



Arnulf Rainer
The 1978 Venice Biennale

Salzburg Villa Kast
30 October 2021—22 January 2022

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Opening: Saturday 30 October 10am—1pm

Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg
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The exhibition presents works by Arnulf Rainer that were first shown in 1978, when the artist represented Austria at the 38th Venice Biennale. The selection of 35 works from the Austrian Pavilion features his *Self-demonstrations* as well as his seminal *Hand and Foot Paintings*. In his uncompromising search for new means of expression, Rainer developed radical approaches to art, making him one of the most influential artists of the post-war period.

The photographic *Self-demonstrations* form the core of Rainer's performative work, which occupies an important position within his oeuvre. In the late 1960s, the artist would frequently take postcard portraits during nightly sessions in the automated photo booth at the Westbahnhof train station in Vienna. Rainer documented his own grimaces and other extreme facial expressions, drawing on dormant or manic reserves of energy to express the tensions of inner states. The artist has noted that facial expressions and body postures predate the spoken word as forms of human communication, and he considers them more complex and meaningful than language. During an experiment with mescaline, he perceived spots of colour on these portraits and, acting upon this impulse, began overdrawing on the photographs, thereby initiating the *Face Farces* series. The process of overdrawing further emphasises the expressive moments captured in the images and these graphic or colourful adaptations either correspond to the mood of the photograph or contradict it.

From 1969 onwards, Rainer's photographic portraits were created with the help of a photographer in so-called 'Fotoséancen' (Photo-seances) and often expanded to include the movements of his whole body. This new approach created a performance situation that allowed him to practice accentuated self-reproduction, but also symbolic change, vulnerability and self-destruction. He subsequently processed the photographs in many different ways: sometimes the images show only slight traces of overdrawing, while others are barely recognisable under a network of paint, scratches and lines.

Lines and colours emphasise or obscure certain features of the underlying photographic image, while the act of overdrawing expressed Rainer's spontaneous reactions to the material at hand, which until then was unfinished or incomplete. The *Self-demonstrations* are a vehicle for his exploration of existential transgressions and preoccupation with his own image, connecting the artist to Viennese Actionism. However, unlike the Actionists, his performances never had a purpose within themselves and always took place outside of the public sphere.

In 1979, Rainer acquired large studio spaces in Austria and Bavaria, which allowed him the floor space to create an extensive series of physio-motoric *Hand and Foot Paintings*. The first of these paintings had originated in 1973, when the artist broke his brush while working frenziedly on a large *Face Farce*. Not wanting to break his concentration, he continued to work with his fingers and, in the process, discovered that the speed and immediacy of this technique enabled a new and very direct way of translating an emotional state into an image.

In the *Face Farces*, the finished work brought out the existing qualities of the photograph, but Rainer dispensed with this intermediate image in the *Hand and Foot Paintings*, surrendering himself entirely to his impulses. In these works, his hands obsessively caress, swipe and slap the painting surface, often using red paint in anticipation of the bloodied hands that might result from the violence of this method.

‘He liked the feel of paint on his fingers,’ wrote Rudi Fuchs in 1989. ‘He understood that painting with hand and fingers (and occasionally with his feet) provided a directness and swiftness of touch that could be another kind of translation of an emotional state of mind into an image.’ The works bear the distinct imprints of the artist’s fingers or feet in the paint, remaining as an index of his movements. Colour is formed directly by hand on the canvas, conveying the intensity, ferocity and, at times, the delicacy of his touch. ‘In my body-generated painting,’ wrote Rainer, ‘my interests have turned away from all qualities of colour and composition in favour of the unexplored possibilities of direct application of strokes and colours by means of the artist’s body.’

About the Artist:

The Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer is regarded as a pioneer of Art Informel, a movement which brought an intuitive form of lyrical expression into the field of abstraction. One of his early influences was Surrealism, and an ongoing interest in dreams and the subconscious imparts a mystical element to his work. He created his first *Overpaintings* in 1952, layering brushstrokes over existing artworks or photographs, and has continued to investigate the possibilities of this process throughout his career. During the 1960s and 1970s, experiments such as ‘blind drawing’ brought Rainer into contact with Viennese Actionism, as he explored the extremes of facial expression and body language. From the 1980s onwards, he increasingly used religious motifs, such as the cross and crucifixion, with their connotations of suffering and death but also transcendence.

Following his inclusion in the 1978 Venice Biennale, Rainer’s international reputation flourished during the 1980s, with important solo exhibitions at the Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1981); Centre Pompidou, Paris (1984); Abbazia di San Gregorio, Venice (1986); a *Self Portraits* show that travelled the United States (1986); and a major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (1989). His work was also included in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* and *Avant-Garde in the Eighties at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1986-1987)*, as well as entering the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum. More recently, his work has been the subject of retrospectives at international institutions, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2000); Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands (2005); Alte Pinakothek, Munich (2010); Albertina, Vienna (2014); and Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, Austria (2017). In 2002, the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich dedicated a room to the artist, where his work will be on permanent display.

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