinerary, but only when we take the journey we will be able to transfer it from a manifest form (score) to a singular experience. Brehmer's 'notation systems' of social processes implicate a future that becomes altered in the act of exposure. A thought from 1974 could turn into "a test extending beyond the action" today and tomorrow.

Is an alternative contract to Capitalist Realism possible? Maybe it is neither 'direct action' that helps us to survive nor is it a dichotic division into 'friend' and 'enemy' that allows us to propose a new set of instruments for change. The exposure of projects by KP Brehmer today proposes *a series of tests* "extending beyond the action." It is incumbent upon us to understand that to look is a claim to act in order to question. What might we learn from KP Brehmer: the reflection on the means of exposure, including ourselves, has the capacity to potentiate the excess in exhibiting in order to articulate a possibility to defy Capitalism and defend society in a different way.

1. Interview with Alex Andrews, September 2010, http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk, distributed by *Multitudes* founded by members of The Otolith Group, London.
2. One version of the snake exists as page torn from a print publication (in the exhibition at CAAC); the other one is a painted watercolour of the picture by Brehmer.
3. The replacement of shot/reverse-shot by fiction/documentary is taken from a sequence of *Notre Musique* (2004) by Jean-Luc Godard, where Godard is filmed while giving a lecture in front of an audience of a literature festival in Sarajevo in 2002.
4. The British artist Richard Hamilton pioneered a rather reflexive understanding of Pop Art in the 1950s already, when he asks himself and us through the famous collage *just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956).
5. Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*, film, 1967.
6. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002, pp. 56–67.
7. "Klaus Peter Brehmer produces collages from negatives of newspaper imagery, from print raster, from typographic and constructivist elements into image designs, construction plans, which he copies on zinc printing plates, before they are retouched, alienated, smudged. Finally, the plates are etched in an acid bath until stable large 'klischees' develop.

Any amount of reproductions can be produced from these 'klischees.' " Werner Rhode, in: Galerie René Block (ed.), *Klaus Peter Brehmer Trivialgrafik Hansjoachim Dietrich Ereignisbilder*, Berlin, 1965.

8. René Block, "Lügen Bilder auch?" *KP Brehmer Alle Künstler lügen*, Kassel, 1998, p. 7.

9. Monika Brehmer via a phone conversation with Sarah Poppel, February 14, 2011.

10. Wilfried Kuehn, Doreen Mende (eds.) *Displayer 01*, University of Arts and Design ZKM Karlsruhe, 2006, pp.041–047

11. Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal (eds.) *Art⇄Society*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974.

12. In the year 1971, KP Brehmer was appointed professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg; in 1987 guest-professor at the Art Academy Hangzhou (PR China).

13. *Kunst und Politik* (Art and Politics), exhibition and publication by G. Bussmann, Badischer Kunstverein, 1970; *Kunst im politischen Kampf* (Art in the Political Struggle) exhibition and publication by Christos M. Joachimides and Helmut R. Leppien, Kunstverein Hanover, 1973; Berlin Colloquium, 7. Produzentengalerie, April 1974; *Art⇄Society*, exhibition and publication by Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974.

14. KP Brehmer, in: *Art⇄Society*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974, p. 57.

15. *Ibid.,* p. 58.

16. I would like to draw the attention to the film *Ticket of No Return*, 1979, by Ulrike Ottinger, staging a psychogram of a city like Berlin in which the art character 'exact statistics' reveals the hypocrisy of class society.

1.